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VOL. 5—NO. 3
FALL-WINTER, 1932

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Our Cover

this issue depicts a scene from the story entitled, "The King and the Pawn," by Seven Anderton, in which is shown the marvelous invention of "The King" and the effective manner in which he means to carry out his ultra-humanitarian scheme. The demonstration is most convincing.

Cover Illustration by MOREY

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Faster than Light

By Harl Vincent

Author of "Venus Liberated," "Barton's Island," etc.

Illustrations by WESSO

IF the world is not thoroughly equipped to meet every possible contingency that might arise, if, or when, interplanetary travel becomes an established fact, it won't be because imaginative writers did not foresee and offer treatment for these possibilities. In this story, for instance, which is, in a way, a sequel to the very popular story called "Venus Liberated," which appeared in our Spring, 1929, AMAZING STORIES QUARTERLY, our well-known author seems to have thought of everything—and then some. "Faster Than Light" will be one of the outstanding stories of the present year.

CHAPTER I The Message from Venus

IN the quiet luxury of his private office on the ninetyeth floor of the great Mercantile Building, Ralph Prescott sat day-dreaming. A casual glance at his desk calendar had been the cause of his mood, for the date shown there in precise block letters of gilt was February 18th, 1947. Exactly one year had elapsed since the day he returned to earth from the planet Venus, and the memories evoked were many and disturbing. Disturbing because there came to him so vividly the awful fear that had clutched at his heart during the mad return voyage through space with Margaret Sprague so desperately and hopelessly ill in her



"Shades of the Kellonians!" Steve's startled exclamation broke in on their conversation. "What do you suppose that is?"

stateroom. Vivacious, dark-eyed Margaret who later recovered and became his bride. Disturbing too, Ralph's memories, for the reason that they brought a sense of unrest, a yearning for the adventurous life that had been his during the stay on Venus and for the feeling of satisfaction in the accomplishment of his part in outwitting and destroying the ancient enemies of Venus, the Kellonians. There had been growing upon him for months a distaste for his duties as presiding genius of the Prescott chain of department stores and an urge to be off into the far-flung reaches of the heavens. With the advent of this day of anniversary these feelings came to be almost an obsession; Ralph was

most grievously afflicted with wanderlust.

But he dared not broach the subject to Margaret. Not because he feared she would object—rather he was sure she would welcome the suggestion gleefully—but because he hesitated to plunge his bride of less than a year into a new series of adventures in which she might be subjected to dangers such as those of that memorable first visit of Terrestrians to Venus. He would not, could not, leave without her; this brave

girl he had taken to wife had become so ineffably dear, so much a part of his new life, that it was unthinkable. And yet . . . that last invitation of Teddy Crowley's to make the voyage on the newest Sorenson vessel had been a temptation.

He rose slowly from where he had hunched in his chair before the broad vacant expanse of his glass-topped desk and sauntered to the window where he looked out grumpily over Central Park. Life in New York City was a humdrum and aimless thing at best these days, he was thinking. There was the same routine of business day after day, the same rush and bustle of the airplanes in traveling from home to office and from office to home, the same places to go for entertainment, the same vacuous pleasure-seeking friends to meet night after night, and the same old boring social obligations. Of course there was always Margaret; Ralph's frown softened as he thought of her quick smile and the alert birdlike poise of her sleek dark head. There was no sameness about Margaret, for in her there were new charms to be discovered every day, every hour. One could not be bored with Margaret; their home life together in the Westchester County home was ideal—all that could be desired, and more. The other things were what irked him; his enforced separation from her during the business day, and the futile gatherings of futile people outside of business hours—things that seemed inconsequential when viewed in the light of the tremendous happenings of the year before. Things that were necessary and proper but puffing nevertheless.

A gray shape flashed across his field of vision, a commercial aerocab that swooped down over Fifth Avenue from the landing stage atop his building and made off across Central Park. In a moment it had joined thousands of similar vehicles of the air, a steady stream of them speeding northward in the City Traffic level. But in the flash of passing he had taken note of a familiar face at one of its windows, a broad ruddy countenance that was visible only for the briefest instant and yet was not to be mistaken. Steve Gillette! Steve who had been one of them on the voyage of the *Comet* and who had remained behind on the planet Venus to join his life with that of Rena, the Corsisian Tritu Leboru operator. Good old Steve! But what was he doing on earth, and why had he visited the Mercantile Building without looking up Ralph?

On a sudden impulse he moved swiftly to his desk and flipped the lever of his optophone. In excited voice he repeated the call number of Doctor Ramon DePolac when the impassive countenance of the exchange despatcher appeared in the television frame.

In a moment the pleasant, VanDyke-bearded face of the noted psychiatrist was imaged in the instrument and the kindly round eyes of the older man looked out at him through the horn-rimmed spectacles that enlarged them so enormously.

"Hello stranger," the doctor greeted him affectionately. "About time you were looking up some of your old friends."

Ralph flushed; he *had* neglected the doctor. "Been awfully busy, Doc," he apologized lamely. "But say—what I called you about—did you know Steve Gillette is here in New York?"

"Why yes. He's talked with you then?"

"No, I just happened to glimpse him in an aerocab that left our building and I was wondering why he didn't drop in on me when he was so near. What's wrong with him, anyway?"

"Why Ralph, that's funny." The doctor's round eyes expressed amazement. "He talked with me this morning; arrived yesterday from Venus on the *Neptunia*. And he said he was on his way to see you; said he had a message from Crowley."

"A message from Teddy!" Ralph's pulse quickened

unaccountably and he became a whirlwind of energy. "Excuse me Doc," he blurted, pushing violently on the button that would summon his secretary, "if I ring off on you. I'll have to look into this—find out why Steve didn't see me, and try to get a line on where he is stopping so I can get in touch with him. Good-bye."

"I thought you'd be interested." Doctor DePolac grinned understandingly. "Good-bye Ralph." His genial features faded from the optophone.

The door opened and Ralph's secretary entered. Prim and angular but highly efficient, Miss Downey had been his father's secretary for many years before him, and she looked upon the young president of the Prescott stores with something of disapproving tolerance. Things had never seemed the same to Miss Downey since the death of the elder Prescott. In her own mind the more modern methods introduced by the son were sure to ruin the business eventually, and she could not now understand how it was that the financial statements of the concern were continually improving.

"Has there been a gentleman asking to see me?" asked Ralph.

"A gentleman!" Miss Downey's eyebrows lifted scornfully. "An uncouth person by the name of Gillette was here, Mr. Prescott. He claimed to be your friend and demanded admittance, but I informed him you were in conference."

"You told him that!" Ralph frowned and half rose from his chair. "Why didn't you notify me he was here?"

"An hour ago," said Miss Downey stiffly, "you gave orders that no one was to be allowed to disturb you—no one."

"Yes—oh yes. You may go, Miss Downey." Sheepishly avoiding the reproving stare of his secretary, Ralph made a show of rummaging in a desk drawer for some papers while she stalked from the room.

When the door had closed behind her he sank back in his chair. Day dreaming! And this was what it had brought him to. By his own act in arranging for solitude he had sent away Steve Gillette, the very man to talk to when he was in a mood like this. And Steve had a message from Teddy Crowley, the doctor had said. Teddy, Ralph knew, had gone over to Venus more than three months previously and had not returned since. Undoubtedly he was engaged in some mysterious and probably exciting mission there. And there had been rumors that his employers, the Sorenson Corporation, had recently turned out a new and improved ethership which had left the earth secretly with a picked crew of men. Ralph tried to link up these facts and rumors in his mind, tried to make of them an explanation for this message Steve was supposed to have for him. And the more he thought of it the more he was convinced that Teddy Crowley was planning something of importance.

Well, he thought, if Steve's message was an important one, it would reach him. Steve was not one to be discouraged easily and would undoubtedly return, or possibly would use the optophone. Ralph was mightily cheered by this conviction.

A twinge of conscience assailed him as he recalled his conversation with Doctor DePolac. Certainly he should have kept in closer touch with this man who had done so much for Margaret and for him, who had been so congenial a companion and so valuable an aid during that first expedition to Venus. And Ralph had treated him rather brusquely a few minutes ago; he would call him back and apologize.

He reached quickly for the call lever of his optophone.

"A call for you, Mr. Prescott," came the droning voice of the despatcher when the exchange connection was established. "Do you want to take it?"

"Certainly, send it through." No longer did Ralph crave solitude.

The radiant features of Margaret flashed into view in the frame of the theophone. Ralph's heart performed the little flip-flop that always occurred when those dear eyes smiled into his.

"In conference, dear?" she asked archly.

"Not to you," he grinned. "What's up, Midge?"

"Steve Gillette is up."

"You've heard from him?" Ralph's excitement grew apace.

"Heard from him!—he's up here, at the house, loudly calling for you. Can't you get away and come home? It—it would be a sort of reunion."

"You bet I can. Be there in fifteen minutes."

Margaret, it seemed, was as excited as he when her bright face faded from view.

RALPH lost no time in getting to the Mercantile landing stage and astounded the pilot of his private aerocraft by his breathless demands for a record trip to the Westchester home.

"Anything wrong, sir?" asked Cronin, his pilot.

"No, Mike, nothing wrong. Good news, I hope. Let's go."

Lifted by the anti-gravity energies of its hull and propelled by the powerful reaction motors astern, the little craft flung itself into the high speed traffic level at two thousand feet and sped northward at nearly four miles a minute.

Well within the prescribed quarter hour Ralph was hurrying across his own broad lawn and up the steps to call out gleefully to Steve Gillette.

"Lord man, but it's good to see you!" he exclaimed.

"And to see you." Steve grinned broadly.

They said no more for long moments, only gripping hands mightily.

Margaret, fluttering about them, steered them into the library and ensconced them in the most comfortable chairs. Then she curled her slim body in her favorite corner of the divan before the fireplace.

"Don't mind me," she smiled. "Just go ahead and talk everything out, you two, and I'll be a good listener."

Ralph sobered as he saw the brightness of her eyes and the eager excitement of her bearing. "You have a message from Teddy?" he said to Steve Gillette. "The doctor told me."

Steve lighted a fat black cigar and settled himself luxuriously. "Ye-s-s," he drawled. "But that can wait a bit. I haven't seen either of you in so long that I'd like to talk a while—just talk. Okay?"

"Sure." Ralph winked delightedly at Margaret.

