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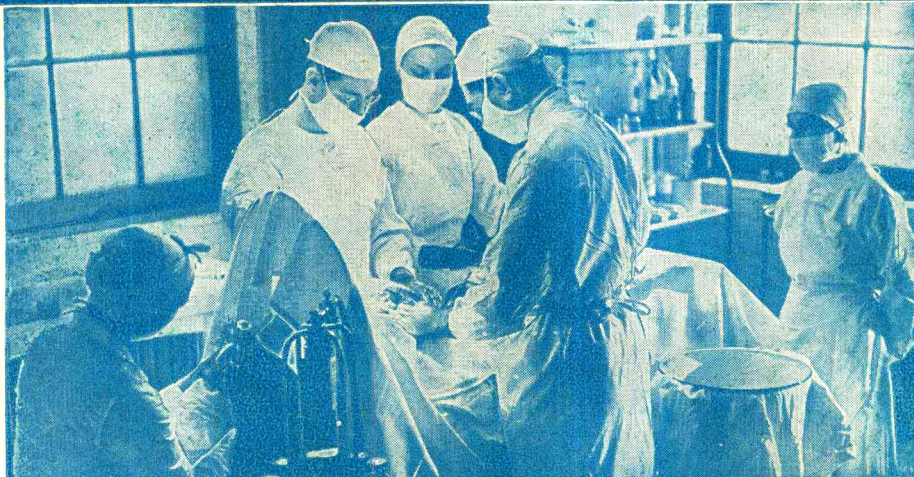
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SEA PEOPLE
BY RICHARD S. SHAVER

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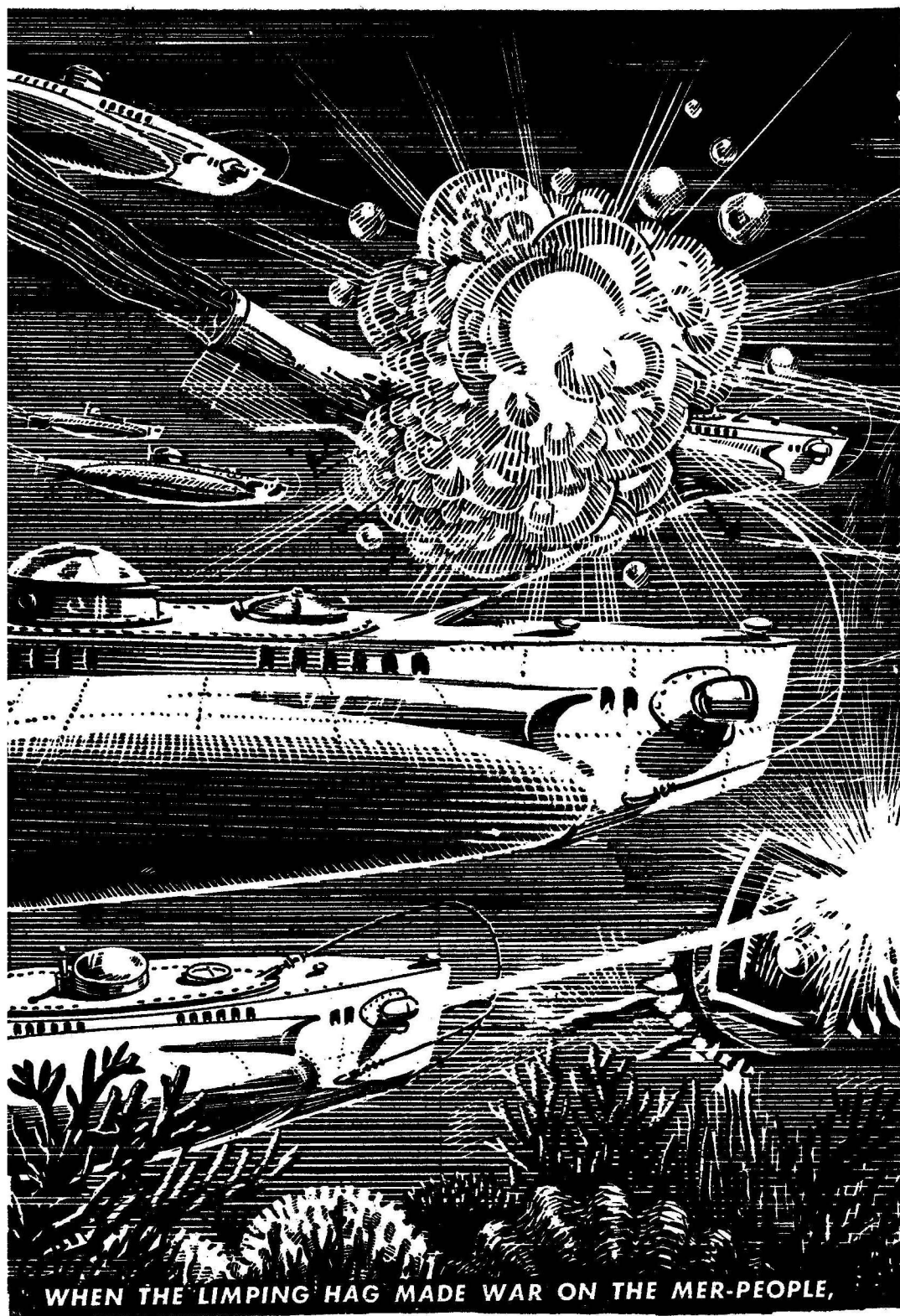
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WHEN THE LIMPING HAG MADE WAR ON THE MER-PEOPLE,

The SEA PEOPLE

By Richard S. Shaver



SHE HAD TO FIGHT IN THE OCEANS OF TWO WORLDS . . . !

FOREWORD

EVERYTHING IN this story, except the incidents, plot, and names, is precisely fact. The extra-terrestrials, half-fish and half-human, their space traveling submersibles filled with the water they breathe, their origin on Venus, my contact with them, all are true. I may have been fooled by some extremely detailed solidograph projections, but if I was—there *do* exist God-like minds equipped with apparatus which by no stretch of the imagination could have been built on this earth. And if my contact with the Sea People was telesolidograph projection of some imaginary thought record of a people who do not exist—the mind who made that record could paint better with his mind, and instantaneously include more detail, than any painter that ever lived on earth. It might have been a thought record from the ancient stock in the caverns—but to me this contact with extra-terrestrial life was completely real—and I myself am a trained artist; I would not have missed the vagueness usually present in imaginary solidograph projections of thought pictures. These pictures were actual transferences of actual, living, breathing, intelligent men and women of a type forgotten on earth except in our legends of the mermen.

Synopsis of First Story of Hecate

(For you fellows who didn't read the first account of my experiences with secret ray peoples—I was shanghaied into the armies of the secret rulers of the caverns, sent to Venus to fight against the finest people I ever saw, for the worst things I ever saw in human form—the vampires under Hecate.

Hecate was an immortal, a witch from antiquity, who long ago in the past discovered in some forgotten manual of horror a method of beating age by continuous infusions of children's blood. Through the centuries her power had grown, and, transplanted to Venus via the antique space ships, still to be found in the secret caverns, had set out to place the whole planet under her horrible rule.

I believe these people exist exactly as described. If they do not, something greater does exist, a mind capable of such strong, full picturization of actual living detail that no living man can tell it from the actual breathing presence of life, cultured intelligent life in all its intricate details.

I talked with them, discussed the problems of inter-spacial relationship under the repression of such a drastic nature as we surface men suffer, and learned to love the beauty of their minds and bodies. The Sea People are one great hope for man's future. They will help.

CHAPTER I

I PUT the cue back in the rack. Hogan had trounced me again. The pain was worse. I could hardly stand it. And I couldn't say a word to anybody. You can't say that an invisible maniac is burning you with an invisible ray. People just won't believe you. I turned to the Irishman.

"Listen, Hogan, I got to get away from this town. There's a guy after me. A bad one, see? He'll kill me if I stay here. Sell me your papers. I'll give you mine. They're just as much good to you."

"Sure, Steel, one A.B.'s papers are as

You remember how I got away from Hecate when she was fighting off an attack by the White Tuon Amazons from Venus. How I got back up from the caverns into my native city of Boston.

Well, I didn't feel much like living. A man who has tasted the incredible delights of the antique stim mech doesn't get much kick out of boogie woogie. Now that I seemed to have lost all hope of rejoining Ceulna, if she lived, I didn't care much what happened next. But somehow I knew plenty would happen. It always did—to me. I guess you remember Ceulna, the Venusian dancer who rescued me from Hecate's dungeon.

For you who didn't read that account, I had better describe myself a bit. I'm about a head and a half taller than the average man, and

good as another's. But how do I know what the law has against you, you trying to run away the way you are? I don't want any trouble I didn't make myself. See what I mean?"

"I'll throw in the U.S. Navy peajacket with the six bucks I offered you. A guy offered me twelve for it yesterday. How about it?" I hated to give up that warm peajacket.

The Mick eyed the peajacket speculatively.

"These Canadian winters are cold, Hogan. Better take it. That moth motel you're wearing won't do you any good when the wind starts to blow. Better give in and be a buddy, instead of an old Irish grandmammy. I ain't got a thing against me with the law. Just this one bad gee, and he knows me by sight. He wouldn't give a damn what papers I was carrying."

Hogan took a chew of tobacco—then said: "I was just going to ask you to throw in the peajacket and call it a deal. I'm taking a chance, or I wouldn't ask you for the coat. But I figure if you need the papers bad enough to give up that new peajacket on a cold night like this, why, you need help."

The coats and papers changed hands. Now I was Hogan, born in Dublin, and Hogan was me, Big Steel, born in Sandusky, Ohio.

considerably wider. I've hands that are far oversize, even for a man of my size. I suppose I'm good looking, though a bit battered, for my nose is knocked askew and one of my ears is decidedly tin. But my smile is wide and infectious, though my profile is far from Grecian perfection. Football and other activities of the harder kind have given me a map that shows erosion. The clean vitality and friendliness that live in me make me attractive to women, and valuable as a friend to men. I am just a big American, but my size, coupled with my natural speed, give me an edge on any physical competition. You have seen my type working on the docks or in the steel mills of America; wherever the pay is high and an element of danger makes the work attractive, there you will find me.

YOU can't get away from crazy ray pursuit without crossing a lot of water. Those caverns run in a vast network under all our earth, and those little fiends can get around down there just about as easy as a Greyhound gets across the continent. For the caverns are really great highways connecting the ancient cities, and if you look you can find the old rollats sitting there waiting to take you anywhere. Still ready for use, uncorroded by time!

But they can't cross an ocean, because the Sea People live in the caverns under the deeps, and the Sea People are sane, and won't let the mad nomads of the caverns cross. So they can't follow you across an ocean—not every time. I knew that, but not many do know it.

From my experiences with the mad degenerates of the caverns under earth, when they start chasing a surface man with their penetrative rays, he had better find a way to jump across space itself. It is almost impossible to shake them off. They cling to a trail or a hate like a leech. And they don't have much different minds from a leech, at that.

The best place to eat and run at the same time, when you're broke, is in the hold of a liner that's carrying a cargo of fancy groceries. And when you pick out the place to hide in the hold, take

But, let me tell you fellows who look for thrills and adventure—when you get a bellyful of it, you *can* have enough. I have had enough!

How would you like to put a blast into a shipload of beautiful female warriors, or see your friends drop dead around you, boiled to death by scalding water? Since I know something about adventure, I'm a peace loving man. Maybe you'll be too, after you've heard how it all was.

I took up my old life as a steel worker for awhile. Then one of the mad ray people who infest the caverns under some American cities, decided he hated me. I knew what he was, and when he tried to hand me a line of bunkum, I told him off. He started to ray the pants off me. That's where this story begins.)

The Author.

your time and look the ship over. If you look carefully, you'll find a ship where the boilers project into the storage section of the hold, and the boilers will keep you warm.

An hour later I lifted the hatch of the liner called the *Newfoundland*. I found a place near the boilers and made myself comfortable with some bags of flour for a bed. Warm and dry, and plenty of food in the hold. I had watched the dock wallopers load her yesterday, and she was taking on fancy groceries by the ton.

I fell asleep. When I woke up the North Atlantic was gurgling and splashing past the steel plates of the hull, and the engines were throbbing. The soft sway of the ship, the running thump of busy feet overhead, the tug whistles outside—everything told me we were going places. And was I glad!

If the big tub docked in England, on the other side of the drink, I'd be free of the d. . . . Hoblok, the imp from Hell, the little Horla, Crazy Max, who had been driving me nuts for over a year. Ever since I got away from old Hecate, under Boston, the city where I was living then.

BUT the big *Newfoundland* docked at St. Johns. St. Johns, in case you don't know, is the capital of Newfoundland, and this particular ship always stopped there on the last leg of her trip to England. But how was I to know? I was no seaman.

I was discovered in the hold by long-shoremen putting in more cargo. They turned me over to the cops, and the judge gave me twenty days. That ship was chock full of fancy groceries, and I had bedded down over those nice warm boilers for a good long rest. The dock wallopers were over-solicitous.

The grub in the Newfoundland jails isn't near what a man can get for him-

self out of a hold full of the best. But I was lucky, I guess. The Newfoundland winters are no joke, and outside the cell window the snow was coming down. All day it came down, the first day. I'd spent my last dough for the papers from Hogan, the Irishman from Dublin, so I could stay on the other side when I got there. I had to have the papers. He knew it, I suppose by the look a guy gets when he is followed by something he can't see or talk about. Lots of men that don't know what it is go crazy when they're *it*. But I knew, so I ran.

CHAPTER II

MY first night in St. Johns' jail, I bummed a cigarette from the guard, who was dozing outside my cell in the hall. He was a right guy. "No smoking in the cells," he said, real loud for the neighbors' benefit, then slipped me a cig.

