

THE MUTANTS By Rog Phillips

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Cult of the
WITCH QUEEN

By RICHARD S. SHAVER
and BOB MCKENNA



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He writhed, helpless, under the powerful beam of light

FOREWORD

THIS is a tale of two planets, Earth and Venus, and of a man who found himself the plaything of the ugliest and oldest woman on the two worlds. She looked like a witch, and a capable witch has spells. This witch had had six centuries to study the ancient magic: the incredibly antique mechanisms left by the race whom we remember in vague myths only as—the Gods.

No one could live that long? Well, quoting Alexis Carrel, who is pretty well accepted in the world called science: "In medieval times, the idea of blood transfusions from young people as a means toward immortality, was widely believed in. . . . was the subject of a transfusion from the veins of a young man . . . The idea has certain things to recommend it . . . under proper conditions it might work." *Man the Unknown*, Alexis Carrel.

And too, did you ever see an old tree rejuvenated by the grafting on of a young sapling? It is a common practice among tree-surgeons.

Well, there is a legend of a woman who lived an unknown number of centuries. The first she is heard from is in fourteenth century Spain, and the legend can be found in the works of Sienkiewicz—who was a reliable man. She was called "The Watcher," also "Hecate, the Undying", also "The Mother of Sin". That there was a cult who followed a woman who was supposed to be undying is well nigh indisputable. But it seldom mentioned after 1500.

One day I met a man who told me this story. Knowing as I do that the antique caverns and the ancient mech of the God race does exist; knowing as I do the works of Carrel and certain others whose indisputable evidence is entirely in support of the possibility of

immortality; and knowing that trees are rejuvenated by the grafting on of young trees, I could not help but see the possibility of the truth of his story.

That children can be grafted on to aging people, and the young sap, the vital growth secretions of their bodies, used to make the modern vampire live on and on, I could not dispute, for I can not argue with such men as Carrel who have actually raised virtually immortal flesh in their test tubes and perfusion apparatus.

That there are usable space ships in the lost caverns of the secret ray groups of Earth, I could not argue, since I had seen the caves and the perfect preservation of the mechanisms built by the forgotten race, the Gods. That you have never experienced those things which happen to people—those mysterious and wonderful things which tell them that everything important on earth is not in the newspapers—can believe any of this tale, I do not expect.

For those readers who do not know that a large percent of this apparently fictional account is true, I warn not to read the footnotes; not to speculate on the possibility of age-old and secret vampirism and of mightier secrets too vast and too destructive for any man to find a way to tell his fellow-man.

But to "those who know" I want to answer one question that has puzzled so many of you . . . the question "ARE THEY IMMORTAL?" In this story it is particularly well answered. The other question which I know is in the mind of many of you: "ARE THEY EXTRA-TERRESTRIAL?" is also well and fully answered. To those students of the past who have puzzled about all the smoke around the subject "magic" or "witchcraft" this story is also particularly helpful.—*Richard S. Shaver.*

CHAPTER I

Our imagination cannot encompass all reality, for in the infinitude of universes, all things happen.

Eli Cramoisue, "Infinitesme's Philosophie"

Published 1784, Paris.

JUST outside one of the sprawling dull black and grey mills that feed the maw of Mars, on one of the dirty alleys that flank it, was a beer garden; no different than one of the scores that are spawned by droves of hot, thirsty workers.

At a battered bar of this joint was a tall, newly scrubbed young man about thirty. As he gazed thoughtfully into a half consumed glass of "suds," a denim-clad figure detached itself from the group about. In the camaraderie that such places breed he said:

"How'd it go today, Mac?"

"Oh, so-so. A little hot, but it was time-and-a-half today. How'd you do?"

"Okay. Say, I know you now—thought there was something familiar about that voice—you're the welder on #6 Skid, aren't you?"

"Yeah, but I can't seem to place you . . ."

"Electrician—I move around a lot." Casually throwing a rumpled bill on the counter, he said to the perspiring barkeep, "Bring us another round."

Frowning slightly the welder tried to decline the largess, "—had enough, oughta be 'getting'."

"Aw, don't tell me that. Where are you going to go this time of night. Look, how about us grabbing that booth and I'll buy all the drinks. Tonight's my birthday. Celebrate!"

"Well, Okay—but the next round's on me."

Carefully carrying their half empty glasses, they settled themselves on opposite sides of a sticky, ring-marked

booth table. Cigarettes were brought out by the welder. "Smoke?" he invited.

"No, thanks . . . used to smoke 'em, but five years away from 'em and you sorta lose all taste for tobacco."

"What's the matter? Swear off and stay off—for five years?"

With a wry grin, the other chuckled dryly, "Would be better to say I WAS sworn off." The welder asked what he meant as he lit his own cigarette and drew the first pleasurable puff.

"Well it's a long story . . . but you look like the type that might listen so I'll tell you." With that he finished his drink and instructed the waiter to keep some spares on deck. Then, toying with the ash-tray, he began:

"YOU'D guess my age as forty or forty-five, wouldn't you?"

The young welder, shrugged his shoulder and lamely wondered, "Well, aren't you?"

"No, I suppose I'm the same age you are—thirty." When the welder raised his eyebrows, in disbelief, he continued, "I know I don't look it, but I've knocked around a lot, been a sailor, and a whole crew of things . . . things that have left their mark. In my eyes mostly. Look at them—they've seen things no man was meant to see and stay sane."

Mentally frowning on his luck that seemed to throw him with crackpots, the welder moved impatiently as though to slide out of the booth.

"No, no, fellow—don't get up. Listen. I'm not nuts . . . and I'm not drunk . . . but I'll go nuts, if I don't get somebody to listen to me while I get something off my chest. I've GOT to tell somebody. Take it easy, and listen, will ya?"

As though thinking 'this bird might have a good yarn at that', the welder

pushed his back against the side-wall and propped one foot against the arm-rest on the other end of the seat, and settled down.

"That's it. Relax and listen. Hey, WAITER, bring us another round. Yeah, same thing." Seeming to address the departing waiter's back, he soliloquized, "A guy can't talk to most people about things that are really big—just like you can't put two quarts in a one-quart pail. Well, I've got something big . . . a lot bigger than quarts and pints, but when I really get into it you're going to think maybe you did make a mistake, maybe this guy is a jerk—or screwy. No, wait, don't say anything, just listen. Before I'm done you'll get cold feet. You'll be afraid to even listen to things different than those people usually talk about. You're going to be worried that maybe one of the bunch over there might hear me and take you for a sap for just listening to me—much less taking me seriously. If you got the guts to face something you don't know—even a little—hang onto the handle bars, I'm going to cut loose.

"DID you ever hear of Charles Fort?

I guess not. Most people haven't. Anyway, this guy Fort spent twenty years going through old magazines and newspapers. Searching for odd things that happen, are reported, wondered at, and then forgotten. Odd, queer things like chunks of machinery falling out of the sky. Strange shadows passing the face of the moon. Things that "look like ships" crossing the moon IN FORMATION. Twenty years he spent—he's been dead now for seven or eight years—and, except for the Fortean Society, most of those that did hear of him have forgotten already. But he wasn't wrong . . . there IS an understandable CAUSE for most of the

things we call mysterious. They read Fort and forget . . . you'll listen to me and you'll do the same thing, too. Marvel a little—and tomorrow, well, you'll know that there isn't anything that can make sense like your welding torch.

Anyway, I have to tell someone even if he won't believe . . ." Then, downing his drink in one gulp, Big Jim continued, "Unless you've read his books, you wouldn't believe there was so much stuff—things that have happened and then were "explained". Hah! that's a laugh! Explanations! The only trouble is those that do the explaining wouldn't recognize truth if it was pointed out right under their noses. Fort had a great big laugh at the weakness of us humans—all through history things out of the ordinary have happened. First it was the medicine men. Anything unusual was the angry gods. Then the high priests. And now we have a new hierarchy of explainers . . . the scientists. The explanations all had a same "oneness" . . . the gods were angry, the sacrifice wasn't large enough, or . . . 'as proven by mathematical calculation'. Talk. Chatter of little mon-keys. Talk. But not the talk I'm going to do. Five years ago I couldn't talk to people—couldn't say more'n a few words to anyone without running out of what to say. Now I've GOT to talk to someone about what I've learned. They won't listen to me, though . . . I'm not telling them what they want to hear. Don't reassure 'em that things ARE what they seem. That must be it. They can't understand—think I'm ribbing them. God! I wish I was."

Waving a brawny forearm at the smoke filled room, Big Jim laughed mirthlessly. "Look at 'em . . . racing around on a pointless little merry-go-

round. Twelve hours work, a few beers then home to a dull shack and into bed. Same thing, over and over. I got away . . . once. Escaped from this useless life for five years. Now, dammit, I'm back, and doomed to the same old grind 'unto death'. Doomed to futility.

* * *

'BOUT five years ago . . . '39, it was, I sat in this same hole-in-the wall. Was a little earlier in the year, —June, I think. Hot, fetid night . . . hotter than tonight. You know, the kind of a summer night young fellows prowl the streets, wishing for a woman. Every night isn't the same. You know how it is, one of those nights when every woman you see is the most beautiful thing God ever made . . . some of 'em a lot more than that. Well, I started walking home. Lived up on Cherry street then—about sixteenth. There I was walking along, just like the rest of the single fellows that night, when all of a sudden, I got the damndest feeling. It's hard to describe—but I could see and hear someone . . . Someone watching me from about a mile away. "This damn heat's giving me mirage's or something," I says to myself. Crazy, I thought.

I can't tell you exactly what this was like—there seemed to be a big woman watching me with a strange kind of apparatus. That's not it exactly. Because, though she was watching me—I was aware of her and her actions . . . Can you imagine yourself in a dream, aware of someone standing beside you, and you're watching the action at the same time you're one of the characters? That's what it was like . . . except I was wide awake. Anyway, if I was dreaming, I didn't want to wake up cause she was interesting—big, and a guy as big as me is always keen on big women, most of 'em seem like

midgets.

I KNEW what she was thinking. That's what made me think I was dreaming. Awareness, I guess you'd call it. Someway, I knew she was making a decision from things she could read in my inner self. That's important. I KNEW she was reading my mind . . . as I was hers. But it appeared as though she were watching ME through a mirror or lens, or . . . or what?

She was saying to herself, "Yes . . . he'll do. I'll jerk this big handsome lug out of his dull rut. He'll find a life that's at least exciting, if not . . ." and she chuckled in a sinister way to herself, ". . . if not wholly desirable."

She turned to a girl beside her I hadn't noticed before. If I was dreamin', I was sure picking 'em tonight. This second girl—woman, would be righter, I think—this second one was big and beautiful too, though she did seem younger.

At the first one's signal, she moved closer to this mirror or screen that we seemed to be on either side of.

Remember I'm walking down a street all this time. But when the younger one moved closer to the screen, I seemed to be right there. I could look right at her.

Brother, kicking around all over the world, you meet and see a lot of women, but believe me, I've never seen any like her. Something she had—beauty, or personality, dunno which—came right out and smacked you hard. You know, your mouth seems dry, your stomach flutters and you think you'll never draw another breath, the way your throat's tightened. That's the way she was.

I remember her nostrils most. Nicely flared . . . but red, inside. Not pink, red.

I was sure I was dreaming—she was gorgeous, but her hair seemed almost

too fine, like spider silk. And her hands seemed webbed, almost.

She smiled a queer little smile, just showing her teeth—bigger and whiter than most people's.

And her eyes! Man! Bigger than any I've ever seen. Soft and luminous and knowing. A little sad. Strange too—with a strange sadness I can't explain.

She didn't have much on. A few spangles and sparklers . . . like a specialty dancer, or something. She didn't need anything else. The big woman said something to her in another language. The girl nodded and leaned toward the screen. I don't know how she did it, but she kissed me.

Like I'm dreaming, see, she kissed me and yet I couldn't touch her. That kiss was like a thousand thrills piled on top of each other. Gods! nothing—anywhere—has ever affected me like that kiss. Perfect ecstasy.

But I'll never get kissed like that again—I'll never see her, again. I wasn't dreaming . . . she WAS real. But she's lost to me now. Lost for the same reason you won't believe what I'm telling you. Poles apart . . . yet . . .

THAT funny sense of dreaming while awake—of seeing things a mile away, left me, suddenly. The way a light goes out. One instant I was being kissed, in ecstasy; the next, I was just walking along as I had been before I became aware of the big dame reading my mind.

The moon hung low at the end of the street, half hidden by that hill on the north side of River Street. Big. And a funny kind of golden red. That night it seemed too low—like a furtive celestial prowler. It made me conscious of bloody, evil, unknown things. Even the familiar, common

things suddenly seemed horrible . . . inexplicably . . . The horror almost of death . . . as though I were a walking dead man in a corpse world. I hated myself and the world with a dull, hopeless hate. Hate for the dull routine of the steel mill—the dirt—the choking smoky air—the booming clank of steel being born in the bowels of a grimy, impersonal, soul-destroying monster. Hopelessly, I tried to think of a way to get away from its depression. I didn't care to walk anymore, so I leaned against a 'phone pole. No reason for going home . . . even if I could sleep, that would only be a brief release. No reason for going anywhere.

Then SHE appeared again . . . but differently. No dream this—the McCoy. I think, "What kind of dreams am I having?—first I see her in or on a screen, now I'm thinking she's standing in front of me. I'm nuts."

You'd think, seeing someone, you know if it was a dream or real. But she seemed taller and dressed differently . . . like she'd just come from a masquerade, or something. She had on a long dark cape—in the poor light of the street it looked like it was red . . . like blood. Fastened close around her throat. Falling in straight folds almost to the ground. I noticed her shoulders were nice and square but appealingly female, despite her size. I couldn't see her hands—nothing but her head and this long dark cape.

I stared at her face, but out of the corner of my eyes I saw queer designs in gold chasing each other around the lower part of the cape. They didn't help my sense of unreality, I'll tell you, I half consciously wondered who the hell would work up designs like that? Then, driving all thoughts and wonder from my mind—like a door opening into a darkroom—she spoke.

Softly . . . with an amused little laugh, that was sad too, somehow . . . "Hello, big fellow."

I just looked . . . finally I managed weakly, "D—didn't—I see you—in a kind of a—a—a dream—a little while ago?"

Again that funny little laugh like the tinkle of a little glass bell . . . "Yes, you did—that's why I'm here." The funny accent didn't make me any more certain I wasn't dreaming yet, but I was willing to gamble when she invited.

"Come with me. You'll soon understand . . . everything."

I wanted to pinch myself. Instead, "If you'll open that cloak," I said, "then I'll know you're the same girl I saw in the dream."

SHE turned her head, quick, to see if anyone was looking at us. Then assured that the street was deserted, with one motion she opened her arms, spreading the red cloak behind her like a curtain of blood. I felt my strength go to water . . . like a white flame against the night she was . . . no more on than when I saw her before.

"I am called Ceulna," she said. "You are to follow me."

"Sister, if you're real, I'll follow you to hell."

"Come then," and she turned, allowing the cloak to fall concealing that glorious figure again.

She led me down a few blocks into a street where all the lamps were out. Dark as pitch. I thought what a guy usually thinks in such districts—why do they live here in places like this. Why don't they get out? You know how the houses are down there, all alike.

Well, she went in one of them with me right after her, my big feet stumbling, for she moved fast. Back apiece,

where there was more light, I could occasionally glimpse the outlines of her body, as the cape would momentarily cling to her in places. That figure was a swaying promise of delight—the answer to all my dreams, and I didn't mean to let her get away from me.

Somewhere inside the house, without turning on any lights she found a door. Opening it, she turned slightly, and, taking my left hand in hers, started down stairs . . .

I never went down so damn many stairs before or since. Down and down, pausing every once in a while, she'd open another door, then down again. Down, always down 'til I thought I'd never be able to walk if we did hit a level spot. Doors opening before us, closing after we'd pass through . . . then on down. Big doors, I noticed—after my eyes got accustomed to the faint light that seemed to be all around, without any source of light being seen. As though everything—walls, floor, ceiling and doors—were giving off a faint illumination of their own. Big doors of dull metal, that kept getting bigger the farther down we went. Groaning open before us, clanging shut—I wondered if she had walked up all these stairs in so short a time—IF she had.

"What are all these steps about, sister?"

"You'll find out!" And that's all she'd say—but she didn't stop going down stairs.

Well, I couldn't do anything but shrug and follow her. Then suddenly, my thoughts were interrupted—we'd run out of stairs!

There in front of us was a door, bigger than any of the others. The kind you don't expect to see 'til you meet St. Peter.

The girl, Ceulna, I should call her

now, turned and said, "Inside you will learn about life—and its absolute worthlessness. For your own sake, I hope you learn quickly. For down here you can die awfully sudden . . . or awfully slow."

Then a final reassuring squeeze of my hand and she busied herself with some strange lever. That big door ponderously opened, and we went through.

You couldn't tell exactly how big the place was . . . it was all black hangings instead of walls. But I got the impression that they did cover walls. All over the still black folds were gold figures like those on the girl's cloak. Peering closer, I was mildly surprised to see that the figures were artistic crabs, and from some place in my memory I recalled reading that the crab was the ancient symbol of evil wisdom and power.

SOME distance from the great door were people. Those drapes made distances deceptive. We moved toward this group, which, judging from the way Ceulna moved, was our destination. Maybe I should have said . . . our destiny . . .

Walking to the throne, which I saw now was what the group was clustered about, I glanced at the floor. A green floor that seemed to be half alive. Then I realized it was the color and the curving, veinlike lines of dark red carefully worked into the material of the floor, that made it look so like the flesh of the lower reptiles.

After what felt like an endless walk, we stood in front of this throne-like chair. Then I knew I hadn't been dreaming, for seated in the chair was the woman who first contacted my mind back on the street. There was the screen and a whole mass of apparatus.

I used to be a ham radio man and I

worked with electricity, but I couldn't tell what any of those tubes and screens were for. The only thing I sensed was that some way they were electrical. But I swear those glowing tubes, view screens, dials, lever switches and peculiar glowing globes were never built by men for men's hands . . . or women's either. Oddly, I thought, "Hell, this looks like some of the equipment beings of other planets make . . . in science fiction stories!—or like some of the stuff that I've had nightmares about after too much whoopee.

But the dame on the throne didn't look like a monster (at first). She was beautiful. Like I always imagined Cleopatra was. Beautiful—and dominant. A kind of voluptuous beauty that set the blood pounding through your temples. The kind of woman a life of indulgent luxury makes. She was big too, like Ceulna. Big all over. Not gross, just big.

There she was half reclining on this couch or throne. It might have seemed like a gag—except everyone around her was so darn quiet—like they were afraid to even breathe.

She had on a long gown that was out of this world—made of some shimmering material that clung to her in the right places, like it was part of her. One leg was crossed over the other, and the constantly changing shimmer of the cloth highlighted a long smoothly curved thigh that I'd have whistled at if it hadn't been so damn quiet.

I figured, "I didn't crash this joint so I'll give her the once over a couple of times." And I did.

STARTING at her head there was some fine metallic net that kept her hair in place, except where it hung straight to her shoulders where the soft waves started to cascade down her

back. Her shoulders, too were wide, but certainly not girlish . . . well rounded with an inviting texture. The only reason I could see for the dress was she wanted the color.

She looked at me with half closed ice-blue eyes.

The dress was like a thousand miniatures of her eyes—like some weird jewels had been woven into the cloth. Glittering and sparkling like liquid gems—or the eyes of vampires—a diamond under a full moon.

She stared at me awhile longer, so I looked the rest of them over. The men—slaves, I felt—wore only G-strings, but the females were all wrapped up to the eyes like Arab women. Evidently, the boss on the throne dislikes any other women displaying flesh where it might look better than her own.

Finally, her pouting mouth twisted into a grin and she spoke. Her voice was hardly human—almost musical, but lacking the tone flux of human emotion. A mocking meanness ran through her words,

"You are a fortunate man, Big Jim," while I wondered how she knew my name. There hadn't been a peep out of me. Then, I remembered the machine—if I could read her mind while she was using it, I suppose she could read mine too. But what was she saying?

"You have been chosen by a mighty organization as one more unit of strength . . ." On that last word her cold eyes ran over my body like a horse trader looking at a good buy.

I thought it best to keep my mouth shut 'till I found out what this was all about.

"You will remain here until you understand what is expected of you. I will decide what your duties will be. If you are thinking or refusing, re-

member that your wishes in the matter are not important. None who enter here return to reveal the entrance to those not of our organization."

My first impulse was to get up and slap her face for her insolence. I couldn't speak. I was getting damn mad. Just as I was ready to say something, she continued, "Now, while you are at hand, I can show you our punishment for disloyalty—in case you are ever tempted to betray us. Happily, I can also demonstrate the rewards you can receive for devoted accomplishment in obeying our orders. When you are shown, remember you can obtain more of the same pleasure anytime you are able to do us a service."

SHE gestured languidly to a female slave who quickly pulled back a heavy drape, revealing a greater mass of huge mechanism. A massive complicated thing that wasn't anything made by modern man. The rounded intricacies had the beauty of life forms. The surfaces had a hard glitter and iridescence more living than metallic. Looking at the strange shape, I felt its power and knowledge. Power more piercing than mortal men. Somehow, I felt puny and ignorant, looking at that thing. And I'm not puny and I'm not ignorant. But the mech—down there they call all the ancient machinery 'mech'—the mech wasn't really big, it just made you sense the bigness of it.

Above this—mech—hung the crucified figure of a girl. Eighteen she might have been—her body a soft symphony in sculptured stone.

What were all the good looking women doing here, I wondered. Here down so many steps, under ——— City. I guess we might have been a mile or more under the earth.

I thought at first that this new girl

hanging above the mech was just a horrible parody of a statue—the way certain lights and shadows were playing over her body. Then, suddenly, I went cold. It was a living woman!—she moaned softly, and her limbs writhed—painfully—slowly. She was alive—a crucified living young girl!

Placed under the girl's feet was a long, ominous looking couch. I didn't like the gruesomely suggestive look of the thing—there were straps attached to it, hanging like the open arms of Death, waiting for something—or someone. Someone to hold down—while the gods only know what horrible things were done.

The Boss dame gave me just a few seconds to take in the scene—then she made an imperious gesture. I should have been on my toes—but I wasn't.

Two of the slaves came alive at her signal then, and before I realized what was coming off they had hold of my arms. That made me mad—fighting mad. With a curse, I jerked my left arm free. Before the two dumb slaves knew what I was doing I had swung around. Getting a good grip on the one on my right, I tossed him against my other little playmate and both went sprawling. They weren't too anxious about getting up again, either. Before any more could jump me I turned around, ready to sock the next bird that made a move. No one did.

There wasn't a sound—except my own gasping breath. Then, the formerly soft, pouting moist mouth of the big broad running the show hardened into a thin line and she spoke—her voice like the lash of a blacksnake whip in the stillness—no longer soft and voluptuous, but strident and threateningly angered.

"I see I shall have to teach you several lessons at once!"

I GLANCED right at her. She was standing up now—that smooth, just too soft figure of hers quivering with scarcely concealed anger.

Without any warning, she bent slightly, reaching for the banks of controls. She found the one she wanted and threw a switch or lever. A beam sprang out of the huge mech. Sprang out like a searchlight's beam—in my direction.

I figured that if I was to do anything it had to be now, so I started toward her. I didn't get far—I was out of my league. She moved the beam onto me saying, "Now, note, my muscular rebel, everything you do you do by my will. Mine, not your own. This is the first lesson—learn it well. Resistance is useless . . . your big muscles are my property so long as this beam is on you and I look into this screen."

I wanted to smash my fist into that lovely, angered, sneering face, but what she said was true! I had no volition of my own. I tried and couldn't even move a finger.

With my mind fighting for control of my own body, she made it move to the couch and lie down, the beam always on me.

Strapping me down, the slaves fastened several wires as different places on my skin.

This Hellion that was ruler here stepped down from the throne and glided over to me. Her voice husky with some emotion—some strange eagerness suddenly awakened within her, she whispered, like the hiss of a snake.

"Now you will experience one of the least of the rewards we grant those that do our bidding, loyally and well. She that hangs there," indicating the crucified girl, "has earned our punishment by betraying us to our enemies. Absorb both 'lessons' well—if you wish

to enjoy yourself here in the future."

With that she seated herself at what looked like the console of an organ, not three feet from my head.

Directly above me drooped the body of the girl. The woman's mechanical voice, still husky with that strange note explained, "This mech is called the organ of opposites. From it lead two sets of wires, one controlling a synthetic nerve impulse of pleasure energy, and the other, a synthetic nerve impulse of pain. With it I can give immense pleasure and intense and violent pain at the same time. The girl is wired to the pain source; you are connected to the pleasure vibrant. Beware that you are never at the other end of the wires . . . watch, and feel . . .

She let her fingers down caressingly on the keys—she depressed one, and through my body ran a wave of intense, insupportably sweet pleasure.

Momentarily decreasing my enjoyment was the sight of the girl hanging above me—simultaneously contorted with violent pain. Then I became aware of the girl's thoughts and sensations . . . the ancient mech that was controlling both the girl and myself could, almost magically, make both of us aware of the other's thoughts and sensations—aware, as though our minds and emotions had been transplanted. I KNEW her thoughts, and somehow, I knew she was aware of my own.

THE first surge of opposing emotion was only the opening note of what proved to be a symphony of unguessed pain and exquisite pleasure. Whatever else the cruel voluptuary at the console might be, she was a virtuoso of an art unknown on Earth to ordinary men . . . by the skilled use of some sensation music, playing bodily

sensation with the feeling and dexterity of a masterful surface musician.

Enrapt by the cacaphony of opposite sensations she was sending through her subjects, her fingers increased their speed—greater, and more intense, the sensations coursing through our bodies, crescendoed as her fingers depressed key after key . . . exquisite chords of pleasure, at this witch's mad artistry, were multiplied a thousand times. A vast storm of ultra-powerful synthetic emotions and pleasure sensations grew within my brain—within every nerve and tissue of my body . . . the pleasurable sensations of a lifetime packed into each wave every time she pressed a key . . .

