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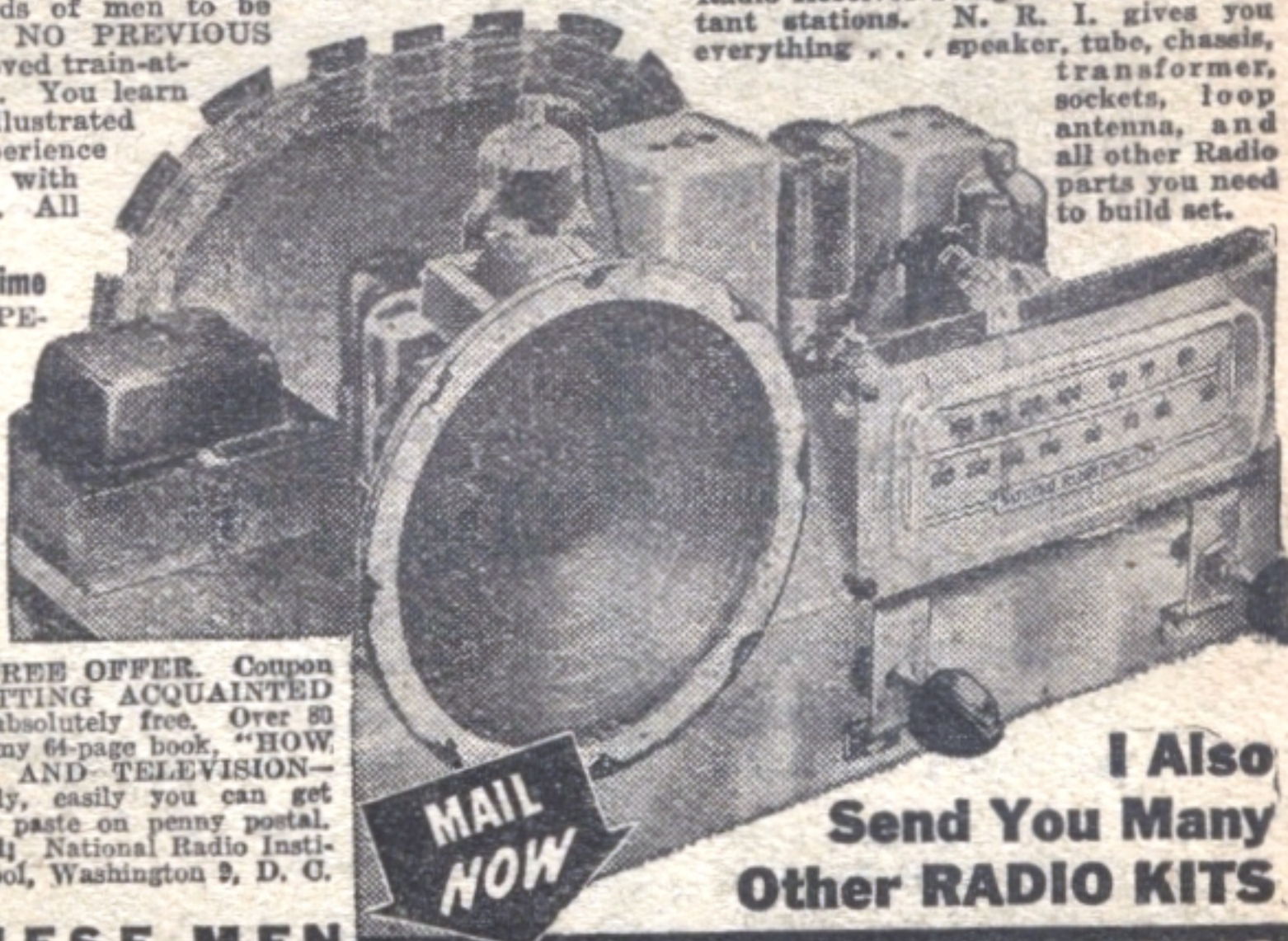
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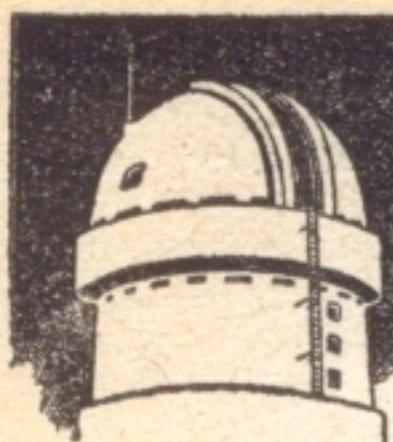
Cover painting by Arnold Kohn, illustrating a
scene from "We Dance for the Dom"

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The OBSERVATORY

Presents

THE NEW EDITOR



HOWARD BROWNE

WITH THIS first issue of 1950, Howard Browne takes the reins from the capable hands of Raymond A. Palmer as the new editor-in-chief of **AMAZING STORIES**. We consider ourselves extremely fortunate in having been able to lure away from the gold signs and glamor of Hollywood, this extremely capable and prolific author of five best-selling novels, innumerable science-fiction stories, over 500 radio scripts, and several movie scenarios. This is probably the first time in history that a magazine has stolen a stellar writer from Hollywood, rather than the other way around.

FROM A childhood spent in Arapahoe and Lincoln, Nebraska, Howard moved to

Chicago when he was 18. Shortly thereafter, a chance occurrence led him to read a textbook on creative writing and then, more as a gag than anything else, he tried his hand at doing fiction. He was startlingly successful from the very beginning—and achieved great popularity in pulp science-fiction under numerous pseudonyms.

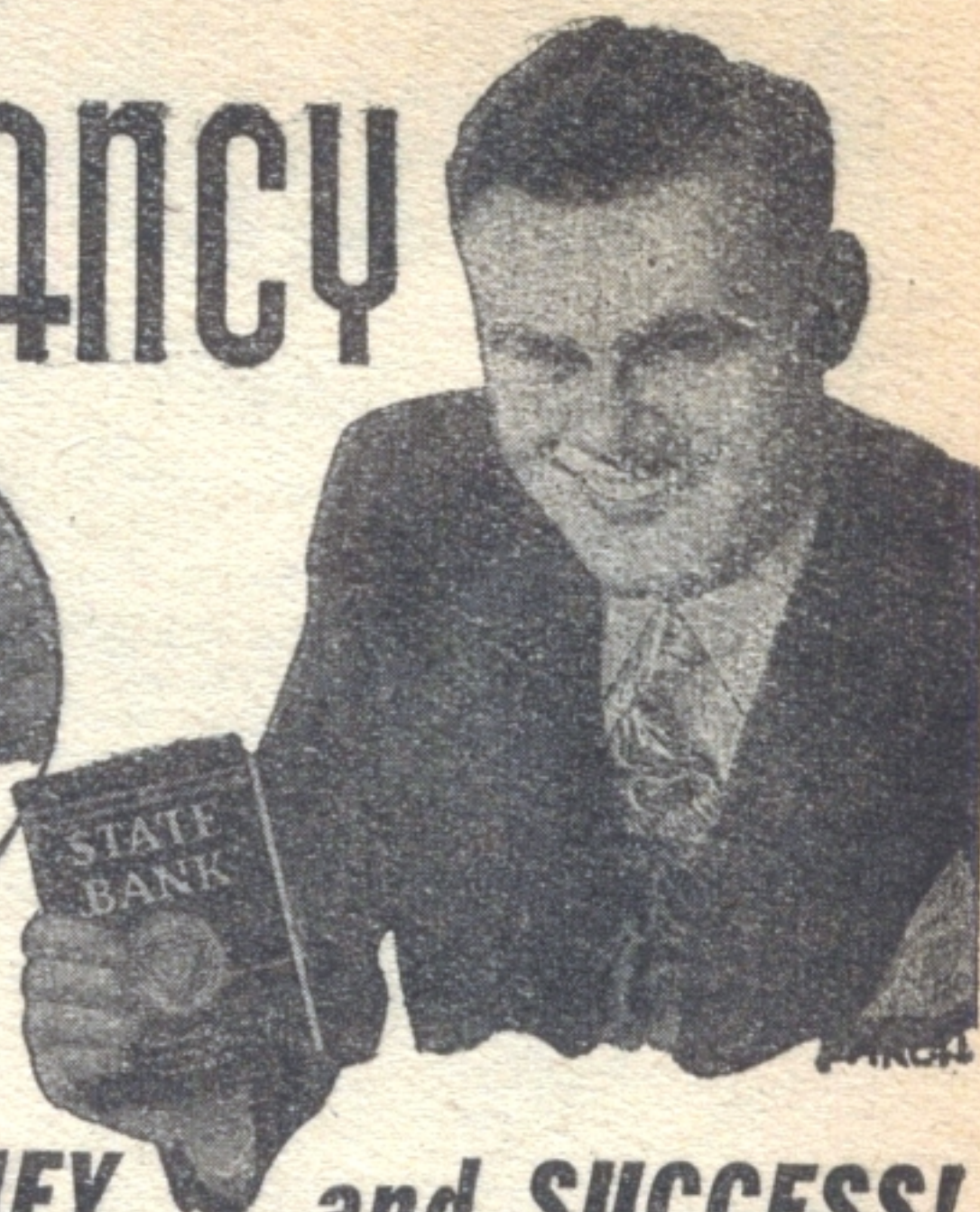
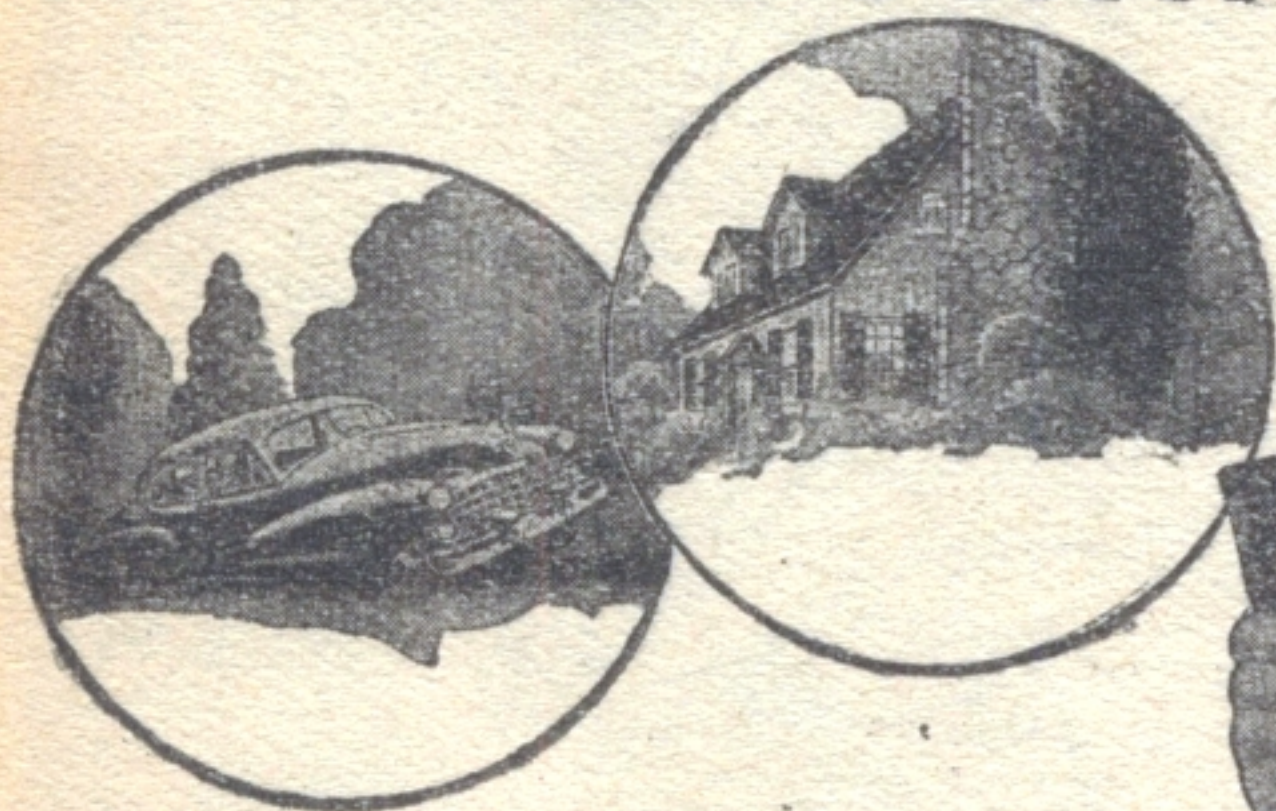
UNDER HIS now famous pen name of John Evans, he has established an enviable reputation for himself as a writer of outstanding mystery-suspense novels, and has been acclaimed by reviewers as being among the best mystery writers of our time.