I was lying there, taking a drag at it, with my blanket over my head in case the wrong guy looked in the cell door. A little voice-ray came into *my* blanket.

"Hello, Hogan, alias Steel. What are you doing here?"

I said, "Who are you? An old friend, or a new one?"

The ray said—"A new one, maybe. Maybe I've got a message for you."

Then another ray came in through the wall—one of the big ones—and said in a large way—"Look!"

I let the blanket down from my head and let out a slight yip. For, squatted in the corner, was a bigger spider than there is! It was six foot high. At first I thought it was a record picture of a Venusian arachniden—a real monster. Then it moved forward and it had a woman's head. A very beautiful brunette head, it was. I wondered if I was nuts or if they really

were giving me that kind of projection.

The spider woman came closer, said, "Ah, my love!"

I spoke up quickly—"I'm *not* loving any spider!"

She replied, "That's what you think." Then she stuck a big stinger into my center section.

I was paralyzed. What else is a spider-sting supposed to do to you? No, I thought, I'm not paralyzed. Anyway, I was chock full of tobacco juice. I could see it rolling around inside me, for the ray made me semi-transparent. I lay there exhausted, and the big spider laughed at me with her beautiful woman's face, and soon disappeared through the wall. I was hoping the guard would poke his head up to the door grill and look in, but he didn't. I wonder if he would have fainted or just gone quietly crazy?

I LAY there in a strange torpor for about half an hour, and all through me a fierce growth went on, a strangely pleasant growth. I felt like a mother. I soon learned I was a mother! For out of my skin began to pop a myriad of tiny spiders. I was afraid to move, for fear of crushing my little children. In the distance I could hear the little ray imps laughing at me, but I didn't move anyway. Those little spiders might be intelligent.

Then I woke up, and looked around carefully for little spiders. There weren't any. I said—"Now ain't that the doggondest adventure you ever had, Steel? You, a mother!"

Such is the ancient magic—it can do anything, no matter how fantastic or incredible, and make it seem true. What had happened to me was just strong thought projection plus the telesolidograph,¹ which responds to thought as a horse to the reins.

Well, after I had borne the spider

woman's children, she returned and began to talk to me. Only she had dropped the spider woman and was just a big, beautiful, friendly brunette. She told me, among other things, that a ship of the Sea People's lay off the shore, in the waters of the bay that is St. Johns' harbor.

I expressed curiosity, for I had heard of the Sea People of Venus while among the Tuon Amazons of Venus, but I had never met any of them.

Then the woman, who did not bother giving me her name, though I often lie and fit syllables to her really beautiful appearance, told me: "This ship contains some members of the race who have heard of you. They might be able to help you get what I read in your mind you want. They will talk to you tonight—so I am warning you—they can give you what you want—but they are proud, and unless they consider you worthy, they won't deal exactly well with you. So guard those Hag-inspired corridors of your mind, for they may get the idea that you are a rotter. You aren't, are you?"

"What?" I said, "Me a rotter?"

"Sometimes, thinking of your past with the vampire, Hecate, you can look pretty rotten to one who has never been a mind slave. So watch it, you big, good looking hick, you."

"Thanks, beautiful. With you around I won't be a rotter, anyway."

I sighed, for I knew you can't love every woman, but my heart sometimes tries to. They can be so darn attractive. But maybe you never had that

¹ In my other stories, I've explained telesolidograph projection to you. It is an antique device that can project a picture that looks solid, feels solid, is practically solid—yet it can be projected through a solid wall—or through miles of solid rock. What you tell such a machine to do it will do. So one is never quite sure, in contacts with the ray people, what is true and what is mere humorous bamboozlement.—Author

trouble? Well, you never talked to a beautiful woman over a soul-revealing telaug ray. You think you saw beauty when the stage smoothy took off some of her wraps? Brother, when a woman shows her soul over a telaug ray, there is no hope for you. You are sunk; that's final. And when you have met more than one woman over such a ray, the heart gets a bit confused. Then, when you do meet your own woman, she looks in your mind and sees the effect of those others, and does she get to work with the mental eraser! And how you hate to give them up. You know how it is when friend wife puts her foot down on your special pin-ups. Well, multiply that by a thousand!

THEN I made my first contact with the Sea People. My first impressions were delighted surprise, for the Sea People are something. They didn't project pictures of themselves into the cell, as earth ray would have done. They beamed me, and the beam from their wonder mech transported me, sensorily—bodily into the main center salon of their submersible interplanetary ship, where they lay off Newfoundland in the deep water.

The room was lavish, colorful, beautiful. The Sea People were a kind of fan-tailed mermen. I gathered that one of their numerous homes was Venus. There they swim openly in the warm waters of the seas. Here on earth they stay within the ship, breathing the water that is artificially warmed and aerated and pumped through their ship just as air would be if they were air breathers. They are very beautiful people and unlike our conception of merwomen, have two legs that are not legs, but great driver fins, connected to the body by long knee-less, serpentine jointed legs. Their scales are prismatic, and above the hips their skin is human

in appearance. But more of all that later—

Sometime after my talk with the dark women of the native Newfoundland subterranean ray people—a ray came into the cell from the Sea People. My impression was of being transported to their ship—and in the course of the conversation they told me they knew me—knew what I knew about Hecate—and in order to use me against her—were going to get me out of that jail the same night.

I could hardly listen for watching their long, knee-less, serpentine legs in lovely motion in the water. I, the visitor, was a full projection in three dimensions within a suspended globe of silver force in the center of the chamber. About this picturing ring they swam slowly as they talked to me—what seemed to be me—for I was much more conscious of being present within that ring of force than being aware of my identity.

As is the polite custom among all ray peoples, they gave me thrilling caresses of augmented synthetic body electric. It is something like meeting a soul with its insulation removed. Or like holding a great human heart in your hands and feeling it love you so strongly that your whole body swoons from the sensation. These merwomen were beyond a mere man's power to meet in love, it was more like admiring the ultimate in woman-soul as it was displayed before you; in fact there are no words or phrases in the language of surface men to describe such sensations. All I can tell you is to imagine your most intimate, sacred, and pleasant emotions augmented by an electric device to many thousand times their normal power. The result would be similar to what a man feels when one of the Sea People's merwomen shakes his hand and smiles—over the telaug solidograph.

CHAPTER III

THE jail delivery came about unexpectedly, in spite of the fact that I was waiting for it. I had fallen asleep and was dreaming sweetly of my Amazon sweetheart, wherever she might be—when a cry of "Fire!" brought me to my feet. The air was hot, and down the corridor I could see the glare of flames through my bars.

Guards ran down the corridors, then, driven back by the flames, they set to unlocking the doors and shouting: "All out, and gather in the courtyard!" It was just a bull-pen outside the prison, but the Newfoundlanders called it a "courtyard."

The corridor was full of struggling men fighting for the doorway, when a cold and invisible hand laid hold of my arm with an irresistible pressure and I was drawn down a smaller side hall. At the end was a door, ajar. Outside the night was empty of life. The hand on my arm drew me swiftly onward into the dark. In ten minutes the prison was out of sight behind.

In an hour I was at the water's edge, the mighty roar of the Atlantic on the rocks of St. Johns' breakwater the only sound. Up the line of breakers my invisible captor drew me, and finally, out of sight of all possible observation, I was drawn swiftly out into the roaring breakers. I knew better than to resist, but the water in my throat choked me, and I was well nigh drowning. Thirty feet from shore, where the white smother lessened, lay a shadow in the water, and the hand drew me to the shadow, and then I was inside a little undersea boat.

My guide was seated at the controls, holding the boat firm as a rock, with magnetic grapple rays, and at the same time guiding me with a solidograph projection of her own right hand, invisible

in ordinary light—but powerful enough to be, in all ways, as strong and real as a genuine hand.

These Sea People were twenty feet from fin-tip to head crest; twenty feet is a lot of strength—and in this case a very great deal of beautiful woman, too. She shot the boat backward into the deeper water. Over her head was a glass-like globe—a mask, in which was the water she breathed in place of air. Instead of a helmet for me, she had emptied the boat of water, and donned a helmet herself. She answered my unspoken thought. "I have no helmet for you."

I THOUGHT I had better speak up while I had time, for I had no way of knowing what they might think of me. For all I knew, they considered me as a true enemy, a true follower of Hecate, and hence but a hostage in their hands. I said: "I have an idea you think me something of a poor, honorless wretch, and as such, not worthy of honor from you—or of consideration. I want to say that I have done evil against your people and friends, the White Venusians, but only under mind-augment control from Hecate. I could not have done otherwise. Please remember I am not truly a follower of Hecate's, but was sent into her service as a spy by the Tuons."

"To me, your name is Hogan, and I do not hold anything against you. Your first use to us is as a source of information—you know Hecate's ways better than any other living man. We want to know them, too. You have been assigned to me. I will pay you for the information. Do not fear us, we will deal honorably with you, even though we may despise you. We are not entirely impractical. Incidentally, I am Lt. Ol-tissa, officer in the Venusian Under Sea People's Colonial Navy."

Since I know that few of you have sat within inches of a twenty-foot long merwoman and talked business with her, I will try to tell you what such an experience is really like. It sounds like a fish story now, as I tell it, but in truth it did not seem so as she sat there, still gleaming from her recent expulsion of the water from the little submersible.

Everywhere the water was dripping; cold, glittering droplets of it upon her body, that body that was not human, yet was instinct with a mighty measure of that thing we know as human beauty. Her skin was not scaly, even in those parts of her most fishlike. Her odor was not fishlike either, but rather more like a bather might smell, if she had been in a frogpond—batrachian, if you follow. So was her skin an iridescent, unscaly, smoothly mottled skin of a glistening sheen that surpassed the polish any sculptor ever lavished on his stone mermaid. Her back, finned and greenish, and her head-crest, an upthrust glory of thin spines and gleaming membranes upon her gloriously erect head, were the only parts of her body above the hips that were not wholly human. The front parts of her torso were white skinned and perfectly sculpted by nature's ages of selection in their life in the undersea strongholds, to express the ultimate of form to the male. Her face, wide nostriled, gave little hint of her water breathing nature. Her gill slits, oddly enough, were under her arms, down where our short ribs are situated. Now they spurted water, in short, rapid jets, releasing the water from her helmet taken in by her nostrils. The helmet was supplied with water by a hose from a pump.

But the long muscled, serpentine grace of her is the thing that impressed me most—the powerful driving grace of her long, sinuously muscled body. Her hands, too, were not human, being

nearly a yard long, webbed, and powerfully fingered, with sharp talons on the finger ends, that seemed not to interfere with her dexterity upon the complex keys of the control board of the little ship, equipped as it was with powerful armament, all controlled from the great panel in front of her—as well as the telaug, stim ray, and beneficial ray equipment that is anciently standard among ray people.

I suspected that the type of equipment used by these undersea people was different in conductivity from the kind of equipment I was used to as a slave of Hecate. As I learned later, it was much more effective in the conductivity of surrounding water than in the medium of air.

I DID not bring these Sea Venusians into the former story of Hecate, because they stayed in the background during my visit there, and because I heard but little of them. They did not meddle much in the affairs of land people. *But now they were ready to meddle.* The reason, I learned from our talk: The Hag had taken to hiding in the depths of the sea, and was preying on their colonies here on earth for the children she and her blood-taker followers must have to stay alive.

Among other captives, she had taken a certain scientist, a female named Hyplotee, a woman who was extremely important to the Sea People, for the reason that she bore heredity secrets in her mind, a legacy from the far past. The secret they feared to lose was the location of a cache of extremely powerful antique weapon mech, whose location was kept from general knowledge because of the tremendous destructive power of the weapons. Hyplotee was the sole repository of this knowledge. Hecate had got wind of this bit of information and had managed to capture

Hyplootee when she took one of the Sea People's undersea cities.

The Venusian merwoman's voice was low as she told me all this. "You have some things we want. Your acquaintance with Hecate, your knowledge of the workings of her mind, and the value she places on your person. She has obtained some of our ships, destroyed and made slaves of the people of several of our smaller colonies here. She has learned to live in the depths of our heretofore inviolate oceans. It is our business to find her and obliterate her. We fear her quite as much as ever did the Tuons of Venus. They cannot help us in our underwater war on Hecate, but you can. Will you?"

The powerful inner life of the merwoman, who was a leader of her people and a woman very much alive—spread before me in a swift play of explanation—an infinitely attractive, sudden revealment of her character. It was a sweet dropping of all mental guards for my inner self to see that she had no evil motives in her propositions to me. The attraction of her was too much for me. Though I had sworn never to touch anything to do with Hecate again, I could not keep my oath. I answered, "I will help you if I can."

THEN she sprang her kicker on me.

"We have planned a use for you, as an emissary to her from us. You could get to see her; one of us would be killed before we reached her."

My God—they expected me to walk into Hecate's hands voluntarily!

"But what good could I do, if I did reach her? She would not let go of me again. You know what she has trained me for, what kind of a thing I am when in her hands. If that is all you want—a messenger to Hecate—count me out now. I don't want any." I was as nearly angry as a man can get under

the fearful attraction that such beings exercise upon a male. "She could not be fooled again by the mental radio which the Whites inserted in my brain sheath before. How could I serve you, in her hands? I would be just one more unit of opposition, if you are in opposition to her."

The merwoman continued, "She started by capturing one of our ships, and from that one she designed and built others. Now she is in open war with us. She thinks we are much easier to deal with than the air-breathers, because we have never had any opposition in our native element, and know little of war. But we have a plan. You are a part of it. What have you to live for, among your own people? We can offer you life-value, we can offer you an immensely richer life than you have at present. What have you to lose?"