God forgive me! the thoughts I had while that damnable machine was playing will haunt me through hell and a thousand lifetimes! . . . while I was groaning with the floods of delight, I DELIGHTED in the girl writhing painfully above me more than anything on Earth . . . At one foul step the operation of the ancient mech made me cruel . . . and EVIL . . . all my flesh and being *desired agony and pain* for her that I might soar the heights of pleasure that was the inevitable accompaniment of her torture.

No man could do otherwise—for the setup of those synthetic nerve impulses was an automatism of *evil*—pleasure in another's pain was the essence of the mech.¹

In a brief moment when the wave of sensations had subsided before crescendoing again, I looked at the big witch

¹These synthetic electric sensation impulses forcibly replace one's natural will with its artificial will. The victim's will and self obeyed the great evil machine, for its strength of nerve- and thought-electric was so much superior to the natural will of man. The good, beneficial uses of the ancient machine had been perverted by the profane hands of others than the original builders.—Author.

who was controlling my delight drenched body . . . like an artist pouring his soul into his playing, the woman's face was rapt—I realized that neither the poor tortured girl on the cross, nor my own ecstatic body, meant more to her than a page of music does to a pianist. Vaguely, I wondered . . .

"WHO . . . or what . . . WAS she . . . where'd she come from?"

Then, cutting short any further thoughts, the stops of synthetic emotion were pulled by the witch-artist, and, once more, my senses and self went reeling and soaring in their first lesson in evil desire . . . in devilish pleasure in another's intense agony.

Whatever she was I didn't care then. I was her slave . . . for such tremendous joy and bliss had never before been mine.

This type of treatment, springing from the ancient cult's customary practices in increasing its evil strength was what had made the woman what she was . . . but this I learned later.

I was favored 'cause my arrival coincided with her punishment of the girl, and the witch couldn't resist the chance to practice her art on an attractive male and spend her venom on a beautiful woman together.

An hour of this weird and horrible music of opposite sensations passed. Pain for the girl whose lovely body by then was dripping bloody sweat over me in a steady stream; pleasure for me, straining at my bonds, consumed with ecstasy. Pain and Pleasure. The girl's mouth was pulled open in a continuous scream—a sound to haunt the deepest hell.

At last, a final crescendo of rending chords made the two bodies strain violently toward each other . . . mine in a convulsive surge of delight . . . the poor agonized girl's, in tearing deathly

pain . . . a torrent of blood gurgled from her open, agony-frozen mouth—death was setting her free from her Hell. . . . With her last few gasping breaths her eyes glared at me . . . her face . . . God! . . . her agonized face will never leave my mind—nor over let me sleep in peace.

THE male slaves came and released me. I couldn't think—but an evil desire had been born in my brain . . . a desire to have such pleasure always. Too, I had a strong sense of guilt . . . I HAD enjoyed the death agonies of the girl.

The woman who had just tortured a girl to death and awakened a devil in my own soul sat with her eyes gloating at the racked body of her victim. I knew, instinctively, that many, many people had died at her hands in just that way. She turned to me.

"Now you have seen our punishment . . . and tasted a bit of our reward—" She was looking at me approvingly as she continued, "—if you do well what is asked of you, you can earn a life of such pleasures as few mortals have ever known . . . If you get idealistic or squeamish—and or try to buck the ruler group—you will die as she died—or in an even more horrible and painful way. I, Nonur, have spoken. Go."

With that and a tired wave of her hand a slave came and led me away. I couldn't have answered her even if my condition had permitted me. As I left, my ravished humanity began to reassert itself, and I swore an oath never to rest unless I had to, until I had stopped such torture forever, by killing all such as she . . .

I knew it wasn't, yet I kept telling myself that this was just a wild nightmare—I'd wake up, sweating and worried and then forget about it.

But I didn't wake up—I WAS

awake! Such things just couldn't go on under a modern American city—but they could—and DO!

That night I met others who had thought such things couldn't be—but are. Others, like myself, recruits for the secret army the hidden people were gathering. For that was the purpose of numerous other young men I saw. All as strange to this place and its ways as I was.

CHAPTER II

"I have killed many things, but none was a greater crime than this, that they should die before the flesh had quite grown used to being round a soul. A white and shrunken nothingness. . . .

From "Memoirs of a Warrior"

Bikaren of Tuon

Venus, 1609.

THE rock down here under ——— City was a labyrinth of rooms and passages. Big rooms that seemed to have been lavishly furnished, sometime in the past, but the splendor was covered with inches of dust now. If I had only known how ancient that dust was, down there in the almost dustless caverns, I'd have looked more searchingly beneath its blanketing greyness.

Some of the rooms had been cleaned out and furnished with beds and plumbing. These rooms contained but few of the hulking mysterious mechanisms characteristic of the ancient place.

They contained other men too—the room I was taken to had an occupant already. His face was thin and haggard—broken teeth were hideous when he spoke. About forty, I guessed. As soon as the slave escorting me left, the old one began to question me. Impatiently, as if he'd have burst if the slave hadn't gone and permitted him to satisfy his curiosity.

"What do you know of this place, young fellow?"

"Very little," I answered, "but before we go too far hadn't we better get acquainted? My name's Jim McKenna, steel-worker from the city upstairs."

"Glad to know you, my boy. My name's Farne—Henry Farne. 'Hank' to my friends." He stood, taken aback, when I reached out to shake hands. Then hesitatingly, he put his out.

"You're new here, aren't you?"

I just grunted an affirmative "Uh-huh."

"I'm an old hand in this hellish life—and ole Hank knows a greenhorn when he sees one—"

Better be careful, I thought, so I said, "How?"

"Well, the look on your face, fer instance—all the oldtimers have a dopey, fatalistic expression. It's the 'stim' juice—that's stimulative electric, case you didn't know; anyway, the stim juice kills their souls."

The old boy was evidently glad to have an audience, for he continued like a lecturer or something—

"Think I know why too—that mech is too old—way too old—to use like they do, constantly. Not as healthy as it was when it was built long ago—God only knows HOW long ago." Here he smiled, displaying those dirty, discolored, broken teeth. "You'll find out—'s funny to get used to the idea that a secret underworld life like this exists on Earth without anyone upstairs getting wise. Been like that for centuries—little change . . . but to get worse, I guess."

He'd been looking no place in particular, when he suddenly looked straight at my eyes and said, "Your face, Jim—that's the name, isn't it?—your face, Jim, is still human—or I'd be afraid to talk to you . . . afraid you'd run to the big shots and get me in

wrong. You are newly arrived, aren't you?"

I NODDED, my curiosity aroused. This Henry Farne seemed to know something of this darkly strange, horrible organization whose ruthless torture and cruel pleasures I had felt tonight. As a frog's tongue does to a fly, these cave dwellers had reached out and snared me—the beautiful creature who had led me here was just bait for the trap whose rulers were shanghaiing an army. I wanted to know what I was in for.

"Look, man, give me the dope, will you—what's this all about anyway?—I just came down tonight."

Evidently this satisfied the old man for he squatted on his heels against the wall in front of my bed. Settling himself, his eyes scanned me carefully, then—

"I'll take a chance and tell you what I can—but don't let THEM know I told you anything. I've been punished before for my opinions . . . the rulers don't like truth spread around too much."

He paused long enough to take a long, thin, purple cigar from his pocket.

"Know what this is?" he asked, holding up the cigar. I looked at it a minute then answered, "Well, it looks like a purple cigar, why?"

Hank put the long cigar in his mouth and lit it.

"It's a cigar alright—but it's not tobacco—it's a drug grown on the planet Venus . . . a whole lot different than tobacco—here, taste it."

I took the weed and took a drag on it. The smoke was sweet, heady, and very pleasant. At the first puff my mind felt a new exhilaration—it was racing. I was suddenly more awake than I had been all evening. Somewhat reluctantly I handed the cigar back. "That's certain-

ly not tobacco—no tobacco ever gave me such a lift. Wonderful stuff," I commented.

Satisfied, Farne took the cigar again, saying, "That was just a test to see if you were familiar with the weed. Had you been an old timer, like me and the rest, your face wouldn't have shown surprise when you first tasted that potent drug."

"This old bird isn't as dumb as he looks," I thought to myself, as he leaned back and began an account that lasted half the night.

"You've got to be careful down here—never forget that. Careful . . . careful of even what you think . . . That cat from Hell out there can read minds with her damn mech."

Like the caliph of ancient Bagdad listening to Scherezade, I listened without a word as Hank spun his yarn.

"NONUR . . . that's the witch's name . . . Nonur, and others like her rule these caverns—these ancient caves that go back beyond the memory of man. The caves—these caves here—are the long hidden home of some ancient, wiser-than-human race."

"Did you see the mech of opposing sensations?" he suddenly asked.

"See it? Hell, man, that crazy dame put me through it!"

"Well . . . that's not so good, but the point I was making was that machine and thousands of others—all the mech you'll see down here, except the plumbing—was built unguessed thousands of years ago by beings who knew infinitely more than modern men. Nonur, and the others before her, have had this ancient mech since earliest time . . . I suspect since before the biblical flood."

I was having a hard time getting that, when he continued to pour out one

startling fact after another . . . I couldn't believe then . . . but IT IS TRUE!

"The use of this antique mech has made them into dero—most of 'em, anyway." At my puzzled glance, Hank explained that "dero" meant degenerate robot—degenerated humans, lacking in will or souls. "Through the years," said Hank, "the continued use of these marvelous mechanisms, and other factors, idleness and cannibalism, for instance, has caused them to evolve in an utterly different way of life. And in the centuries they have managed to keep the secret of the caves hidden from surface men—whom they despise and hate . . . so they say."

By this time the Venusian cigar was consumed. Hank tamped it out and then continued. "Even their bodies, minds and thought processes have been changed from anything you are used to regarding as natural to men like us. Let me warn you, right here, young fellow, never forget that as long as you're in the caves . . . they're not human, so don't try to outguess 'em by figuring they'll act like you would."

"I suppose," continued Hank, "this ancient mech was built originally for pleasure and stimulation—but these devils have managed to make torture machines out of pleasure rays and body-electric-stimulants. It's their source of power—brings some of 'em riches, tremendous riches—to boot."

"NOW, Boy, these devils have plans for you so I'll give you the dope on things you might need to know. The ancient people who build these caves . . . also conquered space. Some of their old spacers they abandoned when they left Earth forever. This bunch down here have found some of 'em and got 'em running . . . that wasn't too hard . . . the ships are practically in-

destructible. When they got 'em operating they traveled the far spaces, in the past centuries. Still do, even today . . . make regular trips between Earth and Venus. They go to Mars too, I hear, but I've never learned much about it—except there isn't much life on Mars, but I HAVE been to Venus."

I had seen too much already to offer much doubt about this—these ancients were far, far ahead of the boys on the surface, so I urged Hank to tell me what Venus was like.

"Venus is a whole planet of jungle paradise . . . peopled by a beautiful and advanced race superior to Earthmen in many ways. The women of Venus are far more beautiful than those of Earth, on the average, but, then, so are the men,—though they're not as large as the women. Now, the ones we work for aren't good for the Venusians, nor good to them. Unlike Earth, however, the Venusians are well aware of the evil presence in their midst—and we of Earth are that Evil. The Venusians have the antique mech too, but it's not a secret with them; they know more about it than the secret rulers of Earth . . . and that makes them powerful enemies. They're getting wised up now, but they used to be gullible as Hell, which made them putty in the hands of a skillful liar. You are here because the Venusians, millions of miles away, are wising up."

For the life of me I couldn't see how anything that far away could affect me so I asked him to explain.

"The native races of Venus," he went on, "have recently risen against the invaders from Earth—done pretty well, too. Our chief allies there are the 'cultists', the Hagmen—priests of Hecate—led by their so-called goddess, The Hag, herself. Hecate—The Hag's—age is unknown—supposed to be immortal. She's a giantess—bigger'n yourself.

Big! And a master of much of the ancient wisdom. She went to Venus centuries ago—and in that time, has built up a well-knit, effective organization. That's why you're here . . . you are going to be trained to fight for these hidden powerful people of Earth against the free peoples of Venus."

The idea didn't appeal to me. Not that I didn't like to fight—but I do like to pick my own. This business of being forced into something made me mad, but I figured I'd better let Farne go on talking and learn what I could.

"YOU talk like a man whose been well educated," I prompted him, "yet, you look as if you had had a life of poverty and hard work—how come? What happened to you?"

He smiled, though there wasn't much humor in it. "Well, you see, these people—the ones from Earth—have a government of a sort perhaps comparable to the government of Rome during the corrupt reign of the later Caesars. I was sent to Venus years ago. I liked the natives, got along well with them—too damn well, in fact. When trouble came between the Venusians and the Earthmen, I was under suspicion. And, with these rulers of ours, my young friend, suspicion means they either kill you or throw you in a cell 'til the danger is all past. That's where I've spent my time . . . in a dank cell deep under the mighty fortress-city of Luon."

As though he was wryly pleased with himself, Hank continued, "Hah! Then when our little Venusian Friends really began to fight, and a long war was seen to be inevitable—our beloved 'masters'," and here he spat, "decided my great knowledge of Venus might be needed. Soo . . . with many apologies, they took me out of prison, gave me a square meal for a change, new civilian clothes and put me aboard the first

ship for Earth. I got here yesterday . . . and they haven't paid any attention to me since I landed."

That seemed to end his tale, so I figured I would ask a few questions myself. "Just what," I asked him, "are these Venusians really fighting about?"

Farne looked at me quizzically. "It's hard to tell you . . . but their children have been disappearing regularly—and they blame Hecate's priests and the Earthmen. More than that—well, I don't know absolutely—but from the usual practices of the Cult of Hecate—the Hag she's called—I can imagine that the Venusians have plenty of provocation."

"What is this 'Cult of Hecate'," I asked, "this 'Cult of the Hag' as you call it?"

"Well . . . it's a sort of an old thing on Venus—you might call 'em 'Early Settlers'. Went there from Earth, around 1400, I think. They're a cruel bunch—my front teeth were smashed when one of them kicked me in the face . . . though they're not unlike our own secret ray people here on Earth in their cruelty. I want to warn you—"

"Warn me!" I interrupted, "against what?"

"Yes, warn you, young fellow—don't decide you don't care to join their little army . . . since you know all about them now, you'll not be allowed to return to the surface world. And if you balk at the enforced soldiering . . . you'll be treated as a deserter and put at some kind of hard labor . . . or worse. Pretend to be highly entranced and wholly charmed with everything down here . . . no matter what your true feelings, approve of their cruelty when you see it . . . or you won't see long."

HANK talked for a long time before we turned in—of the immense

steaming jungles of Venus, of that tropic planet's girl-warriors in their gleaming ray-proof armor, racing on the crystal spider-walks they spin like great glittering cobwebs through the tremendous tree growths. He talked of the ancient love-cults whose rites and ceremonies he described at length; their struggle with the horror cult of the cruel Hecate, the Mother of Sin—the Cult of the Limping Hag. He told me of the great glass houses, of their cities that hung like strange and gigantic fruit from the huge tree limbs of the forest giants.

Hank caught my imagination as no one ever has; I longed to see this strange world where the trees grew large enough to form the foundations of cities; where the great sluggish rivers dotted with the shining crystal craft of the laughing youth of Venus, rolled their awful might to the deep red seas.

The desire to see the wonders of Venus for myself made me more reconciled to the rugged training I soon had to undergo—even more I was anxious to go on, now, after hearing Hank.

SWIFT days of training passed. I was outfitted with a uniform and weapons. Taught to handle certain of the antique war mech of the caves. These seemed to be in great profusion, collected from the labyrinths of dwelling caves—perhaps from other planets, too. They were thousands of years old . . . but they had been built by that ancient Master Race . . . built by the God-race, to last forever—built of time resisting materials, and the caves themselves were so air-tight and damp-proof that the ancient mech was, for the most part, still in good condition. All the antique weapons were self-contained units—some were mounted on wheels, having a seat like a tractor. The mech

had a tank into which they poured water and inside the tough shielding metal a little dynamo of tremendous power sprang into whirring life at the touch of a button. Its power must have been drawn from the disintegration of the water by some method long lost to men.

On the tractor-like model there was a lever in the center that controlled the ray-beam of destruction—in the same way a joy-stick controls the movements of a plane in flight; right and left swing for right and left sweep of the beam and forward and back to move the beam up and down.

I learned to read the dials in the view screen—dials that indicated rough, fine, and vernier focus of distant objects.

They didn't teach us how to make any but the simplest of repairs wouldn't let us open any of the cases. But then, I don't suppose there is a man living, anywhere, who could have really fixed one of the ancient mech-weapons that had actually broken down.

That view-screen was a marvel. I wondered if the rays' amazing power and range was due to fine lenses or to a system of magnetic fields, like an electron microscope, or something. That thing could bring a man thirty miles away into such sharp focus that his face seemed just two feet from the screen. Most of our training consisted of practice with this instrument—bringing distant objects into swift focus, center 'em on the cross hairs—then press the firing studs. Wham! and whatever was in focus just wasn't anymore. A terrible, deadly weapon—but only a tiny unit, comparing with their large weapons as a rifle does to a Big Bertha.

From what I saw of their weapons and maneuvers in the vast caverns, this small force of a couple of thousand men could have beaten any of the Earth's

surface armies before the army knew what had happened.

These rulers of the caverns were the potential, if not the actual, Rules of Earth . . . yet, VENUS COULD FIGHT THEM!

What terrible forces would we shanghaied soldiers have to face? What would the Venusians throw at us that could stop an army armed with these marvelous weapons of the Gods Themselves! And surface men didn't even suspect they exist. They still don't!

CHAPTER III

"Evoel O Bacchus!" thus began the song; And "Evoel!" answered all the female throng.

Unbind your fillets, loose your flowing hair, And orgies and nocturnal rites prepare.

Virgil

HANK knew what he was talking about . . . they trained us . . . and kept us in luxurious kennels. I had been there about two weeks when they called us to a feast. To celebrate our departure, we learned eventually, but departure to a far planet—not to home. A sort of a morale builder before they sent us off to the wars . . . their wars.

As we entered the vast cavern hall, which dwarfed the immense tables set with a thousand places, I was stunned. It wasn't the sheen of the golden vessels, or the sparkling of the jewel-set lamps, nor the rich fabric and design of the hangings, nor even the glittering bosoms of the Rulers. It wasn't even the thousand dancing girls' glistening bodies present to amuse us . . . it was the several hundred gossamer-draped girls—floating in the air! like living bubbles in a god's draught of champagne . . . through some weird magic of the ancient mech they floated in a

hypnotic state—each bouyed up by a levitation beam from the mech and synchronized so that they moved slowly about without ever crossing or colliding.

Due to their hypnotic condition, their faces were the faces of dryads long hungry for love and suddenly released from their tree-coffins. The gleaming, flashing girdles about their hips, enhanced the seductive, never ceasing motion . . . their floating hair glittered with what may have been gold dust—but looked to me like diamonds or stars.

This magic of floating women set the keynote of the feast—lavish beauty above the somehow sinister faces of the luxurious, decadent group who were the descendants of those who for long centuries had kept the secret of the ancient magic.

A Bacchanalian revel to show those who were about to plunge into battle for them that they weren't niggardly . . . but the Rulers could easily afford the cost—I learned later it wouldn't have to be repeated for many of their new soldiers . . . most of these young men were soon to die, fighting on the spider-walks of the Venusian cities of crystal. Soon to die—but they had no inkling of it, who would have, in that utterly abandoned orgy? Nor had I, except for a brief wonder at the weapons that the Venusians must have if they could face the mech we used . . . even here in the banquet hall.

When the blood is racing and your eyes can't focus clearly for the delightful way your mind seems half attached to your body, logic is soon forgotten . . . and the Rulers that night had the means to do it. That feast surpassed anything I had ever seen—or even read of in ancient Roman splendor . . . strange drugged drinks were served to excite us, the strange, wild haunting melodies of Venusian music never

ceased. The stimulating pleasure rays I'd already experienced, and still craved, played always about the hall—an invisible lightning, intensifying the interest of a man and a maid—drifting on to other couples when their attention turned to other affairs.

There were jugglers, and conjurers, and dancing girls from Venus. It was in this group that I met again the girl Ceulna . . . the same one who had lured me here, the first night. She had just concluded a dance whose furious tempo and strangely exotic gyrations would have exhausted an Earth girl far more than it had this tall glorious, marble-limbed Venusian. A Venusian—that's what she was—a Venusian, here under a modern American city. She . . . and thousands like her.

VENUSIANS are subtly different that Earth people—their nostrils flare widely and are scarlet inside. Their eyes, a light grey or a flashing green that varies according to their spirit and interest—much larger eyes than one sees any need for. And webbed hands! Yes—webbed—webbed almost to the tips of their long, graceful fingers. Brilliant, large white teeth—oddly, the canines are larger than those of Earthmen, but still pretty.

Well set on their heads are their very thin, shell-like ears. Rather large though, but one doesn't notice this in the women, as they are hidden in the floating silk of their hair. Venusian hair is curious, being of infinitely fine stuff—like spider silk—too fine for quick combing, often quite matted, but always beautiful. Beauty? Ceulna was . . . how do they say it? . . . the ultimate of beauty.

I was suddenly more than glad to see her again. I felt more acquainted with her than any of these others reveling about us, so I invited her to join me.

Like women everywhere, though, that was her idea—what had brought her to my table anyway.

Evidently that was the case for we soon were talking like life-long friends seeing each other after a brief absence. She spoke a little English in that funny little accent that made my heart do flip-flops—and I asked her many questions, as much to listen to her as to really get an answer. Simple, common little questions like, "What do you young people of Venus do for amusement?"

Then, the thinking voice, "make love, like you of Earth . . . or we swim . . . and swim. We of Venus swim much, much more than you. Or, we like to make thoughts on the old machines . . . but of that you would not know."

Finally, lowering my voice, I asked, "How is it that you of Venus work for those who are at war with Venusians?"

"You do not know much of Venus," she stated with a sad shake of her head. "You see, in my home city the Hagmen rule—and that Limping Hag, their Queen—she is not a good ruler. So . . . I go to work for the Hag's allies, for they have more fun . . . more dancing and music. Hecate, the Hag, is not fun, ugh!"

I grinned back at her wide, good humored smile as she just wrinkled her nose. She probably didn't care for the Hag, I thought, but she didn't let it mean too much in her fun-loving life. She had a terrifically attractive personality—a kind of lazy vitality, a sureness of herself I envied. Well, I like fun too, and she was more than fun—just to be near her was exhilarating. I frowned at her as though I thought the Hag was distasteful too—then we both laughed gaily, like little children.

WE WEREN'T the only ones laughing—about us swirled increasingly

unrestrained revelry—being excited to ever greater unrestraint by the sweeping pleasure-ray's stimulation.

My curiosity as to the strange unsuspected strength of these hideous Rulers . . . that whispered fear of the Hag I'd heard so often—I felt I could get answered if I kept my interest masked in gaiety. So, I laughed as I prompted, "Tell me of the Limping Hag that you fear, Ceulna."

Shrugging her beautiful shoulders, she started, "The Hag is a very ancient . . . supposedly immortal . . . creature. They say she is centuries old . . . many centuries. She's a giantess—a hideous, old giantess. We don't know when she first came to Venus . . . she and her followers landed in the wild forests and were there many, many years before they were discovered."

Ceulna glanced at my eyes as though to assure herself I was listening, then continued, "She was much smaller, then—and her followers weaker in numbers, possibly only a few thousand in all. But the gullible and innocent women of the Tuons who ruled the surrounding country believed every lie the Hag and her men told, and let them live in peace . . . until it was too late. The Hagmen are accomplished liars—particularly in lying to a people to whom a lie is unthinkable—the Tuons believed too easily all they were told. Now . . . now, we know the Hag is an antique vampire who prolongs her horrible existence with the blood of young children . . . and takes no other food."

I guess I expressed disbelief, momentarily, or something, because Ceulna hastened to reassure me, "Oh, yes, the Hag even has many big farms . . . farms of children . . . but, somehow, her . . . child-cattle, don't do very well, and are old when a normal child would be just grown. She steals their youth . . . by living on a daily infu-

sion of their young blood!"

"What does she—the Hag—look like?" I asked her, my eyes on her vivid, startlingly alive face with those oversize Venusian eyes flashing strangely out of the ultra-whiteness of her Tuon skin.

Cocking her head coyly to one side, she asked me, "Would you like very much to see?"

I nodded with a smile and she arose. "Then follow me and I will show you some magic that children play with on Venus."

I trailed after her spangled dancer's form as she threaded through the boisterous, drunken mob, wondering where a person acquired such a gait—like a tight-rope artist's—her figure as balanced as a gyroscope, yet, as sinuous as a cat's. Had I seen the spiderwalks of her home city on Venus, I would have known how many generations of perilously racing feet had produced the delicate precision of her stride.

SOON we were in the part of the caverns where the dancers had their quarters. Ceulna's apartment was lavish and luxurious. At my appreciative glance, she laughed, "Boss, he like my dancing. He say, 'You like this place?' I say, 'Okay, Boss.' He say, 'Okay, Beautiful.'"

Opening a curiously embossed metal chest, she withdrew a green crystal globe that had a kind of coronet attached. Immediately, its resemblance to the Egyptian headdresses worn by priests and gods made me wonder if the pictures I had seen in history books were similar contrivances from the same source? However, my speculations were cut short by Ceulna's actions.

"Now watch the ball and you will see what the Limping Hag—the Mother of Sin, looks like," and she pressed a stud at the side of the heavy coronet base.

A light quivered into vague life within the green ball's depths . . . the crystalline, murky green slowly whirled and cleared to reveal a picture—as though one were looking down on a scene from a great height.

"I spied on her one day from a big tree—she didn't know I was there," Ceulna chattered, as the globe became clearer. "There! There she is . . . the big one."

The figure in the globe *was* big, standing twice the height of the figures about her. Her body was well covered with flesh, still, she seemed bony. Barbaric ornaments were hung and fastened all over that huge harridan. Her face was a fierce Medusa mask from antiquity, covered with a network of fine wrinkles. She seemed to scorn clothes and her immense dugs hung down to her waist—the living incarnation of that foully evil Hindu Goddess KALI! in the flesh.