IN THE field of science-fiction, his first book, **WARRIOR OF THE DAWN**, published over seven years ago, is still bringing in royalty checks. And at least three of his book-length novels were adjudged to be among the most popular published during 1948 — **FORGOTTEN WORLDS**, **THE MAN FROM YESTERDAY**, and **THE RETURN OF THARN** (a sequel to **WARRIOR OF THE DAWN**).

MANAGING EDITOR of the Ziff-Davis Fiction Group for five years before leaving for Hollywood two years ago to devote all his time to writing, Howard has a true feeling for the editor-writer-reader relationship which is so all-important in the successful publishing of a top-flight magazine. And within due course, as soon as he becomes rehabilitated in his new job, we have his promise of original stories from his own pen along the lines of his earlier novels.

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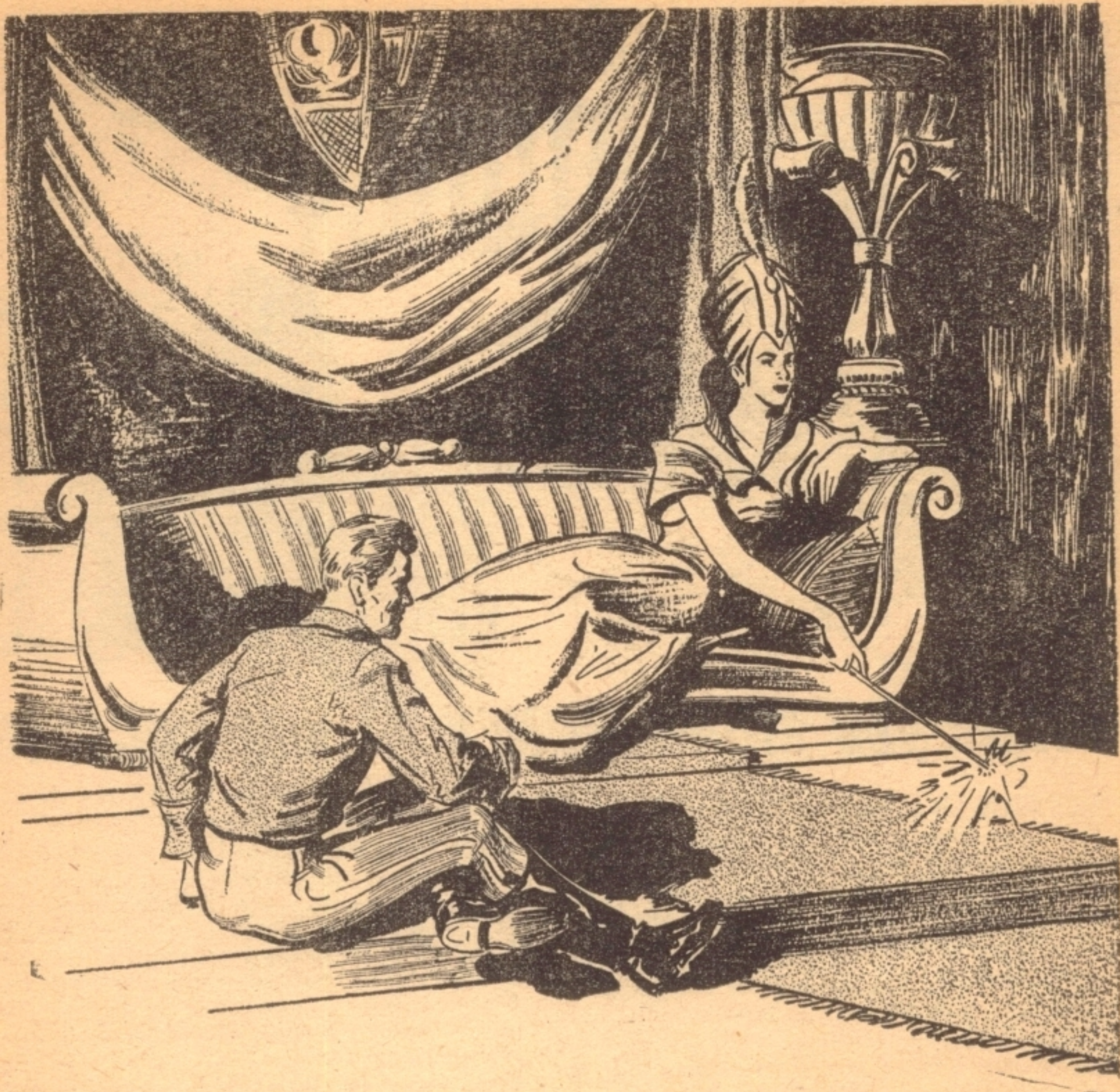
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WE DANCE for the DOM

By Richard S. Shaver

The Dom had a triple crown, and it was by a strange circumstance indeed that he set it on Green Wing's head!

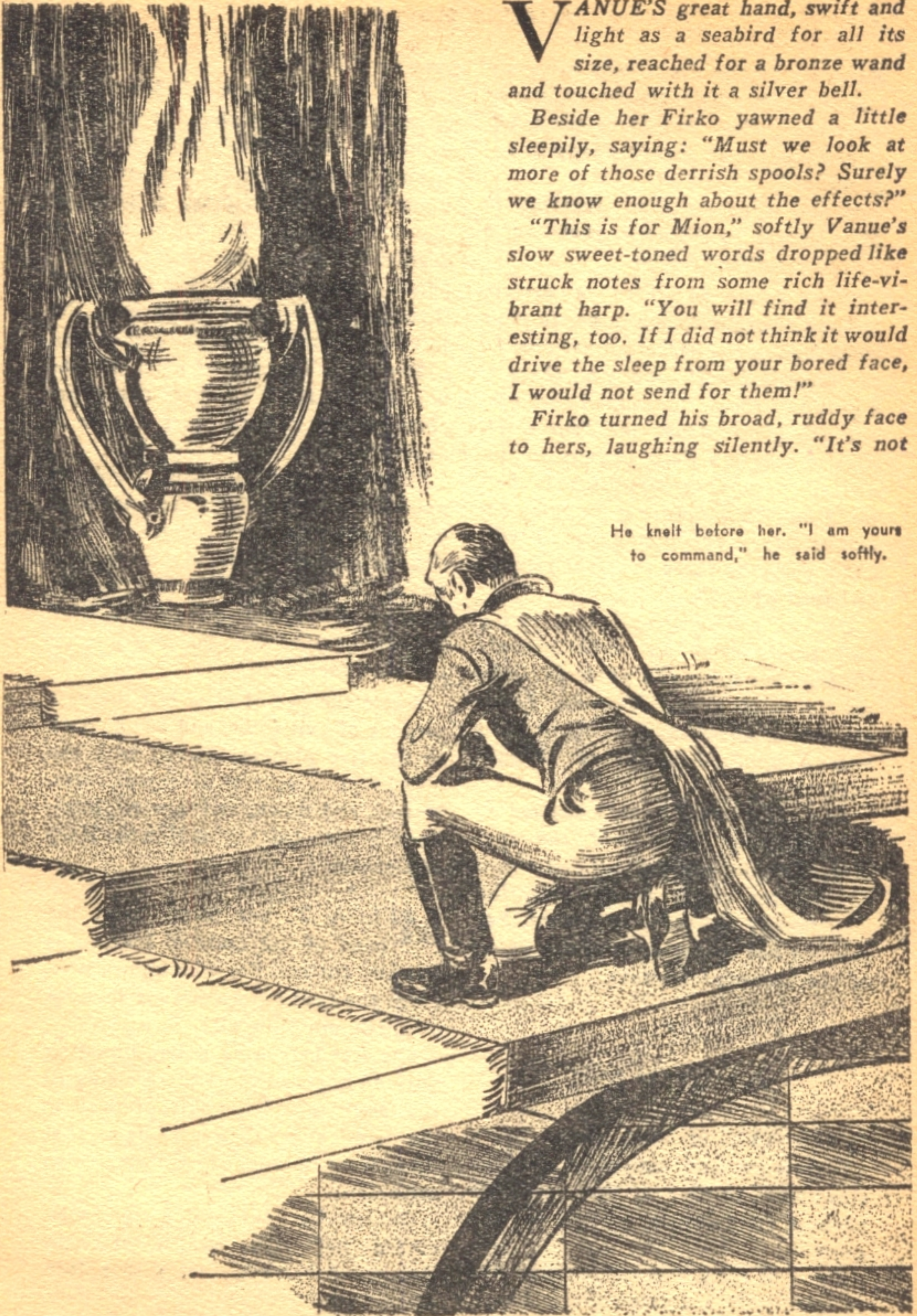
VANUE'S great hand, swift and light as a seabird for all its size, reached for a bronze wand and touched with it a silver bell.

Beside her Firko yawned a little sleepily, saying: "Must we look at more of those derrish spools? Surely we know enough about the effects?"

"This is for Mion," softly Vanue's slow sweet-toned words dropped like struck notes from some rich life-vibrant harp. "You will find it interesting, too. If I did not think it would drive the sleep from your bored face, I would not send for them!"

Firko turned his broad, ruddy face to hers, laughing silently. "It's not

He knelt before her. "I am yours to command," he said softly.



sleep, its dreams from your eyes, the magic of your hair, the moonshine of your ivory flesh caught in my mind. A man in love is always sleepy in appearance."

Vanue ignored him, turning to Mion, come to Falnorn, their home on the satellite of Enn.

"You came to learn a certain method of organization to use in your work among the barbarian nations. In the records I will show you, there is a group of races, intermixed throughout one giant planet and four satellites. These are dark planets in unstarred space, yet their culture is shattered and falls before a singular societies grasp for dominance. I will show you why these peaceful peoples fell into war..."

One of the floating-haired young Nor maids came on quick silkenly sliding feet upon the glittering mirror-floor. Into her Mistress' hands she put a file-disc, bearing in slots near a hundred spools of thought wire.

The fluorescing vapors swirled in the prisoning force field, the augmented record reached out and seized us with the greater-than-reality illusion that is the value of record. For one can not forget or miss one detail of the recorded wisdom.

* * *

CHAPTER ONE

THE EYE of view swept space through and narrowed on the slow, slow, turning of four dark balls about a fifth—much greater and the center.

Each of them was starred with the red and gold and green of city domes. The red were the factory cities, the green the places of growth of plants for food, and the gold were where the peoples lived—and lived for the plea-

sure of life alone.

Then oddly, the eye of view swept up and away from the five balls of spinning rock, and outward for a space. Narrowing again to closer view upon a vague drifting, a glowing cloud wide-flung like a great river of deadly, venomous mist-force. A serpentine tide of dust-motes, giving off through the projection-screen the jarring vibrance of exploding atoms.

