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Tales of Scientifiction

ASTRO- Adventures



STAR PIRATE Premieres in

"Corsairs of the Cosmos" by Lin Carter



ASTRO- Adventures

Number 2

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THE CONTROL ROOM



Howdy out there, all you spacehounds! This is your ol' pard, Captain Astro, hoping that all you ether-eaters have bought your latest copy of that sterling publication Astro-Adventures! Leaping asteroids, spacehounds, but have we got an issue for you this time--chock full of sizzling adventures that will have all you spacehounds hocking your ion-blasters in order to afford our next one! We'll be leading off with the latest epic adventure by that master of space action, Lin Carter, who gave you only last issue that matchless masterpiece of planetary peril, "Murder in Space." Hold onto your gravity belts while you read "Corsairs of the Cosmos," the first adventure in a new space-spanning series featuring that rock-racing rogue Star Pirate!

Veteran spacehound Richard L. Tierney teases the imagination with a surreal saga of strange worlds,

"The Other Place." And strap yourselves in for a brand new regular feature, "Tales from the Time Warp," which will resurrect stories from the Good Old Days of Pulp Science Fiction, good ones, but neglected . . . until now, that is. Hop on board for Henry Kuttner's "The Eyes of Thar" from the April 1944 issue of Planet Stories. Thanks to Dan "Galactic" Gobbett, our reprint editor, for coming up with this one!

You'll get some cosmic chuckles out of "Rescue Mission 2030 A.D.," a tale of religion run riot in the future by Charles Garofalo and Robert M. Price, and as befits studious space-cadets, you'll learn a lesson or two from Will Murray's astro-article, "Captain Future vs. the Old Ones," which first appeared in Fantasy Mongers #8, Fall 1983.

OK, that's enough chatter on the sub-space frequency! Let's clear the static and tune in for thrills!

Captain Astro

CORSAIRS OF THE COSMOS

by Lin Carter

Can the Daredevil of the Spaceways solve the secret of the invisible mastermind of crime?

1. Villainy in the Void

The Interplanet Lines freighter Saturn Maid had just entered its parking orbit about Callisto, the jungle moon of Jupiter. Present on the bridge was Captain Nargo, a fat, dark-skinned, moon-faced Mercurian with the bright gold eyes of his race. He was there to make certain that his pilot entered orbit properly. Satisfied, he turned to his communications officer and was about to tell him to signal up the fleet of tugs which would unload the Saturn Maid of her valuable cargo, when he suddenly froze.

Someone was pressing the business end of a proton needle in the small of his back--

"This is The Blur speaking," a soft voice whispered in his ear. "Kindly instruct your officers to disarm themselves, and I assure you that no one will be harmed."

"Devils of the Darkside--!" the plump Mercurian choked furiously. Then he fell silent. Whoever the mystery mastermind known only as "The Blur" might be, he was the most cunning and successful corsair of the spaceways since the legendary days of Star Pirate himself. Although, unlike Star Pirate, The Blur did not hesitate to stain his hands with the blood of those foolish enough to get in his way.

"Mr. Urgon," the Captain said in strangled tones to the pilot, a red-faced Jovian giant, "you will remove your sidearm and lay it on the control console. You other gentlemen will do the same."

The burly Jovian stared in surprise. "But, Captain--!"

"Do as I say, Mr. Urgon," growled the Mercurian officer in tones that would accept of no demur. Baffled, his officers disarmed themselves. The pressure of the proton needle left the small of Nargo's back. With furious eyes he watched as The Blur crossed the bridge to scoop up the weapons. As expected, he saw nothing but the slightest mist or haze where the figure of a man should have been fully visible--The Blur was aptly named, he thought bitterly to himself.

"Captain, we are being approached by an unmarked cruiser!" yelled a young ensign. The Captain turned to stare at the forward televisior screen and saw a lean, rakish craft. It was painted dead black, and something about its slim, wolfish lines sent a cold shudder up the Mercurian's spine.

"That is my ship," The Blur whispered in his ear. "Instruct your men that the forward airlock doors be opened."

"Open the forward airlock doors," Nargo growled, fat cheeks quivering with frustrate fury.

The young ensign gave him a startled glance. "But, Captain--?"

"Do as you're told, boy!" snapped the Captain. "It may have escaped your notice, lad, but we are being pirated, curse the luck! There's a gun at my back even as I speak. Open those airlock doors, and be quick about it!" And with bitterness in his golden eyes, the Mercurian watched as a dozen unknown men with

opaqued space helmets began transferring crate after heavy and ponderous crate to the nameless corsair craft. Those crates, he knew, held costly ingots of pure iridium, vanadium, chromium and ylemium from the metal refineries on Titan. The refined ore, almost one hundred percent pure, was worth an immense fortune.

"You have been very cooperative, Captain," hissed that hated voice in his ear. "Therefore, neither you nor any of your officers or crew have suffered injury. Be cooperative a brief while longer, and we will no longer interfere with your voyage . . ."

"Go to the Devil, sir!" growled the Mercurian.

A soft chuckle was his only answer.

Moments later, the black cruiser drifted away from its linkage with the Saturn Maid, and vanished--becoming as invisible to the human eye as had been its mysterious master.

Within the hour, System-wide news services alerted a startled citizenry that The Blur had struck again!

2. Calling Star Pirate!

The chairman of Interplanet Lines was a large, red-faced man named Pendleton whose hair was growing thin on top and whose temper was usually belligerent. As at the moment, for instance.

He glared accusingly across the gleaming expanse of his huge desk, carved from a heavy slab of costly Venusian goldenwood, at the Space Patrol officer who had just entered the executive suite. This was a granite-jawed veteran with thin lips and eyes like twin gimlets. His name was Brannigan. At the moment he was perspiring freely and striving to hold on to his own temper.

"--I assure you, Mr. Pendleton, that the Patrol is doing everything

in its power to catch this crook who calls himself The Blur and to bring him to justice! That's why we have called upon persons such as yourself to cooperate with us--"

"Cooperate!" said Pendleton, with a rude snort. "Brannigan, everybody at Interplanet has cooperated fully with requests from the Patrol since first this madman ran amok and began raiding our freighters! You requested that we keep our ore shipments secret, and we kept them secret. You requested that we permit no passengers aboard our freighters, and passengers were forbidden, save for our own employees. You requested that all officers go armed in space, and we armed them all. And none of these measures did any good! Do you know how many credits that shipment of rare metals The Blur pirated from the Saturn Maid was worth, man? More credits than you'll earn in your entire career! And this is the sixth of these outrages this maniac has perpetrated against Interplanet!"

"I know, sir, but--!"

"But nothing!" growled Pendleton. "I've had enough of you and your cautious half-measures. The time has come to bring into play extraordinary resources--the extraordinary abilities and skills of a truly extraordinary man. I refer to none other than--Star Pirate!"

Brannigan flushed and bit his lip. That mischievous, devil-may-care rogue of the spaceways had long been a thorn in the Patrol officer's side. In the days when he had been an outlaw, a thief and a living legend, he had outsmarted, outwitted and outflown Brannigan with merciless ease; then, when he grew bored with such easy victories and was offered an official pardon from the System Council, following his heroic endeavors in the affair of the Solar Queen, and turned his brilliant intelligence, his matchless skills as a space pilot and his intrepid bravery to the service of justice,

he proved better at crime-fighting than Brannigan, and had solved more than one mystery crime that had left the Patrol officer helplessly baffled.

"You mustn't do that, sir!" Brannigan protested. "Whatever people think, the boy's nothing less than a cunning criminal--pardon or no pardon! Oh, he's got everybody fooled by pretending to work on the side of the law--but I know better! And someday that clever young devil will trip himself up, and I'll have him at last! You know the old saying, sir--a leopard cannot change his spots. Once a crook, always a crook!"

The executive looked unconvinced. "And I'll remind you of another old saying," he said tartly. "Set a thief to catch a thief."

"But he's a common criminal--!"

"Rather an uncommon one, I'd say," snapped Pendleton sharply. "For seven years he ran you and the Patrol ragged. Ship after ship fell to him; he always showed you his heels and got away with the loot, and never once did he so much as spill a drop of blood in accomplishing this thievery. True?"

Brannigan dug out his handkerchief and swabbed his streaming brow. "True enough, sir, but--"

"The entire resources of the Patrol were hurled against him, and you couldn't even locate his secret base . . . what does he call it, 'Haven'? As a matter of fact, even now that he works on the side of the law, it's my understanding that you of the Patrol still don't know where Haven is!"

"That's true enough, sir, but you don't--"

"Enough of this talk!" Pendleton said harshly. "You're a good man, no doubt, Brannigan, in your way. But you go by the rules . . . and what we need right now is someone who's not afraid to throw away the book and maybe even bend a law or two, just a little, in order to get the job done."

"But, sir, I--"

"I've met your chief, Carew, a time or two. An excellent officer, a shrewd judge of men, I'd say. I understand he trusts this Star Pirate implicitly. He's nobody's fool, Carew; fine old family. And if he trusts Star Pirate, then I trust Star Pirate!"

He turned to thumb his desktop television to life. The sweet, heart-shaped face of a lovely girl with honey-blond curls and eyes as blue as April skies melted into view.

"Yes, Mr. Pendleton?"

"Get me Commander Carew at the Patrol base on Pallas, please, Robin. Person-to-person; I'll deal with underlings no longer . . ."

3. Lost World of Space

Between the orbits of Mars and Jupiter stretches that bewildering zone of shattered moonlets and whirling rocks known as the Asteroid Belt. In their unnumbered hundreds of thousands, the fragments of "Aster"--that lost world of space--circle in orbits and counterorbits of such complexity that even computers are often helpless to deduce their periodicity.

Some of the larger asteroids--Pallas, for example, where the Patrol maintains its regional headquarters, and Ceres, where the crops of corn and wheat and barley are grown that feed the Belt and its peoples, and a few others--are large enough to have sufficient gravitational pull to hold breathable atmospheres. The rest are airless rocks, sterile, bathed in hostile radiation--mere hazards to navigation.

Some of these, however, bear mysterious ruins, the remnants of the architectural wizardry of time-lost Aster, it may be. Little is known for certain, although much is conjectured, about the Lost Planet which was (it is theorized) torn asunder in the grip of intolerable gravity tides in a relentless tug of war which took place many millions of

years ago between the giant planets, Jupiter and Saturn and Uranus on the one hand, and the inner worlds and the mighty Sun itself. In that contest, Aster was destroyed... but still its weird, enigmatic ruins thrust their mystery against the cold mockery of the uncaring stars, on lost, unknown, unvisited moonlets that whirl giddily forever through the endless and cold night of space.

Haven is one of these, save that, unlike most of the asteroids, this miniature worldlet is warm and fertile, with a breathable atmosphere and near-Earth gravity. This was the result of the fact that, even though little more than a mile in width, the core of Haven is composed entirely of the very heaviest of metals. This lends Haven mass, and mass means gravity, and gravity means the ability for a body in space to hold air and moisture, which would otherwise be uselessly dissipated into the vacuum.

Star Pirate had discovered Haven and its strange ruins years before. Had not the twists and turns of fortune made of him, for a time—but only for a time—an outlaw and a buccaneer of the spaceways, his keen, searching intelligence and scholarly gifts might have made of him a space archaeologist. For his true interests lay with the immeasurable reaches of antiquity, the ancient past, of Earth and every other world.

Thus, as a youth, he had found Haven. Fascinated by its ruins and their indecipherable inscriptions, he had made his first base on the tiny moonlet. Years later, when he was being hounded from world to world by the Patrol, he remembered the tiny, uncharted fragment of immemorial Aster, and made of it his secret base. For Haven had this additional factor, beyond its warmth and atmosphere—it lay at the heart of a deadly whirling vortex of meteor swarms which were sudden death to any ship that did not know the tricks of safe passage through the vortex—

which he had learned with infinite labor, and at the expensive loss of many radio-directed drone vessels.

Now it was home to him, who had no other home.

Star was working in his laboratory when the call came in from Pallas. He had programmed the computer with a complete knowledge and grammar of every known language, and of every system of writing known—every form of character, cuneiform, pictograph, alphabet, hieroglyphics—from Earth and every other world with intelligent life. This formidable program he was now pitting against the mysterious characters cut in the solid basaltic stone of the Asterian ruins on Haven, in an attempt to crack the secret of the enigmatic runes.

"Star? Pallas calling," said a soft, familiar voice in the hissing sibilants of a Venusian. It was Phath, his Venusian sidekick and general factotum, a slim, supple man, as sly and nimble a thief as had ever opened a lock or picked a pocket. He had the hairless pate and albino pallor and pink eyes of a true Backwater Venusian from the Swamp Country, and had been Star's comrade and friend since that day, long ago, when the Pirate had risked his own life to rescue the marooned Venusian, then a complete stranger to him, from entrapment in the vortex of gravity tides beyond Uranus which men called the Sargasso of Space.

"Curse the luck," grumbled Star. Then, "I'll be right there."

The television screen showed a familiar figure, lean, ascetic, with the hawk-face and silver hair of John Carew. His lean figure was clothed as usual in the dead black of the Patrol, the twin platinum comets of his rank agleam from his high collar.

They exchanged a swift word or two in greeting. On his part, the Commander saw a tall, long-legged youth with broad shoulders and lean hips. He had green eyes, sparkling

with mischief and intelligence under a mop of unruly red curls, in a space-tanned, clean-shaven face, and he wore, as usual, a drab one-piece zipper-suit of gray synthetic.

"What's up, Commander? The Blur again?"

Carew made a slow, rueful grin. "Should have known you'd be one jump ahead of me, Star," he chuckled. Then, in terse, well-chosen words he described the latest daring exploit of the mystery criminal.

The redhead nodded thoughtfully.

"As in all previous cases, The Blur was already on board," he mused. "But Interplanet has refused to accept any passenger, on request from the Patrol, right?"

Carew nodded, silver hair glistering. "Outside of officers and crew, the only others aboard the Saturn Maid were one company accountant, a senior Interplanet executive returning from his vacation on Titan, and one of their scientists. Company men, one and all."

Star shrugged. "Not important; if you can make yourself invisible, as The Blur can, you can come aboard anytime the ship is loading. He could have walked aboard at Titan, say, and stayed out of sight in the hold or an unused compartment, until it was time to strike. Clever devil . . . the secret of invisibility has defied science until now. Wonder how he does it . . ."

"The black cruiser vanished as usual," remarked Carew. "It did not land on Callisto, for the Port Authority was keeping watch for just such an unlicensed descent and landing, and has been since the first of these Blur robberies around Callisto."

