

EXCITING ADVENTURES IN THE WORLDS OF TOMORROW!



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WHOM the GODS
WOULD SLAY ...

By IVAR JORGENSEN



A THRILL-PACKED TALE OF EARTH'S FIRST INVADERS!

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WHOM THE GODS WOULD



With a hissing, crackling noise, the flame from Hangra's cane formed a cage about Lars



SLAY

By Ivar Jorgensen

The ordinary woman gives birth to human offspring. But the princess Lall had ants on her planets! . . .

Book 1

Rulf of The Golden Horn

KNUTE SWENGORSEN had walked many miles inward from the *norsevillage* by the *fjord*. It had been a long, hard climb up the rocked and timbered mountainside. But Knute had moved swiftly, eager to scan the obscene face of Hangra, the witch who had long since been driven into the uplands by the decent folk who lived beside the sea.

Now, weariness was upon him, and he climbed with a curse for each

sharp rock, and a more potent curse for the hag who made herself so inaccessible to a man seeking the boon of her dark powers. Thus, a black mood rested upon him as he clambered up the last thorny slope and stood before the squat, teetering hovel of the far-famed witch.

There was no one there to greet him. He scowled and his voice rang across the lonesome crags: "Ho, foul mother! Show yourself before I smash to bits this rotten sty you live in!"

His answer was a somber cackle from off to the left. He whirled and looked among the rocks until he saw her, crouching atop a great boulder. It seemed a stupid place for even a witch to rest, and Knute called out, "Come down, you hag! Did one of your phantom beasts drive you aloft?"

Hangra had eyes of breathtaking beauty. But these eyes were surrounded by a ghastly ruin of scrawny, wrinkled flesh. She was little more than a sack of sparse bones draped over with a shapeless, evil smelling gown. Hair, greasy and matted, obstructed her vision as she peered down at the blond Northman.

"I was studying the stars," she said.

The inanity of this cheered Knute Swengorsen. "Old fool! It is high noon and there are no stars. Have your brains finally rotted beyond all use?"

There was no hostility in Hangra's reply. "The stars do not vanish in sunlight from those whose eyes are sharp. One steeped in the lore may read them night or day."

Knute threw back his head and roared with laughter. "And what say the stars, old crone?"

"They speak of evil—of dark and dreadful things; of a voyage across the void from star to star; of an evil ten thousand years in the making; a devil's nightmare now about to bloom."

"You talk in silly riddles. Voyages from star to star. If such rot were really true, it could still bring no harm to us."

Only now did Hangra flare in anger. "The earth also is a star, you thick-skulled ass! This horror I see concerns us very much."

"Call me not an ass, foul mother," Knute growled, "or I'll pluck you from that rock and twist your throat. Get down here now and serve me. I came to get a potion."

HANGRA'S EYES remained upon the blue heavens and her thoughts were far away. Then she closed her eyes and sat as one possessed by a vision. "As strange a ship as I have ever seen," she whispered. "A ship not built to sail on sea or land. Fire pours from its bowels, and it rides a flaming tail across the skies."

She ceased speaking. Her ancient frame trembled from the tension of her trance. She moaned; then spoke again in a curious sing-song voice that chilled the Norseman standing down below.

"I cannot see the substance. It wavers, thick as mist, before my eyes. But all the evil essence I can sense. It rides within that ship. It comes this way across the void." Hangra trembled even more violently and clenched her bony hands as if in anguish. "But I cannot tell if it be man or god!"

There was a time of utter silence. Gripped with a feeling akin to terror, Knute stood dumbly watching the trembling hag. The breeze had ceased to blow. The trees hung motionless. Not a birdling twittered in the air.

Then again, the croaking of Hangra's tortured voice: "Not man. No man has ever learned to ride the void. And if not man—then a god." She stood suddenly erect and pushed her scarecrow arms above her head. "A

god! To loose a horror on the earth. All men will die!"

A shriek, as of great pain, was ripped from Hangra's dried and twisted lips. Then she fell to the surface of the great boulder and lay as though dead.

Knute Swengorsen glanced uneasily about him and drew a short-sword half from the scabbard at his belt. He knew a fear, and sought to allay it by striking at some foe. But there was no foe; no one at which to strike. He looked again at the still, black form on the boulder. "Wake up, witch Hangra," he growled. "Awake and brew my potion. I'd be away from here."

And Hangra did awaken upon the sound of his voice. She sat up, looked around her as if in wonder, then came down from the boulder with such ease of motion and so swiftly, that she did not appear to move. She stood before Knute, leaning heavily upon her cane. Her face was drawn and white.

But with the passing of a moment, she was herself again. And around Knute Swengorsen, the forest whispered, the breeze played with the grasses, and the birds resumed their chirpings. Knute shook his head as though to clear away the vapors of a brain-mist. He towered threateningly over the withered crone.

"I thought I saw you standing on yon boulder. I'd have sworn I heard you mouthing weird insanities. Yet you stand here. Was that some spell you cast, old witch?"

SHE WALKED around him, utterly without fear, stood in the doorway of her hut and regarded him through eyes of great beauty; eyes like green jewels moulded into an obscene setting by some devil's craftsman. She leered at his bewilderment and said, "What would you have,

Knute Swengorsen?"

"Are you deaf? Four times I told my want. A potion such as only you can make."

"There are many potions—for many purposes."

Knute Swengorsen dropped his eyes like a sullen child. "Mine must be strong and swift. One day now—maybe tomorrow—Rolf comes again to the *fjord*. Even now his galley may be sighted."

"Rolf of the Golden Horn?"

"What other Rolf could I be speaking of?"

"I heard he died in some far land to the south."

"Not true. I'd heard that also. But word came overland."

"How could word come overland from such a far place?"

"It was brought by a band of strange men. They wore gowns, like women, but of coarse and heavy stuff. Fools in women's clothing who tried to make us kneel on the ground and pray."

"I've never seen such men."

Knute sneered at her. "They would have no intercourse with witches. They carried crosses on their staves and told us of a God who died upon a cross."

"What God was this?"

Knute Swengorsen waved an impatient hand. "It doesn't matter. We killed the men before they could tell us much. The news about Rolf they told before."

"What news?"

"Rolf left with Rollo, full a year ago. They went to slay and pillage in the southern lands."

"That I knew."

"According to these women-men, both Rolf and Rollo traveled far—into a land called Gaul, I think they said. They burned and killed."

The old hag grinned. "And filled their galleys up with priceless loot

I'll wager."

"But Rollo drank of alien wines that turned his blood to water. They traveled until they came to a city walled in stone. There Rollo took a dark-eyed wife and swore he'd never ride the sea again."

"Rollo? Not to return?"

"Not to return. But Rolf refused the bait. He spat upon Rollo and turned the prow of his galley north." Knute waxed even more sullen. He sank to the ground and sat poking the earth between his thick legs. "So now I want a potion, witch."

HANGRA threw back her head and cackled. "I think I see the plot. With Rolf's returning, your chance of fair Freya's hand grows remote indeed. You know full well she'll never bed with you."

"Silence hag! One word more and I'll slice your skinny neck."

Hangra ignored this. "Does the Golden Horn also await Rolf's return?"

"It hangs upon the wall," Knute growled. "Within the Common House."

"And none but Rolf has ever drunk it dry?"

"None."

"What potion would you have me brew?" she asked.

"A simple one for your foul alchemistries. Something to put into the Golden Horn so that when Rolf drinks, it will knock him to the earth. One draught of ale and he falls—"

"And dies?"

"Not death, you fool. It's ridicule I want. Something to destroy the myth of his manhood. With the *norse-volk* laughing at him, I'll take my chance that Freya's love will cool."

Hangra's eyes flashed with scorn. "The day you get sweet Freya into bed, my wolves will mate with

doves!"

Knute sprang to his feet and raised a fist over Hangra's head. But the witch stood her ground and laughed with fresh contempt. "I'll not make your potion," she said, and turned away.

But then she stiffened and turned slowly backward, facing Knute. But she did not appear to see him. Rather, her eyes stared through his great bulk and seemed to be reading something written on the hills beyond. She held up a bony finger and spoke—but not to Knute Swengorsen. Rather to the trees and hills and the high blue sky above.

"A potion in the Golden Horn. Why not?"

Knute grinned. "I knew your senses would appreciate the joke."

"You'll swear it is for his lips and his alone?"

"Fool crone! What man would dare use Rolf's great drinking horn?"

"True words." But Hangra still was deep in thought.

"Well, witch. Do I get my potion? I have gold to pay."

"I'll brew the draught."

"And it will do the deed?"

Hangra cackled and rubbed her hideous hands together. "Beyond your boldest dreams. Now sit you down and rest while I prepare the pot."

Knute Swengorsen lowered himself to the surface of a rock and watched Hangra disappear through the dark doorway of her hovel. He lounged in comfort, foreseeing in his mind the sweetness that would be his with Rolf thoroughly discredited. Certain he was that Hangra's potion in Rolf's ale would do the trick. How could Freya do otherwise than foreswear a man turned into a laughing stock? He'd have her in his arms before the new moon rose.

His attention was caught by the sound of movement within Hangra's

hut. Then came an odor, stinking, as from a musty cellar of rotten frogs. And Hangra's voice like bone scraped on bone as she chanted some dread spell.

BUT THERE was more to come.

Night fell with the seeming swiftness of a blanket drawn across the sky and Knute stared in terror—helpless to move—as a ghastly, blood red glow emanated from the doorway of the hovel. And Knute Swengorsen knew the witch was not alone. There was the sound of muted voices—then a moan of devils, snarling as though loathe to obey some command of the powerful witch within. The red glow dimmed and brightened, to throw a huge shadow of Hangra's twisted form as she moved back and forth about her strange business.

Then it was done with. The blood glow faded and the crone came forth bearing a small vial. "Put this into the drinking horn," she said. "The quantity is minute. But the eighth part of a tiny drop. It will not be seen."

His courage returning, Knute snatched the vial from her thin fingers and thrust it into his belt. Also from his belt, he took forth a bag that jingled pleasantly and held it out.

"Your money, witch. Take it. I would hasten home. This crawling place plays tricks upon my eyes."

Hangra stepped backward. "Begone. And take your gold with you. Evil though you are, you've done the world a service coming here. Back to your village, and take care lest the wolves feed on your flesh."

Knute laughed. "I have no fear of mountain wolves, old crone."

Hangra watched him stride down the rocky slope. Then she looked upward, into the dark sky, and muttered, "No fear of mountain wolves.

But what of those that hover in the void?"

After Knute Swengorsen faded from sight, Hangra went back to the high boulder where she sat for a long time watching a great red star low on the horizon.

Soon a chill wind came up and moaned through the trees. With it, the cold moon. Then a shadow flitted softly over the boulder and a white-fanged wolf was there to crouch at Hangra's feet. Without thought, her hand went out to stroke its head.

The wolf licked the hand, straightened and stood staring in the direction Knute had gone. The gray beast whined and wagged its haunches. The wagging was a plea.

But Hangra slapped the wolf across the nose, and spoke sharply: "Curb your appetite, my friend. That, or hunt elsewhere in the woods this night. He is not to be touched. You hear my words? Not to be touched."

The wolf snarled and slunk away. Hangra called after it: "His meat is far too precious for your gullet. He carries the fate of the world within his belt."

She turned to continue gazing, in dreadful fascination, at the low red star.

ROLF OF the Golden Horn was heading home. The winds and the forty oars were driving the prow of his loot-laden galley ever northward; out of the wide mouth of the Gallic river; swift past the isles of Engle-Land; hard into the waters of the cold Northern Sea and up under the shadows of the great lights that flamed down from the top of the world.

Rolf was going home.

In his heart was a strange mixture of sorrow and happy anticipation. Sorrow at the weakness of Rollo, beside whom he had sailed—to sack,

burn, and pillage, even to the gates of Alexandria in the warm southern seas. Together—their galleys breasting the waves side by side—they had prowled far down to the warm and perfumed lands, to sink their swords deep into the rotting corpse of decadent Rome. Side by side, they had gloried in being Vikings! Laughed deep in their throats at the prayer that went up all over Europe to the Man of Galilee and his Father which was in heaven: "From the fury of the Vikings, O Lord, protect us."

Laughed at the gentle prophets; pillaged and burned as they put their faith in the thunder gods and the great-breasted lightning goddesses of the northlands. Spat their contempt on all things weak.

Then, for Rolf, the shock.

Rollo—one day in Gaul, as they cut their way through the defenders of a gray-stone town—raising his sword above a kneeling figure; lifting his great blade high to slash in twain the frail body of a youth.

Then Rollo saw. Not a youth. A dark eyed girl, with breasts scarcely swelling the surface of the white tunic she wore. She knelt before him and in her hands was a small gold cross. Her body was erect from knee to head—straight as a northern pine she knelt. Her face was calm and there was no fear in her eyes.

Still marveling now, Rolf remembered what he saw. Rollo's blade pulled short in mid-air. Then lowered to his side. Rollo's hand reaching down to lift the maid up by her rich, dark hair.

Rollo's voice: "Do you think that bit of gold will save you, maid?"

"I think it will," she answered, steadily. "But kill me if you will—it matters not. Strike. With my final breath I'll pray for you."

AND ROLLO—with a weariness in his voice Rolf had never before detected: "Be silent, maid. I'm not in need of prayers." But the words and the tone did not match as Rollo released his grip on the girl's hair and touched her gold cross with his finger tip. "There is no strength in this bauble."

"The strength of Him who died upon a cross."

Rollo had turned to Rolf, sheathing his sword the while. "I tire of this. I'll go and rest myself." Then to the girl: "Come, maid, and tell me of this fool you worship. This God who allowed himself to be crucified."

Rollo had been strange from that day on. Keeping to himself and showing no interest in the sharing of the loot. One day, he came to Rolf's tent walking side by side with the girl, her hand in his. "My weariness still persists. I'm tired unto death of pillage, fire, and screams of agony. Even now I fear the worst—that blood will flow in rivers through my dreams."

"Then we'll go home," Rolf told his sailing mate. "I too am lonesome for the high, white peaks. We'll turn our galleys north."

"You must return without me. I'll take me here a wife and here I'll stay. Farewell to you, Rolf. And may your own wild gods have pity and blot your crimes from out your memory."

"My gods are your gods, too."

"Not so. Mine died in Galilee." And Rolf saw the cross suspended around Rollo's neck.

Rollo extended his hand, but Rolf turned away in bitterness. Next day he sailed.

And now, facing again the peaks of his homeland, his heart was troubled with uncertainty as he marveled at the power of the dark-eyed maid who'd bent the fierce Rollo in her hands like

a slender twig.

But uppermost were his thoughts of Freya, the golden-haired Norse-maiden he'd left standing on the shore a full year back. Filled as he was with contempt for the slender dark-eyed women of the south, Freya's image gleamed in his memory, quickening his heart and the breath within his throat. Rollo could turn into a milk-white thing if he chose; could take a spindling maiden as his bride.

Rolf smiled. A woman awaited him! A tall and golden maiden built for ecstasy. Broad of bosom, strong of limb. Born and bred to withstand the first, full, glorious shock of mating.

His kind of woman!

Rolf's thoughts were broken now by a shout from the bow of the galley. The thundering voice of Lars, his second in command and his good friend: "Rolf—out ahead! We've raised the points beyond the *fjord*. We're home!"

ROLF HURRIED up the runway upon each side of which twenty slaves bent their broad backs to the oars. They were a mixture, these slaves. Picked for their girth and sinew from a dozen conquered ports, their skins were black and yellow and white. Some wore great shocks of hair. Some, but a thin black pig-tail down their backs. And others bald as gourds. Each was as strong as several ordinary men but none could break the chains that held each to his place. Their backs were broad. But still they feared the whip that lashed them on.

Rolf passed the slaves and went into the prow of the dragon-galley to stand beside Lars and peer across the green waters. "By Tor, you're right! I see the *norsevolk* gathered there!"

And this was true. The galley had been long since sighted. The *norsevolk* lined the shore. Lars, his great red face aglow, waved an arm, then laid it

over Rolf's shoulders and said, "I envy you, my friend—for the prize that waits you there."

Rolf's smile was small and tight as, suddenly, a bleak, depressing mood came over him. "She's probably forgotten me," he muttered. "Wed now, no doubt, and waiting with an infant in her arms."

Lars' laughter rang against the hills and back. "Not Freya! That lass will bed with you or die a virgin. How many have tried to turn her heart away from you and failed?"

The *fjord* was now abeam. Rolf said, "You'd best take the rudder, Lars. Bring her on the beach and then set the slaves to unloading."

This disappointed Lars. "I'll run her in, but let the others take care of the rest. I vow I'll see you drain the Golden Horn."

Rolf's smile deepened. "So be it. You and I shall seek the Common House."

The galley was beached skillfully, while the whole *norsevillage* gave shouts of welcome. Rolf's Viking crew tumbled ashore, many to seize yellow-haired wives—to sweep them up and carry them back to the village, each with a line of children strung out behind like a joyful tail. Lovers clung in passionate embrace, and there was not a Viking who did not find a pair of waiting arms.

None except Rolf.

FOR FREYA did not shout welcome with the rest. She stood apart, and as Rolf approached her she smiled but made no move. Nor did Rolf consummate his year-old dreams by seizing her. A peculiar silence gripped him, a shyness he had never known before. He merely held his cupped hands forth and said, "I brought you these."

Her eyes were for him and not the savagely gotten loot. "They matter

not," she said softly. "You brought yourself unwounded and alive; that is enough."

But the hands of Freya's mother, gnarled and worn, reached out. Her old voice remonstrated with her daughter: "Be not so ungrateful! Jewels, rings and pendants from far lands. The ransom of a king and you spurn it. Are you mad?"

Rolf's eyes were still on Freya's face. They remained there as he opened his hands and spilled the baubles into those of the Norsemother. Some missed the open palms and the old woman was on her knees scrabbling feverishly in the dirt.

But Rolf and Freya saw none of this. Rolf said, "You waited?"

"Had you ever cause to doubt?"

He dropped his eyes like a bashful stripling. "I was so far away. You are warm and young and beautiful. Your loins must have cried out for mating. And you had no way of knowing I'd return."