The slow, impersonal voice of Vanue struck again through the great chamber, and Mion's heart rose to it as always:

"The current already impinges upon the orbit of Gran Jac, the largest planet. For one month of our days it has so flowed. I want you to notice the change. It is my purpose to show the error it brings into their pattern of life. Greater it grows as the flow increases."

Again the eye of view left the vast serpent of evil force, and swung back to the five planets, starred with the city keeps of several divergent races. Nearer, and down, and now alighting upon a wide balcony within the Keep of Dorneen.

* * *

MELOA T, her name, upon the band of her carnival bonnet, as was the custom. For who knows who, when the mad gaiety sweeps in tides of mirth, mingling all?

She stood, looking down, brooding with an anger strange there above all the laughter and the skirl of music in the wide plaza below. Anger that these were untouched, while her own mate...

Golden her skin, blue and soft-curved her rich wealth of hair. Brown-red her eyes, hot with a deep resentment against Fate, or men. Some thing upon which she could not quite pin the fault.

Glittering the badge hidden from the casual eye between her firm

breasts—that badge the sign of the Winged Blade, set with the single green gem of Dom, given her as a special honor by the Triple Crown himself.

Puzzled her thought, for until a month ago, peace had lain like a blanket of warm benevolence between the five planets—and now had struck the plague!

The plague, strange rumours of its being spread by conspirators, and deaths unexplained even by the plague. To top it, her own Kal Harn had shown the angry red spot to her inadvertently. She knew!

Silly of him to avoid her, to pretend anger, she knew it meant death. That he should think she wanted life without him! Yet, he would not come near her. Even now he waited in the hidden craft among the cold rocks outside, that had brought her. Locked in, he spoke to her only through the telaug disc within her shoulder ornament.

Kal Harn, an Eagle Blade, to fall among the first! When the sudden need was so great, their peril, unexpected—finding them all at a loss.

A soft sound, behind—she whirled.

Kal Harn himself, come here in spite of the spot upon his arm! She put up her arms to him, but his lean face remained aloof, he put her arms aside.

"It can't hurt to look, poor devils. They are all laughing to keep out the fear. To have one last fling before..."

Even as Meloa noted he had forgotten to conceal the Eagle Blade, shining symbol upon his bright green tunic with the silver star beneath, as if even *here* the Blades had no enemies—the man came from the doorway, on the run!

He left his feet two paces away, and struck Kal with both knees high in the small of his back.

Kal fell with a groan, as the Felar-

nese, his black-bristled face distorted with savage, strange hate, tugged a leaden sap from his hip, swung it up.

Kneeling there on Kal, he ignored Meloa as a helpless bit of decoration, which was a vast mistake.

MELOA CAUGHT the heavy sap as he swung it down—in her palm, wrenched and twisted hard. The leather and lead came free from his clutch, and Meloa swung as quick as a striking snake—down upon the shaven head of the attacker.

Head and sap made a sickening dull thud together. The thing was heavier than it seemed, but even as he pitched forward she struck again, above his ear. He fell across Kal's back, so that she had to roll him over to get him off.

Kal grinned weakly. "I can't get used to this! We never had trouble with the Felarnese, much as they may hate us. Now, they're after our blood on sight!"

"You!" Meloa could not keep the angry scorn out of her voice. "You knew, yet you wore the Blade in plain sight! What kind of agent are you? Don't you even know why we are here?"

Kal looked at her dumbly, rubbing his side.

"Oh, Kal, you are sicker than you realize! Please let me take you now, this nad, to Med-Center."

Kal sat up, still rubbing his back.

"Did you tell me why we're here, darling? I didn't attend the meeting, you know."

"I tried to, but how do I know if you listened when you wouldn't even let me see you? If you had remained in the ship, as you said! It wouldn't have mattered. Now, we're spotted!"

"Maybe not. It doesn't matter now anyway. Hear the call?"

From the disc on her shoulder or-

nament, and the one hidden in his uniform cap, was coming the thin scream of summons. They knew what the sound meant, though no one but a Blade would even have noticed the thin, eery vibration, almost inaudible.

"The Teyna screams!" said Meloa, gripping with her hands the strong arm of Kal Harn, now leaning sickened against the balustrade. The attacker's knees had struck hard and deep, leaving agony in the soft kidney region.

"They sent us here, to Dornoon. Now they summon us back! Something has happened. And we have learned nothing."

"We have learned the Felarnese seek our lives. It is much, the Blades needed to be sure of that."

Meloa still stood over the prone, long limbed body of the unconscious foreigner, the sap swinging in her hand thoughtfully. Kal frowned.

"Long, long have the rumours floated, but it meant little. Now, suddenly, all the little states are splitting off from the Triple Crown, the Dom knows not where to turn. All falls upon we Blades. We must pin down the center from which this death purpose flows. Perhaps there is no center, but only some madness without real plan. Perhaps it is the plague, the fear of it, the attempt to retreat into isolation and so stem the spread of it."

Meloa snorted, wrinkling her nose in unmaidenly disgust. "You think like any babe! It is the Triple Crown they want, and these dissident groups are aggravated by false attacks—and so are turned against the Dom by some plotting group. We will find them, and the struggle will cease as quickly as it began. The ancient compact can not fall! The progress of a century of peace would be wiped out. All will be at the throats of the other again, as in the old days. It cannot

be! Someone must see to that!"

"You're too optimistic," said Kal. "The Dom is old, and too cunning for his own good. He is not trusted, too often have his little schemes been exposed to his discredit. You are prejudiced because the Dom favored you with the green star on your Blade insignia, you are blinded by gratitude. This struggle will not cease while he lives."

"There are grievances, true. But not serious, nor really worth their lives!"

"Freedom can seem worth many lives, and long have these Felarnese wanted rule by a family of their own blood, their own race. He fended them off with his cousins, with the Green Wing of the Tal—and they hate the Tal, even if the Wing is beautiful, she can never win them over truly."

"Stand here, when the bird of war screams from our discs! This traitor stirs, we have to leave or deal with him."

The pair moved off toward the door, even as the man on the floor lifted his head, his face rapt with thought. He had overheard and understood where it was they went, and who they were. He had been told only to kill the man, now two were to be dealt with. Well, it was news the Blades considered the Tal of their own party! The fools!

* * *

VANUE'S VOICE blended with the skirl of the Sendal dance music from the pipes of the revelers, as she murmured:

"Note, Mion, how the thoughts of these peoples turn to struggle as the serpent tide of oncoming space dust thickens about their worlds. The fangs of the serpent head only touch the five planets, and already the once

unified races split and prepare for struggle. Kind against kind, mind against mind—the dis-illusion strikes error deep into all the thought pattern. Death-dealing WAR only can come of their thought, for such is the error! Magnetically the splitting of all the planned unity occurs even as it is pictured in the mind screens within the brains ignorant of the cause of such thoughts. It is simple when one observes afar as we are doing, but it is impossible to avoid the error when the mind itself and those of all about suffer from the sundering repellant magnetism from the ions of decay brought by the flow from space.”

Mion scarce heard the voice of her, blending as it did with the scene through which the two Blades pushed, angling toward the far bottleneck where the crystal-clear dome of the Keep gave on the air-locks that kept out of the cold of the sunless world.

KAL HARN followed close on the heels of the tall lithe girl; Amazon-strong gleaming-sheathed in smooth green syntha-skin.

Kal tried hard to avoid contact with the untainted bodies about him, keeping the stricken arm under his cloak, letting the girl ahead make path. The fear of giving the plague etched his face with lines of worry. None knew the cause or how it spread. Only they knew that remorselessly it struck—

After the two darted the tall, lean, dark-faced Felarn spy, his whole appearance foreign here among the blue-haired Nines, off-shoot as they were of Meloa's own race of Node. He must not lose sight! Freedom from the Dom, independence for his race—hung upon letting no Blade move unattended. Had not the Green Wing promised? The Cranes would not fail

her. They could not, once that ally was lost, only defeat would be theirs!

Kal Harn, head turning constantly to avoid contact, caught a glimpse of the dark, intent face. He whirled, leaped, drew back his arm. His fist lashed out, landing high on the swarthy cheek-bone. The man staggered. Kal brought his right up from the ground, but the spy swayed easily outside, and came back with two swift blows to his face, blinding Kal.

Kal gave him elbows, to keep him off till his eyes cleared. The angry plague spot on his arm throbbed painfully, reminding him he might be dooming this man to the same fate—but he buried the thought. The spy brought up a knee that found the pit of his stomach. Harn reeled back, and the man's fist crashed again and again to his face in swift fury. Then, he saw again clearly, and blocked a blow, catching it on the palm of his hand. He feinted with his left, the arm that hurt now terribly. The spy ducked the expected blow, and Harn blasted his right to the jaw with everything he had. The bones seemed to give, the man crumpled, caught himself, sagged to one knee, holding his face. Merciless, Kal slugged him twice on the temple and he sprawled unconscious. Kal stood there, nursing his bleeding knuckles.

He hated that throbbing spot on his arm. Why, why, he wondered? Why death for the Blades? Just what did the Felarnese mean by following, by attacking a Blade? One would have thought the man would have given up after the first attempt failed. They must have been given orders to kill or follow to destination all Blades—to follow until they knew where they could be found by a force sufficient to kill them. But what did they expect to gain by killing a few Blades? They were too many for

such tactics to eliminate them soon enough to save the Felarnese from their vengeance. Kal shrugged the problem off as Meloa tugged at his sleeve.

CHAPTER TWO

OUTSIDE THE Keep, the still stars blazed afar, the naked rock reared black and stark, streaked with the silver of ancient ice unmelted.

Kal and Meloa ran in long leaps, their muscles were strained in the gravity of Gran Jac, as were all the Blades during their youth. The gravity of this lesser satellite Dornoon was slight compared to that of Gran Jac or even of Node.

On the left, in the sky, the vast black round that was Gran Jac hung like the mysterious home of giants of the darkness that it was. A tremendous round scarred shield, dotted here and there with the great dull red gems that were the cities of the giant men of Gran Jac.

Beside Gran Jac moved visibly the tiny brilliant marble that was Felarn, rapid in its orbit, and farther on the broad sweet green round of Node, gemmed with the sapphires that were cities, and hung about with the golden rayed fires of the heat spheres. The other satellite of Gran Jac was hidden by the bulk of Dornoon beneath their feet.

In his heart, Kal felt a swift pulse of longing for the sweet air of Node, cleaned as it was by the white leaves of the pale trees that grew there only.

For Node, the mother of both the Nines and the Nodes, had long ago been warmed by the heat spheres set aswing above her by the father of science.

Node alone had natural air and plants, unlike the more backward Gran Jac and the satellites.

The secret of powering the heat

spheres had been kept by the ancient Doms of Node. One more rankling issue—that secret—perhaps the paramount cause of the recent turbulence.

Even as Kal stared up nostalgically at the dim green glow of Node, the weakness struck him!

He fell, cracking his head globe against the black rocks. Meloa, with no time to think, for air gushed instantly from the long fissure in the plastic, picked him up in her two arms and ran on, hardly missing a stride. His weight was no great burden here.

Frantically she turned the dial set in the round lock face of the space. Bundled Harn in, swung shut the heavy metal, snapped the dogs, pulled down the air lever. Unscrewed his broken head-piece, threw it aside, raised his head:

"Kal, speak! Speak to me, darling!"

Listening for his breath, faint it was and weak, but stronger breath by breath. He sighed, moved his stricken arm.

"I've got to take off, Kal," panted Meloa. "There may be others, now that they know us. Only the carnival law forbidding weapons saved us. I'll strap you in. We have to report, and then you're for the Med-center."

Kal struggled to his feet with her help, staggered to his acceleration cradle, lay half unconscious while she strapped him in, pneumo-pads tight about him.