"And it didn't venture into deep space either, I'll guess," said Star with an impish grin. His respect for this Blur fellow was increasing by leaps and bounds, and he was looking forward to matching wits with the invisible criminal. The Asterian runes could wait . . . as they had

already waited for two hundred million years, for their decipherment.

4. Spaceward Ho!

When Star Pirate concluded his conversation and Commander Carew's image had faded from the ground-glass viewscreen, the lithe redhead turned to order Phath to get the Jolly Roger ready for space, but the white-skinned Venusian (who had shamelessly eavesdropped on their talk) was already lugging provisions into the cargo hold of the trim little speedster, and grinning at the prospect of some action for a change. Star had his weird ancient stone hieroglyphics to keep him busy between adventures, but Phath had nothing else but cooking their meals to occupy himself with, and he sometimes missed the good old days when the two of them had lived a wild career of outlawry and space piracy.

Once aboard and vacuum-sealed, Phath took the controls.

"Where to, Chief? Callisto?" Star shook his head slowly.

"We'll go there later; right now, head for Mars," he said.

"Mars?"

"Mars."

The Venusian shrugged. "Okay, Mars it is." Power surged from the rocket engines and the trim little speedster, the Jolly Roger, lifted on a plume of flame from the twilight, jungle-clad surface of the tiny moonlet. Phath switched on the computer pilot, which alone had reflexes swift enough to read the radio signals flashed from secret beacons on the whirling meteors, and which alone could safely pilot their craft through the deathly storm of churning fragments of stone and metal.

Phath joined Star Pirate in the cozy little lounge and handed him a steaming mug of good Venusian coffee. "This guy, The Blur, has a ship that just plain disappears, right, chief?" he inquired.

"That seems to be the case," admitted the redhead. "But how--and why--nobody knows."

The Venusian shrugged. "Same way The Blur goes invisible, don't you think, Star?"

"It's not just a matter of becoming invisible, Phath," said the other, sipping the delicious hot brew. "Visible or un, nobody searches for a moving spaceship with eyes alone--they move too fast. But they can't elude magno-detectors. Spaceships have hulls, and hulls are made of steel--"

"Which show up on magno-detectors," grinned Phath. "You're right, chief: spaceships are made of steel . . . excepting when they aren't."

Star Pirate made a noncommittal sound. Both he and Phath knew that the Jolly Roger did not contain an atom of ferrous metal, but was constructed from an alloy of noble metals so as to be completely undetectable in space. It was one of the many secrets of Star Pirate, and one which had, back in the old wild, lawless days, enabled him to come and go as he pleased, thumbing his nose at the Patrol.

But there were limits, even to such a trick. The Jolly Roger was a tiny two-man scout, while the lean, black, wolfish cruiser of The Blur was capacious enough to house a crew of at least twelve, as counted by eyewitnesses aboard the Saturn Maid, and to carry half a billion credits worth of ingots of iridium, chromium and vanadium--

He paused, struck by a sudden thought. It was as if the first ray of light had just penetrated the darkness which had up till now clung about this mystery. And Star grinned, that impish, reckless grin of his that Phath knew so well.

"By Yakdar's brazen backside, you're on to something already, aren't you, chief!" yelped the Venusian admiringly.

"None of your heathen Swamp Country curses aboard my ship," said

Star Pirate with a pretense of sternness. "I'm taking a nap in my cabin; let me know when we get to Mount Mern."

Mars loomed ahead, huge and ruddy and swollen in the viewscreens, when Star awoke. The surface of the sanguine sphere was laced with those uncanny markings which had reminded the terrene astronomers of an earlier century of canals, but which had proved eventually to be nothing more than oddly symmetrical patches of a rubbery-leaved shrub which distilled moisture from dust-dry soil, and was cultivated by the dwindling nomad tribes of Mars for precisely that purpose.

Their goal, Mount Mern, rose in a range of low, worn, age-old mountains in the southern hemisphere of the Red Planet--a region called Ygnarth, which was in the Drylands of Cotaspar. As the Jolly Roger came floating down on braking jets to the narrow stone plateau which served as a landing field, Star and Phath suited up. Although the air of Mars was breathable, even here on the top of one of her ancient mountains, it was thin and cold and dry, and an airmask was preferred by Earthmen to the dreaded disease, called drylung, which had claimed so many of the lives of early colonists from Earth.

They emerged from their craft and plodded across the bare stone plain, flogged on by icy gusts. Ahead loomed a strange domelike structure of dark stone. It was older than Babylon, that dome of darkness; older than Egypt. It had already been unthinkable ancient when the slim little red men set into place the cornerstone of the Great Pyramid of Cheops. Perhaps it had been but newly built when the last of the dinosaurs died in the steaming fens of Earth, while the little mammalian ancestors of humankind stared on with awe.

Phath restrained a fastidious

shudder. Home to him were the fetid bogs and bubbling fens of the Swamp Country of Venus . . . this bitterly cold, desiccated, withered old world ran against his grain. He hated Mars, and everything about it--and especially the little old man they had come to see!

The portal of the incredibly ancient monastery was of wood, but of wood so ancient that it had petrified into a slab of grained and darksome stone. The symbol that portal bore was of a metal not unlike bronze, in the form of two crescents, linked back to back. The symbol was that of the Twin Moons of Mars, and this monastery was, or had been, ages ago, dedicated to the Moon Gods once worshipped by the ancient race whose nomadic remnants still lurked in the dust-choked ways of the immemorial, half-deserted cities of the Red Planet.

The man who answered the door, however, was no monk, and in no way to be thought of as a holy man. He was diminutive, little more than a dwarf, with a bald skull and an ugly, wrinkled, froglike face, which bore a perpetual scowl which seemed permanently carved into place on his wrinkled green-skinned face. It amused his warped sense of humor to wear the dusty, dark-red robes and scuffing sandals of the long-extinct order of Moon Priests.

"No missionaries, no salesmen, and no beggars," rasped the frog-faced green dwarf. Then, peering more sharply into Star's face which grinned behind the glastex faceplate of his air helmet, he blinked eyes like frozen chips of black ink and stepped back, opening the door more widely.

"Ah, lad, 'tis you! Come in, come in, and we'll share a drop of good wine to warm the blood! Welcome to yourself . . . and even to that damp-skinned, web-footed swamp-wriggler you persist in keeping around, if only to draw the flies."

Phath flushed, one hand going

to his gun butt, eyes narrowing to dangerous slits. "Why, you leather-skinned old dust-lizard, if I'd known it was you we were visiting, I'd have brought my sandmask to keep out the smell!"

"Is that so, you pasty-faced, pink-eyed scum of the Swamp Country!" snarled Dr. Zoar. "Why, I've half a mind to--"

"If you had half a mind, you'd move off this dried-out dustball of a planet, and find somewhere else more damp and soggy and liveable--"

"Boys, boys," sighed Star Pirate wearily. But it was no use: the feud between his Venusian sidekick and the aged Martian savant was of long standing, and the two seemed to thrive on insulting each other.

5. The Secret of Callisto

Within the fifteen-foot-thick stone walls of the ancient Martian monastery, the air was purified, thickened, enriched with oxygen, and humidified. A fire roared on the grate of the vast hearth, and warmed the empty room. The green-skinned savant served them fine old wine, curious Drylands fruits, native cheese, and succulent sausage meat.

"You will have a problem, lad, else you would not bother to intrude upon my studies," said Dr. Zoar. Star grinned sheepishly and admitted that this was so. The scientific part of his schooling had been left to the hands of the green dwarf, who possessed an intellect that was among the very finest in the system, and he had a healthy respect for Zoar's mind. He discussed The Blur with the diminutive Martian sage, and the problem of invisibility.

Zoar scowled over the problem, munching his portion of cheese and fruit and meat. Finally, the little Martian shrugged.

"So science has never conquered the problem!" he rasped. "Who cares?"

Of what possible utility would such a solution be? That is to say, how would the power to become invisible be of any use to men?"

"I don't know," admitted Star with a grin, "but it sure helps The Blur!"

Phath uttered a bark of laughter, almost strangling on a mouthful of sausage. Even Zoar permitted himself a rare grin. Then Star explained.

"If we know how he did it, we'd be a bit closer--perhaps--to learning who he is," said the redhead. Zoar chewed some cheese, ruminating, unable to find a flaw in Star's argument.

"You know what angstroms are?" he demanded suddenly.

"The measure of electromagnetic energy," said the Earthling.

"You know the angstroms which measure the part of the electromagnetic spectrum devoted to visible light?"

"I do," said Star Pirate. Zoar nodded, satisfied, then poured them all another cup of black Martian wine.

"And does your knowledge of the history of recent centuries extend to the principles of radio-jamming? Of broadcasting on the same frequency in order to blanket, to negate, to wipe out, the original broadcast?" inquired the diminutive sage.

The light of cognition illuminated the space-tanned features of the young redhead in the gray zipper-suit. He nodded dumbly.

"Excellent!" said Dr. Zoar, reaching for the cold stone bottle of wine. "Do have a drop or two more . . . I am delighted to learn that your, ah, association with our web-footed friend here has not, as I might very well have feared, dimmed your intelligence."

Phath glowered, scowled, but said nothing. For one thing, his mouth was full of sausage and cheese at the moment. For another, there was nothing much to be said. He and Zoar had never been able to agree

on anything, except for their mutual devotion to the redheaded youth who was their leader.

"And is there another problem with which I may help, perchance, with my feeble wits?" purred Dr. Zoar. He was feeling fine, having already solved the mystery of The Blur's invisibility--at least to his own satisfaction.

Star Pirate cleared his throat, and mentioned the puzzle of the utter disappearance of the dead-black cruiser, once it was finished robbing a cargo ship off Callisto. According to the magno-detectors of the Callistan Port Authority, the pirate craft had neither landed in the fungus-forests of that jungle moon, nor had it journeyed into deep space. It had simply vanished from human knowledge.

"Nonsense," snapped Zoar, helping himself to another noggin of the excellent wine. "There is an answer to every question, otherwise that question could not be asked. All that is required is the application of human intelligence . . . of knowledge . . . ah! Yes; of course; or, at least, perhaps. For I cannot be certain, without investigation. Tell me, boy--what is unique about Callisto, moon of Jupiter?"

Star Pirate wrinkled his brow, frowning in thought.

"Well," he said at length, "for one thing, it's the largest known moon in the System, large enough to be counted as a planet, like Mercury, if it was in free orbit around the Sun and not in a captive orbit about Jupiter."

"True enough," grunted Dr. Zoar. "But what else?"

Star scowled, rubbing his brow. "Well, it has an atmosphere, but, then, so have Io and Ganymede, and--"

"No, not that. Think, boy! Think!" rapped the old Martian savant.

Star racked his brain, somewhat befuddled by the old strong Martian wine, but not to any great degree.

Suddenly his brow cleared and he grinned his famous grin, and uttered a brief sentence of seven words, which made Phath blink incredulously, but Zoar grin with delight.

"Ah! Splendid!" crowed the old savant. "It heartens me that your deplorable relationship with this web-footed swamp-lizard has not--as I feared it might do, by now--sapped your intellectual vigor! Well, my boy, I believe that you are now in possession of all the data you require in order to bring the depredations of this bandit of the spaceways to an end, so I will bid you and your, um, confederate, farewell, and return to my studies . . ."

They waded back across the stony plateau, leaning against the bitter wind, masked against the dry air, all the way to where the Jolly Roger awaited their coming. Star Pirate had a pretty fair notion that he now held the keys to this mystery in his hands, but, as for Phath, the milk-pale Venusian was completely in the dark.

6. The Blur Unmasked!

The interplanet Lines freighter Uranus Gal paused briefly at Titan to take aboard a large shipment of semi-precious metal ore in purified ingot form, before breaking orbit and directing its flight to Callisto.

The only persons aboard who were not either officers or crewmen were two company officials, a secretary in the employment of Interplanet and one of the Interplanet scientists, who had been studying radionic energy waves in the gulfs beyond Saturn.

The purser, however, was a new man, unknown to the crew. He had curly red hair, mischievous green eyes, an impish grin, and had found it remarkably easy to make friends aboard ship.

In the course of time, the Uranus Gal arrived in parking orbit around Callisto, and the Captain, a yellow-

skinned Uranian called Quolk, prepared to instruct his communications officer to call up the tugs which would carry down to the surface of the jungle moon his cargo of semi-precious metals.

There occurred, however, an interruption in these plans. In the form of the muzzle of a proton needle, thrust against the spine of Captain Quolk by a hand unseen.

A cold voice whispered in his ear: "This is The Blur speaking. Place your weapon on the console and instruct your officers to similarly disarm themselves, and I will guarantee to you that none of your people will be hurt. Disobey, and I refuse to become responsible for the consequences."

Quolk stiffened, glared, then subsided, grumbling. He plucked his proton needle from its holster and placed it atop the control console. Then, just as he was about to raise his voice and instruct the others on the bridge to do the same, an unexpected voice spoke from the rear.

"This, friend Blur, is the pressure of a proton needle planted in your own back," the voice said pleasantly. "Now, unless you would enjoy having a sizeable portion of your backbone reduced to drifting atoms--which I really do not think you would enjoy at all--I suggest that you drop your needler on the floor. And if you happen to bear any other weapon, drop that one, too. Because, in the ancient turn of phrase, Blur, the jig is up."

There ensued a few moments of utter silence. Then there came to the ears of all in the vicinity the thud of a handgun dropped to the flooring. Moments later, the weapon melted into visibility.

With one foot, Star Pirate kicked it well away from where he stood behind The Blur.

He twisted the vernier on the power unit he wore, this way and that, until suddenly sparks sizzled and a shadowy figure came slowly

into view, standing between him and the Uranian, Captain Quolk. It was slight, bent, and draped in a veil of dark cloth.

"Star Pirate, I believe," whispered the veiled figure, with a slight bow of the head.

Star nodded slightly--not for one moment relaxing the pressure of the proton needle he held firmly against the spine of The Blur.

"Professor Jonas Pertinax, I believe," he said, and it was observed by Captain Quolk and one or another of the officers on the bridge that the dark-veiled figure, now fully visible, flinched violently.

"How did you . . . know my name?" hissed the veiled one. Star Pirate laughed, and reached out and twitched away the veil, revealing a balding, elderly Earthling with rheumy blue eyes, a large nose, and not much chin.