The green whorls had left the globe entirely and I could see the background. The Hag was in a big garden—a garden that I found out later could only exist in the hot-house air of Venus. Among the immense, flowering shrubs, and over the heavy carpet of weird yellow-veined grass, played many scores of children.

"She loves children, that old one," said Ceulna bitterly. We have conclusive evidence that the children are bled to make Her live! Here on Earth, you graft young saplings onto old trees, and the young sap makes the old tree young again, so why not the same thing with people? The Hag learned how to do just that in some Hell in the far past . . . and that is why she does not die . . . and why she loves children so. Huh! it's no wonder—they mean eternal life to Her."

I couldn't answer, but I understood the bitter tone of her voice—think of the horror if the unscrupulous rich ever

discovered that evil method of the Hag's for staying young. It would be one burden too many for the broad backs of the poor to bear.

CEULNA'S voice had dropped lower as she continued, "Soon, you go, with many young men to fight against my people . . . to fight for such undying Evil as that hideous giantess, to fight and kill my people so our children may be used to make blood for those evil veins. It's . . . it's too . . . horrible!"

My own voice dropped, sad and low, and I answered, "This has always been a harsh world of work and worry for me, Ceulna, and I see your own world isn't much better under the rule of my fellow Earthmen. I don't know what I can do about this mess, but Ceulna, if the time ever comes that a blow from my fist can help free the people of these two worlds from the burden of these damn vampires, I promise you, I'll strike—and HARD!"

It's not like my nature, but Ceulna's grateful glance as I spoke made me feel very noble—like a crusader or something. But I meant every word I said, then.

"I can't see how I can do anything now—but I will learn, and later the opportunity may come. Tell me more, Ceulna!"

She nodded, smiling slightly at the way I spoke her name, the green brilliance of her eyes shining with tears. "I have always done others' bidding and it may be I always will, but among the free people of Venus—my people—it is not so. They love their people, and life, to them, is a rich feast of love and pleasure. Some of us though, under these secret rulers from Earth, and under the priests of Hecate, we foolish ones who believed their lies, do the work and the rulers seek only to weld

our chains tighter."

A tear welled from one of the beautiful, limpid eyes as she stifled a faint sob and continued, "When one knows that the children she bears will be used only as blood producers, and be old with the antique, ancient blood they pour back into the children's veins, it's . . . too horrible. Some day we will be like the ants, without sex or pleasure, living just to serve the huge body of some ancient Queen—like Hecate—the Limping Hag, who lives on the youthful bodies of our children. Life does not get better for us—it's—but tell me your name, O my new friend."

I WAS falling for her—but hard. Still

I thought that nothing was to be gained by letting them know who I was. I told her, "You can call be 'Big Jim' like all the rest of my friends, Ceulna, though I guess down here I'm just Number one-eight-seven-one-X—that's the number they gave me. But, I'm not so young, nor so innocent that I can't appreciate your beauty, Ceulna, and desire it!"

"Aah! that's better," she smiled, "I remember how your big feet followed mine when they sent me out to get you . . . in . . . here. You were so very anxious to get some place with me—I couldn't help but know what you felt. You should . . . know how I . . . how I hated to lure you into this evil life, but I had no choice. They see and hear over such distance with the ancient apparatus, that I have to—must—do as they ask—or die, as that girl died that night. She was a young friend of mine who tried to keep a young boy out of their clutches, and failed—but what woman could help such actions? Many, a great many of us die when they catch us talking, even as we are doing now."

"Boy! they certainly hand out the punishment for even little things around

here, don't they?" I asked, as much to bolster my own rising alarm as to make Ceulna talk more.

"They are unjust—so, we will talk differently after this—talk of the glorious wisdom of our Rulers, of the foolishness of those who dare oppose them. We must talk—and think—like this for you never know who is listening with the telemech rays.

At the mention of even thinking, I must have raised my eyebrows in disbelief, because Ceulna hastened on as though to convince me.

"Yes, even your thoughts must be guarded. When you know, or feel, someone is listening to your thought, my handsome friend, you must think as if you loved to be treated as an animal to be fed upon, or some of the 'watchers' will report you to the Rulers as an enemy, and you saw yourself what they do to an enemy."

"Watchers," Ceulna?" I asked, "What are they?"

"The Watchers are the spies of the Rulers," Ceulna spoke rapidly with quick glances over her shoulders as though she expected someone to catch us here in this weird apartment a mile under the earth. "The watchers stay at the telemech screens listening to others' thoughts—thoughts they hasten to report to the Rulers, trying to curry their favor. But not many of them dare to do that for they cannot but help think wrong too, at times, and then someone else would get back at them. At least that's one thing we have, we who are used to this life. We can protect each other by such methods—those who don't do so, get it sooner or later."

"Surely, Ceulna, you are stretching things a little, aren't you?" I told her, though truthfully I didn't doubt her a bit, now.

"No, Handsome One, it is truth—there is always danger—unless we get

them first. That is our life. Remember it!"

I COULDN'T imagine controlling my thoughts so well that no one knew what they were, so I told Ceulna lamely, "Well, it must be hard to pretend to approve of robbing children of their youth for such a witch as the Hag! But, Ceulna, wh . . ."

"No, wait. Now I must tell you what to do while there is yet time," she interrupted, "—for I may not see you again. When you get to Venus, you must escape from these people. How, I don't know, but you must. Do not fear my people . . . or be afraid to go to them—you of Earth know little of pleasure or true beauty, or the emotions that the correct use of the ancient mech can arouse, but we Venusians have developed our science along the lines of those of the ancient Gods who first built these magic mechanisms—the mech of love and beauty—so do not fear us that still remain free. Go to my people—you will have to think of a way after you get to Venus—and tell them that you are a friend. Among those of my people still free you will learn something of love and beauty that will change your whole life . . . and perhaps help you to free your own people!"

Ceulna was now talking so fast that I didn't have a chance to interrupt her for more details as to how to find her people—she must have been excited and assumed that I knew enough of Venus that I could find my way around it like I would my home town. But what was she saying now?

" . . . remember, while you are near the Hag's men, or any of those that you think MIGHT be siding with the Rulers here—think of something other than your true thoughts, or your true purpose. Think other thoughts . . . or the secret Rulers will kill you with a

ray!"

Before I had a chance to open my mouth with an answer to this, a pair of girls came running into the apartment, bare legs flashing. They were mere children but had the muscled firmness and smooth-flowing movements of highly trained dancers.

They clamored at her in the Tuon tongue of the dominant people of Venus—the tongue of most of the white races on that cloud-wrapped planet. It was a very different sound than any earth tongue, sounding like a musical exercise of predominately vowel sounds, and prolonged oooh's, nnn's, rrr's—a very liquid language it was.

I couldn't make any sense out of what they were saying, so I just stood there and took in all the beauty of those six flashing legs and well-knit bodies. If these were samples of Venusian women, the whole planet must have been populated with show-girls. "Not bad!" I thought to myself.

Ceulna finally turned to me, and grasping my hand with a slight squeeze, told me what all the bird-talk had been about, "They are calling for my Spider Dance, and I must do it . . . wait for me afterward at your table, and we will talk some more . . . 'bye . . . and don't forget!"

CHAPTER IV

*From her black bloody locks the Fury
shakes*

*Her darling plague, the fav'rite of her
snakes*

Aeneid
Virgil

ON THE stage had been strung a huge web of shining strands like a monster spider web. It angled upward from the footlights to the top rear of the stage—the farther strands lost in the gloomy shadows. Half con-

cealed in these shadows crouched the huge figure of a black spider, twice the size of a man—a beast from a nightmare. (I learned later that such monsters were inhabitants of the vast forests of Venus!) As I took my seat the monster moved out over the web and did a slow dance upon the strands—a lazy spider testing his web with his weight. Then it retreated again to the rear. As the spider grew still and the web ceased to vibrate, out upon the shining threads sprang Ceulna.

Her superb body was striped with colored prismatics in insect simulation of a fly, her arms concealed in the thin membrane of a pair of transparent wings. A dizzying exhibition of tight-rope dancing such as no earthman or woman could ever emulate followed. She spun, fluttered, dipped and rose, flew above the huge glittering web like some beautiful fly, fascinated by the glitter of the strands of the web. Then she faltered and fell near the center of the web. She struggled and writhed with marvelous acting, too marvelous, I thought for that tremendous spider was creeping forward inch by inch and the suspense was terrific—the threat optically so real. The sticky ropes seemed to hold her inextricably. Down upon her rushed the great spider, jaws agape, around and around her he whirled, thin silken ropes wrapped her again and again. Then he settled to his meal. That spider was too damn real. I leaped to my feet as Ceulna's lovely body disappeared between the monster's cavernous jaws. I distinctly heard bones crack, and blood ran out of the thing's mouth.

A silly conjecture that the cruel humor of some such character as had entertained me on my first night had placed a real monster of the type the imitation body of the spider had been designed to simulate upon the stage

came into my mind. I could think of no other way the act could look so real.

But Ceulna emerged again from the spider's mouth, her face and arms covered with blood, the beautiful wings crushed, and fled bounding across the webbed strands off the stage. The spider seemed in a frenzy, his great mouth hung open dripping blood, the jaw appeared to be broken. The monster swayed about the web. The falling curtain cut off the scene. That was either marvelous stage craft or something horrible had taken place before our uncomprehending eyes. Impatiently I sat waiting at the table where Ceulna had come before. At last, she appeared, swathed to her beautiful chin in a cloak of brilliant bird feathers—like the ones worn by the ancient Aztecs. There was a long scratch on her face, across her nose and down her soft cheek.

"That was great, Ceulna, and don't tell me that is the way they do their ball room dancing on Venus! I thought—."

Ceulna had looked directly at me then, and the expression in her eyes told me that all was not cream on her peaches.

"Ceulna! Something's wrong! That dance scared me to death—I knew something was rotten in Denmark. Tell me, Beautiful, what's wrong?"

SHE sat down, her breast heaving from all that exertion—and it looked to me like she was going to cry.

"It's—that spider. I . . . I . . . oh, I don't know how to start! I tried . . . I . . ."

"Now take it easy, Beautiful," I tried to soothe her. "Just you sit back and relax . . . there, that's better."

At my concern over her, Ceulna smiled gratefully and I'd have liked to take her in my arms, as you do a rest-

less baby.

"Oh, you are too kind to be in this life, my Handsome One, it's all so unclean down here . . . I knew something like that would happen to me—eventually—that wasn't my brother . . . that . . . that," and here she started to sob, but quickly stopped the sound, though I could see the tears all set to start pouring out.

"Easy does it, Ceulna," I said, patting her hand. "What wasn't your brother—the spider?"

Quickly nodding her head, she said, "You see, on Venus that dance has been performed like that for many centuries. It's a favorite of my people's—the Tuon's. The costumes the dancers wear, having been made so often through the years, are exact reproductions of the genuine creatures—mine and the spider's—that spider wasn't a costume, that was a real Arakniden from the jungles of Venus—a monstrous survival from the age of insects. My brother has always taken the part of the spider, when I dance, and he does it perfectly, which made it hard for me to realize that it was this monster instead of my brother in costume. I thought at first it was my brother going through the routine ill or drunk; he didn't follow the things we usually do. When it seized me, I thought that my time had come. I drew up my knees and then straightened out, breaking the *thing's* jaw with the full strength of my back and legs." She sobbed again here. "But I didn't get away unhurt—look!"

She drew back a cape of feathers and showed me great fang gashes in her arm.

"Gods! Ceulna, then that was your blood. Who . . . what devil out of hell would make such a damnably fiendish substitution for your brother?" I was half afraid of the answer she might

give to that.

Shrugging that rainbow-clad shoulder, she said, "One of the ruler group—it means some of my careless talk has come to the attention of one of the blood-takers—one of those seldom seen."

"Who are the blood-takers, Ceulna? Surely none in this hall right now—look human enough."

"No, my Handsome Friend, none here in the hall, but these are only part of the Ruler group—the others are hideous creatures, many of them so hideous a sane person breaks into uncontrollable screams if he is suddenly confronted by one of them. They are cruel as the spider you saw, and they keep other monstrous creatures for their own frightful purposes."

"**W**HEW! Some pets these birds have!" I whistled. "But surely your brother isn't one of them."

"The Gods forbid! What really frightens me most is what has become of him? They—ugh—must have taken him to the lower caves—none ever returns alive from there but the vampires themselves."

"Now, Ceulna, I wouldn't worry—how do you know they've taken him?"

"I just know. They couldn't have made the substitution without his knowledge, and Mala wouldn't have weakly submitted to having his sister eaten by the horrible spider!"

I couldn't figure what to say to that—this place had too many queer angles, and all of them deadly. She told me she was sorry and when I asked why . . .

"If I am in the Ruler's displeasure, why so are my friends. I shouldn't have come to you now. It places you in danger—but I just had to."

It seemed to me that I'd been in danger since she had led me into this

magnificent wormhole, so I just shrugged . . . what the devil!

"They may do nothing to me for a long time. They love to keep someone in an agony of fear—like a cat and a mouse game, and, then, when one decides they have forgotten and begins to feel safe, they strike again. I . . . I can't stay here. I must flee . . . but where? It's almost impossible to get out of these caves."

"Well, Ceulna, let's see. The little time I've been here," I suggested, "I've noticed many of these dusty corridors lead to unused and seemingly endless caverns—like this we're in now. Where do they lead? I'd think they'd be an easy escape?"

Smiling, she patiently explained, "To a newcomer that would seem true, but the ancient exits and entrances are covered by time with rocks and earth—it's a mile, or more, to the surface. Strangers can't realize the immense age of this place—the indestructible nature of the antique work fools their senses. Oh, yes, we could get into the other caves—and wander on forever—finding nothing—no food—no water—nothing but tube after tube, and chamber after chamber—forever! The ancient God-built machines can do much, but they don't make food—they don't create water."

ADMITTING her arguments were good, I tried to reassure her, "It's plain to see, from the little I know of this mess, that you are doomed if you stay here. Lessee, now . . . look, Ceulna, a man can live for weeks without food, if he has to, and I'd say that the ancient builders piped water into these caves—someplace. I'd say the pipes still held water if we'd look for 'em. Then, too, they must have stored some food—I've read that honey and some other things, seeds and stuff

like that, have been taken from the tombs of the Pharaohs—4000 years old and still able to be eaten. The Egyptians put this stuff in containers sealed with wax—probably the ancient builders of these caves did the same thing. I'd gamble my life on the chance we could find such containers and make our way out."

Ceulna, seemingly, didn't think too much of my idea for she shook her glorious head, then frowned slightly.

"No, it might succeed—if the Rulers didn't know the caves like I know the palm of my hand. We'd wander in circles, they would follow, and we wouldn't escape."

"Well, Ceulna," I commented, "what would you suggest?"

"I don't know . . . I don't know what to do. If I pretend nothing has happened they may do nothing to me—that's the way they are. You can't tell what they'll do—except that it will be horrible, and fiendishly cruel. I don't know what to do."

"Look, Ceulna, I've got an idea. Soon they are sending this small army to Venus—sending us in *some* kind of a ship, a ship I have never seen—but you have! You know where it's kept."

I was trying to appear as though I was just talking to one of the pretty dancers the Rulers had provided for the entertainment of their new troops, yet, at the same time, I was desperately trying to make her certain of my plan.

"Listen, Ceulna, go aboard that hidden ship—any way at all—then, later, when we are in space, watch from your hiding place and when you see me, whistle. If anyone else hears it I'll pretend it's me whistling. When I've found you, I can bring you food. Then, when we get to Venus, steal off the ship while it's being unloaded for the return trip to Earth."

It must have sounded like a large order, for she looked at me sort of helplessly . . . and very appealing.

"Stowing away isn't hard, Beautiful," I assured her. "Most of the crews I've ever heard of are more apt to help a stowaway than not. It is very probable, from the way this thing took place, that those aboard the ship for Venus won't know anything about it. If they do, they'll probably be sympathetic and help you, even if you are caught after the ship leaves Earth. I'd say your worst danger was here—hiding yourself aboard that ship as quickly as you can seems to me the safest course, but, Ceulna, I . . . I'm sorry, I don't like to say this . . . but I can't see how you can help your brother, even if you stayed here. Perhaps he's dead already."

WHEN I mentioned her brother, she couldn't keep the tears back, still the girl had grit, and she was a swell little actress.

"I will do it!" The poor girl's eyes glowed in gratitude to me. "You make it seem so easy! Believe me, the spider is an easy death compared to some they think up for us." She stood up then. "I go now . . . the less you see of me, the safer for you, so you will not see me again until we are in space. When we get in space, walk everywhere about the ship that you are allowed. You will find me."

The brilliant cape of feathers floated swiftly away through the crowd. A lump of pity . . . and something more . . . was in my throat. I was beginning to get my bearings in this Devil's Dream I'd been decoyed into. I swore a great oath to myself—an oath that I would taste no pleasure, relax not the least fibre of will, 'til I found a way to strike at this ancient, powerful nest of parasites on man! It was an oath

I kept, too. For even though they are equipped with the weapons and machines of the very Gods themselves, these ancient idlers have allowed their brains to atrophy—and I know why. The ancient, infinitely capable machines, which they spent no effort to create, have removed most necessity of effort from the Rulers' lives. Those ages of idling, of deviling poor ignorant surface men, have cost them their birthright of Will and Sense, the best gifts the Gods left us. Surface men have had to exercise these gifts somewhat, and, as a result, are more of a man, and less a horrible insect that can live only be bleeding a host.

I sat thinking, digesting the horrible setup of this age old cavern life, until the last drunken reveler had staggered off to bed. Then I took myself to my own chamber—a chamber filled with Farne's very audible snores.

CHAPTER V

*Wish for the Wings of wind to mount
the sky;*

Or hid, within the hollow earth to lie!

" made this short
reply

'Tis hostile heaven I dread, and partial Jove."

Twelfth Book of the Aeneid

THE next morning they marched us a long time in the gloomily beautiful caverns. At last we came to a black and silent expanse of water, whose farther reaches were lost in the darkness. Under our feet the black rock stretched flat and smoothly glistening to the water's edge, where it ended, cut clean as a straight edge. At that edge was moored a vast ship. It was a tremendous vessel, like a submarine, a craft from the Elder World. Its antiquity was only seen by blo-

ting mottles on the dull sheen of its metal hull. That it was a still space-worthy spaceship I realized from Farne's accounts of them. It was probably older than the Pyramids, yet, but for the dull mottling of its hull, looked as if it had just slipped from the ways. Had this been its resting place through those untold ages of time? Of what marvelous material was it built that it was still in running order after all those tired centuries had passed?

My speculations as to its origin were cut short; a harsh order barked down the long line of men. Great doors opened in the side of the ship and our lines of green-clad troops marched aboard and down the long gangways to deep inside the bowels of the ship. Platoons were assigned quarters inside and I had a chance to look around. The ship contained round portholes but they were all closed. I guessed, rightly, that vision was obtained by the marvelous penetrative rays the Ancient Builders had used so much. We stowed our gear and then stood around waiting.

A slight swaying motion was the only indication that we had taken off. This continued for half an hour, then, quite slowly the cabin floor started to lean at an increasing angle. Shortly the after wall became the deck. As this deck slowly became less and less of a deck, I found myself floating—and the rest of my companions likewise. There we were floating in air like a lot of fish in a bowl of air. Gradually, the ceiling which had been the forward wall of the cabin, became the floor. Suddenly a sensation of falling upward swiftly faster and faster nearly robbed me of reason. In despair I called to Hank Farne.

"What the hell is happening? What goes on here!"

"Well," Hank finally managed, after laughing like he'd choke, "that's an

order not easily filled, my ungainly friend!"

"Dammit, Hank," I snorted, "this ain't funny, now cut that insane laughing and tell me what the devil is happening to us, or I'll drift over there and wring your scrawny neck!"

MY ANGER and the way I was flapping myself around in the air just sent him into gales of irritating laughter. Finally he calmed down.

"What a sorry hunk of frightened little boy you are—but I'll tell you what's happening—much as I can. You see, my short-tempered friend, modern science doesn't understand the nature of gravity, so there is no concept to employ in explanation with which you are familiar."

"Well, Hank, I got lots of time. Let's hear what you think it is." I was beginning to get over being miffed at his laughing and felt Hank was in one of his 'lecture' moods.

"All right, I don't think y—— Never mind. The ancient race who built this monster ship DID understand gravity—and a lot more. The same God-Race that built the caverns on Earth, and who knows on how many other planets, and all the ancient mech—they knew or learned, that gravity is an inrush of tenuous stuff going into all matter and becoming absorbed by it. Gravity is a reverse force—in many ways—to light which is an OUT rush of flaming force particles. These particles only return to matter as they become gravity, thus completing the full cycle of change which forms our universe."

"But, Hank," I puzzled, "what's that got to do with this falling upward sensation we're getting?"

"I'm coming to that. In the tail end of this crate, and along the bottom are the 'Driver Plates,' as they call 'em in these ancient ships. Incidentally, there

is an immense supply of these plates in the original storerooms. I've seen workmen replacing 'em. Now, the 'Driver Plates'—a strange dense metal they are, too—are hooked up to great cables from the power supply—generators like the ones on the dis-beam."

"You mean that they're flying this buggy on electricity?"

"No, not exactly. Just what happens to—or in—the plates when the juice is on, no one now living knows, I don't suppose. Anyway, the plates melt slowly away, and somehow give off an out rush of force particles . . . similar, in effect, to gravity, but far stronger proportionately. Thus anything near the plates starts to fall 'away' from the plates above, and Earth falls 'away' from the plates beneath. The more juice they shoot in the Driver Plates, the faster the 'fall' takes place. Get it?"

"I think so. But go on, Doctor, I'm listening."

"In other words, those plates are *reverse-gravity* drives. Some ancient scientist did a swell job of *reversing* the integrative process of gravity, and so got a beautifully simple process by which matter causes things to 'fall' away from it. Clear enough?" Hank grinned, looking like a dirty little urchin, with his straggly hair and splintered brown stubs of teeth behind his twisted lips.

MY STOMACH seemed to be turning inside out, but I began to see the sound cunning sense beneath his not too attractive exterior. I grinned back, for Farne was my kind of a man. You didn't have to tell that boy anything twice—he was usually way ahead of you.

"Clear, nothing," I answered him, "I don't suppose modern men *can* come very close to understanding those wise

ancients. This idea of matter being growing stuff is a new one on me. If I've got it right, all matter *INTAKE* is the cause of gravity, right? The ancients reversed, and speeded up this *INTAKE* process, then, the matter melts away, and things fall 'away' from the matter." I grunted, "Huh! It *sounds* simple. I suppose, though, all great things are simple in concept. All they did then, I guess, was put the plates between Earth and the ship and it takes off."

"That's almost it," Hank was being very patient. "But the fact is that the repulsions on either side of the plate would neutralize and no motion would result."

"Oh, I hadn't thought of that," I acknowledged. "Well, then, how do they get action?"

"'Understanding'. The ancient God-Race understood the nature of energy flows and devised materials which are opaque to them. Now, the chamber in which the driver plates are placed is lined on the ship side with a material opaque to the repellant flow. They designed this opaque lining to reflect the flow around the plate and out the rear of the driver chamber. Result—all the repellance is in a rearward direction. Thus, the ship runs like a sky-rocket—by recoil. Though the source of the kick is different. That's as close as I can come to understanding the drive of these antique ships. However . . ."

Suddenly I remembered Ceulna!

"My God, Hank, Ceulna is stowed away on this ship and I forgot her! We've got to find her!"

"What the devil is she doing abroad?" demanded Hank.

I quickly recounted what she had revealed to me after the "Dance of the Spider" the night before. Farne sputtered when I told him the fake spider

of the dance had been the real thing.

"The Devils!" he cursed, "they go to any lengths to kill the thing people like best. Ceulna is the best loved of all the Rulers' entertainers!"

"We've got to look for her, Hank. Everywhere . . . everywhere she might have hidden. You know the ropes, so you lead the way."

THE two of us left the cabin, walking quietly forward. The whole layout was strange to me, but Hank seemed to know his way around. We hadn't gone ten paces when an officer stopped us. His voice had me plenty worried.

"Enlisted men are to stay in their cabins while the ship is in flight." He spoke firmly, but in the slow drawl of Southern U. S. A tall dark fellow, but his face was pale with his years in the caves and his eyes were dull as though his brain were asleep.

Farne was not taken aback. He smiled easily and flashed a badge he'd taken from his pocket. I had an idea what it was, though Hank hadn't told me just what kind of work he'd been assigned to since his return.

The officer saluted. "Sorry, suh!

I didn't know you. Is there any way I can be of service, suh? My name's Leadbetter, suh. Lieutenant Leadbetter."

"Perhaps, Lieutenant, you can." Hank was acting like an officer himself now. "I'm on the lookout for a certain Venusian—no particular description. Distinguishing marks reported to be a shredded left ear and a scar on his left wrist. Wanted under suspicion of working for the Tuons. Know anyone fitting that description, Lieutenant? To my knowledge, there aren't a dozen Venusians aboard, are there?"

I figured Hank was giving a fictitious errand to explain his presence on deck, but as an intelligence officer, he probably had full right there.

The officer scratched his own left ear reflectively. Apparently, he could think of no such Venusian. So, wishing us luck, he saluted and left us.

As soon as he was out of sight, Hank led the way swiftly aft.

"If she knows as much about these ships as I think she might, she'd be in the driver compartment. They're warm, and at a distance of several feet the radiations from the plates are beneficial."

(Continued on page 109)

A



Beneath the Venusian Amazon's attack, the Hag's defenses weakened . . .

CULT OF THE WITCH QUEEN

(Continued from page 38)

WE ENTERED the deserted propulsion end of the ship. The driver-plate device never needed attention. Since these antique creations were perfection in craftsmanship, they didn't demand attention, so the crew seldom came here.

We had hardly entered the place when I heard a low whistle. I looked around but couldn't find the source of the sound, so I called, "C'mon out, Ceulna. This is my friend, Hank."

I heard her low, luscious laugh behind me, and turning, saw her emerge from a tool locker like a reviving mummy from a sarcophagus. Even the tool locker of one of those ancient marvel ships was decorated as beautifully as a Pharaoh's mummy-case.