"Messages," chuckled Steve, "Remember your message from Thalia, queen of the islands of Coris? I've lived there so long, Ralph, I'm calling Venus by their own name for the planet. Remember how we all got together? Venus calling to Earth for help and you getting the message through Doc DePolac's electro-telepathoscope. Teddy Crowley discovering the principle that made possible the building of the ethership *Comet*. Professor Timken at Strathmore Observatory getting the visual signal of the Corisians through the big new telescope. Cap French joining up with us—God rest his soul. And the girls too, Margaret and Mary, remember how they got in on it?"

A silvery tinkle of laughter interrupted him. "We forced our way into the party," she put in, "and were quite unwelcome."

"At first," said Ralph, his eyes grown suddenly anxious as they rested on her fondly. "There was danger, you know."

"And remember," continued Steve dreamily as if they had not spoken, "the trip across space—the first ever

taken by man. The shock it gave us all when we saw for ourselves the terrible destruction wrought on the cities of the Corisians by these monstrous enemies of theirs. Remember the first raid we saw and our horror at the appearance of the Kellonians? Prof Timken and Torvan, the Corisian astronomer at the Royal Observatory of Seritanis, desperately trying to locate the invisible satellite of Coris while we were battling the raiding galdons of the Kellonians. When they finally located it and you, Ralph, took over the leadership of the expedition to the dark satellite. It was some battle with them in the caverns three hundred miles beneath the surface of Kellos, wasn't it? And, dog-gone it, Ralph, I'll never forget the way Cap French's explosive ripped that satellite apart—man alive, that was an explosion."

"Yes, and poor old French didn't live to see it," Ralph broke in sorrowfully.

"No, poor devil," husked Steve, "and Romos died—and others. But it was a swell job you did, Ralph."

"I! The job was done by all of us," growled Ralph.

"We'd never have done it if you hadn't taken the reins," maintained Steve stoutly. "Isn't that so, Margaret?"

Ralph Prescott's bride nodded brightly, vigorously, with a suspicion of moisture in her eyes.

"And then," Steve went on, "Margaret's illness and your hurried trip home with her and the doctor. Teddy and Mary went with you, too, and the Prof and I remained in Seritanis. We've been happy there, but man alive, we worried like the devil until we got word that Margaret had recovered. And we thought you folks would come back, but you never have."

Ralph avoided Margaret's eyes. "And now you've come back here, Steve. Why did you return?" he said softly.

"To bring Teddy's message to you—and Mary's."

Margaret's quick indrawn breath brought a shiver of apprehension to Ralph Prescott. He knew now that Teddy wanted him; knew that Margaret would be anxious to go. And, anxious as he was himself to embark on some new venture into the heavens, he was fearful for her safety. Unreasonable forebodings had him in their grip.

"The message—what is it?" he husked.

"Teddy, you know, is still Sorenson's consulting engineer—is still his right hand man, and gets a whale of a retainer from old Sorenson. And Sorenson has been commercializing these etherships that are built in his shops south of Philadelphia. He's taking all possible advantage of the newly established relations between Coris and the earth that were brought about by this invention of Teddy's. And now he wants to reach out further into the heavens; he has built a new ship—some later discovery of Teddy's—that is designed to travel faster than light, and wants to set out for another solar system where Professor Timken has located huge deposits of radium."

"Wait a minute, wait a minute!" gasped Ralph. "Faster than light, you say this new ship will travel. And Timken located something in another solar system. You're talking impossibilities, Steve. The speed of light is the maximum attainable in this universe of ours, according to the Einstein theory. And to find something in another solar system is ridiculously impossible; why, if I remember rightly, some of the things told me by the professor, the nearest star to us is Alpha Centauri and that is four and a third light years away. And a light year is six million million miles! It can't be that what you say is true. Why—"

"I'm telling you," Steve insisted. "This new ship will do what I say; I've worked on it, and tested it out with Teddy. And you forget that the Prof is working with Corisian optical instruments now. With that huge telescope in the Royal Observatory, he can do things

undreamed of by astronomers here on earth. It's all fact, what I'm saying and Sorenson is financing an expedition to a solar system even further from us than the one you mentioned. Procyon, the star is called by our astronomers, Vusti, by the Corisians, and it is more than ten light years distant. What do you think of that?"

"Lord!" Ralph could only stare. Steve's statements held the ring of truth, especially since they were backed by the authority of Teddy Crowley and Professor Timken. "And Ted Crowley—"

"—wants you and Margaret to come along with us in this venture," supplied Steve, "and Mary wants it; she's anxious to see Margaret, and is going with us herself. She says you're old stick-in-the-muds—both of you—and she's peeved because you didn't come along the last time she and Teddy left for Coris." Steven's eyes twinkled. "And besides, Ralph, Teddy thinks there might be some real adventure out there around Vusti, and he says you will be a good man to take the helm if we run into any trouble—like you did when we went to Kellos. What do you say?"

"Nothing doing!" snapped Ralph, still avoiding Margaret's eyes.

"Ralph!" With startling swiftness Margaret was across the intervening space and upon his knees, raising his chin in her cupped hand and looking at him with that old imperious stare. But love was in her compelling gaze, and comradeship. And the same wanderlust that had gripped Ralph earlier in the day. "Ralph," she insisted, "we will go, we must. It's true, what Mary said, we are not made for the kind of life we've been leading. For a long time I've seen your restlessness and I've known the reason you tried to hide it from me. You are afraid for me, afraid I'm not equal to the hardships of such an adventure as you've been longing for. Pooh! If Mary can do it, I can, Ralph Prescott, and I want you to know that I've been restless as well as you. I was only waiting too see how long you would hold out against the urge. Now that Steve has come, it is all settled. In my mind, at least. We're going, aren't we?"

The grim lines that had set in Ralph's jaw softened as she clung to him. And when she cuddled her head against the hollow of his neck in the birdlike way she had, he looked over at Steve and dropped a solemn eyelid. But a smile had come into his face and into his heart. His old apprehensions were forgotten.

"All right, dear, we'll go," he whispered.

Steve grinned delightedly.

CHAPTER II

Adventure Begins

THE ethership *Neptunia* was scheduled to take off for the return trip to Venus in five days and the time dragged interminably for the Prescotts, although there were many things to be done in preparation for the journey. It was with a feeling of relief that Ralph turned over the management of his business to Terry Vance, the young vice-president upon whom he had come to rely so fully. The Prescott interests could not be in better hands during his absence. Miss Downey, he observed with amusement, was more than ever doleful and gloomily alarmed for the future of the concern she had served so many years.

Margaret's time was occupied mostly with providing herself a suitable wardrobe and the problems presented in selecting and purchasing the necessary apparel were many and varied. But she went into the orgy of shopping with enthusiasm and displayed the same intelligent efficiency that characterized all of her activities. It was a strange assortment that finally arrived at the

Westchester home for packing in her trunks. Sports wear was very much in order, and such sports wear. Ralph had told her to provide for every conceivable climate and she had done so with the utmost thoroughness. There were sturdy boots and leathern-trousered hiking costumes, garments of wool and of fur that would have served for the most arduous of polar expeditions on earth, outfits of light yet strong material such as were worn by feminine adventurers into the African veldt. And even a knapsack and blanket roll. To the usual feminine finery she paid not the slightest attention; a scant armful from her regular wardrobe would suffice for their stay in Seritanis before the real journey began. Margaret was enjoying herself hugely and her excitement grew in intensity as the days passed.

Steve Gillette had gone to Philadelphia to conclude certain business with John Sorenson with reference to the expedition which was to set forth from Venus, and it was not until the fourth day that Ralph heard from him by optophone.

"Ralph," he said, and his honest eyes were alight with anticipation, "Sorenson is tickled to death that you're going. He hasn't forgotten the first trip, either, you know. But he's kept me busy down here, shipping all sorts of supplies ordered by Teddy, and I'll not be able to get over to New York until tomorrow. Wonder if you will go up and see the doctor for me—I won't have time—and get him to deliver the instruments I ordered from him to the *Neptunia* landing cradle."

"Sure, I'll do it, Steve. Too bad we couldn't get the Doc to go along with us too."

"Yeah. He can't make it though; we'll be too long away and he couldn't leave his practice. But there's another chap coming from Tinus—from the earth, you know. A fellow Sorenson is sending for some special purpose." Steve lowered his voice and his brows drew together in a frown. "Name's Dillon, Jack Dillon," he said, "and I don't like him much. Guess the old man knows what he's doing, though."

Steve's broad, usually smiling countenance now contorted in serio-comic anxiety was a spectacle that brought a chuckle from Ralph. "I wouldn't worry about him," he said. "Better leave it to Sorenson; he's a pretty good picker of men, from what I've seen."

"We-e-ell," drawled Steve, and his frown relaxed, "I suppose we'll have to put up with Dillon. Anyway, I've got to hustle now—see you tomorrow, Ralph. The big day."

A few words of badinage concluded the conversation and Ralph sat staring at the darkened frame of the optophone after Steve's image faded from view. Jack Dillon; somehow the name had a familiar sound, and deep in Ralph's consciousness, or in an imperfect memory of some past event, unpleasant associations were hidden. After a moment of unsuccessful groping for recollection, he shrugged his shoulders and dismissed the matter from his mind. More than likely his feeling had merely been one engendered by Steve's expressions of distrust. But if Ralph had known what disaster was to befall their expedition through this same Jack Dillon, he would have been in a much less exultant mood than came over him as he left his office for the last time before the great day of embarkation.

A HALF hour later he was in the office of Doctor DePolac, facing the world-renowned psychiatrist across a polished mahogany table top.

"So you are taking this long shot into infinity with Teddy?" A far-away look was in the doctor's round eyes. "I certainly wish I were able to accompany you, Ralph, but a year or perhaps more—it is utterly impossible for me. Margaret goes with you, of course?"

"Surest thing you know," Ralph's face clouded. "And—and Doc," he stammered, "I'm sorry—the way

we stayed away from you." The eyes behind the horn-rimmed spectacles twinkled.

"You are forgiven, my boy. You see, I knew the reason; only too well I knew how our talks about Venus affected you. I knew you were itching to be away, and Margaret as well—that neither of you dared tell the other. And now Steve Gillette has returned and in five minutes convinced you that you should set out on an adventure that may well be of far greater magnitude than the first."