"I'd mate with no one else. That you should know."

Rolf was now afire to take her to himself and have her. The passion choked in his throat and strangled his words. "Then even today? This night?"

Freya's eyes clouded. "So you may take the sea again at dawn?"

Rolf moved closer and she held her ground until her breasts were hard against his plate. And in his dizziness Rolf heard a voice. The voice was his, but not the words. The words were those of Rollo, spoken back in Gaul, but they came from Rolf's lips as though entirely undirected by his brain.

"I tire of war. I'm through with pillage; fire and screams of death. Even now I fear the worst—that blood will flow in rivers through my dreams."

Her eyes lighted and now her lips came close. "Fear not, about your

dreams, my love. From this day on I'll take full charge of them. Your time of steel is through. My heart will be your buffer in the night."

"This night?"

"We'll say the vows and spread the marriage feast. Tonight I will be yours."

Rolf let out a mighty shout. "Lars! Jorgen! Nels! Give gifts to all! Gems, gold and silks! And pass the word to lay the wedding feast!"

LARS, EACH arm filled with a yellow-haired maiden, gave also a lusty roar. Arising from where he sat, he dumped both maidens to the ground and said, "By Tor! I've waited a long time for this! Unload the ship. Give wealth and loot to all! Rolf of the Golden Horn will soon be wed."

Immediately, the Viking crew approached from all sides. They laid hands on Rolf and carried him away to his dwelling place. As was the custom, the maidens did likewise with Freya; vanishing with her into the village, to the accompaniment of much laughter.

At Rolf's dwelling place, the Vikings crowded around and horns were raised, filled full with foaming ale. A horn was pushed toward Rolf and it was Knute Swengorsen who remembered.

"Hold there, fool! Is all custom to be forgotten? Rolf should go first to the Common House. The Golden Horn stands waiting to be drained."

This indeed was the custom. A chieftain's worth was measured greatly by his ability to consume the strong ale of the *norsevolk*. And in all the *norseland*, there was no horn so huge and heavy as that of Rolf's. Twice Rolf had stood at the board in the Common House, held the Golden Horn aloft, and emptied it with a single, superhuman draught. This

while other Vikings stood by in silent envy. For this feat, more than for any other, they granted him his role as leader. But he could not rest on laurels won before. Fresh off the sea, custom demanded that he repeat the act and thus prove anew his strength.

Rolf eyed Knute Swengorsen and his smiling ceased. He had no liking for this man. A coward, Knute, as evidenced by his land-locked feet. Never had he ridden a galley south in search of loot and glory. He preferred to remain behind and plead suit to lonesome maidens. Weak and cowardly, he had the friendship of no man. To frustrate Knute Swengorsen more than for any other reason, Rolf said, "I'll drink at the wedding feast—and not before."

This did not suit Knute Swengorsen. "Could it be you doubt your strength? It would seem you wish to get the maid Freya safely bound to you before you risk your prestige."

Rolf scowled and stepped forward. Drawing his sword, he slapped it flat across his tormentor's rump. "But for the fact that I refuse to kill upon my wedding day, I'd spill your rotten blood. Away, landcrab! And leave this place to men."

Lars dropped his horn and snatched out his own blade. "I'm not being wed today," he cried, "so I claim the joy of slaughtering this cow. I'll tie my hands and lie upon my back and fight him with a sword between my toes."

Rolf, his good spirits revived, stepped forward, laughing. "We'll have no blood to mar this wedding stag."

"I'll tie my legs and fight him with my teeth. He can use two swords."

Rolf roared, "Enough. I claim a drink from all."

THE VIKINGS raised their horns.

Lars scowled, then grinned and sheathed his sword as Knute Swen-

gorsen went quickly out the door. A horn was pushed toward Rolf. He drained it and a cheer went up.

Then Lars called, "Silence! I have a tale. A story you'll all like—of love in Gaul. The night we razed their shores, I found two maidens on the rocks—sisters, I vow, who were bathing in the surf. Such terror in four eyes I never saw. Such abject haste to grant my every wish."

A dozen Vikings laughed and one man said, "The details, Lars. You left a sadder pair?"

"Sadder! But no! I'll tell you more of it."

He settled to his tale. The stag was on.

The hours passed swiftly until, at sunset, Rolf told his vows to Freya by the tree where all the *norsevolk* marriages were made; told them, not knowing of the bitter days ahead. Freya vowed also. Then a maiden bent to shred up Freya's gown—to tear it fore and aft from hem to waist. This symbolized the giving of the bride and they were wed.

Next was the Common House; laughter and ale and food under the yellow light from the great fish oil lamps. Shouting, the Vikings—men who sailed the seas, as differentiated from the *norsevolk* who stayed at home—seated Rolf and Freya on a throne at the end of the groaning table. Shouting, they brought forth the Golden Horn and filled it to the brim with ale. This horn was twice the size of all the rest. Encrusted with jewels and brimming with the brew, it made a weight to break a camel's back.

They handed it to Rolf. The Viking Chief stood tall and lifted the horn on high. All eyes were on him now, and silence settled over the Common House. Twice prior, they had seen him do this thing. But still the thought was in their minds: No

man can empty it!

Lars, as though sensing the trend of their minds, got to his feet and cried, "No man but Rolf!"

Rolf took a breath that added a full five inches to the girth of his barrel chest. He put the horn against his lips and drank. The level of the ale went down the horn and, as it sank, each Viking came slowly from his seat as though drawn erect by the falling of the brew. Down—down it went, and higher, even higher, was the tilt of the great cup in Rolf's hands.

Then, with victory seeming sure, Rolf faltered. He swayed. His blue eyes glazed. His grip faltered on the horn. The vessel tilted backward, crashed down with a ringing sound and rolled across the floor.

ALL THE Vikings stood frozen in surprise—all save Lars. His chair fell over as he rushed to Rolf's side past Freya's reaching arms. But Rolf stiffened and scowled and motioned Lars away. But only to reel and grope; to fall forward like a wind-blown tree and lie as though dead.

Freya knelt down beside him. The Vikings crowded forward. And, shouldered out by the sea-roving giants, the *norsevolk* clustered in the background and spoke among themselves.

They had doubted his ability to empty out the horn. And yet their surprise and consternation was just as great that he had failed. One by one, two by two, and in groups, they went silently out of the Common House as though they felt themselves the humiliation Rolf would know when he awakened.

Now only Freya, Lars, and a dozen Vikings remained. To the Vikings, Freya raised accusing eyes. She said, "You yourselves betrayed him! You let him drink too much at your stupid stag! How could he dry the

Golden Horn with forty horns of ale already drunk." She cradled Rolf's great head in her lap and wept.

One of the Vikings answered her: "He drank but little at the stag. The warmth of southern climates must have softened him."

Lars raised his head and snorted like a bull. "The man who said that better be prepared to fight!" he roared.

The incautious Viking dropped his eyes in confusion as Lars' hand went toward his blade. But Freya frowned. "Have done with words. All this bravado gets us nothing. Help me lift him to his bed."

As the Vikings lifted Rolf and carried him to his dwelling, Lars walked behind with Freya, muttering the while. "There's something rotten here. Rolf could swill ale 'til dawn and walk away. He could laugh with every Viking stiff beneath the board. But to keel over like a stripling in the sun! This smacks of Hangra's work!"

"But she was driven upland long ago," Freya protested.

"Still—many know the pathway to her door."

The Vikings laid Rolf upon his bridal bed. Then, lowering their eyes, they went away. Freya sat long and silently beside her snoring husband. Lars left, to return at a later hour. His face was grim and he was wiping dark blood from his sword.

"He still sleeps?"

"Far deeper than before. It seems that he has just begun to sleep."

"And so does Knute Swengorsen. But for a far longer time, unless he has a means of rising from the dead."

"What made you seek Knute Swengorsen out?"

"Because he was the only enemy Rolf had in the village. Knute yearned to wed with you himself. That I've known for a long time. At the point

of my blade he told a tale to make a man sick. He got a potion from the witch Hangra and put it in the Golden Horn."

"You killed him. Now death has marred my wedding night."

"Say rather just execution of a cow not fit to live. You'd best lie down beside your husband and share his dream this night, so long as there is nothing else to share. I have a trip to make into the mountains."

"You waste your time. Hangra cannot be slain by mortal man. Her savage wolves would tear your vitals out."

Lars scowled. "Rest with your husband, maiden, and leave the work of men to men. I yearn to stain my sword with the blood of a witch."

BOILING with rage, Lars left the *norsevillage* and moved toward the uplands further from the sea. The way was sharp and hard, but a pale moon lit the hills and Lars' expanding anger drove him on.

Halfway to Hangra's hut, a shadow fell across Lars' path. The shadow materialized into a wolf, snarled, and slashed with razor fangs at Lars' thigh.

The Viking's sword cut a silver path through the moonlight; a low-slung arc, and the wolf screamed like a soul dipped in hell's hottest brimstone. It slavered in fear and skulked away on three legs, and upon the path in front of Lars lay a severed wolf's foot.

Lars bent and picked it up. The blood, fast running from the ankle, dripped to the ground and then all the blood was gone. But, strangely, under the soft fur gripped in Lars' hand, there was a strong, even pulse beat as though the thing still lived. Lars thrust the paw into his belt and strode on up the mountain.

More shadows came—to turn into

gray bodies, hate-filled eyes, great mouth-caverns, filled with fangs. Lars' sword slashed out again and again, but the wolves were careful now. They slipped like water away from his blade, but ever to whirl and come at him again.

Finally, in a great spasm of frustrated rage, Lars dropped his sword and seized the closest beast in his doubled fists. The creature had leaped at his throat and he caught it full in the air, its jaws agape. His hands wrapped true around the jaws, both top and bottom. Then, his legs set wide apart, he tore the beast asunder with one great retching of his muscled chest, until it hung lifeless, split from snout to belly.

"Take that and dine on it, you fiends," Lars yelled, and hurled the carcass at the circling wolves. They fell upon it like the wolves they were, and Lars climbed on. But, strangely, in his belt, the wolf paw continued with its steady, even beat.

Lars found Hangra on the boulder where she seemed to spend much time these days. He drew his sword and hailed her in a ringing voice. "I'm going to kill you, witch! The potion for the Golden Horn was no doubt Knute's idea. But you must share the guilt with him and die. Even now great Rolf lies in a stupor from your handiwork."

SHE watched him from the rock above, her green eyes smouldering with an abstract fire. "The potion Knute desired and the one he got were entirely different," she replied. "Nor should you blame poor Knute Swengorsen too much. He was but what he was, a weak mortal shell. And his visit to my hut was in reality long foreordained."

"You speak in silly riddles. You try to fend off my wrath with words. Come down and meet your fate."

Hangra came to her feet and her green eyes burned. "Silly Viking!"

"I tore your wolves asunder with my bare hands. I sent them slinking into the brush. And now I'll slay their evil mistress."

Her smile was a twisted leer as she replied, "You had no cause to kill my pets. They were a committee of welcome. They sought to lick your face in friendship."

Lars sprang toward the rock, his sword upraised. Hangra croaked, "You cannot slay me, fool! Perhaps you have no fear of my poor powers. Would this reshape your views?"

She waved her cane. A stream of blue fire welled from its tip to lance out and knock Lars' sword from his grip. This done, the flame formed into a hissing, crackling spiral that wrapped around him, forming a cage.

"Stand where you are, Viking! Move not an inch. To touch that fire with so much as a fingertip will spell your death."

Lars stared in wonder at the quivering flame, then heard Hangra's words continuing: "I have no wish to see you stiff in death. And as to Rolf, have you no fear. He sleeps in order that he may fulfill a destiny in which you'll share. Rolf has become a chosen one of forces far beyond your ken or mine. He will awaken soon, so return to your village, for you carry with you a talisman you both will need. A magic tool to guide you on the way you both must go."

Lars' rage had faded and great wonder took its place. He pulled, frowning, at his beard. "There's something here too deep for me." He studied Hangra, then hastened to add: "Think not for a moment that I fear this blue-fire cage. Were I still so inclined, I'd walk right through it and cut your heart from its place in your skinny chest."

Hangra grinned ever so slightly. "That I know full well, brave Viking, and I consider myself fortunate that I have talked you out of such a deed."

Lars pondered. "Yes, your words, while I don't understand them, seem ponderous and full of wisdom. You promise that no harm will come to Rolf?"

"I promise nothing of the sort. It is not within my power. Both he and you may die. We all may die. Return to your village now. You'll find he's learned much that you should know."

As though having forgotten the fire, Lars stooped to pick up his sword. Hangra's hand moved slightly, and the fire bent away from him in all directions; then it faded into nothingness.

Lars, deep in thought, sheathed his weapon and turned down the hill. He walked slowly and came to a halt as Hangra's voice pursued him: "Guard well the wolf paw in your belt. You'll find that Rolf knows what to do with it."

Lars continued on and anyone within earshot could have heard him muttering, "It's not that I was afraid. It's just that discretion is a part of valor that should not be overlooked. When one fights demons, one only does the best one can. One strives to stay alive."

He increased the speed of his lagging feet now, and was suddenly conscious of the wolf's paw pulsing evenly in his belt.

IT WAS well into the night when he reached the *norsevillage* and went straight to Rolf's dwelling place. All was quiet as he pushed his way into the bed chamber where Rolf lay. As before, Freya sat by the bedside, waiting patiently for her husband to awaken. Rolf's huge form lay quiet on the bed.

But, as though Lars' entrance were a signal, Rolf stirred, and Freya

leaned quickly forward. "His eyes are opening," she whispered. "He is awakening."

This was true. As Lars and Freya watched, Rolf sat up and looked around the chamber. There were signs of great bewilderment in his expression. He passed a hand across his forehead and asked, "How came I back so quickly?"

"Back from what place, my love?" Freya inquired of him. "You have not been away. Not since you returned in your galley from the south."

Rolf continued to gaze around him. "That was long before. Since then I traveled to a strange place—high in mountains so tall they dwarfed the peaks we know here in the Northland."

Freya pressed an anxious question: "Do you not recall our wedding, Rolf? The feast in the Common House and your drinking from the Golden Horn?"

"Aye, that I remember well, but it was very long ago. Much has happened since."

"It was only yesterday," Lars said. "Regardless of how things appear to you, the facts are these, and mark them well because they are true. You fell into a faint while drinking from the Golden Horn and we brought you to your bed. For hours, you've lain in a stupor and are just awaking now."

Rolf stared full into Lars' face and the latter stood frozen. It was as if Lars had never seen this man before. Swiftly he scanned the giant Viking's face. The features, taken singly, seemed the same: the jutting hawk's nose; the high forehead; the great mane of golden hair. Yet in assembly, they seemed to mark a different man.

THEN LARS saw what had changed. The eyes. New fires burned within them now. The icy, northern blue was gone, and in its

place were azure fires reminding Lars of those the witch Hangra had used to trap him in the uplands. And Lars was filled with awe at what he gazed upon and could not understand.

He came forward and placed a hand upon Rolf's knee. "It was a potion in your drink that laid you low—put there by Knute Swengorsen and brewed by Hangra in the hills. Knute Swengorsen I killed, and hastened up the mountains to do the same to Hangra."

Lars shifted his eyes and split his telling so that Freya was also included. "But I came upon strange things. There is more to this than Knute Swengorsen's jealousy. Hangra spoke of things foreordained, and in the telling, I got the feeling she is not so evil as we've always thought. Now tell us what occurred within your dream."

Rolf got up and stretched his mighty legs. "I must go forth and slay an evil god," he said.

Tears came to Freya's eyes. "Somehow I knew, there in the Common House, that wedded ecstasy was not for me. What god is this that you must slay, and why?"

"Come," said Rolf.

He led them from the dwelling place and stood in the open gazing at the sky. For a time he stared only at the moon; then gave this over and let his eyes wander across the star-filled heavens, stopping now and again to study some intricate pattern upon the inverted surface of the dark-blue bowl above. Then he raised his arm and pointed to a large red star close to the horizon.

"The god comes from there," he said. "I traveled far with Hangra in my dream. Just how it was done, I do not know, but I learned many things. She showed me somewhat of how things are made; knowledge I did not have before. She showed me that the stars are not just pin pricks in the

night where light comes through, but worlds like ours upon which people live."

Both Lars and Freya were silent. All this was beyond them and smacked of insanity. Yet such was Rolf's intensity, it did not occur to either of them to doubt.

"She showed me then a ship not built for land or sea; a giant tear drop fashioned in a forge and made to sail the void." He was still pointing at the baleful red star. "It came from there," he said, "straight toward our world. And in its hold, there rides this evil god who must be slain. If this god triumphs, earth will end its days, overrun with vermin eating out the life of every living thing."

"What does this god look like?" Lars asked. "And how will all this vermin come to be?"

ROLF FROWNED. "I cannot answer you—I do not know. There was a mist that covered everything. But I saw Hangra's eyes and heard our own gods speak in thunder from the skies. In Hangra's eyes and in the thunder, only this was clear: The evil god must die. I tell you even our gods are afraid, and Hangra trembles for the world."

Lars was staring also at the star. "Hangra told me something of this tonight and said I also fitted into the scheme. The details all are news to me, and I will test you now to see if this be truth or just some hoax to fill up Hangra's time."

"What test have you?"

"Tell me—what talisman do I carry that will be needed, and how will it be used?"

Rolf did not hesitate: "There is a place flanked with high mountains; the top of the world, it seemed. It is to this place we must go to find the god, and in your belt you have a wolf paw Hangra gave you."

"She gave it not! I took it from her

beast."

"She sent her beast. The wolf paw has a pulse beat in it and as we make our way across the sea and land, the paw will show the way."

Freya was weeping quietly. "How?" she asked. "By running on before?"

"No. But if our path be true, the pulse will beat. If not the pulse will fail. We have but to follow—it will lead the way."

"I still don't understand," Freya pursued. "Why was my husband chosen for this mission? And you say our gods are fearful in Valhalla. That cannot be true."

"Our gods are fearful for the world. They are powerless before this alien god."

"And Hangra's magic? That is powerless too?"

"The only power that can destroy this god is a strong right arm and several feet of steel."