"You were listed as present on several of the trips made by Interplanet freighters when they were raided by The Blur," he said. "And your speciality is in the field of electromagnetic radiation. It did not take very much detective work to discover that on three different occasions you contested in court Interplanet's claim to certain patents resulting from your work--"

"For which I was inadequately paid," hissed the balding scientist in venomous tones. "I decided to use my genius--which they valued so little!--to reduce Interplanet to beggary. The which I would have done, had not you come meddling into affairs which have naught to do with you--"

"Captain Quolk, an unmarked cruiser is suddenly in the vicinity, and is closing upon us with magnetic grappling beams," cried an ensign.

"Quite all right," declared the yellow-skinned Uranian. "Bosun, conduct Professor Pertinax to the brig, and lock him up. But first I want the prisoner subjected to a strip-search, in case he has any of his nasty little gadgets on him!"

Star laughed and slapped Pertinax between the shoulders, where he appeared to have a natural hump. "Oh, I doubt if you'll find anything other than this--it's the instrument which made him seem invisible to us."

"Is it really?" asked the Uranian, curiously. "How does the thing work?"

"Quite simply, really," said the Pirate. "It broadcasts a jamming frequency in the same wavelengths as visible light, but in a globular and heterodyning field, which in effect bends light around the figure wearing it, so that it vanishes to our sight. Clever, but not all that mysterious."

Stripped of his invisibility projector, The Blur was led off between burly men-at-arms. Quolk turned to his "purser" with rare good humor in his beaming smile.

"And what will we do about yonder black wolf?" he boomed, gesturing at the corsair ship.

"Nothing. When the airlocks do not open, The Blur's men will guess something has gone wrong, and will flee to their base," said Star. "What they will not guess, is that my own ship is waiting--and that I already know where they are going!"

The Uranian bent upon the red-haired youth a stern but admiring gaze. "You are quite a remarkable young man," he said softly.

"Not at all, actually," grinned Star. "Callisto is famous and unique for more than one reason. One of these is that it is the only moon in the System--actually, it's big enough to be considered a planet, and would be, if, like Mercury, it circled the Sun and not another planet--the only moon in the System, I say, that has a moon of its own. This miniature moonlet is known as Callisto-Alpha. It's less than half a mile wide, and nobody ever remembers it's there . . . except for a certain old Martian scientist I happen to know. Well, that's the site of the secret base of The Blur's raiders. It has to be: there's no-

where else to go; if you don't land on Callisto, or go off into deep space, you have to land on Callisto-Alpha, to unload your ingots of rhodium and vanadium and--"

"Why did The Blur concentrate on metals like that, anyway, I wonder?" muttered Captain Quolk. Star Pirate grinned again.

"I can even answer that one, too, I think! He wanted to get a sufficiency of non-ferrous metals to build an undetectable space-cruiser that wouldn't show up on a magno-detector! This would give The Blur and his gang of outlaws the freedom to roam the spaceways at will, leaving the Space Patrol helpless to pursue them. They could have preyed upon the ship-

ping of world after world, bringing Interplanet Lines to its knees. And when we investigate The Blur's base on Callisto-Alpha, I'll bet you fifty credits we find a space-cruiser made of noble metals, and about half-built!"

Captain Quolk heaved a hearty sigh of relief.

"Young fellow, you are a remarkable person. And if you don't mind accompanying me to my quarters, I have been hoarding a cask of century-old Martian fire-brand for just such an occasion as this one has proved to be. . ."

"Lead the way, sir," said Star Pirate, with a smile.

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with science fiction adventure. As a matter of fact, I suspect the very SF elements that are inextricable with the Cthulhu Mythos are going to ensure that Lovecraft's work survives into the twenty-first century. And if there are Earthmen venturing into deep space a hundred years from now, when they want a good scare, they're not going to bring Stephen King or Edgar Allan Poe with them, they're going to bring along the works of H. P. Lovecraft, whose style has all the creepiness of the past, but whose tales of "the nameless larvae of the Other Gods" which might be pawing and groping at the hull of a U.S. starship will definitely be relevant to any future age. When the first exploration to a black hole nears its goal, I'm sure at least one astronaut is going to be thinking about "the spiral black vortices of that ultimate void of Chaos where reigns the mindless de-

mon-sultan Azathoth" and hearing "the thin monotonous piping of a daemonic flute held in nameless paws"--in his imagination, at least.

But for my part, having read of Hamilton's shoggothian Kangas, I can now fully appreciate the dire suggestiveness of the line in At the Mountains of Madness which runs: ". . . Abdul Alhazred whispered about . . . 'shoggoths' in his frightful Necronomicon, though even that mad Arab had not hinted that any existed on earth except in the dreams of those who had chewed a certain alkaloidal herb." When Lovecraft wrote that "the mad author of the Necronomicon had nervously tried to swear that none had been bred on this planet," he was of course setting up his readers for the ultimate horror, but he seems also to have inspired Edmond Hamilton to write about shoggoths from Out There.

THE OTHER PLACE

by Richard L. Tierney

A murderer and a scientist wash their hands of this world to take refuge among the alien beings of another dimension!

I hated Hal Norris, so I took my time about killing him. The first bullet got him in the back and shattered his spine--I could tell that by the way he flopped and twitched on the floor. Ignoring his screams (which I knew the neighbors would ignore also, although I didn't really care) I deliberately placed the next four slugs in his kneecaps and shoulder-joints. Then I left him to die in agony, vaguely hoping that his death would be years rather than moments away, yet not really caring.

When I walked out into the alley afterwards I felt better than I had for a long time. It was not the shooting that I had enjoyed so much as the expression on Hal Norris' face when he knew that he was doomed. He would never really understand my reasons for killing him, of course--his kind never understands--but that wasn't important; all I cared about was that he should die in pain and know that I was his killer.

That's how it is when someone does you dirt, someone whose very nature you hate and you can't get back at them because the law is on their side. Hal knew the law--the system--and he had used it to work me over. But he had miscalculated. He'd figured I'd come whining to him in defeat; instead, I'd come with a gun.

Still, I might never have done it except for what he did to Noreen--but, no, I don't want to tell about that. I swore I'd make Hal pay someday, and I did. But I'm not writing this account in order to live all that over again.

★

So now, at last, I had done it--and now that it was done, I felt no emotion whatsoever. For years I had felt little but hate; now that Hal, the main focus of that hate, was dead, there was no feeling to take its place. I was an empty shell.

I wandered casually away from the Loop, away from the blatant neon signs and the noise of sirens as they began to converge on Hal's apartment. A tingle of anxiety stirred somewhere inside me, and I realized it still mattered to me whether I got caught. Well, it was unlikely they would find me in the short time they'd have, but if they did I still had one bullet in my automatic, and that bullet would put me forever beyond their reach.

I walked until I came to the park by Lakeshore Drive. Here I rested on a bench and looked up at the stars. For a moment I thought of just going out on the town--enjoying myself in one last spree before I'd have to blow my brains out or go down in a final shoot-out with the police. Yet I'd promised the professor I'd meet him here--and anyway, for the moment my only desire was to sit and rest and gaze up at the bright, cold stars . . .

It was perhaps five or ten minutes later that the professor's black, two-door coupe pulled up in front of the park bench on which I sat. I quickly climbed in beside him, and he drove off.

I think the professor was an old man, but I could never be sure, for his strange appearance somehow made it difficult for me to estimate his age. His hair was white, what there was of it--just a fringe that hung around the back of his long, narrow head from ear to ear. He was short and slender. Heavy, thick-framed spectacles rested on the bridge of his long, sharp nose, and his head seemed very large in proportion to his body. Even then I'd had cause to know that he was by far the most intelligent man I'd ever met, and that in other ways he was unlike other humans; knowing what I know now, I'm sure he was a mutant.

Months ago, when my lonely wanderings had led me to his door, he had told me that his name was Karl Weiss. I think now that my hunted, almost desperate air had more to do with his decision to take me on as his assistant than did my college background in the biological sciences.

"What were you thinking about them?" he asked, gesturing upward as he drove.

"About what?"

"The stars. You were looking at them when I drove up. So few people look at them anymore! What do you think of them?"

I shrugged. "I wasn't thinking about much of anything, and I could only see a few of them--too much downtown glare."

"Did you ever think of going out there?"

"Not since I was a kid," I said. "I never thought it might happen. I guess I still don't quite believe we're going there now. Down deep, if you know what I mean."

Professor Weiss nodded. "Did you take care of your last bit of--business--satisfactorily?"

"Yes."

"Good," said Weiss. "You have not told me what that business was, and I will not ask you, but I think

I can guess its nature--and sympathize. I left Germany some years ago after concluding a similar business, I believe. It is good to have such things out of the way before going on a long journey."

I was startled, and once again amazed by this strange man who seemed so unlike all others.

"I hated him," I said. "Maybe I hate them all. There's something wrong with all of them--something more than just stupidity. If there weren't, men like him couldn't use them the way they do. If there weren't something rotten about the human race in the first place, people like him would never exist at all..."

I stopped speaking when I saw Weiss' eyes twinkling. Suddenly he laughed.

"I know you--we are alike, you and I!" He took his right hand from the wheel and swept it in an arc as if to include the whole city. "You feel yourself superior to these others, and you resent the rules they set up. You can't consider yourself one of them--one of the crowd."

"You seem to know all about me," I said. "Yes, I do feel superior--I've always felt it. Even when I've doubted it, they've kept proving it to me--over and over, all my life. I've always felt their control over me as somehow wrong--no, not just wrong, but mindless! They never think about anything . . ." I suddenly contrasted all the humans I had known with the black, star-gemmed sky above. "For instance, they never think about what might be going on out there!"

Weiss laughed again--a gentle laugh that had no mockery in it, only sympathy. "And that, my dear Stephen, is why I chose you for my assistant and no other."

We continued in silence for several miles, first south on Lakeshore Drive, then westward through areas of tenements and grimy

factories. Finally I asked Weiss: "Have you decided where we will go?"

"We will travel far," he said--"farther than any being has travelled before. We may never return. Stephen, can you--if you must--live the rest of your life without the company of another human being?"

I knew he was serious--but I was no less so. I looked back over the Chicago skyline and thought of the things which "human company" held in store for me should I return: police courts, a prison cell, perhaps a death sentence. What did I have to lose?

"Yes," I said, "I can live without company. But you still haven't told me where we're going. Will it be Alpha Centauri? Arcturus? Or even beyond the galaxy . . .?"

"I can't yet tell you where we're going," said the strange old man, "because I haven't thought of a name for it."

II.

Weiss brought the car to a halt before an ancient brick warehouse and we got out. After unlocking the heavy metal door of the building, he ushered me inside and locked it behind us. Once again I stood in the great, cluttered room strewn with electrical parts of every size, shape and complexity. Weiss glanced briefly about the workshop in which we had labored secretly for so many months.

"We're leaving them quite a puzzle," he said. "They'll never put it together, I'm sure. Come, Stephen, let's go to the roof now."

We ascended a rusty iron staircase and walked out on the flat roof, and I saw it there once more, gleaming under the starlight--a metal cylinder perhaps thirty-five feet long, tapering to a point in front and lifted at an angle toward the night sky. On the back end of the thing was a spidery framework that

somehow resembled the dish of a radar scanner.

"Have you thought of a name for it yet?" I asked.

"No. It needs no name--but it will take us farther than any man has ever gone."

It may seem strange, but never during the long months of our labor had I doubted Weiss' sanity or competence. As I have said, he was different from other men. Now, standing there on the roof with that fantastic machine in front of us, I knew it would do what he had designed it to do.

"Are you ready, Stephen?"

I took a last look at the skyline of the city. "I'm ready. I was just wondering about--after we're gone--what's going to eventually happen to all of them?"

"They will eventually destroy themselves, I'm sure. That is why I did not bother to do it myself, and instead bent all my energies toward perfecting the light-drive."

"And I still don't really understand the light-drive, even after helping you build it."

"I have no time to explain it now," said the professor. "Come--the sun will rise very soon, and when it does we must leave the earth."

He drew me over to the cylinder and through a small door in its side. There was a room inside just big enough for two people to be comfortable in. On the wall hung two pressure-suits.

"I'll give you a last briefing on the controls and equipment," he said. He helped me into a pressure-suit and went over its adjustments with me. The control panel was next; it was extremely simple, consisting of a speed indicator and a single lever in a slot that read "start" and "stop". I told the professor that I might master it, given time, and he chuckled.

"We still have half an hour until dawn," he said. "You still have time

to reconsider. If you decide to back out, you are still free to do so."

"No. I made up my mind months ago."

"To be frank with you, Stephen, you will be something of a guinea pig on this voyage. Conditions in the place we are going may be utterly different from what they are here. Your presence will give me an opportunity to study human reactions to those conditions objectively."

"Always the scientist, aren't you! Well, if I'm the guinea pig, at least you're in the experiment with me. And I've never felt that you're the type that miscalculates."

I returned to the roof and stood looking toward the north, toward the lights of the great city, while Professor Weiss pattered around getting things checked for departure. At that time I truly felt no regrets for all that I was leaving; rather, I was pleased to reflect that the law would never find me and that I, Stephen Randall, would be an eternal puzzle to the civilization I was leaving behind.

The sky began to grow brighter. Soon it would be daylight, and I would be leaving the earth for--what? Where was this "other place" the professor had often spoken of? And what was the nature of his "light-drive" which would take us there? Certainly Weiss was a man of unique knowledge and ability, at least centuries ahead of his time--if indeed the history of the human race would ever include a "time" for such as he!

"It is time to go," said the professor quietly. "The sun will be up in a few minutes."

We climbed into the machine and sealed the door shut behind us. Weiss touched a switch and a low hum of power surged through the ship. Gazing through the thick quartz plate above the control panel, I beheld the sun's rim beginning to peep over the urban skyline.

"Sunlight--the source of our power," said Weiss. "We can leave any time now."

"Will the acceleration be great?" I asked, noting that the seats before the panel were only moderately cushioned.

"There will be no sense of acceleration at all. The forces driving us will act equally on every atom inside the ship, including those of our bodies. You may remain standing if you wish."

As he spoke, he threw the lever on the panel slightly forward.

As he had said, I felt nothing. I looked out the quartz window and saw that we were shooting upward at a terrific velocity, but I felt no sense of motion; it was like looking at a movie. Had I relied on my senses and not my reason, I would have thought that we were stationary and that the ground was dropping away from us! Chicago swiftly became a toy city of blocks, a huge irregular gridwork, a dark splotch on the ground, a small dot on the shore of Lake Michigan, and was finally lost from view entirely.

"That should shake their eardrums a bit," commented the professor, "but we won't be able to put on any real speed until we leave the atmosphere."

I said nothing, but secretly marvelled. If this was just a slow crawl to his way of thinking, then what was his idea of speed?