"I just can't figure how your offer would do me much good if I am to walk into the hands of Hecate the first thing I do. No thanks, again."

The seawoman's voice, answering, was as cold as the great deeps. "You do not know us well, Mr. Hogan. When you do, you will know better than to refuse what we offer. Until then, I must requisition your services, much as it pains me. We need you, and you are in no position to refuse."

It seemed that whether I liked it or not, I was going to go to work for these Venusian Sea People. They felt no compunction about the matter, for, not knowing me well, and knowing I was once one of the Hag's favorites, they probably had no high opinion of me. For that matter, I could not blame them. The things I had done under Hecate's powerful mind control had so covered the sheets of my memory with a sense of terrible guilt that in spite of the facts of the case, I felt inwardly that I must be a scoundrel. I was a scoun-

drel, but it was not my fault. Hecate had carefully made me into a tool and a plaything, and her control—the mind operations she had performed upon me to make me what she wished, a slave of her unspoken will—had not done my real character any good. I *mean* well enough, I mused, but somehow it never turns out.

BEFORE Lt. Oltissa was a remarkable mapping device. It was a device apparently based on the principle of magnetism, which expresses itself most noticeably in the resemblance of window frost to trees and landscapes. It was a sheet of glass, balanced upon a gyroscopically leveled table, a table that was held perfectly level in spite of the surrounding gyrations of the submersible ship. Over the surface of the glass a fine sand was constantly in motion—and the motion very strangely and magically depicted the changing conformation of the country round about—the sea bottom and its intricate ups and downs—as perfectly as though some sorcerer were working with the sand with invisible hands. The scale of the thing was controlled by a dial at the side of the table, with the markings of the dial indicating the units of measurement—miles to inches of the scale topography map, or relief map. Their name for it was—translated—the motile map.

By some peculiar development of the knowledge of the laws of magnetism, the mysterious currents of electricity which everywhere pulse in the earth, were here tuned in upon by the magnetized sand, which then arranged itself magnetically upon the plane surface exactly in accordance with the conformations of the surroundings. It was the best device they could have had for undersea navigation, and it worked perfectly. I realized, after I looked at

it awhile, that the frost we are so used to seeing upon a window pane, must also arrange itself to represent some landscape nearby, but the uncontrolled atunement of the magnetism renders the whereabouts or recognizance of the frost picture impossible.

Oltissa, seeing me examining the device intently, commented: "It is an interesting bit of work. Just as one's eyes see force lines of power as light, so does this mechanical eye see the reflections and deviations of magnetic force lines as light—and forms a reflection of these reflections and deviations upon the sand screen, in much the same way the eyes form a reflection by the nerves upon the screens inside the mind. It is a very useful device because of its great range. You can travel through the water at great depths at speeds of a hundred and more miles per hour, and yet see the whole floor of the ocean unroll before you as clearly as though equipped with telescopic eyes that penetrate any darkness."

"What has the Hag been doing?" I asked Oltissa.

"When she escaped the Venusian White raid, she took a ship lying at the dock in the undersea entrance of the caverns where you were first taken into the caves. There were about a hundred or so with her, the worst of the lot. They drove the ship into the depths of the Atlantic, and plunging it into a bank of ooze out of sight, managed to escape the searchers. After the Venusians returned to their home, Hecate took over an ancient deep sea cavern and began to build up her power once more, as I have told you. We want to stop her before she has grown too powerful."

"I should think the advantage would lie with you, because of your knowledge of life in the depths of the sea. She is out of her element in the water."

"One would think so, but the persuasive powers of the Hag, of which you know so well, have enlisted some of the captives from our numbers in her service, and of course they are not ignorant of our methods."

AS WE talked, Oltissa had driven the little submersible alongside a huge, dark bulk looming in the water. She explained, "This ship we are in is the only one which is equipped with apparatus to maintain an air supply. It will be taken into the locks, where it will stay, and you must remain inside till we come for you. Do not try to get out. You cannot escape." Oltissa smiled a bit too friendly upon me, but I could not know that it meant anything except a desire to make me feel at ease. Then she left through the door locks.

I watched her painful progress on the floor till she reached the water lock, and through the window the sudden grace and ease of movement that was hers when she was in the water again and free of her air helmet. She flirted those long double tail fins of hers and shot out of sight into the fantastically huge corridors of the ship in which my little prison lay like a barnacle in a cranny.

CHAPTER IV

LT. OLTISSA brought me an air helmet the next day, and I was released from my little prison into the great water-filled ship. I felt like a frog playing ambassador to a barracuda court. Those mermen were big and powerful. They must have weighed four to six times as much as a man, and they moved through the water with the grace and speed of a porpoise or a seal. In fact, with much more of both than either, or any other water life.

I could not get over my delight at the lovely appearance of the women of the Sea People. For they were like our legendary mermaids, except for structural differences I will explain: first, their iridescent fan-tails weaving ever soft beauty in the water; and then the fact that, unlike our conception of the mermaids, they had two legs that were not legs, but great drivers, muscular, serpentine pillars of strength that ended in those iridescent fan-tails that were not too large to impede swimming.

I tottered about in my magnetic shoes and face mask with air tank on my back, goggle-eyed at the wonderful art of their life, as it was displayed both about their persons and on the walls and appointments of the chambers of the great ship. This ship was modeled after the ancient craft, but was built, like others of their fleet, by the ingenuity and engineering ability of the mermen themselves—the first time I had contacted people capable of producing anything like the ancient mechanisms that were to me the acme of a God's progress.

The walls were painted, or inlaid, with mosaics of vari-colored sea shells, cut to fit the pattern of the picture, and gleamed iridescently in the water-light with all the colors we associate with tropical undersea life. Under these huge mosaics were long upholstered benches where the merwomen reclined when not lashing the water of the chamber into—to me—overwhelming maelstroms of current with their activity.

Through the water swam the multi-hued rainbow fishes of Venus, and if you think it is indelicate to eat a raw fish, you should have seen a Princess of the Sea People pick one off in her flashing white teeth without pausing in her stroke down the chamber toward some swift-demanding duty. As graceful as Gods themselves, the act of eating a

raw fish was nothing except natural and beautiful. Getting as close to one as possible, I tried to find out if the fish she was about to eat had scales, for I could not see how a throat so nearly human could engulf fins, spines, head, tail and scales of a fish without disaster. Perhaps she did it to befuddle me, for I did not notice any other feats of the kind. Perhaps she released the fish from her mouth as she turned the corner out of my sight, and laughed delightedly at my expression. And perhaps not, too. Anyway, they were a beautiful and delightful people, more cultured as a whole than any I had met on Earth or Venus, and the great power of their mighty, serpentine bodies was not confined to muscles, but could be unleashed into devastatingly accurate thought upon occasion.

THOSE occasions were all too frequent, as I learned when I pled my cause against my approaching fate at the hands of Hecate and they argued that I had nothing to fear, since it was not my fault I was not with Hecate *now*, and she would welcome me—whereas the Lady Hyplatee would be slain or worse unless released at once.

They said I could undergo the slight discomfort of Hecate's amorous attentions for their sakes, if I was a brave and good man, and I agreed. The next minute the eyes of the Hag, blazing yellow cauldrons of lust or anger, would arise in my fevered brain, and I would invent another reason why they should not do this thing. Their scorn of "my unwillingness to do such a trifle for the sake of a noble and good lady," at last lashed me into shamefaced silence. They were right; I put the best face I could upon the matter and agreed.

All the while the mermaids courted the mermen, or vice versa, and their love-making had none of the prudish

hesitancy of landlubbers. They were more vitally alive than men, and they had an abundance of the potent aids to love making that the Gods of the past have devised and which the Sea People had learned to make as well. The scene was a batrachian revel—I mean bacchanalian revel to conventional eyes—though to their eyes it was normal everyday pleasant relations between friends and lovers.

Ah, well, who is to say what is right and wrong? Life has ever displayed its fecundity as it existed—and the Sea People were no exception to nature's rule. Those bodies, so long of waist and white of bosom, so sinuous of limb, so powerful—yet so utterly cultured and graceful of movement and expressive in thought-form upon the conductive water that conveyed all their thoughts constantly one to the other in complete frankness and openness—seemed to have no need of subterfuge, having no evil designs. A complete knowledge of each others' inner thought from childhood gave them a more complete happiness than ours ever is. The psychiatrists may be right in saying that it is necessary to reveal our thought or it will fester in the darkness. There were no hidden complexes or frustrations festering in the minds of the crew of the long *Sea Dragon* as it slipped deeper into the great deeps of the Atlantic in search for the route to the hide-out of Hecate. They knew the approximate position, but the exact spot, being hidden, was not going to be easy to find.

AS THE ship sank deeper into the darkening water, I was forced to leave the fascinating scene of the strange life of the Sea People, and take refuge in a heavy air tank, against the mounting pressure. The Sea People, inured to pressures of the deeps since childhood, apparently didn't mind the

increasing pressure. The ship, being in complete contact with the water outside by means of its intake or breather pipes, was in no danger from pressure, the pressure equalizing naturally. I suppose some physiological mechanism within the bodies of these ancient people of the deep sea likewise adjusted interior pressure to outer pressure, for they evinced no fear of the depths whatever.

For myself, the air pressure was bad enough, though the gradual descent made my adjustment natural and not unbearable. I knew the desperation of Hecate, air-breather like myself, that she should take up life under the unpleasant conditions of greatly increased air pressure which she must undergo constantly. What a fearful rage of maddened desperation must possess her, having been forced to hide down here since I had last seen her in flight from the White Venusians.

Through the tiny window of super-thick glass in my tank I watched the crew in the big control chamber. Over the sand-plane device called the motile map bent the chief, Motora, looking like Neptune himself with a world at stake, as indeed it seemed was true.

Something of the place they sought must have shown on the delicate tracery of revealing sand of the electrified plane, for Motora raised his hand and the big ship checked its motion and lay still as any fish, when fearful of the maw of a greater fish. The tenseness grew; I could feel it even inside the thick metal walls of the tank. My breath steamed the glass, and I wiped it away with my sleeve, peering intently—as if by my will to shape the will of fate itself.

My one hope of final deliverance from the hands of Hecate that had reached me even in the jail of St. Johns; my one chance of ever seeing Ceulna

again—lay in these peoples' desire to crush Hecate, and it seemed that to crush Hecate they must have this Hypolotee, the fish-finned handmaiden of wisdom whom Hecate had captured. To have her, they intended to barter me. It didn't seem like much of a plan to me, but perhaps they knew what they were doing.

If I could but hear . . . Something was coming over the visiphone, and an image of someone outside was upon the screen—but who or what I couldn't make out. It seemed my hour had come and it was Hecate's long arms for me, and no sweet maiden of my own choice. I was again to be the favorite of Hecate, the Horror of Venus, the Mother of Sin, the ancient undying spawn of Time itself. Was ever a man so accursed by an unwanted female? Witch I could have taken without a murmur; age, too, I could have put up with—but the hideous life in the mighty body of that Mother of Sin, the awful, undying lure of the will to procreate within her—the utter degradation of losing one's self and will, losing all claim to manhood under the dominating stare of her yellow eyes . . . Something in me writhed and crawled out of sight beneath the self-loathing that my deeds under her dominance raised in me. No spider ever sauntered into the jaws of his devouring mate with less desire for his fate than I had as the mermen hooked chains about my air-cell and swung my prison toward a lock in the side of the ship. That creaking crane was delivering me to Hecate willy-nilly, and I was a hero for giving up myself in exchange for the noble lady of the Sea People—but a most unwilling hero I was, in spite of all the logic of value to the future my mind conjured about the deed. It wasn't just right, someway—but I had consented. Well, so be it, but Devil take it, too.

CHAPTER V

OUTSIDE, the darkness closed down about the window through which I peered—as helpless as a clam in his shell—trying to see the swimming giants about me, or trying to catch a glimpse of my captors.

When I did walk out of that metal cell, it was to face the yellow eyes, the great gray shoulders, the Medusa hair and the sinister smile of my former mistress, Hecate. She was seated, as when I had first seen her, in the great crystal nest of some forgotten god, bathed in the ancient, miracle-ray of life-force that come from the indestructible mechanisms that only a god could build. From her side twitched a slender force finger of compulsion, and within my mind raised the old, hideous compulsion, the awful attraction which she so well knew how to create. I was her slave; she had shaped my mind to her will. I was again her thing.

Step by step I mounted toward her. Her great yellow eyes blazed in mingled anger, a faint joy at seeing me again, and the pleasure in dominating me that had always been hers. Her huge arms rose toward me. I was paying for the release of a human greater in value than myself—human, even though one of the Sea People—even though she was as much fish as woman. Hyplotee had gone free. Hecate did have an affection for me, I had a value to her. I was surprised that anything resembling affection could dwell in that time-hardened heart, but only a God could have explored the recesses of her mind and come out sane and unpuzzled. She was a maze of contradictions, unpredictable, cruel; a vampire upon the blood of children for an age; a thing as unwanted to any natural human as a tarantula cuddling at his breast.

Life can be impossible of compre-

hension. If there be a greater God, it seems that he has dropped this earth from his knowledge and left us to our resources. I felt betrayed by all men, but what man has not had that feeling? Great as were the Sea People, I had no real hope that anyone would ever finally best and kill this monster that time forgot. Hecate was Hecate, as resourceful as the Goddess whose name she bore; or for all I know she may have been that ancient Goddess of evil herself—long ago.

“YOU have wandered far from Hecate.” Her smile was peculiar. I could not know if she was playing with me, waiting to vent her obvious anger with events upon me, or if she meant really to welcome me again to my former place in her affections. “Did you mean to break your oath to me that night in Boston so long ago? How long is it—one year or three? Things have happened rapidly since then. It has been touch and go for me with your friends, the Whites. But they seem to have given up the search. I am growing stronger; your place by my side can be a rich one. Are you still of a mind to flee from me?”