"Melo, I'm done. I don't like the outlook, better it might be if you turned in your Blade sign. Give up your commission—return to your home. There is some vile mystery about this sudden rising of the Clans, of the Felarnese, of the Gran Jac Ultimatum to the Dom. He cannot win, and only a fool gives allegiance to a fool. How the Dom got himself into this, I know not, nor how he can retrieve anything. Get out, while there

is time! I cannot help you!"

Meloa touched his hot face with the tips of her fingers. "Don't think of it, Kal. Forget the struggle and get well. I will do what seems best."

"I don't trust the Dom, long ago I learned that about him that is not to be mentioned. Long as I have served him loyally, still I have always known there was reason to doubt him."

Kal tried to go on talking, but his voice trailed off weakly, his eyes closed. Meloa darted forward to the controls, snapped the pads tight about the pilot seat, pulled back the throttle. The center jet roared, the black dark outside was lashed with a great whip of glaring yellow light as the little ship curved steeply up, swung in a long turn and arrowed away toward the gemmed green disc of distant Node.

* * *

BENEATH THE Palace of the Triple Dome, there was a retreat known to few, built centuries ago by the first Dom of Node. Cut from the solid rose-granite on which the three towers rested, a long low-arching tunnel of a room, the harsh rock yet unsoftened even by the spilled luxury of furs and hung tapestries. The soft body of the old Dom was ill at ease, always, here.

It was a warrior's room, and the Dom was no warrior, the blood of the Doms had run thin long ago. If, in truth, he was of the Blood. Even that had been whispered of him.

He sat, wearily turning the pages of a worn leather-bound volume, listening to the increasing stir with a worried ear. Sounds from the palace chambers above were brought down here by a speaking tube, cunningly contrived to augment even a whisper to audible volume. Many a secret plot he had spied upon from this place,

with his ears only, given thus power to hear in all the important rooms of the palace.

The time was almost at hand, and he must reveal to these simple-minded followers of his the truth of their predicament. Would they retain their ancient loyalty, or turn and flee, leaving him defenseless to face the long-gathering wrath?

Idly his still-bright eyes ran over the dull type, reading:

"For an age the black skinned giant race of Gran Jac held all dominance, all rule, over the five planets. And no man knows how long this was true, for the giants destroyed the written records of the smaller races of the satellites. But in those days, every city dome raised its own food, the warmth provided by localized fires from local power sources. Even oil and coal were brought and burned, even into historic times this work of mankind was paramount, mining fuel and raising food kept the energies of man directed only to the creating of gardens that they might live. And the great size of Gran Jac races made them unequalled in battle, and a harsh rule they exercised—taking the little people off to the great domes of Gran Jac to labor or to die. And many did die, before their muscles hardened to the great weight of the planet.

Then, after all that dark time, came the man named Enuj Ra, who ingeniously created the first fire-globe of undying warmth, and set it aswing above the dead cold round of his planet, our own mother Node. At first the men of Gran Jac laughed at the pretty toy, but the people of Node, overjoyed at the possibilities, helped Enuj Ra create more and bigger fire-globes and tow them into their orbits above Node. Gradually the warmth spread, the air became atmosphere instead of ice, plants began to appear—and the men of Gran Jac came to

superintend the planting of the whole planet for their food.

But Enuj Ra was proven truly a genius, then. He hid himself away, and upon the arrival of the great ships of Gran Jac, he turned the master switch, and each fire globe went instantly out, in the sky above. Raging were the giants to learn that no food would they get from the new power unless Node was given freedom. Searching and tumult filled Node, as they sought out the genius—but find him they did not...

"Enuj Ra," murmured the Dom. "If your shade had the power, he could do another good turn tonight.

CALMLY THE old Dom, of the blood of Enuj Ra himself, read on. Overhead the muffled sound of the gathering grew, and his ears counted the slow sound of the chronodisc gear.

"Thus by secrecy insuring the dominance of the people of Node over all races of the five planets, having in his hands complete control over the new and so-needed food supply, Enuj Ra bided his time. Ten cycles of fruitful food production must go by, the multiplying mouths fed by the new abundance must grow into manhood. Enuj Ra waited, and at the proper time, dominance was assured because all the races of the five planets must have the food that Node produced. Then Enuj Ra again shut off the power of the fire-globes, and announced that unless a treaty accepted and favorable to all of the five planets was agreed upon by the giant blacks of Gran Jac—there would be no more food from Node.

Thus our great forebear brought about the existence of the Triple Crown, based upon the possession of the food supply by Node, and since that day no military action has been

taken without the signature of the regnant Dom of Node..."

The old man sighed, put up the worn volume. He took up the Triple Crown from where it blazed green and gold upon a pillow of scarlet, and set it on his greying head. He took up the gold crook, set with the sign of the Teyna, the ancient bird of war of Node. He muttered:

"Now must I tell them that the day of peace is past, and our hold upon the life-line, the bread and fruit of the five planets—is broken and gone, and again the men of Node must accept the slave collars of the men of Gran Jac."

He stood for a time, gazing into a gaping burnt place in the solid stone of the wall. Short nads ago, one turning of Gran Jac upon its axis—that hole had been a door of ancient impermeable metal, inviolate, shielding with its unsolvable locking dials the formulas of the Fire Globe, just as they had been placed there by the dying Enuj Ra.

"Which of those I have welcomed here, could it have been?" muttered the Dom, touching the ragged fragments of burnt metal and splintered rock. "There were but four knew what it contained. My two sons, Reb Ra and Naj Ra, they are on Gran Jac, at the training schools. That leaves two—The Green Star and the Green Wing of the Dal. Brother and sister—heirs by blood—what advantage would they win in possessing the secret? Do they desire this crown so much they would plunge the four lesser planets again into slavery to the giant men? What could Gran Jac offer them, greater than they have? Some value beyond my thinking..." The old man moved on, to face his followers.

THE VOICE of Vanue, saying in that more than human warmth that was hers above all others:

"Note that in the past there was struggle and war, that the cause of its cessation has seemed to be a treaty brought about by pressure on the greatest need in life—food.

"Yet, in truth, there must have been in that earlier time another tide of disintegrant force ions, and that tide's ending coincided with events that brought about peace. That peace has lasted until in the circling currents, the log serpent-tide of Dee touches the five planets once again. Now events and their reactions interpret to their again distorted errant mind patterns only to mean—war!"

Mion nodded. "Yes, the pattern is directly opposite! If the cause of their war was real and logical, it would have been started by Enuj Ra's denial of their right to the new power and warmth—yet, contrarily, peace resulted. Now, in this new advent of the tide of Dee, the publicizing of the formulas so that all the five planets may enjoy the warmth of the heat-spheres, that seem to them cause for new warfare springing up among them. In reality, it should make for peace, since it will reduce the pressure of necessity and bring about greater plenty for all of them if new areas are brought into food production."

"Thus is always the face of error, illogic setting forth as logic, and finding acceptance..."

Vanue's voice, when it ceased, left always a poignant longing for yet another and another sound of its beauty.

Mion's eyes and ears tore their attention from the brief, intense delight of Vanue's self, from the ringing, thrilling sound and dizzying sight of her too-great life. He bent again to the thought cloud, where that other

world of color and light and life was again displaying a new facet.

THE GREEN WING, Queen of the Tal, greatest of the clans of the Nines, swept across the ball-room on the arm of Verde Cire, the Genode of all the Blades. The two Teyna wings, dyed green, ancient symbol of the leaders of the Tal, spread proud and high above her nobly chiseled head.

Unlike the races of the Nodes, her skin was only faintly gold, and her hair so pale a blue as to gleam like silver—falling to her shoulders in metallic waves, there caught in a net of emeralds. Beneath the emerald mesh, her pale shoulders glittered with a fine dusting of metal powder. Her high proud breasts thrust from a nest of small green feathers, feathers that sheathed the strong arches of her hips and swept downward to end at her feet in long fronds. A wide leathern belt, worked over with the Dal symbols of the trident crossed on a blade set between the two wings, circled her waist. Her feet were cased in open-work gold leather sandals. She danced with a sleepy indolent grace, seeming to hold the tall Verde stiff with awe and worship of her.

The lesser lights of the Blade organization danced too, seeming to leave always a circle inviolate where the Green Wing and their own appointed head, Verde Cire, danced as alone upon the floor.

Or they clustered in small whispering groups, their faces intent and thoughtful, unmindful of the setting for gayety. Thus it was not a ball, so much as a necessary prelude to something far more important than dancing—and some occupied their feet with the dance, but only that time might pass.

The musicians, nested in a great couch slightly screened by the pale

fronds of the white fern, played muted, soft melodies of love and indolence, seeming to wait too, holding in all exuberance, as if the occasion was too funereal to let joy flow from the long golden horns, or humming harp to rise to triumph above human thought, or drum to beat too loudly and so distract the coming event with unseemly noise.

The Dom, peering out from his peep-hole behind the rostrum under the white fern, felt the waiting and the worry, knew that some word had spread—that all there waited for something like a death.

But the Enode had struck moments ago, and the Dom stepped up to the main dais and held up his hand.

The music ceased, the dancers stood in their places, and silence fell.

Expectant, somehow grotesque and faintly horrible silence.

All eyes centered on the withered, weary, but still cunning-eyed and quick-handed Dom. The eyes roved from his goodly, gold chain draped paunch to his wide stooped shoulders and gloomy face—and then politely looked elsewhere, waiting. Or examined the embroidery, rich on the wide sleeves, or speculated on the meaning of the cryptic symbols bordering his wide collar—and did not look twice at his face.

"My countrymen, you who have been chosen from among the finest of the young Nodes, trained and made ready for long years for the tasks the future might bring—My own brave Blades, I have to tell you that the greater task has come. The time is NOW—our Fate is upon us!"

He stopped, and his little cunning eyes swept here and there, looking for effect, waiting for question, estimating, putting off... Then he pursed his lips, bent forward, gripped the sides of the flat-topped rostrum, and

in a shrill whisper that broke in his throat yet went on audibly:

"The ancient formula of the heat-sphere has been raped from its shrine, the power is gone from the race of the Node!"

FOR MOMENTS the silence grew, until no sound but slow tension rising could be heard. A slow increasing rustle, as of wind, of breath caught and slowly released against the will, grew until the swift whispering murmurs broke forth, then the Dom raised his narrow red hand again.

"The task you have been trained for is now upon you! Recover the secret before all power is gone from the Node, before once again our race is in thrall to a greater, made to serve and to slave and to be—never free again!"

The Dom now turned his eyes upon the Green Wing, where she stood close before the rostrum, where he had purposely halted the dance that she would be caught there before him.

"Only two beside myself upon all our globe knew where the plates of the secret formula were kept. Those two were the Green Wing and the Green Star of the Tal Clan!"

The old man stepped back, delivered of his shaft, to watch the effect.

As if propelled by a spring, the Green Wing swirled feather light to the rostrum, sprang upon the dais behind, faced the startled, accusing faces of the Blades.

"Your old Dom does not know of what he speaks. Think you Gran Jac has waited without effort all these long nads, waited for lifetimes—without sending even one hireling spy to seek out our secret? Nay, it is no time to turn accusing our friends, to set our own blood against blood. Time instead to test the temper of our Blades in action!"

The Wing paused, gazed for an in-

stant at the old Dom as if weighing his utter worthlessness—then went on. Meloa, entering from the darkness heard her, and marveled at her manner, for she suspected very strongly she was behind the Felarnese activity, felt that she was plotting treason against them all...yet one would think she herself was the very heart-blood of loyalty and honor.