Lars had taken the wolf paw from his belt. He handed it to Rolf. "There is your talisman." It lay in Rolf's palm and Freya reached forth and took it. Her eyes widened.

"A paw severed and still beating with the rhythm of a heart. There's much in this to cancel out all doubt. And vet..."

"When do we leave?" Lars asked.

"We've already waited far too long. The time is very short."

"Then I will rouse the men?"

"One man. Call Jorgen only. We must travel fast and light 'cross half a world."

FREYA MOVED close to him, her eyes again brimming with tears. "Is the rush so great that you must leave a virgin bride? Cannot the god-slayer become a husband first and his virgin bride a wife?"

Rolf took her in his arms, then pressed her back. "I will return," he said, "knowing you'll keep yourself for me."

She stood erect and there was misery in her eyes. "That you can always

know, for it is truth. But still scant comfort for the one you leave."

But he scarce heard her. He'd turned to Lars and the fever in his own eyes had increased. "The wind is fair and will remain so for a time to come. We raise the sail and ride the waters. That much I know. Bring Jorgen to me in my dwelling place."

Silently, Freya helped her husband dress; wound up the leather thongs that held his leggings on; fastened his belt and then—though it took all her strength—insisted that she lift the great horned helmet; and while he knelt, she put it on his head. Then she had one last word. Simply, she said, "Please do not go, my lord. My heart tells me you will not return; that I will await you, barren, knowing and wanting no other man, 'til I am old and toothless and alone."

Rolf's laughter boomed against the ceiling. "Have no such doubts, sweet wife. I will return when this great deed is done, and we will raise strong sons to sail the seas and bring us wealth in our old age. But go I must."

Freya lowered her head in submission. "Then I will say no more. One kiss, my husband."

They kissed, and as Rolf released his bride, the room seemed full of giants. Lars himself took up a lot of space, but the two with him, added to the bulk of mighty Rolf, seemed to bend the walls of the chamber.

"Here is Jorgen," Lars said. "He understands it not, nor did I bother to explain too much, but he is agreeable."

JORGEN was of the Viking cut. Broad, red-faced, yellow-haired. But in his eyes was a certain bovine look—a dullness as though not too great an intelligence roosted behind them. But none could question the loyalty he gave his Chief.

"My sword is ready," he said. That was all.

But Rolf's attention was held by

the fourth man in the room. A giant Nubian who stood with folded arms. Naked to the waist, he appeared to be built of shiny black mahogany. His muscles bulged and rippled beneath his ebony skin.

"This slave I know," Lars said. "I talked with him on the galley coming north. We took him during a raid in Gaul—hailed him off a slave platform where he lay chained."

"But I said bring only Jorgen," Rolf cut in.

"True, but this slave will be valuable. He speaks five languages. He has served many masters in many lands. His tongue would be of use to us."

Rolf considered, then nodded his head. "You are right, but no man goes on this journey as a slave." Turning to the Nubian, Rolf said, "What is your name, fellow?"

"Tazor is what I'm called." The Nubian's eyes were flat, expressionless.

"We go on a long and perilous journey, from which all of us may not return. Do you wish to go with us, sharing our hardships and our rewards—as a free man?"

"I was taken as a slave at four," Tazor replied. "My father was a slave and his, and his again. Freedom I never had so I do not know whether I'd have use for it or not. But I will go with you and do my best."

"Strike off his chains," Rolf said. "Give him a belt and weapons and a cloak."

The Nubian was supplied. Water and ale and food were put upon the ship. Rolf kissed his wife again as Tazor raised the sail. Then, with a mighty push, Rolf sent the galley off the sand—into the sea—to follow it and climb aboard.

The freshened pre-dawn winds filled the dragon-canvas and the galley

sheared to the south as Jorgen laid the rudder over hard. White water chopped across the prow.

Then, in the faint false dawn, the sharp eyes of the Viking Rolf beheld a figure on the rocky point beside the *fjord*; saw Freya's hair streaming in the breeze, her arm upraised. Heard her call out, "Farewell, god-slayer. May fortune favor you!"

"I will return," Rolf called. Then he turned his eyes forward and never again looked back.

DAY AFTER day came up at dawn to pass and sink into the western sea. Rolf paced the walk between the empty galley benches and grudged each passing hour. Lars, too, seemed impatient.

"The land crawls by," Rolf growled. "Would that we had a ship the like of which I saw within my dreams."

Lars shrugged. "Wishing is of no help. We can but bide our time and hope our talisman proves faithful."

Rolf took the severed wolf paw from his belt. "The pulse beats strong and true."

Lars scowled. "I'll have more faith in that claw when I find it can do otherwise."

The faith of the Viking was bolstered four days later when the land they skirted began to fade away toward the east; when Rolf brought forth the wolf paw and called, "Hold! The beat is fading out. It's almost gone!"

Lars ran forward and found that it was true. "According to this hairy pilot," Lars said, "we've gone off course. What are your orders now?"

"Cleave to land!" Rolf shouted. "Jorgen—over on the rudder! Tazor—bend the sail!"

Upon command, Jorgen brought the rudder hard over, the Nubian hurled his strength against the mast and

brought the square sail around until the ship heeled eastward. After a few minutes, Rolf nodded and handed the wolf paw to Lars. Again the beat was strong and even. Lars stared at the grisly trophy in his palm and said, "This thing fair makes my skin creep!"

Later, with the stolid Jorgen holding the rudder—as he would hold it, if necessary, until Kingdom Come—the other three were standing in the bow.

"Tell me, Nubian," Rolf said, "do you know anything of these lands we pass?"

Tazor's dark, expressionless eyes played back and forth along the shore. "This, I believe, is the far northern part of the Gallic lands. We travel to the east, but not the east of spices and of palms. They must be reached much further south as you well know. I have never been this way before, but I think that trouble lies ahead for our ship. I fear the waters end in ice on one side and the vast land from whence came the Mongols on the other."

"The wind holds fair as it has held for days," Rolf said. "According to our talisman, we must go on."

The Nubian looked silently at Lars and Rolf—then said, "You told me when we left the shore that I was free."

"That's true, you are."

"Then I may not be amiss in giving voice to curiosity. I have a natural wonder as to what land you seek—what place we go. Considering the route we take, my wonder increases."

"You have a right to know, my friend. We've kept you in the dark from carelessness, not plan."

IMMEDIATELY, between them, the two Vikings told the Nubian of all that had occurred. The part that

Hangra played—the mission she had given Rolf to kill a god in some far place.

Tazor looked flat eyed at the wolf paw, took it in his hand and felt its pulse. His expression did not change. "I long to speak my mind," he said, "but never having been so bold before—"

"Speak out, man," Rolf growled. "What must I do to prove to you you're free?"

Tazor tossed the wolf paw into the air—caught it. "This could be but a trick," he said. "In the bazaars of Alexandria I've seen fakirs turn iron rods to snakes. I've seen a dog beheaded and then go about its business sniffing in the rubble. Yet all was fraud, done by suggestion of the fakir into the minds of those who watched. The witch you tell of could be no more than they. A creature with the ability to creep into men's minds and leave her own will there."

Lars blinked. "The man speaks wisdom. If one grows as wise as this by being a slave, we should all spend a few years in chains."

Tazor's smile was a brief and fleeting thing. "I do not call this fraud. I only say it could be. But as to its being so, there is one point that gives me pause."

"And that?"

"You say this witch told you the earth is round and that all the stars above are also round—other earths we see at night because the sun reflects against them."

"That she told me," Rolf said.

"All that is truth, and no magic is involved. Wise men have discovered these things by human means but are afraid to speak out for fear of being tortured and killed."

"Then Hangra spoke the truth!" Lars said.

"That, to me," Tazor said, "is the strange part of it. How this witch in

the northern wilds can know these things is far beyond me."

"She is very old," Rolf said. "I have known of her since my childhood. She could have come from some far place."

"Driven away for speaking the truth possibly. But on one point she is in error."

Lars could bend in any direction with the slightest breeze. He said, "Ho! You caught one of her lies? I spotted several myself."

"This god she sent you to slay. He is no god. When the time comes—if it does—for you to drive your sword into him, you will find him flesh. Even though he comes from some far world in a ship we do not understand, he is mortal. That I know."

"And why are you so sure?"

"First, there is the tendency of all mortals to blame all they do not understand on gods. Hangra had wind of something she did not understand and so she calls the perpetrator—this interloper from the void—a god."

"Second, you were selected to oppose him because of your girth and strength. Probably no man on this earth or from any other world could stand before you. But what chance would you with your puny steel—or any of us have—against a supernatural entity?"

Rolf's eyes burned. "Such wisdom from a man who spent his life in slavery!"

"Any wisdom I have gained," Tazor said, with the same quick, fleeting smile, "is probably the result of being forced to keep my mouth shut and listen. One hears much in a lifetime."

ROLF TOOK the wolf paw into his hand and stared at it. "We'll still depend on this," he said.

"Of course. But depend more on

what is in your own heart; in the confidence you have in your own destiny. What place was it you saw while in your trance?"

"There were high, rugged mountains, raging storms and flying snow so thick you couldn't see your hand."

"That could be in the mountains north of the Roman boot. Or further east, where the backbone of the world runs like a spine above the land called India."

"But the place we seek," Rolf said, "was bare of snow, and warm. There was broad blue water and a place this ship of space could come to earth."

"India's holy men tell of such places in the highest mountain spine. But how a witch so far away could know—"

Lars yawned, then slapped the Nubian cheerfully upon the back. "Enough of this deep talk. So much wisdom in so short a time fair spins my brain. It's time for food and ale. The rest will keep."

"I am without hunger now," the Nubian said. "I'll take the place of Jorgen. I'm sure he thirsts for ale far more than I."

"My appetite is also gone," Rolf said, and moved toward the bow where he stood deep in thought. Soon he was scowling and in his eyes was a look of bewilderment. He shook his great yellow mane like a bull beset by insects. "Something full strange is happening to me," he muttered.

And truly, it was strange indeed. Since Rolf had awakened from his sleep, his very mind seemed changed. He had become conscious, it appeared, of a new, invisible world within the air. Now and again there were soft, vague whisperings in his ears. And yet not so, but rather in his brain. Not words, spoken in sound, but images of thought, complete and whole, projected from without.

It was as though his mental eyes had been opened to a vast new vista of thought-traffic flowing constantly; but still like whisperings in a dark room. Just now, as the dragon-ship clove west, and Lars went unperturbed about his meal, Rolf felt the impact of a message spanning space. His new-found senses told him it was from the mind of Hangra in the hills. The message came, but it was not for him.

This he knew, because the message was a plea—the calling of a name repeated many times.

Rollo—Rollo—Rollo, far in the land of Gaul. Rollo who has a mighty cross of gold—give ear!

Again and again the image picture came until the bewildered Rolf felt a sense of guilt, as though he crouched to listen by a wall. Suddenly he turned and bawled aloud: "Lars! I have changed my mind. Pour me a horn of ale. I'll drink with you!"

Book 2

The Scourge of Mars

LORK, THE Hermit Scientist of Mars, stood at the highest window of his isolated tower and watched the destruction of a planet. He was a handsome man this Lork, by Martian standards. He stood four feet two inches in height—quite tall. His body was acceptably spindling and insignificant and his magnificent head measured twenty-eight inches from ear to ear. This afforded him a brain pan unmatched in size by any on the planet. Also, the ray examination given by law to all Martians revealed his brain surface as having over a foot of channeling to the square inch. In short, Lork was one of the most notable achievements of a twenty-thousand-year-old civilization. A human brain developed to its ultimate.

WHOM THE GODS WOULD SLAY

His broad face was entirely expressionless as he studied the devastation going on about him—as he looked out over the wide plains stretching in all directions from his tower, to see the solid mass of voracious black destruction.

It came in a great arc, this dark wall, moving ever forward to cover the land with itself. Before it, and disappearing relentlessly under the wall, were the green fields, the forests, the homes, the great farms that had fed all Mars. Here and there on the panorama before Lork, a scattering of Martians in twos, threes, and small groups, staggered across the fields and waded the streams in a vain attempt to avoid their certain fate.

But these last few moved slowly now, their strength almost gone. They were only a handful to the multitudes, almost the entire population of the planet, that had already fallen and been consumed by the black wall during the six awful months of its existence.

Lork, tiring of the distant black monotony, desired a closer look. He shut his eyes and projected a mental reflector across the green area surrounding his tower, thus bringing the moving wall within a few feet of his scrutiny.

The ants, of which it was made up, were jet black and about five inches in length. They had four legs on each side of their tuberous bodies, and each one possessed a pair of mandibles capable of snapping a fragment of rock into two fragments. Their speed was amazingly swift—a steady forward sweep of slightly over seven miles an hour, and they left nothing in their path. The forward edge of the wall got the cream of the forage, of course, but the hungrier waves coming along behind consumed the very fiber of the trees and the remains of animal structures right down to

the last fragment of bone.

The Ants of Lall left behind them only the rock and earth they walked upon.

LORK'S MENTAL processes now were based primarily upon the fact that he could do nothing about this destruction. Therefore, he viewed it with an entirely objective attitude. He was incapable of emotions such as hate, greed, fear, regret, so the approaching moment of his own destruction and that of the few students he housed in his tower, was a matter of no great interest.

No—not entirely true. There was a tinge of regret in his mind, but for the reason that he must die with certain questions unanswered; questions concerning this ant horde of Lall's. Computing swiftly, Lork ascertained to a nicety his own life expectancy. It came to three hours and slightly more than nine minutes. He didn't bother cutting it any finer than that, and immediately turned his mind again to the major question that plagued him.

As a preliminary, he created an immense mental reflector and boarded it, so to speak, for a trip around the planet. The job of destruction, he saw, was almost completed. From pole to pole, the ant hordes lay from three to four inches thick on more than nine-tenths of the planet. The final tenth would soon be covered.

But not quite all of it, and that was what puzzled Lork. As he spanned and respanned the globe, he visited again the tiny sanctuaries, the small havens invariably shunned by the ant hordes. These sanctuaries were of course crowded with Martians. It was amazing to see the ant wall split as one of these small areas was approached, surge around it in two directions, and merge again on the far side. Of course these places were but false security for the refugees crowded into them.

The Martians so sheltered would die in the end regardless—die of want and starvation. But the point of interest to Lork was the fact that the ants avoided—without exception—every shrine and place of worship on Mars. These and these alone were the sanctuaries.

This completely baffled Lork's superbly objective and scientific mind. He was not averse to orthodox religion, but neither was he a religious man. He had visited the great shrines and had found the cool interiors restful and refreshing. He had admired the fine works of art on the altars, but the spiritual significance of these temples of orthodox religion failed to touch him. Even now, with surviving Martians hailing their temporary deliverance as a miracle—knowing beyond all doubt that their god was protecting them—Lork refused to accept this as an answer.

WHY, HE asked himself again and again, do the ants avoid the shrines? He did not wish to die with this knowledge ungained.

He had wrestled with the problem for an hour and a half now, and he was going to have to give it up because there was another question to be answered. This last was not a scientific conundrum, but it interested him nonetheless. It concerned Lall.

Why was she destroying the planet upon which she herself had to live? Was not this the equivalent of suicide? Why was she doing this?

Seeking an answer, Lork projected to that small portion of the planet he had not recently visited, the high polar cap where Lall made her headquarters. She was, of course, in no danger from the ants, nor was her small band of husbands, but she and they depended—as did all other Martians—upon the edible outgrowths of the planet itself. Yet she was destroy-

ing the surface of this planet as fast as she could manage it.

Lork was cognizant of Lall's mental makeup. She was enjoying all this immensely. Since the fool Martian Council had banished her to the pole—instead of executing her as Lork had recommended—her great ambition had been to avenge the insult and humiliation. But she was no fool. Certainly she would not do this at the expense of her own destruction. She must have a plan, and Lork yearned, in an entirely abstract manner of course, to know what it was.

He brought his mental projection to bear on the polar cap, arriving there just as Lall, surrounded by her five husbands, approached the vast dome-shaped building around which the other buildings clustered and stood waiting for the door to open.

Lork studied Lall with objective curiosity. He knew what she was, of course; nothing more nor less than a huge queen ant. A most interesting history had preceded her.

She had been born of normal parents—a male and female antedating the great two-hundred-year Improvement Period, that era when the human race was scientifically up-bred just as cattle had been scientifically up-bred generations before, and with just as brilliant results. As cattle were bred for meat, so were humans bred for brain and intelligence. They diminished in stature and broadened in skull capacity and scope of intellect.

There were various phases of experimentation, of course, before the correct formula was hit upon, some of which was to the eternal disgrace of all Mars. This last—in the main—by a clique of scientists who came momentarily into power and attempted to transplant the unerring and little understood instincts of certain insects into the perfect human male and

female. They were caught up with and speedily eliminated, these fanatics, and it was believed they did little damage. In fact, their tampering was all but forgotten when—ten generations later—Lall was born to obscure and apparently normal parents.

SHE WAS a throwback of the most startling kind. Physically, she represented the perfect female form of the pre-enlightened age; tall, with smoothly rounded limbs, prominent breasts, and all the facial beauty with which uncontrolled nature endowed females for the purpose of attracting and stimulating males and thus increasing the birthrate. Had this been the entire extent of her peculiarities, she would have been merely a lovely, but rather sad freak. A lonesome beauty in an enlightened age that had no need of female beauty.

But Lall developed other tendencies; sexual appetites that bordered upon the obscene and were thus classed until she was examined by the Martian Medical Board and the truth became known; that the unfortunate creature had borne the brunt of those awful experiments of the long ago. Physically she was a woman, but her off-spring assumed a far different shape. Startled doctors were forced clear down the insect gamut to the queen ant in order to find a counterpart to Lall's procreational activities.

Mentally, the insect world had captured her completely. She had the instincts to a nicety—all the cunning and the sadistic cruelty of the ant. These traits, coupled with unusual human intelligence, made her a problem over which the responsible elements of Martian society had to pass judgement.

The verdict was exile, and that verdict, rendered without the authorities knowing of Lall's vast physical resources and procreational powers,

set the death seal upon a planet. The execution of that planet was now being carried on.