Ralph grinned joyously. "I hope so," he said fervently. "And I don't worry as I did about Margaret. Guess we are a pair of incurable wanderers, that's all. And Midge is in wonderful health now."

"She is a wonderful girl, Ralph. You are luckier than you know. And as for fretting yourself over her ability to take care of herself, it is utter nonsense. Why, in the more than three years she was in my employ before you met her, she encountered more emergencies than the average young lady does in a lifetime. And always met them with the courage and ability of a veteran, always winning out on her own initiative, too. We miss her around here, my boy."

"I need her more than you do, Doc," smiled Ralph. "And you can bet I'll never let her get away from me. But how about these instruments Steve ordered from you? I nearly forgot my reason for coming."

"Oh, the mentascopes. They are all packed, awaiting Steve's instructions."

"Can you have them delivered to the *Neptunia* before take-off time tomorrow?"

"Most assuredly. I'll have my aerocab pilot deliver them this afternoon. And I hope they will prove of considerable value during your visit to this other solar system."

"Fine. By the way, Doc, what are these mentascopes?"

"I thought you knew." The doctor stepped to a nearby cabinet and returned with two helmet-like contrivances. "These instruments are a development of my electro-telepathoscope and operate in the same manner with the added advantage that a two-way mental communication may be carried on with them whereas with the original bulky machine this could not be done without great inconvenience. The term mentascopes is one I have coined—I think it quite apt."

As he talked, the doctor was adjusting one of the helmets over Ralph's head. He then donned the other himself and Ralph saw that a six inch disc of gleaming metal was attached to the flexible cap directly over the forehead.

"As you know," the doctor was saying, "the nerve impulses are purely electrical in character. The nervous system is merely a complex network of telegraph lines connecting the various parts of the body with a central office—the brain. Sensory impulses go to the brain electrically; motor impulses are sent out from the brain in the same manner. And the thinking processes of the brain—these, too, are electrical or electro-chemical in nature. . . ."

Doctor DePolac's lips ceased moving, but his discourse went on as a mental communication: "... the mentascopes picks up these impulses and transmits them through the ether as short wave radio oscillations. You will observe that you are now receiving such thought impulses from my brain and that they come to you almost as the spoken word. There would be no difference if I thought in Latin or Greek—you would still understand, for the language of the mind is universal. If I think of a horse or a cow or a house you receive the impulses in the same terms, regardless of the sounds my lips might form to convey the same thing in some alien tongue."

As these thought were conveyed to Ralph, he watched

the flashing of the corresponding visual representations on the disc over his friend's placid brow. First the horse, then the cow, and immediately a dwelling. It was like the electro-telepathoscope, as the doctor had said, only infinitely better. The images were clearer and the conveyed thoughts more easily understandable. And these instruments were portable. The doctor was removing his own mentascopes now, and smiling triumphantly.

"It's wonderful, Doc," Ralph enthused. "I've never forgotten the workings of your original machine, but this is certainly far superior. How many of these did Steve order?"

"Ten. Teddy Crowley had asked for them last time he was home and they have been ready for some little time. His idea is that he might find inhabited planets in this distant solar system you are to visit, and he expects to communicate with any intelligent beings there by means of the mentascopes. Teddy isn't missing any bets on this trip, my boy."

"He never does." Ralph removed the mentascopes he had worn and examined it with interest. "Great thing," he said. "Why, we can even learn the spoken tongue of alien beings with these. By listening to their words and watching the thought images—translating from the conveyed impulses as well, in the same way the Corsicans learned English from us."

"Exactly." Doctor DePolac beamed with pleasure. "And I hope they will help this trip to bring great enjoyment and much knowledge to all of you. I—"

He broke off, and his eyes were wistful as Ralph consulted his watch. "If only I might accompany you," he faltered, "I would—"

"You needn't tell me," Ralph consoled him, taking his hand in a convulsive grip. "I know just how you feel. Next time perhaps you can do it."

They said very little after that, but their farewells were of the kind that can pass only between two strong men who have been the best of friends and have shared tremendous experiences. And Ralph knew when he had left that the thoughts of the world's greatest brain specialist would follow his old companions wherever they might roam in the vastness of space and for so long as they might be gone.

THE day of departure dawned crisp and clear, and the *Prescotts* arrived at the Long Island landing field of the *Neptunia* a full two hours before the scheduled time for the take-off. The huge sphere of gleaming metal that was the ethership rested in its cradle amid a scene of the greatest activity. But for the open freight and passenger ports in the lower portion and for the crowds surrounding the loading platforms, it might have been a great silvery ball glinting there in the noonday sunlight for a sole purpose of dazzling all beholders. But the dangling cables and the swift up-rushing of huge packing cases as hoisting motors whined in the sphere's interior, the more deliberate and staid motion of the lift that moved up and down between the passenger entrance port and the platform beneath, marked the big sphere for what it was—a man-made contrivance designed to carry on traffic with some far distant land. Only Teddy Crowley could have conceived this mighty ship of the heavens, only he knew fully the basic secrets of its construction. It was a worthy monument to his genius.

Margaret clung to Ralph's arm as they came in under the curving hull of the *Neptunia*. "It—it thrills me all over again," she whispered. "It's just like the *Comet*. And to think we are starting out again—together. Oh, it will be a new life for us and an opportunity we both have longed for. It's just too good to be true."

"The only thing I can't understand," agreed Ralph, "is how we managed to hold out for so long. With

Mary begging you, and Teddy hounding me every time we saw them, I thought they had given us up that last time."

"But they hadn't, and I'm glad." Margaret was tripping along at her husband's side, so gleeful she could scarcely contain herself.

"Look, Midge, here comes Steve." Ralph waved his hand in greeting to the chunky, red-faced mechanic who was pushing his way through the crowd of sightseers.

"Hello, folks," puffed Steve when he reached them. "Glad you're so early. All your baggage on board?"

"Yes," answered Ralph, "and the mentascopes were delivered yesterday, tagged in your name. But where's this Dillon you were telling me about, Steve?"

"Oh, he's late getting started. Hope he misses the ship."

"Why Steve," laughed Margaret, "you are grouchy today. Who is this man you seem to dislike so much?"

"Jack Dillon, a fellow Sorenson is sending. You won't like him either. But come on, folks, I've made arrangements with the captain so we can be in the control room. Let's get set in our quarters and then go below for the take-off."

They presented their passage credentials at the wicket and were quickly whisked up through the entrance port in the passenger lift. It was the first time either Ralph or Margaret had set foot in an othership since they returned to Earth in the *Comet* and they looked about them in wonder. The *Neptunia* was quite different in internal arrangement. The *Comet* had been more of an experimental vessel, a workshop really, designed more for utility than for comfort. But the appointments of the *Neptunia* were equal to those of the most luxurious air liner plying the transoceanic air levels. They passed through the elaborate lounge and smoking room and looked in upon the magnificent saloon. There was a tiled swimming pool, a gymnasium, a card room—in fact everything to make the trip enjoyable. And Margaret gurgled with delight when they came to their cozy stateroom.

But Steve Gillett did not give them much time to themselves, for he was banging on their door and calling to them before they had time to examine the luxurious furnishings and many conveniences of the spacious compartment.

"Hurry up, folks," he importuned them, "I want you to meet pilot Haynes and the captain."

"Honestly, Steve," laughed Margaret when they joined him in the corridor, "I believe you are more excited than we are."

"And why shouldn't I be?" he retorted, his honest face alight. "This is an occasion, getting you two started. And besides, I know more about what is in store for you than you do. I've got lots to tell you, and—well—I want to get acquainted again."

"You haven't been holding anything back from us, have you, Steve?" asked Ralph with mock solemnity.

"Of course not, but I haven't had time to give you the inside story of this trip we're to make. And I'm full of it—especially since spending a few days at the old shop and talking things over with Sorenson himself. But first let's go down to the control room; it'll make you feel at home."

They came to a small lift—something the older *Comet* had not boasted—and were quickly dropped to the lowermost portion of the great spherical vessel.

"Why, it is just the same," enthused Margaret. "I could almost imagine we were back in the midst of the first adventure." She closed her eyes ecstatically.

"Except that the control levers are chromium-plated," Steve said drily, "and the pilot has a cushioned seat."

But Steve watched his friends with pleased expression as they examined the appurtenances of the control room. Ralph moved from control pedestal to instru-

ment board like a man in a dream, fondled the gyro and inductor compasses that were used when navigating over the surface of a heavenly body, then gave his attention to the main telescope which provided for such extreme accuracy in the navigation of the heavens. He peered into the eyepiece, twirled a micrometer adjustment and smiled a satisfied smile. The instrument was arranged with television connection to viewing plates on various portions of the outer hull surface and was thus capable of providing vision in all directions. It was evident from Ralph's pleasure that he had focused something on the cross-hairs correctly. He was forgetting the prosaic duties of a department store executive, remembering the brief but intensive education he had received from Teddy Crowley and Professor Timken in the sciences of engineering and astronomy.

"There he is," hissed Steve, looking through one of the viewing ports to the passenger platform beneath.

"Who?" Ralph, startled by his vehemence, echoed Margaret's exclamation.

"Jack Dillon. See?—the big fellow with the gray fedora and the pigskin brief case."

There was nothing in the man's appearance to warrant the feeling of unfriendliness he had aroused in Steve. He was a tall man of athletic build and military bearing, perhaps thirty-five years of age, and with determined, not unhandsome features. His eyes, from this distance, seemed pale in color and rather close-set; the nose aquiline. Nothing about him was sufficiently unusual to attract a second glance had it not been for Steve's expression of dislike, although he was perhaps a bit blatantly attired.

Yet, at sight of him, Ralph was seized anew with that indefinable feeling of having known the man at some time or other, or of some unpleasant circumstance in which he had figured. As before, he was unable to recollect or to place the fellow in his memory. And it was certain that he did not recognize him as an acquaintance, though there was a look of familiarity about him and a dimly familiar sound to his name. It was baffling, but probably not important.

At that moment their attention was diverted by the entrance of pilot Haynes and Captain Johanssen. Old employees of the Sorenson Corporation, both of these men, and thoroughly familiar with the part their visitors had played in that first momentous venture into space, they were enthusiastic in their reception and loud in their praises of Ralph's prowess as leader of the expedition to Kellos.