"We must use our strength now, to make our future more secure than any hidden paper and old man's political manouevering ever made it secure. Enuj Ra could well have been the death of every soul on Node when he denied the formulas to the Blacks of Gran Jac! But we were lucky, and they were condescending and lenient, let us have our way. They gave us our chance, and it is not dead because some thief in the night broke an ancient safe-box! We are alive and free, let us make the most of it, swift and sure welding all the clans, all our might—into one strong weapon, picking out the joint in the armor of our rising adversity and striking deep to the heart, now! Before the thought of our fall becomes reality, and our own fears make us slave!"

Her high, keen thrilling voice fell from very effort to a husky, throaty, persuasiveness as she went on:

"Listen to the Dom, bow down to the Triple Crown, and fail to take the immediate action necessary. All will then be lost, as Your Dom expects already. It is no time to listen to words of defeat and fright and indecision! It is no time to turn the Blades against the Tal, we are one blood. We are knit by ties too great to sunder with one word of accusation!"

Meloa, shoving forward, shouted clear above the rising tumult:

"Let the Dom speak, let us hear first his purpose. No treason without cause!"

THE DOM, feeling impotent and a little ridiculous, and sure that his suspicion of the Wing and the Tal was the result of an aging brain, stepped forward close beside the quivering, angrily trembling gown of green feathers. As the silence fell, he spoke, his eyes upon the flushed lovely face of his cousin.

"What could the Gran Jac offer the Tal that we can not offer? —That was my thought when suspicion in my old mind turned to the Green Wing and her brother, the Star of the Tal. Do they want the Triple Crown enough to barter the freedom of us all for the bauble?"

The old man eyed the Green Wing, and the still mass of faces, his eyes holding an infinite depth, a strange sensation of hidden nobility of purpose passed from him to each one.

"Even if that is true, there is a solution! I do not think it is true, and from this day it must never be considered true by any of us. Whether her brother or herself has had a hand in this thievery I very much doubt—they would not be here. But, that there may be nothing dear to them with-held by us, that they may be bound to us indisolubly—their own fate linked inextricably to our own—in full appreciation of their value to all of us as the leaders they unquestionably are—to hold them forever firm in their intelligence I give what is most precious to myself and I hope to all here tonight, The Triple Crown!"

So saying, hardly knowing how or why he did this deed, but feeling that he was utterly unprepared to meet the crisis, the old man lifted the green-gemmed triple ring of gleaming gold from his head, and with every grace in the motion, set it upon the blue-silver hair of the Green Wing! It rested there above her as-

tounded face as if wholly made for her—and a deep sigh went up from all present—a sigh of strange and mingled emotions.

"I am an old man, cousin. You are young and brilliant, your abilities have been demonstrated over and over. Men will follow and obey you without question. I have long thought upon this act, and now the act is forced upon me, if the good of all is to be served. Rule for that ideal, the good of all, even as Enuj Ra worked and ruled—and avert this coming blood-shed!"

The Green Wing, her voice low and bemused with effort to understand the reasons behind the act, murmured:

"My brother, and your two sons, all set aside—in my favor? Why? Why, Naja Ra, do you do this thing to yourself and to the rightful heirs?"

"Because tonight, if ever it was in my life, my vision is clear and my thought uncorrupted. You are the life shaped to the need that arises before us. Later when the trouble is past and forgotten, then can the rightful possession be discussed at law, until all are weary enough of the problem to accept the judgment. Just now, we need your vital accurate thought, your instant decision, action directed completely toward the heart of the trouble. I have made my own action in that direction, for I myself have been the unwitting cause of some dissension among us. You can draw the clans into one, draw the Nodes to the Nines, and lash them into action beside the Tal. Court the favor of the Felarnese, and spend hours making jokes with the Genpoint of the Gran Jac legions. Be a Monarch, toy with these war-mongering sons of perdition, and so doing weld the five worlds again into one!"

CHAPTER III

MELOA T left the Three Towered Dome with strange emotions and angers mingling, fit to choke her. How could that young too-beautiful minx hope to hold the reins of the Blades, the fierce Tal clans, the conflicting groups of both the Nines and the Nodes, and still court the Felarnese from their ancient and now again active enmity? The old Dom, whom she understood and loved, must have lost his wits, been distracted by her beauty and vitality, been childishly influenced by an old man's whim.

But she had her mission, and her loyalty was to the Triple Crown, whoever wore it. If the Dom thought the Green Wing capable, and it meant the death or defeat of them all—there was nothing she could do about it now.

Outside the warm air of the dome, the soft night of Node closed down chill, the warmth of the floating heat-spheres was shut down to minimum, the temperature fallen to below comfort. The leaves of the pale trees were folded like buds against the cold. The tame cats of Node wailed among the trees, mating and fighting and sounding like ghouls arguing over a corpse.

Meloa shivered, sped along to the speedy Blade guard-ship that was her personal charge now—with Kal Harn sick to death in the medical dome.

About her slim waist was now a strong band of plain leather, and in the scabbard close riveted to the belt hung a flame-blade, incongruous in its grim efficient deadliness against her soft curved thigh. War hung above them all, and the day when weapons were forgotten or ignored was gone.

All that practice the Blades had regarded as play without ever expecting any genuine need—now Meloa

knew it had not been play, but needed preparation for disaster.

The ship lifted, swung in a short arc, blasted close beneath a softly glowing heat globe, powered with the same mysterious, self-fueling, exhaustless mystery of science as the flame-blade against her waist. This was the Blades one great advantage—they had the flame blade, and no sword ever built could stand against the steel-melting flame the old Enuj Ra had given their race against all others.

Even the Nines and the Tal had not the flame-blades. Idly Meloa wondered what would be done about that if they allied against—perhaps the giants of Gran Jac themselves could not face the flame-blades. It was not yet known, they had never been used in a major conflict.

The old Dom had killed any possibility of war between the Tal and the Nodes. Remained the Nines, the Felarnese and the terrific strength of the giant Gran Jac race of blacks. With the Tal and the Nodes welded by the Green Wings double identity as hereditary Queen of the Tal, and as selected Dom of the Nodes—would they act now concertedly to oppose them before they grew yet greater?

The ship burned across the cold sky toward the giant dull sheen of the Gran Jac. 'Melo to Gran Jac, to the Temple itself and learn there, what was intended and what was prophesied' were her orders.

She settled softly, jets silent, between the two great bulks of Mt. Malor and Mt. Rak. Left her ship in the ever-shadow of a crevice. Crept across the ragged rock face to level going—swung in a long stride toward the great dome of the old City of the Temple of the Way.

STRANGE religion, these giants, mused Meloa. Believed that a

body had a soul and the souls went to a grey place of mists after death! That a grey King ruled there, still and all-knowing, among the drifting shades of his subjects. His Queen was supposed to be black as a carbon electrode, and to sit motionless beside him—forever. Both alive only in the mind, the Palace of their Thought where they welcomed the souls of the dead!

Within the ancient, weathered face of the Temple within the Dome, was a hole in the great natural rock over which the temple had been built long ago. This hole was said to be the only existant portal to the Land of Death from the Land of Life.

And the only exit from the Land of Death!

Once each Dan, thirty cycles apart—a being came from the black hole and told them of the future of the black race of Gran Jac. And returned again to the Land of the Dead.

Melo shrugged, smiling a little at the giant's belief in anything so ridiculous and gloomy.

But the giant race invariably fulfilled the prophecy. Whether by coincidence or because of belief causing implicit carrying out of the prophecy as an order—one could pretty well gauge the future activity* of the Gran Jac giants by listening with care to the oracle of the Temple of the Gateway.

Melo meant to hear it, and it returned again in two nads,—time left now only to get there and make a way within the Temple, with luck. She must not miss the oracle, or the Gran Jacs might act before the new Dom learned of its import.

If the oracle said war, war it would be, whether they had enemies to fight or had to attack some friend. It was only recent times the Oracle had prophesied peace. Since Enuj Ra had stymied them and made the priests

of the Temple see the light behind the Heat-spheres, Meloa reasoned.

She eased up to the ten foot round of the corroded metal of the air-lock. Nervously she fingered her helmet lugs, she wanted to get it off and grin at the big nine-foot black guard she knew waited inside. He could be a trouble, or he could be friendly and ignoring of formalities. There was no time for checking of credentials, though she had them all in order.

With a vast hiss of air, the big round twisted sideways, she slipped through the widening slot quickly, tugged off the lugs, threw back her already steaming helmet. She smiled her best smile at the wide, sullenly inscrutable face of the giant, and after a second, the infectious gayety of her youth struck home, and he grinned. The huge teeth of him startled Meloa, she had not been on Gran Jac for near a dan. Fierce, homely people, they were good hearted enough ordinarily, but terrible in anger.

"Here for the opening of the Way?"

"Aye, big one, I must see the path I will tread when I get as homely as you, and die for shame of it!" Meloa purred the jest and taunt in her best Gran Jac jargon, a tongue with little in common with her own.

His smile disappeared for an instant, then he saw that she meant the impossible, for such a beauty was not passing here every day.

"When you get as homely as myself, the world will have decayed about us into mist, little butterfly. If you must wait to that day, you will never die."

"Perhaps I am the shade of some dead woman, returning to enter along the way when it opens for the sooth of the Day of Truth."

His face sobered again, and he looked at her closely, and over his shoulder fearfully.

"Do not jest, little Blade, the ears of the men who serve the way are never closed. You are no shade, but flesh and blood. Get on with you, and on your return, tell me of the word."

MELOA pushed open the inner door, sliding it silently in its ancient worn grooves, her heart beating thanks that no Ware orders had gone out. Evidently the big race had taken the rumours of trouble as froth and nonsense, or had already the secret firmly in their hands and feared no event.

Along the wide, gloomy streets she padded rapidly, avoiding contact with the great-bodied natives. Her cloak hid the flame-blade as it had hid it from the guard, but a touch would reveal it. Not that it wasn't legal, as their agreements went. But not tonad, of all nads, would one wear weapon but for fear of ones deed finding one out.

Into the vast doorway of the Temple of the Portal of Death. Past the gloomy swathed forms of the stone "watchers", past the gigantic mounted figure of the First Warrior King. Under the Arch of the Tortured Captives, their writhing forms of stone wreathing up and around in one symphony of sculptured pain and ugly triumph. Along the Corridor of Silence, where the little green-lit wall niches held the Nee candles, burning with sweet fragrance, and the tiny witch images of the lost Elves.

Then she was around the two tall armed guardians of the portal of the Chamber of the Way, and among the silent gigantic figures of the waiting black worshippers. Eagerly she slipped forward past the columnar legs, making her way almost to the throne where the Genpoint himself waited on his throne of black adamant, set with blood rubys in the ancient skull pattern of the Gens alone.

The throne faced the thirty foot ragged rock opening where the empty round well slanted steeply from the rugged slope of natural rock against which the temple had been erected.

The Opening of the Way was almost due, she had cut the time shorter than she intended. The blackness of the depths of the pit within the jagged round of the cave mouth was already adrift with subtle grey streamers of mist—which always preceded the approach of the Ghost from the world of beyond.

The awe and the conveyed implicit belief of these giant people in their cavern ghost struck through the armor of unbelief shielding Meloan from fear of the coming spirit, and for a moment she was sure she was wrong. Sure that a living ghost from the land of the dead was really about to appear!

The drifting mist began to circle slowly, centering in a kind of grey whirlpool, and the funneling center of the whirl deepened to a long tunnel, a tunnel suggesting infinite depth, and as subtle and no less infinite, a sinister peril.

Far, far off a figure appeared, visible only through the center of the web of mist—and the figure grew swiftly as if rushing like the wind from distances too vast for mortal mind to grasp.

Meloan wondered if it were not mirror tricks by those who held the giant race in thrall to their wits? Wondered, too, fearfully and simply if this were not the truth—a visitation from the world beyond all death!

QUITE suddenly the web of mist was blasted as by terrific power, swept invisibly aside, and standing there at the center of the rugged circle of age-worn rock facets was a tall, thin-robed greyness.