All this flashed through Lork's mind while he watched Lall as she waited for the door of the great building to open. And also, just before the answer to his second question was revealed.

This answer came when the door opened and he followed Lall and her husbands inside the building; when he saw the ship.

Lork's surprise was deep and genuine because this space ship he was staring at had no legal right to exist. Ten years prior to this time—shortly after the first successful space flight to the smaller of Mars' two moons—space ships and space flights had been outlawed by the Supreme Council as being contrary to the long-range principal of isolationism written into the Second Martian Constitution eleven centuries before.

The four ships known to have existed had been cut up and turned into scrap metal. Or so it had been announced. Evidently, Lall had found a way to corrupt certain public officials.

THIS, HOWEVER, did not interest Lork to any great extent. Of more importance to him was the fact that one of his questions was answered. Lall had no intention of remaining on Mars to starve. She planned, obviously, to leave the dead planet and seek a home somewhere else in the solar system. But where?

This, Lork speedily learned as he moved close to peer over her shoulder while she studied a solar map handed her by one of her husbands. A planet was encircled thereon. The one closest to Mars and slightly nearer the sun. Quite logical, Lork thought.

At that moment, a hand touched

Lork's shoulder. He started, glanced around, and was again standing, both physically and mentally, at the high window in his tower. Pralt, one of his students, coughed apologetically as he withdrew his hand.

"Sorry," Lork said, "I was projecting."

"Didn't mean to disturb you. Just wanted to call your attention to the ants. They're almost to the base of the tower. It won't be long now."

Lork glanced down. "You're right. We won't have long to wait. It will be interesting—the experience of death."

"I'm looking forward to it. So are the others."

"By the way, my projection was quite successful. I answered one of the questions."

"Really? Why do the ants avoid the shrines?"

"Not that one. I discovered why Lall is not afraid to destroy Mars. She has a space ship. She is going to the planet called Earth."

"Ah! Official corruption. Too bad there's no use doing anything about it."

"Have you ever been to Earth?" Lork asked.

"No. I've tried, but I've never been able to project that far."

"I made it twice. Very backward planet. Still slicing each other up with knives. Not a bad lot though."

Pralt sighed. "Certainly wish we could figure out why the ants avoid the shrines."

Lork glanced down to where the ants were exploring the lower bastions of the tower. It was only a matter of nine and three-quarter minutes now. "Why don't you work a few more equations on it?" Lork said. "I'd do it, but I'm going to be rather busy."

"Doing what?"

"Try to warn Earth of Lall's coming. I think I can push some tele-

pathic pictures through."

"But you say they're backward. There won't be a mind on Earth capable of receiving the pictures."

"Maybe not, but it's worth a try. An attempt will satisfy my sense of justice."

"In the meantime, I'll try some advanced theoretical equations on that shrine problem."

THE TWO scientists placidly seated themselves, and each went about his work as the sound of ant mandibles grinding through rock became audible from below. Lork's huge head quivered as he created an electrical field around it. He closed his eyes and his magnificent brain began functioning—creating clear mental pictures and hurling them out into the void. The space ship was excellent material with which to work. It had color and size, two of the pre-requisites for the ideal mental image.

Meanwhile, Pralt sat with folded hands, building and rejecting equations with a speed that turned his thought-channel into a silver blur. Because time was limited, he also adopted a color pattern, designating red as the unvarying clue. That way he could spin the equations through his brain without check and merely watch for a flash of red.

The minutes passed. The sound of a million ant-claws climbing the tower was first a faint whisper; then it became the sound of wind blowing across a field of ripe grain. Now the grinding of ten million jaws as the ants did away with the sashes of the lower windows. The tower trembled. There was a dread and fateful sound in the stair-tunnel outside the door.

Pralt saw a flash of red in his thought train.

Glancing at the door, he flung his mind after the stained equation and dragged it back. If they would only

give him a few more seconds. The door shivered, bent like paper, disappeared.

"I've got it," Pralt said. "The shrine is *Y shaded*—the ant horde, *calandra theorized*."

Lork rationalized it and allowed himself an instant of mild surprise. "Well I'll be damned," he said. "I'll try and tell Earth."

But he never knew whether or not he succeeded. A moment later he was experiencing the equation of death.

LALL, ALL her evil beauty glowing, fiercely joyful, looked down from the port window of the space ship as it blasted up into the thin atmosphere over Mars. It was a black planet now; a globe covered with crawling, twisting death; a symbol of her triumph—her magnificent revenge.

"Tell the pilot to circle once or twice," she said. "I want to look it all over before we go."

One of the huge-headed husbands who gave her constant attendance, sprang up to relay the order. As the ship levelled away on a fiery tail to skim the black surface below, Lall declaimed for the benefit of her three remaining spouses: "They know now what it means to humiliate me."

The Martian men replied in unison: "Yes, Lall."

"Never was a revenge so complete—so entirely satisfactory."

"No, Lall."

Knowing full well what kept these miserable males in line, Lall turned casually, opened her robe, readjusted and belted it while pretending not to hear the collective catching of their breath.

"That despicable Lork! The one who recommended my death. I would like to have witnessed his final agonies. How he must have writhed and screamed!"

"Yes, Lall."

She turned and flung up her lovely arms in a gesture of triumph. "Lork and all of them! That stupid Council! Those doctors who examined me as though I were a freak! The wives who screamed for my death, The husbands who allowed me to be exiled and shamed. All of them died in agony and I rejoice! Do you hear that? Rejoice!"

"Yes, Lall."

She turned again to the window and—looking down—she softened. A tender light came into her eyes. "My ants," she whispered. "My poor, poor ants. Nothing more to eat. No one to watch over them. They too must die."

"Yes, Lall."

"But it will be a worthy death and they will not mind because they love me as I love them." She lowered her eyes under thick, dark lashes and looked like nothing so much as a beautiful virgin, trembling in anticipation of her wedding night. "But there will be more ants. Many more."

The husbands leaned forward and put eagerness into their reply: "Yes, Lall!"

"Now I tire," Lall said. "Tell the pilot I have kissed my brood goodbye. Off to the far planet and new conquests!" Her voice softened, "Tell him also that he will be favored this night."

THE MARTIAN men drooped a trifle upon hearing this, each because of his own personal disappointment. Yet it was perfectly proper, because the pilot was Lall's fifth husband.

"You may leave now," she said. "I would rest."

"Yes, Lall," they replied, and trooped out.

Alone, the ant queen lay down upon her lounge and closed her eyes. She was weary, what with the tremendous strain of arranging everything and the

prolonged period of egg-laying which preceded her savage destruction of all living things on Mars.

But even above that, there was *the problem* adding mental strain to the physical. Lall knew without being told—knew from age-old instinct—that continued procreation was as necessary to her as the air she breathed. The law which governed her existence was clear on that point: Breed or die. Perpetuate or wither into a husk and blow away.

She found no personal pleasure in this monotonous process and often cried out against her unhappy fate. But, nonetheless she was forced to face it and the problems it conjured up.

The greatest of these was males to use in this unending process. She had had a great deal of trouble on that score all during her mature life. Martian civilization had gone through the period of enlightenment long before she had been born, and a great majority of the Martian males looked upon her physical beauty with complete disinterest. The five husbands she now possessed had been gotten only after long and weary searching. And invariably, the Martian male who responded to mere physical beauty was an inferior specimen. This hurt the quality of the eggs she produced, a thing she bitterly resented. Mulling the problem over in her mind, she thought with fierce joy of the ten and twelve inch ants she could produce with virile mating. And also came the gnawing worry relative to the five husbands she had. They would not last much longer. All too soon they would become hollow shells, husks to wither and die as she herself would wither and die if she found no males to replace them.

Then, deeply weary, her eyelids drooped and she slept like a tired, beautiful child.

ROLLO THE Viking was the happiest of men. Not filled with the wild, false happiness he'd come to know in his more violent years, but deeply ingrained now with a contentment he had earned through long hours of penance and meditation.

With sorrow, he had watched his true friend Rolf turn coldly northward; stared with tear-filled eyes as the dragon-ship heeled the breeze and rode away down the wide Gallic river toward the sea.

But he sent a blessing on the wind to guard the mighty Rolf and see him safely home. Then he turned with a heavy heart toward his own sorry affairs.

So much there was to remember and regret; so many hours of repentant agony to be spent at the foot of the cross before the evil he had done could be atoned. But there were times of great joy, also. These came when he was privileged to pore over the old documents, the priceless parchments that told of Christ the Savior.

To the changed Rollo, each of the carefully scrolled words of the patient monks was a burning symbol; and the meaning of the words and phrases thrilled him to his very soul.

Once his heart had been touched by the magic of the Galilean, he had gone doggedly and methodically about the doing of what had to be done. He had knelt before the good monks and then had arisen to break his sword over his knee. Next, under their direction, his loot had been distributed among the poor until he had not a coin nor a piece of silver.

Then had come the penance; the hours and days on the cold stone before the church clad in but sackcloth with ashes on his head and sorrow in his heart.

Slowly, magically, the cleansing process was completed and came the day the good friar lifted him and

said, "Arise, my son and look upon the cross. Your heart is pure."

And such gladness went through the being of Rollo, he could scarce contain it. He looked for one glorious instant upon the glowing symbol of Christianity and murmured, "Oh Lord, I am not worthy," whereupon he again fell to his knees and prayed until the sweat stood out on his great muscles and he was like to faint.

Then he rose up and went about another duty; went straight to the cottage of Madella, the slim girl he'd seen first below his upraised sword and later in a burst of white, revealing light.

He sat beside her and took her hand in his and said, "I came to ask great happiness from you."

She smiled. "My hand?"

He shook his head. "Nay—release from my promise to you."

Her smile faded and there was sadness in her great brown eyes. "You do not love me?"

"It is not that. I think I love you more than any man. But I would take the greatest of all vows. I would vow chastity and service to Him from this day on. I love you well and you love me. But beside our love for Him, all else fades to a feeble glow."

She said, "I understand and I rejoice that I have seen this miracle occur. Such a short time ago, you came from down the river shouting oaths—filled with dark deeds and lust for our blood. And now I see a saint before my eyes."

He pressed her hand. "Far from a saint. Merely a humble one who wants to serve. Do I have your permission?"

"Go with God. I'll pray for you."

HE KISSED her lips and went back to the church; into the monastery of the monks to stand before the kindly abbey there. "I beg to spend my days within these walls.

Give me the meanest duties in your house. I'll mop the floors or plant the land or wash the tired feet of those who work. Command me, Father."

The keen and wise eyes of the abbey studied Rollo's face. His silence lasted while the sun bent down to bathe the room in fire through the deep-stained glass. Then he arose from his chair and told Rollo, "Come with me."

Rollo looked with wonder on the place they went. The abbey smiled and motioned toward the walls. "There," he said, "is our greatest treasure; the books and scrolls and manuscripts on which our faith is based. The word of God told in many ways and in many languages. This is your place, my son. Read, study, learn the tongues; and store up all the knowledge you can hold. This you must do, for even now I sense your destiny. The Church has need of fire such as yours."

The shorn Viking went joyfully to work and the day came swiftly when a papal scroll arrived: "*From this day hence—Rollo, Bishop of Ellenstein.*"

Rollo was taken with consternation. He said, "Father—I do not understand. The time has been so short."

Again the abbey smiled. "These are thin and dangerous years for Mother Church. Think not but what His Holiness considered well. You are tied with a silver cord to the Great Heart beating down in Rome."

Later, deep in his joy, Rollo called out, "We'll have one rich treasure here. A golden cross so great that none but a *norseman* has the strength to carry it. Call all the goldsmiths in!"

And it was done.

AT TWILIGHT, Rollo loved to walk in the cool gardens beside his modest dwelling place. Here he

could be alone among the flowers; could marvel at the wonders Heaven wrought upon the earth; could seek to come in rapport with his God.

Upon this night, he stayed quite late, breathing the cool perfumes. Then, suddenly, he sought the abbey out. Found the good cleric in his austere room.

The abbey sprang up all confused to say, "My son, it is not meet that you should come to me. You had but to raise your voice."

Rollo waved an impatient hand. "I would consult you here. Sit down by me."

They sat side by side on the hard iron bed and Rollo spoke: "I seek the counsel of your experience. A strange thing just occurred."

"What thing?"

"I was walking in the garden and it seemed that someone spoke to me."

"Some passerby no doubt."

"Not so. This voice was not a voice, but something more. A wave of consciousness that swept through me in silence and yet it was far more clear than any spoken word."

"A picture printed on the mind?"

"Aye—that."

"Describe the scene."

Rollo's brow was furrowed deep with thought before his words would come. "Strange. It should be a simple thing to do—yet it is not. One thing is clear. I saw a giant ship drawing a tail of fire across the sky. A ship the like of which no man has known. It was coming from some far place beyond the sky and rocketing toward earth like a falling star."

The abbey pursed his lips thoughtfully. "Strange—strange indeed."

"There was a mist far stranger yet that covered it. Or possibly a mist around my mind. At any rate, I sought to judge the thing—to see what lay within—but I could not. It was as if the substance blurred, but the essence

stood out crystal clear."

"And that essence—?"

"Was *evil*! So evil that I paled and felt a wave of weakness in my knees. Then, Father, I knew beyond all doubt that I must take my cross and go forth to meet this ship."

The abbey raised a hand and scratched his shaven pate. "The waters here are deep and dangerous. I scarce know what to think."

"The call to go was clear as any call I ever had."

The abbey still stared at the floor. "You tell me this—confide in me. Now tell me how you want me to reply."

"So I will know if I must go or stay."

THE ELDER man sat silent for a time—then raised his eyes and slowly shook his head. "That, my son, I cannot do. This only may I say: You are the Bishop here—not I. Your hand is in the Hand of God—not mine. It ill behoves a waddling duck to tell an eagle where to fly. The decision must be yours and yours alone."

Rollo sat for a time, sore troubled. Then the abbey said, "But this I tell you. I'll stake my love of truth on your decision whether it's to go or stay."

Rollo got suddenly to his feet. He took the old man's hand. "Thank you, Father. Now I know. I must obey the call. Come you with me to get the golden cross."

"You go alone?"

"I go alone."

"But where?"

Rollo stopped and stood deep in thought. "To the west. To a place where the river bends, then slightly north. I have no fear. I will be led aright."

Still troubled, the abbey said, "But all alone and carrying the cross. It is

so large two ordinary men can scarcely lift up its weight."

Rollo laughed. "You forget my heritage. I was a Viking in my wilder days. And in all the *norseland*, only one had greater strength than I."

"And who was he?"

"Rolf of the Golden Horn—God love his mighty heart!"

"And God preserve his soul. Farewell, Rollo, Bishop of Ellenstein. My prayers walk with you."

A few minutes later, an insomnia-ridden townsman glanced through the window of his poor hut to see the Bishop walking up the street. His Grace wore a gold-stitched yellow robe and on his head was the glittering mitre of his office. But stranger still, he carried in his two hands the golden cross no other man could lift.

The townsman spent a moment steeped in indecision. Then he hurried to his pallet to lie down trembling—to pull the ragged blanket over his head.

LALL PACED the confines of her cabin on the Martian space ship as it hurtled through black void. Now and again she stopped to peer out the window. But there was nothing to be seen but pit-blackness.

Even the sun had vanished. At first this phenomenon frightened Lall. But one of her husbands explained that this was to be expected. There was nothing against which it could shine; nothing to refract its rays. This calmed Lall's fears but did nothing to still the hot fires burning within her.

Memories of her Martian triumph helped some. She spent a great deal of the time in recalling details of her vengeance and regretting it could not have been more terrible.

Also, she planned. If this planet they approached was inhabited by intelligent beings, she could have more

happy hours. What she had done on Mars had kindled within her a fire which until now had only smouldered. Nothing in her lifetime had given her such pleasure as she'd gotten from witnessing the vast destruction. There would be more of it. Vengeance upon the whole solar system. The thought thrilled her. Planet after planet swept clean of all life save hers. The whole of known space populated only with the life she herself had created.

The possibility made her dizzy from the suggested scope of its power.

Finally the hour arrived when the space ship moved into a twilight zone and her pilot husband came to tell her the journey was almost completed. He pointed forward through the window.

"Our planet is only a few thousand miles ahead. I've cut speed. We'll circle it and see what we can find out."

Lall stared at the great globe. It was covered with a peculiar colorless pattern, ranging from white to dark gray. There was much more of the white and the darker hues than the intermediate.

The pilot explained: "The white and very dark indicates the planet is covered mainly with ice and water. The intermediate shades are the land masses."

Lall frowned. "There's very little land, it seems."

"No. The ratio is close to ideal. I'm almost certain the planet is inhabited."

"But by what manner of creatures do you suppose?"

THE PILOT, though a miserable and spineless creature in the hands of Lall, had an average Martian brain which meant his intelligence far transcended any found on Earth. "I'd say they are not a great deal different from ourselves. Basically, the evolutionary process is the same everywhere. If the higher forms of life

can exist at all on a planet, they would develop pretty much the same as on every inhabitable world. The conditions on the planet below should not differ greatly from those on our own world. We are pretty sure to find that the ruling race of creatures stands erect on two legs, has at least two arms and certainly hands with a well developed thumb attached."

Lall was interested. "How do you know these things?"

"Because the things I mentioned are causes, not results. They make the ruling race."

The planet had changed a great deal now as the ship circled it to slip gradually into the atmosphere surrounding it. Now the sun blazed forth and the color spectrum was again in evidence.

After use of an enlarging glass, the pilot reported to Lall: "The planet is inhabited, but not thickly. There are whole continents apparently uninhabited. Portions of other continents have a fairly thick dispersion of life, evidently both human and animal. The population is thickest, of course, in metropolitan areas, and these seem to be most numerous on the coasts of the continents.

"This indicates primitive methods of transportation, most long-distance hauls being made by water. Hence, a backward civilization in early stages of development. I see no sign whatever of air craft."

"How are the humans built physically?"

"Close observation is not possible at this speed, but from what I can see, they do not differ greatly from ourselves."

Lall pondered this information. The pilot asked, "What are your orders, Lall?"