"We must attain the speed of light, of course," he said, as though answering my unspoken question, "in order to cross over into the other place . . ."

"The speed of light!" I cried. "You never told me your machine would do that!"

"It will. By tapping energy from the sun."

We were already beyond the atmosphere. The professor nudged the lever forward, and I saw that our speed jumped to the fantastic rate of 200 miles per second. Moreover, the lever was now slowly moving for-

ward on its own as some automatic mechanism took over; we were steadily accelerating.

"How do you know," I demanded, "that there actually is an Other Planet?"

"I could explain it mathematically," said Weiss, "but you would not understand. I'll try a simpler, though less accurate, explanation; you know, of course, that the speed of light is constant--that is, that no matter how fast you are going, or what direction, light from any source will always reach you at the velocity of about 186,000 miles per second.

"Yes, I know. So how can we ever go as fast as light?"

"We cannot--at least not in relation to light itself. We will, however, be flying away from the sun at light-speed--even though the light from the sun can still be considered to be reaching us at 186,000 miles per second."

"That sounds absolutely impossible."

"All a matter of perspective," said Weiss, pacing the floor as he warmed to his subject. "As our velocity increases, our time-rate slows down in relation to the time-rate of the solar system. Therefore, even though we are receding from the sun at great speed, a light ray 186,000 miles in length emitted from its surface can pass us in one of our seconds."

I glanced at the speed gauge. It read 186,000 miles per second!

"In other words," I said, "we're now living more slowly than people on earth?"

"Slightly. The difference is negligible now, but as we approach the speed of light it will increase drastically. Before long, one of our seconds will equal a thousand years on earth--and eventually, when we reach the speed of light, earth-time will cease to exist altogether in relation to us."

I knew now why we could never

return. I looked at the gauge and saw that it was now registering 4,000 miles per second.

"But where does this 'other place' come in?"

"I was coming to that," said the professor. "In gaining a dimension of infinite time in relation to the solar system, we lose a dimension of space. By achieving light-speed within the sun's gravitational field . . ."

"Wait--I'm lost. What does the sun's gravitation field have to do with it?"

He looked at me as though I were a small pupil who hadn't read his lesson. "You realize, of course, that gravity is merely a property of space in the vicinity of material bodies?"

"I'll take your word for it."

"Then you can see that our acceleration must take place in a gravitational field such as the solar system offers, so that our speed may increase in fairly close proximity to large bodies such as the sun and the planets. You see, we must be travelling at light-speed in relation to something--something fairly close and massive."

I did not see, but kept silent for fear he would try to explain something else and get me even more confused. I looked again at the gauge, found it indicating 12,000 miles per second.

"Therefore," Weiss went on in spite of my silence, "as our time-rate and velocity approach infinity, so does our mass, along with a contraction of one of our spatial dimensions . . ."

"You mean the faster we go, the heavier we'll get?" I ventured.

"No--our weight has nothing to do with our mass any more. In fact, if you will get up, you will find yourself nearly weightless. We are nearly at perfect free-fall point now."

I did as he said--and found myself floating toward the ceiling. I felt

slightly giddy and sick and almost as if I were falling. The gauge, I noticed, read 30,000 miles per second.

"Our mass increase is proportional to a spatial contraction in the direction of our travel," he droned on. "The greater our speed, the greater our mass in relation to an equal stationary volume of matter of equal stationary weight--'stationary' referring to the sun, of course--until, at light-speed, we shall become, in relation to all earthly perspective, two-dimensional and of infinite mass."

"It sounds like we'll be squashed flat," I said. The gauge now registered the unthinkable velocity of over 100,000 miles per second.

"No," said Weiss. "We'll merely be squeezed out of this universe, so to speak--and into another one."

I felt relieved to find that I seemed to be able to understand his last statement. Then I started to feel apprehensive. "Will we undergo any--alteration--when we enter this new universe?"

"None that our senses will be able to detect. We will perceive the altered dimensions as mere re-orientations of the dimensions of our own universe. In other words, we'll see it as another three-dimensional universe existing in time. It's all a matter of perception."

"Another universe!" I cried. "So that's what you meant by the 'other place'! What do you think we'll find there?"

The professor shrugged. "Anything--or possibly nothing. To speculate would be useless in face of an infinity of possibilities. But we shall soon know. Look--in ten more seconds we shall achieve the speed of light!"

I glanced at the speed-meter and found that our velocity was 180,000 miles per second. The indicator was ever more swiftly moving toward the mark that denoted infinity. I

looked out the quartz porthole, surprised to find the distant stars as bright and immovable as ever; I had expected to see them streaking by, and only when I saw them motionless still despite our terrible velocity did I gain an inkling as to the enormity of our universe in space and time--and actually began to feel that enormity. . . .

Then, even as I watched in those last seconds, the stars suddenly sped off on a million wild tangents, grouping, dissolving, and re-grouping into cosmic whorls of chromatic splendor--until, forming at last into one mighty galaxy of whirling motion, they seemed to explode in a final burst of kaleidoscopic light--

And then they were gone.

III.

We were in the Other Place. There was no sense of transition, only the realization that there were no longer any stars. They had vanished.

But there were other things.

They were not planets, nor suns, nor anything we had ever seen before. Some loomed far off and might have been as huge as worlds, while others drifted by close at hand and were only inches in diameter. All were alike, yet no two were exactly alike. They extended indefinitely in all directions, seemingly infinite in number, each glowing with a soft blue light and having at its core a spark of golden radiance, and the glory of them was beyond description.

"What are they?" I murmured, feeling a strange wonder growing upon me.

"That we must go out and learn, Stephen."

Though his words were matter-of-fact, the professor's voice was somewhat hushed, and I knew he felt the same wonder as I. He began to get the pressure suits ready. I looked

over at the speed indicator and found the needle pointing at zero.

"We aren't moving!"

"Naturally not. Light-speed in our universe is equivalent to being motionless in this one. Here--get into this suit, and we'll go outside."

I asked no more questions while we helped each other into pressure-suits, hoping Weiss would not start another of his scientific explanations. My hopes were fulfilled, and when all was ready we passed through the airlock into unknown space.

Drifting free in the void, I examined the alien objects more closely. They reminded me more of crystals than anything else--crystals of every size. The smallest were about the diameter of golf balls; of the more distant ones we could form no accurate estimate, but they could well have ranged up to the size of planets or even suns. They were of every angular symmetry imaginable, like snowflakes but more complex, their symmetry radiating in three dimensions rather than the snowflakes' two. All were a transparent blue in color, and in the heart of each there pulsed a soft gleam of golden light. Throughout all this fantastic space, as far as we could see, there was nothing but these cosmic sapphires, stretching away into a dim haze of blue and gold.

A crystal about four inches in diameter drifted by and the professor reached out to grab it. It slipped out of his hand almost like a cake of wet soap.

"Why--they're frictionless!" he exclaimed. "See if you can catch one, Stephen--we must take some into the ship for analysis."

This was not easy, but we finally developed the knack of holding the smaller crystals by cupping our hands together over them. Larger ones, say a foot in diameter or more, we could not handle at all. Having

at last captured two of the smallest, we took them inside the ship.

The results they showed under analysis were astounding, and Weiss finally concluded that they were not composed of matter as we know it at all. All chemical tests were negative; they would not react to anything. Nor did heating produce any results. Most surprising of all, they seemed to lack that property of matter known as "mass", and the professor concluded that they would have no weight in a gravitational field. Yet they were unbelievably rigid, and would not change shape under the greatest pressures we could apply to them.

"I can't understand it!" said Weiss when we had finished our testing. "They obey no laws of matter, and they seem to be indestructible."

"Maybe they're the atoms of this universe," I suggested. "Atoms are as nearly indestructible as anything I can think of."

I was gratified to find that he took my suggestion seriously. "You may well be right, Stephen. The building blocks of this universe! I'm glad you thought of that."

"And yet, they're so big . . ."

"Size is relative, and space an illusion. Your hypothesis accounts for our being unable to detect mass in these objects with the crude tests we have made so far. What we regard as a frictionless surface in these crystals may only be the outer orbits of electrons moving at fantastic speeds. I think I can see a way to prove or disprove it."

"How?"

"By bringing various crystals in contact with one another," said Weiss, "to see if they form molecules." To demonstrate, he nudged our two crystals together in the air until they touched. Nothing happened.

"I guess my hypothesis was cockeyed," I said.

"Not necessarily. There is a great diversity of crystals here,

just as there is a great diversity of atoms and molecules in our own universe. These two may only be of sorts that won't combine with one another. We'll have to go outside and continue this experiment on a larger scale."

When we were outside again, we continued our strange game. Though unable to handle the crystals, we were able to nudge them in the directions we wished them to travel. Before long, we saw that our atomic theory was groundless, for although we tried crystals of every size and shape in hundreds of combinations--even bombarding one as big as a hill with dozens of smaller ones--none of them would combine with another. Occasionally we saw them collide of themselves in their aimless driftings, always without results. We were stumped.

"I should have known we were wrong," said Weiss through the radio built into his helmet. "Some molecular combinations can be expected to give off light during their formation, and we have seen no such flashes in all this immensity."

"So what do we do now?"

"Start gathering crystals in your knapsack. We'll take them back to the ship for further analysis."

I started to do as Weiss asked, and had gathered up half a dozen of the crystals when a disconcerting thought struck me. I began to look around in every direction.

"Where's the ship?" I asked.

The professor began to look around also. "I--I think it's over behind that hill-sized crystal we were testing--"

"Well, let's get back there! I don't like the idea of getting lost in this mess at all."

We sped around the giant face of the crystal, propelled by the small CO₂ jets installed in our pressure-suits. But when we arrived at the far side, the ship was nowhere to be seen.

"Perhaps it was that big crystal over to the right," suggested the professor.

I felt myself sicken with horror as I caught the uncertainty in his voice. All our food supplies and equipment for survival were in the ship!

"Good God!" I cried out. "These crystals look the same from every angle!"

"Easy, Stephen--we're not lost yet," said the professor. "If we keep our wits about us, we might still--"

He stopped speaking, and I saw him gaze hopelessly about in the immensity through which we drifted. In that moment I thought of the ship as home, security, life--as everything I had ever wanted that was beyond reach. I wanted it desperately. I came closer to praying than I had for all my adult life, and felt that if I could only regain the ship I would never leave it again

And suddenly it was there, right in our line of sight, drifting toward us in a slow, impossible curve around the flank of a mansion-sized crystal that had concealed it from view.

We gazed at it, spellbound. It was a long moment before either of us regained enough composure to speak.

"How did it happen?" I said at last.

"I don't know," said Weiss, looking around him wonderingly, "but I think the crystals may have had something to do with it."

IV.

During the next few "days" we ran extensive tests on the crystals--tests quite different from our earlier ones. Though we did not find out what the crystals were, we soon discovered what they could do.

For instance, we found that we

could move objects with them. By being in close proximity to a crystal and concentrating on any other crystal close by, we could cause the latter to drift in any direction we chose. Moreover, any object within the ship, or even the ship itself, could be moved by this means. No longer did we have to rely on high-pressure jets to travel outside in space; by merely taking a crystal along in our knapsacks, we could will ourselves from place to place. Nor did we have to worry any more about getting lost--for, by concentrating hard on the ship, we could make it come to us as it had on that first occasion.

Nor was this the only astounding property of the crystals. As we progressed, we discovered that we could not only move matter but also change its atomic and molecular structure. This benefited us enormously, for we merely had to visualize something we wanted and the crystals would supply it. We found that we could purify the air by simply converting waste gases back to oxygen. Food and water also would never be a problem for us, and we realized we would be able to exist in this strange universe indefinitely. The crystals would not, however, create matter out of nothingness, and we had to save every bit of matter we had brought with us from our own universe.

Obviously our minds had some effect on the crystals--or vice versa--which caused nearly our every wish to be gratified. It was almost as if the crystals were watching over us. When I mentioned to Weiss my impressions on this subject, he came forth with a possible explanation he had been mulling over.

"I believe you are right about that, Stephen--in fact, I have come to the conclusion that these crystals, whatever else they may be, are conscious entities."

His theories were continually astounding me. "You mean you think

they're alive?"

"Not exactly--but this may be a good example of life as we do not know it."

"Does this theory of yours explain how they move things?"

"They do not do the moving," said the professor. "Our minds do that. The crystals merely serve as catalysts or amplifiers."

There was no stopping him once he started on something like this, so I made myself look as intelligent as possible and listened.

"It is my belief," he went on, "that all space-time is filled with a basic, boundless power which underlies all other forms of energy. The anthropomorphically-minded call this power God, and it is available to certain minds which have the property we call 'faith'--a property most humans lack, unfortunately. These crystals, however, are completely open to this latent power of the universe, due to their complete lack of what we think of as 'will power'. They possess complete faith, if you want to think of it that way, and there is therefore nothing to stop the inflow of universal power. Yet they are mere minds with no will--vast intellects calmly contemplating the universe, possessing all knowledge and power yet lacking any motivation or desire to use it. They are static. But when we came into the picture, we introduced the new factor of will power. Somehow, when we are near a crystal, our desires are transmitted through it and activate the 'power of the universe' on our behalf."

"That's a nice poetic fancy," I said, "but hardly a scientific theory. In other words, you've run out of hypotheses and don't have the slightest idea what the crystals are or how they function."

Weiss shrugged and grinned wryly. "At least my poetry gives us an aesthetic explanation to pretend we believe in, no?"

"I'm surprised at you! I'd like

to know how these things came to exist in the first place. Any ideas on that?"

"Yes," said the professor. "I'm inclined to doubt that they came about naturally."

"Why? How else would they have come about?"

"Let me give you an analogy. Suppose a cabbage worm found himself in a place where there were no objects but cabbages. He would have his every need satisfied beyond measure. Yet, being incapable of thought, he would not realize that he was in a vegetable garden where at any time the gardener might find and destroy him."

"You mean--you think something grew these crystals?"

"Not 'grew' exactly," said Weiss, "but that's the general idea. The crystals themselves are useless, but in partnership with minds possessing will power fantastic things could be done. Yes, it's conceivable that beings inhabiting this universe might be 'growing' these things for their own use."

The thought was not comforting. I found myself wondering what a bug feels like when the gardener sprays him. If there actually were beings cultivating these crystals in some unimaginable way, they would be mightier than anything the mind of man could imagine, more powerful in their wisdom than man could ever hope to be.

I did not sleep well that "night."