Margaret smiled in mischievous delight over her husband's confusion. But her heart was singing. It was an auspicious beginning of their voyage.

CHAPTER III

To Coris

I NORDINATELY proud of his vessel, Captain Johanssen, an angular tow-headed Scandinavian, spent most of the time remaining before the take-off in enthusiastic discussion of the *Neptunia's* construction. And his guests were in nowise bored, for they had so long restrained their interest in the development of space craft that his information served to revive their memories of the *Comet* and to supplement these with valuable knowledge of the swift advance in the art since the designing and building of the first vessel.

The *Neptunia*, he told them, was considerably larger than the *Comet* or the two ships which Sorenson had sold to the Corisians. It was a double-hulled vessel, as the others had been, but the outside diameter had been increased to two hundred feet and the diameter of the

inner hull to one hundred and eighty feet. The inner shell thus circumscribed a cubical structure that was approximately one hundred and four feet on a side and so was capable of housing considerably more spacious passenger quarters, besides providing much greater freight carrying capacity. The outer hull plates were of super-silicon steel of a new composition which permitted energizing with gravity-repelling forces more than double those of the *Comet* in effect. The Schrantz metal insulating strips between the hull plates had likewise been improved so there was a minimum leakage of the attracting or repelling energies between plates or groups of plates when it was desired to segregate sections of the hull to utilize the energies in various directions as required when changing the vessel's course. Bracings between the inner and outer hulls were of a new metal of extremely light weight and tremendous strength which provided for much greater rigidity of the huge sphere. The inner cube housed, beside the great power plant of one hundred and fifty thousand kilowatts capacity, six decks of passenger's and crew's quarters and storage compartments for baggage and light freight. Holds for the bulkier freight were provided in the four side spaces between the cubical inner structure and the spherical inner shell.

As was the case with the earlier vessels, the spaces at the top and bottom of the huge cube between it and the spherical shell were utilized for installation of the many complex mechanisms required in the operation and maintenance of the vessel. The lower space housed the control room and the force generators which provided the energy used in the floor plates of the ship for artificially simulating in the interior a gravity condition approximately equivalent to that of the earth. And in the upper space was an astronomical observatory with an extremely powerful radio telescope, a complete machine shop, and the apparatus for generating oxygen and absorbing carbon dioxide as well as for humidifying and heating or cooling the air within the vessel. Between the inner and outer spherical shells were numbers of observation galleries and promenades for the use of the passengers and these were provided with large, circular viewing-ports of thick fused quartz to permit the passage of the sun's ultra-violet rays unimpeded. The remaining space between the two shells was occupied by the fuel storage tanks.

The captain was still talking about the *Neptunia's* superior equipment when a siren shrieked outside. The time for departure had arrived. Looking through the floor ports of the control room, they saw that the landing platforms had been cleared and that the guide shafts of the passenger lift were being removed by a crew of workmen. A sea of upraised faces was down there on the landing field—curiosity seekers from far and wide. The navigation of space was still so new and little-understood an accomplishment as to draw great crowds for each arrival and departure of a vessel.

Pilot Haynes was at the controls and there came the smooth hum of the great generators in the power plant overhead. Again the siren shrieked, indicating that the hermetically sealed covers of the outer ports had been bolted to their seats.

"Lighten ship," sang out the captain.

"Ay sir." The pilot drew back a shining lever and the floor beneath them swayed gently as the *Neptunia* became weightless in her landing cradle.

Margaret's eyes were shining when she looked at Ralph.

"Ten per cent repulsion from Earth."

"Ay sir."

The ground fell away rapidly and soon the landing field was but a small rectangle in the checkerboard of

Long Island fields and towns and roads. Its crowd of tiny figures spread out sluggishly and aimlessly like an army of ants. The view was blotted out by a white mist that enveloped them and then they were above a fleecy cloud, rising with incredible rapidity.

"Twenty per cent repulsion."

"Ay sir."

Twenty thousand feet, thirty, fifty. The needle of the low-range altimeter moved rapidly over its scale and then had reached the upper limit stop. Ralph turned his eyes to the speed indicator. Five miles a second, six, seven. They had left the outer reaches of the earth's atmosphere.

Captain Johanssen was at the navigating telescope, peering into the eyepiece as he adjusted for right ascension and declination of a target star by which to set his course. "Full attraction on hull sections eight thirty to eight fifty," he called.

"Ay sir." Pilot Haynes manipulated a series of buttons on the main control panel and the floor tilted ever so slightly.

The earth now was a huge bowl beneath them, a great dished surface with the horizon as its rim. Cloud-flecked, showing an ever widening expanse of ocean to the east and a swiftly extending view of the Atlantic coast directly below. To the west, the horizon raced away from them with the speed of an express train as the contours of the United States were revealed to greater and greater extent and in smaller and smaller size. Soon it was as if a relief map of all North America was spread there before them, then the whole western hemisphere. And abruptly the earth was no longer a great bowl but a globe that filled the entire heavens in its majestic immensity.

Ralph glanced once more at the speed indicator and saw that it registered one hundred miles a second. The journey had well begun.

"How far is Venus with the planets in their present relative positions?" Ralph asked of the captain.

"About one hundred and forty million miles. It is near superior conjunction."

"Let me see," Margaret broke in dreamily, "I've forgotten the distances at maximum and minimum."

"Twenty-five million, seven hundred thousand miles separate Venus and Earth at inferior conjunction," answered Ralph from memory of Professor Timken's teachings, "and one hundred sixty million, one hundred thousand miles at superior conjunction."

"The head of the class for you," chuckled Steve.

Ralph grinned joyously. It was good to be back in the atmosphere of science, and what a relief from the routine of his New York life! "What is your scheduled time for the trip?" he inquired of the captain.

"A little more than three days; to be exact, seventy-eight hours."

"What! Why, on the *Comet's* initial trip we made it in twelve hours. That was for eighty-eight million miles, of course. But on the return trip, more than eighty-five million miles, we did it in five hours. On account of Margaret's illness, you know."

"I know," the captain admitted, "but you must remember that you had no need to conserve fuel. Cost meant nothing on that trip. But now we are trying to make the voyages show a financial return and it means we must average a much lower speed. We do not exceed five hundred miles a second average on the regular service that has been established. The concentrated liquid fuel is enormously expensive, you know, and at greater speeds we show a financial loss in operation."

"It makes that much difference, does it?" This was a phase of this business of space navigation that Ralph had given no thought.

"Indeed it does. It is all in the acceleration, of course, since very little fuel is required to maintain a constant speed in the nearly perfect vacuum of space once we have accelerated to that speed. And the power required increases almost exactly as the square of the speed to which we accelerate. The fuel consumption at a thousand miles a second is four times that at five hundred miles a second, and at two thousand miles a second is sixteen times that at the speed we now use. So, you see, in a commercial venture such as this has become, this question of speed becomes an important one."

"I should say so!" exclaimed Ralph. "And your passenger lists are not large, are they?"

"They are very small. The general public is not yet ready to take what seems to them to be a big risk. Besides, the rates for passage are necessarily high—if we could attract more passengers they could be lowered, of course. There is the question, too, of determining freight rates commensurate with the profits of the newly established commercial traffic with the people of Venus. I can't get used to calling the planet Coris, as they do."

"How many passengers have you on this voyage?"

"Only thirty, and there are accommodations for two hundred. If we could fill our staterooms every trip, it would be a different story."

"H-hm. That probably explains why Sorenson has built only this one vessel since the *Comet* and the two he sold to the Corisians. And why the *Comet* has made only a few trips as a freighter and the Corisian vessels have only visited Earth a couple of times. It is a new angle to the whole problem of traversing space—for me at least."

"But Sorenson has built another vessel," Margaret put in.

Pilot Haynes turned around in his seat, surprised, and the captain dropped a meaning eyelid.

"We'll not speak of that," said Ralph hastily.

"And Ralph," interposed Steve, "there are other reasons why the traffic between planets has been so light. I told you I had lots to tell you."

"Yes," Ralph wrenched his mind from consideration of things commercial and gave himself over to contemplation of Earth's swiftly receding globe. By the time they were ready to leave the control room it appeared no larger than did the moon when viewed from Earth and, like that body when in quarter phase, it was a silvery crescent with the shadowed outline of western North America the only distinguishing marking.

THEY sat in the lounge a little later, Ralph and Margaret and Steve. Only one other passenger was there, a pompous elderly man who sat at a writing desk at the far end of the room.

Steve, lowering his voice confidentially, was holding forth on the subject concerning which he had dropped so many hints. "It is all a question of fuel," he said. "Captain Johanssen gave you an inkling of the conditions, but didn't tell you the half—he doesn't know. The Dober Concentrate Corporation, as you know, are the manufacturers of this liquid fuel used in the etherships—Dobite, they call it—and they've been getting mighty cocky during the past six months. They have raised the price of Dobite four times already, and the last time the *Corisiana* and *Seritanic* came to Tinus—the earth, I mean—Dober soaked them the equivalent of sixty dollars a pound for the stuff."

"Whew!" Ralph whistled. Though he was aware of the fact that a pound of Dobite held greater heat than a ton of coal, this was truly an exorbitant price. "What's their idea?" he demanded. "Are they trying to ruin the chances of interplanetary commerce be-

coming the boon to Corisian and Terrestrial that we had all anticipated?"

"It's industrial warfare," hissed Steve. "Dober saw the possibilities of the Crowley ethership in the beginning and he tried to get old Sorenson to let him in on it. But John Sorenson is no fool, either, and he turned him down. Then was when Dober started his price boosting and, take it from me, it's a serious thing."

"I should think the law could be invoked to stop him," Margaret suggested angrily. "He has no right—"

"The law!" scoffed Ralph. "Our laws seem to have been made to be broken. And besides, there's no law as yet relating to interplanetary commerce or interplanetary relations. It's too early in the game."

"And Sorenson is helpless," Steve went on. "Dobite is a chemical compound which defies analysis. The formula is very carefully guarded in the Dober laboratories and the most noted chemists in the world have failed to discover it. So the old man is at their mercy."

"Isn't there anything that can be done?" Ralph asked.

"That's where this new mystery ship of his comes in; where we all come in. This expedition to Vusti is being made to solve the fuel problem once and for all, not only for the Sorenson etherships but for the entire planet Coris."

"Thought you said we were going for radium," Ralph objected.