"We are well armed, but still they may be dangerous. They'd probably try to destroy anything they don't

understand, and we could be overwhelmed. Therefore, we'd better select a landing field on the edge of a thinly populated area away from the cities. That will give us an opportunity to get our bearings and plan our future course."

THE PILOT made one more trip around and then cut speed as he flashed over what appeared to be the highest mountain range on the planet. He glided down the far side, over vast stretches of desolate, lonesome country. There he found the twisted course of a river cutting into the western part of the great continent below him to originate in the mountains to the northward.

"I see a likely spot there ahead," the pilot told Lall. "Wide, flat grassland on the bank of the river just by a small island. A snow-capped mountain range protects it on one side. In the other direction are dense forests."

Lall smiled. "Set down the ship. It seems an excellent spot." A look of tenderness was in her eyes. "Forests. Food for my ants—until they find red meat."

The ship came in smoothly under the skilled hand of the giant-headed Martian. He gauged the long, grassland runway to a nicety, bringing the vessel down with the nose tilted at just the right angle, the exhausts mixed to exactly the correct coloring to keep from sending the spaceship end over end.

The job finished, he breathed a sigh of relief and wiped the perspiration from his broad forehead. Lall smiled and rewarded him with a kiss. This, he obviously thought, was reward enough for any man. He raised his eyes to hers and trembled; but she straightened and the softness left her, her mind now encompassed with pressing problems.

The quartzite forward window revealed no dangers as she and her husband gazed out upon the new planet. "Everything seems much the same as we left behind us," the pilot said.

Lall smiled and the spreading of her lips revealed white sharp teeth back in her lovely mouth. "Not quite the same," she said.

"I meant the same as our planet used to be, except the growing things here—the trees and grass—are of a much paler hue."

"That's true. Not nearly so dark as ours."

"I see no signs of either human or animal life."

"We'll never find out standing here. Open the port and run out the ramp."

The pilot obeyed with some hesitation. Steeling his courage—what little of it he had—he led the way down the ramp and became the first Martian to place feet on the soil of Earth. It was to him, however, a dubious honor. He shared with many Martians—except those with completely developed abstract minds—an overabundance of physical cowardice. This base emotion was of course bred out of such Martians as Lork and Pralt. But in the common run of Martian males, those found still clinging to the exaggerated sexual urge were also supercharged with almost child-like timidity.

YET, IN the presence of Lall, the pilot tried valiantly to hide this weakness. He stood on the green grass of the valley with a flash-pistol gripped tightly in his fist. Close to him, Lall stood erect in beauty and arrogance, her head thrown back, hands braced against lovely hips, as she surveyed the valley.

Her other four husbands hung back near the ramp, set to dive into the bowels of the ship at the least sign of danger. Only the fear of earning

Lall's contempt had brought them forth at all.

"A likely place," the Ant Queen said.

"Yes, Lall," they echoed.

She laid a hand on the shoulder of her pilot husband. "I think you'd better do a little exploring. Circle around the whole area. See how deep the river is and find out if it can be crossed. See if any creatures are hiding in the trees."

"Yes, Lall," he gulped. Fearful as he was, he would die before letting her sense it, which was, of course, a kind of courage in itself.

He moved forward gingerly, stepping gently as though afraid of disturbing the grass under his feet. He felt a pain, a dull ache in his right hand—and realized it came from the agonized grip with which he enfolded the butt of his pistol.

After some progress downriver, he glanced back and his heart came close up in his throat as he saw that two hundred yards separated him from the safety of the ship. Lall waved a hand. He waved back, glad she could not see the sickly smile on his face. Turning again, he steeled himself. He must go on. The next time he turned to look, the ship was out of sight.

Gradually, as he traveled on, his fears lessened. This seemed an utterly deserted place. And pleasant, too. The air was pleasingly warm; the whispering of the trees in the forest he skirted was a sound of welcome and companionship.

There was a rather heavy drag upon his legs, an increased effort necessary to push one foot in front of the other; but this he understood. The atmosphere on this planet was denser than that on his home planet and the magnetic drag was greater.

But all in all, he suffered no great difficulty, and turned finally to test the depth of the river. At this par-

ticular spot it was quite broad and the waters showed no perceptible movement. He put a foot into it, found a bottom of hard sand, and moved out into the stream until the water licked at his belt.

This, he found, was its greatest depth. He waded on, leaning against the slow pull of the current, and stepped finally onto the other bank.

A QUICK spasm of fear shot through him as he realized how broadly he was cut off from the safety of the ship. Then the fear quieted somewhat, but it was with slow and careful steps that he approached the fringe of the forest.

Now it seemed not nearly so friendly and companionable. It was a forbidding wall, remindful of another wall he'd seen on his native planet not too long before. One that went forward tumbling always over itself and leaving no living thing in its path except the wall itself.

But the forest wall stood as in silent contemplation of the great-headed little creature that approached it. The pilot was walking on tiptoe now—carefully—ready to spring and run at an instant's notice. Slowly, he moved in among the trees.

A slight sound to the left hurled him against a tree trunk where he crouched with his pistol poised. The sound was a rattling of dead leaves near another tree. He held his breath, and a moment later the bright, sharp eyes of a small animal were peering up at him.

The creature had a tail larger than itself; a tail of which it seemed inordinately proud. The appendage plumbed up behind the creature's small back and stood even higher than the perky head which was now tilted in inquiry.

The little animal made a remark in

a questioning tone, but the Martian pilot was at a loss to understand the words. Then, a threatening gesture from its paw set the Martian trembling. Obviously, the little animal could move like lightning. Suppose it were poisonous? In the twinkling of an eye, it could leap forward and sink its teeth in his leg.

The creature was indeed fast of movement. Its tiny paws were shifted so swiftly the eye could not follow them. As if by magic, a second of the creatures appeared and stood beside the first. Blindly, the pilot raised his gun and fired. There was the soft whirr of the charge clearing the barrel; the quick, bright, soundless explosion as it hit the target.

The pilot lowered the gun and stared at the hollowed out concavity in the earth where the inquisitive squirrels had stood. They were not there any more. Neither was the grass upon which they stood.

With his fear heightened, the pilot wondered if his act would possibly bring swift reprisal from others of the tiny breed. In his mind was a picture of ten billion ants cleaning off the surface of Mars. What if the forest suddenly became alive with even ten thousand of these outraged little rodents? His gun would be of little value.

As he backed away toward the river, the pilot experienced a grim sense of satisfaction. Regardless of the timidity he knew was a part of him, he'd nonetheless landed upon a strange planet and had defended himself from the first threat to his safety.

The second threat, however, was a far different proposition. He turned after walking backward some hundred feet toward the river and saw this threat looming over him. Now

he knew the very essence of terror as the gun hung limply in his paralyzed fingers.

IN A BROAD, pleasant valley in eastern Gaul, a band of some hundred wandering Mongols camped by a blue river to rest themselves and lick their wounds. The battle had occurred not at this place, but further up the river, and the Mongols had moved lower down in order not to camp so near the corpses strewn about.

Night had fallen now and the yellow-skinned warriors squatted about in attitudes of ease. There was talk and hearty gusts of laughter at some kill recounted, some deed of slaughter lived again.

Others there were who sat in silence scowling over wounds received that day. The eyes of these moved often and again to four dark mounds—four heaps of roped-down flesh—that lay all helpless by the Chieftain's tent. And all the warriors marvelled, wondering how the chance encounter with four men could have ended up with twenty Mongols rotting on the river bank.

Three were of yellow hair, giants in stature, from the northern lands. The other, a Nubian scarcely smaller than the other three in muscled girth.

But the Mongols were of a number doubled many times by four and all were mounted well and spoiling for a fight. By the ancient idols! How could four men slash with such abandon, with such power? How could four men afoot—giants withall—form such a front that onslaught after onslaught of a mounted force went down and crawled away on bloody sands?

And then—more strange by far—how could these same four men so suddenly capitulate? Stop fighting? Stand with folded arms? Stand mute

and ask defeat? The Mongols shook their heads. Strange indeed were the ways of the blue-eyed men.

AND SORE bewildered also was the *norseman* Lars. Bound hand and foot he lay beside his fellows also bound. Long had he lain unconscious from a blow across the skull; a blow to send an ox to last oblivion. Lars opened now his eyes and blinked at the darkened sky. "By Tor!" he muttered. "What afterworld is this? Why are the gods not here to welcome me?"

Tazor, the Nubian, spoke, "Gently, my friend. The blow you took upon the head still rings among the hills."

"Seven I slew," Lars said. "Or was it nine or ten? I lost the count." Lars stopped to gather his scattered faculties. "Then—then—by Tor! I mind me now! Rolf ordered meek surrender, or so I thought. From force of habit I threw down my sword. But I must have been in error—"

"No error there." It was Rolf of the Golden Horn who spoke, lying trussed like a fowl beside the helpless Lars. "I gave the order."

Lars strove again to speak; could find no words. Then stated simply: "Reason has long since bade my mind good-bye."

"It was a masterly move, our surrendering."

"Your words but prove the fact of my insanity. I swear I heard you call our groveling masterly."

"Full well I did. Tazor evolved the plot and whispered to me just before we laid our weapons down."

"This fool," Lars said, "will be in your eternal debt if you'll but clarify."

"How many moon turns has it been since last you saw the *fjord*?"

"More than I care to count."

"How long since we left the water and the ship and followed the beating

of the wolf paw south?"

"Many," Lars growled. "Crawling like four great bugs across the rocks and up the hills of Gaul. Sometimes I feel I'm doomed to spend my latter days marching forever on beneath the sun."

"Well do you grasp my point. Now mind: We came into this valley and walked with the fall of the river, the wolf paw beating true. Ahead stretch many weary leagues, the only highway through this endless land."

"I listen," Lars returned, "but little do I hear."

"Bear with me. Now—today, there came this eastern horde bearing our way."

"No contradiction there."

"And at what speed! Did you mark the way they thundered on the mounts to eat up leagues like walrus snapping fish?"

"True."

"So, in a blaze of genius seldom duplicated here on earth, it did occur to Tazor they should take us with them at that speed."

"Vaguely I see it now. A master stroke. Glad I am that I have a skull thick enough to survive and enjoy it. But tell me this: How did great Tazor know they would not smash us down and leave us dead to feed the wolves?"

TAZOR answered for himself: "I know the ways of men. They all seek wealth. The four of us in the slave marts of the east would bring enough to fill the coffers of the Chieftain even though the coffers be as large as oil vats."

Lars sighed. "So be it. But I still think there could be found a simpler and less wearing way. Why did we not rout these devils and take four of their horses for ourselves?"

"Did you ever ride a horse?"

"No, but the process looks simplicity itself."

"Far from it. Left to themselves, these spirited animals would throw your bulk beyond the nearer peaks. When you came limping back, they'd be far gone."

"But how can the Mongols make the horses gentle down and let us ride?"

Rolf yawned prodigiously. "That," he said, "is a problem for the Mongols. Now we'd better sleep."

But before he closed his eyes, Rolf looked beyond Lars to the fourth dark pile and asked, "Jorgen? How fares it there with you?"

Jorgen rarely used words. For days on end he spoke not unless spoken to. He said, "I fare quite well, my Chief. Good dreams to you."

"And so to you, faithful Jorgen." Then Rolf slept.

Lars was not so easily satisfied. "Fortunate I am," he grumbled, "to be traveling with such shining strategists? Ere long they'll brilliantly arrange to have me in my grave."

Rolf's breathing was deep and even. And clutched in his good right fist, the wolf paw beat the even, steady rhythm of a heart.

The Mongols were astir before dawn. As he opened his eyes, Rolf saw the night guards already squatting at their food. He watched the stirrings of life come into the wild ferocious band. Those wounded in the battle of the previous day, growled and snarled so all could hear of the soreness of their wounds.

The fires were beaten up and meat thrown on to cook. A hobbling casualty came by and stopped to aim a kick with his good remaining leg at the sleeping Lars. The Viking moved. He opened his eyes to see the Nubian pull himself up to a sitting position.

"Ho, there!" Tazor called. "Food

for the prisoners! Else our weight will fall and we'll bring but a pittance in the mart of slaves."

The sour-faced Chieftain of the Mongols considered this, then motioned toward some crouching warriors. With ill-grace, they arose and brought a leg of meat to the shackled four. They kicked the Vikings into a haunched-up position and loosed the bonds upon their arms—ropes woven in far India, the toughest known.

ROLF TOOK the leg and tore it in four parts. The prisoners ate. But it was scarce enough and Lars, chewing a final bone, debated asking more. But he held his peace and rubbed the places where the ropes had cut his flesh.

The ropes were soon put back upon their arms and four dancing horses brought from out the pack. The legs of the four potential slaves were loosed and they were forked into the high-backed saddles on the mounts. Then the ropes were tied again beneath the bellies tight and hard.

They took the treatment in complete silence, all save Lars, who muttered, "Were this fool beast to catch on fire, 'twould be a sorry day for me indeed."

Soon the troop was ready to move. The Chieftain raised his hand and hoof-beats rose into a thunder. And even though sod was underfoot, a dustcloud billowed up to meet the rising sun.

The cavalcade moved at a gallop through the hours and the Vikings suffered tortures of the damned. Only the Nubian sat as one at home upon his horse and tried to tell the others how to lessen their own punishment.

"I'd take a thousand spears against my breast, drive devils mad to have my blood, in place of this," Lars said.

Through tight-set teeth, Rolf an-

swered, "Count up the days we gain by this great coup."

"They'll not half total all the blisters on my rump," Lars said, and then went grimly back to the business of suffering.

The sun moved high and still the Mongols made no move to rest. Time passed, and Lars moaned wearily. "The endurance of these yellow men is something to tell one's children of. Do we go on and on 'til only death relieves our agony?"

Forward they went on horses made of iron, tireless. Then, with the sun at quarter-sky, Rolf flashed a look at Lars. "The beat in the wolf paw fades! The time has come to go our separate way!"

They had come to a place where the placid river forked; one branch to turn along a mountain range, the other down a widening valley toward the blue and distant plains. The Mongols took the latter course and this—for many—brought on sudden death.

With a Viking cry, Rolf called to Lars, "Now is the time! Avenge your smarting rump!" Rolf took a mighty breath, and with one great flexing of his huge torso, he snapped his bonds like strings of brittle silk. A sudden whirlwind was this Viking Chief. One sweeping arm snatched up the sword of a Mongol riding close. An instant later that same Mongol's head bounced bloody on the ground to be kicked here and there by milling hooves. Like a whirling storm of death, Rolf cleared an area around about, then slashed with his sword the bonds that held his legs.

The Mongols rallied swiftly, and swords flashed, but not until Rolf had freed the helpless two. The Nubian, Tazor, was free himself, but not from strength. Rather from stealth he'd used to keep his muscles free when the bonds were fastened on.

IN AN instant Tazor had the weapon of a fallen yellow man. With superb disregard for his own blood, he charged the Mongol horde and cut a gore-stained furrow through their ranks.

Lars, by most happy chance, had gotten back his own great sword from the guard who carried it. He spurned his mount and got his two great feet again upon the ground. Then, with a shout of fiercest joy, he raised the blade above his head and it became a whirling scythe of death.

The Mongols broke and fell away in rank disorder 'til their Chieftain, caught off-guard by the savage suddenness of what had passed, came charging in. He led a deadly wedge of keen-edged blades.

Rolf snatched the shining Viking blade from Lars, dropping the Mongol short-sword he'd acquired, and roared at his companions, "Hold! This devil chief is mine!"

The Mongol thundered in, the great sword flashed. Then, for an instant on the bloody plain, the Mongol chief rode hard on a headless horse. As Rolf's blade came around again the horse went to its knees, following its severed head down to the ground. The Mongol chief pitched forward into the nicely balanced arc of Rolf's red blade. It severed him across, from hip to hip; half of his belt above and half below, his torso dropping off to sit down in the dust, the legs to stay entangled with the horse.

Lars, with the short-sword, waded roaring in, to stop two Mongols, swiftly sending them to whatever hell or heaven they merited. While Tazor, brilliant in his attack, drove back, with Jorgen, one wing of the foe.

Then it was over as the Mongol men, in losing their Chieftain also lost their nerve and broke to flee; on down the valley not to stop 'til Rolf, because of distance, could not say if they

were bugs or men.

Grimly the Vikings wiped their swords while Tazor bent to kill the gibbering screaming Mongol chief who lay, still living, on the gutted turf.

Then Tazor moved away, intentions plain, to capture Mongol horses standing by. But Lars called out, "Not one for me! I'll walk though it be twice ten thousand leagues." Jorgen then spoke up too—he of the frugal words—to growl, "I'll keep you company. For me the age of speed has not yet come."

Rolf scowled at them, then shrugged, "So be it, black man. We will stretch our legs. The leg was made for walking after all."

Tazor returned to them, and Rolf held up the talisman. "The way," he said, "leads down the nether branch along the mountain range."

LIMPING, THE Vikings took the smaller stream, striving to match the easy strides of Tazor, the Nubian. All day they marched, to stop when the sun went low and set the snares in which, luck willing, they would find enough to breakfast on. Then they lay down and slept.

They arose with the sun and broke their fast on four rabbits eaten raw before they started forward again. Just after high noon, Rolf stopped. With a slight frown, he drew the wolf paw from his belt. As it lay in his palm, there was visible evidence of renewed activity in its pulsing. Under their eyes, its movement increased until it lifted itself and fell to the ground.

"We are close," Rolf said. "We come to the end of our journey." He drew the great-sword from his belt. "Soon an evil god meets destiny."

As his words died away, they turned as one man to see a strange, grotesque form moving toward them. To make it

even more unbelievable, the creature, whether human or animal, was coming backwards from a strip of forest. He was of spindly, underfed body and wore a head the like of which no Viking nor Nubian had ever seen. A huge, misshapen head.

The creature backed relentlessly toward them, raising each small foot with great care in its turn, to set it down as though he walked on fragile eggs. As he moved nearer, he gripped some strange instrument in his right hand and stared at the harmless forest as though it were inhabited by devils.