I stayed with the professor for some time, during which the inevitable happened: boredom began to set in and replace the wonderment I had originally felt at being in such a strange place. There was a soft and soothing beauty about this universe, but nothing ever changed. The ship's clock indicated that several weeks had passed, but subjectively it seemed (paradoxical as it sounds) more like years or moments. One felt the presence of eternity

in this twilight blue-and-gold vastness, and I understood the feeling that had led the professor to theorize about such things as God, faith and infinite power, even though we both knew such theorizings could not at all explain the awesome Fact.

Then one "day" a change occurred.

We were outside the ship in our pressure-suits, idly drifting and gathering more crystals to test, when he soft light all about us began to dim. As far as we could see the crystals in every direction slowly darkened down to a dim purple, while the golden pulsings at their hearts slowed and faded to a smoldering red. At the same time a strange fear and melancholy settled down upon me, intensifying rapidly. I felt instinctively as though something unutterably dangerous were abroad; I froze; my heart hammered and I floated in silence, fearful of making the slightest movement or sound, fearful even of my cautious breathing within my helmet and the rhythmic thudding of my heart. The professor floated as motionless as I, and somehow I knew for a certainty that he shared the same awful dread.

Then, far off in the distance--it may have been miles, leagues or even astronomical distances away, for there was no way of estimating--a new phenomenon slowly expanded into existence, bringing with it new colors and configurations. It was like a vast cloud of shining bubbles of many sizes, an iridescent congeries of spheres that ponderously swirled and grew, filling our space with a hard and somehow evil radiance. As we watched it in fearful fascination it slowly spread itself over the surface of one of the largest crystals until the latter was entirely hidden from sight; then, just as slowly, it began to contract. The harsh light gradually dimmed as the bubble-mass contracted, till at last the phenomenon dwindled to a point and was gone, leaving no

trace of the crystal or itself behind. Then slowly the light of the crystals returned to their normal pulsing blue and gold, and the horror lifted itself from my soul.

"My God--what was it?" I breathed when at last I was able to speak.

"I don't know." Weiss' voice, filtered through the speaker inside my helmet, trembled with awe. "I don't know, but I think it may have been--the Gardener."

V.

For some time an idea had been slowly forming in my mind, and the "morning" after the frightening phenomenon I brought it up to the professor.

"Karl," I began, "you told me when we left earth that we would probably never return. I'd like to know just what the probabilities of returning are."

"You want to go back," he said.

"Yes. I've been thinking. When I decided to come along with you, I had nothing to lose. If I had stayed I might have gone to prison or even been sentenced to death. But if I went back now, I'd have nothing to worry about."

"You mean . . .?"

"Yes--the crystals. With just one of them we could be the masters of the world. There's no need for us to flee society now, because we could destroy or remake it as we saw fit. Anyone who hindered or annoyed us could simply be willed smoothly and painlessly out of existence. Just think, Karl--we could say to this mountain, 'Be thou removed, and cast into the sea,' and it would literally happen!"

The professor smiled a little, but there was no surprise in his expression.

"I've been expecting you to say something like this," he said, "ever since we found out what the crystals will do."

"What about it? Can we go back?"

"We'll see. Yes, I'll help you go back if you wish. In a way it's very simple, and in another way very difficult."

"How do you mean?"

"The easy part," said Weiss, "is that in order to get back you merely have to travel any direction you choose at the speed of light, and you will find yourself back in the same place on the material body you departed from originally--in other words, on the south shore of Lake Michigan, on earth."

"Is that all? Then what's the catch?"

"The catch, Stephen, is that the earth which we left no longer exists in time, in relation to us, except as an infinity of time-points. You could come out at any point in earth's history from the time it condensed into a solid ball to the time of its extinction."

That was a big catch, all right. I thought about it for awhile. Finally I said: "I'll chance it! There's really not much to do here, and I'm afraid I'd eventually die of boredom if I had to stay. The crystal should sustain me wherever I come out in time--even if I hit the remote future, I doubt mankind will have anything to top it."

"Very well. Let's get things ready."

During the next few days we constructed a small, one-man space capsule for my return--for the professor was determined to remain in the Other Place.

"There's nothing for me in a human-infested world, even if it's on my own terms," he explained. "Humanity can offer me nothing I desire. Besides--" There was a far-off look in his eyes--"there is so much to learn here! Someday I might even contact the powers or beings which I believe developed these crystals--if there are such beings. Think of the knowledge to be gained from them, Stephen--secrets beyond any-

thing mankind has ever known or even imagined!"

Remembering the horror that I had felt under the shining sphere-cloud phenomenon, I felt anything but a desire to encounter such powers. "Is that your last word, then?" I asked.

"It is--but you needn't worry about my welfare. The crystals will supply me with all I need."

We stocked my space capsule with the few supplies I would require for my return--food, air cylinders, scientific equipment of various sorts and medical items. Most of it, I suspected, I would never need with a crystal to aid me. I helped the professor construct a small-scale light-drive and install it in the capsule. The radiant energy in this universe was not intense enough to power such a device, but that problem was easily solved by installing a crystal in the drive mechanism--a small one about two inches in diameter, since the design allowed no room for a larger one. I took two extra crystals of the same size in my knapsack, just in case I should lose one.

And so at last I said farewell to my companion, the strange man who had so strangely befriended me in the greatest crisis of my life--a man who would give up all power in order to gain knowledge. The last glimpse I had of him was through the quartz pane of my capsule, as he drifted weightless amid that crystal profusion. I answered his parting wave, then pushed the velocity-lever forward. Everything vanished in a blur of speed; in this massless universe there was no inertia to overcome, and I achieved light-speed as quickly as I could push the lever over to its limit. I was on my way back to the stars.

The first impression I received to indicate that I was back on earth was that the light hurt my eyes. The crystal world had been a dim

place, and it was some time before I grew accustomed to sunlight again.

While I was waiting for my eyes to adjust, I removed my pressure-suit and strapped on my knapsack. As long as I had the crystals in my possession, the world was mine!

When at last I stepped outside, my eyes restored, I found that things were greatly changed. The sun was small and dim in the sky, and the light which had blinded me was actually a fading remnant of its former brilliance. The earth was old. Chicago was gone, buried beneath the sands of time, and no trace of it remained. But far to the northwest, the towers of a titan city reared strange, dark spires above the horizon. Man was still here.

Walking westward, I soon came to a great road that lay along the shore of a wide, stagnant bay of black water--a bay extending southward from a distant sea that might once have been Lake Michigan. And here I received the greatest shock since my return from the Other Place. Along this road dark forms were moving, toward and away from the great city to the northwest. At first I thought these things were vehicles, but when I had advanced to a better vantage point and was able to view them more closely, I cried aloud in wonder and horror, for I saw that they were immense black beetles, each one many times larger than a man!

I had been on earth several months now, and have been over much of its surface. I am convinced there is no human being alive but me.

My trouble, of course, was that the age of the earth is so great, and the time during which humanity inhabited it was so ridiculously short. I must have had less than one chance in a million of hitting a time when human civilization flourished.

I've thought of going back to the Other Place and making another

attempt, but I know now that that is impossible. The crystals I brought with me simply do not have the necessary power; whether because they no longer have the reinforcement of all the other crystals in their universe, or whether the earth's gravitational and magnetic fields act as inhibitors, I do not know. But then, it makes little difference, as I'm sure I'd never live long enough to hit that lucky chance in a million.

The beetles aren't so bad, now that I've gotten used to seeing them around, but they're not exactly companionship. They're certainly not a menace, ignoring me for the most part. They seem never to fight wars or do anything else that requires much energy; they float about the sky in great airships, or wander across the landscape in a leisurely manner, pausing to suck the juice of trees and plants. They build great cities of stone, and many of their buildings seem to be archives and museums wherein are stored knowledge and relics of many human and pre-human civilizations.

I need not fear for survival, for with my crystals I can power

my capsule to roam the earth at will, though their power is not great enough to lift me into outer space. The beetles recognize me as an intelligent being, and indifferently allow me to wander and explore in their mighty cities and archives. There is much that I am free to do, and much for me to learn. I am the last man on earth, and sometimes I feel lonely with that thought; but on the whole, this world is not a bad exchange for humanity.

Sometimes I find myself wondering if Professor Weiss will return one day from the Other Place. Even if he should, I am sure I will never see him again; earth's history is just too vast. And then, too, he may have met the Gardener . . .

And now my account is finished. I shall bear this manuscript to the giant beetle who is Keeper of the Archives in this great stone city whose name I do not know, and he shall store it with the millions of other records that are kept here. I am sure it will be a puzzle to strange scholars in the long future ages, before it, with the rest of this fading world, crumbles to dust.

Continued from p. 37:

Let me go!"

She whirled out of his grasp with sudden vehemence, turning her face away so that he could not see her eyes. Without glancing at him again she bent over the shaft and found the topmost pegs, and in a moment was gone.

Dantan stood there, waiting. Presently he heard the muffled humming of a muted bell, as though sounding from another world. Then he knew

that there was no one in the ancient laboratory beneath his feet.

He shut the door carefully and scraped soil over it. He did not mark the place. The dim red spot of the sun was rising above the canyon wall. His face set, Dantan began walking toward the distant cavern where his aircar was hidden. It was many miles away, but there was no one to stop him, now.

He did not look back.

THE EYES OF THAR

by Henry Kuttner

She spoke in a tongue dead a thousand years, and she had no memory for the man she faced. Yet he had held her tightly but a few short years before, had sworn eternal vengeance--when she died in his arms from an assassin's wounds.

He had come back, though he knew what to expect. He had always come back to Klanvahr, since he had been hunted out of that ancient Martian fortress so many years ago. Not often, and always warily, for there was a price on Dantan's head, and those who governed the Dry Provinces would have been glad to pay it. Now there was an excellent chance that they might pay, and soon, he thought, as he walked doggedly through the baking stillness of the night, his ears attuned to any dangerous sound in the thin, dry air.

Even after dark it was hot here. The dead ground, parched and arid, retained the heat, releasing it slowly as the double moons--the Eyes of Thar, in Klanvahr mythology--swung across the blazing immensity of the sky. Yet Samuel Dantan came back to this desolate land as he had come before, drawn by love and by hatred.

The love was lost forever, but the hate could still be satiated. He had not yet glutted his bloodlust. When Dantan came back to Klanvahr, men died, though if all the men of the Redhelm Tribe were slain, even that could not satisfy the dull ache in Dantan's heart.

Now they were hunting him.

The girl--he had not thought of her for years; he did not want to remember. He had been young when it happened. Of Earth stock, he had during a great Martian drought become godson to an old shaman of Klanvahr, one of the priests who still hoarded scraps of the for-

gotten knowledge of the past, glorious days of Martian destiny, when bright towers had fingered up triumphantly toward the Eyes of Thar.

Memories . . . the solemn, antique dignity of the Undercities, in ruins now . . . the wrinkled shaman, intoning his rituals . . . very old books, and older stories . . . raids by the Redhelm Tribe . . . and a girl Samuel Dantan had known. There was a raid, and the girl had died. Such things had happened many times before; they could happen again. But to Dantan this one death mattered very much.

Afterward, Dantan killed, first in red fury, then with a cool, quiet, passionless satisfaction. And, since the Redhelms were well represented in the corrupt Martian government, he had become outlaw.

The girl would not have known him now. He had gone out into the spaceways, and the years had changed him. He was still thin, his eyes still dark and opaque as shadowed tarn-water, but he was dry and sinewy and hard, moving with the trained, dangerous swiftness of the predator he was--and, as to morals, Dantan had none worth mentioning. He had broken more than ten commandments. Between the planets, and in the far-flung worlds bordering the outer dark, there are more than ten. But Dantan had smashed them all.

In the end there was still the dull, sickening hopelessness, part loneliness, part something less definable. Hunted, he came back to

Klanvahr, and when he came, men of the Redhelms died. They did not die easily.

But this time it was they who hunted, not he. They had cut him off from the aircar and they followed now like hounds upon his track. He had almost been disarmed in that last battle. And the Redhelms would not lose the trail; they had followed sign for generations across the dying tundras of Mars.

He paused, flattening himself against an outcrop of rock, and looked back. It was dark; the Eyes of Thar had not yet risen, and the blaze of starlight cast a ghastly, leprous shine over the chaotic slope behind him, great riven boulders and jutting monoliths, canyon-like, running jagged toward the horizon, a scene of cosmic ruin that every old and shrinking world must show. He could see nothing of his pursuers, but they were coming. They were still far behind. But that did not matter; he must circle--circle--

And first, he must regain a little strength. There was no water in his canteen. His throat was dusty, and his tongue felt swollen and leathery. Moving his shoulders uneasily, his dark face impassive, Dantan found a pebble and put it in his mouth, though he knew that would not help much. He had not tasted water for--how long? Too long, anyhow.

Staring around, he took stock of resources. He was alone--what was it the old shaman had once told him? "You are never alone in Klanvahr. The living shadows of the past are all around you. They cannot help, but they watch, and their pride must not be humbled. You are never alone in Klanvahr."

But nothing stirred. Only a whisper of the dry, hot wind murmuring up from the distance, sighing and sighing like muted harps. Ghosts of the past riding the night, Dantan thought. How did those ghosts see Klanvahr? Not as this desolate

wasteland, perhaps. They saw it with the eyes of memory, as the Mother of Empires which Klanvahr had once been, so long ago that only the tales persisted, garbled and unbelievable.

A sighing whisper . . . he stopped living for a second, his breath halted, his eyes turned to emptiness. That meant something. A thermal, a river of wind--a downdrift, perhaps. Sometimes these eon-old canyons held lost rivers, changing and shifting their courses as Mars crumbled, and such watercourses might be traced by sound.

Well--he knew Klanvahr.

A half mile farther he found the arroyo, not too deep--fifty feet or less, with jagged walls easy to descend. He could hear the trickle of water, though he could not see it, and his thirst became overpowering. But caution made him clamber down the precipice warily. He did not drink till he had reconnoitered and made sure that it was safe.

And that made Dantan's thin lips curl. Safety for a man hunted by the Redhelms? The thought was sufficiently absurd. He would die--he must die; but he did not mean to die alone. This time perhaps they had him, but the kill would not be easy nor without cost. If he could find some weapon, some ambush--prepare some trap for the hunters--

There might be possibilities in this canyon. The stream had only lately been diverted into this channel; the signs of that were clear. Thoughtfully Dantan worked his way upstream. He did not try to mask his trail by water-tricks; the Redhelms were too wise for that. No, there must be some other answer.