"We are. Radium is the solution of the difficulty. Remember the Corisian power plants? They obtain their motive force from a radioactive compound, you know. And you'll remember that their supply of the stuff was depleted sadly by the depredations of the Kelonians. We put a stop to that, of course, when we destroyed Kellos, but there is still a shortage of power in all Coris and the work of rehabilitation can not go on unless a new source of supply of radium is found. Our expedition will thus serve a double purpose, if successful."

"Of course radium is extremely costly on Earth," Ralph said thoughtfully. "And we could not expect to help Coris in this respect. A new and cheap source would do it. But, do you mean to say that the etherships are to be redesigned so as to use the Corisian method of power generation?"

"No—something better. Teddy's been working with Prof. Timken and the Corisian scientists for nearly three terrestrial months and has developed an entirely new type of prime mover. It's an atomic engine, Ralph, and utilizes the energy of disintegration of the atom of hydrogen."

"But Steve, hydrogen is comparatively cheap," exclaimed Ralph. "And—with the enormous amount of sub-atomic energy available in a minute quantity of the gas, I should think the problem already solved."

"It isn't, though. What you say is true, but this atomic engine of Ralph's requires the gas radon, a product of radium, as an excitant. Its emanations produce a progressive disintegration of the hydrogen atoms when confined under proper pressure and temperature in cylinders subjected to the influence of a definite high frequency pulsating magnetic field. Teddy has worked it all out and it's the greatest little engine you ever saw. But you can see that we need a cheap and unlimited supply of radium as badly as the Corisians."

"I begin to see, yes. And Timken has located what he thinks to be this source away out there in Procyon." Ralph was impressed anew with the marvel of it all, with the seeming impossibilities that were accomplished by men of science.

"Not only that." Steve's voice dropped still lower. "This new engine of Teddy's will revolutionize the power industry of Earth as well, if sufficient radon can be provided. Get it? Sorenson will not only have the aircraft and spacecraft game in the hollow of his hands, but the manufacture of prime mover equipment. The steam turbine manufacturers and those building Diesel engines and other internal combustion engines will be closing up shop. It might even affect the manufacturers of hydro-electric apparatus, since the high initial cost of water power developments on account of the huge dams and flumes makes a comparatively expensive thing even of electrical power derived from 'white coal.' Now you see what I mean by a real industrial war—it isn't only Dober but a lot of others as well, and I've an idea some of them are wise to what's going on, even though it has been kept as secret as we know how."

"I'll say you had something to tell us," exulted Ralph. "Why, this is going to be almost as good as the war against the Kellonians. And anything is apt to happen. Like the gold rush days of our old West. Radium is a far more valuable prize—"

"Cut it!" snapped Steve. "Here comes Dillon."

Both men arose, Steve slowly and unwillingly, when the tall chap they had seen on the loading platform came striding toward them. A smile of welcome was on the man's thin lips and his manner was of the utmost cordiality. At close view his eyes were pale in color—a cold-washed-out blue like the sun-bleached eyes of a desert prospector. And they were close-set. But it seemed to Ralph that there was good humor and tolerance in those eyes and nothing to justify his own queer feelings a short while back nor Steve's open animosity.

"Margaret Prescott, Mr. Dillon," Steve was growling ungraciously. "Ralph Prescott, Jack Dillon."

There was old fashioned courtliness and respectful admiration in Dillon's greeting of Margaret. And nothing but the heartiest good will in his grip of Ralph's outstretched hand. What doubts may have remained in Ralph's mind were quickly dispelled.

But Steve took no part in the ensuing conversation and Ralph was moved to extreme embarrassment before this man who was so obviously in John Sorenson's confidence. He would take Steve to task when next they were alone.

"Yes, I am that Dillon," the newcomer replied to Margaret's query. "The junior partner in the firm of P. J. Dillon and Company. That is why I am on this trip. Our concern is one of those that finance the Sorenson interests and I—well, we—thought it was best I come along. Not for any business reason really." Jack Dillon hesitated and his pale eyes twinkled. "I guess I just wanted to come. I'm quite a vagabond actually, and the thing appealed to me. And with father and Sorenson such good friends, it was easy to arrange."

Nothing but frankness and good nature in that statement. Rather it tended to raise Ralph's opinion of the fellow immediately and to inject a sense of good-fellowship and comradeship into the meeting. All but for Steve, who drew apart from the trio in sullen disapproval. It was evident to Ralph that Margaret had taken to Dillon as well, for she engaged him at once in an exchange of brilliant repartee and was in high spirits and obviously not displeased when he offered his arm on the way to dinner.

But Steve Gillette, walking behind with Ralph, muttered ominously when they entered the dining saloon. "He's no good, I'm telling you. I've got nothing on him, Ralph, but something tells me he's bound to cause trouble."

"You make me tired," Ralph came back at him impatiently. "Lay off him for a while, what do you say?"

Steve flushed like a small boy caught with a jar of jam. "All right, boss," he whispered, "but I'm telling you, that's all, and you will find out for yourself. Mark my words."

And Ralph Prescott was moved again to wonder as they sat down at the captain's table.

CHAPTER IV

In Seritanis

ON the island of Thronia, close by the shore of the practically tideless ocean, lies Seritanis, queen city of all three thousand islands of Coris. Nearly the equal of New York City in size, the Corisian metropolis is as teeming with life and activity as might be desired by the most restless Manhattanite. But in Seritanis there is a strange beauty that is not to be found in any of the great cities of Tinus, least of all in that one of greatest population and affluence that sprawls along the Hudson River. The capital city of Coris, when viewed from the air, presents a sight that is never to be forgotten by the fortunate Tinusian who has viewed it.

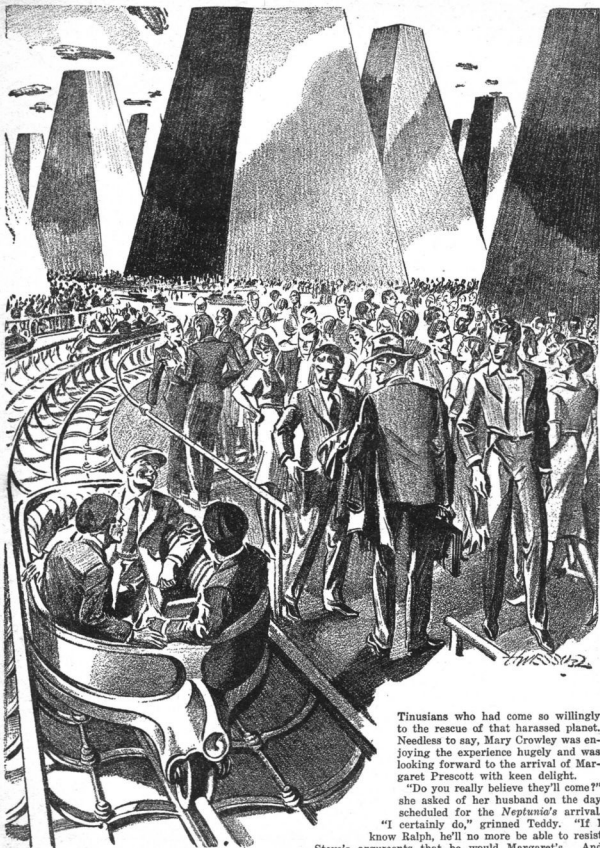
Her streets are broad and well lighted throughout; by day there are no darkly shadowed canyons, by night no poorly illuminated slums or darkened and deserted business sections. The wide avenues are laid out in orderly straight lines and are crowded with traffic during the city's waking hours. There are great parks and public squares to break the monotony of perfect orderliness of arrangement, and variety is likewise furthered by the coloring of the buildings. These are of many colors of extreme brilliance—blues, reds, and purples of vivid hue. A veritable rainbow of colors set off against the pale green tint of the metallic pavements and moving ways. And a remarkable sheen is everywhere in evidence, for each and every structure gleams as brightly in its own particular color as if covered with the glossiest of baked enamels. The buildings, even in the business section, are not as great in height as the skyscrapers of Tinus, scarcely ever rising to more than six hundred feet from the roadways. Like huge truncated pyramids, all of them, with smooth windowless sides tapering upward to the tops that were flattened for the landing and launching of aircraft.

In the central portion of the city is a huge square about which the administration buildings are grouped. Here is the purple palace of Queen Thalia, most pretentious of all structures in Seritanis, and the Royal Observatory, the Hall of the Council, and various buildings housing the many departments of Thalia's government.

It was here that Teddy Crowley had spent most of his time since his last visit to Tinus, some three terrestrial months previously—here in the workshops of the Royal Observatory. Here too, Professor Timken had labored for more than a year and a half as time is reckoned in Coris.* Having once set foot in the Royal Observatory, the professor had no desire to return to the earth and here he had remained since the first visit of Terrestrians to Seritanis. His was the distinction of holding the first commission of an earthman under Thalia's regnancy; he was the first human from an alien world ever to become a naturalized Corisian. And Mrs. Timken had followed him here, finding herself strangely happy in the new life and the new home.

During their present stay in Seritanis, Teddy Crowley and Mary, his bride, had been quartered in the palace. This arrangement was made on the invitation and insistence of Queen Thalia, who considered herself and her people so greatly indebted to these

* A year on Venus is 224 days as compared to the 365 days of the earth. The Venecian year is thus about 194 terrestrial years.



"That's fine," smiled Dillon. "I'd lose myself in Seritanis if left to my own resources."

Tinusians who had come so willingly to the rescue of that harassed planet. Needless to say, Mary Crowley was enjoying the experience hugely and was looking forward to the arrival of Margaret Prescott with keen delight.

"Do you really believe they'll come?" she asked of her husband on the day scheduled for the *Neptunia's* arrival.

"I certainly do," grinned Teddy. "If I know Ralph, he'll no more be able to resist Steve's arguments that he would Margaret's. And I'll bet that Steve got Margaret to side with him, too. Last time I talked with Ralph I could

see he was weakening, but I didn't push him too hard because we weren't ready here anyway. But now that we are and Steve has told him the story, I'm willing to gamble on their coming."

"I do hope you are right, Teddy, for I should hate to think of making the long trip without Margaret along."

To be the only woman, you know, is a bit embarrassing."

"Margaret will be along," said Teddy confidently, "and Rena Gillette would be one of the party as well if it were not for that new youngster of theirs. Cute little rascal, isn't he?"