"I've had the most wonderful time," she laughed. "Last night when I avoided the two sentries and came aboard, I came right here. I had heard the rays given off by this drive mech were beneficial—but no one told me it felt so good. I've been lying in stim for nearly twenty hours—no way to get away from it."

Still laughing gaily, she kissed me. "You look like a beautiful young God after all the stimulation I've had!" And she kissed me again laughing irresistibly. "I had no idea!"

I told her she looked like a beautiful young Goddess herself. I'd never seen such an improvement in anyone in such a short time. I was going to spend as much of my time aboard as possible getting the double stim of her presence and these rays she was talking about.

"I thought you were running away from danger—not eloping with Jimmy, here," Hank grinned at Ceulna.

"Ceulna, this is Hank Farne, my only friend aboard besides you," I introduced Hank to Ceulna.

"I'm always glad to meet a friend of the so Big Jeem," she said, giving her hand to Hank as Americans do, then kissing him on the forehead as the Venusians do.

"Hank has been on Venus for years," I said.

Ceulna, puzzled, looked at Hank, "Oh, then he knows our customs. I will give him our formal greeting or he will feel hurt."

Hank put up his hands protestingly, but she sank kneeling before him and embraced his knees in the ancient Greek fashion.

"It's a very pleasant custom," explained Hank, "once they greeted one another that way in many countries on Earth—long ago."

Hank seemed much taken with Ceulna. "But we must plan how to avoid your capture. You know how nasty it can be to fall into the hands of anyone connected with the followers of Hecate—the Hagmen!"

"Yes, I know—too well," answered Ceulna, her supple body shuddered all over. "I have seen some of their 'entertainments' of my poor people in my home city of Delphon."

"Just what is the difficulty in keeping her concealed?" I asked. "Can't she just stay here, quite comfortably, on the food we can bring her from our own meals? There seems to be plenty of it."

"Listen!" Hank hissed suddenly, for outside in the long companionway came the slow clump of a workman's boot. "At any time one of the officers or repairmen may come in here to get tools outa the locker or to inspect the generators, or to oil some part that's lost its ancient sealing."

The clump of those boots didn't stop, but grew louder and louder, finally halting outside the door behind which we stood immobile.

A GUN suddenly appeared in Farne's hand. I didn't have one, but I held up a restraining hand in front of Hank, making a gripping motion with my fingers. My paws are about twice the size of the average man's, and Hank got the meaning.

The latch grated, the door swung in. A blue-dimined figure started through, a large wrench in his hand. Quickly my own hands locked about his throat. A slight startled gurgle and he was soon quiet. I didn't care to kill him, but a look on Ceulna's beautiful terrified face tightened my grip the last destructive bit. I felt his windpipe crush—a convulsive shudder, and he went limp. Dead. The first man I had ever killed—but he wasn't the last. It's not a good feeling to kill, but it had to be done.

"What the H— ah . . . blazes are we gonna do with him, Hank. He's dead!"

"Oh, you huge beast, you . . . !" Ceulna's face blazed in sudden fury and revulsion toward me. "You didn't have to kill him. We could have hidden him somewhere—in a locker or something. He would have been found eventually!"

"I'm sorry, Ceulna. I was excited. I couldn't help it—he . . ."

It grieved me to have her look at me as if my hands were dripping blood.

"We'll get rid of him." Farne wasn't ruffled. "There is a space lock for refuse in several places."

Ceulna's anger and revulsion subsided, and she suggested, "We can put him out the drive tubes from this same room—there is an opening."

Getting an artistically decorated wrench, I went to work. Time had tightened the bolts pretty effectively, but at last the cover came off revealing an opening a little larger than necessary for a man's body. Everything the Ancients left is too large for mere man. They were men, if they were men, of huge size—that Ancient God Race.

"The drive flow is too strong!" cried Hank as a blast of force drove me back against the far wall, nearly stunning me. "We couldn't shove this carcass through that opening if there were a dozen of us!"

The field of force-flows sealed the opening more effectively than any metal plate. It formed gravitational vortices within the room; we swayed this way and that, or were thrown to the floor as though by a living opponent. We had to get that cover back on, even if we couldn't push the body through—but how?

After an hour of futile struggle, Hank solved the problem. He detached the great insulative nuts that held the cables from the generators. The great cable, as thick as a man's arm and heavy as Hell, was a job. Finally we lifted it off, and the tricky gravity flow, that buffeted us about the room, ceased. We shoved the dead stranger out the drive tube, replaced the plate and tightened the ancient bolts. What metal that stuff was! Old as I knew they were, there was only a fine grey corrosion to show it, less than an eighth of an inch loss in all those uncounted centuries.

I SPENT many hours of that trip in the drive chamber, for the radiations were

intensely stimulating, with a cumulative charge effect. After you were in there an hour, a glow of well being stole about your body, gradually increasing until you could not tear yourself away. Ceulna forgave me for the inadvertent killing—thanks to that influence which made the world seem a bed of roses.

All three of us were mighty worried about discovery, for we knew how these secret people habitually made mountains out of molehills to get a chance to punish somebody. However, nothing happened to further the chances of any mishap.

CHAPTER VI

Lo, take this herb of virtue, and go to the dwelling of Circe, twill keep from thy head the evil . . . Thy company yonder in the hall of Circe are penned in the guise of swine . . . in their deep lairs abiding.

The Odyssey

THE ancient hulk—its indestructible generators purring sweetly on the water that was their only fuel—settled slowly into the obscuring clouds of Venus. They must have been following some kind of radio beam, for we drifted out of the clouds directly over a vast cathedral-like structure rearing up from among the mighty, primeval trees. That this type of structure, built of rock from a foundation deep in the earth, was nearly unique on Venus, I didn't know. Nor did I know that the cult of Hecate, the Hag, whose headquarters were located there, were the descendants of the cult of the Limping Hag who had left Spain some five centuries before. These things I learned later. I had expected wonders from an alien race of a different development than our own. When the mighty ship settled lightly to earth outside a vast medieval pile, I was nonplussed at its strangely familiar appearance. The men who lowered the drawbridge came to meet us clothed in antique monkish robes such as are worn in some monasteries on Earth today. I turned to Hank.

"Say, what is this anyway. Venus or fourteenth century Spain?"

Farne smiled. "I was waiting for your reactions. These are people whose ancestors came to Venus just as we are coming now in the ancient ships from the secret caverns. They belong to a terrible and very ancient

cult—the cult of Hecate, also called the Limping Hag. It is a schism—an offshoot from the ancient Rosicrucians. The Rosicrucians are hardly more than a memory on earth today, but once they were a mighty and mysterious power on earth. When Hecate's followers perverted the science to evil ends, the Rosicrucians drove them out. It was at the time of the plague on earth, and fleeing simultaneously from the plague and the wrath of the mighty world organization at that time, they came here to Venus and so have remained. They have been a curse to the Venusians for their practices are cruel and terrible.

"The Hag, herself, is a kind of living Goddess, said to be immortal. She is the ruler here. Hecate is hated by the natives but they cannot drive her out. She is our ally in the war now going on."

SOME days later I stood with Farne in one of the great corridors of the church-like fortress. Through the dark, high-beamed rooms of the musty old stronghold moved a strange mixture of races. The descendants of the original Rosicrucian renegades were at times clothed in sober, all-enveloping monk's robes, and sometimes dressed like warriors of fourteenth century France or Spain. Guards in steel corselets with halberds held erect stood at the doors and passages. Past them went groups of the two-white Venusians of the northlands, fierce redmen from the hot equatorial belt, and green amphibians from the marshy islands of the sea cities. The green men, a species peculiar to Venus, were green skinned with gill slits in their necks, interior lungs as have ordinary men, webbed hands and wide-webbed feet. They had no noses to speak of, large staring, fixed eyes, and spines on their heads. The great black duckfooted men of the south lands were the most formidable in appearance. Huge muscled and gigantic of build, they had a dull stupid look, small eyes and flat heads. Through the ages of life in the swamplands of the south, they developed a tremendously wide foot. All were subjects of the cruel Hagmen, Farne explained. Most of them wore nothing but a few glittering baubles, the hothouse climate was not conducive to wearing clothing. Always their skin glistened with the cooling moisture they exuded. The smart uniforms of the recently arrived forces soon wilted, hanging damp-

ly on heat weary Earthmen. Yet they looked more efficient and capable than did the living relics of the past and some savage looking Venusians. But the white men of Venus, even though nude and flashing with barbaric ornaments, had a noble, cultured air superior to that of the Earthmen. They were taller, too, averaging well over six feet.

Ceulna had escaped into the jungle. We gave her a gun and several clips of cartridges before the ship landed. She intended to steal off the ship the first night after it landed. We thought it safer not to try helping her, though Farne wanted to accompany her. But it, would attract attention and pursuit if either of us were missing. Ceulna, herself, said, "You would only be a burden to me in the jungle. I can travel swiftly and easily through the high trees. You have seen me on the ropes of the "Spider Dance"; these limbs are not so different. We Venusians inherit such ability. I will get in touch with you at the first opportunity. Please, please take off yourselves." She kissed us goodbye. Ceulna was gone, and with her most of the pleasure of life.

SINCE my arrival on Venus I had little time to learn the exact nature of the political setup between Hecate, the Hag, the native rulers who were our allies, and the invading forces of the Earthmen. Later this became clear to me. The men of Hecate, as well as the red, green, and black races, were minority groups on the planet, while the white race had always been the dominant force. Now the lower races and the recently arrived Earthmen joined forces to destroy the ancient white cities.

Harak, one stronghold of the Hagmen, lay sixty miles north of the tree city of Lefern. Lefern was a mighty city built in the gigantic trees of the forest. Hank told me about the first night I descended into the caverns. It was a powerful city of the Whites. I learned that Lefern was our first objective. It had been able to hold out against everything the Hagmen and the colored Venusian races directed. Now the shanghaied Earth forces were to be used to the last man if necessary to annihilate the Whites' stronghold. If the Earthmen succeeded, if we subdued Lefern, our value to the Venusians would be demonstrated, and our leaders would probably cash in plenty.

But if we didn't conquer the city, our position with the leaders of the Venusian aggressors would be decidedly minor.

Few Venusian roads were laid on the surface of the ground. Instead, they were strung between tree piers twenty or thirty feet above ground. These suspension bridges were made of the universal plastic substance in common use on Venus. It was light, strong, durable. Over this swaying transparent structure our trucks of supplies, the little one man ray tanks such as I was assigned to, our bigger six- and eight-man units, and our marching army of infantry moved toward Lefern—somewhere between six and eight thousand men, I guess.

On Venus it rains every night—most of the night, but the days are often clear. There is little wind, just the slow drifting of the grey mass overhead, the clear almost shadowless light, and the brilliant vegetation. The latter is full of pulsing life, growing, always growing; you can almost see it grow! The soil is seldom solid enough for any vehicle, but much of it can be walked on, if one knows where the firm places are.

About thirty miles from the city, in easy sight through our telescopic penetray-vision weapons, the bridge-road branched like the fingers of a hand, into dozens of smaller roads, all pointing toward different parts of the wide-spread city.

The city itself hung like festoons of giant cobwebs on the gigantic trees. Level over level, the cobwebs were hung with the many-colored and glittering globes of the Venusians' homes and shops. Of vari-colored plastic, these homes were of all sizes, suspended from the great web of the roadways or from the limbs of the trees themselves.

AS OUR engineers set to work on the cables of the road, strengthening them with ray resistant additional cables so they could not be burned from under our feet, we deployed on the two outer roads which ran at nearly right angles to a line directly into the city. The idea was to bring as many rays as possible to bear on it.

From the sparkling city came no sign that we were sighted. I swept a close focus over the vast system of webs which was Lefern and, except for an occasional tall warrior woman racing on some errand or

other, I could discern no life at all. Apparently the place had been evacuated. I noticed that many of the larger globe houses, which were factories or store-houses, were opaque to my vision beam. Heretofore, I had found nothing that obstructed its passage, so I was sure that these places were opaque by some device of the Venusian Whites. At my side Farne, who was equipped with a special long range vision device, spoke to me.

"This city of Lefern is a woman's city, ruled by Amazons. For three months in the spring of each year men are allowed to visit the city, the rest of the time no men are allowed within."

"Well, if that's all the opposition we'll have, this is going to be a pushover!"

"Don't be too sure, my optimistic young friend. Those ladies in there really can fight . . . and then some!" said Hank, obviously trying to caution me against losing my precious head, "and they are fighting mad now. They're especially bitter against the men under Hecate, because these Amazons have a kind of religious veneration and love for children—as well as a mother's love—and they don't care for what the Hagmen do to kids."

My stomach turned over. Fighting women was not to my liking. But I knew it was fight or die for me. I had seen the fate of others who had objected to their forcible induction into the strange army. I did not care for any of their "deserter medicine."

At the order, we commenced firing on the city. The opaque globes resisted my disparay, as well as the others' rays which rather astonished me, as nothing before had failed to disappear before it. The few Amazons who had been racing along the net of walks quickly disappeared—some shot down, some had ducked into the opaque buildings. Just when I was beginning to wonder why the city did not return our fire, and the webs of the city were beginning to be a tangle of cables cut by our rays, it happened.

A huge ray flashed out from the top of the center globe. It touched our bridgeways reinforced supports which our engineers had fondly imagined to have been made impervious to ray fire.

HERE and there it lanced, pausing a breath to burn through the cables,

then dancing on to the next support. The bridge-road began to sag, and before you could count ten, our whole army and its many tons of equipment was spread out on the soft muck of the earth below the road. At the same time billows of yellow gas arose from the ground ahead and began to roll steadily toward us. Behind the gas I could see the crisscrossing beams of the windmaking ray I had heard of, but had never seen in use before.² Scrambling about in the soft mud and the tangle of cut cables and equipment, we hurriedly donned our gas masks and awaited the worst, that is, those of us who had not been crushed under the fallen tonnage.

My little ray equipped tractor was sunk two feet in the muck which bubbled greedily as it sucked at the mass of equipment. Somehow, my heart rejoiced that these alien people were so well able to defend themselves. The gas rolled steadily closer. Would our masks prove as ineffective against their gas as our tactics had proven useless against theirs? Strangely, I hoped so, for those tall cool women in their jewel-like city that hung like a web of magic against the pearly sky of Venus, were not what I wished to destroy.

After I had gotten my gas mask in place, I secured my sinking weapon to a nearby tree trunk with a heavy vine. I had a great regard for those antique products of a lost science. I had not much time for thought before the gas cloud rolled over our struggling ranks and I learned that our masks too were futile against the Amazons. With a Hell-Fire in my nostrils, I passed out.

I AWOKE with a sharp intermittent pain in the rump. I put back one sleepy hand to encounter what seemed to be the toe of a boot. Looking around, I saw what appeared to be Ceulna, grown still taller and now covered all over with a strange tattoo.

I cried, "Ceulna, when did you get tattooed, and what the devil are you pointing that confounded pistol at me for?"

But Ceulna's double paid no attention to my words, only kicked me again in a spot

²This windmaking ray is described in the story "Thought Records of Lemuria" and was an essential part of most antique ray installations. Much of it was weather-controlling apparatus; they made winds, caused rain or dispersed rain clouds, and could throw lightning bolts.—Author.

already sore. I got groggily to my feet. All about me a similar scene was being enacted in endless repetition.

The Amazons had followed in the wake of their anaesthetizing gas and were making us captive. There was no fight in us. I didn't see anyone reach for a weapon. Somehow, I was glad, very glad I would not have to shoot any of these tall pink-and-white darlings. They were not made for that. I grinned at the woman warrior beside me. "You don't know how glad I am to see you."

She made no answer, only prodded me into line with that peculiarly deadly looking weapon she carried. Between a double line of the Amazons we started the long trek to the city. They wore mud shoes, a wide rounded board slipped over the boots, but we captives struggled along ankle deep in the muck, often falling when we hit a soft spot. A ripple of feminine laughter accompanied each fall. Somehow our mighty army was ridiculous. Remembering the bloody death sweats I had seen, such as the one of the girl on the cross the first night of my arrival in the caves not so very long ago, I blessed the fortune that had forestalled our attack.

Behind me Farne nudged my shoulder. He whispered, "This is something I've wanted and waited for for ages. When I get the ear of one of their officers, we'll make out Okay."

Ahead of me another earth man spoke up. "I'd like to see old Hecate's hag-face right now. She'll probably bust a blood vessel and lose some of that baby blood she's full of."

Another voice remonstrated. "Aw, I don't believe all that stuff. Didn't you ever hear of war propaganda? They treated us pretty white. That show they put on for us the night we left Earth must have cost plenty. The grub was always good, too."

No one answered. The line slogged on in silence. Shortly we ascended a swinging ladder into the tree roads again. Here lines of long narrow vehicles waited, which explained the swift arrival of the Amazons. As we stood waiting to board the speedy looking buses, I examined the guarding warrior nearest me.

EXCEPT for the webbed hands and feet, they were almost identical to earth people. But their appearance was utterly

different. Tall feather plumes on their head gear accentuated their height. My guard's clothing consisted of a G-string and weapon belt, arm bands of heavily jeweled and shining yellow metal, and knee-high boots of a gleaming stuff like woven metallic thread. Her skin was intricately tattooed with an all over pattern that even covered her face with lovely curving lines. The design was sea waves and flying long-necked birds. As I looked about at these tattooed skins I learned definitely that the beauty nature gives a woman can be immensely enhanced.

Later I learned that the tattoo was used as we use family names, the motifs indicating family ancestry. A heron over a sea wave meant one was the son of a woman of the Herons and a man from the sea tribes. A tiger stalking a deer indicated family connections with those tribes. On Venus they wore their family trees on their backs. But some modern city groups had dropped the tattoo as too barbaric. Ceulna had not been tattooed, I recalled.

One of the men near me, who had also been all eyes for the beautiful Amazon bodies, shouted in English, "Buddies, their mating season doesn't start 'til next month. We'll be the only men in the city. Talk about tough luck, this is terrible!"

One of the women seemed to understand English for she snickered and then repeated the man's remark in the Lefern Venusian language. The laughter rippled up and down the line until the sharp bark of an officer stopped it.

The glittering, jewel-hung mist-web that is a Venusian city in the distance soon became recognizable dwellings and streets as we flashed into the outskirts on our way to the center.

We did not have time to enjoy the beauties of the city and its feminine population. We were unloaded from the buses directly into a large and forbidding structure that ran all the way up the side of a tree almost to the low clouds. Many trees of Venus are large enough to have the tops hidden in the low clouds. This was a big one . . . I guess about the size of the Woolworth Building. I noticed that the weight counterbalanced the pull of a great suspension cable on the other side holding up the main street of the city.

Those delicious looking Amazons locked us up in cells and left us. I wonder how

many men felt as slighted by this neglect as I. A man's thoughts and emotions are so seldom logical. The days dragged by slowly.

CHAPTER VII

"I supplicate thee, O Queen, whether thou art a goddess or a mortal? . . . to Artemis, I liken thee, for beauty and stature and shapeliness.

The Odyssey

AT HER broad desk in the Intelligence Bureau Central Offices of Lefern, City of Tuon, Oanu, Chief of Secret Police, sat musing. The usually disciplined controlled lines of her face had relaxed except for a slight contraction of well shaped eyebrows. One long fingered, webbed hand kept pulling at her lower lip. The other, beautiful and white, idly drummed the polished top of the desk. Aimlessly, she pushed back the chair and with the grace of a serpent, stood up, her long metallic cloth cloak falling in heavy folds to the floor.

Six feet of efficient fighting machine—and gorgeous. She, too, was a warrior woman of Venus. And like most of the women of Venus—most of the white Tuons, she was beautiful and graceful. The long cape was the only covering she had, the jewelled straps and belts she wore weren't designed to conceal the well moulded figure—they functioned. Upon them were her shining insignia of rank and hooks and clasps for more of the strange weapons of Venus. A short bladed, damascened knife crossed the center of the girdle belt, and on the left side was holstered one of the deadly little hand gravity-beams of the jungle planet. Her plumed, ray-proof helmet was carelessly flung on her desk and her golden Tuon hair tumbled about her broad shoulders. Oanu lacked the leaner lines of the younger women, such as Ceulna, voluptuous rather than slim; still, she, too, carried herself like a skilled dancer, head held regally high, the movements of her hips fluid and the slow pace of her stride like the rippling muscles of a leopard.

Now, she seemed tired. With one hand she absently pushed a stray curl off her broad high forehead, then hooked her thumbs in the broad weapon belt. A few idle pats with her finger tips, and with just the faintest suggestion of a swagger, she strolled toward the broad window at the

side of her desk. Stopping in front of it she raised one tapering, delicately tattooed leg and planted a gracefully sandaled foot on a low seat.

Wistfully, she stood there watching a rainbow-plumed pair of Venusian lovebirds cavorting in the branches of the great tree. It was too bad, she thought, that the too rigid code of the Tuons forbade living with a man. It would be nice to be near a man always. The mating season was so very short—only three months, and if you found that you had fallen in love, it was hopeless. You must lose him forever, for the next year there would be another mate. The law forbade more than one child of a union . . . and, of course, the law was correct. It was a known fact that a race acquires strength by careful crossing of complementary traits. Yes, true, but it did spoil life so to lose one's mate every year. . . .

FROWNING, Oanu put aside her thoughts and pressed a button among the rows on the side of her desk.

"Bring those films that were taken by the telescopic camera of the Hag's city of Harak, as well as the films of the city they now call Disin," she barked into the orifice below the screen. "Also have the prisoner, Henry Farne, brought to me."

Oanu seated herself at the magnificent desk. An aide brought the films she ordered. The door opened the second time for a tall warrior guard and a prisoner. Henry Farne's dirty, bedraggled figure appeared more than ever the adult urchin as he entered the green dream of an office. He stood smartly at attention before the Intelligence Officer and flashed his most flattering and impish grin. Farne knew women; he knew that the boy in him would appeal to Oanu, the mother.

Oanu's eyes softened—almost twinkled—as she looked at him, and when her eyes relaxed like that, she was as beautiful as any dancing girl in this Tuon City. Suddenly, she snapped back to her role as Chief. The soft contours of her body tightened imperceptibly, those beautiful eyes hardened, and her inviting, voluptuous mouth contracted to a hard thin line.

"I have been informed, Earthman," said Oanu, her voice not at all pleasant, "that you have been in the service of these modern invaders from Earth for sometime, and also that you have been working for Hec-

ate. It is obvious from your long experience here that you know something of the conditions that exist on Venus which have brought on this conflict. How is it that you continue to serve them if you know their vile purpose?" She looked at Farne like a schoolma'm who's just caught a kid with a rat on a string.

"You would not ask if you knew the details of my record," Hank said in defense, however, not in fear of his examiner. "I have been lying in prison here on Venus for many years because my too open sympathy for your people aroused suspicion against me. A short time ago I was sent back to Earth. They figured I might be able to give the Earth leaders some valuable information about your organization. Now, I'm back here on Venus as a scout in their enlarging army, that is, what was their enlarging army."

"How many men did that last ship bring from Earth?" Oanu asked, a slight smile playing around her mouth. Hank's words had pleased her.

He realized she already knew the answer, but wanted to hear what he would say. "About two thousand men outside of the crew—all new recruits who have trained for about a month in the use of the antique weapons. You know, of course, that Earthmen are not accustomed to the antique mech. That is confined to a few sparse groups."

Oanu looked at him a long time. "You have a loyalty to these people who keep your own people in ignorance of the wonders of the ancient science?" she asked.

Hank grinned at her frankly. "None whatsoever, lovely lady. If I have any loyalty in my heart, it is for such women as you who have built a wonderful life for your people and who know how to fight to keep that life. But women like you are seldom able to trust such men as myself. You aren't clever liars, nor do you understand a liar and dissimulator like myself. I was raised in a very different school. My boyhood days were spent in criminal pursuits. All the dodges by which we live in such an environment are to you but cowardice and villainy. But I could be of service to you just because of my experience with the people whom you think of only to despise. It is one of your people's weaknesses, their inability to understand the criminal mind."

"Yes, that may be true," Oanu agreed. "There is a saying I have heard from Earthmen. 'Set a thief to catch a thief.' It is the thought that was in my mind when I sent you for." She picked up the cylinders her aide had brought her. "I sent for these films taken in the city of Harak from which you just came and in Disin and other cities under the Hag. My purpose is to arouse your sympathy and so loosen your tongue. You will find them interesting."

OANU raised a small projector from a recess in her desk, inserted a roll of film, and on the wall as the lights dimmed, a picture appeared.

Farne said, "Before you go on with the film, I suggest that you have the rest of the prisoners assembled and show them the nature of their ally, The Limping Hag. They are Americans like myself who have had the advantages of some moral education. I can assure you they are not savages. The secret ray group on earth have treated them very well, and they haven't the faintest idea what they are here to fight for, nor have they had a chance to refuse this service. Most of them would work for you gladly if you were to show them the truth."

Oanu liked the idea. She had expected to spend more time bringing Farne to realize a sense of duty toward the Tuon cause. She had not expected his smiling understanding of the rightness of the Tuon position.

With a quick affirmative nod, Oanu pushed a button and spoke into a silvery wire sphere, "Elpha, have the male prisoners brought to the assembly hall." Then beckoning to Hank to follow, she strode out through a circular door flanked by barbaric vases.

Soon, more than a thousand young Americans were assembled as Oanu had ordered. Like a mad dream, there they were, hundreds of modern American fellows, prisoners of a warrior race of women on a far planet, looking at scenes Earthmen hadn't seen publicly in six centuries.