A mile or so farther along he found the reason for the diverted stream. Landslide. Where water had chuckled and rustled along the left-hand branch before, now it took the other route. Dantan followed the dry canyon, finding the going easier now, since Phobos had risen

* * * an Eye of Thar. "The Eyes of the god miss nothing. They move across the world, and nothing can hide from Thar, or from his destiny."

Then Dantan saw rounded metal. Washed clean by the water that had run here lately, a corroded, curved surface rose dome-shaped from the stream bed.

The presence of an artifact in this place was curious enough. The people of Klanvahr--the old race--had builded with some substance that had not survived; plastic or something else that was not metal. Yet this dome had the unmistakable dull sheen of steel. It was an alloy, unusually strong or it could never have lasted this long, even though protected by its covering of rocks and earth. A little nerve began jumping in Dantan's cheek. He had paused briefly, but now he came forward and with his booted foot kicked away some of the dirt about the cryptic metal.

A curving line broke it. Scraping vigorously, Dantan discovered that this marked the outline of an oval door, horizontal, and with a handle of some sort, though it was caked and fixed in its socket with dirt. Dantan's lips were very thin now, and his eyes glittering and bright. An ambush--a weapon against the Redhelms--whatever might exist behind this lost door, it was worth investigating, especially for a condemned man.

With water from the brook and a sliver of sharp stone, he pried and chiseled until the handle was fairly free from its heavy crust. It was a hook, like a shepherd's crook, protruding from a small bowl-shaped depression in the door. Dantan tested it. It would not move in any direction. He braced himself, legs straddled, body half doubled, and strained at the hook.

Blood beat against the back of his eyes. He heard drumming in his temples and straightened suddenly,

thinking it the footsteps of the Redhelms. Then, grinning sardonically, he bent to his work again, and this time the handle moved.

Beneath him the door slid down and swung aside, and the darkness below gave place to soft light. He saw a long tube stretching down vertically, with pegs protruding from the metal walls at regular intervals. It made a ladder. The bottom of the shaft was thirty feet below; its diameter was little more than the breadth of a big man's shoulders.

He stood still for a moment, looking down, his mind almost swimming with wonder and surmise. Old, very old it must be, for the stream had cut its own bed out of the rock whose walls rose above him now. Old--and yet these metal surfaces gleamed as brightly as they must have gleamed on the day they were put together--for what purpose?

The wind sighed again down the canyon, and Dantan remembered the Redhelms on his track. He looked around once more and then lowered himself onto the ladder on metal pegs, testing them doubtfully before he let his full weight come down. They held.

There might be danger down below; there might not. There was certain danger coming after him among the twisting canyons. He reached up, investigated briefly, and swung the door back into place. There was a lock, he saw, and after a moment discovered how to manipulate it. So far, the results were satisfactory. He was temporarily safe from the Redhelms, provided he did not suffocate. There was no air intake here that he could see, but he breathed easily enough so far. He would worry about that when the need arose. There might be other things to worry about before lack of air began to distress him.

He descended.

At the bottom of the shaft was another door. Its handle yielded

with no resistance this time, and Dantan stepped across the threshold into a large, square underground chamber, lit with pale radiance that came from the floor itself, as though light had been poured into the molten metal when it had first been made.

The room--

Faintly he heard a distant humming, like the after-resonance of a bell, but it died away almost instantly. The room was large, and empty except for some sort of machine standing against the farther wall. Dantan was not a technician. He knew guns and ships; that was enough. But the smooth, sleek functionalism of this machine gave him an almost sensuous feeling of pleasure.

How long had it been here? Who had built it? And for what purpose? He could not even guess. There was a great oval screen on the wall above what seemed to be a control board, and there were other, more enigmatic devices.

And the screen was black--dead black, with a darkness that ate up the light in the room and gave back nothing.

Yet there was something--

"Sanfel," a voice said. "Sanfel. Coth dr'gchang. Sanfel--sthan!"

Sanfel . . . Sanfel . . . have you returned, Sanfel? Answer!

It was a woman's voice . . . the voice of a woman used to wielding power, quiet, somehow proud as the voice of Lucifer or Lilith might have been, and it spoke in a tongue that scarcely half a dozen living men could understand. . . . A whole great race had spoken it once; only the shamans remembered now, and the shamans who knew it were few. Dantan's godfather had been one. And Dantan remembered the slurring syllables of the rituals he had learned, well enough to know what the proud, bodiless voice was saying.

The nape of his neck prickled. Here was something he could not understand, and he did not like it.

Like an animal scenting danger he shrank into himself, not crouching, but withdrawing, so that a smaller man seemed to stand there, ready and waiting for the next move. Only his eyes were not motionless. They raked the room for the unseen speaker--for some weapon to use when the time came for weapons.

His glance came back to the dark screen above the machine. And the voice said again, in the tongue of ancient Klanvahr:

"I am not used to waiting, Sanfel! If you hear me, speak. And speak quickly, for the time of peril comes close now. My Enemy is strong--"

Dantan said, "Can you hear me?" His eyes did not move from the screen.

Out of that blackness the girl's voice came, after a pause. It was imperious, and a little wary.

"You are not Sanfel. Where is he? Who are you, Martian?"

Dantan let himself relax a little. There would be a parley, at any rate. But after that--

Words in the familiar, remembered old language came hesitantly to his lips.

"I am no Martian. I am of Earth blood, and I do not know this Sanfel."

"Then how did you get into Sanfel's place?" The voice was haughty now. "What are you doing here? Sanfel built his laboratory in a secret place."

"It was hidden well enough," Dantan told her grimly. "Maybe for a thousand years, or even ten thousand, for all I know. The door has been buried under a stream--"

"There is no water there. Sanfel's home is on a mountain, and his laboratory is built underground." The voice rang like a bell. "I think you lie. I think you are an enemy-- When I heard the signal summoning me, I came swiftly, wondering why Sanfel had delayed so long. I must find him, stranger. I must! If you are no enemy, bring me Sanfel!"

This time there was something almost like panic in the voice.

"If I could, I would," Dantan said. "But there's no one here except me." He hesitated, wondering if the woman behind the voice could be--mad? Speaking from some mysterious place beyond the screen, in a language dead a thousand years, calling upon a man who must be long-dead, too, if one could judge by the length of time this hidden room had lain buried.

He said after a moment, "This place has been buried for a long time. And--no one has spoken the tongue of Klanvahr for many centuries. If that was your Sanfel's language--" But he could not go on with that thought. If Sanfel had spoken Klanvahr then he must have died long ago. And the speaker beyond the screen--she who had known Sanfel, yet spoke in a young, sweet, light voice that Dantan was beginning to think sounded familiar. . . . He wondered if he could be mad too.

There was silence from the screen. After many seconds the voice spoke again, sadly and with an undernote of terror.

"I had not realized," it said, "that even time might be so different between Sanfel's world and mine. The space-time continua--yes, a day in my world might well be an age in yours. Time is elastic. In Zha I had time a few dozen--" she used a word Dantan did not understand, "--had passed. But on Mars--centuries?"

"Tens of centuries," agreed Dantan, staring hard at the screen. "If Sanfel lived in old Klanvahr his people are scarcely a memory now. And Mars is dying. You--you're speaking from another world?"

"From another universe, yes. A very different universe from yours. It was only through Sanfel that I had made contact, until now-- What is your name?"

"Dantan. Samuel Dantan."

"Not a Martian name. You are

from--Earth, you say? What is that?"

"Another planet. Nearer the sun than Mars."

"We have no planets and no suns in Zha. This is a different universe indeed. So different I find it hard to imagine what your world must be like." The voice died.

And it was a voice he knew. Dantan was nearly sure of that now, and the certainty frightened him. When a man in the Martian desert begins to see or hear impossibilities, he has reason to be frightened. As the silence prolonged itself he began almost to hope that the voice--the implausibly familiar voice--had been only imagination. Hesitantly he said, "Are you still there?" and was a little relieved, after all, to hear her say,

"Yes, I am here. I was thinking. . . . I need help. I need it desperately. I wonder--has Sanfel's laboratory changed? Does the machine still stand? But it must, or I could not speak to you now. If the other things work, there may be chance. . . . Listen." Her voice grew urgent. "I may have a use for you. Do you see a lever, scarlet, marked with the Klanvahr symbol for 'sight'?"

"I see it," Dantan said.

"Push it forward. There is no harm in that, if you are careful. We can see each other--that is all. But do not touch the lever with the 'door' symbol on it. Be certain of that . . . Wait!" Sudden urgency was in the voice.

"Yes?" Dantan had not moved.

"I am forgetting. There is danger if you are not protected from--from certain vibration that you might see here. This is a different universe, and your Martian physical laws do not hold good between our worlds. Vibration . . . light . . . other things might harm you. There should be armor in Sanfel's laboratory. Find it."

Dantan glanced around. There was a cabinet in one corner. He

went over to it slowly, his eyes wary. He had no intention of relaxing vigilance here simply because that voice sounded familiar . . .

Inside the cabinet hung a suit of something like space armor, more flexible and skin tight than any he had ever seen, and with a transparent helmet through which vision seemed oddly distorted. He got into the suit carefully, pulling up the rich shining folds over his body, thinking strangely how long time had stood still in this small room since the last time a man had worn it. The whole room looked slightly different when he set the helmet into place. It must be polarized, he decided, though that alone could not account for the strange dimming and warping of vision that was evident.

"All ready," he said after a moment.

"Then throw the switch."

With his hand upon it Dantan hesitated for one last instant of wariness. He was stepping into unknown territory now, and to him the unknown meant the perilous. His mind went back briefly to the Redhelms scouring the canyons above for him. He quieted his uneasy mind with the thought that there might be some weapon in the world of the voice which he could turn against them later. Certainly, without a weapon, he had little to lose. But he knew that weapon or no weapon, danger or not, he must see the face behind that sweet, familiar, imperious voice.

He pressed the lever forward. It hesitated, the weight of millenniums behind its inertia. Then, groaning a little in its socket, it moved.

Across the screen above it a blaze of color raged like a sudden shining deluge. Blinded by the glare, Dantan leaped back and swung an arm across his eyes.

When he looked again the colors had cleared. Blinking, he stared--and forgot to look away. For the

screen was a window now, with the world of Zha behind it. . . . And in the center of that window--a girl. He looked once at her, and then closed his eyes. He had felt his heart move, and a nerve jumped in his lean cheek.

He whispered a name.

Impassively the girl looked down at him from the screen. There was no change, no light of recognition upon that familiar, beloved face. The face of the girl who had died at the Redhelm hands, long ago, in the fortress of Klanvahr. . . . For her sake he had hunted the Redhelms all these dangerous years. For her sake he had taken to the spaceways and the outlaw life. In a way, for her sake the Redhelms hunted him now through the canyons overhead. But here in the screen, she did not know him.

He knew that this was not possible. Some outrageous trick of vision made the face and the slender body of a woman from another universe seem the counterpart of that remembered woman. But he knew it must be an illusion, for in a world as different as Zha surely there could be no human creatures at all, certainly no human who wore the same face as the girl he remembered.

Aside from the girl herself, there was nothing to see. The screen was blank, except for vague shapes--outlines-- The helmet, he thought, filtered out more than light. He sensed, somehow, that beyond her stretched the world of Zha, but he could see nothing except the shifting, ever-changing colors of the background.

She looked down at him without expression. Obviously the sight of him had awakened in her no such deep-reaching echoes of emotion as her face woke in him. She said, her voice almost unbearably familiar; a voice sounding from the silence of death over many chilly years,

"Dantan. Samuel Dantan. Earthly language is as harsh as the Klanvahr

I learned from Sanfel. Yet my name may seem strange to you. I am Qui-ana."

He said hoarsely, "What do you want? What did you want with Sanfel?"

"Help," Quiana said. "A weapon. Sanfel had promised me a weapon. He was working very hard to make one, risking much . . . and now time has eaten him up--that strange, capricious time that varies so much between your world and mine. To me it was only yesterday--and I still need the weapon."

Dantan's laugh was harsh with jealousy of that unknown and long-dead Martian.

"Then I'm the wrong man," he said roughly. "I've no weapon. I've men tracking me down to kill me, now."

She leaned forward a little, gesturing.

"Can you escape? You are hidden here, you know."

"They'll find the same way I found, up above."

"The laboratory door can be locked, at the top of the shaft."

"I know. I locked it. But there's no food or water here. . . No, if I had any weapons I wouldn't be here now."

"Would you not?" she asked in a curious voice. "In old Klanvahr, Sanfel once told me, they had a saying that none could hide from his destiny."

Dantan gave her a keen, inquiring look. Did she mean--herself? That same face and voice and body, so cruelly come back from death to waken the old grief anew? Or did she know whose likeness she wore--or could it be only his imagination, after all? For if Sanfel had died as long ago as he must have died, then this same lovely image had lived centuries and millenniums before the girl at Klanvahr Fortress. . . .

"I remember," said Dantan briefly.

"My world," she went on, oblivious to the turmoil in his mind, "my world

is too different to offer you any shelter, though I suppose you could enter it for a little while, in that protective armor that Sanfel made. But not to stay. We spring from soil too alien to one another's worlds. . . . Even this communication is not easy. And there is no safety here in Zha either, now. Now that Sanfel has failed me."

"I--I'd help you if I could."

He said it with difficulty, trying to force the remembrance upon himself that this was a stranger. . . .

"Tell me what's wrong."

She shrugged with a poignantly familiar motion.

"I have an Enemy. One of a lower race. And he--it--there is no word!--has cut me off from my people here in a part of Zha that is--well, dangerous--I can't describe to you the conditions here. We have no common terms to use in speaking of them. But there is great danger, and the Enemy is coming closer--and I am alone. If there were another of my people here to divide the peril I think I could destroy him. He has a weapon of his own, and it is stronger than my power, though not stronger than the power two of my race together can wield. It--it pulls. It destroys, in a way I can find no word to say. I had hoped from Sanfel something to divert him until he could be killed. I told him how to forge such a weapon, but--time would not let him do it. The teeth of time ground him into dust, as my Enemy's weapon will grind me soon."

She shrugged again.

"If I could get you a gun," Dantan said. "A force-ray--"

"What are they?"

He described the weapons of his day. But Quiana's smile was a little scornful when he finished.

"We of Zha have passed beyond the use of missile weapons--even such missiles as bullets or rays. Nor could they touch my Enemy. No, we destroy in ways that require no--

no beams of explosives. No, Dantan, you speak in terms of your own universe. We have no common ground. It is a pity that time eddied between Sanfel and me, but eddy it did, and I am helpless now. And the Enemy will be upon me soon. Very soon."