The four stood motionless, overcome by sheer surprise. Now the creature was upon them. He turned and froze. On his face was written such abject terror as to be ludicrous.

Gently, Lars reached out and lifted the thing by its collar. He held it forth and spoke to Rolf: "Is this your evil god?"

Then Lars put it down and surrendered to great laughter. He slapped his thick thighs as the roaring of his merriment echoed through the trees. But only to laugh anew as the creature streaked away, its thin legs flying as it rounded the river bend and disappeared abreast of the island just in sight beyond.

As Lars' laughter died, Rolf slowly shook his head. "No," he said firmly. "That thing may be evil, but it isn't any god. Come."

They moved after it, walking lightly now. Lars' humor vanished as they watched, sharp-eyed, for movement anywhere. None was seen.

Now Rolf stopped suddenly and pointed on ahead. "Look you upon it there," he said. "A ship not built for sea or land. And in that ship sits the evil god!"

place the sun would rise. The night hours passed and dawn came softly up to kiss the far-off snow-capped mountain peaks. Morning—and then the sun vaulted the world's rim; and glittered on the great cross Rollo bore.

The way was level and easy, the grasses underfoot soft, as Rollo moved along the river bank. But mid-morning brought the end of easy paths. The country roughened and the grass grew sparse and thin. Rocky, the land, with scrub growth reaching out to catch his robes and make the going hard.

But not once did Rollo falter until, with the setting sun, he came to a bleak and windswept hill where stood a sorry hut. This dwelling was the meanest of the mean; fashioned of logs with naught but sod to make a roof.

The Viking churchman stood before the door and set his great cross down. He called, "All hail to you within! Rollo of Ellenstein seeks food and a place to lay his head."

He had been watched for a long time in his journey up the hill, and now the dwellers in the hut peered forth. A voice, all whine and snarl did beg: "Go on your way, oh huge one! We are poor. And nothing we have to tempt your appetite. Our board is bare. Our son a cripple—our daughter skinny and unbeautiful. Please leave us in our misery and our want."

Rollo, unruffled, sat himself cross-legged down before the hut. "I pity you for a crippled son, but I do not seek a slave. Your daughter may be thin and hideous, but she has beauty if her heart is pure. And if your food is gone—then come forth to sit here and share mine."

Rollo took from the sack around his waist a giant loaf of bread. He broke it and the malty odor rode the wind into the hut.

"Come forth, I say. I would not sup

ROLLO, ON leaving Ellenstein, walked eastward toward the

alone. I want company."

Cringing and filled with fear they came from in the hut. A frightened man and wife; a frightened son; a daughter pale and broken from disease, her eyes upon the bread.

Rollo broke the loaf and held forth pieces which they snatched. With timid sounds, they stretched their mouths and ate as though they had not broken fast for days. They finished up their bread and picked the fallen flakes up from the ground to eat them also.

AND THEN the husband looked upon the cross. He fingered it, each motion filled with fear. But wonder overcame his fright, and he said, "A strange weapon I have never seen."

Rollo said, "No, my friend. Not strange. Have you never seen a cross before?"

The great-eyed girl spoke up: "There was a time I mind—two snows ago—when a man with a shaven head came by our hut. He had a cross but it was small and made of wood."

"He told you not about his God?"

"Nay. Close on his heels came Vandals filled with wrath. The shaven man went on across the hills. The Vandals stopped to burn our hut. They took our food and left my brother here for dead."

The brother, his fear allayed, picked up a crumb, grinned as he ate it, said, "A stupid lot. We had three hens. Each day they laid three eggs—rare hens indeed. The Vandals killed them all and ate their flesh."

The father spoke: "Your name, huge traveler? Your name and mission here in this bitter land where no man's life or goods is safe?"

"I told you—Rollo of Ellenstein. My mission lies on ahead."

The husband's eyes strayed to the cross. "You come without a guard,

and Vandals near. They'd slay you in a trice and take your cross. Such golden treasure will not go far across these hills."

"The Vandals keep you poor?"

"They sweep across these hills like an evil scourge; as constant as the winds in their attentions. Let a man save one loaf of bread, one bag of grain and lo! they tear away the hinges on his door."

Rollo's eyes swept up the hill and down as though gauging the extent and worth of the country. "You have neighbors? There are many of you here?"

"A goodly number when gathered once together in a place. But like the timid field mice, they scatter out and make themselves unseen."

Rollo got to his feet with decision. "Call them together," he said. "Tell them a servant of the Christ is here and would speak to them. Tell them that Rollo of Ellenstein brings hope and love and has great words to speak."

He slept on the bleak hill that night and the following day they came—slowly at first, with timid, faltering footsteps. Then, fascinated by the great golden cross and the man in strange robes who carried it so easily and without fear, they gathered close and listened to his words.

He told them of Jesus, of his life and times; spoke of the mighty force He held in His gentle hands. He told them of the new law this Man brought—not to kill but to help—not to steal but to give. He spoke 'til the sun was high and told each man to take his wife and children to Ellenstein where there would be food for all.

THEN, AS the sun reached its highest point, the Vandals came; over the crest of the hill in a screaming wave, down on the kneeling throng.

With a Viking roar of old, Rollo turned to face them, weaponless, save for the cross he bore. He lifted the cross. "The Church Militant!" he belted, and using the great cross as a scythe, he mowed the Vandal men and horses down like an outraged reaper deep in a field of corn.

He tore great holes in the sweeping charge and the Vandals all fell back—as much from wide-eyed consternation as from the bone-crushing slaughter in their ranks. Never before had they seen a warrior such as this—clad in fine robes, crowned with a mitre, swinging the strangest weapon any man had ever seen.

The trembling natives had fallen back like wind-swept leaves before the Vandal ranks had felt the crushing blows of Rollo's cross. Now they stopped to watch the chilling sight. The broken Vandal bodies strewn about the ground. Fierce warriors squalling in pain, whimpering, dragging broken limbs along the grass.

The natives did not run, but they did not advance. They stood and stared.

Now the Vandals formed again and moved with a surer hand into the fray. They centered their force on Rollo and again his great cross swung its deadly arc. But there were many Vandals, and in time they bore him down.

As he fell, Rollo prayed, seeing the natives trembling as they watched, yet not retreating. "Lord, give them the courage they have needed long. Let them realize this barbarous horde is not invincible—that valiant men alone can save their wives and families."

But, as a Vandal saber laid across Rollo's skull, the natives had not moved. Rollo went down, seizing a Vandal chief to slay, even as he fell before the horde.

Book 3

The Ants of Ill

ROLF WAS sore bewildered and distressed. Slowly he walked down the ramp of the Martian ship and back to the waiting group by the river's edge. The strangeness of this affair was in his mind; uncertainty of what he was to do.

When first the ship he'd sighted around the bend, after the craven Martian man had fled, there had been only sureness in his plan. The ship and the evil god. Enter the ship; slay the god; fulfill the orders he'd been given in his dream.

They had approached, the four, warily, down the river toward the ship. Then Rolf held up his hand. "Stay here," he said, "and wait. This is my mission, mine alone. I'll open that devil's box and do the deed though all the hordes of darkness bar my way."

Alone he advanced, sword held in readiness. Wondering, he looked into the huge, black jet tubes that had hurled the ship like flame across the void. This, Rolf mused, must be where the fiery tail comes out. He sought to enter there. His way was barred by soot-caked grates through which he could not pass.

He quit the nether end and circled round the ship and climbed the ramp. The port was closed. He sought to pry it loose with his fighting blade, but so hard was the metal that he scarce made a scratch upon the surface of the plate.

Now he stood back and smote the space ship hard. The pounding echoed up against the hills and Rolf's voice thundered out: "Come forth! Come forth and face the fighting sword of Rolf. This day will mark your doom. This day your blood—O evil god—if

blood you have—will spout like fountains from a dozen wounds. Come forth!”

Nothing occurred, and Rolf looked back to where his allies stood upon the grass. Lars with his blade unsheathed, poised to come charging down upon the ship. The Nubian, Tazor, frowning as in doubt, the sunlight shining on his great black bulk. Jorgen, a patient warhorse waiting there for words to send him into life or death. Again Rolf beat upon the port.

Slowly it opened, pushed outward from within, its mighty hinges silent as a grave. Rolf crouched, his sword held tight, poised to cut down the first emerging thing.

But the sword was never raised, the thrust not made. The blade dropped down to hang from Rolf's lax hand. Also his very jaw went lax at sight of what stood there within the door.

A WOMAN—nay, a girl—in scarlet robes; a creature not of evil, but of good. For truly, if this beautiful queen was foul, then nothing was left there that could be good. The grass, the moon, the sun, were loathsome things, if evil lay beneath that scarlet robe.

She had such beauty as he'd never seen. No blemish marked the smooth and rounded limbs. Her hips were slim as starlight and her breasts had such exquisite contour as to set men raving for the touch of them. Her face, a dream of perfect symmetry, full-red her lips, teeth even and white as snow. And purity of soul lay in her eyes, reflecting out great innocence, great good.

Rolf said, “Where is the evil god who holds you here?”

“My name is Lall,” she replied, smiling, while she looked him over slowly, her eyes traveling upward past his thong-laced legs; hovering there

above; then, taking in the span of his shoulders, Lall thought of the great crushing power of those arms. “I am a stranger from another world, hoping to find a welcome here.”

“You came alone?”

A languorous wave of her hand indicated her Martian husbands clustered behind her. “Practically alone,” she said. She turned to the Martians. “Go about your affairs.”

“Yes, Lall,” and they scurried away into the bowels of the ship.

Lall stepped back, smiling. “Won't you come in? Perhaps I can show you things you have never seen before.”

Rolf considered this. He frowned and glanced again at the three who awaited him. Then he shrugged and followed Lall into the Martian ship and stood in wonder at the things he saw.

And finally they came to Lall's personal chambers. Strange and heady were the perfumes that smote Rolf's nostrils as he followed the ant queen into the rose-draped place. Lall appeared wearied. She stretched her gorgeous body out upon a pastel-shaded lounge. Her arms went out gracefully toward Rolf in a motion that could have been either invitation or a sign of languorous fatigue.

The Viking stood watching her, his bewilderment decreasing not one whit. “You came alone in this metal sky dragon—alone to this world, clear across all the heavens above?”

Lall smiled.

“That I cannot understand. You would need a crew of slaves to make the ship ride true. There would be duties to be done.”

“One man who knows his art can guide this cruiser. It is run by instruments, by machinery. It needs only the pilot and the other four to do very simple tasks.”

Rolf shook his head. “I feel it could not be done by so few, unless

you are truly a goddess. You do not look like one and Tazor the Nubian said you would probably be mortal. Tell me, are you mortal or a goddess?"

"I am mortal." She held out an arm toward him, then arose from her couch and came close. "Feel me," she invited. "Put your hands upon my body and you will discover it is not made of ethereal stuff."

Rolf laid his great hands upon her shoulder and she moved closer, as though from their pressure even when there was no pressure, until she was against him. Then she reached up her hands and drew his head down and kissed him. It was a sensual kiss. Laughing now, she stepped back. "Did that seem the cold kiss of a goddess?"

ROLF HAD no answer on his tongue, and as Lall looked at him, she had a wonder of her own. This huge, magnificent clod, from his own words, did not appear to have arrived by chance. He spoke as one who was at the end of a search, and mouthed words about mortals and goddesses.

Then who had sent him? That superbrain Lork, who lived in a tower back on the planet now stripped? Both he and his student, Pralt, were known to have tremendous telepathic powers. But granted that in their last moments they'd gotten knowledge of her contemplated destination and had sent mental pictures through the void—who on this backward planet had the skill to receive them from so far?

Lall put a carefully guileless light in her eyes and asked, "You seem to come as one on a mission, handsome giant—"

But she got no further as a great suspicion dawned on Rolf. "Hark to this, mortal, goddess, or whatever you may be—I speak as I have always spoken, and you answer me. Even in

this one world there are many tongues, and often one man knows not another's meaning. Yet you answer me in my own tongue though you are from a star. Only a goddess could do this." The suspicion within him had heightened, and Lall had a qualm of fear.

"That is only as it appears to you," she said. "I speak the universal language of your thoughts and mine. It may be hard for you to understand just how it's done, but I am sending thoughts to you, after reading in your mind the thoughts you put into words. Your mind interprets my replies in the only way it knows, putting them first into your own native words so they may register."

"That I do not understand, except you say you can read my thoughts." He leaned forward in quick triumph as though he had already scored a point. "If that is your ability, why do you question me for why I came? Why do you not read this in my mind?"

"I cannot reach into your memory. In order to read your thoughts, I must first ask you to bring them forth. If you but think the answers. I will know."

"I'll tell the answers," Rolf replied. "I was sent here through the powers of the witch Hangra; I saw this ship approach the world. And clear my orders came: Go forth and meet the ship. Therein resides an evil god who must be slain."

Lall's fear deepened into chill. The superbrain! Or Pralt, or one of the other students in the tower. They were all dead but they had gotten in a telling blow. Lall's hand trembled at sight of Rolf's fingers closing over the jewelled guard of his great blade. Still, she felt she could handle this naive and simple minded giant if the entire truth had not been told.

SWIFTLY SHE searched his mind to discover if he knew how to cope with her ants. Possibly even the superbrain had not known this secret—the knowledge of how to guard one's self from their ravenous jaws. In Rolf's mind, Lall found no inkling that the knowledge lay buried there. In fact, she could find even no image of her dreadful children. Rolf, it seemed, did not know of the scourge that had depopulated her planet.

Lall smiled and breathed more easily. After all, her fears had been unfounded. If the superbrain had known the secret, he and his students would not have died so horribly.

"No doubt," she said, "your message was authentic, but it could have become mixed in the sending. It could have been misinterpreted by this Hangra of whom you speak. It is so easy to mistake good for evil. A slight misconception can unjustly brand the deserving as ravenous beasts. Look at me," she said, spreading forth her arms. "Do you trust your senses? If so, do I look evil to you?"

Rolf, sore puzzled, shook his head. "Never in all my time have I seen such beauty—such obvious purity—a heart so clean reflected in two eyes. Tazor, the Nubian, said it could be so—that good could be wrongly adjudged as evil."

"This Tazor. He must be a man of mighty mind. Twice you have spoken of him. Who is he?"

"He is a black man who has always been a slave. But his wisdom is beyond any I have known. He speaks with a level tongue and has watched and listened many years."

"A black man. But you are fair. Tell me—are the men of this planet vari-colored?"

"There are yellow men who come with sword and flame from the east. There are black men who mainly serve as slaves. And the white men

who overshadow all the rest in skill and courage."

With the need for fear allayed, Lall's own urgent desires, the hot demands of her very nature came to the fore. Again her arms slid over Rolf's shoulders, and her rosebud lips were tilted toward his own.

"A certain white man stirs my blood," she said. "And I could stir within him such fires of love as he has never dreamed."

Rolf drew back from her. "A man would be of stone if his blood did not heat at sight of you. But I am pledged. I've taken me a wife who's yet a virgin waiting in the north. My vows stand like a wall before me now."

Lall stepped back laughing. She smiled up at him like a gorgeous imp. "What are you going to do with me?"

"I do not know. I must seek counsel with Tazor and Lars."

"I will not go away."

Rolf turned toward the exit of the ship. Lall's word held him. "A thought. Why not send to me this Tazor in whom you put such trust? I will talk to him as I have talked to you and he can judge."

"That will be done," Rolf said, and left the perfume of her presence, deep in thought.

ALONE, LALL spent some time also in deep thought. After a while, she stepped to the window and looked out, her eyes calculating as she surveyed Rolf's waiting friends. She pursed her luscious lips and stood with one sharp fingernail tapping her milk-white teeth. Then, as though having made a decision, she went to the door and opened it.

They waited there, her five Martian husbands, and they smiled up at her as one. "I have need of you," she said.

"Yes, Lall."

Or rather—was her unspoken thought—my need for you is over.

“Come one at a time at the usual interval.”

“Yes, Lall.”

The first husband followed Lall into her cabin and stood waiting. She turned and smiled at him; came close and put her arms around him. He was small, remindful of a child standing against her warm beauty. She felt his trembling body and there was contempt in her face.

This he did not see because, when he raised his eyes, she was smiling again. Gently, she elevated his head and lowered her own while he stood in sweet anticipation of the kiss to come.

It was the kiss of death.

Her beautiful lips opened as they approached his throat and the white teeth were revealed in all their terrible sharpness. They settled against the flesh of his throat, gently at first, as though to make betrayal the more agonizing.

Then they slashed in and through, meeting deep under the veins that carried his life-blood. At the same moment one of her arms held his small body helpless while her other hand stifled his scream. Soon he ceased struggling and she lowered him away from her body.

As she looked down at him the savage joy within her welled up into her eyes and they were not beautiful, but held the cold ferocity of a soulless insect.

One by one she slew her husbands until they were a pile of prospective carrion behind the bed. Then, when it was over, she suffered the exhaustion that was sure to come from such violent pleasure of the emotions. She sank down upon her lounge and lay still, and in a few minutes all her beauty came back until she looked for all the world like a girl weary of

doing good for others.

It occurred to her as she lay thus that she had cut off her escape from this new planet. Her pilot was dead—the second in the heap behind the bed. This, however, failed to disturb her greatly. Her mind was too full of tired ecstasy at having vented the cruelty which was a part of her nature.

Languidly, she glanced toward the bed. One tiny foot was in sight, bent at an odd angle. She would have to do something about those bodies, Lall thought. But not right away. Not this minute.

She lay with her mind full of the four giants of this new planet. She thrilled from thinking of what lay ahead.

SO ROLF was sore bewildered as he left the alien ship. He crossed the intervening space to the three who awaited him and Lars spoke up.

“I see no blood upon your blade. But I saw the comely wench who greeted you. She seemed out of place among the evil ones that ride that ship.”

Rolf sank to the ground with his legs crossed. This was a signal for the rest to do the same. They sat in council thus and Rolf scowled hard.

“It looks, Tazor, as though your words were wise. I fear the source of my orders gotten in the dream was controlled by jokers, liars, or other evil ones. Were I to slay that girl, I could not face the wife who waits for me.”