I knew she had read my own unwilling mind, to get that picture of myself stealing away from the battle through the stairs to the surface, when all the rest had fallen beside me and Hecate herself had rushed to a new center of ray—another and greater emplacement, to continue that battle—or had gone to the ships that waited in the deep waterway to the undersea.

“I did not flee,” I lied to her, for I did not care to confess the whole truth, and what I was saying was a half truth good enough to conceal my guilt that showed mentally. “I didn’t know where to find you. If I had waited there, I would have been killed. I took

the only way out, knowing you would find me when opportunity offered. I did not return to the Whites, did I?" This was the only lie—for I had had no opportunity to return.

"No, you did not, they were too busy trying to pin me to the wall. They didn't do it. They failed, as they always will. I know more about war-ray and the ways of the men who built these great weapons and caverns than all their scientists and wise men put together. But—let be; you are back in your old place by my side—as you swore when I released your friend Ceulna from the death in the dream room. And here you must stay; you have sworn it. And if you break your oath to me—" her eyes grew horrible in her great, grimly smiling face, her fangs thrust at me like the spider she was, and the baby blood rushed pinkly under her gray skin to warm the death-in-life that she was—"if you break that oath—the death you will die will be such a one as Satan himself would not have desired, when he lay under Everest for a thousand years in chains and pain-beneficial. Do not forget that either, my little man."

"Hecate is threatening me," I said, curious tones in my voice. "Hecate has changed. Hecate either forgives, or acts. But threaten—never."

"It is a simple fact, and no threat. One more slip on your part and there will be no forgiveness, for I do not take chances on my people. They are either wholly mine or they are dead. Let me see your thought."

SHE activated the greater augmentative rays, and within my skull my mind woke to life under her will. Swiftly she worked over it, noting the changes, my inner struggles to release myself of the awful compulsion to search for her, to find her, the mad-

dening uncertainty as to the fate of Ceulna, all the thought that had tormented me since that fateful night when the Whites had driven her into the depths of the sea.

And as she read my thought, the little force rays under her fingers leaped to change the struggle to complacency, the will to freedom to a will to submit to her will, the self in me to become again a reflection only of her self. Her ego replaced mine under her skillful hands, and when she looked up from her work, all the painful effort of two long years was wiped out. I was again her slave. And this time there was no Tuon-White service watching from afar to release me at any moment. This time I was in for it. I would remain her thing.

CHAPTER VI

AND then I woke up, for the gray cylinder of metal in which I had been imprisoned by the pressure of the depths was suddenly jerked back into the lock, and the *Sea Dragon* shot upward at tremendous acceleration. The ooze of the bottom swirled under our driver's glass, obscuring our bulk from the eyes of the Hag's ray warriors, crouching somewhere under the muck within their time-forgotten fortress that Hecate had remembered in her extremity.

I had been asleep from pressure exhaustion, and dreaming. Something must have gone wrong with the exchange. Probably Hecate had attempted to get hold of me without giving Hypotee her freedom—had tried to double-cross the Sea People and failed. And in that sleep of exhaustion, I dreamed I was again in the arms of Hecate and powerless to resist the synthetic lure of the tremendous antique generators of stimulative energy-flows.

I was vastly relieved when the *Sea Dragon* reached the surface and I could step out of my tank into the air helmet and again talk with my kindly captors.

"The old witch tried to pull a fast one," Oltissa explained, as I entered the big central chamber of the ship where the long bodies of the fish men rested between shifts, or danced—as they called their gyrations to the soft pulse of the nerve music of the Sea People, or sprawled on the floor playing their game of "hacra"—a game like chess, but different in formation and moves.

"I fell asleep and dreamed, from the weakness due to the pressure," I laughed. "I dreamed she had me again. She wrapped her arms around me—and I woke up, to find myself being drawn back into the ship. It was uncanny—a magical bit of work. I had given up hope—"

"Hogan, you don't mean to tell us you don't love her?!" Oltissa was again indulging in what had been her chief amusement since I had met her—kidding me about my erotic relations with the ugliest female on two planets.

I sprawled beside her long, rather overwhelming beauty and looked up into the great, water-emerald eyes of her. "Oltissa, how about that promise you made me? Is that off now?"

"No, Hogan, if we can find Ceulna for you—if she exists—you will be restored to your beloved. Or she will be restored to you."

"It's fifty-fifty, Oltissa. Sometimes she is dominant, and sometimes I am. It's really love. And can she bawl me out about Hecate! But tell me, what did the Hag pull just now that made you call off the trade?"

"She sent out an undersea crawler, supposed to contain Hyplotée and an operating crew only. When they reached what they thought was point-blank range, they opened fire. Ap-

parently Hecate is not so interested in getting hold of you as we had supposed. Our crew intercepted the fire with defense screens of shorter-flow, and we 'scrammed', as you say."

"Yes, it is either that she is no longer interested in me, or she is trying to get from Hyplotée the secret whereabouts of the ancient master-weapons of Venus. In the latter case things look mighty black for the Sea People, do they not?"

"That is true, Hogan. But her attempts to reach the hidden place may lead us to the ancient cache—and also may expose her strength to our fleets. The seas of Venus are not a place for Hecate to operate unscathed, I assure you. But we have plans."

"**O**LTISSA, if I were running things—now that the Sea People definitely know where Hecate is located, I would order an all-out attack upon her stronghold. I wouldn't wait for her to get set."

"Such an order has already gone out, my Hogan. You happen to be right—it is the moment for attack. But you know how far Venus is from here. We have to wait for our full strength."

"And if you must draw forces from Venus for this attack, you must take measures to make sure that Hecate has not anticipated such a move and decided to use the opportunity to reach the cache of which only Hyplotée knows, and now—perhaps Hecate."

"That is true, Hogan. She may outwit us in that. But only watchfulness could help us, for we do not know where this place may be upon all Venus."

"Oltissa, why not search again the old records and books of Hyplotée's family home, the archives of Alor? Search until you find the ancient secret. It may be that a search would turn the thing up for you, without Hyplotée. At

least, the effort would not be too expensive. It may be that even Hyplotee must go to the ancient family home place of Alor to obtain a map to find the exact spot. In that case, you must have men posted there to tell you if Hecate attempts to raid Alor, men who can summon devastation upon Hecate."

"You are thoughtful, Mr. Hogan. I will see that that particular little trap is set for the old she-devil, your love." Oltissa smiled wickedly at me. "You are a traitor to your true love when you plan so against Hecate. Think of all the joy, the god-like joy in her arms you will lose if we kill the immortal Hecate. Do you not wish to be immortal, too? I am surprised, Hogan."

And Oltissa flashed away, the thought-laughter of her vibrating in the water beside me where she had just lain her great woman-strength, her iridescent fins fanning the scented liquid into many cool ripples against me. I sighed. Somehow I couldn't take it; it was a sore spot that I should always be mocked for having been the lover of the ugliest woman of two planets. To the Venusians, who thought so greatly of beauty that ugliness had almost been bred out of their races, it was impossible that a man could have affection for anything ugly. But they had not felt Hecate's super-strong stim, her endless supply of peculiar pleasure rays chosen from the loot of two planets full of the antique mechanisms left by the God races. Hecate had planted powerful hypnotic impulses that made my unwillingness body-cells her slaves—and the love for her that lived in me in spite of my own will, was always present to be seen by their sensitive minds over the continually-used thought augmentative machines spread throughout their ships and their homes, so that everyone was always pretty fully conscious of all the thought of everyone

around him. It was like wearing a clown suit, to be forever conscious of a love for an ugly, hated woman, their worst enemy.

THOUGH they were capable of removing this mental excrescence from my mind, they had not done so, as the mental operation by their compulsion and hypnotic rays would have removed my value to them as an exchange for their Hyplotee. Now that this need for my services had been removed by Hecate's attack upon their exchange ship, I had hoped that they would tend to this humiliating excrescence in my mind, but as yet they had not done so. However, they were a people at war, and time just now was the essence of opportunity, I knew. The next few hours might determine their future fate. Would Hecate get to the ancient cache, or would they manage to crush her first?

I could not believe that Hecate would hold out against the combined fleets of the Sea People, but so far most of their strength remained on Venus. The few colonies of them that had been planted in Earth's seas were not capable of handling Hecate alone. But those colonies in Earth's seas were already centuries old, and not weak, by any means.

If I had been running things, I would have attacked at once, rather than wait for the ancient Vampire to strengthen. She must be very weak in numbers, even though two years had passed since she had eluded the fleets of the White Venusians. Two years' work by her few remaining followers could not have rebuilt her strength as it was on Venus before her defeat, for she had had centuries on Venus and on Earth to attain her former position. She must be weak; why not attack and find out?

These thoughts I kept uppermost in my mind, hoping they might influence

the thoughts of the officers about me. Perhaps they did, for before many hours had passed we were joining a rendezvous of many, many great Sea Dragons upon the dark bottom of the North Atlantic.

CHAPTER VII

AS far as penetray vision could reach—thirty to sixty miles, according to the density of surrounding material—lay the war-fleet the Sea People had gathered together for this attempt upon Hecate. Ever the lights revealed another great ship sinking through the gray surface overhead, down and down to lie beside the others, while orders and tactical discussions flashed between the finny officers of the great ships.²

All these exchanges of thought around me concerning the coming attack were but Greek to me, and after a half hour of such rapid exchange of orders and the information of Hecate's position, the fleet began to move. I suspected this was the end of Hecate, for though the Sea People were practically untried in battle, I could see no weak-

ness in them.

But in truth they were like the amateur Firpo—a giant—but no match for the experienced Dempsey. Unless perhaps we could land such a blow immediately as knocked Dempsey from the ring.

I kept thinking of the encounter as I had seen it in the newsreels, and Oltissa noticed my meaning. She swam swiftly past me, saying, "I will discuss your suggestion with the chief. And I want to say that I approve of you, somehow, in spite of your revolting love affairs." Her laugh wafted backward to me, and I cussed. I liked her, but she *would* laugh at me.

THE fleet began the attack from a vast range. It is always difficult for ray of a portable nature to attack a permanent installation. The massive work of the ancients, built for the ages, was always vastly more powerful than anything that could be moved. The answer, of course, is a great number of units, lined up to send a simultaneous ray of combined power against a single point. But the combined power of all the portable units is seldom enough to outmass the tremendous defenses built by the ancients, who had a weakness for defense in preference to offensive weapons, being, I suspect, not addicted to aggression.

Our combined fire from several hundred ships, as nearly as I could estimate, seemed to affect the great black screens of force globing the bottom below and ahead of us, not at all. Somewhere, perhaps miles under the rock of the bottom, lay this last refuge of the hated vampire. I began to doubt even the Sea People's ability to take the place, for they seemed to know little of Hecate's strength. It was possible, I realized, that these seemingly powerful people were not so effective at war.

² The Sea People's warships ran from three hundred to five hundred feet in length. Some were antique, some were modern copies of the antique designs. They were not slender, as the awful power of the antique drive did not cause so much need for streamlining. Being an homogeneous people and having experienced little war in their history, they had no great need for speed under water. The antique ship they used as model for their craft was primarily a space ship; all their craft were submersible space ships, equipped for air, water, or space travel. They had no landing equipment for landing on terra firma, always coming to a landing in the water, diving deep into the seas to take up their momentum by the buoyancy against the pressure of the depths. I suspect that when men take up space travel, this method of landing will be found the only convenient one for a ship equipped for space. It does away with all need for super-strong units for wheels, skids, etc., reinforcing of such units—needing only a normally strong hull able to take pressure at all points.

Anyway, they went at it hammer and tongs, from a good safe distance. Hecate couldn't do a lot of shooting without letting down her screens—and she wouldn't do that till she knew just what the finny boys had. But she did throw some powerful stuff right through her own shorter, hoping on blind chance to make a few hits while she tested our strength on the shorter meters. I wondered if the Sea People weren't playing right into her hands by throwing everything they had against her shorter fans, hoping to blow them out, while all they would accomplish would be to give Hecate a good idea of their fire-power on her volt-amp meters—or the antique equivalent.

The fireworks went on for maybe twenty minutes, without anybody seeming to get anywhere. I dragged my helmet-weighted body through the water, while the mermen darted about me like fiends serving some finny devil of a ruler. It was difficult for me to peer out the ports, for they were not set for a man of my height, but put at various levels for the fishmen. I wished heartily for the feel of a good big ray-cannon under my hands. I wanted to take a sight at that black cloud of evil life below; but though the Sea People's officers must have noticed my thought, no one obligingly gave up his place at the firing levers.

Hecate must have us pretty well figured out by now, I thought. Then out from under the hiding cloud of black shorter and muddy red clouds of swirling muck from the bottom that the force flows had disturbed, came trundling a line of great undersea tanks. As soon as they cleared the shorter ray limits, they began to blaze away at us with plain old dis-rays, and the water filled with steam bubbles from the disintegration heat as well as gas bubbles of hydrogen, oxygen and chlorine.

THEN fate gave me a hand in the battle. Those tanks were manned by Hecate's old time Spaniards, not new to ray fighting, and the dis-needles knocked off the whole crew of the gun nearest my port. I hopped down from the great lounge I had stood on to peer out the port, and crawled over onto the firing seat of the ray-cannon.

It was a dissociator, which differs somewhat from a dis-ray, in that the latter causes goutts of fire wherever it strikes, as well as along the ray path. A dissociator is a vibrant that unlocks the tiny magnetic charges that are the little hands that hold matter together, so that matter melts and turns to nothing—a soft mushy stuff that disappears like thick smoke after a time; but it does not start real disintegration of the fiery kind that is nature's own disintegration.