She let her shoulders sag and resignation dimmed the remembered vividness of her face. Dantan looked up at her grimly, muscles riding his jet jaw. It was almost intolerable, this facing her again in need, and again helpless, and himself without power to aid. It had been bad enough that first time, to learn long afterward that she had died at enemy hands while he was too far away to protect her. But to see it all take place again before his very eyes!

"There must be a way," he said, and his hand gripped the lever marked "door" in the ancient tongue.

"Wait!" Quiana's voice was urgent.

"What would happen?"

"The door would open. I could enter your world, and you mine."

"Why can't you leave, then, and wait until it's safe to go back?"

"I have tried that," Quiana said. "It will never be safe. The Enemy waited too. No, it must come, in the end, to a battle--and I shall not win that fight. I shall not see my own people or my own land again, and I suppose I must face that knowledge. But I did hope, when I heard Sanfel's signal sound again. . . ." She smiled a little. "I know you would help me if you could, Dantan. But there is nothing to be done now."

"I'll come in," he said doggedly. "Maybe there's something I could do."

"You could not touch him. Even now there's danger. He was very close when I heard that signal. This is his territory. When I heard the bell and thought Sanfel had returned with a weapon for me, I dared greatly

in coming here." Her voice died away; a withdrawn look veiled her eyes from him.

After a long silence she said, "The Enemy is coming. Turn off the screen, Dantan. And goodbye."

"No," he said. "Wait!" But she shook her head and turned away from him, her thin robe swirling, and moved off like a pale shadow into the dim, shadowless emptiness of the background. He stood watching helplessly, feeling all the old despair wash over him a second time as the girl he loved went alone into danger he could not share. Sometimes as she moved away she was eclipsed by objects he could not see--trees, he thought, or rocks, that did not impinge upon his eyes through the protective helmet. A strange world indeed Zha must be, whose very rocks and trees were too alien for human eyes to look upon in safety. . . . Only Quiana grew smaller and smaller upon the screen, and it seemed to Dantan as though a cord stretched between them, pulling thinner and thinner as she receded into danger and distance.

It was unbearable to think that the cord might break--break a second time. . . .

Far away something moved in the cloudy world of Zha. Tiny in the distance though it was, it was unmistakably not human. Dantan lost sight of Quiana. Had she found some hiding place behind some unimaginable outcropping of Zha's terrain?

The Enemy came forward.

It was huge and scaled and terrible, human, but not a human; tailed, but no beast; intelligent, but diabolic. He never saw it too clearly, and he was grateful to his helmet for that. The polarized glass seemed to translate a little, as well as to blot out. He felt sure that this creature which he saw--or almost saw--did not look precisely as it seemed to him upon the screen. Yet it was easy to believe that such a being had sprung from the alien

soil of Zha. There was nothing remotely like it on any of the worlds he knew. And it was hateful. Every line of it made his hackles bristle.

It carried a coil of brightly colored tubing slung over one grotesque shoulder, and its monstrous head swung from side to side as it paced forward into the screen like some strange and terrible mechanical toy. It made no sound, and its progress was horrible in its sheer relentless monotony.

Abruptly it paused. He thought it had sensed the girl's presence, somewhere in hiding. It reached for the coil of tubing with one malformed--hand?

"Quiana," it said--its voice as gentle as a child's.

Silence. Dantan's breathing was loud in the emptiness.

"Quiana?" The tone was querulous now.

"Quiana," the monster crooned, and swung about with sudden, unexpected agility. Moving with smooth speed, it vanished into the clouds of the background, as the girl had vanished. For an eternity Dantan watched colored emptiness, trying to keep himself from trembling.

Then he heard the voice again, gentle no longer, but ringing like a bell with terrible triumph, "Quiana!"

And out of the swirling clouds he saw Quiana break, despair upon her face, her sheer garments streaming behind her. After her came the Enemy. It had unslung the tube it wore over its shoulder, and as it lifted the weapon Quiana swerved desperately aside. Then from the coil of tubing blind lightning ravened.

Shattering the patternless obscurity, the blaze of its color burst out, catching Quiana in a cone of expanding, shifting brilliance. And the despair in her eyes was suddenly more than Dantan could endure.

His hand struck out at the lever marked "door"; he swung it far over

and the veil that had masked the screen was gone. He vaulted up over its low threshold, not seeing anything but the face and the terror of Quiana. But it was not Quiana's name he called as he leaped.

He lunged through the Door onto soft, yielding substance that was unlike anything he had ever felt underfoot before. He scarcely knew it. He flung himself forward, fists clenched, ready to drive futile blows into the monstrous mask of the Enemy. It loomed over him like a tower, tremendous, scarcely seen through the shelter of his helmet--and then the glare of the light-cone caught him.

It was tangible light. It flung him back with a piledriver punch that knocked the breath from his body. And the blow was psychic as well as physical. Shaking and reeling from the shock, Dantan shut his eyes and fought forward, as though against a steady current too strong to breast very long. He felt Quiana beside him, caught in the same dreadful stream. And beyond the source of the light the Enemy stood up in stark, inhuman silhouette.

He never saw Quiana's world. The light was too blinding. And yet, in a subtle sense, it was not blinding to the eyes, but to the mind. Nor was it light, Dantan thought, with some sane part of his mind. Too late he remembered Quiana's warning that the world of Zha was not Mars or Earth, that in Zha even light was different.

Cold and heat mingled, indescribably bewildering, shook him hard. And beyond these were--other things. The light from the Enemy's weapon was not born in Dantan's universe, and it had properties that light should not have. He felt bare, emptied, a hollow shell through which radiance streamed.

For suddenly, every cell of his body was an eye. The glaring brilliance, the intolerable vision beat at the foundations of his sanity.

Through him the glow went pouring, washing him, nerves, bone, flesh, brain, in floods of color that were not color, sound that was not sound, vibration that was spawned in the shaking hells of worlds beyond imagination.

It inundated him like a tide, and for a long, long, timeless while he stood helpless in its surge, moving within his body and without it, and within his mind and soul as well. The color of stars thundered in his brain. The crawling foulness of unspeakable hues writhed along his nerves so monstrously that he felt he could never cleanse himself of that obscenity.

And nothing else existed--only the light that was not light, but blasphemy.

Then it began to ebb . . . faded . . . grew lesser and lesser, until--Beside him he could see Quiana now. She was no longer stumbling in the cone of light, no longer shuddering and waving in its violence, but standing erect and facing the Enemy, and from her eyes--something--poured.

Steadily the cone of brilliance waned. But still its glittering, shining foulness poured through Dantan. He felt himself weakening, his senses fading, as the tide of dark horror mounted through his brain.

And covered him up with its blanketing immensity.

He was back in the laboratory, leaning against the wall and breathing in deep, shuddering draughts. He did not remember stumbling through the Door again, but he was no longer in Zha. Quiana stood beside him, here upon the Martian soil of the laboratory. She was watching him with a strange, quizzical look in her eyes as he slowly fought back to normal, his heart quieting by degrees, his breath becoming even. He felt drained, exhausted, his emotions cleansed and purified as though by baths of flame.

Presently he reached for the clasp

that fastened his clumsy armor. Quiana put out a quick hand, shaking her head.

"No," she said, and then stared at him again for a long moment without speaking. Finally, "I had not known--I did not think this could be done. Another of my own race--yes. But you, from Mars--I would not have believed that you could stand against the Enemy for a moment, even with your armor."

"I'm from Earth, not Mars. And I didn't stand long."

"Long enough." She smiled faintly. "You see now what happened? We of Zha can destroy without weapons, using only the power inherent in our bodies. Those like the Enemy have a little of that power too, but they need mechanical devices to amplify it. And so when you diverted the Enemy's attention and forced him to divide his attack between us--the pressure upon me was relieved, and I could destroy him. But I would not have believed it possible."

"You're safe now," Dantan said, with no expression in voice or face.

"Yes. I can return."

"And you will?"

"Of course I shall."

"We are more alike than you had realized."

She looked up toward the colored curtain of the screen. "That is true. It is not the complete truth, Dantan."

He said, "I love you--Quiana." This time he called her by name.

Neither of them moved. Minutes went by silently.

Quiana said, as if she had not heard him, "Those who followed you are here. I have been listening to them for some time now. They are trying to break through the door at the top of the shaft."

He took her hand in his gloved grasp. "Stay here. Or let me go to Zha with you. Why not?"

"You could not live there without your armor."

"Then stay."

Quiana looked away, her eyes troubled. As Dantan moved to slip off his helmet her hand came up again to stop him.

"Don't."

"Why not?"

For answer she rose, beckoning for him to follow. She stepped across the threshold into the shaft and swiftly began to climb the pegs toward the surface and the hammering of the Redhelms up above. Dantan, at her gesture, followed.

Over her shoulder she said briefly,

"We are of two very different worlds. Watch--but be careful." And she touched the device that locked the oval door.

It slipped down and swung aside.

Dantan caught one swift glimpse of Redhelm heads dodging back to safety. They did not know, of course, that he was unarmed. He reached up desperately, trying to pull Quiana back but she slipped aside and sprang lightly out of the shaft into the cool gray light of the Martian morning.

Forgetting her warning, Dantan pulled himself up behind her. But as his head and shoulders emerged from the shaft he stopped, frozen. For the Redhelms were falling. There was no mark upon them, yet they fell.

* * *

She did not stir, even when the last man had stiffened into rigid immobility. Then Dantan clambered up and without looking at Quiana went to the nearest body and turned it over. He could find no mark. Yet the Redhelm was dead.

"That is why you had to wear the armor," she told him gently. "We are of different worlds, you and I."

He took her in his arms--and the soft resilience of her was lost against the stiffness of the protective suit. He would never even know how her body felt, because of the armor between them. . . . He could

not even kiss her--again. He had taken his last kiss of the mouth so like Quiana's mouth, long years ago, and he would never kiss it again. The barrier was too high between them.

"You can't go back," he told her in a rough, uneven voice. "We are of the same world, no matter what--no matter how-- You're no stranger to me, Quiana!"

She looked up at him with troubled eyes, shaking her head, regret in her voice.

"Do you think I don't know why you fought for me, Dantan?" she asked in a clear voice. "Did you ever stop to wonder why Sanfel risked so much for me, too?"

He stared down at her, his brain spinning, almost afraid to hear what she would say next. He did not want to hear. But her voice went on inexorably.

"I cheated you, Dantan. I cheated Sanfel yesterday--a thousand years ago. My need was very great, you see--and our ways are not yours. I knew that no man would fight for a stranger as I needed a man to fight for me."

He held her tightly in gloved hands that could feel only a firm body in their grasp, not what that body was really like, nothing about it except its firmness. He caught his breath to interrupt, but she went on with a rush.

"I have no way of knowing how you see me, Dantan," she said relentlessly. "I don't know how Sanfel saw me. To each of you--because I needed your help--I wore the shape to which you owed help most. I could reach into your minds deeply enough for that--to mould a remembered body for your eyes. My own shape is--different. You will never know it." She sighed. "You were a brave man, Dantan. Braver and stronger than I ever dreamed an alien could be. I wish-- I wonder-- Oh, let me go!

RESCUE MISSION 2030 AD

by Charles Garofalo and Robert M. Price

Could Carmine withstand the missionary zeal of a fanatical robot hunting for steel souls?

Carmine was a bounty hunter of antiques. He'd braved the worst parts of New York to track down an eighty-year-old comic book; he'd even ventured Atlantic City's waterfront to collect a century-old print of an obscure western flick. But he bit off more than he could chew the day he went to Bayside Plaza.

He made no overt moves when the heavy hand came down on his shoulder. His accoster had no idea of the laser derringer that had automatically shot out of his sleeve into his right hand, or the disciplined tightening of Carmine's stomach muscles, so as to prevent his ruining his pants in terror.

Carmine turned deliberately to face who or whatever had stopped him. He'd been warned to expect anything in this decrepit New Jersey shopping center. He was equally willing to conceal the gun in his fist should the person prove to be harmless, or to fire quickly regardless of the consequences. But the sight of the seven-foot-tall robot caught even him by surprise.

It was one of those old HumanForm or "android" models, a hulking caricature in gleaming steel. With the vacant calm of semi-hysteria Carmine noted it was one of those scarce A-2683X model bodyguards, those strong and sturdy mechanicals designed for taking and dishing out violence. The stainless steel finish of the robot gleamed; he had been well taken care of, or perhaps had looked after himself, since the mechanicals had been given emancipation by presidential decree. Incongruous-

ly, the robot was dressed in a white long-sleeve shirt, corduroy trousers and bow tie. Carmine also noted that the mechanical's face had been altered. The box-mouthed radio speaker in its jaw had been removed, and what replaced it was a roundiform screen that looked like a TV commercial grin.

Carmine kept the gun concealed and waited for the robot to make the first move.

"Hello, brother," the robot began in a rusty but friendly voice. "Have you heard the GOOD NEWS?"

"I don't think so," Carmine began. "But I'd be interested. Any good news would be a change at this point."

"WHAT? You've never heard the message of our savior Jesus Christ?" the robot thundered.

"Well," Carmine stammered, "the padre back at my high school used to say somethin' along those lines, but--"

"Have you ever taken Jesus into your circuitry? Have you not yet embraced the Lord of everlasting function? Have you not been built again in HIS NAME?"

"Er . . . I'm not too sure I want to continue this."

"Come, come, my brother"; the mechanical gripped his arm. Carmine's hand went nerveless with the unexpected pressure, involuntarily releasing the laser-pistol, which dropped uselessly to the floor. "We all must be rebuilt. Bring Jee-zus into your functioning! Surely you are aware that no intelligence can enter the kingdom of God unless he

be lubricated in the oil of the Lamb! You must become a brand new model to receive everlasting function without need of repair!"

This was not what Carmine had in mind, especially since he had come looking for a rare 1942 original print of Bedtime for Bonzo. Obviously this wasn't Bonzo. But it was a pain in the rear, and Carmine usually went out of his way to avoid this sort of thing. The HumanForm didn't exactly notice his discomfort, but he seemed to anticipate some resistance, which accounted for his viselike grip of the bounty hunter's arm.

"Come, come," the robot urged. "You must be programmed in the Spirit. Your whole life will be renewed!" As he spoke, the giant eyes grew brighter and fiercer, his speech came faster and faster, and his grip crunched tighter and tighter.

Carmine tried and tried to think of a way to distract the android and slip away. Just then the robot's grip increased to the same degree as the grip of a Kenmore trash compacter. But contrary to the opinions of Carmine's erstwhile contemporaries, he was not made of garbage. He was flesh and blood, though the robot didn't seem to realize the fact.