"Little Stevie's a darling." Mary's eyes were momentarily wistful. Some day, perhaps, she and Teddy might settle down and . . . but the lure of vagabondage was strong upon them both, and it might well be they never would . . .

Teddy's private telephone jangled. This was an instrument strange to the Corisians and antiquated on earth; it had been installed by the professor's workmen in their rooms in the palace and connected with the Royal Observatory.

"Can you come over immediately?" came Professor Timken's voice over the wire when Teddy had answered the call. "I've something to show you."

"You've developed the photographs taken last night?"

"Yes, and they show even more than I anticipated."

"I'll be right over," said Teddy with enthusiasm.

"What is it, Ted?" asked Mary, looking up from the book she had been thumbing idly.

"Photographs of Vusti, where we are going, taken through the big telescope with a new high magnification arrangement the professor has developed. Want to come with me?"

"Do I?" Mary joined him with eager alacrity.

THE main telescope in the Royal Observatory is an enormous refractor whose objective is seventeen tines (two hundred and forty inches) in diameter. Only by the greatest good fortune had the Corisians been able to construct so huge a lens that was optically perfect, and the feat would have been utterly impossible had it not been for the finding of a great natural crystal in a mine near the northern city of Rankin. This crystal, a quartz of the utmost transparency and freedom from flaw was found to pass all rays of the spectrum, including the ultra-violet and infrared bands, with equal facility. And many years were required in grinding it to its final perfection of curvature.

Professor Timken loved this huge telescope as if it had been a child. And, during the comparatively short time in which he had been in charge of the Royal Observatory, he had been enabled to catalog and photograph many hundreds of discoveries that were made possible by its extreme magnification of one hundred million diameters. With this instrument, the earth's surface is brought within a distance of less than a quarter of a mile—visually—when in inferior conjunction with Venus. And this tremendous magnification is made possible only by virtue of the arrangement provided by the Corisian artisans for using the instrument in observation of the heavens without the disturbing intervention of an atmosphere. For the telescopes of Coris look out into the vastness of space through an invisible tube from which all air is evacuated, this being accomplished by projecting a cylinder of etheric vibrations along the line of sight, which vibrations are of such nature as to provide an almost perfect vacuum within their influence. The interference of atmospheric disturbances which has been such a handicap to terrestrial astronomers in utilizing high powers in their instruments has thus been overcome.

But, notwithstanding the high power of the great telescope of the Royal Observatory, a body so far removed from the solar system as the star called Procyon by terrestrial astronomers is still viewed as but little more than a point of light. For this reason the professor had been working on a new photographic attachment which would further increase the enormous magnification, and his first tests of the apparatus had just been completed.

He welcomed Teddy and Mary in his study, where two photographic negatives were affixed to the brilliantly lighted opal glass of the viewing cabinet.

"At last we know something," the professor exulted, leading his visitors to the cabinet. "Vusti is the center of a solar system quite similar to our own, as I had presumed. There are seven planets in the system of Vusti, one of them a double one like some of the twin stars. I have only now begun to measure their distances from their sun, and the various diameters." Professor Timken's close-cropped graying beard was bobbing with excitement.

"Hold on a second," laughed Teddy. "I see nothing here but plates of clear glass with thousands of black specks on them. Where is Vusti, and where are its planets? How can you distinguish them?"

"These are negatives, my boy," the professor said patiently. "You should remember from your own work that light and dark is reversed—the black specks as you call them are the stars of the firmament in the field surrounding Vusti."

"But Vusti itself, and its planets—how do you identify them?"

"Vusti appears in the exact center of the plate—the larger dark spot here." Professor Timken indicated its position. "It was centered on the cross-hairs of the eyepiece and the clockwork of the telescope kept it trained on the body during the time of exposure of the plate. Vusti and the still more distant stars are thus held as stationary images and appear as pinpoints or perfect orbs in the photograph. But the planets of the Vusti system are traveling in their orbits about the central body and are thus *not* stationary with reference to the photographic plate during its exposure. See—they appear as elongated splotches, having moved a definite distance in the time of exposure. From the lengths of these streaks, I will be able to compute their relative velocities and the characteristics of their orbits."

"And this means?" Teddy was staring open-mouthed at the tiny black markings.

"It means that we know something at least about this solar system before we start. And it means that we'll know on which planet to look for the radium supply."

"You have determined even that?" Mary Crowley had never lost her awe of the mysteries of astronomy.

"Yes, by means of spectrographs. The spectroscope, Mary, is an instrument used in determining the presence of the various elements by breaking up the light coming from a heavenly body and determining the nature of the constituent parts. With the new high power attachment, I have been able to investigate the spectra of each planet of the Vusti system in turn and have obtained strong radium lines in that of the double planet, which you see—here—as two dark semicircular streaks close together. It is here we must go in search of the rare element needed so badly in Coris and by Sorenson."

"This would indicate that huge quantities of the stuff must be present on one or both of these double planets?" Teddy inquired.

"It would—it does indeed. And it might well be

that we shall find such extensive deposits as to make them extremely difficult of approach. Depending, of course, upon the precise form in which the substance exists, the radiations may be so powerful as to penetrate even our lead-insulated garments and prove swiftly fatal to human life. It is by no means a pleasure jaunt on which we are to set forth."

"No, we hadn't expected that," Teddy commented drily, "but I am sure we have been and are taking every possible precaution."

"But it is a pleasure trip," trilled Mary. "It is to be the great adventure, and if there is danger and hardship, it will only serve to add zest to the experience."

"Glad you take it that way." Teddy's gaze was solemn when he answered her, and it was anxious when he bent it again upon the professor. "Don't you think you'd better get some sleep?" he asked him gently. "Up all night, weren't you?"

"Y-yes, but it isn't the first time. And I was so absorbed I couldn't leave off." Dark hollows were under the professor's eyes and his shoulders sagged wearily.

"I know, but there's no use in killing yourself over this thing," Teddy was firm. "Listen to me now, Prof, and do as I say."

"And," Mary broke in, "this is the day we expect Margaret and Ralph to arrive—don't forget that."

"Yes, oh yes." The professor's face brightened and he consulted his Corisian chronometer. "Yes, yes, I must go home and bathe and shave. I'll have time for a nap as well."

"That's the stuff," Teddy approved. "And we'll all meet at the landing stage."

The three Terrestrians were in excellent spirits when they came out of the observatory, and Professor Timken's weariness seemed to have left him in the anticipation of the arrival of the Prescotts.

ALTHOUGH in the Tritu Leboru or General Intelligence Bureau of Coris, news events and ordinary messages are transmitted to the four corners of the planet by etheric vibrations, the communication is carried on by means of recorded thought impulses which are translatable only by the telepathy-trained Corisians. For this reason no effort had been made to utilize the facilities of the Tritu Leboru in communicating with the new etherships when in transit. A powerful radio-phone station was in the process of construction and the plans of this contemplated full contact with the vessels of space throughout their entire journey and likewise oral and visual communication with a similar station being built on Earth. But these stations had not as yet been completed, so it was impossible for the Crowleys to know whether Ralph and Margaret Prescott actually were passengers on the incoming *Neptunia*. And, as the time for her arrival drew near, they became increasingly anxious.

"Oh, I do hope you are correct in believing Steve was able to get them to come," Mary said to her husband as they stood by the landing cradle on the field which had been provided on the outskirts of Seritanis. "I'll not be very enthusiastic over the long trip without Margaret along."

"They'll come all right, I'm sure." Teddy's words were confident but he was not nearly so sure in his own mind as he had been. "And I must say I'd not feel as contented if Ralph were not with us. He is the quick thinker among us all, and the one most endowed with the quality of leadership. In case of any trouble with unfriendly races, he is the man to take charge of things. We must have him, Mary, and if he isn't on the *Neptunia*, I'll have to go back after him myself I am afraid."

"If you do, I'm going with you. I think I can do

more with Margaret to persuade them than you can do with Ralph."

Teddy laughed. "Guess you are right," he admitted. "But why do we keep speculating on the possibility of their refusal to listen to Steve's arguments? We'll know for sure in a few minutes; meanwhile let's keep on thinking they'll be among the passengers on the *Neptunia*."

The crowd of Corisians was thickening about the landing platforms and they had not seen Professor Timken approaching them. He suddenly appeared from amid the press of seven-foot Venerians and stood before them grinning like a truant schoolboy.

"Just had word that the *Neptunia* is coming in over the northeast end of Thronia," he said excitedly. "She'll be in her cradle precisely on time."

"There she comes now," exclaimed Mary, pointing. "Just see how the sun glints on her hull plates and how brilliant a spot she is against the green of the sky. Oh, I hope Margaret is aboard."

Mary could scarcely contain herself from excitement, but Teddy and the professor watched in silence as the great silvery ball came swooping down upon them from out of the eastern sky. As she loomed ever larger, Teddy was considering the thought and labor spent on her design and construction. He knew each and every detail of her reinforcing beams and welded plates; the function of every piece of apparatus that was in her had been calculated as an essential part of the whole by himself. And no item of her specifications was there but was written indelibly in his memory. These brain children of his were a part of his life, inescapable even had he wanted to give up interest in them. His throat constricted unaccountably as the huge sphere drifted directly overhead as lightly and as silently as a feather in a gentle breeze. Her lower observation ports were crowded with intent smiling faces and the entrance doors were open.

And then the *Neptunia* cuddled softly in her cradle, rocked almost imperceptibly for a moment, and was still. A perfect landing.

"There they are!" Mary gurgled when the first load of passengers came down in the lift. "I knew they'd come—I knew it."

Teddy nudged the professor with his elbow and grinned in appreciation of Mary's new enthusiasm. Now that she had seen her friends, she was only too ready and anxious to forget her former doubts.

"And Steve is right behind them," he said.

"Who is that talking with Margaret?" asked the professor.

"I don't know," replied Teddy, peering over the shoulders of the tall Corisians whose sturdy forms well now blocked his view. "I never saw him before—probably only an acquaintance of the voyage."

But the well-dressed stranger was still with their friends when they reached the landing platform to greet them. He stood silently respectful, hat in hand, while the two girls indulged in the most affectionate of welcomes. It was a jubilant reunion of old friends, but through it all Steve Gillette was downcast and uncommunicative.

Eventually, when they had drawn apart from the crowd, Margaret Prescott presented the stranger to Professor Timken and the Crowleys as Jack Dillon.