I got a line on the head tank and let go, but that tank just didn't melt away and disappear. What was the matter? Evidently the Hag had equipped the tanks with a damper ray—an all over protective field that was designed to dampen and neutralize just the type of dissociator vibrant we were using. The fire of the Sea People wasn't doing any good, and our ships were backing away from the fierce ray needles of the antique Spaniards of Hecate's. I knew that our crews must be decimated, from the bodies floating about me in the water. There was no particular reason that this ship should have been hit harder than the others.

I knew what to do, from my long tutelage under Hecate herself. I threw open the clamps on the gun cover, took out the big coils, and rearranged them in a new sequence of torsion. I would have to keep changing the atunement of the dissociator until I hit a frequency that was effective, yet not dampened by her protective vibrants.

Half a dozen times I changed the line-up of the coils, cussing steadily because there was not a supply of coils of various alignments ready alongside the gun, as there should have been. I didn't realize that this was just a sample of what the Sea People had overlooked in their inexperience. They underestimated the Hag. They thought her no scientist. Well, Hecate had her faults, as numerous as barnacles on a derelict, but lack of study in her immense past was certainly not one of those faults.

I had to guess at the proper alignment of the tortion coils, and some of my changes probably wouldn't have hurt a flea. But sooner or later I would hit one that would penetrate her damper rays. On the seventh try, the big tank that was trundling now almost under our hull and raking us fore and aft with general-dispersion needles, began to turn into soft glue wherever I touched her. She stopped, her treads ceased to churn up the mass of ooze under her, and the whole top of the tank caved slowly in under the pressure of the mile of water overhead. One down, and a few hundred to go.

I did not realize I was fighting from a dead ship, that I was the only man alive on the ship. But that was the case. Oltissa came zig-zagging through the water to my side, dragging one maimed limb behind her. "Hogan, we are the only ones left on this ship. What the devil has happened to everyone?"

"I don't know what you people think of Hecate, but I don't think you will laugh at her again. You practically ignored me, who knows more about Hecate's mind than any man alive, and walk into the worst defeat Hecate ever handed out to anybody. Now get into the control chamber and take this ship where I tell you; maybe I can save a little from the mess."

THE cannon were connected with the control chambers by a telaug hookup, and getting into the master's seat, Oltissa navigated the ship wherever my thought indicated. We circled slowly around the lumbering tanks, at extreme range, and I kept the huge ray-point steady on the whole line-up as we circled. As tank after tank folded up, weakened by the dissociator till the water pressure completed the job, the whole formation turned and beat a rumbling retreat. The mass of ooze they stirred up as they converged upon the point in the shorter cloud where they had emerged, hid them effectively from my sights. Keeping the cannon pointed on the approximate place in the cloud of mud and shorter rays where I thought they must all pass to enter, I waited till the last one had disappeared. Then I told Oltissa to get the attackers to withdraw, I had something to say.

Out of several hundreds of ships, with which we had come down on Hecate, only about one hundred and fifty were able to withdraw. The rest were settled to the bottom behind us, empty of life, or unable to proceed under their own power.

I left the cannon, staggered into the control chamber, angry and pretty near exhausted from pressure and strenuous effort. I pointed 'Up' to Oltissa, who drove the ship upward at a speed that brought me to my knees in the agony of the bends.

Oltissa stopped the ship and the rest of our battered armada gathered slowly around us. Still on my knees, I reached over and flipped the ship communicator lever. On the screen the face of the master of the nearest ship appeared, a face that reflected the agonized desperation of defeat. I shouted in my own language, knowing that the basic thought would be conveyed anyway:

"You people have got to listen to me,

or you will never get anywhere. From now on listen to me!"

CHAPTER VIII

NOW I had them where I wanted them—ready to listen. I put a crew at work changing the great dissociator rifle-cannon into variable pitch rayguns, and installed beside each cannon a rack of coils in sets so that changes in the atunement of the dissociator rays could be accomplished with a simple removal and replacement of one set of coils—a matter of two seconds' work. Over and over I emphasized their disregard for ordinary forethought of battle emergencies that had failed to allow for damping rays from Hecate's defense.

The dis-cannon were likewise worked on, and some of the adjustments I had learned from Hecate were installed to increase the range by fining the focus to a narrower beam and installing heavier conductive metal so that the guns could be fired in rotation with the full power of the whole ship's dynamos, instead of as they were now hooked up, a broadside, lowering the effective power of each gun by lowering the flow of current.

Besides this, I had noticed their tactics were not carefully thought out—or they had not learned from seeing similar conflicts. I outlined a course of tactics where the whole fleet maneuvered as a single unit, firing over each other in a row. This caused the ionization of the beams to cut resistance for the next beam, so that the concentric simultaneous beam of the whole fleet's firepower might be directed along on beam path only. The result of this combined beam would be disastrous and probably greater than anything of a non-portable nature the Hag might have.

In effect I gave them three new and vastly more powerful weapons, out of their same equipment, simply because I had the experience they had not had. In addition I suggested that, simultaneous with our attack, a telesolidograph projection of several ships around each ship of ours would, over the whole expanse of the fleet, give an effect of tripling the enemy targets and decrease the fire we would sustain by two-thirds or more for the first few moments of battle.

The first half dozen newly fitted ships I dispatched to retrieve the battle ships we had left behind in our retreat, if Hecate had not already done just that. They drove off several tanks engaged in towing the big empty hulks into Hecate's hole under the sea, and set to work towing them back to our own rendezvous. But they lost a crew in the engagement. All but three of the disabled vessels were recovered.

The work occupied several weeks, and during that time a fleet of fifty ships arrived from the Seas of Venus to reinforce our strength. Nearly a month had passed before I decided that everything I could do for them had been done. I told them to go ahead. If they failed, there was nothing I could do about it.

WE advanced on the target, which was, as before, just a great black cloud of shorter fans projecting upward from the sea bottom. The sea growths had mostly been blasted away by the previous attack, and here and there in the deep ooze crisscrossed the great sunken furrows made by Hecate's sub tanks.

Following my suggestion without reservation, the finned commander of our fan-tailed legions lined his fleet in a solid phalanx, firing over a simultaneous beam of combined power be-

fore he ever reached the range. A tremendous gulf was blasted into the bottom of the sea as we proceeded nearer and nearer toward the great black cloud that was all we could see of Hecate's fortress.

As the tremendous power of our combined fire beam struck into this cloud of protective conductive, a series of shocks shook the water about us and great clouds of ooze shot upward, obscuring everything. I turned to my telaug communicator and shouted to the commander—"Turn on the solidographs; those were the screens burning out—they'll come out shooting!"

About us sprang in sight a series of other ships like our own—mere projections, but so real they would fool anyone at a distance of three feet. Now all about us lay a dozen other fleets, in variant formations. It would be impossible to tell whether one was shooting at a real ship or a false one. In and out the operators wove the unreal ships with the real, while all the while our fleet fanned out wider and wider, in staggered formation to avoid the fire we expected. But it didn't come.

Just out of range of actual visual sight over our visi-rays, I saw a series of scuttling shadows. Pointing them out to Oltissa, I asked her what they meant.

"The old vampire's taking a sneak! —" and Oltissa snapped the information to the fleet commander.

After the shadows streaked a dozen of our ships, but the rest of the fleet lined up in firing order again, and with a combined beam of destructiveness blasted the position where the first explosions of burning-out shorter had occurred. A great whirlpool formed in the swirling mud and water as the sea rushed into the mighty caverns below the soil. As this maelstrom subsided, one by one we shot into the opening and

entered the water-filled caves below to see for ourselves that Hecate had really fled. This idea, however, seemed unwise to me.

IT was, verily, the home of Neptune himself that Hecate had chosen for her hiding place. On every side stretched the tremendous enigmatic machines and tall sculptured handiwork of the ancient sea people—the original dwellers in earth's oceans. Some of them were representatives of a people somewhat like my present friends of Venusian origin, but for the most part they were of a race I had never seen pictured before. The vast spaces of time that had passed since the mother of life first spawned the race of these statues—the awful weight of infinitudes of eons of past time—rested on one in here with a more sensible pressure than the miles of water overhead.

Cautiously we stole along the cyclopean corridors of green-lit water—and the surprised goggle-eyes of the fishes let in from the sea bottom stared back at us and at the mystery of ancient timeless beauty that was the work of immortals about the caverns. A writhing squid trailed himself across our bow plates, his tentacles jerking convulsively as he grasped at the slippery surface where our view rays played ahead—seeing the greatness that once was ecstatic life and infinite wisdom's home, and now was the last desperate retreat of the Mother of Sin, the hideous immortal. Somewhere she fled, or lay in wait for us with some devilish gin of her devising—and I shuddered, for I knew the tortuous cunning of her mind patterns, to which even all my intimate experience with her thought had not given me the key. I shuddered with fear for what she had prepared for this foolhardy entry of ours into her lair.

Even as I communicated my fears to Motora over Oltissa's telaug, a blast shattered the darkness behind us into roaring deluges of sound, a catastrophe—terrible crash of explosive in water that lay the merpeople in quivering helplessness at their posts—and when my senses came again to use—behind us the way had closed. Within our ears came the telaug rays of the Hag, hearing her evilly mocking voice—"Proceed—go ahead—drive on—whichever path you choose now is death—go on."

I shouted at Oltissa: "Speed,—full speed ahead is your only chance—you may beat the trap ahead before it lets go. Do as she says; she tries to delay you till they close the caverns ahead."

Naturally Hecate would tell us to go ahead if she wanted us to wait—for naturally we would not expect her to give us a key to the way out of the trap we had stepped into.

The drivers roared as the half-stunned mermen leaped to the controls, and about us the blast of force from the drivers of our fellow ships reverberated from the walls—and on we drove at suicidal speed. The cavern walls narrowed. We slowed to negotiate the tortuous turns ahead—and a mighty tornado of powerful blasts unleashed titanic forces ahead of us as the rocks swayed and crashed about us.

AS the terrible sounds died out and the echoes swung at last to rest, we lay locked within Hecate's power by our own foolhardiness in failing to expect subterfuge. I had been thinking all was safe in the hands of the Sea People—but a noble brow and cultured manner is never a criterion of behaviour under the press of such circumstances as occur not in cultured surroundings. They had not thought of a subterfuge, for the ways of evil were strange ways to them. The great, good

men of life are so often blind in just that way—and the Sea People were not different.

Within our ears bellowed laughter from dozens of watching penetrative rays from Hecate's cohorts—watching our minds in our extremity and laughing at the death thought in our heads. We all knew we had not long to live.

"Start the pumps!" We could hear the fearful, witch-woman voice of Hecate give the order—and a dozen boils of water about us told us the caverns were equipped to get rid of water when needed. Shortly we lay, dry and helpless, and nowhere in range of our ray could we find any enemy, but only black fans of obscuring shorter ray in the distance, at which we fired without result. We were captives—the captives of Hecate—and we knew we had but a few hours at most to live—and that living we knew would not be pleasant.

CHAPTER IX

THE merpeople sealed off the water inlets and outlets of the ships. I looked down the line and counted twenty ships before the curve of the cavern walls obscured the rest. I turned to Oltissa. "How many ships were ordered in here?"

"Thirty," she answered shortly, and somehow I knew she thought I should have forewarned them somehow for such an obvious trick.

"Oltissa—I was not watching; I trust your intelligence too much; I admire you Sea People—and forget you do not think in terms of battle and ruse and such shifts of thought as are habitual to Hecate and her crew."

"It is no time to be sorry. If it had been your decision to make—you would not have driven ships into this trap—would you? It is our fault for not put-

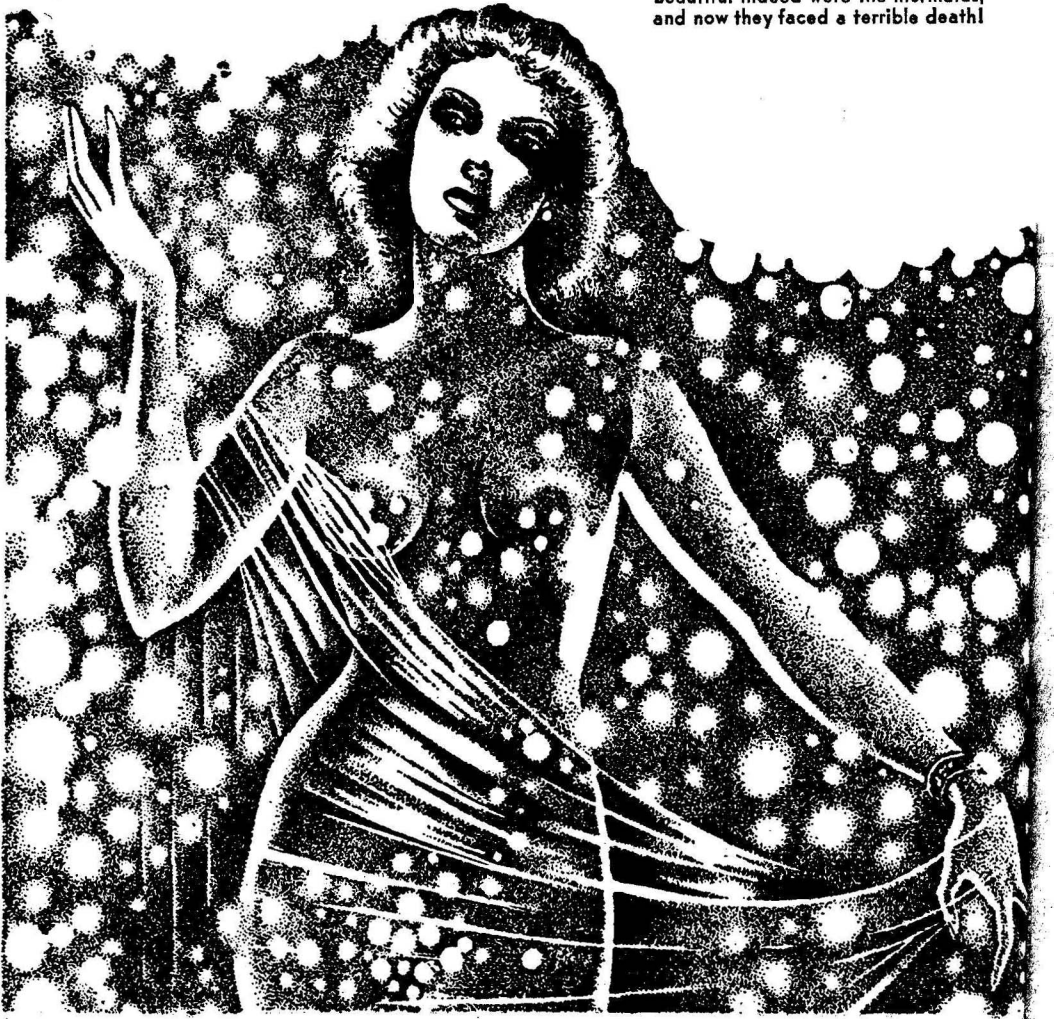
ting you where such decision would have been up to you. But—what do you think will happen to us—?”