Lars looked ruefully at his worn boots and leggings. “You’re telling us we walked an idiot’s road? That now we’ve come these weary leagues, there’s no one here to slay?”

“This girl has with her several of the stunted creatures such as him we collared near the bend. And no one else.”

"I could have stayed at home," Lars growled, "stamped on a dozen sand crabs, and rated myself as highly as coming here to snap the life from those small monstrosities."

Tazor had not spoken. He sat quietly as though waiting for a definite word from Rolf. The Viking leader said, "Why don't you go as I went, Nubian—into the ship—and speak with this red-gowned lass? With your great knowledge, your experience, some word or sign might clear the clouded way."

"That is your wish?"

"It is my wish, but not an order, friend. At times you seem to slip back into other days and rate yourself a slave."

The Nubian arose. "Though I am free, your wish, and any wish of those I love, will send me even to the gates of hell."

"Well spoken, black man," Lars commended him, "and here's a wish from me: Inquire of the lass if in her ship she has by chance a piece of northern cheese. As things now stand, I'd kill ten men for just one whiff of mouldy *Ballocraz*."

TAZOR MOVED slowly from the group and turned his footsteps toward the ship. He went with leisured pace and when he came abreast of it, he stopped.

He laid a hand upon the hull that pierced the depths of void. Leaning close, he studied it with great intensity. He rubbed the surface with his hand, then drawing forth his sword, he beat upon the hull until the metal rang. Then he stood back and marvelled that not a mark or scratch appeared upon the hull.

Speaking softly, he said, "The men who made that metal stand supreme above the finest mind this world has ever spawned. The world from whence this space craft came must be a won-

drous world indeed. My mind cannot conceive its splendor and its wealth."

He circled the ship and stood before the great jet-tubes. He rubbed a finger on their inner surfaces and studied hard the residue that clung. Shaking his head, he rubbed the finger clean upon his belt and sought the space ship's ramp.

The girl stood waiting for him there and—as Rolf had looked—he looked at her. But through far different eyes.

Tazor appraised her differently than Rolf. He granted her the beauty that he saw, but the Nubian had gazed on female charms in more ports and places than all his three companions in a group. He'd seen the vast slave markets in the great cities set like jewels on the shores of the Southern Sea. He'd watched them come in chains and stand upon the block, naked like cattle, for all men to see. He'd heard their charms extolled by bearded auctioneers, even to pitiful details of their skill at pleasing any master whom they served.

And Tazor could not look on beauty now with any reaction save pity for the favored one. For long he'd heard it said: Happy the ugly wench who works the fields and scrubs the bricks rather than serve dark-faced lustful men.

So Lall's lush body was lost on him as he came to the top of the ramp and bowed. "I come to speak with you," he said. "That I may give good counsel to my friend who seeks to know which path his feet must tread."

"Enter," Lall said. "And I can only hope for your intercession with him. I wouldn't care to be killed by mistake. I am utterly defenseless and at your mercy."

TAZOR WENT as Rolf had gone, into the cabin of the Martian girl. But there were no bodies strewn behind the bed. And subtle, rare per-

fume lay on the air.

Tazor tested this. He had never known its like before. He looked about the cabin while Lall sat down demurely on the lounge.

"I feel your sense and wisdom are far greater, my lord, than that of the yellow haired giant."

"I am not your lord and the wisdom of my friend is not to be discussed. The point is whether you shall live or die."

"What manner of place is this." Lall cried, "where a defenseless woman is slain on suspicion? Is there no justice here?"

"Very little. But we will do our best to find some in this case."

"You don't question my ability to speak with you," Lall said. "Is this because it does not seem strange to you?"

"It is not difficult to see that you speak with your mind more so than with your lips. The process is known among the wise men of this world."

Lall was ill at ease. This black man had an agility of mind that caused concern. She felt the power of his eyes as they bored into her own. Yet, she told herself, he was a man. And as such was subject to her charms.

She arose and approached him with humility. She knelt before him feeling—from her instinct—that this approach was best. "I put myself upon your mercy," she whispered. "I have come from a far-off place with only good will in my heart. Would you see me slain?"

Tazor made no move to touch her. She extended a timid hand to lay upon his knee. He ignored it.

"You come from among the stars." Tazor said. "Why? Were you exiled?"

"I came of my own free will."

"Fleeing, perhaps, from some crime committed?"

Lall felt a chill upon her spine. "No, my lord." Then she came to her feet

and stood before him. "Am I not beautiful? Pleasing to your eyes?"

"The point is not in dispute."

FROWNING SLIGHTLY, Tazor examined her with his eyes. They slid slowly downward from her face while the frown deepened. He studied her breasts, her slim waist, her hips and thighs and legs. He came also to his feet and his hands were upon her while she felt a sudden thrill of hope.

But this soon changed to troubled wonder as he stopped his search and stepped away.

"There is something that eludes me," Tazor said. "Something I cannot grasp. You are like all other women I have known—yet different. I cannot name the difference, yet within me I am sure it is not small."

He walked away, then turned suddenly and asked, "How are you different, wench?"

Lall sobbed as she lowered her head—sobbed like a beaten child, and said, "I am not different from the rest. Why do you think I am? I breathe—I live—I love. Is there no kindness in you, black man?"

"Far more, I think, than you will find elsewhere. But this is not a time for kindness, maid. This is a time for knowledge, and instinct. Yet both now do me ill. You're different, yet I cannot say just how."

Lall was no longer frightened. She felt she had passed the crisis in this interview. She knew full well this Nubian would never lie within her bed. But that was not too great a loss, she thought. In one of the yellow-heads she'd find a mate.

But she wanted to get away from his keen brain, his brilliant eyes. Again she sobbed and stood with lowered head. "I tire now. Please go and carry whatever counsel you will to your friend. If I must die, so be it. But now I would rest."

Heavy with thought, the Nubian went out; and down the ramp and back across the grass. They waited as before, both Rolf and Lars alert to hear the first words Tazor spoke.

But Jorgen seemed a thousand miles away within his mind. His eyes were on the ship, and he scarce heard Rolf's growling words: "I'm waiting, black man—speak."

The Nubian said, "I feel that I have failed you. There is little I can say. I saw the wench and looked into her eyes. I questioned her and sought to probe her soul but I could not. She has the breath of purity—and yet..."

"Yet what?"

"I sense an evil there so thick and black that hell's dark corridors would shrink away from contact with it."

LARS GOT to his feet and drew his blade. "All this deep talk is quite beyond my simple nature. I say kill the wench. If not that, I will stalk those forests there and bring back food. Or could we take food from the wench?"

Tazor shook his head. "I'd vote against that move. I'd not care to fill my stomach with what I sense within that ship."

Lars snorted. "It's old women we've become. Four strong men squatting here debating whether we should kill a maid. We've all developed softness in the guts. Perhaps a little meat is what we need."

Tazor did not appear to have heard him. The black man was weighted down with a vast problem. "I feel that something happened there while I talked with her. Something that told me what I wished to know. Yet I was far too thick of skull to see."

Both Rolf and Tazor watched idly as Lars went striding into the forest.

"It keeps eluding me," Tazor went on. "I must relive the scene and find

the flaw."

"And I would walk away to be alone," Rolf said. "I'm wearied sore—my spirits deep and dark. What fools we be, Tazor, you and I. While we sit out here pulling on our beards, the maid, if she be evil, will charge the fires in her ship and fly away."

Tazor shook his head. "She will not leave. The maiden fears us not. She welcomed us and seeks something that we have. But I know not what. Let's wrestle with our problem through the night and see what sunrise brings. The maiden will not leave."

Rolf got to his feet and moved off toward the river. Tazor sat motionless as did Jorgen, and the sun sank in the west.

Then Lars came striding forth from the trees with a great shout and a buck across his shoulders. As darkness fell, a fire roared upon the shore and the Vikings ate.

LATER, THE fire fell to glowing embers and they lay as though in sleep. But Rolf slept not 'til hours had passed, and it was thus with Tazor. "There was something," he kept muttering, "something to prove the feeling in my heart."

Soon the measured snoring of the unburdened Lars found companionship in the even tones of the sleeping Rolf and Tazor. Of the four, only Jorgen remained awake.

Now he arose softly and moved like a huge shadow toward the space ship.

JORGEN'S MIND was such as to move always in one channel. Never was there more than a single thought held therein at a single time. Never more than one course of direct action. As he approached the ship, the thought flaming in his mind was of Lall. He had seen her standing twice in the ship's entrance when she'd waited for Rolf and Tazor to come up

the ramp, and her beauty smote him like a blow.

In the wanderings of the Vikings through the Southern Sea, Jorgen had never been one to carouse and wench for the sake of filling idle time. Many a southern beauty he'd passed up with scarce a look because no spark was kindled within him. But when one struck his fancy, he moved upon her with a singleness of purpose that was terrible in its finality.

Thus he moved now, up the ramp of the space ship to beat a fist on the metal door. There was no response and he beat once again. Slowly the panel moved inward and in the frame of strange illumination from within, stood Lall.

Jorgen spoke no words. He stepped through the doorway, lowering his huge head to get inside. He spoke no word, but his demand was in his face and in his eyes. The maid took a backward step, unhurried, and he followed on as she —also silent—took another step and another.

It did not occur to Jorgen that he was being led. Nor did he think to notice what her reactions were. He cared not a whit for anything but the fact that she was slim and desirable and beautiful and that she'd struck a spark from the hard core of his being.

They went through another door now and there was no fear on the maiden's face. And even Jorgen had the grace to be surprised when finally she smiled and held forth her arms.

To Jorgen, whirled along on the crest of man's most elemental task, there were only conscious highlights in his mind. The knowledge that here indeed was a worthy foe in the eternal battle between man and woman. Her slimness was a deception for she rode up to him with all the ardor of one bathed in the same fire that consumed the huge Viking.

Here was no shrinking lily—unless

perhaps a tiger lily with a fierce desire to meet his own. She sought no gentleness and even mighty Jorgen was amazed at the ferocity with which she met his own—to blend it all in one ferocity that mixed and melted in together to be one.

When it was done, Jorgen felt with dull wonder, an exhaustion he had never known before. It was as though a portion of his life sap had been withdrawn from out his veins. He stumbled from the cabin without a backward look. He pushed his way from out the ship and down the ramp, returning again to his fellows where he dropped upon the sod and closed his eyes. As he drifted into sleep, a sweet and warming thought was in his mind—a memory: She was a worthy wench. A worthy wench indeed.

THE VIKINGS and the Nubian arose at dawn to eat again. They took the cold meat in their hands and tore it with their teeth.

And it was now that Tazor stopped with suddenness and smote his thigh. "I know," he said. "I know at last. God sell me to the devil for a fool! All night I sought the key that was before my eyes and I saw it not."

Rolf put his own food down. "What do you know?"

"That she is evil—that the maiden must be slain. The voice that spoke to you was filled with truth. A scourge of some variety now sits upon our world. She must be slain."

Lars snorted as he went on with his breakfast. There was no occasion important enough to make him lose his interest in his food. "At least someone is finally sure of something around here. That's indeed a novel situation. But tell me—how did you arrive at your conclusion?"

"When I talked to the maid I spoke some bitter words and her body was torn by sobs."

"She wept?"

"No. That was it. She did not weep. Her eyes were dry and yet she made the motions showing grief. No tears came to her eyes and that's the key. The maiden cannot cry! Therefore, she is not human. She is evil and must die."

"This is conclusive?" Rolf asked.

"Beyond all doubt. The devil never cries. The evil are incapable of tears."

Rolf came to his feet with a lunge and bared his blade. "Then I can do this thing and get it done. It will take but a moment, then we start immediately back to the northland, back to my waiting bride."

He strode toward the ship with purpose etched in every bone and muscle of his build. He climbed the ramp and the flat of his sword rang loud upon the metal.

"Come out, evil goddess! Open the panel, Lall or whatever it was some foul mother named you. You've reached the end. But death that's short and painless is a gift when death becomes the order of the day. Come out!"

There was no response. The door remained closed while Rolf's sword rang again upon its surface. The other Vikings and the Nubian came up and Lars spoke out: "I call that rather dunderheaded, friend. Devil or god—evil or good—the nature's still the same. And few will step forth lamb-like at an invitation to their own death. I'd rate the maid a fool if she opened now."

ROLF'S EYES were blazing with righteous and fanatical anger. "One does not cavil or deceive in dealing with foul things! One speaks the word of truth to shame the lie. Now that she has not come, I'll take this ship asunder piece by piece. I'll drag her forth."

Lars stood with hands on his hips

surveying the hull. "You may be strong," he said. "The mightiest in all the northland, but I'll vow you've met your match."

Rolf hurled himself against the door, only to be hurled backward like a straw. He advanced again, roaring a Viking oath, but the door to the ship fit snugly in the hull and there was not an opening into which even a needle could be thrust.

In monumental rage, Rolf leaped upon the ground and tore the ramp itself from off its mooring. He slammed the metal slab against the hull with a sound that could be heard a mile around. But no impression did he make upon the hull. Not so much as a tiny mark to show where he had laid the metal on.

He turned and threw the ramp away from him, doubled his mighty fists and shook them at the sky. "I have not failed," he roared. "By Tor, I have not failed! I'll have her out though hell stands in my path!"

As Rolf spoke, Lall came to the window of the ship and looked out at them. It was a strange look as though Lall had been far away and had no idea what was transpiring. Her face was not now beautiful with youth, but drawn and worn as from a long and bitter period of labor, pain and woe.

She looked out at them and smiled and Tazor was sharply struck by her expression. "Could I be wrong?" he muttered to himself. "She looks for all the world like good itself. Like a mother—deep and wondrous eyes she has. Filled with compassion for all the helpless of the land. Could I be wrong?"

Rolf waved his sword aloft and shouted judgement on her head. But her manner was as one who had been given gentle greetings by a friend. She smiled and withdrew. And the smile was like a benediction, blessing all.

Tazor saw and marveled but, to mock his conscious mind, there came a coldness in his loins to rise and spread like unseen reptiles crawling over him. He shuddered, and beneath the warming sun the sweat upon his brow was cold as ice.

Rolf had gone to the rear of the ship and was tearing with maniacal rage at the grates in the jet-tubes. But the grates held firm and it dawned with sharpest clarity on Rolf that the Martian known as Lall was tight and safe within her metal walls; that he was like a bug with broken wings assaulting the Alexandrian gates.

He fell to one knee, drooping, dejected, then came erect again. "All is not lost! If I cannot enter in and slay the witch, I'll slay her from without!"

HE RAN forthwith to the timbered line and returned at a killing pace, dragging behind him a tree that would have taxed the strength of five men.

Tazor and Lars stood back and watched. "He means to burn her out—to roast her alive," Lars said.

"Aye," the Nubian returned.

"But will she not escape? Will she not set those rosy tails a-flaming and ride them off into the sky?"

Tazor scowled and studied the terrain. "I have a feeling she cannot. I hadn't thought of it before, but I feel that she is trapped upon the ground. I doubt if even that great ship can tilt upon its tail and go straight up. It would surely need some room to get its speed—like the great web-footed birds I've seen in southern swamp-lands. I doubt the ship has room to rise again."

Now Rolf, with untiring energy, had heaped great logs of wood about the ship until it seemed to sit like some huge sacrifice upon a funeral pyre.

The sun was lowering when he had

finished with his self-appointed task. He stood back and called to Jorgen: "Bring an ember here. Bring fire that we may see a devil roast!"

Some minutes later, the first flames crackled as the fire came alive, to brighten and set its teeth into the waiting wood. The Vikings and the Nubian stood back and saw the flames grow strong and leap about the ship and give the coming night a crimson gown.

The licking fingers crawled about the ship to leap higher and higher until they reached the level of the windows up above. And as they watched, the face of Lall appeared once more. Lit by the outside flames, it was a face of arresting beauty once again. Gone was the pain and vestiges of sorrow in her eyes. She looked with childlike curiosity upon the fire leaping at the ship.

And then she laughed.

But not with any spite; more a laugh of happiness and wonder at it all. Then the merriment was gone and she turned away from the window to be seen no more that night.

But Rolf, with superhuman energy, kept feeding up the flames all through the night. Asking no aid he worked as one possessed; worked as the only man upon the earth, ignoring all the others in his dogged energies.

All night he kept the flames alive and leaping high. No more was Lall's face seen, the windows blank with that odd glow of light created in the ship.

WITH DAWN, Rolf gave off laboring and let the fires die. He said to his companions, "She must have met her fate. Preferring to die inside, rather than come forth and taste the justice of my sword."

Lars said nothing. Only the Nubian had a word: "That would take will power far beyond the average mortal

man. The agony of dying from slow heat would drive the bravest out."

They watched the flames smoke and die and the hull of the flying ship was black from soot and ashes all around. Now they advanced, and Tazor laid his hand upon the hull.

"It is not even warm," he said. "I thought as much. A metal able to withstand the heat and cold of space, would hardly suffer from our poor attempts."

He brought his hand away and on it was the soot-ash. Where his flesh had touched, the metal of the ship showed bright and cool and unmarred as before.

At that moment they looked upward, their eyes caught by movement in the window. Lall looked, slanting her eyes downward the better to see them.

Again she had changed. She was brighter, harder, more brittle. The beauty in her face was the beauty of a fine art piece moulded in precious metal by a genius cold of blood and without a soul.

I can see it now, Tazor thought. The evil in her. Never a face so fair to serve as mask before a heart so black. We waited, in our justice, far too long. It was this justice that defeated us.

Rolf raised a giant fist. "Come out, you devil's thing! Come out and go back to your evil father with one clean thing about you—the thrust of a two-edged sword straight through your heart."

"You make it sound so inviting," Lars said, "I'm sure she'll strain herself in getting to the ground."

Lall looked down upon them and she was not smiling now. Her eyes were full of such a hate as scarce two eyes could hold. Her lips drew back from teeth now turned to fangs by the grimace. Her hands came up, the fingers arched to claws, each with a

crimson nail of sharpest point. She spoke and though the space ship walls were thick, her words came clear—as thoughts—into their minds.