"Mr. Dillon," she explained, "was sent along by Mr. Sorenson and is to accompany us on the other—the long trip."

"Is that so?" Teddy looked inquiringly at Dillon; this was a move on Sorenson's part that he had not anticipated and he was not at all sure that he approved.

"Yes," Dillon smiled disarmingly and withdrew a

thick packet from the breast pocket of his coat. "I have here a letter to you from John Sorenson which I think will explain matters satisfactorily."

Teddy reached for the envelope and, as he did so, caught Steve's sullen expression as well as a flicker of anxiety that was in the look Ralph sent in his direction. Odd that Sorenson should do a thing like this without having consulted him previously. But the queer pale eyes of the newcomer were honest enough, and friendly. He seemed to be a gentleman as well, and certainly was a fine physical specimen—a good man to have along perhaps.

Deciding to read Sorenson's letter later, Teddy thrust it into his own pocket and dismissed the matter from his mind.

CHAPTER V

Preparing for the Journey

MARY and Margaret hastened to the Crowley suite in the palace, leaving the men to take care of the baggage and such other matters as required attention at the ethership terminal. When arrangements had been made for the transfer of all personal belongings and the large amount of freight that was consigned to Teddy Crowley, the five men left for the heart of the city in one of the high speed two-wheeled vehicles of the Seritanis Muro-Linot, or Public Transportation System.

Jack Dillon, never having been a visitor to Coris, was deeply interested in all that he saw and engaged Professor Timken in spirited conversation regarding the sights of Seritanis as their gyroscope-balanced monorail car sped along on its single rail above the green metal avenue that led to the great central square of the city. The moving ways alongside and the increasing press of vehicular traffic on the roadway between amazed him no less than did the great stature and superb carriage of the natives. And the vari-colored flat-topped buildings with the sloping walls proved a never-ending source of comment as they flashed by. Of course Dillon had seen the cinematograph views that were transmitted over the optophone by the World News Bureau, but to view the strangeness of this city of Venus with one's own eyes was another matter.

"They must average about seven feet tall," he said of the Corisians he saw on the moving ways.

"Yes, that is about the figure," responded the professor, "that is, for the men. The women's average is about six inches less. And they are a remarkably handsome race, don't you think?"

"I certainly do, and uniformly so, from what I have seen so far. But tell me, Professor, are these colored pyramids we are passing all places of residence?"

"In this district, yes; we have not yet entered the business section. When we do, you will see much larger structures. In the outlying residential portions of Seritanis, such as that we are now passing through, the buildings are much like the apartment houses of New York and other great American cities. And the inhabitants live in much the same manner as do our own people at home."

"They have no windows in these buildings, professor. I have read of this and have heard of their perfection of interior lighting and air-conditioning over the news broadcasts, but it has always seemed to me to be an unhealthful arrangement. Do you not find it so?"

"Indeed not. It is a far more healthy condition than would exist were they to depend on windows for light and ventilation. The natural sunlight of Coris is greatly deficient in ultra-violet radiations on account of

the vapor laden atmosphere of the planet which filters out the greater part of these beneficial rays. And the Corisian scientists have produced a method of artificial lighting that is far superior to the natural source. Not only is the interior lighting completely diffused so that no shadows are cast in any portion of a room, but it is of such quality that all bands of the spectrum are included in precisely the proper proportion for results most beneficial to the human body. The ventilation is perfect; a uniform temperature is maintained throughout the year and uniform humidity as well, both of the exact value that has been determined by experiment as most healthful for the inmates of the building. In foundries and workshops, of course, the temperature is adjusted to a lower value and the humidity is modified to suit the requirements of human beings engaged in strenuous labor. But in all cases the air is filtered and is germless, a condition that is utterly impossible of attainment where ventilation is obtained directly from the outside by opening and closing windows. No, Dillon, the windowless building is not unhealthful; it has proved a boon to the general well-being of the city dwellers of Coris. You can see it in their appearance—though their existence is sedentary as a city dweller of Earth, each one of them looks as if most of his time were spent out of doors in the most healthful of occupations.

The diseases of Earth, especially the lung afflictions, are practically unknown in Coris."

"Yes, I had noticed the vigorous and energetic look of them," Jack Dillon said thoughtfully, "and I suppose this has had something to do with their great physical size as well."

"That is true—the average stature has increased materially since the perfection of the new type of building. Of course there are other factors entering into it, the advanced knowledge of their medical men in the importance of the various glandular secretions of the body, the correct proportioning of vitamins in the synthetic food which forms a large part of their diet—many things."

"It is all very fascinating," said Dillon. "I understand they have some means of seeing through the walls of these buildings, too, as if windows actually existed. Is that correct?"

"Yes, and the means is absurdly simple. There are rectangular metallic panels in the rooms which are connected electrically with an outside viewing plate and—presto!—we have an inside image of the outside view. Similar to some of the television applications in use on Earth."

You will find many things to interest you in Seritanis, Dillon."

"I can well believe it, and I hope to make a longer stay here on some future occasion. I suppose we'll not be long here now—"

Teddy turned around where he sat in the seat ahead of them and interrupted the conversation. The car was entering a district of taller edifices and was slowing down for a station stop. "This is your station, Dillon," he said. "I'm having Steve accompany you to your hotel and he will bring you to the observatory to join us when you have made the necessary arrangements for your rooms and have gotten yourself settled there."

"That's fine," smiled Dillon. "I'd lose myself in Seritanis if left to my own resources. I'll join you very shortly."

The broad countenance of Steve Gillette was an expressionless mask when he arose to comply with Teddy's request of him. And it was with none too good grace that he steered Dillon across the moving ways when the two had left the car.

"STEVE hasn't much use for Dillon, it appears," laughed Teddy, when he and Ralph were finally seated with the professor in the observatory office. "I'll have to give him a talking to, because we can't afford to have any friction or personal animosities on this trip to Vusti."

"I thought him a very intelligent and friendly chap," Professor Timken put in. "And I believe he will be a valuable addition to our party."

"What do you think of him, Ralph?" asked Teddy, eyeing his friend with those steady blue eyes of his.

"Why, I don't know," was Ralph's measured reply. "At first I had some slight doubts of Dillon. Somehow there was a lost memory of something connected with him—something unsavory—but I haven't been able to recollect what it was. And since meeting him, the feeling has left me. He seems to me to be on the level and is a quiet, unassuming chap. While he was very sociable during the trip over on the *Neptunia* and was particularly nice to Margaret, he was unobtrusive and inclined to leave us to ourselves whenever he divined that our desire was to be alone. Very considerate, he seems to be—in fact I can't say I have a single thing against the man."

"Hmph. I'll give Steve a piece of my mind," said Teddy. "He's as unreasonable as Old Nick at times."

"Have you read Sorenson's letter?" the professor inquired.

"No." Teddy withdrew two long packets from his pocket and regarded them thoughtfully. "And there's a second letter that came by the regular mail on the *Neptunia*." He opened the one Dillon had brought and read the enclosed message carefully. Then he slit open the other, the one which had come by mail, and found a separate sealed packet enclosed with another note.

"Funny," he remarked in puzzled voice, "the old man doesn't say much in the letter Dillon brought and it is stilted in wording. Introduces Dillon and asks me to show him every courtesy but doesn't mention the other letter at all. In the second one that the mail brought, there are instructions not to open the sealed packet until we've reached our destination and then only if the quest for radium is successful. If we have to return with empty hands, I'm to destroy the packet unopened. What can it mean?"

"Doesn't he give any reason?"

"No. He confirms his previous approval of the inclusion of you and Margaret but says about Dillon only that it was his own desire to accompany us for experience and for the adventure."

"That's what Dillon told us on board the *Neptunia*." Ralph saw from his friend's expression that he was worried and undecided.

"Well," Teddy shrugged his shoulders and indulged in a wry grimace. "I'm working for Sorenson and he's paying for the expedition, so what he says goes. But I don't like the tone of his letters—I read between the lines and am convinced that he's hiding something from me—a thing he never has done before. I wish the new radiophone station was ready so I could talk with him personally."

The professor had remained silent and now said with some asperity, "It seems to me that everyone is making a mountain of a molehill. I see nothing in the coming of this man Dillon to alarm us and can think of no good reason why we should allow his presence to make the least difference in our plans or to disturb our normal peace of mind."

"Oh, there'll be no change in our plans," Teddy interposed hastily. "We leave Coris in four days regardless of what Dillon—"

"Hush!—here he comes," warned Ralph.

Teddy's brow cleared at sight of Dillon, who seemed

only a smiling and enthusiastic sightseer when he came into the room. And even Steve appeared to have lost some of his ill humor in the interim, for he was engaged in animated conversation with his companion.

THE succeeding days were busy ones for those who were to embark upon the long voyage through space. Mary and Margaret were engaged in the purchase of provisions of every variety in amounts sufficient to feed the entire party for a period of six lunar months and spent much time in consultation with Corisian dietary experts in order to assure themselves that there was no error in the quantities provided and in assuring properly balanced menus to maintain the health and vigor of all of them. The men were engaged in storing the vast assortment of equipment aboard the vessel that was to carry them into the mysterious depths of interstellar space and in assisting Professor Timken's small crew of Corisian workmen in installing certain instruments and apparatus which had been manufactured in Seritanis.

The *Blue Streak*, as Teddy had christened the mysterious ship, was housed in a special hangar which had been constructed in the walled-in outdoor area behind the observatory. The vessel, when Ralph Prescott first inspected it, impressed him as a radical improvement even on the *Neptunia* and he knew that Teddy had put into its design the utmost of his rare inventive genius.

Although considerably smaller even than the old *Comet*, the *Blue Streak* was a marvel of completeness in every detail of its construction and provided the utmost of comfort for its passengers. With an outer hull diameter of only one hundred feet and with but eight feet separating the inner and outer shells, her inside cubical structure measured only forty-eight and a half feet on a side. Nevertheless, there was crammed in that small space a most marvelous assemblage of mechanisms as well as complete living quarters for a party of ten. And every cubic inch of space between the sides of the cube and the inside wall of the sphere was utilized to the greatest advantage.