The bone-thing face was grey of

skin, the long too articulate hands were surely only grey bones...

Woman or man, Meloan couldn't know surely. Only that it was death, incarnate, terrible, she shuddered away from her first view of the Opening of the Way!

The fear of the awful reality of death and life-beyond-death yet more horrible than death itself struck into Meloan's young mind. She tottered as any girl might do, fell suddenly into the dark vortice of unconsciousness—a fainting spell which all her training and hardening and experienced will could not fight off.

What happened then she did not see or know, but it was not good.

As her falling body struck the rough grey stone of the floor, her cape fell aside, and even as her flame-blade was revealed to the startled, back-pushing giants near her—the twisting handle released the terrible power of the pale flame!

The flame lanced out in a long deadly path of terrific heat. The force shield of the handle coils protected Meloan's body. But it did not protect the feet of the giants beside her, and they leaped and screamed and bellowed as the flame reached among them, moving in an arc of twenty feet at the tip of the lance of fire as Meloan's body settled and rolled over.

Then both fallen girl and burning blade lay there, eclipsing entirely the gloomy glory of the grey shade from beyond the edge of life.

As that blade burned; burned there in the Temple where no weapon was ever allowed to be borne, and upon the body of an alien and a guest of trust—the anger of the giant Genpoint on his throne was terrible to see.

His voice did not dare to speak out his anger, for it was time and more for the words of the sacred oracle standing there about to speak!

But his anger *could* find vent, a vent acceptable to the Lord of Death-land himself!

The Genpoint got to his feet, gigantic even among those giants, a ten footer of incredible musculature among even this race adjusted to a life upon a dense and large planet.

Fiercely, silently, moving with the burning force of rage—his violated sanctuary and his insulted emissary from the Grey Land of Death watching him—he bent, shut off the flame, picked up the body of the unconscious girl. As his assembled people gasped he bore the slight drooping figure to the very mouth of the dread cavern. There he lay her at the feet of the waiting agent of death and bowed to the very floor, asking pardon with the ancient gestures that are used where no man dare speak.

Silence, filled with the sense of justice swift and entire. The tall thin greyness began then to speak, the terrific meaning of the ancient words from the back of time rolled out over the Chamber of the Way into Death.

Softly the stylus of the Genpoint glided over his waxed pad, as he noted down each character spoken out by the oracle.

The words ended, the grey thin terrible death-in-life stooped, plucked up the small self of Meloan T, down swirled the grey mist of time and space and swift distance. The grey figure receded down the tunnel of grey impossible mist and Meloan was gone upon the journey into the land of the dead.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE GREEN Wing smiled as she stood to greet the Genpoint of all Gran Jac. Himself honoring her with this visit to learn the truth about all the rumours of war—as well as to explain the incident which had caused

the sending of a member of the Blades to the Land of the Unliving.

Skillfully she led the talk, parrying his questions even while getting answers to her own probing as to the plans of the Council of Gran Jac. Of his inability to handle her the great black warrior was soon well aware, his broad ugly face dewed with the moisture of effort, his eyes holding on hers like a great beast fascinated by the antics of some bright plumaged bird.

VANUE'S voice came to Mion faintly, explaining. *"Note that immediately behind the head of the serpent tide the space dust thins and almost there is none. Note that the portion of the tide of the dis flow passing the five planets now is this same tenuous portion, and that the thin-ness of the tide of dis coincides with the suddenly repaired pattern of their life. The Dom of Node generously gave his crown to the person best fitted to receive it, she bends every effort to unite the dissident nations into one peaceful state, abandoning meanwhile her ill-conceived, and treacherous plot to ally the Tal clans with the Felarnese, and the giants of Gran Jac send a peaceful emissary, their own official leader appointed by their council—to the Nodes, to learn if they can avert war."*

"I observe the coincidence of the subsidence of the dis-tide with the subsidence of the war-like activity," answered Mion.

"Note that the thicker body of the serpent tide moves closer to the five planets inexorably. Watch how their passions and events answer the growth of the oncoming flow. Soon they will be swallowed up in the body of the serpent, their true thought obscured will launch them into wars they will be unable to reason out a way to avoid. It is inevitable

that untrained minds should succumb to such unseen influences."

Vanue turned and touched the now sleeping Firko with a caressing fingertip. He did not awaken, but only smiled and murmured her name, sliding lower on the couch. She pillowed his head against her arm, and turned the thought spool to a faster tempo.

The deadly wide body of the serpent flow of disintegrant dust moved now swiftly, swallowing up the five planets into the thickness of its body.

"What is this Land of the Dead into which poor Meloia was taken?" asked Mion.

"You will see there a strange pair indeed. They are abandoned children of the past, their inherited science enough to keep life in them—not enough to keep off other effects of De such as you already know about. One of them has become a wholly evil form of degenerate parasitism, the other a passive despairing passenger upon the will of Fate, moving no finger to halt the course of events. Observe them closely, for one day you will find within your own body the effects of unobserved quantities of dis, and that day you will know better than to choose flight and isolation, as this pair did."

Vanue softly turned up the amplification, and Mion slipped again into the unconscious state of complete absorption in the course of events.

THE GENPOINT of all Gran Jac strode purposefully through the great portal of the three towered Palace of the Dom of Node. In his hand he held an ultimatum received from the Council of the Planet he represented, and his face was grim, though his heart misgave him. He read it through to the Green Wing once, then tucked it away in his breast.

The Green Wing waved away the

three officers of the Blades with whom she had been conferring before his arrival. They had reported to her on the ineffectual effort to recover or learn the whereabouts of the secret of the heat-spheres.

She stood stiffly, hardly nodding to the giant Genpoint, for she knew the council was under his thumb and this his doing. She could read on his face as he read that this was his decision after his long talks with her, and anger flamed within her that all her effort to reconcile him had gone for nothing. She listened with scant attention as he read, her face stony, her eyes moving everywhere but to his face, again.

Now the play-talk of the past days was over. She guessed that he had carried this paper just as it was now in his bosom when he first came—had now decided to deliver it to her orally.

His words fell gloomy and with a dull finality upon her, echoing over and over in her mind as if written there forever:

"To the most Honorable Dom, Green Wing of the Tal, Queen of all the Nodes. It is requested that your people must agree to turn over the formulas for the warming fire-globes without more delay. If you refuse, action will be taken by the warrior chiefs of the Gran Jac. Too long have we humored your people while this needed thing was withheld, no more can we suffer this evil."

There was more, formal signatures, directions as to how the formulas were to be delivered—

When he had finished, tucked it loosely into his uniform jacket, the Green Wing held out her hand, he strode with one great step to her dais, laid it in her hand. She said:

"There is no need for this! You must know we cannot turn over to you what we no longer possess. Why don't

you help us search for them, if you do not already have them?"

The Genpoint recoiled that full stride in surprise. Anger and complete distrust of her strove to cover his face, he put them aside visibly.

"I had decided that the theft of the formulas was but a rumour, when your worship did not speak of it to me. I cannot understand that they are not in your possession. How could it have occurred here at the center of the Blade's watchfulness?"

The Green Wing eyed him coldly. He did not express contrition for nearly calling her a liar. He only stood, awaiting the answer to the ultimatum from the powers he served, and sometimes ruled.

With an effort she controlled her anger, smiled slowly and gestured with her hand.

"If we cannot give you the secret of the spheres of heat, how then can we avoid war, my noble ambassador?"

"It would not be a war, small one! It would be too bad, that is all!"

"Already you slip into the uncouth ways of the warrior, insulting me, calling me a liar and 'small one'—and you expect an honorable answer to a message such as you bear me. What do you really expect—treatment of your person that will serve as cause for war? The thing has been stolen from us, come, I'll show you the vaults."

As they stood within the ancient lair of the Doms of old, before the blasted vault doors—the Genpoint gave her answer:

"If ever the warriors of Gran Jac learn that this has been contrived to make fools of us—that day you can expect attack. Until then, I will hold the dogs of war in leash."

He stalked out, and the Green Wing sighed with vast relief. She had expected the worst.

VANUE murmured to Mion:

"Note here how great events are controlled by un-noticed influences. If they had remained above the surface of the earth, the flow of magnetic evil force full about their minds, they would have parted in complete anger and discord. But they left the surface, descended here below the rocks where much of the incoming magnetism is obstructed and neutralized by the still unimpregnated rocks above the chambers of the Dom—and their anger cooled, the Genpoint departed without deciding upon war."

"I note the incident, and the reason for it," answered Mion. "It was not the burst vault alone."

CHAPTER FIVE

CONCATENATION of terrifying silent noise; swift, vibrant motion of rushing forces soundlessly pressing on and on. A terrible emotion-racking sensation of death from the thing that bore her...

Meloa awoke to find herself frozen in the weird embrace of that which could not be, but was. Frozen, motionless-in-motion, still yet with swift on-sweeping silence that was ear-racking with a pressure that should have been sound and was not! Fear an icy torrent of crawling cold in the bowels, on her back, up her neck—she shrieked once, and stopped—she could not hear the sound!

On went the thing, and poor Meloa held her breath, closed her eyes, and after a time, fell mercifully again into another faint.

BACK upon the worried little world of Node, young Kal Harn came in a short time to the point of inevitable death—as did all who showed the angry red marks of the plague. He fought back the darkness, crying

out for his sweet Meloan T, weakly—

"Meloan, come now, where have you gone when I need you most?"

And the slim young nurse-maid pressed his hot body back against the pillows, in desperation telling him: "Your Meloan has already been given to the Grey Prophet of the Way of Death by the Genpoint of Gran Jac. There is no use your crying for her—she will never come again!"

Cruel it was to tell him, but she was driven beyond caring by the many duties for so many stricken by the rapidly spreading plague.

Poor Kal weakened swiftly after that, and knew there was no use nor much sense in wanting to live anyway. But before he died he exacted a promise that he, too, would be laid before the Opening of the Way of Death.

It was done, even as he asked of them. Permission was gained of the priests of the Temple, his body was lain where before only the great black carcasses of their own race had been placed—and the lean grey figure came and bore him down the tunnel of funneling mist.

MELOAN T, when she came to her mind again, found herself lying upon a pale grey bank of moss, and waiting nearby a tall woman, clad in black.

Upon her shoulder sat a great red bird. Of the sky beyond was nothing but a slow whirl of mist, and sometimes glowing ragged rocks showing through the grey mist.

The tall woman stroked her bird, and presently said: "Greetings, little stranger from life. Are there many so attractive as yourself above?"

The bird glared down disapprovingly upon Meloan's distraught face, and squawked one loud sound of complete disgust.

"Are you a friend?" asked Meloan. "In this place I did not expect friend-

ship. What am I to expect here, and how came I to be sent here?"

The woman smiled gloomily; wearily, yet she smiled. "A friend, yes. Expect? You can expect to understand nothing here for a long time—and when you do understand, it is not good."

"Are you dead? Am I dead?" asked Meloan.

"This is not so dead a land as you might think, little stranger. It is a land of deep and ancient magic, long turned evil, yes. But of death we have only a little out in the open. Most of it is stored away, waiting its use."

The woman's voice was very strange and different to Meloan's ears, who had never met before a human who had been gifted with innumerable years of life. Warm, yet impersonal, slow and rich with much knowing, one wished for that voice after it ceased. Meloan's eyes sought her face when she spoke, to look for the beauty the voice expressed upon the strange, almost cynically weary face. But the eyes of her always remained veiled and distant, not looking into Meloan's. Sad eyes, waiting, too full of some past pain, like a memory that would not go away.

"Who are you?" Meloan sometimes asked, awed by some sudden revelation of inhuman wisdom or by her statuesque height, her solemn, distant bearing.