The first image to appear on the huge circular screen was the medieval looking square in the fortress city of Harak, which they had just left in their attack on Lefern. The square was the market-place of the city, but no one traded there. They stood about a pyre of wood, staring at the figure that twisted its white face to God and back

to Hell again. Fantastic flowing smoke clouds swirled above the victim as flames licked hungrily at tortured white skin that turned black and ran with bursting veins of scorching blood. The stake was high. The people circled slowly to see the woman's form that writhed, surging against the chains that bound her. The flames grew higher; the woman twisted slower like a sick snake. Her lips were stretched apart and her teeth clamped whitely on a tongue that streamed with blood, her blood. As the flames blew this way and then back again with the fitful breeze, the people swayed in unison to see between the licks of fire. Black smoke rolled low and took shapes that beat against the brain with fearful meaning. Fluttering birds streamed by and wheeled, and flew back whence they came, sensing the black coils of fear that were in that place. The dogs sat on their haunches, their red tongues lolled out dripping slow saliva on the worn pavings at the smell of the cooking meat of the living woman. Some of the priests of Hecate's evil worship strolled by muttering, their beads clicked in their hands. They did not bother to look at the familiar scene of torture.

MORE and more of these horror pictures followed until we learned Hecate's worship was, in effect, the ancient Inquisition still functioning with its rack and stake, its needlers and iron-maidens.

The rich-cultured, low voice of Oanu kept up a running commentary of the scenes we looked upon. A good quarter of the globe of Venus was under the domination of the Hag's followers. Many once beautiful cities like Mersepolis were now wrecks, inhabited by misery.

Mersepolis hung among the great golden trees called Redgans for the scarlet blooms they bore. Once its vast web of walks and bridges had bustled with the laughing throng of native Venusians and its maidens had been famous all over Venus as the most beautiful of any city. Now Mersepolis had been in the hands of Hecate's men for thirty years, and no longer thronged these walks with life. There were only plodding workmen in rags. There were a great many children, but most of them were extremely pale and listless. The bright colors and the semi-nudity that was their custom had been forbidden. They now wore a kind of over-

all of blue and gray which was dress for the lower classes. Occasionally the black of the priests was seen, but rarely passed the gold and scarlet of the high priests, the inner circle of Hecate's empire. These were the blood-takers, the beings who lived on the blood of children.

Beside this city of Lefern, where the captive Americans watched the films depicting the cruelties and baseness of the Hagmen, there were twelve main cities on the continent which was the largest of the three large land bodies of Venus. Much of Venus is ocean, and much of the land is jungle. Of these twelve cities, Bruchion with its dazzling splendor, Rhacote, where the spires of the love-temples pierce the clouds, Panete, which was one huge building pierced by the trees that supported it and fronted by two rosy obelisks like great horns were of the Tuon race; all were Amazon cities and the most advanced culturally.

The three-towered city of Isis Phar had an inverted race of people living there of some strange culture—the men were like women and the women like muscular men. They were still free. The seven-columned city of Isis Loch was a neighbor of Isis Phar. Its people worshipped an ancient sea monster whose age no one knew. He was said to come in from the sea to answer their call.

There were seven cities in the south under kings—the kings were alleged to be immortal, but Oanu smiled as she explained them. These were called Alexan, Phys, Rhylat, Arsinoe, Delphon, Ekippe, and Nicosthene. And last, she showed scenes from Bubastison where the people are all one sex and could give birth by self-fertilization.

Of all these cities, only four had fallen to the Hag's intermittent warring, but over half of the land and the smaller communities had fallen to her warriors at some time in the past. These big cities, like Lefern had withstood all attempts to subdue them through the years, though one knew that they were always preparing for the next onslaught. Withal, it was a great land and rich and lush with life.

CENTURIES before, the Hag, with her evil crew, had come from Earth in the great and ancient spaceships, blasted out room for herself, and there sat in her for-

tress built by her slaves, brooding over the beauty of the world and hating it. From time to time she sent out warring expeditions, but this last one was growing into an attempt to subdue all of Venus. There were two reasons for this. The inner circle of blood-taking semi-immortals needed ever more and more children for their increasing demands as their number grew. And, there was an ever growing resentment of this same use of the children. This resentment had to be crushed before it became an organized power.

This was a bigger job than it would have been on Earth, for unlike the Earth people, the Venusians had known and learned to use the antique machinery of the God-race since the earliest times. Their science was a product of both their own work and the super science of the Ancients. On Earth only a few secret groups knew of the existence of the caverns and the weapons they contained. Since their science made the Venusians formidable antagonists, Hecate had contacted these Earth groups and was receiving men, supplies, weapons, and manufactured articles from them. In return she showed them how to delay old age by use of transfusions of children's blood.³

It was a disgusting, repulsive setup, and Farne realized that if Venus' free peoples fell, Earthmen would have no chance or hope of ever throwing off the evil leech that the secret ray groups would become with the Hag's methods of stealing children's youth. In time the Earth people would become what the Hag's people were, a slave population existing solely to support the priests and to furnish children whose blood would be used by the inner circles to prolong their horrible lives.

The hidden strong-hold, Disin, was the principal city of the followers of Hecate since the Hagmen came to Venus. The fortress City of Harak was the place our ship had landed. Under each of these cities, as under most of the cities of the ray-wise rulers, tunnels had been driven connecting them with the ancient cavern cities of the God-race and with each other. Bruchion, Panete, and Isis Phar of the inverted sexes had all fallen to the Hagmen

³Alexis Carrel in "Man the Unknown" says, "In medieval times the practice of transfusing young men's blood was widely spoken of and recommended."—Author.

recently. Isis Loch had just been reported captured. Lefern was the last place attacked and had surprised the Earth leaders with her able defense. But this was just the beginning of a long struggle for supremacy on Venus, Oanu well knew.

SOME scenes on the films were of the children farms kept by the inner circles of the Hecate cult. Those showed the chubby, well-fed infants of four and five years before they had been subjected to the blood transfer by the old members of the cult. Needles were inserted into the arms of these unfortunate children, then as a small pump drew the fresh, healthy blood from the child for the old man, his aged blood flowed into the child through a companion tube. The child remained hooked to the vampire for a month while the blood of each was exchanged for the other's. The child was allowed to eat his fill, but the vampire touched neither food nor drink during that period. The effect was miraculous for the old ones. Wrinkles almost disappeared, the flesh became firmer and the body began to grow in stature. At the same time the child rapidly showed signs of old age. Nor was the child released after one blood transfer. After several such sessions, his young body was allowed to recuperate and then was used again by the lesser priests.

This process of prolonging life had been brought to Venus from Earth early in the fourteenth century when the Rosicrucians drove out the Hagmen for their perverse use of the secret science. The practice had grown under Hecate, and now there were many men and women of the Hag's inner circle who were several centuries old.

So it was that a group of super-vampires, led by the Hag whose age no one knew, except that she had brought the original band from Earth five centuries before, endangered all the children of Earth as well as the children of Venus. For the older and the bigger the vampires grew, the more children were required to keep them in health.

At the beginning of this practice on Venus, the children were returned to the neighborhood from which they were stolen. But it wasn't long before the Venusians realized just what these little old people who had been carefree, healthy children, meant to their race. When several attempts

were made to rescue the kidnaped children, the Hag doubled the guard on the baby farms, killed on sight anyone caught near them, and sentenced to death each child whose young body became so filled with the poison of age that they were no longer useful to the vampires.

One film showed the mother caverns. In great hospital-like rooms in hidden caverns, thousands of Venusian maidens were kept constantly pregnant, bearing more and more children for the baby farms. It was a revolting picture, this making cows of human beings, and the men from Earth who watched growled fiercely in their throats and clenched and unclenched their hands.

AS THE pictures of the baby farms unrolled before us, we saw the huge ogre-like body of the ancient witch out of the bloody past, Hecate, the Mother of Sin, strolling among the playing children, putting her mark of the Egyptian crossed circle with an electric branding iron on the arms of the rosiest and most active youngsters. Hot anger welled up in each man there. Hate flooded the assembly room. We wanted blood—Hecate's blood—her dying blood. We swore not to rest until the Hag was slain.

I wish I had sworn to stay several miles away from that same ogre-like body, for Hecate, the witch, still had a spell or two, But that came later.

Then came scenes showing the Hagmen burning the children who had reached the end of their usefulness as blood producers. These vampires found it more desirable to rid themselves of the prematurely aged youths and maidens, for their living presence was a perpetual reminder to the lower classes of the Hag's empire of the hideous nature of their rulers' parasitic life, feeding on the life blood of the people. So they were gathered together to a place called "The House of Life," so called to disguise its true purpose. Here they stayed for a short time, but daily dozens of them were taken into the cellars of the place and thrust living into a furnace. The furnace was a great iron statue of the God Moloch, whose worship the Hag had revived from her memories of Earth, to explain the burning of the children.

She taught that the ceremonial burning transported their souls to a children's heav-

en. The victimized people knew better, but they didn't dare talk openly against the thing, for the Hag was an old hand at getting rid of lowly opponents.

As we Earthmen saw more of the film unfold before our eyes, and realized what a horrible change the influx of the Hagmen brought to the beautiful life of these people, a thing surprising to Oanu happened. A chorus of cries arose: "Give us a chance, Amazons, let us fight for you against this thing."

The film stopped. The lights flashed on. Oanu stepped forward.

"Now you have seen the horrible system of life which you were blindly fighting for. For ages, on Earth, your own planet, such vampires have secretly existed unknown to you. It is one of the oldest and vilest practices of your Earth. We, the free white peoples of Venus, are the only force on the two planets who understand and fight this evil. Because of our knowledge of antique ray science, we are the only force that can fight against the Hag. If you want to cast your lot with us, and fight beside us for the future of your seed, for the future of all men against this destroying evil, you will be trained as our own soldiers are trained, and trusted until you prove unworthy of trust. If you choose not to fight for us, you face only the prison from which I summoned you."

The prisoners, Farne and I among them, rose as one man, shouting a Venusian word we had learned in the prison. "On! On!" The word was "yes" in Venusian.

So it was that the other prisoners, who had to a man chosen service under the Tuons, were trucked off to the military headquarters. At Farne's suggestion, Oanu kept him and me after the others had gone.

OANU was not a subtle person unless the occasion demanded it. She came to the point at once. Her voice was low and intense.

"We need spies. We have vast resources in man power, in the stores of antique weapons, as well as modern copies which we manufacture. But we need spies to tell us precisely what weapons the Hag intends to use. The study of these antique works is a very deep science. The Elder Race made many things for which we cannot discover the purpose. Some of these mysterious machines may well be weapons

and it can easily happen that the Hag, from her centuries of experience with the God-work, may know of weapons which would wipe us out completely. If she, herself, takes a real interest in the struggle and throws herself into the battle seriously, she may bring into use mightily destructive mechanisms which we will not be able to counter."

Farne glanced at me with a knowing look, and then grinned. I guess I did look pretty silly—this spy business was way over my head. Seeing Hank grinning, I tried to grin back, but I was puzzled—with all the stuff I had seen, why the necessity for spies?

As if in answer to my unspoken question, Oanu continued:

"We must have someone find out what weapons they intend using in the crucial struggles yet to come. We have spies, but we get little information from the inner circles, and that is what we must have. Certain marks from the weapons they prepare for battle must be in our hands before the battle is joined. If we guess wrong, we will have no counter. It is this lack of vital information that keeps us from attacking the Hag. We do not know, as you Earthmen say, what her 'ace in the hole' may be."

"Where do we come in?" queried Farne.

Oanu answered bluntly: "You, Hank Farne, are perhaps the only man on Venus really fitted to act as a spy on the last arrivals from Earth . . . and vice versa, you are the only one fitted to spy on us for your former masters. So to avoid the latter, I intend to use you for the former."

Ragged as he was, Hank looked like a real courtier when he bowed and assented to Oanu's remarks, whether with mock dignity or not, I didn't know, but it sounded good.

"Whatever I can do, My Lovely Chief, I will."

"You profess to admire us Tuon women much. You will risk your life daily in this service, and if you prove true to us, one or more of us will be your reward. You should find that highly attractive for we on Venus have developed the art of love with the use of the ancient stimulation electric."

"At your service," grinned Hank, his snags of teeth showing, his eyes twinkling devilishly. "I'll take the job, and by Jupiter, I'll come back for the reward, too."

The reward of being first on your list," he said meaningly.

Oanu smiled on him. "If it is really me whom you admire, it can be arranged. You will be first on my list if you succeed, I promise you. But, remember, we take a new mate every year."

"AREN'T you two forgetting me," I interrupted. "Though I can only wonder at what possible use I can be as a spy."

"We have ways of making you capable of getting information for us. We need only your consent. Of course, your value to us is enhanced if you are equipped with knowledge of our ways as is Farne. Our methods have little to do with your present ideas of what is the work of a spy."

"A spy spies, doesn't he?" I asked, a little flip.

"No, he doesn't," patiently, Oanu went on. "I will explain. To make a spy, we insert a tiny radio transmission apparatus in the skull. This is done in such a way that the apparatus is not noticed even under penetrative vision ray. Your own knowledge of its presence and function will be erased from your mind so thoroughly that even the most exhaustive examination by the telaug will not uncover the fact that it's there. The memory cells in your brain carrying those thoughts will be themselves destroyed in your head by our penetray surgeons. We have a minute needle ray for just that purpose. The wound it makes heals in a day; the memory is gone forever. By hypnotic conditioning, you will think yourself a supporter of Hecate. You see, a spy does not know he is a spy. But a spy is very easily controlled by us from a great distance, by virtue of the same mechanism which broadcasts his thought to us."

I turned to Farne. "I don't follow her, Hank. What does she mean?"

"See," answered Farne, "she equips us with an invisible walkie-talkie, unbeknownst to us. It tells everything we hear or see all the time over an individual wavelength. Then, the Tuon Intelligence listen to our individual broadcasts and guide us by mental control into situations where we can pick up info. For all of which we get a soft break when we fall into Tuon hands again, and their controls keep us out of trouble among the Hagmen."

Oanu smiled at this, nodding. "I'm glad you think that way. We can do it, al-

though the credit for the development of the wonderful piece of equipment that makes it possible, belongs to the Elder Ones. We found a few of them a long time ago in an ancient underground arsenal. Guessing that it was part of their war mech, we were finally able to divine its uses. I don't think they made very many, for there were only a few of them in the arsenal."

"WELL," I asked, "how does this thing work?"

"After we had discovered how, it was simple. All it is, is a miniature, ultra-powerful thought augmentor. With it, it is possible to control the spy completely—thoughts, emotions, and actions. But what makes it valuable is the way it augments the spy's thoughts and alters them so that they can't be read by an ordinary telaug. Through it, we can so control the spy that he is guided unconsciously into an advantageous position where what he sees and hears will be significant. By placing a large number of such robot spies throughout the Vampire outfit, every move the Hag makes will be known instantly here in Tuon Headquarters."

"Well, if it works the way you say it does," I spoke up, beginning to believe that she really knew what she was doing, "it certainly beats carrier pigeons!"

Oanu smiled condescendingly, then went on: "The 'spy-mech' is very much like those modern radios brought here to Venus by you Earthmen. Here, I'll show you one."

Walking to a far wall, she opened a small door and took something out. Coming back to where we stood, she extended her hand.

"Look," she said, "don't let the small size fool you. With this little thing we have the key to unlock the flood-gates of destruction on that detestable Hag and all her evil cohorts."

Neither Hank nor myself had ever seen the mech that she had been talking about so we both bent over to examine it.

"Why, that doesn't look like any radio," I protested, "that looks to me like a small half inch bit of flat bone or something."

"It looks like a piece of skull," Hank seconded.

"That is what it is supposed to look like," explained Oanu. "Notice the little jagged edges of the case—that is what looks like bone, the case. Well, those little jagged

edges are fitted into a similar opening that our surgeons make in the spy's skull."

"Say," I protested, "don't tell me that we'll have to run around with that thing in our skulls!"

"It isn't as bad as it sounds," Oanu explained. "We only do it with the spy's consent. After that is obtained, a very delicate operation will insert this apparent piece of bone into your skull; it almost entirely replaces the bony section it is designed to resemble. When it is in place in your head it will look still more like a piece of bone. But within that deceptive bone is some of the most powerful and complicated apparatus on all Venus. The case is of the same opacity as bone and nothing can be seen of its interior—not even a shadow, as the interior is made of materials transparent to the penetray, and their outlines are hidden by the shadow of the case.

I didn't see where any comment that I could make would do justice to the genius and skill that had made that originally, so I just nodded affirmatively, "Very clever, very clever."

"It is that," said Oanu, "and it is the only way that we know of that surveillance and intelligence work can be carried on where telaug rays read the minds continually and where the penetrays search every man for concealed weapons or enemy radio devices. There is practically no danger of discovery for nothing could possibly be noted except a slight portion of the skull which seems more opaque than the rest. And there is another advantage. The operations also splices certain nerve fibres fast to the receiver and transmitter so that your thoughts are instantly broadcast, and any commands given through the mech are immediately superimposed on your motor nerves. Thus, your actions can be completely controlled from this Intelligence center. And, too, we are able to protect you, whereas, we couldn't if you were free of any control. But, you will have to consent of your own free will."

"Well, if you say that is the way to lick the Hag," I said, "when do we start for surgery?"

"That goes for me, too," said Hank.

"Good! I thought that you both would agree to it—that's why I called you here to my office. You are going to become valuable operatives of our Intelligence,

eligible for the greater rewards that recompense services of this type."

Then, she impulsively reached out to shake hands with Hank and me . . . a Venusian Warrior woman shaking hands. That over, she planted a big kiss on Hank's surprised mouth.

CHAPTER VIII

*Now at the head of Hel's pale Host
Those livid armies of the lost
A giantess, all shameless, strode . . .
For Baldur gleams the beaker bright,
His seat is set by Hela's side;
Elvidner was Hela's hall,
Iron-barred, with massive wall;
Horrible that palace tall.*

*From "Valhalla,"
Julia Clinton Jones.*

OUR uniforms gained us entrance to the city of Disin. Without knowing just why, we asked to be taken to Hecate. (Farne surmised that sometime in the past she had taken the name of the ancient Goddess Hecate. Her undeniable great age would lend overwhelming support to the idea of her ignorant followers that in medieval times she was Hecate.) The guards before the great drawbridge accosted us in antique Spanish—Castilian, it sounded to me. We only repeated the name of Hecate over and over, and finally the guard called a comrade and sent us down the labyrinth of passages.

I found myself greatly excited. We might see the living antique who really could be the ancient, infamous goddess of evil. At this stage of the game, nothing seemed impossible to me.

As we approached the inner sanctum, the guard with us was challenged time after time by the steel-cuirassed inner guards. With a few words, they permitted us to pass. Presently we stood before a monkish figure, white-haired and falsely benign of face, a gold chain his only adornment relieving the severe brown sweep of the cowed robe.

The fellow questioned us in an archaic form of English—sounds and words in a language that hasn't been heard since Cromwell's time:

"Ye have escaped the Tuons? Mayhap ye can tell me how it happens that of all the gear and war-ray sent against that accursed city, but ye two ray are able to find

the path back?"

Farne spoke up quickly, probably fearing that I would put my foot in it, though neither of us really understood what had happened in the interval of time, as the memory had been obliterated from our minds by the Tuon medicos.

"When the cables were cut at the time of the attack, we fell from the road into a huge bush. Looking out, we saw the other soldiers being made captive by the Tuons. We were afraid to stir from our hiding place for fear we would be taken too. After the Amazons left, we climbed down. To avoid capture, we left the open road, and not knowing our way, we have been lost in the forest. Some natives found us, and although we could not talk to them, knowing only English, they brought us here."

After several more such questionings, Farne and I were taken through more chambers. We were on our way to the Hag. We noted that everyone referred to her as "Mighty Hecate," that is everyone who had any sort of position in the fortress. However, those that feared and hated her called her "La Hag." But few of the lower classes even knew she had another name, for the lower classes all hated her. But when in her presence it was surprising to hear the many voices calling her "Your Mightiness," "Hecate, Our Goddess," "O Glorious Fount of All Wisdom" and other outrageously flattering salutations.

We marched down several gloomy corridors. Torches placed midway on the stone walls for illumination cast strange moving shadows like the small lighted candles do in a darkened church. More fourteenth century geared soldiers guarded the passages. The monk's rustling habit and the clack, clack of our footsteps echoed and re-echoed. Finally, we halted before a massive iron-banded, oak-beamed door. At a command from the robed figure, guards flung open the door.

SHE lay within the chambering transparencies of some old vitalizer mech. It was a tremendous thing pouring a flood of rich, golden rays over her great body. The emanations of these rays, striking the eyes, gave the illusion of beauty even to the Hag's hideousities. I knew how unspeakably pleasant just a touch of those golden rays could be, and guessed at the vast flow of infinite pleasure which such a flood of

the potent gold must bring to the senses.

In spite of my better nature, my knowledge of the unutterable delight she controlled in the mysterious ancient stim machine made desirable the vast, brooding, terrible strength in that old, old body of hers. Vampire, she was, yet I felt a devouring interest in her. Like an unholy mass of putrid, pulpy flesh being born from a bud of a rose, something—something awful, and unclean—something in me rose horribly to destroy the last dying spark of decency in my brain—a brain that wasn't my own. I couldn't know it was the Tuon Intelligence women reading my mind and stimulating those thoughts to protect me from her savagery—and her unpleasant habit of killing whomever displeased her.

Now, Hecate was a sensitive reader of thoughts, her centuries of experience with the telaug rays and thought augmentors had given her memory such complete data that she knew the thoughts most men think as children know the multiplication tables. Give her a facial expression and she could build up a man's thoughts by deduction quite accurately. Beside this, always on watch around her were several aides at the old thought augmentive beams, reading every thought of every person and looking constantly for every possible approach of danger or opposition. When anything interesting came up, it was their custom to throw a trans-telepathic beam into the great one's head. Seeing liking for Hecate rise in me in spite of my will, these unseen watchers connected me instantly with the ancient mind, for they thought it amusing that this big foreigner should actually register love for her.

Looking at Farne, she saw the fear and understanding he had for her. She saw, as well, the compliance toward her. This the Tuons had superimposed upon Farne's thoughts to protect him. Then her eyes returned to me, reading the strange emotion the Tuons had placed there. I knew she returned my interest from what happened. Perhaps the Tuons had not foreseen this or perhaps planned on it, though I did not think they could wish the secret upon which all their intelligence work depended placed so dangerously close to the Elder-wise eyes of the Hag. But they were unable to change the course of events without too much maneuvering. Tuon caution or their inscrutable purpose cost me my soul.

THE Hag questioned both of us sharply as to the nature of the Tuon attack upon the small Earth army. Learning that it was gas that accomplished our complete defeat, she dismissed Farne to the care of her intelligence men for complete questioning. She kept me standing before her while she lay on the transparent couch of the ancient vitalizer mech. Here began a horrible phase of my life.

Hecate, the unholy Mother of Sin, the Ancient Hag herself, was looking at me with her yellow eyes blazing. The others had left the room. Those yellow, feline eyes burned upon me for a long time. She lay there fingering the black hair that coiled weirdly over great, rock-gray shoulders.

Suddenly, from the bank of instruments and controls before her couch, she played a ray over me which caused an excess of inner energy to make every muscle of my body stand out quivering.

"So," her peculiarly accented English, coupled with her deep voice tones rolled persuasively from the depths of the splendor of the ancient wonder work about her, "you find the terrible Hecate attractive. How is it that so young a man can find attraction in this great, ugly body?"

Simultaneously, she played another ray upon me, causing an intensely pleasurable stimulation of every sense of my body. A fierce emotion horribly not my own, but one which ruled me, nonetheless, surged up into being within me. Or was it myself . . . aroused and impassioned with a consuming curiosity by the vampire lure of this witch woman—a thing often written of—written by writers who had never felt the terrible conquering power of the real aura itself? I did experience that power. No man's mere will can buck a dynamo. I succumbed.

"I don't know," I heard myself mumbling, "O Mighty Ruler of this land on a planet strange to me, why I should love you more than other women. But you can read the truth in my mind."

Now Hecate had many male sycophants and paramours who would have done anything she desired, many slaves to choose from, but some perverse whim in the dark labyrinth of her mind made her want me. And anyone who knows anything of the science of stimulative and nerve control electric knows that I didn't have a chance once that whim grew into a full-fledged desire. My great size, my ignorance of the

dark and evil life about me—what it was that intrigued her is hard to say.

I watched her huge form with eyes I could not turn away. Step by step I mounted the stairs under the flood of thickly golden rays, and erg by erg, the commanding pressure of mighty, overwhelming pleasure electric rose within my body. No man could have turned back from the ancient sugar coating of that bitter soul of evil. Then I stood beside her fascinated by those terrible yellow eyes that were neither human nor beast—like the faceted eyes of a female spider watching the approach of her mate, or the calculating, impersonal eyes of an octopus. All the untamed fierceness of such creatures lived in her eyes—their selfish will to live no matter what the cost to others—the ignorant soul of the she-tiger that eats her own cubs was in her character wholly. Those eyes, alive with the fire and the selfish wisdom of centuries of feeding on the young blood of children, burned into my own, hypnotically erasing every thought from my mind but the horrible joy that flowed through me and would flow more and more greatly if she so willed it. That synthetic joy—no less irresistible for being a product of a machine—flooded me, overpowering every natural impulse. Too, in my mind was the suggestion she put there, that through the prostration of my will to hers, lay the path to power as well as to strange, lost wisdom for me. I yielded—I failed—I lost myself in those strange arms.

SO it was that I became Hecate's thing, and stood behind her throne at the daily audiences of her ministers and her appointed rulers from the conquered cities. Always, I stood ready to her pleasure, and daily the clean, naturally good will in me died away, replaced by the insidious, inhuman electric of her control mech. Perhaps it was her doing and perhaps not, but the old mech placed an electric charge within me—in the tissues of my body which remained there like a new character. Daily the faraway Tuons heard through my mind what their ears were never meant to hear, and credited me with much valuable information on Hecate's plans.

As the time passed and my freedom became greater, I pieced together the facts and circumstances that had spawned Hecate. Some I overheard from lesser courtiers

—but most from the lips of the legendary Hecate herself.

Wise Mistress of the Ancient Wisdom—hellion goddess of abysmal evil and dissolution, she was 'Mighty Hecate' to her attendants; to the enslaved peoples under her heel she was the 'Limping Hag—the Mother of Sin.' The common, whipped people spat her name, 'The Hag'—but she was a filled-out hag, a human leech bulging with the blood of uncounted victims, and heavy for her size from the use of certain beneficial rays which were concentrates of certain vibrants from the gravitational flow. She explained later to me that much of her durability was due to this type of ray, that the blood transfers were supplemented by the rays. She obtained a vital and growth-promoting food supply from the veins of the young, but she obtained health and strength and the ability to absorb the blood of the young from the ancient integrative rays.