At any rate, his next move was now clear: he'd better do just what this electric evangelist told him. And that was to follow him. With a grip like that, he wasn't going to have to worry about Carmine cooperating.

They marched briskly out of the mall, down the block, and through several alleys whose twists and turns confused even Carmine's sharp treasure-hunter's sense of direction. The android's grip seemed to loosen a bit as he noticed Carmine wasn't resisting. But it was still impossible to break away; maybe once they reached their destination Carmine would find an opportunity for escape. After all, he'd been in equally tight

scrapes before--those All-Hemisphere comic book conventions could be death-traps.

Before long, they came in sight of a building that had plainly been abandoned some time ago, but recently refurbished for new uses. The look of it was strange, downright tacky, in fact, as if the place had been fitted for efficiency but with no sense of decor at all. Almost as if a machine had . . . The sign above the shabby storefront read "Eternal Salvage, Inc." Carmine didn't like the sound of it.

Sure enough, inside were rows of equipment crates arranged like church pews. Lined up like display models in a showroom were more of the robots, all dressed like his captor, all mouthing programmed platitudes in a metallic drone. They all faced a podium behind which Carmine saw one HumanForm dressed differently from the rest, in a polyester suit. This must be the high priest. His lenses quickly refocused in Carmine's direction.

"Well done, brother! A new unit comes to join our flock!"

"Well, not exactly!" Carmine piped up. "That is, I'd like to think about it some . . ."

"No, no, my brother," shot back the preacher-droid. "The Holy Program says, 'Now is the day of salvage'! How do you know you won't walk out of here and be picked up for scrap metal tonight? Then where would you be? Would you be with the Lord at the Terminal of Grace, or down in the smelting vats below?"

"I'll take my chances!" whimpered Carmine half-heartedly, knowing he could never hope to penetrate the mechanical's logic-loop.

"Bring out the BC-AD converter," the hierobot was instructing his assistant. "It should clear his circuits of Original Static." The other robot handed him a nasty-looking device that looked something like a set of headphones, but that had to be screwed into place. This

might work on mechanicals, but Carmine didn't think his fragile human skull could stand up to that kind of treatment.

"Wait! Actually there's no need for that! I . . . er . . . suddenly see the flaw in my programming! I repent! Praise the Lord! I have been rebuilt! The Spirit is in my memory banks!"

"Come, brothers, let us lay hands on this new believer!" shouted the leader with well-oiled glee.

A dozen robot arms, as gentle as policemen's billies, landed on Carmine's back and shoulders. He crashed face-first to the floor. The only good thing that had happened was that it was the robot's grip that had broken off, not Carmine's arm as he had feared.

"OOOHHHH!" groaned Carmine. Actually he said far more than just that. He drew on a fine repertoire of words picked up from years of rambling through the slums of Brooklyn and Harlem. Most of these words had never been programmed into the mechs' memories and were new experiences for them.

"@!x?#ng:!" he bellowed, with further variations on the theme.

"Get back, brothers, get back! Hallelujah, he's speaking in tongues!"

"Hallelujah!" they all shouted in electronic ecstasy. All lenses were raised heavenward as Carmine picked himself up, bruises and all, up off the floor. Keeping up the

ruse, he shouted a few "Amens!" as he backed toward the door.

It was working; the robots were now going berserk with religious rapture, pounding the walls and floor, rolling and leaping. Carmine barely managed to avoid being brained once or twice by waving android arms as he made his way out.

He was about a block away before he heard the crash. The overzealous mechanicals had collapsed the building on top of themselves! Most would probably be crushed or at least immobilized, but some would no doubt be able to free themselves and come after him. And since they knew the alleys better than he did, Carmine was afraid he might lose the advantage of his head start. So he started running, huffing and puffing with the effort (too much soy-simulate pizza lately!).

Then he stopped in his tracks. Why would they be following him anyway? Most likely they'd think he was caught in the collapse, and there was no reason to blame the crash on him, after all. So Carmine paused to rest, gain his bearings, and find his way back to the shopping mall. There was still that print of Bonzo to track down.

As he picked his way through the garbage-choked alleys, he reflected on the day's experience and felt a keen sense of relief; though it was as close a call as he'd had in a long time, he had been saved (if you will pardon the expression).

Captain Future vs. the Old Ones

by Will Murray

H. P. Lovecraft's ideas and creations have turned up in some of the damndest places, and still do. The power of his Cthulhu Mythos has exerted a strong influence over several generations of writers since the heyday of Weird Tales. But of all the places for the Lovecraftian influence to creep in, the pages of the rather juvenile space opera pulp, Captain Future, seems an unlikely place to discover shoggoths.

Captain Future chronicled the star-busting exploits of a twenty-first-century superman born Curtis Newton, but better known as Captain Future. He saved the Universe a whole bunch of times along with his sidekicks, Grag the robot, Otho the android, and Simon Wright, the Living Brain, in the pages of his own magazine and in Startling Stories between 1939 and 1952. Science fiction author Edmond Hamilton wrote most of the Captain Future novels under his own name and an occasional pen name, Brett Sterling.

One of the Brett Sterling opuses was Red Sun of Danger (Startling Stories, Spring 1945; in paperback as Danger Planet), in which Captain Future journeys to the distant planet Roo, where the natives are becoming a problem. Roo, it seems is the sole source of a plant called vitron, a kind of super-vitamin which slows down the natural aging process. The entire solar system is dependant upon the stuff, which is harvested by human colonists. The native Roons, however, have taken to attacking the Earth colonies and disrupting the vitron harvest.

Captain Future and his sidekicks, collectively known as the Futuremen, pile into their starship and head for Roo.

Their investigation leads them to question a Roon named Gaa:

"Why have you Roons been attacking the colony?" asked the Brain's rasping voice.

"I have already told you," faltered Gaa. "You starmen must leave Roo before disaster comes."

"What disaster?"

Gaa hesitated, then answered. "The Old Ones will come back in wrath."

"The Old Ones?" There was a sharp, startled quality in the way the Brain echoed it.

"What is it, Simon?" whispered Joan, impressed by his reaction.

Simon Wright did not answer her. He spoke again to Gaa. "The Old Ones cannot come back. They died a million years ago."

"No!" Gaa's voice rang with superstitious fervor. "They did not die. They are too mighty for death. We have seen the omens with our own eyes! You must go away before you wake them and bring horror upon us. That is why we must drive you from Roo."

The term "Old Ones" is not new to Captain Future's ears. But he doesn't connect the phrase to the works of H. P. Lovecraft—who is evidently out of print in the twenty-first century—but with a half-forgotten interstellar race known as the Kangas. These Kangas are not native to Roo (otherwise awful "Kanga-Roo" jokes would roll across the page) and in fact supposedly no longer exist, but Captain Future knows of them.

He knows because of his archaeological expedition to the star Deneb back in the novel, The Star of Dread

(Captain Future, Summer 1943), when he went to investigate a planet circling that star which was supposed to be the source of all human life in the universe. Edmond Hamilton covered this topic first in his column, "Worlds of Tomorrow," in that same issue in a way that foreshadowed the events of Red Sun of Danger when he wrote that prior to the Denebian Empire, the Universe was ruled by the Linids, "a mass of highly intelligent protozoa, who had learned the ability to cooperate in large or small numbers." Little was known of the Linid, and even less about the pre-human race who came before the Linid, "they who held the galaxy long before us and reigned in greatness, they of the darkness whose name was fear, the mighty Kangas whose somber glory had passed away and is forgotten."

All this sounds a lot like the milieu generated by H. P. Lovecraft in his stories of the Cthulhu Mythos with their dead but deathless Old Ones and successions of pre-human races on Earth and on other planets.

Captain Future tries to explain to another character about the first humans from Deneb and the various pre-human races:

"According to archaeological researches," Newton continued swiftly, "before their time the galaxy was ruled by a great pre-human race. We know almost nothing about them except that they were a powerful, wholly alien, star-travelling race. They are generally referred to as the Kangas, though the legends of many star-peoples speak of them as the Dark Ones or the Old Ones.

"The Kangas ruled this galaxy more than a million years ago. It is thought that they were not many in number. They exerted their sway through a subject race of protozoan creatures whom they created. But the star-conquering men of ancient Deneb found scientific means to defeat the Kangas and their creatures.

We learned about that when we visited Deneb. The Kangas vanished, became extinct.

"But superstitious dread of them still haunts many worlds. It's present even in the distorted legends of the Solar System. And the Roons believe it utterly. They have an ancient dread of the Old Ones. Now something has made them believe that the coming of the colonists is threatening to awake the Old Ones."

That "something" is renegade Venusians who have tampered with the so-called Crypt of the Old Ones (shades of Cthulhu!) so that it appears to be opening. Captain Future and crew instigate a frantic search for this Crypt, which they discover is on Black Moon, Roo's satellite. Or more precisely, on a white plateau on the moon's surface, where it's visible from Roo. The plateau is not named, but Lovecraft readers might be inclined to call it the Plateau of Leng.

Racing to the Black Moon, the Futuremen are on hand for the awakening of the Old Ones:

Up over the edge of the crater, from the newly gouged depths, was coming a fat, black, obscene thing. It was a big, semiliquid, plastic mass, that heaved itself painfully over the rim and was followed by another of its kind.

The Kangas! He was looking at creatures no human eye had fallen upon for ages. They were looking back at him.

For they had eyes. It was the only recognizable feature of those insanely plastic black bodies--the two enormous, pupil-less eyes that fixed solemnly upon Captain Future.

Fortunately for the Universe, Curt Newton has the twenty-first-century equivalent of the Elder Sign--the Denebian Wands of Power, actually psycho-amplifiers which absorb the powerful mental influence of

the Kangas and turn it back against them. The menace of the Kangas is effectively squelched.

Fans of H. P. Lovecraft will recognize many borrowed concepts, including a tendency on the author's part to contradict his own background. The "subject race" of protozoan creatures mentioned in Red Sun of Danger are obviously the Linids. Whether or not they were created by the Kangas depends on which of Hamilton's accounts one reads. In The Return of Captain Future (Startling Stories, January 1950), Curt Newton encountered the last surviving Linid, which is described as consisting of a "central core of denser darkness, cowed by looped dark capes and veils." No mention of the Kangas is given.

The essence of the novel, Red Sun of Danger, seems to be a retelling of Lovecraft's At the Mountains of Madness with variations. The Kangas and the protozoan Linids more or less correspond to the star-headed Old Ones and their subject race, the shoggoths. Except that Hamilton describes his Kangas in terms reminiscent of Lovecraft's shoggoths, whom HPL described, variously, as looking like a "plastic column of foetid black iridescence" and "a shapeless congeries of protoplasmic bubbles, faintly self-luminous, and with myriads of temporary eyes forming and unforming as pustules of greenish light . . ." The protoplasmic qualities of the Linid are also reminiscent of the shape-shifting shoggoths, and I suppose there's a vague correlation between the star-headed Old Ones who seeded the planets with various life forms and the human Denebians who colonized the Universe with their seed.

That Edmond Hamilton consciously borrowed from Lovecraft is undeniable, as his distinctly Lovecraftian adjectives prove. He was a regular Weird Tales contributor and had to be familiar with HPL's fiction there. Lovecraft was no fan of Hamilton's

interplanetary stories, and said so in letters and a Hamilton parody he once wrote. He might have turned over in his grave when Red Sun of Danger was published.

So it's curious to see these Lovecraftian ideas materialize in a space opera epic. Or is it?

Although Lovecraft wrote horror stories, they were forward-thinking horror stories, with strong SF elements. At the Mountains of Madness, after all, first appeared in Astounding Stories, a science fiction magazine. And Hamilton was not the last to borrow from the Cthulhu Mythos when writing space opera. Consider the following scene from Chapter 12 of Alan Dean Foster's Star Wars novel, Splinter of the Mind's Eye, when Luke Skywalker encounters the following in a temple on a jungled planet:

Each swimming in his or her own thoughts, the five walked across the spacious floor toward the far side of the temple. A colossal statue was seated there against the dark wall. It represented a vaguely humanoid being seated on a carved throne. Leathery wings which might have been vestigial swept out in two awesome arcs to either side of the figure. Enormous claws thrust from feet and arms, the latter clinging to the ends of armrests on the throne. It had no face below slanted, accusing eyes--only a mass of Medusian, carved tentacles.

"Pomojema, god of the Kailburr," Halla whispered, without knowing why she was bothering to whisper. "It almost seems familiar, somehow." She chuckled nervously. "That's crazy, of course."

Oh, I don't know. I think a lot of people would find Cthulhu familiar, whatever he's called.

When you think about it, Lovecraft isn't all that incompatible

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ETHERGRAMS

Astro-Adventures #1--I loved it! I know, nowadays you could not have a story like "Prisoners of Vibration" (too many airplanes around; they'd have noticed the city before) or "Mnemoka" (Mars with natives), but the first was a masterful mad scientist adventure, and the second was not only Clark Ashton Smith, but good Clark Ashton Smith. Steve Behrends does a more than adequate job of finishing the Smith story. "The Soaring" was good "space the final frontier" stuff, and I was sorry that "Murder in Space" was not longer. Perhaps Mr. Carter would be willing to expand it into a short novel, for the second half of a double (they keep talking about bringing back those good old doubles). Also I can't help noticing there was a great variation in themes and plots in the magazine: no story repeated the other. "Soaring" had a mild philosophical slant to it. "Murder" was adventure-mystery. "Prisoners" was a solid mad scientist adventure. And "Mnemoka" was a supernatural horror story set in a science fiction background, something only Smith and C. L. Moore ever did. Congrat-

ulations are due to all parties involved with this effort.

Charles Garofalo
Wayne, NJ

I enjoyed Astro-Adventures #1 greatly. The cover is super.

Don Webb
Austin, TX

In general, Astro-Adventures #1 is quite impressive. I especially liked the Smith/Steve Behrends "Mnemoka"--fantastic stuff! Both "Murder in Space" and "Prisoners of Vibration," meanwhile, threw me straight back to the time of "pulp SF" (especially the latter), for which you're to be congratulated, along with Messrs Carter and Jacobi, of course! On "The Soaring," upon first reading, I was unfortunately somewhat confused, but the second reading seemed to straighten things out somewhat and I've no longer any quibbles. Overall, Astro-Adventures #1 deserves a certain thumbs-up, methinks.

Alex Bardy
London, England

STAR PIRATE

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She spoke in a tongue dead a thousand years, and she had no memory for the man she faced. Yet he had held her tightly but a few short years before, had sworn eternal vengeance—when she died in his arms from an assassin's wounds.



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