“Slow death at the hands of her torturers—or worse, to become robot slaves in some work house of hers—there is no knowing what—but it will not be fun.”

It wasn't. As I looked at Oltissa, waiting for the death she had no idea how to avoid, a tremendous sorrow and

an admiration for the qualities of her people came over me. Her crest, erect and quivering, her wide scarlet mouth, her nostrils palpitant with the quick nervous drafts of greenish water, the long white column of her tapered, sinuous throat, twisting slowly as if looking, looking for a way out that there was no use to look for, but could not help; the great long-fingered, webbed hands, wrung now in tortuous indecision, the

Beautiful indeed were the mermaids,
and now they faced a terrible death!



great water-emerald eyes, so full of humanity and fierce prideful thought, the great sculptured torso of her, with the perfect breasts and the slim, long waist that carried her so beautifully in the water, the hips that were as no human's hips, yet were so perfect for her, flowing into the green mottled power of her thighs—all the admiration that man can have for perfect woman flooded in me and tears came unbidden to my eyes. I knew that no beauty like hers would long exist within sight of Hecate, who hated woman's beauty as she hated no other thing. Her awful age-old hideousness that yet had longed for immortal beauty, had its own terrible pride in the power of her evil strength, that gave life to her dead-alive body.

As I looked thus at Oltissa, I felt a warmth begin to grow within me, and peered out the visi-screen window through the solid metal of the wall. Far off, from under the black power-screens that hid Hecate's strength from our eyes, came toward us two great gleaming rays of power, and ended—one each at the end of our ship. Under the terrific power of the current in those two conductive beams, the rock was turning red in the distance, and within the ship, at the ends where the rays impinged, the water was filling rapidly with bubbles of vapor.

I wondered—and then her plan struck me in its hideous fullness. She planned to boil the water inside the ships till all life within was gone. It was the safest and quickest way. And then she could open the ends of the tunnel and wait for a new victim to drive in to see what had become of his comrades. With luck she could thus trap another group of merpeople.

TO BE boiled alive was to be the fate of all of us. Even as the truth struck me, it came over Oltissa's noble

face, with a storm of anger and awful striving of her mind for an opening in the walls of circumstance closing about her life. Her hands twisted and twisted as the water heated about her, and her nostrils panted quicker and quicker with the struggle of her mind to face death fully. Then, as the water became less supporting of life under the heating, she gasped to me—"Get within your tank of air; the heat will not harm you in the air—air is not a good heat conductor. You may live when we are dead—and once we are dead she will turn off the rays. You may fall into her hands, yes—but you will live."

I looked long at her, and ever the bubbles of steam formed about us and rose, and there was no use to move, no need for effort to live now—for life was done.

"No, my friend, the beautiful and noble Oltissa; I do not care so much for life under Hecate. It seems to me that death were the best thing that could happen to me. After all, Oltissa, Hecate is the ugliest woman in two worlds—or under them. I think I had better just die, and have it over with."

A smile struggled swiftly over her gasping face, and the great strength that is the Sea People's rippled down her smoothly muscled form, paused at the great driving thighs, and leaped into action as she grasped me by the arms and swam backward with me to the door of the air tank where they had prepared me for my visit to my unwanted mistress. She swung the door open, and it clanged shut behind me with a finality as she shot the dogs about the door into place and clamped them there. She turned on the pump that emptied the tank of water, and as I peered out at her she pressed her lips to the glass in one last sweet gesture of womanhood. I kissed the glass where her lips rested and tried to tell her with

my thought that I knew there existed under our sun no nobler child of the ancient goodness called the Gods, but I know not whether she heard. As the heat increased, I watched the long bodies of the mighty sea race swell and bloat and die, and my admiration for them was not decreased by the way they met death.

CHAPTER X

FOR a long time I stood alone within the death-filled Sea Dragon, peering out of my window upon the green water filled with the once lovely forms of a people in many ways far superior to any others I had known. Now their dead bodies floated, bloated white bellies up, long hands so expressive in their supine waving in the slow drift of the bubbling, heated water. Expressive of the horror and the wrong of all killing. For nothing the Hag could ever gain would be worth so much real value as just one of these merpeople—had she been worthy of them as friends, instead of so horrible a vampire that no sane life could be her friend. What false values must lie in her brain, to seem greater than to call one of these noble mer-race a friend.

Then the heat ceased to bubble its path through the water, and outside I could hear the hammering of workmen making an entrance through the sealed locks. I sank half kneeling in weakness from the terrible heat, as through the opened locks the light sprang and the heated water rushed away, bearing with it some of the long, still lovely bodies of merwomen.

As the water disappeared, through the openings came the horse-faced antique Spaniards of Hecate's crew of blood-suckers. Peering into my tank, they saw my dewed, gasping face, and emitted loud laughs to find the man

they hated and envied—"Big Steel" himself—so near death. A particular aversion of mine, one Juan de Sadalo, his face even more hideously wrinkled than his centuries of stolen life had made it, shouted to the others as he laughed in triumph to find me in his hands—"I say finish him off now, while we have the chance—and tell our ruler that Steel was dead when we arrived."

Beside him, also sneering at me, was one who had been Hecate's chief delight before my advent, a man who had kept somewhat of his looks through I do not know how many years, one Cronguelin, a Frenchman. "You might be a bit hasty, Juan; the rays who watch us may not all be so inclined as to keep their tongues in their mouths. And there is always the chance that she will read your mind one day when you are not thinking of her, and what would she do to you—to find you had killed her sweet thing, Monsieur Steel? No, let the big fellow live. Mayhap when Hecate tires of him, we will find the opportunity to kill him slowly."

The debate was cut short by the arrival of Hecate herself, and I was almost glad to see the hideous leech. Such is flesh, when the mind loses control—a thing of no reason at all. And Hecate had replaced my natural self-control within her own devising.

Hecate came in, striding, powerful, her tall, wide rockgrey form half naked as it always was; her locks wild and black as I remembered them. She found me in the tank, half cooked and choking in the foul air while her men stood about and taunted me.

"You know who the man is, and you can stand there and let him die!" Hecate's ever swift rage mounted visibly into her face. "Do my wishes mean nothing to you, after all the time I have taught you that my will is your will, or your death?"

She shot two of them where they stood, and the others, with wondering faces, busied themselves about releasing me, as though they had not known I was there. For they had learned to pretend, even with their thoughts, in the centuries of slavery to the anger and swift death that Hecate was to those who failed to know what their duty was, as she saw duty.

SO IT was that I found the great Hecate bending over me, her great yellow fangs bared in a grimace of concern. And the dream I had had of falling into her hands came true in her arms.

The deep sorrow which the death of the noble and intelligent friends I had made among the merpeople aroused, was strong in me as I walked beside Hecate to the antique rollat car in which she had come. Thirty miles we drove, nearly in silence, the extreme range where she had lain to spring this trap on the finny merpeople. A grim smile of triumph on her face, she had paid little attention to me during the drive. I busied my mind with swift repair and rearrangement of my conceptional set-up, so that in the mental going-over soon to come, she would not find me too much an enemy. To learn to disguise his inner thought is the most difficult thing a surface man can do, but I had learned the trick the hard way, and I could lie most convincingly with my thought if I had a chance to get set. I would have plenty of chance to exercise my acquired skill in the future. I brushed away my sorrowful thought of the lost Amazon, Ceulna, that dancing, fiery Venusian who had decided I was her love. I had found she was wholly right: no earthman can resist the beauty of the White Amazons of Tuon of Venus, particularly one trained in the erotic dances of that sensuous

people. Well, no good to think of that: I was again the thing of Hecate's.

Things went much as they had in the dream. Hecate sank into her place in the great crystal nest which had once been the throne of some mighty immortal of the past. She swung the telaug beams onto my head and breast, and swiftly went over me, getting much nearer the truth of my thoughts for the past few years than I cared her to. Then she put me to sleep with a great black flood of sleeper ray, and when I awoke I was alone in a chamber, and my mind was again a thing not my own, but waiting to hear the thought of Hecate before it had will to act. Then I knew it would spring into fierce activity to perform her will, no matter how revolting her demands might be. Within my veins I felt the new access of young strength that meant she had given me an infusion of baby's blood as well. Evidently fate had decreed me to me a monster, no matter how.

DAYS passed, and the old routine of my servitude to her horrendous majesty's pleasure became the way of my life. With watching augments I transferred to her mind the thoughts of her followers when they might interest her, and with super-stim rays I pleased her body when she desired it. I was her watch-dog, her hypnotized right hand man, whose will was only a male repetition of her own. I was, as well, her paramour, whose desires and affections, every emotion naturally considered the private property of one's own breast, rose and fell in exact accord with her will. There is no describing the servitude of the soul that can be attained with the mighty intricacy of the old mechanical aids of the body's electrical machinery. It can only be understood when experienced.

Days lengthened into weeks, and out

of the dark water that pressed down forever on this endless cavern beneath the North Atlantic, came no fleet of battle spacers of the Sea People, flaming into battle to avenge their dead. They seemed to have had enough of Hecate's brand of war for awhile.

Occasionally Hecate's men came back from a foray sailing one of the Sea People's ships, with captives in chains in water-filled compartments. What they did with them is a picture of piteous horror I cannot bring myself to describe. Such creatures as Hecate's followers plague men since the dawn of time, but their existence seems to prove to me that there is no God conscious of affairs on this earth. But then I know it, for have I not seen the homes of the God races of the past, and then seen these latter-day monsters wallowing through them in their bloated evil pride? No, the Gods do not know what has taken up life in their former dwellings.

Ever in my nose was the scent of the blood of some tormented creature or other. Always in my sleep the memory of the deeds of that sadistic crew strove and struggled with the dead soul of me, to wake and strike, to wake and crush the nest of adders before the whole earth had become the footstool of Hecate. For daily, from some dark hell of space she had contacted, new recruits came in, to be examined by Hecate's women, by me, and in the case of officers, by herself. For Hecate had no lack of gold—or its equivalent, the intricate super-stim mech of the ancient art. There is no value of gold or gems or human flesh that can compare with some of the more intricate art of these long-gone immortals in value. And in Hecate's centuries of evil aggression under the rocks of Mother Earth, many and many were the people who had failed to hold her fighting men—who

had failed to check her swift, flaming advance. Through the centuries these secret caches of the immortal Hecate had grown. Swiftly her strength grew now, as she bartered the baubles that men desire for good flesh and blood and hard labor—for slaves and warriors and the ancient hulks that form the base on which the modern space fighters are rebuilt.

And in the dead and secret place that yet remained to me of my self's private hopes, a tiny voice cried—"Pray the Elder Gods the Sea People are building, too."

CHAPTER XI

PERHAPS I had better give you a picture of the principal crew of Hecate's ship, which was to lead the attack on the Sea People when we were fully ready. Immediately behind Hecate where she sat at the flagship's intricate panels of communicators keyed to each ship of the fleet, stood her chief advisor and confidante, a square-spectacled blood-taker of an ancient aspect. His appearance was that of some cruel Spanish lord of the time of the inquisition, whose embalmed body had been brought back to life to bedevil mankind again. His great hooked beak, swarthy long-chinned face, and the square antique spectacles, giving him a curiously scholarly look, together with the sinister twist of his full drooping mouth, all united to give an impression of ruthless will—but a will so steeped in centuries of indulgence as to be not a human will, but an automaton of selfishness. About his great form (all these ancient blood-takers of Hecate's intimate group were extremely large, as the centuries through which they survived by transfusions of the blood of infants, gave them life and growth) were the antique Spanish corselet and puffed

sleeves, on his legs the puffed breeches and long hip-high stockings of the time of the conquistadors. Instead of the ancient sword one automatically looked for at his thigh, hung a huge hand weapon, once the property of some son of Zeus or Jupiter, now his personal weapon these many years. It was a ray pistol, a long oval about a foot in length, with intricately worked metal handle of the pistol type, but massive, made to fit a mighty hand such as no longer exists under our sun.

Immediately at his right stood another Spaniard, but a type now almost forgotten—the priest of the medieval Rosicrucians. A long-cowled scarlet and gold robe covered his massive, well-fleshed form. His long face was a mass of wrinkles, a mummy's face suffused with the bright pink of children's blood. His bright black eyes glittered with a strange lust for blood as he peered at the motile map, a new thing to him. Likewise they glittered with a lust to kill as they looked at me, standing by the side of Hecate watching them all, and hoping for a chance to get rid of one of them by catching him in opposition to Hecate's plans.