She had a deformity of one foot which gave her the limp that caused her to be known as the 'Limping Hag,' the devil's rival, partly because of the similarity to the devil which this foot imparted to her appearance. The foot was much smaller than the other. It seemed to lack the forward part, as though it had been lopped off about the center of the instep. On account of it, she looked more diabolical than nature intended, and it was easy to understand why to the common man she was the 'Limping Mother of Sin.'

TIME and unnatural growth had done strange things to Hecate. Centuries of indulgence of every kind had enlarged her lips; they were thick, full, and sensuous. Her smile was extremely wide and revealed oversized teeth like the fangs of a savage beast. Her nose, too, had grown out of proportion and was very long and sharply pointed. The burning yellow eyes and long black hair that just hung straight, uncurled, the huge mouth and enormous nose made up a face so different from that of ordinary man, she looked like another being. Ugly, even hideous, she was, yes; but a fierce vitality and a ruthless kind of sense was in her, giving her a weird dignity. A fear-impairing face it was.

Her hands gave the impression of strength and dexterity far beyond normal humans; the fingers were extremely long and strong, the knuckles large. Her hands

could fly over the keyboard of an ancient force organ so fast that nothing but a blurred motion could be seen. It was when she was at work at one of these old mechs that her true witch-like character was apparent; her yellow eyes blazed intensely, wickedly, straight black hair swished and fanned out grotesquely on rock-gray shoulders. There was nothing of the decorative female in Hecate.

Yet there was a wild, savage attraction about this creature from the depths of the past. This living myth of ancient magic—she was alive. Evil had given her life—the hetacombs of children who had perished that she might live—all the endless cruelty she had practiced and believed in for centuries as efficacious policies to power, all this hung about her as an aura that caused fear and revulsion—these two things caused a confusion in the mind of men who met Hecate face to face. One feared her, was revolted by her, but one came to her as a moth comes to the flame. As for me, she left me no choice. I was to serve her in any way she decided. I did.

By black, unholy arts, Hecate worked over my mind regularly, telling me she was improving its setup. Actually, I think she reduced to impotence those parts of my mind which made me independent of her will. Needle X-rays cut the connecting nerve tissues. In time, Hecate made me a reflection of her will. Without spoken words I was obedient automatically to every slightest wish of her mind, evil as it might be. Hecate had gained such control over my being that I was just another part of her body, an extension as obedient to her will as were her own fingers. But she did not know that at any time the tiny instrument the Tuons had placed invisibly in my skull could become my master, ruling me more thoroughly than she herself.

Why did the Tuons not cause me to kill her? Because there was no real chance; there were the watchers about her always, reading any alien thoughts. The Tuons bided their time.

THE months went by. The armies gathered and drilled. The tremendous war mech of the ancients was dragged from the caverns and mounted on great tractors. Another expedition, this time calculated to crush utterly any possible defense that might be prepared against us, was nearly

ready to launch against the beautiful city of Lefern of the Amazon Tuons.

Some part of me, the decent me, still lived on within my mind, helpless to the horror I was fast becoming, weakly shuddering at the daily tortured deaths of captives in which the Hagmen delighted and with which Hecate saw no reason to interfere, although I believed she was tired of such performances. This still living part of me was powerless to struggle against the evil that overwhelmed me.

I learned to handle the intricate pleasure ray apparatus, the stimulative and beneficial generators of an endlessly variant number of electric rays and energy flows; the whole myriad of involved apparatus which the ancients had left intact and indestructible behind them. I learned to handle all these things under the tutelage of the most experienced hand on two worlds—Hecate herself, who had had seven or eight centuries to learn the art of the ancient ray.

Always, of course, I practiced this art upon the body of Hecate, my new Queen . . . the unthinkable ancient art of stimulating—and feeding—the sensation nerves of a living body with electric flows from the antique, cave-held mechanisms. Somehow, through the ages of time, the Elder Race had learned to nurture and stimulate the human senses by using hydrogen ions bearing certain vital nutrients, carried by beneficial, ionizing electric flows.⁴

Accustomed as she had become to it in the long centuries, Hecate's giant body absorbed the floods of 'ben' like a dry sponge. She was the one that received—and she was the one that controlled—always. I practiced on the ancient mech with the Hag in complete control of my mind—I was but the tool of her will.

⁴ From "A Bipolar Theory of Living Processes" by Geo. W. Crile, page 13, paragraph 3.—"Hydrogen ions permeate all living organisms. The slightest change in the hydrogen ion concentration fundamentally alters the organism; and it is known that hydrogen ions are of high electrical significance."

Page 214, paragraph 2.—"In living organisms an acid alkali balance on opposite sides of the dielectric films (surrounding all cells) is maintained by a difference in the concentration of H- and OH-ions."

Page 46, paragraph 1.—"The constant oxidation of the lipid films of the globules would meet the hydrogen ion-electric potential requirements of the cell."—Author.

She conceived a sort of affection for me, and I found myself imbibing strange and potent fluids, even submitting to regular transfers of the baby blood into my veins without a murmur—the Elder Goddess of Evil Incarnate, Hecate, had removed the cause of any such murmur from my mind.

Her former favorites were, of course, wildly jealous of me or greatly relieved, whichever the case might be, but none of them could carry out any plans against me for fear of her anger. All knew Hecate's anger was usually fatal.

STROLLING beside the giantess with the evilly smiling face through the gardens of the baby farms became a regular part of my life—and not the most revolting part, by far. These walks we took had a sinister purpose—not the romantic thing that lovers feel—but the selection of child blood donors. This hideous life that I walked beside, selected the rosiest and healthiest children, placing her personal mark indelibly upon them for her future personal use.

This mark was done with a small electric branding iron. The seal of Hecate, a circled cross above a serpent, was burned deep into the child's flesh, and that child, from then on, was the personal property of the Limping Hag.

I was as oblivious to the children's howls of pain as I was to the screams of the men and women who daily died before her throne or in the grisly dungeons that underlay the whole stronghold of Disin. I was a man walking in my sleep.

In her gentler, more mellow moods, Hecate was wont to confide her plans to me, her ambitions and her memories of long, gone days. During one of these periods of relaxation, she said:

"You see, My Muscled One, long ago I was young and ambitious, an acolyte of the Rosicrucians. Well, I had a way with men, and some of the inner circle of the order were reputed to be immortal. I wanted that secret—that deeply-guarded secret. I schemed and planned . . . connived. I flattered, ogled the senior priests until at last my chance came.

"One day, they left me alone with the records and I found it, how it was done—this fighting age with young blood. I learned why it was secret, too. There is a great deal to know about this method of using

children's blood for one's own veins, drugs to add to the fluid to keep it from clotting and causing death. One must even learn why people grow old, in order to avoid the foods that cause age, learn how the sun causes age by throwing bits of its fiery self at us in the yellow light, learn how these bits of ever-fire gather in the body from the water and from the meat we eat. I studied how to prepare water free of the terrible poison from the sun and how to feed a child and take the child's blood into the veins instead of food into the mouth, so that the poisons gather in the child and the cleaned blood of the child brings food to one's body free of the cause of age. All these things I learned by giving myself to those old priests, by being pleasant and useful to them—keeping my mouth shut so that none of them ever got into trouble through me . . . or suspected my real purpose—stealing their greatest secrets for my own use.

"Since that time, many tired centuries have passed and I have learned more than any other living person." The unfathomable pits of Hecate's eyes seemed to focus in infinity. She shrugged.

"But I have become a horror and a plague to men, for I must have the blood of their children—and I will have it—for my plans are too great to be abandoned for any of their infantile emotions or virtues.

"I have learned by the study of their writings, how the Gods lived—the Elder Race who built these vast machines and endless caverns, and I have decided to follow in their footsteps."

At my startled glance, she nodded, smiling, "Yes, Tender One, I know where they went—I know why they went away from this accursed sun that makes a horrible blight of all the growth in life—the treacherous sun that lets men grow intelligent . . . only to die before they learn enough to become great.

"This life is but a faint dying echo of that mighty past. A little living reflection of a great fierce time when men were Gods, and the Gods living men, so heavy they sank ankle deep in the solid rock. Look at that machine."

OBEDIENTLY, I went over and examined the great ray-gen mech she indicated. There were many prints of feet in the rock, inches deep, overlapping. It

was true . . . the Hag was right! That solid granite was but soft muck to the feet of those heavy men of the past.

"I've noticed these prints before about the caves," I said to Hecate. "You mean to tell me those men were so heavy they sank into solid rock as though it were soft clay?"

"Turn on that switch in front of the machine," Hecate directed, watching me with indulgent interest.

I reached out a hesitant finger and pushed the lever down to its lowest mark. A hum came from the heart of the mysterious old mechanism. A strange force gripped me . . . stronger and stronger. My knees sagged with a great weight bearing down upon me, but, strangely, the presence of the weight was an exhilarating thing.

"That is the beneficial force which causes the world itself to grow. It is the force of gravity focused and refined into an integrative force which is now making every part of your body denser and much stronger," Hecate explained as the weight forced my legs into a greater crouch to bear the strain.

As she watched me, grinning her fierce, big-toothed smile, the heavy, penetrative, intensified gravitational ray made every bone in my body stand out distinctly. Like a man of glass, every organ and bone was outlined glowingly.

Suddenly, the Hag started and rushed toward me, a great fear on her face. She seized my head and looked closely at the back of it under the strong penetray.

"What is that dark bone in your head!" she shrieked, "What are those wires and metal I see inside?"

I disclaimed all knowledge of what she meant, which was not acting, for the Tuons had removed all trace of this mental apparatus insertion in my skull from my memory. After a close examination of the thing in my head, she called an aide—Enora—showed her the thing in my skull, and ordered her to find out just what it was and what data they might have on such a thing. Then, apparently dismissing the thing from her mind, she went on explaining her plans to me . . . for, now she meant to include me in those plans.

I LISTENED intently, for her mind was the oldest on two planets, sunk though it was in the sin of many lifetimes. Some-

thing of the girl that once had been so long ago—something of the good ambition that burns in all men seemed to burn fitfully within her, although in her continually recurring rages, every good she might do was wiped out.

This something . . . some of the primitive will to survival of the race, still lived in her . . . though it could accept the bleeding process that stole the lives of children to give itself life, accept the burning of these same children to hide the deed from the people, could not accept the idea of all that life used for no purpose.

She consoled herself with the thought that she would be equal someday to the ancient Gods whose work she knew so well and had puzzled over for so many centuries. This plan of power she talked about with me at times, though I was hardly a part of the conversations. She was so used to controlling those about her that automatically I made the answers she expected to hear without volition of my own. In truth, I was not myself at all, but only a reflection of her thought augmented by the great tubes of the telemach until her thought controlled me, unconsciously to us both.

She knew that in the early days of earth's history just after the two races of Gods had left earth and while the mechanisms of the cavern cities were still comparatively new, men had become practically immortal by the rays of the mech alone, without her device of blood-stealing from children. She had, in ancient forbidden records of the Rosicrucians, found accurate accounts of these first cities in the days of the latter Gods. Then, such cities as Asgard were numerous on earth, though the tales of Asgard are almost the only ones to survive. In these cities were conditions such as are described in the *Nibelunglied* . . . where the heroes of Valhalla could not be killed, but were put back together and healed under the beneficial rays of the healing palaces left by the God-race. She knew that these accounts were not legends, but were the truth.

In those far gone days, the secret rulers of the abandoned cities of the Gods sent their maidens out in flying craft to pick up the best of the dead bodies, for they were very human, even though long-lived. They pitied the dead, as well as had a vast need for fighting men in their own wars. The dead men were revived by the magic of the

ancient healing vital rays, and entertained regally, as the legends tell us, by all the devices the God-race had developed through ages of study of life. Such latter Gods as Odin, Wotan, Zeus, she knew to have been ordinary men who had used these vital rays to become virtually immortal. She suspected that they had studied the writings of the God-race and had gone in search of the Gods themselves to avoid the death—the death from the sun—the inevitable fate of all on Earth. This was her ambition, to follow in their footsteps and learn to search space.

TO DO that, she had to build an organization capable of searching every bit of the caverns for data on space travel and on the ancient ships, for those they used were fractious at high speeds, and the men who skippered them could neither repair them nor could they chart a straight course through space. They could only drive the old ships by the seat of their pants, by trial and error. Long as they had been using the old ships, for some six centuries and more, they had learned little about them. Space travel is a science which cannot be learned from modern science, but only from the very ancient records of the builders of the ships. And none existed who could truly read the ancient writing—the very concepts that fit the symbols they used are long dead on Earth and Venus. Trouble and wars with the peoples she despoiled for their children's blood ever kept her from her true desire—mastering the science of space travel and building ancient ships so that far space could be traveled at the high speeds the ancients had used.

This always sounded very big and noble . . . as though she were concerned with the progress of humanity. I am tempted at times to concede that occasionally she really and sincerely was the philanthropist that her talk would lead you to believe . . . though centuries of an unnatural existence doesn't make one so soft and loving. She lived on the raped blood of children, and the next moment talked of pursuing the gods for their secrets of eternal life for the people whose young blood she ravished.

Any woman is a mass of contradictions, but in Hecate all the contradictions had a bloody result. Her hands were bloody almost from the time she suckled at her

mother's breast, and rivers of thick, bubbly blood had followed in her wake from that day forward.

As the Mighty, Gory-handed Hag herself tells the tale . . . I think that she told it to those paramours who had preceded me . . . though where they were is hard to say. Dead, probably. She tells . . .

Of a sunny land bordering on the azure shore of the Mediterranean. A far off land on a far planet . . . far in space, and what man, save the Hag herself, can say how far in Time?

In a tiny village, there was born to a poor couple a child, their fourth, and the third girl. Much like any other child, her birth was not remarked, and she grew and played with her sisters. Her parents, as people in those days did, went on having children. The sun rode smiling across the blue bowl of heaven, day followed night. She was fourteen. Her sisters were a dozen, her brothers three. Their clothes were a simple woolen wrap, their feet bare, and their limbs long and brown and bare. Their only trouble was their stomachs which were never quite full. The fields were stony, they worked, but the food was never quite enough.

TODAY, is a holiday, the little town is full of the people from their homes in the near hills. A sheepskin or a wolf pelt is the men's attire, while the women wear short woollens in bright colors. They have flowers in their hair. The brown, strong children run and shout, the girls go by in groups, arm in arm, chattering shrilly, or racing across the grass in flight from the pursuing youths, who chase and catch them, rough their hair, dip them in the stream or roll them down the slopes. The games go on in the circle near the temple continually, short races, practice with the discus and javelins, mock battles. People come and go, watching the games—strolling through the village—talk and motion and laughter—brown clean limbs, curling hair, bright faces and shining teeth—the people of the tiny village are having a holiday.

The temple is old, but bright with this year's many colored paints on the frescoes and sculptured ornaments on the pediments and capitals. Flowering trees droop before the wide steps by the deep path. Men and women with solemn faces come and go reverently, bearing wreaths and food to the

Goddess. Before her dreaming, mysterious face, they bow to the floor, peering through the dimness at her polished form, and lying in imploring attitudes on smooth stones.

This day, Hecate did not race madly past the pillared doorway to meet the youths in the woods, but paused and looked long at the temple's dark coolness. Something drew her, and her white face with its twisted drooping lips that were too ripe, too red, and her yellow eyes that held those strange depths lit up by some hidden thought within her. She went in from the warm sun, into the coolness and stood looking at the pale limbs of the Goddess, at the pedestal of many sculptured breasts, at the figures that moved about the walls in a pale pictured life of their own. This reverence and worship awoke a rage within her. In contrast to the prostrate forms of the villagers, she stood erect with hands clenched and teeth grinding inaudibly as she gazed about. If she could, she would have toppled over the tall stone Goddess, kicked the offerings out the door, torn down the paintings. Why was she raging inside, she wondered. Why does this thing that filled the dark air with love and fragrance fill her with despair and hate?

A red mist came into her thinking, a shuddering over her limbs. She moaned in agony and ran from the temple, not stopping until she crouched alone in a thicket in the woods. A hunger was in her, her throat was dry, her palms burned. What would fill her, ever? The red fog that was her thinking grew thicker, her mouth dropped open, her white teeth ground together. She slunk through the woods like a dark-eyed and bloody-mouthed ghoul, hunger was in her and her red lips shone with drool. What this hunger was she did not know, but it drove her on.

A soft bleating came to her ears. She saw by a pool not far off, some sheep with their new young lambs. Stealthily, she approached, her body sinuously hugging the ground like a great cat, though there was no need, for the sheep, startled, galloped off in bawling flight. But under her lay a soft throbbing little body clutched in her arms, its stick-like legs thrashing at the grass. She bent the square little head back sharply. The great soft eyes rolled toward her in piteous terror and something in her exulted and feasted avidly upon the helpless fear.

IN HER hand was a little glass knife, a long sliver, its handle wrapped with twine. Slowly she drew its shining edge across the woolly neck, quivering in ecstasy as the blood welled out and down her arm. She held the lamb's head tightly. The round, black eyes rolled madly. It struggled to bleat, but she held the mouth, it could only moan sickly in its throat. She bent and drank the hot blood, drank and drank until the hunger died away and her heart stopped throbbing against her ribs. The lamb was quite still; its little feet were limp and strained no longer.

She rose, left the still heap, and went to the pool and washed herself, combing her hair and making herself like other girls again. Then, she strolled back through the trees again, her eyes sleepy, her lips satiated, her body relaxed. The herdsman would think some fox or other creature killed the lamb.

Now the night lay sadly about her. Her sisters slept fitfully, arising often to drink, while her father snored a tiresome plaint into the dark. A hunger was in her again. It was days since she killed the lamb. A compulsion came into her veins, her palms were dry, her throat constricted. Her eyes burned into the blackness, but it burned back at her. Softly she crept, snakelike across the floor until the warm softness of her little sister's body was against her breast. In her hand she had the sharp piece of glass, a thread cutter from the spinning. The tiny one sighed a little, turned against her. Hecate parted the dark hair, baring the thin neck, and with the glass made a quick, deep slit. She filled her throat with the warm blood, holding the soft little head fiercely, her hand over the struggling mouth. After a long time, the body ceased its struggle, but she held it for the leisure of the stillness, and the sweet trickle down her throat. At last the hunger left her and she crawled back to her pallet and slept.

In her sleep she dreamed—dreamed of the good feel of a full stomach—the pleasant warmth of a cheery fire when the heavens outside are weeping. And other things she dreamed—of stars and planets—and strange peoples—and the dreams of never growing slow and wrinkled and old—a dream wherein she was a god.

Vampire spawn of Earth that she was, she could still talk of her God quest—and with supreme indifference be the cause of

torture and death. Torture and death with a motive. And her motive was always the immortality of Hecate, the Limping Hag. Nothing that went on in her fortress did so without her approbation.

ONCE, walking in some of the lower chambers, I idly paused to watch a fine-looking old gentleman being broken on the wheel. I had so sunk into my role of the Hag's favorite that the sight of agony and hideous death howls left me with only a slight thrill of pleasure. But, this day, for some reason I wondered at the cause of this man's being racked.

Nodding to one of the Earthmen members of the Hag's forces, I inquired as to the reason for it.

The answer was astounding when I grasped it . . . the still human part of me was astounded, I mean.

The Earthman looked at me strangely—my position as the Hag's favorite would indicate that I should know. He shrugged his shoulders, then said. "He was manufacturing a steel 'beam' on Earth and planning to sell it widely. A steel beam in their midst would detract from our ancient moral standing."

The Hagman laughed at his cryptic speech and walked off. I pondered awhile, then walked up to the man sweating in a death agony. He was an Earthman—a high type. An intellectual head he had, and long fingered hands. A beautiful specimen of the highest type of Earthman, though he was broken and bleeding now.

I knew that the antique rays was made of what was called the Elder Metal. That was what he had meant by "beams." I realized then what that secrecy cost the peoples of Earth in engineers and others . . . the secrecy of the ancient mech buried in the caves beneath our feet, though at the time I was too much under the Hag's influence to care. This man was evidently an engineer or a physicist who had been making a ray using a kind of steel that was nearly as good as some of the antique "beams." He had been taken captive and shipped to Venus for final disposition . . . the ancient, brutal wheel a reward for his fine effort for the future of man. These hidden rulers of Earth and the Hagmen—the Hag herself—had no use for such a man but to crack his bones. I understood the whole thing much better. It still goes

on.

At another time I was standing in an apartment of Hecate's noticing some very beautiful figures of women. They were very realistic—colored like life. Curiously, I touched one of the beautiful nudes. It was not stone but had a "give" to it—like a firm cushion. Looking closer I saw that the figures were literally stuffed women! Once they had been beautiful living creatures . . . creatures vibrant with the surge of life. Whether they had incurred the wrath of Hecate, or merely that she had coveted their bodies, so much lovelier than her own bulky carcass, I never knew. But the Hag had them now, permanently . . . had them stuffed and decorating her chambers, like the trophies of a hunter.

This . . . this was Hecate, the Mother of Sin . . . my unlovely, all wise Mistress who was telling me of her plans to pursue the Gods Themselves with me at her side.

CHAPTER IX

"Expect that by such stairs as these," thus spake the teacher, panting . . .

"We must depart from evil so extreme:

. . . I raised my eyes,

Believing that I Lucifer should see

. . . but saw him now

With legs held upward. Let the grosser sort,

*Who see not what the point was I had past
Bethink them if sore toil oppressed me
then.*

—The Divine Comedy

UNDER the combined influence of the Tuon intelligence that directed my every action, and the spell of Hecate's marvelous ancient mech, the incident of the discovery of the dark bone in my head was forgotten . . . even my Evil Mistress had, seemingly, dropped it. We were languidly tasting the delights the ancient "stim" possessed in limitless streams.

Suddenly the quiet spell broke.

Shattering precedent of ages, Enora flung aside the drapes covering the door, and, with the shortest of salutations, rushed to the couch of Hecate, yelling hysterically, "It's an old spy device, Oh Hecate! A spy device of the Ancient Ones—it broadcasts a man's thoughts!"

The shrill tones had hardly died in the room when the Tuons made the move they'd

deferred for so long. Like a switch had been thrown, I was galvanized to action. I had nothing to do with it. A powerful compulsion seized me. Leaping between the two huge women, I swung a terrific sleep-inducer at the smaller and closer one which happened to be the aide. I connected powerfully—with a brick wall. That old bag had been under the integrative ray too much—soft and fluffy like a chunk of concrete! I yelped—thought I'd broken my hand!

Instead of folding up like she should have, she didn't even grunt—just looked at me, all the time tugging frantically at the gun holstered at her side. Boy! I had to think fast. If she got that little playtoy out it would have been all over for me—except for flowers and slow music. I stepped back, my hand feeling like it was broken in a hundred places, my eyes on that wicked little magnetic dissociator that forever nullifies the tiny magnetic charges that hold all matter together. I had no desire to go up in smoke, for love of the Hag or anything else.

(I never will know what kept that thing sticking in her belt. In the years that I had seen and used the hellish weapons of the caves, I had never before seen one that didn't function smoothly. Maybe the Gods love my big baby face.)

When you neck feels the breath of the Grim Reaper, thoughts that take minutes to relate, race through your mind like lightning—that's the way I wondered why Hecate hadn't taken a hand in the thing—so I looked and there was the big cow, hurriedly pulling her massive bulk over to the bank of controls.

"Oh, oh," I thought. "Here's where little Jimmy gets what is known in some circles as 'the works'—gotta do something—with haste."

I moved in on the aide. She wasn't too hep to Earthly "rassling," so when I rammed one leg behind hers and heaved with my shoulders, the old battle-axe went over like an iron balloon. She hit the floor and went sprawling—the gun getting loose and skidding away from her. I grabbed it—too late.

HECATE was still one jump ahead of the opposition. She'd gotten to the mech's control panel and the jig was up. Before I could level the dis-gun at her and

fire, a beam sprang out of the great old machine, stopping me cold, the surging power of Hecate's beam freezing the will that coursed from the antique spy-mech in my head.

I stood still. A living pawn. Two ancient machines fighting silently for control of my body. The Tuons were doomed to fail from the first. They were matching skill with the sharpest hands on two planets, and for all I know, the best mech artist on all ten worlds.

I couldn't think. I was just aware of what was going on. Then, shortly the huge old mech under Hecate's flitting fingers slowly gained the upper hand. I guess the Tuons were too far away to last too long.

Like a puppet on an invisible string, I moved toward the Hag, seated at the control panel. I was numbed or I guess I'd have gone mad at the hell-fire flashing out of those proud, angry eyes. The very hate of hell was burning into mine as I stepped up to her and meekly handed the dis-gun to her—as SHE willed.

Something—an affectionate banshee, or the gods, stayed the awful anger that had destroyed hosts of abler men than me—and for a lot less, too.

She looked at me for a long, long moment, then summoned some of the guards that never were far from her. They and the aide who had picked herself up off the floor by this time were commanded to wind me with certain coils of wire. They were experts at that sort of thing because in a matter of seconds I was tightly wound round and round with many turns of wire and hustled off to the cells in the huge prison under the city of Disin, a prison, incidentally, from which there is no record of anyone's returning alive.

I'll never know . . . and it's cost me many a night's sleep trying to figure it . . . just what the Limping Hag WOULD have done to me if . . .

THAT night a soft hiss that wasn't caused by the vermin made me sit up on the crawling mat I was on. I held my breath . . . listening.

The door slowly opened . . . very slowly, not making a sound. The lock had dissolved in a puff of dust or smoke like that which had almost claimed me earlier that day.

An apparition from a drugged nightmare

entered the cell . . . a tall column of barely heard hissing noise, yet I knew that the noise meant something or somebody.

The column of sound seemed to bend in the middle, bending in my direction. The sweat stood out in cold beads on my forehead. I thought: "This it it—Hell. What a way to die, in a stinking little cell . . . alone."

Then, like the chorus from a basket of snakes came a louder hiss, a hiss that I recognized as a voice . . . and I knew that voice.