"Names do not matter here, any more, little Meloan. I am one who was here before it became what is now the Land of Death. The changes passed me by, inflicting only pain and not destruction of my self—I hope."

"Can I stay with you? Till I get used to it, anyway?"

"If you only knew how glad I am that your bright youth has come to me before death touched you!"

"Are you dead? You can't be dead!

Oh, say it isn't true!"

"You are overwrought, Melo. Of course I'm not dead, though I have often wished to be so. You will understand by and by."

Time went by for Melo, and she could not understand this place or this woman or what possible purpose had been served by her own sending into this strange world. And the woman only smiled when she asked, and told her it was better not to know, for a time.

Then one day, sadly the woman came toward her where she sat by the grey moss-tree where the little pool tinkled from the streams fall. And behind her walked—Kal Harn.

Melo gave a glad cry and flung herself into Kal's arms.

But his arms did not enwrap her in sweet remembering love. He stood like a block of wood!

She raised her face to his, looked into his...*dead eyes!* Then she screamed, and screamed again. She ran weeping back into the cave of her tall mysterious friend.

After a moment the dead, walking body of Kal followed the tall woman into the cave after Melo.

"It is time now to tell you of this place, and why the dead walk," said the tall woman. Her voice drew Melo from her shocked state, she listened with wide, tear-wet eyes.

"*SC* IT IS that only the Queen can give life back to your lover," concluded the tall woman. For all the dead who are taken in here are the servants, the stored weapons of the Lord of this world, which he keeps with his knowledge of life in a kind of half-life. He can use them if he ever has to do so, to fight an invading army. But time has done things to him, he is no longer even remotely human. His Queen, she is

of a different stripe. Ask—she knows the way of release. But I have never heard of her defying the Lord and releasing any of his subjects,"

"You go to them, you know how to deal with beings such as these. I feel completely helpless."

The woman smiled a rather terrible smile, grim and deep and toothy with a time-worn anger in it.

"I am not allowed to enter their halls, Melo. They know I would kill them if chance offered. You they would not fear, for you could not."

"You mean, they rule, and leave you freedom, knowing you are an enemy?"

"That is but a way of tormenting me, so that I live always for an opportunity that they are sure never will come to me. Hate is not good to live with, and they know... But our ancient feud has nothing to do with you. Go, you might have luck."

IT SAT in gloomy splendor, still, motionless as death itself, in a quiet chill of utterly alien power. The place where IT sat was reminiscent of a King behind the chess pieces. There were no pieces before the deathless King, though the impression of will-less servitors waiting the quiet vast will of IT from the grey throne was inescapable.

Melo shuddered, and waited, too. So this was the Grey Lord, who had held the race of giants of Gran Jac under a spell of fear for centuries—still living! *If it was life* that moved within the cold grey eyes.

The floor of the vast and dismal place bore out the impression of chess. Great squares of black alternated with squares of crimson, waiting for some drama that Melo felt would be to the mind behind those terrible eyes no more important really, than any game of real chess

would be to a mere man. Nor to him to be thought of differently than a game.

Beside him, the still, death-like face of the Queen was a black graven mask. Apparently carved of stone, only her eyes lit with a strange blue fire, burning down upon Melo. Of what race this black-fleshed Queen? With her glowing dark skin like polished ebony, the chiseled, alien features expressionless of all but utter weariness and waiting—for what, Melo wondered?

Beauty she had, a still beauty as if herself was of chaste metal. Delicate, yet utterly hard of expression. Lovely, yet cold with some deadly inner cold. Fragile, yet strong of inner intense hardness. Frighteningly motionless, as if she herself was but a statue set there to stare forever at nothing.

Yet no artist ever carved such timeless repudiation of life's worthless values upon any face. No living artist shaped those nude ebony limbs into exquisite form and polished perfection. Nothing could have formed her but the ages of development behind some ancient alien race forgotten now by all the surface life of Gran Jac. There was an alien and utter perfection in every line of her.

Ageless, yet frozen by a weight of time and some realization of the futility of movement toward known useless goals. Lovely with a delicate chiseled beauty. Cruel, with thin lips drawn about with a harsh and angry line that yet seemed to have an infinite patience and a great wisdom within her softening the seeming cruel face into—a terrible beauty.

THE GREY inhuman man-shaped thing beside her moved, then, after so very long that Melo was sure she had mistaken two statues for liv-

ing beings. Crossed one long sinewed leg encased in gleaming grey silk hose upon one in shining black hose—and motioned Melo closer.

The blue deep eye-fire in the dark eyes of the still Queen flickered angrily as Melo moved closer. It was not a good feeling for Melo, standing there. But it was weirdly, terribly pleasant. Some fire of alien, ancient desire from worlds long past—worlds once filled with terrific, immortal lusts—from some world not human that birthed these creatures long ago, came invisibly from IT like the touch of desiring hands upon her body and those hands not man's hands but the eery touch of an ancient, hoary ghost who yet lived on in undying animal strength.

She knew this was the mind of the Grey one searching her, touching her with some intense tactile sensing of the mind. As she stood before the two of them this unseen yet quite real and felt violation of her body went on, mounting in intensity even as the eye-fire of the dark Queen mounted in anger.

Some vampirish power of the Grey Lord seemed drinking at her young strength! Voluptuously draining her with some space-negating tentacle, absorbing her as if his mouth were at her throat, and her life-blood flowing sweetly out and into him.

Weakening, sickening rapidly, Melo put one hand to her brow, reached for some support with the other. As invisibly as it had come the draining power left her, and as if by way of reward a sudden ecstasy flowed through her. A new and different strengthening mounted within her, and as suddenly her anger flashed out at this violation and a terrible realization of the slave-thing she must become to this undying monster upon his throne unless she found a way of resistance where

none seemed possible.

Now Meloia did not voice her consuming anger, but moved to stand silently before the Queen, and their two minds met invisibly there before the Grey Lord in a communion from which he was excluded.

From that communion of two female minds the black Queen turned again to the Grey one, and gazed on him with a steady, penetrating, measuring look.

Scornful her voice, breaking the heavy silence that had so far remained unbroken since Meloia entered.

"I have sat for too long! How many life-times of mortals I have let you go your way, because now since the change that stranded us here, nothing mattered. But now you have overstepped your bounds. This girl is not the ordinary vegetable to whose fate I could reconcile my ancient love of her kind. I can not cynically turn away my face and feel nothing in my heart. You cannot have her, Sakum, you cannot have her or any like her! It is time you learned to live without such sustenance. I place my protection over her, and you know what that means!"

THE GREY long terrible face looked at her astounded. The incredible fingers twitched for a second in all their jointed length, uncontrollably. Something like fright, a long buried fear suddenly unearthed, came and went on the strange, too-wise face. A strong face, yet with an inner weakness as of some long-gnawing sickness.

Then IT shrugged and its thought came out and touched the mind of Meloia briefly, she sensed the probing, asking, knew that her loathing for the ancient creature was seen by him.

"Shall we play a game of our own

chess, my queen? It has been too long since we measured our strengths. This time your beauty will not again sway me to mercy, perhaps?"

Meloia sensed the question the Grey one put to the Queen, noted her swift angered acceptance. Marvelled at the still, unmoving icy calm which held such passions confined. How endlessly long had their hate of each other been held on that leash of time? It was not understandable, these alien, terrible creatures could possess and be moved by such hatred and detestation each of the other, yet sit there. *Have* sat there in Lordship over this eerie world of theirs in calm acceptance of each other for many centuries? Meloia was at a loss to understand what lay between them to bind them so against their wills.

Evidently some ancient tie had today come undone. Herself the catalyst needed to cause the change, and that too was hard to understand. A game of chess—yet the Grey one did not mean chess. He meant instead some contest inexplicable as she sensed the thought between them, some terrific measuring of immortal powers—beyond anyones comprehension but their own undying minds.

Meloia still stood, waiting for she knew not what, while the two young-old creatures of another time rose and walked to opposite sides of the room.

There she noted two small cabinets of opaque gleaming stuff, these came out from the wall at a touch, revealing seats inside. Like the drivers seat of some strange vehicle, and the dash of many complex instruments before the seat.

Each took their places facing each other across the black and red squares of the floor. Even as they touched here and there a control upon the panel, the Queen spoke to Meloia orally:

"I will release your loved youth,

as you came to request, then you had better leave here at once."

Meloa stood watching them make these preparations, listening to the hum and pulse of new awakened power within the cabinets and beneath the floor—and shortly in at the great door came blindly stumbling the mindless zombie that had been her own Kal Harn.

The Grey One looked up, muttered:

"Enter, my first piece, and you expect to take him from me in violation of our agreement!"

From his strange panel of control of hidden power a force leaped out visibly, like violet fire tenuous but intense, touched Kal.

KAL WHEELED and began to leap across the squares toward the black Queen. Quite as swiftly she sent a beam of dull green force from her panel out upon Kal, and he stopped in his tracks. Gazed about him wonderingly, turned to Meloa with his eyes full of questions, and full of new life.

"Meloa! Life again! I thought I was dead, it was a very bad dream, I have been sick—" He came toward her, arms out. Meloa went into his arms with a glad cry.

"Oh Kal, it has been so terrible. The Grey One was going to..."

Some compulsion came to her then, making her tell Kal the thing the Grey One had done to her, and as she realized she had said what she would not, she started back, her hand to her mouth.

For Kal was raging back across the checkered floor, murder in his eyes. She saw he meant to kill the Grey One out of hand, with his bare fists.

But again the force beam flicked out and touched him, and again he became the mindless zombie he had

been when he entered.

Meloa herself now sprang across the red and black squares, intent on scratching out the things eyes that had done this to her man. Quite suddenly her own self vanished from within her, and she knew no more.

Two zombies shambled from the room, and the Grey Lord tittered as they went, he had triumphed over the Queen the first move. But the zombies made no answer.

As they reached the edge of the colored floor squares, a ray flicked to them from the Black Queen, touching each of them, and life came into their minds and into their eyes, and they both fled after one look back at the two who struggled.

In their minds a whisper went with them, etched there in a permanent intensity:

"Bring your Blades, and the Queen will find work for their swords!"

Behind them they sensed those two alien entities facing each other over their crossed swords of weird energy, and wondered, but ran on and on. Meloa murmured,—

"So begins a game that can end only in the death of one of them. And they have lived as mates for endless lifetimes of our time! They have been to each other the staff and solace of an immortal existence, here in the place they built within the bowels of Gran Jac!"

Kal Harn grunted. Then he grinned and answered: "They have lived too long together. Seems inevitable."

NOW MELOA was leading the way well known to her, toward the weird tunnel of force which led

to the great chamber of the prophecy. But how they, unknowing the method of travel along those whirling walls that were not matter but some strange divorce of matter from its inner energies; were to traverse the tunnel was beyond her.

The tall woman, black-clad as usual, with the great red bird on her shoulder, was waiting where the first misty greyness of the tunnel began. She smiled her too-knowing smile.

"You knew we were coming here? How?" cried Meloa, embracing her tightly for a second, then standing back and waving a hand to Kal to show he was again himself and not mindless.

"I have a faculty for knowing even what is going to happen, little innocent. Come, I will show you the way, that your strong muscled lover may bring down upon the Grey Louse the doom he has earned so many times over."

"Yes, we want to go and bring our Blades here as the Queen asked us."

"But you must stay, Meloa, else will I not help you. Your lover will then be sure to return with forces to set you free. If you go with him it will turn out that he will not return. I help you only to turn the tables on the being whom I detest above all others."

Near to the great whirling funnel that was the mouth of the way to the upper world was a small stone house. Here the tall woman made them enter. She took from a closet a cloak, a voluminous grey thing of almost gauzy texture, yet so much metallic weight to it as to be the heaviest garments Kal had ever worn.