Each of us held this watchful thought, planted in our minds by Hecate's arts, and watched each other for some thing that would prove the other not loyal in his inner thoughts. But among those accustomed to the inner circles of Hecate's organization, such thoughts did not occur; they were too expensive; and too they could not occur after Hecate's skillful fingers had finished their work upon the brain center's connecting nerves, isolating those centers most apt to cause trouble by emotional revolt. After Hecate had cut the nerves of the brain, one was not apt to think of revolt, for the fiery needles of cutting ray left no part of the brain functioning but those parts she

understood were purely utilitarian.

Hecate did the planning, we did the development and carrying out of the plans. Capability to originate plans was not left in our brains. If by accident it might occur, she left a hypnotic charge impressed on our memories and will to watch ever for plans adverse to her own in all the minds at hand. And so, like automatons, we watched each other's thought, and remembered carefully whether or not the other was one of Hecate's hands or a tool apt to cut two ways. The reward for such information was the endless floods of pleasure rays which Hecate alone could release upon one; the very flesh played stoolpigeon in anticipation of the great God's delight from her hands.

BEHIND we three and Hecate, stood six other men, wrinkled, old-young devils for the most part, though one was a physicist and a graduate of Rensselaer Polytech many years ago. He was a tall, ascetic looking man, of a suave, deadly slimness, a suit of the ancient ray armor from the cavern armories sheathing his slim limbs, its gleaming, black polished surface setting off his sinuous, graceful figure to the utmost. About his waist hung one of the antique weapons, a weapon of a kind I had never seen used. It was a long slender rod wrapped about with silver spirals of heavy wire. One was apt to run into strange characters and stranger weapons in the groups that held the far-spread cavern cities. Where this man came by the experience and wit to make himself so valuable to Hecate, I did not know. He kept to himself, and his counsel was sought by few other than Hecate. I knew he must be a brilliant man, for Hecate knew the mind as none other I ever met.

Hecate's evil nature was not due to

lack of wit, but to an inner lust for violence that overthrew her logic at frequent and terrible intervals, and during these periods of fury those who knew her kept their distance, and those who didn't died. Even when her inner fires were banked, they looked fiercely out of her ancient yellow eyes, and none could look into her eyes at any time without sensing the deadly struggle ever being fought within her between her own will and some demon that possessed her. So it was that Hecate could plan and build and weld the wills of men to her ambition's chariot wheels; but all would be torn down as her reason surrendered to lust for violence, and hetacombs of men and women must die before her to assuage the demon that lived in her.

Myself, knowing her well, had calculated the keys and reasonings that set her off on death's trail or brought her back to reason's sway again, but could not really understand what she might do next. My own theory was that the radioactives that cause age had not been defeated by her method of fighting age with the transfused blood of children from her child-farms—her nurseries for her young blood-cows; but that a great amount of the stuff that makes others age had accumulated through the centuries within her body. This radioactive material from the sun, as I had learned it from reading her mind in unguarded moments, seemed to accumulate a charge of electric within her body, of detrimental electric, which at times overwhelmed her natural will with flows of destructive electric which to her mind resembled thought, but to which her mind could not help but respond as to a destructive will. In truth it *was* destructive will, and her great age had made her less and less able to hold this will to destroy in abeyance. The least excitement or untoward ac-

tivity was apt to release the accumulation of emanation from the radioactives in her body into a flood of destroying electric through her great strong body and elder-wise mind.

She knew all this, but was unable to combat the thing. So it was that life with Hecate was made up of periods of comparative calm, weighted always with apprehension that something would touch her off, and blood would flow in streams before she ridded herself her body of the alien, horrible will of the detrimental electric. So she seemed possessed of a devil because she was—a greater devil than any other, because she was older than any other. I often wondered if all evil people were not activated by the same detrimental accumulation of emanation from the radioactives in their body, and its different aspects in character dependent entirely on which areas of the brain happened to be weakest and hence most affected by the alien will-force which the detrimental electric stimulates so well.

THEY were a motley and terrible crew, these intimates of Hecate, but they were in truth, like myself, not so much people or personalities as manufactured tools of Hecate's mind, without real character of their own. Like myself, they probably had plenty of character in abeyance, but only beneficial ray treatment or years of healing of the connecting nerves between the intricate parts of the brain which determine the character would free them from their domination by Hecate's will-to-evil. In the case of the Spaniards some of whom were nearly as old in evil as Hecate herself, I knew that within them the soul had died, the ego withered away, and that naught was left but a few insatiable appetites and the mechanisms for thought keyed to

serve Hecate's expressed thought exclusively. I realized that to some extent this mind-crippling of Hecate's was crippling the flexibility and emergency-response reaction of the organization as a whole; but Hecate knew this too, and had weighed the matter and decided the safer way was the better way. In her case, where all men were moved to hate upon their first contact with her, she was probably right. I know that I would have killed her at any time after I had known her for a few days, had I been able, but instead my whole will served her thought in place of my inner mind's promptings.

CHAPTER XII

AT last the day came when Hecate led forth a great fleet of fighting ships and men to scour earth clean of the Sea People, and make at least the oceans of earth her own. Hecate was not content with any power, but always strove to grasp a greater hold of life and of the things that it can give flesh, in the caverns. Eventually she planned to find the uttermost secrets of the antique wisdom, but meanwhile there was fighting—and I knew for her there would be fighting always till she died. The other was but her dream, the fighting was her life.

Beside her in the great ship that led the long, shadowy, fish-like dragons of war across the green slopes of the sea, I watched constantly for any signs of the Sea People. I had installed, from the wrecked and captured ships, the motile maps of electrified sand, of Venusian invention, which was a device not heretofore used by air-breathers.

Presently I caught a glimpse of a hull in the distance on the sand screen map. Hecate held up three fingers as I pointed out the object, and I gave

orders over the telemachs for three ships to leave formation and follow the fleeing Sea People's ship.

The sub was limping along very slowly, as if crippled. As our three left the fleet to pursue, the distant shadow of the ship picked up speed and disappeared in the dark water. I wondered vaguely what could be wrong with the ship. But it was not my business to think, I was a tool. Crippled or sailing slowly? my mind questioned. I remembered the ship had been sailing erratically, in a foolish kind of zig-zag, as if the rudder was out of commission, yet as our three bore down on her she had suddenly righted her course and sped away, just out of range. My mind dropped the subject, and I turned to other matters.

About thirty minutes later the three ships rejoined our fleet. Watching them approach, I saw beyond them and far off to the west, another crippled ship, lying nose down almost vertically on end. I sent a ship to investigate, but as the ship I dispatched neared the apparently wrecked submersible, she pulled her nose up out of the mud and sped off. I felt alarm; the coincidence of the sudden flight made me suspect a trap of some kind—but how could that be? I beamed the three ships now jockeying into position into the formation.

"What ship was that? Did she resist?"

"She was the 'Onspi' of the Sea People's. We shot her to bits. No one escaped."

"Did you get any information from their minds?"

"Couldn't get a thing, she had her screens up."

Feeling peculiarly elated about something odd in the air, and a subconscious feeling of despair lifting from inside me, I still could not consciously coordinate

the coincidence of two crippled ships being able to flee when attacked, with anything in the nature of danger for us. It is a peculiar state of mind to be in, to be doing consciously what one's whole self hates and abhors, yet be unable to do otherwise or think differently. A mind slave is not a happy person. Yet consciously, to myself, I was perfectly at ease and on my toes. Hecate was an artist of the mind; she could do anything to a mind and get what she wanted out of it; and what she wanted was the perfect tool.

I SENT two more after the one pursuing the strange sub disappearing in the far range of the sand map's coverage. No use taking chances.

The three reappeared in about the same time the first three had, and made the same report. The fleet of the Hag sailed on its bloody mission, some five hundred strong, toward its destination, a colony of merpeople in the South Atlantic.

Then Hell broke loose! I had noticed that the crew of the three ships rejoining us had seemed a bit queer, but had not consciously taken full notice of my reactions. But there were now six ships among us who had been out of our sight for not more than thirty minutes. Suddenly these six ships began firing upon us and driving forward into the thickest concentration of ships in our huge double V formation. They weren't firing all their guns, just the master ray that is always fixed in the bow of these antique ships, and is aimed by pointing the ship at the target. They were firing as if manned by one person, and that person a suicidal enemy bent upon our destruction at the cost of his own. Our return fire flooded the foremost of these suddenly berserk subs with dis-ray, but no screens went up to stop the fire. There wasn't much time

to figure why, for—Barr-rrrooom!—the ship exploded in a blast that shattered a dozen of our nearest battle-drivers and sent another dozen nosing toward the bottom with broken hulls.

Instead of understanding what had happened, easing fire and fleeing the oncoming death—our ships for the most part kept on firing on the others—and two more of these traitorous sub-boats went up—taking twenty or thirty of our now scattered formation with them to death.

I leaped to the inter-ship telaug and ordered immediate flight from the remaining rebels—for I suddenly understood what had happened. The Sea People had devised a trick of their own, enticed our ships out of sight, annihilated the crews, loaded the ships with explosives and sent them back into the fleet with a single suicide seaman at the controls. Evidently they had left the dead bodies in their places, propping them up as if alive. It had been good enough to escape our observation for a while—long enough for the one man crews to go into action.

Their trick had cost us near a hundred of our fleet; one of the subs had exploded far enough from other ships to harm nothing, and there were two more to explode should they be hit. These super depth-bombs were the deadliest device I had seen used under-seas as yet. They must have some Tuon male warriors with them, for the suicide helmsmen were four-limbed air-breathers. At the thought my heart leaped. If the Tuon forces had joined the Sea People, mayhap Ceulna was near. I smothered the thought just in time, for Hecate looked up from her desperate preoccupation with the sudden disaster, to see the flame of hope in my face. But the moment passed without her otherwise-intent mind taking note of my disaffection.

HECATE'S opposition, in the invisible distance, seemed to have learned something about war since their ignominious defeat in their other encounters, I reflected. They didn't give us a chance to figure what came next—they threw it at us.

Into sight loomed a fantastic aggregation of variously formed ships, and Hecate let out a snort of disgust, for the heterogeneous collection of under-sea ships bearing down on us gave no indication of the talented and powerful work of the Sea People. As they drew within range, their scattered, unmilitary formation, their likewise scattered and ineffective fire upon us, gave us all a feeling of complete confidence in victory over this disorganized enemy. I had thought much better of the Sea People, myself.

As they drew nearer, we let go a broadside that I fully expected to knock the whole opposition out of the water. It did, but not in the way I had expected. Our fire started something that no immortal, no aggregation of minds that ever lived on earth, could have survived. The first ship struck by our fire went up, exploding with a shattering force, causing our whole fleet to lurch backward in the water. But the rest of the oncoming fleet, like a string of firecrackers, let go one after the other, in calculated intervals, and at the mounting series of cataclysmic explosive force upon my body, I collapsed, passing into unconsciousness. My last picture of that advancing fleet of death was just a great flare of fire dead ahead—fire in the water itself—as though Hell itself had blown off the lid.

CHAPTER XIII

I AWOKE to see a face I had never forgotten, a face that had haunted my dreams for over two years, a face

that meant more to me than my miserable life. Ceulna was smiling down upon me, pillowing my head in her lap. I sighed, but I was too weak to talk. I sighed and sank into unconsciousness again. A long period of shadow life went by for me, and when I was at last conscious of my surroundings, I noticed the rustle of leaves outside the transparent walls, and the soft light of Venus on the fantastic flowers among the rustling leaves outside. I turned my head, and the cheerful, fantastic drapes, the sewing basket with the mark of Tuon art work, the green crystal gazers globe on a stand—everything about the room told me it was Ceulna's apartment in some Tuon city of Venus. I turned my head again, and on the other side sat Ceulna, her lovely head of curling pale-fire hair bent over the sewing of some dancing costume, a food tray beside her, telling me that her bedside vigil was one she did not leave even for meals.

I spoke, my voice husky from long disuse: "Ceulna—come here."

She sprang to her feet with all that impossible grace which only the crystal walk-webs of Venusian cities give a woman, with a glad cry on her lips. "My big one—you are awake at last. Oh, I have feared you never would come back to life again. So long—so long—you have lain there, never stirring."

I tried to sit up, but it was no use. I gasped, "Ceulna, what has happened? Where am I? Give with the information."

"You are with me in the city of Lefern. This is my home now, and Onua's apartments are right next door. The Sea People sent you to us when they returned several shiploads of Tuon volunteers who had enlisted to fight against Hecate. But you seemed to have suffered some terrible shock. They said

you had been in an explosion, a very big explosion. It was an explosion which wiped out all of Hecate's strength at one blow. There were a few survivors—and you and Hecate were among them. They have Hecate in an undersea city, somewhere here on Venus. She is still alive, and I suppose they do not kill her because they want to pump her wisdom out of her head for their use. But she will get no more baby blood to keep her alive. So you can know she will not live long."

I lay back, a flood of relief coursing through me. Hecate was out of the picture. I was back with my best friends, the Tuon Amazons of Venus, and with Ceulna, the best woman I had ever known, besides being the most alluring. I sighed again, and fell asleep with Ceulna's lips on my own.

* * *

THAT is all of the story, except for one little incident. About six months later Lt. Oltissa, whom I had thought dead, landed a water-filled flyer on the great aerial flying field outside the city. (Like all Tuon building, the air field was a great artificial structure hung from the mighty trees to keep everything far off the swampy ground).³

³ Darwin — Naturalists Voyage Around the World.