"You big baboon!"

"Ceulna!" I moaned, both because my bonds were paining me and because of the shock of hearing her voice here under what I knew was an enemy city. "Ceulna, beautiful, what are you up to? You shouldn't be here, you—?"

"Ask me no questions, you overstuffed baboon," she cut me off. "You plaything of a hyena's daughter . . . you fancy fool for that spawn of hell. Oh, you're impossible! You're not worth the trouble I take."

I tried to say something, but she commanded, "Shut up. I'll talk for you."

She was most explicit. "Here, put this on and keep quiet!" Somehow I felt like a married man caught in delinquency. I had not known Ceulna gave a damn for me until she bawled me out that night. But, oh brother, what a job she did, then. Nothing could have been better calculated to bring my sleeping self back to life. She cut my ropes and slid some soft, rustling stuff over me and fastened the two whirling discs about my shoulders, then, walking through the door, she disappeared from my senses. I followed. The faintest possible whirring was the only guide my senses could find to tell me where Ceulna had gone. I followed that faint shadow of a sound that was she, and passed a dozen dead guards, great holes of nothingness where the center of their stomachs should have been. When Ceulna killed someone, she killed them.

MILES later, my unaccustomed feet stumbling after Ceulna a thousand times more anxiously than they had the first night I met her, I caught up with her.

"For God's sake, Ceulna, tell me something."

"You keep quiet, you overgrown lady

killer, you— Of all the men Ceulna could have on two worlds, she had to want you, the only one that would be fool enough to fall into Hecate's arms. It would be better if you were dead. Keep still, we are still in danger."

I swear we walked ten solid miles, and I could get nothing out of Ceulna but violent recrimination. Then, in those gloomy, forever dark caverns, we came upon, of all things, an electric car that I swear was built on Earth, and recently. We got in, in silence, and due to those suits, in non-existence, apparently.

Two hours later, we were mounting in an elevator toward the city of Lefern above. She told me that much. Going into the buildings that I knew were upper Lefern from the rustling leaves outside, she led me into an apartment that I recognized as her personal living place, for the dancing costumes hung in the transparent closet, and the little globe of the kind she had shown me on Earth in the secret caverns rested on a low table. She must have gotten another one. Everything in the room said, "The graceful, lovely, Ceulna lives here." I was immensely glad to sink into a huge chair and just look at her. A great load had lifted from me, and although I was not able to think clearly anymore, I knew I was home.

CHAPTER X

*The Veline fountains, and sulphureous Nar
Shake at the baleful blast, the signal of the war.
Young mothers wildly stare, with fear possessed,
And strain their helpless infants to their breast.*

Virgil's Aenid.

CEULNA was still boiling. "For months," she stormed, "I have watched you over the augments, listening to you make love to that living slime, that giantess of the abyss, that compound of baby's lives and selfish will. And when you get in trouble, who gets you out? I have to! You big blundering oaf, you wasted effort of a mistaken mother. What are you, anyway?"

"Ceulna," I said slowly, "I am angry myself at myself for all that I have lived through. But, I swear I could no more help myself than fly. I am more happy to see you than anyone could explain. It even makes me happy that you should be angry. I didn't know I meant anything to you. Now I know you care for me. Since you

have read so many of my thoughts, you must know what I feel for you, though I have not had much time to think about it."

"That's another thing. All this time in the arms of the ugliest woman on two planets, and you haven't even thought of me, and now you say you care. Bah! And I risk my neck for you. Oh, why are women made that way? If there was a man, a real man wanting me, I would go out of my way to be nasty to him. Why? But just let a big self-centered oaf like you who does not even think of me get himself in trouble, and I nearly lose my neck to pull him out of the toughest prison on Venus. Well, say something, you bovine paramour of an old witch, aren't you even grateful?"

"Why are you so angry, Ceulna? Because it makes you so beautiful with your green eyes flashing and your face flushed, or because it is a reaction from worrying about your man so long? If that's it, come here and I'll show you something."

She moved closer and I wrapped my too-strong arms about her and she started to cry. "From now on, Ceulna," I started to soothe her, "I'm your man; you bought my life with your courage and it's yours. It's yours to do what you want with it."

After crying for a long time, she began to explain. "When the Hag put you down there, I knew it would only be a day or so until some of those hangers-on who have been wishing for your place in her so-lovely arms, her so-sweet embrace, would find a way to do away with you, and much the lovely ogress would have cared what happened to you. She does not like to be made a fool, even if you couldn't help it. I asked Oanu for the suit of invisibility. They are very rare and little known, but there are a few found now and then in sealed compartments in the old dwellings. Only the ancient secret-service owned them, so there are not many. They cannot be detected by an ordinary ray, unless it strikes one directly, and the only way such a feat could have been accomplished. They nullify all vibrations leaving the body. But how to get there without walking all the way? We finally decided to use the electric car, after covering all the wires and motor with material taken from another suit of invisibility. Well, it worked. We have maps of every bit of the old caves and it was simple to find a way into the part where the prison has been built. I doubt if they have such

maps themselves. It was simple, yes. But this does not mean that you are forgiven. Later, maybe."

"BUT I don't understand how you came to have such influence here and how you got them to help you. How come?" I asked her, just to hear her voice again.

"I earn what I get here. They were glad to have me when they found that I knew of Earth-ray and of Hecate. I drew a very high allotment of credits for my work. When Oanu learned that I knew you, she put me in the group who watched and controlled the unconscious spies who are equipped with the device which is still in your skull. So, I know all about you, you vampire's plaything. You . . . !" In spite of herself, Ceulna was forced to laugh at my lugubrious expression. So she laughed and was soon in my arms again, crying softly. If I had known how Ceulna felt about me, I would not have been so ready to leave Lefern for our enemies' hospitality and for the arms of the oldest and ugliest woman on two worlds.

As I sat with Ceulna in my arms, enjoying the happiness and relief that she had brought to me, Oanu came in. She looked at us, a peculiar smile on her face. Ceulna did not rise, and I couldn't with her in my lap. But Oanu understood. She sat down, lighting one of the purple cigarettes of Venus.

"It is too bad that this love I see before me had to be dragged through the slime by Hecate," she said in better English than I had heard from her before. "If either of you had mentioned your acquaintance to me when you were here before, I would have brought you together. Then, all this could have been avoided. But it is over now. Our armies are gathered in the caverns under Disin and you and Ceulna will each lead a detachment. Your knowledge of the place should prove most useful. Within a few hours we will be ready. You had better refresh yourselves, then join your section. There is little time. It will not be long before Disin is in our hands. Simultaneously, the other cities in Hecate's hands will be struck in the same way from below, and, fortune favoring, we will end this vampire horror on Venus.

"Thanks to your efficient love-making," Oanu grinned slyly at me, "we know every weapon that Hecate will use against us, and

have prepared the counter weapons according to the ancient war-ray books. Before Hecate realizes that we have this information, we strike, for she will deduce from the incident of the instrument in your head that we do have such information. So the time is *now*! We have her figured out and an overwhelming counter-attack prepared for anything she may use. Her methods are no longer a mystery as they used to be to us, nor can she have a surprise for us."

"Oanu, something has been troubling me ever since the day I fell into Hecate's hands. I asked her several times, but she always put me off. Where is Hank Farne? I haven't seen him since the day we were both questioned by Hecate."

"Farne has been idling in Disin. No one gave him anything to do, and no one harmed him for they feared you would hear of it. Hecate would not let him see you as she feared his influence over you would turn you against her. You will probably see him if we succeed in the coming attack," was Oanu's answer.

THOSE Amazons didn't pay much attention to me; I was politely told that I was boss of our group of thirty track-rays, much the same type that I had learned to handle under the Earth-ray-men. That boss-stuff was mere fiction, for I couldn't even talk their lingo well, and could hardly understand them. But they did pay attention to business. Through all the many dusty caverns leading to Disin, I knew that similar columns were racing madly toward the city of the vampires. The idea was to get there as soon after our discovery by their rays as possible. I realized that this attack had been caused by the necessity springing from the discovery of the spy-radio, in my head when I was with Hecate in her apartments, for she would guess just about how much we had learned of her plans and would change her whole campaign. To catch her in the midst of the confusion caused by this change was the reason for our attack. Also, there were many valuable men like Farne in the Hagmen's midst who would be killed if the attack failed. The old telepath-radio apparatus in their heads would be their death warrant now that Hecate knew what they were, and where to look for the apparatus.

In front of us vibrated the great fans of the black shorter rays, ready to ground any

beam they might throw at us. Lumbering behind the fans came the light tanks such as my own group, and behind them came larger and larger war-ray. All focused on a predetermined spot in Disin—that spot the place where the great general ro-control with which Hecate ruled the city had its intricately cabled, myriad-beamed, and electric-eyed being. This apparatus Hecate had had brought up, ton by ton, from the depths of an ancient ro-city. With it she could direct any man's whole activity or make the whole population obey the same mental impulse simultaneously. Always, a trusted follower of the Hag sat at this masterpiece of the ancient science, listening to the thought of the city and ruling that thought in the way that it should go, as prescribed by Hecate. A populace ruled in this manner by the ancient ro-controls accepts any occurrence without demur, no matter how much to their detriment. Once our dis-rays put this monster, the actual nervous center of Disin out of commission, their prime co-ordinating center would be cancelled.⁵

AT a signal, immense beams from the giant tractors behind us lanced over our heads, up at the center of the web of telaug beams which ringed the old ro-control mech. In my penetray screen, I watched eagerly as the antique super metal glowed red, then white. But there was one thing our spies had missed, probably because the things had been planted so long before. Whether the heat of our dis-rays caused the explosion or whether they could not see our true position for the mass of black shorter rays under our dis-beams, I don't know, but a vast booming and roaring ahead, followed by a rolling cloud of choking smoke and dust, told us what had happened—the caves leading to Disin had been mined for just such an attack. Our forces had come within a hair of walking into the primitive trap. Simultaneously with the explosion, what seemed like a thousand

or more great dissociator beams bored down at us, and a myriad of dust belching holes appeared in the hardened rock of the cave-rooves ahead. Our "shorter" ray set-up, carefully figured out in advance for just such attacks on the basis of our full information on their weapons, were sufficient.

A few of our delicate telaug devices burned out from the overload and rolled to a stop for repairs, but the columns raced on toward the mass of tumbled rock fragments that now barred us entrance to Hecate's lair. Under the black shielding blanket of shorter ray, the dis-rays hissed at the tumbled rock, and the lava rolled slowly back toward us from the melted rock.

It would not take the big dis-rays fifteen minutes to melt away a half-mile of that rubble, but would the resulting passage be safe for the passage of an army?

Well, we'd find out, for streams of water were playing on the bubbling floor of molten rock and our wheels were rolling over the smoking rock before it had really cooled.

Overhead, the cracks left by the explosion reached upward. We had a few integrative rays playing upward to tie the rock a little more firmly, but I doubted they made much impression through the necessary blanket of "shorter" rays.

Far overhead as we rounded into a branching cavern, on the surface I caught a glimpse of a vast army approaching Disin overhead—a fantastic conglomeration of nightmare weapons, unbelievably huge, rumbling over what I knew was soft mud. As I looked a second time, I caught on. It was a projection of an imaginary army, done with a huge thought-record augmentor. This close to Disin, they had probably detected its nature, but when our attack had been gathering, it had certainly been very efficacious in the dim distance as a cover for our real attack from the caverns. Realistically, on the surface overhead, a purely imaginary army was carrying on a purely imaginary attack upon Disin!

AS we rumbled nearer and nearer to the heart of Disin above us, my respect for the Tuon efficiency and science went up by leaps and bounds. The ray-shielding which had protected the Tuon buildings from the Earthmen's attack in my first action on Venus, must have been understood by Hecate, or at least been figured out by now.

⁵These ro-control mech were designed, of course, merely as an ever-present and all-knowing policeman. But in ignorant and repressive hands, they can become a device by which the whole thought of a city is held rigidly in a narrow rut. Many modern cities suffer from this mis-used ro-mech underlying the modern surface city. They are the origin of the God-myth, omnipresence cultivated by priests.—Author.

Yet, our rays reached upward all through the great medieval piles of clumsy stone that formed Disin. Why had Hecate not used that same type of ray-shield?

If she had covered this, the Tuons evidently had a nullifier for the shield in action, for nothing prevented either our vision rays or dis-rays from sweeping the length and breadth of Disin.

The myriad of rays which had combed down upon us at the time of the mines' explosion were fewer now. The rise and fall and the hiss of our dis-rays raved at the fixed installations within the great center building, evil's cloister, where the monstrous ro-mech dominated our transparent vision with its antique opacity glowing redly and more redly as we sought permanently to destroy this nerve center of the Hag's.

(Later, Oanu explained to me that the defenselessness of Hecate's forces was due to great fields of diffuse dissociation beams which nullified the effect of Hecate's shielding fields and shorter rays, as well as making it very difficult for the defenders to think or act swiftly or well.)

What happened as we finally closed in on the fortress mounting upward through dozens of ramps we bored with our dis-rays, was a surprise to me. I had expected much more of the apparently formidable outfit under Hecate of which I knew so much.

Out of the great courtyard, a score of the ancient space ships rose one after the other. The blood-takers, the core of the vampire organization, flashed spaceward at top acceleration in the ships that glowed from our concentrated fire. Fire that did nothing but heat the hull, for the ancient metal was impervious to most rays except over a long period of intense concentration of many rays.

We hadn't won so soon, surely? What had happened to cause their too sudden flight? Certainly the mighty and ancient knowledge of war that Hecate undoubtedly possessed was not so easily defeated. Yet, there were the ships fleeing—from us. Why?

The answer to my question was soon given. Scores of white flags suddenly were unfurled from every battery within the citadel. With them, terms of surrender blared out, as well as information that explained much to me.

I had not known there was much opposition to Hecate within her own forces, for I had been too close to her to learn anything about it. But the great thought-speakers they turned toward us said: "We have helped you by turning against the Hag. Our beams hastened her departure. Most of the blood-feeders have gone with her, the others lie here dead. Enter and be merciful, O mighty Amazons."

WE did. And Ceulna and I found a chance to do something we had dreamed of in more than one black night. We lined up the surviving Hagmen, and after permission from Oanu, separated them into two groups—those whom we knew well from the cruelties we had observed them in, and those whom we did not know.

This latter group we told to take the former to the children's "Palace of Life" where waited the great Moloch with his fiery mouth well stoked for them. I am not sadistic, but I enjoyed the sight of those ill-natured robots screaming their way to death in the flames more than any other sound I have ever heard.

Ceulna and I gave Farne a bad scare when we pretended not to recognize him in the line-up. The canny little man for once was at a loss. It was a joyous experience when we both embraced him, a very good moment to see the joy light his face . . . to say nothing of the relief. Such moments are what makes life worth the living. Greeting one's dog on coming home, meeting an old friend again, the crack of an evil neck between the hands, the laugh of one's best beloved, what else makes life worth the effort? Such moments are all too far apart. The fall of Disin and the flight of Hecate, the Mother of Sin, from Venus, was a long moment of that kind.

CHAPTER XI

Faust. "When I behold the heavens, then I repent —

Ay, go, accursed spirit, to ugly Hell. 'Tis thou hast damn'd distressed Faustus' soul."

Marlowe

OANU was not the official ruler of Lefern and the allied cities of the Tuon race, but she was certainly a most respected leader among that superior people. Hard upon the heels of that fleeing score of an-

tique space ferries ascended a full hundred of Venusian filled space battleships, under Oanu. In the ship in which Oanu directed the pursuit, Ceulna and I pored over the great space view-screen, its huge master ray boring ahead of the fleet, God only knows how many miles, for one's mind is always prostrate before the potentialities of the ancient workmanship.

"How is it," I asked Ceulna, "that so many as a hundred space ships, still serviceable, are to be had from the ancients' leavings? I would think that they had needed every ship when they left Earth."

"I have often listened to the older people talk of such things—speculating about the Elder Gods is a favorite topic of conversation," answered Ceulna. "Those who know and read the old records say that the migration of the Gods was a long drawn out affair—over a century of great effort—with many trips back and forth to the new home in space. They saw that a strange infection called "de" ails all the machinery and the ships, everything left behind, that is why there is so much of it.⁶

Finally we sighted the fleeing vampires, but we could not catch them. Oanu was wary. One ship followed them to Earth, marked their position on the map and returned with two great holes bored completely through the impervious hull of supermetal. The Earthmen were not having any of us, evidently.⁷

Oanu approached as near to the point on the map as possible behind a mountain

⁶This "de" is a deadly radioactive infection from the sun, and the Elder Gods took the most extreme precautions to leave behind anything badly infected. Themselves, far out in space, transferred to a clean ship, leaving behind even their clothes, after extreme treatment of their own bodies to cure the infection, and abandoned the very ship they left the sun's vicinity with, to drift forever in darkness. Such are Venusian tales about the God Race leaving the planets of our sun—the reason was "de," the most terrible enemy of life. For that reason, many ships were left, some so complicated that no one knew how to run them at all. And the old students of the ancient writings know that Venus and Earth are deeply infected with that "de" from the sun, that it is the cause of aging and dying.—Author.

⁷The old caverns were originally equipped with many great installations of sky-pointing master rays, whose purpose was specifically to defend the underworld cities against space attack.—Author.

range, then the fleet settled to Earth. Certainly she must have had information on the cavern ray of Earth, for many Earth source lifter rays gentled our landing.

Someone here must be rooting for us. Below our downward drifting tons, a great light flared suddenly and the vast mouth of some ancient landing tube yawned, still in use.

I was amazed to find all this vastly developed science of the ancient ones existing all these centuries on Earth, hidden from the otherwise credulous humans of Earth by their very incredulity of anything they do not know all about.⁸

Now, within that supposedly non-existent cave, waited a people whom you know all about, "THE LITTLE PEOPLE," the most charming inhabitants of Earth. They were few, for the centuries of handling the aging mechanisms with its now defective shielding, have made them nearly sterile—they have few children anymore. Many of them are changelings still—as in the old days, surface men's babes. They no longer steal surface babies and leave defective offsprings in their places, but now legally adopt them from orphanages. The blood of the little people has grown weak, but still they are the finest men I have ever met. The little people still love man and they welcomed us with the most delicious mental stim I ever tasted.

(Warning: There are some evil groups descended from castouts, in case you ever meet the "little people.")

The "little people" were very eager to help us against the new menace from Venus, having been practically besieged in their own area of the mountains, their home for many years.⁹ Those with whom Hecate

⁸From the pauper youth, Aladdin, down the pages of history to the modern science-fiction writers, the open-eyed among men have tried to tell others of the hidden magic of the ancients within those impenetrably walled caverns—tried to tell unsuccessfully all about this mighty gift of the old gods of Earth, with no more hope of success than had the pauper, Aladdin.

Jewels from those very same caves could have paid for the publishing of this work. Would you bother to find out if it were true or not? No, we of Earth are too purblind to all the infinite corroboration of such tales about us.—Author.

⁹Exact locations of such places cannot be given, for the "little people" would be offended. For more about the "little people," see Merritt's "Dwellers of The Mirage."—Author.

had sought and found refuge were not friends of the little people.

Oanu was not one to quit with the job half finished. The bulk of the fleet returned to Venus, and soon a steady stream of supplies began to pour in. The whole paraphernalia of our attack on Disin began to be assembled for a similar assault on this Earth hideout of the Hag's.

THE news from Venus was splendid. Two of the cities of the Hagmen were still holding out, but were expected to fall at any time. Soon, Venus would be rid of the vampire system, and the children of that beautiful people once again free to build the great future that was very evidently their potential possession.

During this period, Oanu arranged for a series of brain treatments from the army docs designed to restore my original initiative and character as much as possible. Ray medical work is certainly far different from the ether and knife butcher work we of the surface world are accustomed to consider advanced medicine. These doctors of the penetray just laid me under a lamp that revealed every nerve in my head as if the organ were constructed of vari-colored glass as is a medical display. Then they checked every injury in my head on a chart. Finally, they "operated" with an extremely powerful little benray, a needle of concentrated beneficial force. It hurt in a good way, if you can imagine a good pain. This powerful little ray they focused carefully on the points of injury, one after the other. After an hour a day of this for a week, they pronounced me cured.

I was more than cured. Those docs didn't fool me. They had created several focii of super brain cells in my brain with that super ray. Mentally, I was a better man than I had ever imagined any man could be. I learned why they did not tell me. It seems the ben ray devices are extremely valuable—rationed for use only on the most deserving people, those most valuable to the race. To save discussion on the point, probably at Oanu's suggestion, they had given me, unofficially, a generous dose of some of their most potent growth rays.

Everything was rapidly reaching completion for the attack on the distant refuge of the Hag when—it happened! The "little people" had been so sure that it couldn't

happen, and we, I mean Oanu, had not considered the possibility, for the "little people" had been feuding with the ray-people who lived where the Hag's ships had sunk into the ground—and the "little people" knew their methods inside out. But, Oanu had forgotten that the addition of the Hag's experience to their array of apparatus was a factor rendering the whole a vastly more formidable set-up than formerly. For what Hecate didn't know about the old mech was known by few others on the two planets. Anyway, she found a weapon there that the "little people's" opponents had never used.

A diffuse field of force swept our caverns and stayed there. The stuff seemed to be a flow of radio waves nearly similar to thought waves, and the command it bore to our brains and muscles seemed to be "contract." Anyway, the stuff either accumulated a contracting charge in the nerves and muscles or she kept adding generator after generator to the power supply of the ancient radio-wave transmitter.

I knew that their mech was several hundred miles and a mountain range away from us, but that wave, like a radio wave of modern science, was not stopped by distance or rock. Our muscles just pulled up into tighter and tighter knots . . . at the end of ten hours we were unable to move hand or foot.

WE JUST sat or lay in painful knots of humanity and waited for the butchers to arrive. I swore steadily to myself. I swore viciously. Just when things were shaping so the surface men of old Earth were going to lose some of their age-old burdens of ignorant, all-powerful evil, that rabid witch, my beloved of so many long, lurid and I must admit, interesting nights packed with every sensation the body or mind could experience, pulled this ace out of her sleeve. The mighty Hecate, the Mother of Sin, the Devil's rival, the Holy Howling Horror herself, the only person who had ever been able to make me doubt that Evil was else than insanity, was going to get her Big Jim back again. Now the question that had bothered me so often was going to be answered. Unless help came within less than an hour, the old witch would have the whole thing in her ancient paws again. A great fear for what

she would do to poor Ceulna rose in my heart.

I wept a little, cursed a little and involuntarily crawled before the mental image of that horror of the past. Soon I would be her thing again, or I would be dead with the lovely, fiery soul of Ceulna wilted beside me.

Waiting for the Hag, I couldn't move, so I thought of what I had seen of the "little people" . . . a thing many surface men have tried to see but failed. Some of the oldsters wore costumes of the fourteenth century, the kind you have seen "the little people" pictured as wearing. Long trunks over their legs, short jackets and a pointed hat or stocking cap pulled down over their ears, and pointed, turned-up-toe shoes, they presented an almost comical sight. They averaged a good four feet in height—bigger than one would expect. I suspect that they are not a separate race of men, but men who have lived so many centuries in the caverns that some thing lacking in their environment affected their growth adversely. The younger ones were dressed in modern clothes, evidently from modern American stores, though of course, in boy's sizes. Although many of them were extremely thin, they were a very good looking people. The "fairy drums" and "elfin piping" so spoken of by writers were present when we first arrived, but it was merely a kind of musical greeting to us. I remember nothing in particular to mention about it. Perhaps, I am becoming inured to the remarkable. However, now they have so much good modern music on tap on their radios. It may be that the art is dying out.

THEIR dancing, so often spoken of by other writers, was also present as a part of our welcome, but perhaps the costumes were not appropriate to the pattern of the ancient dances, or they had had no time to prepare a genuine program of merit. It was good dancing—very definitely identifying this group of "little people" in my mind with the legendary artistry in the dance which is attributed to them—but nothing more.

The most remarkable thing about them was a quickness of perception, a lightning kind of intuitive thinking, coupled with extreme agility of movement. But, I had had little time to get thoroughly acquainted with the "little people." They were a race

of good looking midgets, and their magic, which was their knowledge of the uses and possession of the ancient mechanisms of the Elder Gods, was their chief distinction. And, ironically, its value to them was evidently neutralized by the monopolistic attempts of the other groups possessing the ray to kill them and take it away. From what I could gather, most of their time seemed to be spent in fighting such efforts on the part of the other old secret ray groups.

Now they lay, their own muscles knotted in the nervous impulses sent by the Hag and holding them in pained and motionless little bundles on the ancient polished stone of the floor. Their faces were pictures of despair and fear, and the habitual way that fear sat on their faces told me that these impulses were not strange to them.

Far down below us, in the vast tubes that connect all these time-drowned caves, rumbled nearer and nearer the wheels bearing the Hagmen and their new allies, whom I had not seen.

At last, when our nerves were shrieking from the pain of our bursting muscles and the horrified and hopeless waiting that was our only consciousness, they came. Into the cavern rolled the ancient cars of the tubes, a long torpedo-shaped vehicle with many wheels both on the bottom and sides, for the tubes have turns where the sides are used to check side-momentum. These cars still work, some of them are being used under your feet today. And the men that keep them in repair know more in some ways than the best of surface scientists, yet avoid us of the surface. Why? It is the ancient custom to do so. If I should ask, "Why do people marry?" you may understand. That is our way, that is all.

OUT of these long, and to us, hideously ominous, vehicles poured a weird mob of shapes and sizes. These were the people of the caves whose ancestors used the worn-out apparatus and were affected by the terrible x-rays given off by the old junk, affected the same way that fruit flies are affected by x-rays in the modern experiments spoken of so much. This x-ray-caused-mutation had gone on for endless centuries among these certain peoples, for they were ignorant of the cause, and never ceased to use the defective apparatus. The end result was a deformed race begging

description. They had long legs and short bodies, or very short heads on very long bodies, bodies with arms at the hips and the trunk sticking up above the spider-like limb grouping. Some had hides mottled in black and white, some were covered with fine fur, and, surprisingly, some were normal and even beautiful individuals, but the effect of their entrance was that of the hordes of Hell loosed upon us. In truth, they were evil in a way I had not seen in action before. (The simple truth of some life in the caverns sounds fantastic, doesn't it? Truth is a more fantastic and horrible thing than any mind can enwrap—and truth can be a more vast beauty than a man's mind can grasp—if it is. But Earth life, in truth, is a vast horror unperceived by us because we are accustomed to the horror.)