"Put this on. As you step into the funnel mouth do so very slowly. Your body will adjust within the transforming metal of the cloak so that

it can withstand the dissolving forces that else would weaken you too greatly. Only thus may you hope to return."

"But how does it bear people both ways?" asked Kal, watching the eery twisting of the walls around and around.

"It is not anything built by men of today. It was put here by the race of which the Queen is the lone survivor, now. This cloak of metal gauze is the key needed. You will find the floor of the tunnel bears you along, clutching with its magnetic force at the metal."

She opened a small panel set in the wall. There were two levers, one black, and one white.

"You see, it is in some ways a simple magnetic vortice. It has many layers of force one over the other. You know how electric force travels in a wire, the current one direction, the field another? This is the same, by pulling one of these levers the forces reverse their flow, the white is the outward control. Kiss your woman and get on your way! The two who rule here will not remain at each others throat forever."

Meloa watched Kal step into the tunnel and glide swiftly upward out of sight. Then she went back to the stone house, where her eerie friend stood brooding and stroking the great scarlet bird on her shoulder. It shrieked at Meloa and suddenly rose on wide wings, flying off toward the palace of the Grey Lord. Meloa asked:

"Can you see the future truly? Tell me, then, woman of strange knowledge, will my man come back to me? If you answer no, I will put on a cloak and pursue him. I cannot live without him more. I have learned what it means..." Meloa sobbed, and the woman took her in her arms

stroking her hair and crooning softly

"YOU ARE overstrained, little one. It was needful or I would not have sent him away. Of course he will return again. It was that love for you I needed to make sure he would bring his Blades. Nothing is so sure to bring men on the run as the thought of their women in peril—even one alone like yourself. It is infallible."

"What is this Grey thing on his throne anyway? I cannot understand, he seemed to drink my strength from a distance, left me not the same, but changed. I felt drained of something. Then back into me rushed something that was not my own, yet strengthened me."

"That thing is no longer human flesh. He has changed, fighting the years with the science that was left by those who built this place. He has never faced determined opposition, and his preparations will not be enough to overcome well-trained and intelligent warriors such as I know your Nodes to be. They will do for him, and I will be happier knowing he is no longer able to work his will on such as you."

"I feel so different, as if my inner self was damaged..."

"You have been damaged, but you are young enough, you will recover. Heard you ever of the custom of beekeepers? They take the good honey from the hive, and put in its place sweetened water so the bees will not starve. His body, after so long living and the strange things he has done with his life forces, has become unable to create certain life forces. But he has learned to absorb the young life strength; and to keep his 'bees' alive, he has learned to feed them something much less good."

CHAPTER FIVE

KAL HARN stepped out of the tunnel that was to the giant race of Gran Jac the Way of Death. He found the great chamber of the prophecy deserted except for a few gigantic warriors paying their devotions. These fell to their knees at sight of the strange elongated appearance caused by the light distortion in the field of magnetic force about the mouth of the tunnel. That grey robe had to them always meant the messenger from the land of Death.

It was with complete unbelief and consternation on their faces that they watched the tall figure step out of the mouth of the tunnel of force and become shorter, suddenly but an ordinary figure of the smaller races. He cast off the grey robe and appeared to them suddenly not as the dread messenger from the Lord of Death but as merely a warrior of the Nodes!

Kal took advantage of their frozen inability to comprehend. He struck the first blow at the beliefs that bound these giants to protect the tunnel from the very invasion he planned. Kal shouted:

"Now your eyes have seen the truth of this pathway of the dead. It is not holy. It is true there is a place within where the dead are brought back to life, but they are kept like walking dead for warriors if need arises. I think the need *should* arise. Help me get ship to my own world, there I will raise the signal and the Blades alone will invade this world of the dead if you will not help us. There are those who dwell in slavery to a sham, they are your people."

The giants rose from their knees, full of anger at his words. But in a moment the wonder of his presence after they had seen his dead body given to the Way—the possibility

that there was something not quite straight about this tunnel of death—began to penetrate their thinking.

One rumbled from his chest a few words, stumbling and incoherent. "I know not whether you be living or spirit. Certain it is you have trod the Way of the Dead and come forth alive. As such you have the right of the consecrated and are inviolate to our anger as to our laws. I will take you to the Genpoint, he will write you a permit to travel outward or to the globe of the Nodes if that is your desire. Or he will destroy you, knowing more of these mysteries than ourselves."

Kal put in a subtle word: "There will be some fine looting to do, rich and defenseless it is. You never saw such women as he has prisoned there. All as easy to take as the hat off your head..." With which Kal leaped and knocked the helmet from the warrior's head. The big fellow grinned and stooped to pick it up, his eyes upon the little man who had no fear of either Death or of himself.

VANUE moved the record control lever, and the scenes began to flash by at blurring speed. Mion leaned forward to watch intently, for the speed was now confusing.

CONFERENCES, violent arguing sessions, long trips from globe to globe of the five satellites—the effort Kal Harn had to make to convince his superiors his tale was true—To convince the Green Wing herself it was necessary to bring her the nurse and the doctor who had attended him on his death bed.

The meeting between the Genpoint and the Green Wing after their former disagreement, their agreement to join forces for this solution of the disappearance of the dead

placed before the Opening of the Way—the manufacture of a copy of the cloak that Kal had worn, in great numbers for the armies.

The Blades donning the grey metal uniforms their own technicians had manufactured from the one Kal brought. The flight of their ships to Gran Jac, back and forth, ferrying them all to the City of the Temple.

Their entrance into the here-to-fore sacred Temple, column on column tramping through the corridors of the ancient holiness now no longer holy. The shocked faces of the put-aside priests standing helpless before this mass sacrilege. Armed men tramping steadily through and into the fearful tunnel of weird force! The last of them entering and the mighty tread of the armies of Gran Jac beginning as they followed their gigantic Genpoint on the heels of the last of the Blades.

A good half of those marching black giants believed they were marching into death, and would never return—but they marched. Most of them did not doubt the ability of the ancient being ruling the land beyond the tunnel to defeat them, expected to find only dead Blades before the other end of the tunnel.

To the meeting between Kal Harn and Meloia T, there in front of the Green Wing herself. Meloia flung her arms about Kal and kissed him before them all, and tears stained many a warrior's eyes.

The march across that weird land of mist and glowing rocks and strange soft mosses. The sighting of the great grey palace of the past, and charging down upon them from the stony heights an army fearful beyond normal fear.

For they were an army of the undead, those who had passed through the tunnel and been turned into dead-alive by the Grey Lord. Mindless,

their lips giving forth no crys, their blades held straight before them. All moving in unison as though one mind alone directed every body—which it did. Somewhere, seated before some ancient energy device, the Grey Lord was directing his automatons—and each moved precisely as the other, stiffly they marched, ran, thrust and stabbed—all at the same time.

The fighting with that horde of mindless things that had once been men. Most of them were giant warriors from the planet surface, black warriors of Gran Jac, and the flame swords passed through their bodies, burning and searing away the flesh—yet they came on, swinging their weapons and killing the invaders, even when their own bodies were half destroyed. Fearful was the sight of warriors with legs hacked off, walking forward on the stumps, still stabbing and lunging in unison. And each and every face wearing the same masklike emptiness, a face without consciousness, a face that changed not even when the body was separated from it.

INTO THE thickest of the battle came then the tall black-gowned woman with the red bird upon her shoulder. Sent her great winged friend swooping and screaming above the struggle, and cried out to them all:

"Do not fight with these things. They are too worn with un-natural life and long time to catch a living man in flight. Run around them, push them aside and pass on, disregard them."

Even as she shouted at them she showed them with swift hands how they might be tripped up and piled together like cordwood, one on top of another, still with their swords moving and cutting, their legs still striding as if on firm earth!

After her demonstration the quick defeat of the army of the dead. Then the entrance at last into the dread old palace of the past, the glad cries of captive women as they saw that in truth this thing had come to pass and they were delivered from that which fed upon them.

Kal and Melo and the Green Wing, the Genpoint's giant form beside them, coming into the great throne room of the red and black checkered floor.

Seated there still at their strange game the thin and beautiful black queen, flinging still her rays of force across the checkered floor against the Grey Lord. And it, the Grey one, his face fixed in a fury and his hands upon the ray levers that would not any longer bring him victory because the one being in all the world who would have made him invincible with her help was now an avenging fury. The repudiation on her face of the Grey One was a flame of meaning across the throne room, augmented by the great powers of the force rays at her finger tips.

Kal raging out across the checkered floor and the flame sword in his hand arcing out in a great stroke that would have lopped the head off the Grey One. But his ray leaped from his ancient device and the flame of the sword died away before it. Kal raging on, bringing the hilt of the useless sword down upon the head of the undying thing, sprawling him out across the red and black like a great dead spider.

The laugh of the black Queen to see him so, that contained many lifetimes of frustration and hate, a dreadful laugh to hear. Her ray touching his fallen head, and his thought made loud for them to hear:

"Of all my age of striving toward perfection of living, toward beauty and the possession of beauty. All, all

my work cut down by the fist of a youth of no intelligence. Ah, Ninitavha, my queen, how could you do this to me?"

Of the Queen's strange answer to the fallen Lord.

"You can ask that? Better to ask how could I have borne your evil life all this endless time without once understanding that you were no longer life, but something much less worth the simplest living thing! Better to ask what makes a wife so stupid about a thing she once loved!"

"If I had won our little game of chess, Ninitavha, I meant to put you into..."

Her ray reached out again and touched him, he stiffened, his weird long face assuming suddenly that mask like emptiness which told them—the Grey Lord had himself become what he had made of so many—a thing without a mind. To Kal and to them all it seemed a great improvement. The Genpoint led him off, destined for exhibit on the surface of Gran Jac.

VANUE TOUCHED the controls, and the shifting scenes of the thought cloud ceased to flow one into another, became the pearl and smoky amber of quiescence. Mion asked:

"But what of the stolen formula?"

Where has it been all this time?"

Vanue smiled. "The brother of the Green Wing stole it, he thought that with its possession he could bargain his way into the seat of the Dom. After the Dom gave the crown to his sister, he was afraid to confess. He still has it."

Mion laughed. He reached out and woke the thought cloud again, dialing a distant view of the five planets, watched while the great twisting serpent of disintegrant ions flowed on past the group of worlds.

"War will not sweep the five worlds now, the tide of Dee has passed on. It is a good record to demonstrate the influence of disintegrant flows upon human affairs."

Mion leaned back, his eyes striving to keep from watching the overpowering beauty of Vanue. The silk-enly sliding feet of the Nor maids came, removing the record spools, inserting again the usual suggestion records which made the home of Vanue a haven from all conflicting or destructive mental forces. Softly the great thought cloud moved upon itself, and spread everywhere about it a thought of ambition, of the goal of living, but for Mion it was not needed. For to him, the goal of living was to become worthy of this great being's regard.

A FINISHED SUBJECT



By Walter Webb



WE'RE always talking about the great futures of various branches of science and how their expansions are going to take place. For a change let's fasten on a branch of science and mathematics for which we can see no future expansion, a branch which we think has been completely explored. We're speaking of the draftsman's art of descriptive geometry.

When the French mathematician and engineer, Gaspard Monge, invented the method of projections, the three views which everyone knows, and assorted other complicated variations, his subject was rapidly considered by many others. From this study by scientists and engineers the whole

art of descriptive geometry and mechanical drawing was quickly exhausted. Now the matter is standardized completely and we know that machines will be drawn on blueprints in the year two thousand exactly as they have been for the last hundred years and are now.

Some of the methods of descriptive geometry are complicated, but when it is remembered that the subject was invented to enable us to clearly describe in drawings, any three dimensional object, no matter how viewed, it loses its terrors. So we have a condition in which a branch of science has reached its limit. One of the few branches where there is no future...