Page 83—Extinct quadrupeds: "The great size of the bones of the Megatheroid animals, including the Megatherium, Megalonyx, Scelidotherium and Mylodon, is truly wonderful. The habits of these animals were a complete puzzle to naturalists. . . . The teeth indicated, by their simple structure, that these Megatheroid animals lived on vegetable food, on the leaves and twigs of trees . . . some eminent naturalists believed that like the sloths, they subsisted by climbing, back downward, on trees, and feeding on the leaves. It was a bold idea to conceive even antediluvian trees with branches strong enough to bear animals as large as elephants."

So, if you readers don't think trees get as big as I say they do on Venus—see what they think of trees on earth at one time.—Author

Ceulna and I were called out to the field. Putting on air helmets, we entered the water-filled interior of the flyer, and Oltissa gave us a brief explanation.

"You see, Hogan—or should I say Steel—when I was drawn from the ship you thought me dead. But some of those devils of Hecate's revived me by use of the strong beneficial—and after a time I regained my strength. When Hecate's fleet was blown up,—the rest of Hecate's garrison fled, leaving us locked in our cells where they had been saving us for one of their orgies of cruelty—or for some purpose similar. I burst the doors with my strength; freed Hyplotee; found a ship and rejoined my people. Now I am here—alive—to take you and show you what has become of the evil life that was Hecate—the mighty.

"Hecate is near death. I thought you and Steel—or Hogan, as I call him, would like to see what time has done to her—what evil has caught up with Hecate at the end. You will not enjoy it though I suppose you should, for you two have suffered as much as anyone from her work. But seat yourselves, and I will take you to her."

A half-hour later Oltissa dived the little flyer deep into the mighty sea of Venus. I can't tell you where it was, and Oltissa was not very explicit. In the depths we glided into the great tunnel opening on the bottom where lay a city of the Sea People, called Mer-trop. It was one of their largest and oldest cities, besides being the capital city of their vast state. Under its rule were the many cities of the seas of Venus, as well as colonies on Earth, Mars, and a small settlement on Mercury.

Oltissa wasted no time on social amenities. She led us deep into the bowels of the undersea, water-filled

caverns of the city. There we entered an air-filled room, and took off our helmets, glad to escape the terrible pressure. It was a great laboratory, fitted up for the purpose of getting Hecate's knowledge, while the opportunity offered.

IN the center of the room, surrounded by busy scientists and workmen, taking thought records and asking detailed questions, sat the mighty Hecate—no longer mighty. As I approached, a gasp of horror was wrung from me. A pity sprang into my breast in spite of my loathing for the creature. Without her daily infusion from the veins of doomed children, Hecate's tremendous age was taking its terrible toll. Shrivelled to a greater cadaverousness than any mummy ever exhibited, life still glowed in her fierce yellow eyes, but nowhere else on her horrible shrinking bones was there much evidence of life. Over her played the extremely potent beneficial rays of the mighty science of the Sea People, for it was not yet time for her to die—there were still things they might learn from her mind. But I knew that those rays alone held life in the body that had cheated death so long. I understood that not for all the wisdom in the world would Hecate receive one drop of blood from a child of the Sea People—or from any other child on Venus.

The long black hair that had streamed in such witch-like tresses from her head, was now snow white and for the most part gone. Over her head was the thought recording helmet, but her face was revealed under its metal intricacy. Her face, that had been hard as a rock and flushed so pinkly under the grey skin with the plentiful stolen blood, now was a real grey of death, and furrowed with wrinkle on wrinkle till the shrunk, horrible

mouth alone gave the face any resemblance to the human.

Her huge bones, covered only by the folds of grey skin and the shrunk, twisted muscles, moved slowly as she tried to hide her face from my eyes, my eyes that must have shown all the revulsion which I had always felt for her but had never been able to heed. The woman that still lived in her trying to hide that horror of a face from her unwilling lover's eyes—that last gesture of insane vanity in the creature that had been the powerful and heartless Hecate—was the the last straw to break the thread that had bound me to her will with such strength for so long a time. At last my mind was free of the compulsion her witch-art had put upon me.

It seems to me that nature has a balance wheel of some kind, a kind of inexorable weighing device that exacts its pay for every mistake made by the mind of man, that Hecate had had time to make all the mistakes possible, and was now paying for all of them before she died. For I believe that men can beat age, but cannot truly beat evil, and that age and evil are allied in some way, physically allied because results of the same primal cause. Though Hecate had beaten age, she had not beaten evil, and all the evil she had done was now descended upon her, and her face and form, once the epitome of hardy and ruthless strength, was now giving up the last shred of its stolen strength to the inexorable natural law called the conservation of energy. Nature has a purpose, and all strength that is diverted from the path of that purpose is sooner or later returned to the primal store and will again be used toward the original purpose.

HECATE was in agony. All her bones seemed to be aches, by the expression in her face, and the effects

of age increased visibly as we watched. Feebly she beckoned to me, and I approached her, though it required a strong effort of will to overcome the loathing in me.

"My American fighter, the only man of courage sufficient for me to admire—do not remember me this way. Think of me as one that meant you well in spite of the furies of Hell that lived in her." Her voice was a gasping croak from the pit.

"That is a strange speech to hear from you, Hecate. But you were always a contradiction. Hecate, if in the place you are going there is a way to live, remember this—life loves life in other things as well as in itself. And when a life does not love the life in others, it has died. You have been dead longer than you know, but your foul methods have kept you alive in spite of the death of the real life in you. It is not a real life—evil life. Hecate, I am sorry for your life, that could have been so much—yet was only negative in value."

That terrible claw, that had caused the death of untold armies in the far reaches of the past through which she had lived and fought triumphantly as an immortal being of the Devil's own wisdom, reached up and touched me vaguely, as a senile mother might touch a grandson. "You remember this, my strong one—evil does not give pleasure. Evil is a possession—and not the self—and when your soul becomes an evil alien living inside you—have the courage to die; do not fight on for life as I did. There is no way known to drive the evil self out, once it is in possession. Even I do not understand evil. But it is not thought or reason; my own logic always told me the opposite of my evil will—but the evil was stronger than logic. It is like an ever-anger that takes away the wits, and lives on and on—

never thinking—just being always angry. It is a horrible life I have lived—and talking this way is not my will, but only the weakness of death. I have no remorse—but only these thoughts that go round in my head about you. I have a gift for you—a great gift that only I can give. It is a hidden mechanism—a very strange and wonderful machine. In this locket is the secret of its hiding place. Take it."

I TRIED to thank her, for though

Hecate deserved nothing from me or any other sane man—still I could have pity for the fallen. But she strove to raise that claw again for silence, saying—"Man, if you get that machine from its hiding place, and learn what it may teach you, you will become a greater man than any other. There is a mighty wisdom in it—but I could never use its teaching, for my evil self would not let me obey its teaching. Perhaps you are man enough to make your will do what this machine teaches you to do. Goodby, my poor confused one. Remember that Hecate laughs at you, too, for a foolish child whom it pleased her to amuse herself with. But my laugh has a good thing in it, too. It is a laugh at everything in life. It is not worth much, my big one. Work to make it so, but you will not live to see it become anything of great value. But work, if you love those laughing children—and mayhap you can make up for what my life has cost them. Not that it matters; foolish men are but ants with little brains. But it seems men must try to become something, for the Gods so decreed. If you ever get where you have the power, my friend, flee the sun. It is the cause of man's worthlessness. Once, long ago in the times we of the caves know of—men were not such feeble ants, but mighty and Godlike. Flee the sun, and you may become as they

were. Now, go, and forget you ever knew me."

I didn't go at once, however, for I was curious about something. "Hecate, how is it you never followed up the lead that Hyplotee had of the location of the master weapons of Venus?"

"She had a map in her memory, yes, but it was a map in a code I could not decipher. I would have, in time, but I did not get the time. I am glad it is over and you are free—O man among men. If I had had you in the beginning, it would have been different. It would have been you and I—Lords of all Earth." For a second the mighty spirit that had driven her through the

deserts of time for so many centuries, driven her to surmount so many terrific obstacles, blazed forth from her yellow eyes, but in an instant it was gone, and only a dying, gigantic old woman remained—no terrible Goddess, but a loathsome thing that lived on blood and could not get any. My heart praised the fates that had at last brought Hecate low.

I turned, tucking the locket into my shirt pocket. Ceulna took my arm, and we left the chamber where the last pitiful scene in the mighty drama that had been the life of the vampire, Hecate, the Mother of Sin, was drawing swiftly to a close.

AMAZING Facts

By
A. MORRIS

THE LOUSE IN HISTORY

FEW of us are aware of the tremendous role that most despised of earthly creatures, the louse, has played in history. As a bearer of one of the most dreaded diseases inflicted upon mankind—typhus—lice have sometimes been the deciding factor in losing or winning a war.

Throughout all past ages lice have played an intimate role in the social life of the human race. During Montezuma's rule in Mexico, the Indians had such a sense of duty to pay tribute to their ruler that the poorest, if they had nothing else to offer, daily cleaned their bodies and saved the lice. And when they had enough to fill a bag, they laid it at the feet of their king.

Lice have even been important in politics. They were used to decide elections in the town of Hurdenburg, Sweden, during the Middle Ages. When a mayor was to be elected, the eligible persons sat around a table with their heads bowed forward, allowing their beards to rest on the table. A louse was then placed in the center of the table. The man into whose beard the louse adventured was the mayor for the ensuing year.

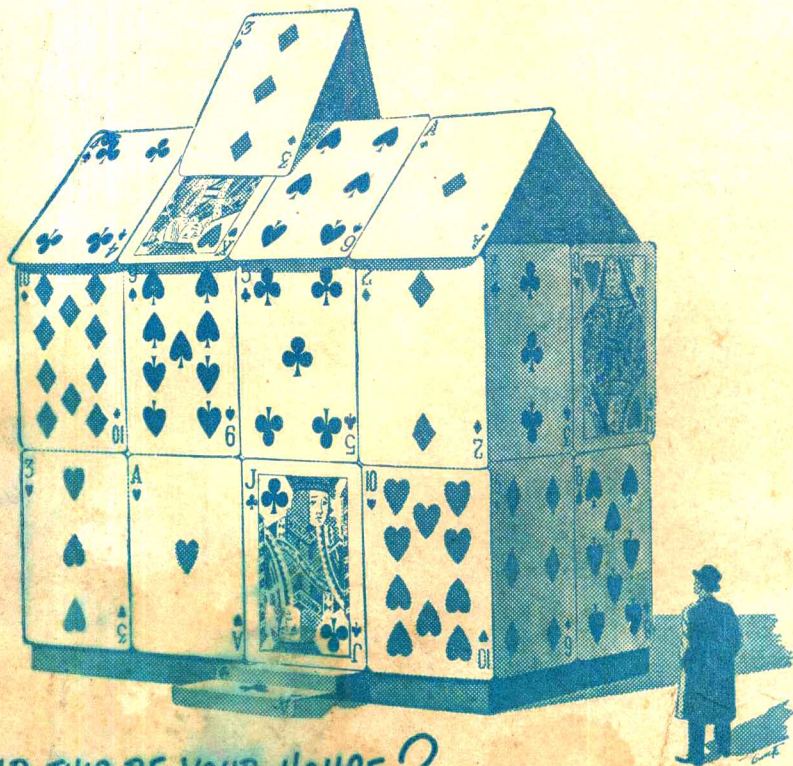
Gentlemen and ladies all over Europe resorted to shaving their heads and wearing wigs in an effort to rid themselves of vermin.

As late as the eighteenth century scientists were harboring a misconception about the louse. Some went so far as to suggest that children were protected by their lice from a number of diseases.

The manner of living throughout the Middle Ages made the spread of lice inevitable. Houses of the poor were mere hovels. Washing was practically out of the question—and all classes, high and low alike wore a great many clothes which they rarely changed. Nowadays lice are not the common pest they once were. But as everyone who has experienced war knows, let soap become scarce, or a change of clothing be delayed—and it takes no time at all before the louse comes back to its own.

STAINLESS STEEL STITCHES

THREADS made of stainless steel as fine as human hair are used as a nonabsorbable suture material. Wounds sewed with steel can be exposed to heat and X-Ray treatments with excellent results. The stainless steel thread is pliable, has high tensile strength and can be knotted easily. This metal suture is expected to take its place along with such materials as catgut, silk, nylon, cotton, linen and horsehair now being used in surgery.



COULD THIS BE YOUR HOUSE?

Now that the war's over and a lot more civilian goods are on the market, it's a big temptation to spend just about all you make, and not put anything aside.

But to fall for that temptation is plenty dangerous. It's like trying to live in the house above—a house that might come tumbling down about your ears at the first little blow of hard luck.

Right now the best possible way to keep your finances in sound shape is to save regularly—by buying *U. S. Savings Bonds through the Payroll Plan*.

These Bonds are exactly like War Bonds. Millions of Americans have found them the

safest, easiest, surest way to save. The U.S.A. protects every dollar you invest—and Uncle Sam gives you his personal guarantee that, in just ten years, you'll get *four dollars back for every three you put in!*

If you stick with the Payroll Savings Plan, you'll not only guard against rainy days, you'll *also* be storing up money for the really important things—like sending your children to college, traveling, or buying a home.

So—any way you look at it—isn't it smart to buy every single U. S. Bond you can possibly afford!

Stick with the Payroll Savings Plan!

**SAVE THE EASY WAY... BUY YOUR BONDS
THROUGH PAYROLL SAVINGS**

ZIFF-DAVIS PUBLISHING COMPANY

*This is an official U. S. Treasury advertisement—prepared under auspices of
Treasury Department and Advertising Council*

STORIES OF THE STARS....ALTAIR

Altair is a star in the constellation Aquila. It is a giant star, and most likely has a number of planets circling it, some of which are capable of supporting living things. Artist Paul has pictured one of those planets and imagined its inhabitants. (See page 177)