"Stare! Talk, and wave your arms, you two-legged carrion piles. It's well for you that being stupid you do not know your fate. My children have been born and now are growing up. More will be born, and more and more. Soon I'll see you as screaming, gibbering senseless things, alive only with pain. Lall's revenge will visit soon for the indignities you've heaped upon me. You have not long to wait."

With that she was gone and the warriors looked at one another. Lars was the first to speak: "I'd swear I heard the wench talking and yet those walls stand up to fire and are not harmed."

Tazor said, "If we could have but known before."

Rolf's face was dark. "I will not leave this place though I grow old. I'll not depart without my mission filled. Someday, somehow, she must come out. I will be waiting here."

He turned and strode back to where the encampment had been made. Soon the other three followed and gloom hung heavy over them.

Came night, then followed by another day. Another day and night until a week had passed and Lars was sore distressed. "It's well and good to have a mission, Rolf. But you also have a wife who waits for you. Will you die here staring at that cursed ship?"

"My mission will be filled," Rolf answered doggedly.

Tazor seemed less affected than the rest. He wandered in the woods and seemed at home. He spent long hours communing with his thoughts and was content. Often he was wont to say, "I love this freedom," say it dreamily.

Jorgen remained the mute he'd always been. He stalked for game and set the rabbit snares. But now and

often he would stop to eye the ship with something in his face akin to pain. As though a sickness dwelt within his heart.

Then came a day they sat before their food when the Nubian looked up. He laid his deer haunch down and spoke as quietly as though but to commend the shining sun. "The door is opening," he said.

SLOWLY THE door of the space ship swung out away from the hull. It had been a long wait, and the four were held by surprise that this sudden change in things should come about.

They sat staring, all but Rolf. The Viking chief stared also, but he came unconsciously to his feet and drew his sword without knowledge of the act. But the necessary spark of command did not go from his brain to set his legs in action.

There was nothing to see at first, save the dark opening in the hull. They waited for sight of the lovely creature within, but she did not appear.

Then the spell was broken, and with a great shout, Rolf charged from the river's edge straight toward the ship. But only half the distance did he cover before he stopped again to stand as frozen as some Roman statue carved of stone.

From out the ship now came a sudden gush of stark insanity. It was as if the entrance had become the mouth of some obscene river.

Ants.

Ants by the dozens—hundreds—thousands spewing forth over each other, down the hull of the ship. But ants the like of which no mortal man had ever seen before. Fully a foot in length they were, and even from the river bank the three still-seated warriors saw them well. Six-legged, sized in body as a smallish dog, each ant

had a pair of vicious mandibles. These they snapped continually to make a sound like the snapping of bones; a sound that increased as the savage horde poured forth.

The Nubian crossed himself and moaned, "Great heaven what is this? An evil such as no man could conceive. She is a goddess, or a devil, or a fiend."

Lars said nothing. His mouth hung open and his eyes bulged out until it seemed a breath of air would knock them to the ground.

Jorgen sat like one who'd passed through hell.

At first, the ant horde seemed to come haphazardly from the ship. As in a sudden spasm of first-freedom, they poured in all directions on the ship and round about; turned the hull black with moving, twisting mass. They raised their heads as though to scent the wind and waking demons stretched within their eyes.

THEN, AS though from some unseen command; as from a word passed lightly on the wind—they stiffened. For a moment each was deathly still. The mass was frozen there upon the ship. But only for a moment; now it moved. The movement made the mass a complete and living thing with each ant just one cell of a monster hideous beyond all dreams.

One omnipresent brain was leading them—this point came clear—as they moved with great precision in an arc. One horn to left and one to right, they spread with amazing swiftness. And before his limbs became unfrozen, Rolf was trapped as were his three companions in an arc of moving rottenness, the river hard behind.

Rolf stood as they swept down upon him, rolling like a wave; the vanguard always going under as the ravenous rearward ants swept over them. With



The mass of hideous ants swept down upon the men with death-like precision

scarce a yard to separate him from the wave, Rolf raised his sword and slashed it through their mass. He slew a dozen of the insects, cleaving them asunder, but he could as well have slashed the naked wind.

Almost too late came Tazor's cry to break the spell: "Run, Viking, run! Retreat before you die!"

Rolf turned and fled back to the river's brink and found the Nubian had sprung to leadership.

"There is but one way—a chance," the Nubian said. "If we kill some, the rest may flee from us!"

Into each hand around him he thrust a burning brand from the cooking fire. "Move on them now," he cried, "before they move on us. Be careful lest you slip and fall. It would mean death."

Showing the way by his actions, he rammed with two burning brands to the brink of the moving wave. He thrust the brands into the rolling mass as one would thrust an oar into a wave. The dying insects screamed,

somehow, in rage. Or else the sound came from their roasting flesh. A stench rose up and the crest of the black ocean quivered and fell back.

Now the four warriors worked as one along a hard-held line. Thrusting their flaming torches among the insects.

But gladly they seemed to die; for each one that shriveled up and fell, there were two to eat the fried remains—gulp up with ravenous jaws the charred ant-flesh and jump forward toward the flame.

For a time the four held ground, killing the hideous insects by the scores. Then Rolf looked up to see fresh hordes of them pouring from the space-ship and he called, "This is futile. When our torches go, we go."

Tazor nodded in grim agreement. "Those jaws are poison. Let one touch you and you're done."

"My torches are almost out," Lars shouted. "It's time to sound retreat! Out to the island first in the river bed, then down the river! No man



can fight these things!"

THEY RETREATED from their war of fire on the ants and hastened to the shore. Then turned to see a deadly, chilling thing. The ants did not pursue. Instead, with diabolical intent, the two horns of the arc advanced in line—to the shore also—and arriving there flung out into the stream, committing suicide that others coming from behind, might use their bodies as a bridge to cross.

In horror stood the rooted warriors, frozen by the ingeniousness of this. "It's like a beast," Lars said in awe. "A single rotten beast with a single brain to guide the way, each ant a deadly part."

With amazing speed the foot-long killers moved across the bridge of bodies, thus to form a living bridge upon the dead and stand silently staring at their prey. It was as though they said, "Your fate is sealed, you will escape us not. Here by this river, ere the high sun sets, we'll have your skin, eyes, flesh, bones."

Now the center of the arc moved down along the shore; again the warriors fled; out through the knee deep water to the island in the middle of the stream. There they turned to watch and saw the ant-horde overrun the place they'd sat at food. Chilled to the heart by horror, were the Vikings and the Nubian, at sight of how the insects tore the meat. Covering it with their blackness; then the black hummock sank and disappeared as the meat went in the bellies of the ants.

Then came a sound fair sickening to hear. The crunching of the bones. For a moment now, the ants in circling swept away from the eating place and Tazor the Nubian shuddered as he spoke.

"Can I believe my eyes? Nothing—nothing is there that was lying there before. The food gone, not a scrap of flesh or bone in sight. Only clean sand. Food swept away so quickly the eye could hardly follow."

"And the knife," Rolf said in a

strangled voice.

"What knife?"

"The hunting blade that I left lying there. Did it escape your eye? The handle was of polished bone, and as the ants fell back, I saw the blade with but a metal haft. The handle made of bone was gone."

SO GREAT was their surprise, the warriors only stared and marveled in sick horror at the sight. They saw that whatever brain controlled the ant had decreed a rest. The insects made no move to drive on in. Instead, with a guard of thousands left to watch and wait, the balance moved away into the woods. Like a plague the like of which no mortal man had seen, they went about their work.

The sound of champing jaws was like the tramp of many horses on a hill. Soon great trees began to fall and over these the insects swarmed and the forest giants—leaf, branch and trunk and root, vanished into their maws to leave bare ground.

"Great God!" the Nubian whispered. "Not one single man should live to see this ghastliness on earth. It pounds upon the senses, assaults the gates of reason and is like to drive one mad. See how they eat! All things with any life at all quickly vanish on any spot they tread! A scourge like that could strip the earth right down to rock and soil!"

The three Vikings were gazing at the entrance to the ship, forth from which, still, the ants were vomited. But in a lesser volume now 'twas true.

"But where do they come from?" Rolf asked with hanging jaw. "What rotten miracle of evil brings them forth?"

"She spawns them," Tazor said, "Out of her body comes the awful eggs that make this possible. The scourge is here! If that wench does not die, the earth is doomed. The gods

who spoke you orders in your dream knew that this horror pended for the world."

"I failed them," Rolf replied. And in his words was a sign of mental agony which only death, it seemed, would finally still. "I failed in duty they did bide in me!"

At this, a strangled shout went up from Jorgen. The others turned and saw upon his face sheer madness brought about by self-contempt. "It was I!" he cried. "It was I who wore the traitor's cloak! I see it now. Hot was my blood for the wench, and in the dead of night I went into the ship and had my way with her. I took her in my arms to bring this on!"

With a terrible cry, he waved aloft his sword and charged across the shallow water toward the shore. Before his friends could move, he reached the wave of insects, struck in frenzy at it with his sword.

Now Lars and Rolf lunged forward to his aid, but only to be held in check by Tazor's arms and Tazor's voice: "It is too late! Stay! You can only sacrifice yourselves!"

AND THIS was true. The ants were over Jorgen with such viciousness, he was already down, a black and writhing mass from which one roar of agony arose before the end. Then, as before, the black mound grew smaller, seemed to sink into the ground, and it was gone.

Now did the Nubian prove himself the pillar of strength he really was. Both Rolf and Lars were on their knees, sick with the sight, and Tazor's strong hands on their shoulders so-laced them.

"Now is the time to prove a man's a man," he said. "Courage to stand against what we have seen is God's own strength. You must bear up."

Lars was shaken with sobs. "I am not craven, I've faced many a fight-

ing horde." Rolf sobbed, "And so have I. But this! The horror of it turns my bones to milk."

"Now is the time," the black man said, "when a man must have a God; one not of myth, but a mighty God of power toward Whom to raise his feeble arms."

Lars said, "Even great Tor himself would flee before this scourge."

Tazor was on his knees and in his eyes shone a light that was an exaltation of his heart. "There is a God. The one true Son of Him who sits above. A gentle savior preaching peace and yet, Who drove the scourges from the court with whips and told the sea to cease its bellowings. That God I turn to now."

And now a stirring came among the ants as Lall, within the ship, ordered them on anew because she tired of watching the stranded warriors and now thirsted for their final agonies. The ants moved as a body to the shore. The Vikings saw the wave move in from either river bank. Hurling their bodies out to drown and make a bridge across which living death could walk with ease.

Lars shrugged and forced again—though gray of face—his old, defiant grin. "Make haste with those prayers, friend," he said to Tazor, kneeling by. "Already I can feel the flesh ripped from my bones."

Now, half the placid river was a solid mass of ants. And the water strip around the isle was narrowing as the writhing insect circle pulled in like a noose.

"Commend yourself to Him," the Nubian replied. And in his eyes was only peace, not fear.

Rolf's eyes were on the ship; he gripped his sword. "If I ran full hard—faster than any man had ever run before—then I could make it. I could slay the witch!"

Lars smiled. "Your slaying days

are passed. You could not take five steps into that mass. You could not—" Lars stopped and stood there staring down along the river to its bank. He clawed an aimless hand at Rolf, found a shoulder, squeezed, and whispered: "Look!"

The Viking chieftain turned, his eyes directed by Lars' single word.

ALONG THE river bank marched the strangest figure they had ever seen or ever would again. A giant, yellowed-haired and broad of girth. A Viking truly, from the sight of him, but a Viking fully met with evil days.

His garments were in bloody rags and on his torso and his arms and legs were wounds in such a number they defied all count. His beard was caked and matted, yellow and red; his great chest rose and fell in labored breath.

But his head was high, step firm, his blue eyes clear. And in his hands he held a huge gold cross.

"It's Rollo," they breathed in unison. "Rollo we left in Gaul to take a wife!" Then, Tazor raised his eyes and crossed himself. "My miracle," he said, and bowed again in prayer.

The Bishop Viking out of Ellenstein stopped now to look about and see the sight before him; the ship, the ants, the men in the lessening circle tightly pressed. His nostrils flared and to his placid face there came a look of loathing.

Then the voice of Rolf, and Lars too, calling out, "Go back! Go back! We know not whence you came, but this is death! Leave quickly or this beast will smell you out!"

Rollo paid no heed. Raising his cross, his eyes flaming, he came on. Straight toward the insect ring in lengthened strides he made his way. Full into them he walked.

And the ants attacked him not. Instead, a wave of terror swept their ranks. Invisible, yet tangible it was, the feeling of their panic in the air. A subtle sound arose, of faint, feeble screaming in their ranks. Gone was the order, gone the deadly discipline. The brain had lost its power, and the ants, like frantic things, sought only their escape from something terrible that menaced them.

The outraged Rollo made of his golden cross a flail and beat them in his path while the Vikings stared in wonder from the isle.

And also Lall observed him from the ship. Sick in her heart she saw the Viking go, with swift precision out around the ants, to drive them up and down the river bed into the deeper waters where they drowned by thousands, sank down and were no more.

Lall sobbed. How had he known? Whence had come this man who knew that her ants were sensitive to the subtlest radic waves?

"How could he know," she sobbed, "that emanations from the purest metal—gold—would drive my ants insane with fear? And how could he have this gold? On the planet I destroyed, it was a sacred metal used only for images in the shrines! There, no man carried gold around with him. There was a law, and to violate it meant death. How came he with this gold?"

THUS DID she babble as her own fears rose to stifle her. She feared the death that faced her now. Feared it as her ants had feared the faint, pure aura sent out by the gold.

In a frenzy, Lall rushed to the control room, wishing now for the pilot husband she had slain. "Come back to me," she whined. "Come back and guide the ship."

Madly she pulled and hauled at switches and levers that were mys-

teries. "I will not die," she moaned. "I have this ship! A child could put it in the air!"

And the warriors, wading knee-deep through the carcasses of ants, saw the great ship shudder, saw the blasts go out from its jet, the fiery tails on which it rode. The ship lunged forward with a heat that seared the ground and melted rock. Then, arcing up, it hurtled toward the sky.

But not for long. Before their startled eyes, it quivered, stood upon its tail, and dived. Down through the sky and toward the mountain range nearby. Hard toward the vertical cliff of a snowy peak.

It hit in a blinding flash, and the sound went out for miles around; the sound of the ship and of the mountain falling down to cover it in a mighty wave of rock and earth that filled the valley, covering the ship forever, or until some future race could hollow out a mile of earth and rock to make a valley there.

LATER, AT rise of sun, there stood three Vikings and a Nubian by the stream. Their stories had been told. Rollo's in an exalted voice of how he'd found a land of beaten people on the way. How he had talked to them of God and how—when he himself was down before the Vandal horde, they'd bared their teeth and fought and had a victory. The word of God had come to make them great.

Then at his feet knelt Tazor with the sun bright on his ebony skin to beg, "Bless me this day, Father. Cleanse my soul and accept my services. Where you go, I will go. I am your shadow now and this day hence."

Rollo, his eyes on Rolf, held forth his hand. "And you, my friend—is your heart still for the northern gods—the shrinking gods who could not save you here?"

Rolf scowled. "I need no gods," he

said, and covered the uncertainty within by adding, "I am strong—stronger than you, friend Rollo. In the north, you tried to dry the Golden Horn and failed!"

Rollo smiled. "Yes, I failed. But I have gained strength since from Him. Here—lift you my cross!"

ROLF LAID hold of the giant golden symbol of the Man of Galilee. He lifted and a strange light came to his eyes. The great cross did not move. Rolf set himself again and strained until his veins stood out and his heart was fit to burst. He could as well have tried to tear a mountain from its roots. He could not lift the cross.

Rollo raised his hand in benediction and his eyes were misty. "Go," he said, "back to the cold north hills you love so well. Back to the bride who waits for you. I see as in a vision that a day will come and we will meet again. A day when you will lift this cross and walk. The day you see a glorious dawning light. Farewell."

They watched him go—the Nubian in his wake—and all was deathly still. Then Lars said, "It is lonesome here. The time has come to leave. This is a dismal place and our home is far away."

"Yes," said Rolf, slowly. "It is lonesome here—and our home is far away."

THE END

SHADOW-LAND OF DEATH

By
JON BARRY

THE borderland between life and death is not distinct and sharp; it is broad and hazy and nebulous. Modern surgical techniques seem to confirm this observation, a belief also held by the ancients. The most recent case concerned, as it often does, a major operation in which the patient's heart stopped.

The man was having an eye removed because of some infection. The operation proceeded very nicely for some time, when suddenly, with only the slightest warning, the patient's heart stopped! Momentarily the surgeon was disconcerted. He knew that apparently the major cause of death seems to be the degeneration of the brain tissues when the heart ceases to force oxygen-laden blood through them. But this doesn't occur for ten or fifteen minutes. Therefore, the surgeon has a certain minimum time in which he can act.

Without hesitation, the surgeon measured his chances. He slit the chest cavity outside the heart and abruptly thrust his hand in and manipulated the heart with flexures of the fingers! This took place less than four minutes after it had ceased beating. Continual massage was the technique, so for fourteen minutes the doctor alternately squeezed and relaxed the heart, until finally it caught "fire" once more and started beating of its own volition! It beat very feebly at first, so the surgeon

kept up the massage for another hour and a half. At the end of that time the heart was pounding away normally and the eye operation had been completed. The surgeon laced the cavity and the patient was none the worse for the wear. Incidentally, while the massage was proceeding the anesthetic had been quickly changed to oxygen.

That such an event could occur, and it has happened fairly frequently lately, is some indication of how broad the death-life dividing line is. So far as medicine can discern, the major criterion of death does seem to be degeneration of the brain tissues through lack of oxygen—when the heart stops. Provided something can be done before this process sets in, other physiological details seem of small moment.

It is not yet known so far as we can ascertain, whether or not any medical experiments have been conducted during operations, in which oscillographic and electronic observation of the body functions have been taken. It would seem that this might be a logical thing to do, this sensing of the feeble electric currents of the brain, or the equally feeble electronic nerve impulses. If a patient were so wired perhaps a surgeon could detect the danger signals more easily and perhaps also there is a chance that death actually manifests itself in some subtle electrical way. The new electronic anesthesia machine may have some value in this matter.