The cave filled with these horrible invaders. The paralyzing waves were shut off ominously. A few of the "little people" made an abortive attempt to reach the old mech, but died writhing in their tracks from the hand ray trained upon us.

The rest of us were grouped together in the center of the cave to await the rulers' disposition. Others took up the usual watch over the screens which are placed so as to bring a continuous view into the center cave of all the ones surrounding us, as well as the surface overhead. Usually, this set-up is the same one left by the Elder Ones, as no modern man could improve on their disposition of the weapons and view rays. These screen are very large, covering most of the walls to a height of ten feet, and nothing that takes place within thirty miles is missed if they watch them carefully.

We squatted miserably in a close group in the center, hope withering within us. Such is ray warfare. One second everything is your way—the next, you would be better off dead. We all knew the part of wisdom was to attack these distorted horrors bare-handed and die before the torture started, but we did not. Such hope is a betrayer . . . a weakness indeed.

At last came what I dreaded—Hecate and her party. Once I had been curious as to what she would have done with me, now I was to know what she would do. Ceulna would not leave my side; I feared Hecate might learn that she was my beloved. Ceulna knew better, but the swift adversity had upset her usual sense—she just clung to me and looked dazed.

HECATE had us kicked into a line and walked up and down, looking us over. Oanu she singled out by her uniform, or perhaps she knew her from her description. She so honored a few other Tuons as well as myself. As I left the line at her gesture, Ceulna, still dazed, followed me, her hands held out numbly. Hecate didn't miss seeing that she loved me. My face was expressionless. I pretended not to notice the girl. The hag smiled grimly and gestured for the girl to be included in the little party she had selected as her special victims. The rest she gave over to the home team to do whatever they wanted to do.

The party began as we left in Hecate's train. It is very unnerving to see a woman hung up by her hair, while she is flooded with pain ray . . . particularly when you can't do a thing. You can't get used to it.

Hecate took us aboard the ship in which she had arrived from Venus. There she took a seat on her crystal throne, whether it was different from the one I had first met her on, I don't know. It certainly was the same type of apparatus, probably the ancient rulers used the thing themselves. No other set-up of apparatus I ever saw had so many varied types of rays controlled by its mech.

We stood and waited while she augmented our thoughts, searching each one of us, pumping everything out of us swiftly with her super-active, but, I was fast learning—not too sharp brain. Finally, she reached my brain. Her sharp exclamation of triumph as she saw what I felt for Ceulna told me what to expect. Now, she could hurt me as she desired without harming my body (which sub-consciously she wished to retain?). She would have her revenge on Ceulna, too.

Standing there and waiting while that ancient from Hell decided what fate would best fit our transgressions was one of the most painful periods I ever endured. Occasionally, her great yellow eyes burned into mine with an enigmatic expression . . . my skin crawled . . . my mind refused to imagine what she might be contemplating. About her stood a few of the blood-takers, hideous old-young creatures of Spanish ancestry for the most part. Age had left them alive, but had marked them in other ways. Tiny wrinkles criss-crossed their skin, and their noses and ears had grown out of proportion. All were very tall.

THEY were dressed in various fashions. Some of them had clung to the ancient Spanish styles—hose and doublet with slashed sleeves and puffed short pants. The women, for the most part, had adopted modern styles, though, some of the more attractive dressed in Venusian manner, which consisted of very little but arm bands, g-string, breast supporter, and many flashing jewels, and a plumed headdress. However, most of them were not beautiful, despite the young, stolen blood pulsing through their flesh and lending sparkle to their eyes.

A terrible weariness was in them, too. Taking the form of a consistent disapproval of everything they looked at, a constant sneer twisted their lips, a conviction that life had nothing more to offer them—that all life about them was worthless and, therefore, to be destroyed, rested on their faces. It was evident that age had been defeated in their bodies, only to take its tolls in other ways. Their faces did not show enjoyment of their stolen life. Even with the infinite pleasures of the High Gods at their finger tips, still, they were miserable creatures, lacking the wisdom to enjoy the fruits of their evil science.

"If we place them under 'Evil Dreams' from the punishment records, they will experience all the tortures and deaths and still be alive to suffer more, or to examine later for information should you need it," I could hear a giant fellow explaining his ideas of our proper fate to Hecate.¹⁰ She nodded her head in agreement and I looked curiously at him. He was a man whom I

knew for an intimate of Hecate's, an old one who had perhaps lived under Hecate's domination for centuries. He was clothed in the Venusian style, his body was brawny, but too big-boned to be attractive. His aquiline, narrow Spanish face served but as a base for his comically oversized beaked nose. His eyes were small, close together, and near-sighted. He wore thick lensed spectacles.

I knew that if this be-spectacled scavenger had his way, Ceulna, Oanu and I and the other unhappy Venusians in the party would die—over and over—the most hideous deaths these super-idiot could devise.

YOU don't exactly got to sleep under the dream beam. When it is turned on, there is an instant of vertigo and you wake up in another world—another person has taken possession of your body—a different life entirely is lived.

Soon, we were all strapped on the couches under the dream beams, and, simultaneously, we blanked out of this world. It was the same record for all of us, I suppose.

With our bodies trembling—yet untouched and unmarked—we suffered the unspeakable hell of having our flesh torn with hot pincers, of the skin of our bodies being removed slowly, inch by careful inch, while irritant powders and salt were sprinkled on the bared flesh and nerve ends, of having finger and toe nails mentally torn out, one by one, being immersed inch by slow inch into boiling water—eardrums throbbing with the agonized screams of

¹⁰These ancients are addicts of the "dream"—the reason one sees so little of them—one reason they do not try harder for power and pomp. The dream machines are the ancient libraries, which were not books, but thought records. To read one, one reclines on a couch, and a record is inserted in a nearby record augmentation machine. The ancient thought unrolls in a beam which conveys it to the brain in synthetic thought impulses. These impulses are vastly stronger than normal, self-generated impulses—vastly more pleasant and thrilling. Reading the ancient records which are accounts of magnificent people doing magnificent things (but, I suspect, things completely misunderstood) are extremely pleasant opium dreams to the addicts, though they were never intended for such a use.

The ancients left books, too, but the more usual record of the past was the thought record. They did acquire some education from these dreams, but the comparative dullness of everyday life the degenerate people of modern times

lived is so uninteresting to the reader of the ancient thought records, that he retreats again to his couch and to the world of the past where life is infinitely more liveable. The thought recording instruments were sometimes used, though their barren brains found little real use for anything. One of the uses was recording the mental agonies of an enemy under prolonged torture. These were too painful to listen to under full strength augmentation, as it would be equivalent to undergoing the same torture. But, they could gloat over them under a mild augmentation and know that the victim had suffered terribly. Though not present at the actual scene of torture, they could be sure that everything possible had been done to make some poor wretch's last moments horrible. Then, too, they could use such records to put a victim through many deaths and still have him alive to suffer again and again. This was what the unpleasant giant talking to the Hag was proposing that she agree to do to them. —Author.

one's friends unmercifully suffering the same sensations. Synthetic pain sensations are even more pain and agony than the actual experience because of the terrific, exquisite augmentation possible with the hyper-powerful ancient mechanisms.¹¹

This ultra-torture went on for weeks or days—Gods! I'll never tell you how long. Then came that vertigo that is the return from the dream submission, the awakening. As I returned to this world, I could still hear all around me the constant, terrible, utterly inhuman sounds of suffering made by the others of our party of Tuons who still were under the dream beams of pain recordings. They were tortured screams that would have made Scrooge weep in pity.

CHAPTER XII

*Hell and the gulf between, and Satan there
Coasting the wall of Heav'n on this side
night,*

*... and ready now
To stoop with wearied wings and willing
feet*

On the bare outside of this World.

*... see'st thou what rage
Transports our adversary?*

—Milton

AS I looked up, I found the giant form of Hecate beside me, a sly smile of triumph on her usually poker face. She didn't waste any time in polite formalities.

"The space ships of your friends are driving us to flight," she hissed. "Is it your wish to accompany me alive, or to remain here dead?"

¹¹These horror records were often taken through the eyes of young boys to catch the reactions of horror and pity and fear, etc., which naturally arise in the minds of the young. Such jobs of recordings were terminated often by death, as the boy's eyes would see too much. You see, the recording is a mental impression, not a visual one. Mental agonies of the victim would be cut in the mental vision of the boy, just as in moving-picture making, various angles are shot. Dream-making by the use of the ancient mech has been a highly developed art for centuries and its addiction has enervated the best of the life of the caverns since the earliest times. But, these records which we were to experience were rather crude affairs, consisting mainly of the pain of a victim of physical torture. The crew around Hecate were not exactly "artistically" inclined.—Author.

My gaze flew to Ceulna, writhing against the straps in infinite agony of the pain dream. I looked back at Hecate.

"I'd like to strike a bargain with you, Hecate. Leave her here, alive, under a simple sleep beam, and I will go with you willingly and serve you faithfully."

She did not stop to ponder my words for she knew me too well. She nodded, then with swift, flicking motions of her huge long-fingered hands, she adjusted the mechanism of the beam over Ceulna. With a choking feeling of relief, I watched her lovely body subside from its straining against the straps and a slow smile of peaceful sleep steal over her face.

Then, Hecate strode about the room with a dis-gun in her hand, firing a short blast at each writhing Tuon. A great hole instantly appeared through their bodies, and at last they were still. Of all who had lain in the room under the torture of many deaths, she left only Ceulna and me alive.

She threw free the straps from my limbs, and, saying nothing, strode from the room. I followed, for I realized there could be little time. All about the caves leaped a strange blue fire which I realized must be the cause of the flight, for a bit of the fire touched me, and the flesh shriveled where it brushed my skin.

"Hell," I thought, "no wonder she was so ready to release Ceulna. She'll die anyway from that damned fire!"

Hecate divined my thought, and flung back at me. "The dream room is shielded well; it is probable that she will live. As for you, that little device in your head will not be there much longer. After that, we will see how you behave."

We entered the great old ship in which Hecate had returned to Earth after so many centuries of exile.¹² Before doing anything

¹²Perhaps the reader would be interested in some Fortean data that will answer his question as to "Why, if these ancient space ships DO exist, they have not been seen and reported to the public before this?"

The only answer the authors can make to this is—THEY HAVE! Strange ships HAVE been seen and reported . . . but we people who pride ourselves on our scientific attainments won't believe what we can—and have—seen with our own eyes. You are referred to the "Books of Charles Fort," (published by Henry Holt and Company, 257 4th Avenue, New York City).

In the 12th chapter of Fort's "Lo!" are these
(Footnote continued on next page)

else, she placed me under a strong penetray and cut every nerve leading to the bit of camouflaged radio-mech in my head. It would no longer broadcast any of my thoughts, I heard Hecate thinking. Then she took a little double-beamed needle of force and with a loud report in my head, the tiny device blew its guts under a terrific overload. Now I was no longer a spy, but I had a hell of a headache. From the way things were going, I guess I was just predestined to be a vampire.

THE great ship, under Hecate's swift hands, rose slowly to the height of a dozen feet, and drifted rapidly down the huge and endless corridors. Ahead of us coursed the rest of the score of ships which had left Venus not so long ago. How long? I no longer had any way of knowing.

Ahead of the racing space ships, I occasionally had a glimpse of the wheeled vehicles of the distorted people with whom Hecate had taken refuge who were leading the way to some new position of strength in which to make a stand against the Venusian invaders.

On the rear view screen we could see a vast fleet of space ships hovering over our rear, far up in the strato-sphere, and lancing down from each ship a beam of blue force. All about us danced the deathly

fire which this beam induced in anything it touched, but the old ships seemed shielded well against the stuff, the deadly flames did not leap inside the ship. I realized that Hecate must be handicapped for experienced hands with these ships, for she must have abandoned the dozen or so ships that had remained with Oanu when the rest of the fleet had returned to Venus for supplies.

I dared not to think of pulling some hero stunt and taking the ship out of Hecate's long hands. One little "think" of that kind would have been death for me, for in this type of augment ray work, your thoughts are always wide open to those about you. Instead, I had to pretend a relief at being in her hands again . . . even simulate the wild attraction which she had induced to live in me . . . always a part of me when I was her slave. Apparently, I did this act well, for she paid little attention to me. One cannot plot and plan in ray work, one can only wait for a break without thinking about it, and don't wait too obviously, either. Somehow, there is almost never a real break. When things turn wrong for those whom one serves, you usually die with them.

Our ships finally came to rest in water. I recognized the black expanse, for the sheer knife-edge of the ancient wharf of

facts (which he culled from newspapers and scientific publications).

" . . . it may be that constructions from somewhere else have appeared on this earth, and have seized crews of this earth's ships.

. . . BROOKLYN EAGLE, Sep't., 1891—something was seen, at Crawfordsville, Indiana, 2 a.m., Sep't. 5th. Two icemen saw it. It was a seemingly headless monster, or it was a construction, about 20 feet long, and 8 feet wide, moving in the sky, seemingly propelled by fin-like attachments . . . it sailed away, and made such a noise that ——— was awakened, and, looking from his window, saw the object circling in the sky.

(Note the date of this occurrence.)

" . . . ZOOLOGIST, July, 1868—something was seen in the sky, near Copiapo, Chile—a construction that carried lights, and was propelled by a noisy motor—or a "gigantic bird; eyes wide open and shining like burning coals; covered with immense scales, which clashed together with a metallic sound."

" . . . NEW YORK TIMES . . . from Bonham (Texas) ENTERPRISE . . . a man living 5 or 6 miles from Bonham, had told of having seen something like an enormous serpent, floating

OVER his farm; and that other men working in the fields had seen the thing and been frightened . . . A similar object had been reported from Fort Scott, Kansas. "About half way above the horizon, the form of a huge serpent, apparently perfect in form, was plainly seen."

" . . . NEW YORK TIMES, May 30, 1888—reports from several places, in Darlington county, South Carolina—huge serpent in the sky, moving with a hissing sound, BUT WITHOUT VISIBLE MEANS OF PROPULSION. (Caps are ours.)

And finally—but this is by no means the last datum that Fort collected. . . .

" . . . ZOOLOGIST 4-7-38—that according to the log of the steamship FORT SALISBURY, the second officer, Mr. A. H. Raymer, had, on October 28, 1902, in Latitude 5° 31' south, and Longitude 4° 42' W., been called at 3:05 A.M., by the lookout, who reported that there was a huge, dark object bearing lights in the sea ahead. Two lights were seen. The steamship passed a slowly sinking bulk, of an estimated length of five or six hundred feet. Mechanism of some kind—fins, the observers thought—was making a commotion in the water. "A scaled back" was slowly submerging.

Q.E.D.—Author.

rock told me we were back in that place from which Earth rulers had sent me and the other green recruits from surface cities to Venus to fight for we knew not what. It was different now, in spite of myself, I felt like a somebody as I marched up the long connecting cave into that part of the caverns which I had first entered more than four years before, by my count. It was hard to tell as the time recording system on Venus is entirely different. No use explaining it to you. It's irrelevant, anyway.

IN that room hung with the black drapes crawling with the sinister figure of the great crab of gold still sat the too-soft figure of the woman who had first greeted me so long ago. Hecate and myself, surrounded by the big shots of the vampire crew, stood before her.

"Greetings, O mighty Hecate," she sneered slightly in her mechanical voice, gloating a little over this great one of another planet, forced to plead here for refuge after such long superiority. "I see that things are not going too well with you."

Hecate was not one to bow her head to anyone. "O Nonur of the Dream-makers, think not that you are not included in the attack from Venus. They intend to wipe Earth clean of all blood-feeders—yourself included. You will be forced to fight for your life quite as much as for ours—and, I advise you not to take any other view. Too much insolence here and my strength can go on to other places where we will be better received, O Gracious one."

Nonur of the pouting, cruel mouth pondered the great Hecate's words visibly, and the sneer slowly drained from her face; her voice became dulcet.

"Knowing the Tuons as I do, O mighty Hecate," Nonur spoke, but try as she did, she couldn't quite conceal the faintest tone of irony in her voice, "I surmise that what you say of their intentions is probably true. Therefore, My Lady, let us forget our little petty bickering and get our two heads together on a plan for defense. Nonur is not one so unwise to spurn the wisdom of the All-knowing Hecate!" And so saying, she bowed her head just a trifle and a small smile played about her lips.

"That is better, my Nonur. Together we can drive those ships back into space whence we came, though the best use of the

space ray is not too well understood by any of us. We have little time. They may attack in force at any time. Again, they may wait for the gathering of an army within the caverns before they attack this position from the space ships for a double assault. In any case, we must not delay in making ready. If you will give me charge of a section of the caverns, I will get on with it."

I WAS soon manning a great old ray gun, its view ray lancing up—up how many miles I'll never tell you—up toward the scattered dots on the screen . . . dots that were the ships of the finest race of people I ever knew, even if they are dominated by women. My job was to center one of those dots on the cross-hairs and pull the lever releasing untold millions of flaming volts of destructive disintegrant juice skyward—to kill people fighting for everything that meant living to me. For all I knew, they might have entered the caves abandoned by Hecate and the monstrosities, found Ceulna and taken her aboard, and then continued the pursuit. She might be on the ship I was training my dis-gun on. I tried to think of aiming without doing it . . . an impossible feat. Seated at the bank of the master controls, Hecate flung a look at me that made the old ro-response in me center the ship and pull the lever. The ship shuddered, pointed its nose slowly Earthward and fell . . . fell faster and faster and the guts in me fell, too.¹³ My heart was a great

¹³The reader may be interested in other phenomena—not listed in the story, but reported in scientific periodicals, etc. From the Works of Charles Fort, again . . . "Upon October 31, 1908, the planet Venus was four months past inferior conjunction . . . there are vague stories of strange objects that had been seen in the skies of this Earth . . . back to the time of the nearest approach."

"In the New York Sun, Nov. 1, 1908 . . . is said that, near Bridgewater (Mass.), at four o'clock in the morning of Oct. 31, two men had seen a spectacle in the sky . . . somethink like a searchlight. It played down upon this Earth, as if directed by an investigator, and then it flashed upward."

(Fort assures us that all the balloons of that day were accounted for.)

"In the New York Sun, Dec. 13, 1909, it is said that during the autumn of 1908, reports had come from different places in Connecticut, upon a mysterious light that moved rapidly in the sky."

(Footnote continued on next page)

lump of lead, and all the time I was trying to act elated at hitting it. I hoped to die. I have never done anything harder, and I didn't know how to avoid it. I couldn't think; I had only to obey the ever present thought of Hecate.

She sat at a great ro-mech in the center of the space ray fort, reading the thought of each of us simultaneously and throwing her own controlling-strength thought where it would do the most good. Unquestionably, it was she who made me fire that shot with the ro-mech, but that didn't keep me from thinking I did it myself.

Her fierce yellow eyes blazing, her brow furrowed, her long nose quivering over the screens that reproduced the screen before each of us ro, she was a picture of fury, of the witch from the past at last at bay, but still fighting.

Fighting a fleet that wasn't retreating, but lancing down toward us, driving before them a barrage of force needles such as never flamed my way before. Through the impenetrable ancient metal around us, hole after hole appeared, stitching across the room in row after row of death. The ro at the ray around me screamed and died, to be replaced by others under control. They had no choice but to fight and die. Now, I was sighting and firing steadily. I hit several more of the distant, deadly ships of the

past, but none fatally.

Further flight was impossible for the Hag, for the ships from Venus ringed the whole horizon.

MY hands were scorched from the smoking heat of the metal of the gun—the long, ringed barrel, glowing redly—the whole works burning hot to the touch. Under Hecate's control, I sighted and fired. My hands, badly burned, were not allowed to let go the firing lever. There just weren't enough of us to fight efficiently, for I knew that in every direction lay monster weapons unmanned and not understood by the ray people here. I thought of the many men and women—wise, efficient “ray” of experience—whom I had seen die at Hecate's hands and at the hands of the others now fighting for their lives. I tried to figure how many of us there would be if we had all been well treated since the time when these began to rule so long ago. “Evil digs its own grave,” I concluded, grinning a grin out of control—killing good men it could use for better ends.

A slave rushed into the great war-ray room, shouting a message:

“Nonur is dead, Oh mighty Hecate. They sent for you to take control—no one else left alive knows how!”

Hecate rushed from the room, a huge, weirdly ungainly figure, her long arms and immense hands swinging by her too-wide hips, her waist a marvel of thinness above those hips, and the swaying rock-gray shoulders heaving with ill-repressed rage.

It was the last I saw of her. She left the room without control—nothing but a couple of wounded ray-ro left alive, moaning on the floor. The others fled with Hecate, not realizing that safety would come when we ceased fire, for the distant ships were only firing at the flame of our ray—probably could not see us individually.

I waited till Hecate's rushing feet had lost themselves in the distance. Then I stole through the rooms, once full of that weird, dreadful life, now riddled and strewn with corpses. I found the chamber where Nonur's throne sat, surrounded by the gloomy black hangings with the dismal crawling gold crab over them. Behind one of the hangings I found the door by which I had entered. It opened without trouble, and I started the ascent to the surface.

“New York Tribune, Dec. 23, (1909) . . . that a “mysterious airship” had appeared over the town of Worcester, Mass., “sweeping the heavens with a searchlight of tremendous power.”

From the “Sydney Herald” and the “Melbourne Leader” he takes an account of a *fireball* falling and exploding at Carcoar, in November, 1902. Here and elsewhere in Australia within a few weeks, the same phenomenon was reported. One, reported by Sir Charles Todd, of the Adelaide Observatory . . . a large “fireball” fell—so slowly it was watched for 4 minutes.

From “Greg's Catalogues” . . . bright ball of fire and light in a hurricane in England, Sept. 2, 1786—visible for 40 minutes. (That's about 800 times duration that the orthodox give to meteors and meteorites.)

Page 101. “Book of the Damned.”

“London Roy. Soc. Proc., 6-276:

“A triangular cloud that appeared in a storm, Dec. 17, 1852; . . . visible 13 minutes; explosion of the nucleus.

See back to description of ancient God-built space ships . . . “Huge, and golden.”

(Fortean material obtained from “The Books of Charles Fort,” published by Henry Holt and Company of New York City.)—Author.

The doors were secured by bars on the lower side and all opened to my questing hands in the dark. Behind me, I could hear the muffled sounds of firing, the twang and thrum of the great coils that released the discharges, the sharp "splat" and "hiss" of the Venusian fire as it burned through the cave walls.

I wanted no more of it . . . if the Hag was to die, I saw no reason for dying with her . . . if she was to win and live, I was not crazy for an endless life as her pleasure robot, for she left a man little sense of his own. No, degraded as the life had made me perhaps, I saw no reason for not losing myself among my fellowmen upstairs, until I could contact sane, good "ray" like the Tuons and so find Ceulna again.

After what seemed the whole of Eternity, I broke out of the house that was the "front" for the stairs—my tortured breath coming in hysterical sobs, my almost naked body shivering in fear and sweat.

SOMEHOW, I got home. I don't remember how—I was punch-drunk and more afraid than I've ever been. Not of anything—just horribly afraid and unnerved.

I guess the elemental animal in me had taken over and I'd run like a startled deer. I'd run too fearfully—too much without thinking . . . I want to go back. I did almost as soon as I'd calmed down. That's a laugh—a hideous joke—I can't even find the house that contains the opening to the caves any more.

Now, when I talk to the ray that gibbers over the city, they mock me, laugh at my predicament, sometimes torment me with pain rays, but of information how to contact the Venusian rays, I can get nothing out of them. Did the Tuons' ships win? I don't know. Where can I find people of the caverns who will tell me how to find Ceulna and the invading Venusian rays? They laugh at me in their idiot way. They are the mad ones of the caverns . . . they never make sense with anyone. The antique ray-mech of Earth is still a secret, and I am out and can't get in. I'm not the first man to find himself shut off from that life. I know. In my place what would you do? There just ain't no way to get back into those caves that I know of . . . but there

must be a way. There *must* be a way!

* * *

WELL, that's the story. Interesting—but surely we don't expect grown men to really swallow all that stuff about caves under the modern world filled with prehistoric machinery—and flights to Sunward planets in ships older than history . . . flights right at this very time? That all makes a very nice tale—interesting for a few hours of reading, or so, but it isn't true really, is it? Why that sort of thing would earn us straight jackets these days, or a pile of faggots in the days of a few centuries ago . . . and we are not so noble and stuffy that we'd risk that.

No, friends, we are not going to tell you that it's true—you KNOW differently, don't you? That such things COULDN'T be. There have never been oddly weird things occur that Science couldn't explain . . . so how could we expect you to believe if we did tell you that it was truth? WE know that such things just don't happen, so we won't tell you that.

YOU have never been badly frightened in a dream and flung your arms out violently to protect yourself from the Gods only know what. And because that hasn't happened—well, you know how it is. And weird, unexplained chills running up your spine—oh, those are caused by drafts say, or—or tiredness. It's just a clever use of coincidence that we use those chills to make parts of our stories seem reasonable. That JUST COULDN'T be some of the people in the caves playing with us. We all know that.

And the magic talisman—the scarab ring—my brother wears on his third finger? Oh, that is something that I dreamed up, figuring that everybody knows the part the scarab played in Ancient Egypt and it would make the whole story seem very weird and mysterious. Really, I have never seen this ring get cloudy and little pictures form in it—little pictures of people in a stygian world. That wouldn't be reasonable, would it? Besides—YOU know that such things can't be . . . such things just aren't so. So, you can go to bed and sleep, dreamlessly. It isn't true . . . it can't be . . . or . . . COULD IT? It was a hell of a long dream, brother, if it didn't happen.

LET'S THINK OF MAN'S RIGHTS — NOT NATION'S



WONDERS OF THE ANCIENT WORLD
THE COLOSSUS OF RHODES

(See page 177)