The outer hull plates were of a distinct bluish hue and Teddy explained that this was due to the new super-silicon steel alloy used in obtaining the enormously increased gravity energy for propulsion. A high percentage of cobalt had been added and other elements which permitted of energization of the plates to hitherto undreamed-of saturation values. The entrance manhole had been provided with an airlock to admit of entering or leaving the vessel when in airless territory without any appreciable loss of the vessel's oxygen supply. And oxygen-helmeted space suits had been provided so that this might be done, if found necessary, either for making repairs to the outer hull while in transit or for landing on a heavenly body without an atmosphere.

As in the case of the earlier etherships, the control room of the *Blue Streak* was located in the lower curved section beneath the engine room deck of the cube. An unbelievably compact arrangement of controls and operating and navigating instruments was here, and there were many new gadgets that were entirely strange to Ralph. But what gave him the greatest pause during his first tour of the vessel's interior was the engine room.

"Why, it's not at all like the *Comet's* engine room," he said to Teddy, "nor the *Neptunia's* either. What have you done here?"

Teddy Crowley grinned exuberantly. "These are the new atomic engines," he explained. "The *Blue Streak* came over from Sorenson's shops two months ago under power of the old type of Dobite-fueled motor, which was entirely satisfactory for ordinary interplanetary travel. But such engines would never do for

so long a journey as we are to make, not only because of their comparatively low ratio of power to weight but because we should not be able to carry sufficient fuel for the trip in a dozen ships the size of this one. We therefore removed the old motors from their foundations and substituted the new engines which were developed here in Coris by Professor Timken and myself."

"There is such a difference in engine weight and in fuel requirements?" marveled Ralph.

"I should say so." Teddy caressed the shiny steel casing of one of the small rotary engines, which was coupled to a large high-frequency generator. "Ralph, this little prime motor will develop more than one hundred times the power of the Dobite motor it replaced. With all of the four generating units in operation, the *Blue Streak* has propulsion energy more than forty times as great as that of the *Neptunia*. And yet our total fuel requirement for the round trip to Vusti consists of but ten cylinders of compressed hydrogen and, as the excitant, only three grams of radium."

Ralph whistled. "It doesn't seem possible," he exclaimed. "And yet—three grams of radium—that is about two hundred thousand dollars' worth, isn't it?"

"Just about," replied Teddy drily. "But think of the distance we are to cover. And think of what Dobite, even if it could be used, would add up to at sixty dollars a pound!"

"Man alive, yes!" Ralph was entirely unable to conceive of the vast distance separating them from Procyon, the star Teddy and the professor insisted on calling by the Corisian name Vusti. He only knew that 3.13 parsecs was its determined distance from the sun and that this was equivalent to about ten and a third light years or some sixty-one and a half million million light years. And he could not conceive of the possibility of traveling at a rate of speed that would carry them in one lunar month, as Teddy and the professor had computed, a distance which light required more than ten years to traverse. "Do you actually believe the *Blue Streak* will attain a speed more than one hundred times faster than that of light?" he asked doubtfully.

"I know it to a certainty," was his friend's confident response. "It is only a question of continuing acceleration for a long enough period of time and any speed may be reached. Professor Timken and I, in making our calculations and in checking these with actual short-time tests of the *Blue Streak*, have agreed that there is no limit to the velocity attainable in outer space. We are sure we can do as much as six hundred times the speed of light, although such extreme velocity will not be necessary on this trip. And you must remember that a very considerable period of time would be needed to accelerate to such an unconscionable speed."

"But—both Einstein and those who succeeded him," Ralph objected. "They claim that *nothing* in the universe can travel faster than light."

"Rats! The old theory of relativity has been discredited long ago, at least in that respect, although there are still a few stubborn scientists who adhere to the teachings. The discovery of the basic relation between gravity and magnetism knocked the theory into a cocked hat, since the gravitational field is precisely the same as a magnetic one with the sole exception of this question of velocity. But Ralph, I'm talking out of turn; the professor is much better able to explain than I am. Suppose we leave this discussion until a later time when he can go into it fully."

"Suits me." Ralph was glad to leave the subject, for it was becoming too deeply involved for his limited knowledge of science.

The arrival of workmen with a recording instrument of Corisian manufacture which was to be installed in the engine room sent them up the iron stair to the two

upper decks of living quarters. And here Ralph found much at which to exclaim in the completeness of the galley and mess room, the library, and the surprisingly roomy and comfortable staterooms. On this, his first visit to the *Blue Streak*, he found it a veritable treasure chest of surprises and he knew that much time must pass before all of its secrets would be revealed.

AT length, all preparations for the journey had been completed and there remained but a few hours until the time of departure. Through the entire pre-embarkation period, Jack Dillon had proved a willing and indefatigable worker and all doubts that may have existed in the minds of the others regarding his suitability as a companion of the voyage had evaporated. Teddy's talk with Steve Gillette, or Steve's own better judgment, had erased the frown of disapproval from that broad countenance of his and, once more, it bore its accustomed expression of geniality.

No word had gone forth over the Tritu-Leboru newscasts regarding the existence of the *Blue Streak* or its contemplated voyage. The secret had been as well kept in Coris as on the earth, although there had been considerable puzzlement over this necessity in Thalia's council. The exigencies and dangers to be met with in the commercial rivalries of Tinus were not as yet understood by the Corisians, whose own great industries were centralized and under governmental control. But Thalia, in her respect and gratitude, had respected the wishes of Teddy and Crowley and instructed her council to maintain the strict secrecy he had requested.

There were rumors in Seritanis, of course, and, in lesser degree, throughout all the islands of Coris, for it had been generally understood that the scientists from the green planet, as many Corisians termed the earth, were at work on the problem presented by the acute shortage of radioactive material for power generation. However, few of these rumors were of a nature that even approached the truth.

And so it was that the voyagers were able to make their departure without arousing the suspicion of the terrestrial diplomatic representative then negotiating with Thalia's government or of the numbers of commercial spies Teddy knew were among recent visitors from Tinus.

CHAPTER VI

Into the Infinite

THE *Blue Streak* left her berth immediately before dawn of the day set for departure and drifted out over the still unawakened city of Seritanis toward the sea. Teddy Crowley was at the controls and at his side stood Ralph Prescott and Jack Dillon. The remaining male members of the party were busily engaged in the engine room or in the observatory above the topmost deck. Mary and Margaret, seasoned space travelers by now and more interested in the new duties they had assumed than in sightseeing, were in the galley preparing breakfast for the entire party.

Those embarking were ten in number and included three Corisians in addition to the seven Terrestrians. There were Ralph and Teddy, with their respective brides, Professor Timken, Steve Gillette, and Jack Dillon. And Thalia had appointed Soltur and Rastor, two of the most accomplished scientists in her realm, to accompany and assist the adventurers from Tinus as well as to represent her interests in the quest for radium. The tenth member of the party was Therin, expert engineer of the Seritanis Churgo-Leboru, or Power Generation Bureau, who had aided in the con-

struction of the *Blue Streak's* engines and was as familiar with their complications as were Teddy and Steve.

Jack Dillon gazed through the viewing ports with rapt interest as the lights of Seritanis fell behind and the *Blue Streak* swept out over the inky sea, gaining altitude slowly. They had not proceeded far when the first faint light of dawn was manifest, and silence reigned in the control as swift reaching fingers of its light streaked out over the ebon sea to paint it with colors indescribable. The vapors at the horizon were illuminated with long streamers of brilliant carmine and purple that stretched toward the zenith to merge into the green of the sky with flame-like flickerings. And, looking back upon the swiftly receding city of Seritanis, it was a blaze of color like nothing to be seen on Earth—blue-greens and purples of every conceivable shade, reds ranging from the palest rose and brightest vermilion to the deepest of magentas—and all shifting and wavering with kaleidoscopic diversification.

Dillon drew in his breath sharply. "This is a sight well worth seeing," he enthused. "I would not have missed it for—well, it pays amply for any hardships or discomforts that might be encountered later. But tell me, Crowley, why have we not left the lower atmosphere?"

Teddy smiled. "On account of this," he explained, waving a hand toward the sunrise. "I knew you'd enjoy it, so though I'd delay for a short time to give you a chance to see it. You had no opportunity before today."

"Thank you," said Dillon simply. And then he fell silent, his eyes turned away, gaze riveted to the ever brightening display at the horizon.

Ralph and Teddy exchanged understanding glances. They too had been spellbound before the beauty of this same phenomenon of nature on the planet Venus and the thought occurred to both that a man who could so appreciate the view was a worthy companion. Dillon's stock had been rising steadily as the days passed.

The sun, much larger than when viewed from Earth, was now a huge blood-red disc just above the horizon and in the pathway of its reflection on the ebon waters cast off a myriad glints as of the crystals of carborundum. A tiny black speck that appeared in the distance grew rapidly larger—one of the night air liners of the inter-island service coming in swiftly toward Seritanis. Teddy increased the gravity repulsion energy and the *Blue Streak* shot skyward to an altitude of forty thousand feet. While there was no chance or fear of pursuit, Teddy thought it best to avoid the scrutiny of curious passengers of the liner in order to prevent further arousing of the speculations of the rumor-mongers.

"Might as well get away," he muttered. "Have you seen enough, Dillon?"

"There is no such thing as enough of such a sight," was Dillon's reply, "But I wish you'd not delay further on my account. I am all for getting off to a speedy start, but, meanwhile, I'd like to ask you a lot of questions about Venus—if you can stand it."

"Go ahead—shoot," laughed Teddy. "I'm only surprised that you have restrained yourself so admirably during these past few days."

"Thanks. Tell me first about the physical characteristics of the planet; about these numerous islands, and their resources; about the people and their home life."

Teddy laughed. "A big order, Dillon. But I'll do my best. Here goes."

He had manipulated the controls rapidly as he talked and Coris fell away from beneath them at a terrific rate. Ralph looked at the various instruments and saw that full acceleration was in progress and that, already,

they were more than a thousand miles outside the stratosphere of the planet. Dillon was propounding further questions and Teddy was answering him in detail, questions regarding the mineral deposits of Venus and the scarcity and abundance of various elements, discussions of the system of government and of Corisian finance.

Seeing that he could add little to the animated conversation and being desirous of talking with the professor, Ralph left the two men and made his way to the observatory and laboratory up top.

On his way, he stopped to watch the operation of the new atomic engines and to joke with Steve and the seven foot Venerian, Therin. And he thrust his head into the door of the galley, only to be shoed away most promptly and determinedly by the two girls.

HE found the professor in the small observatory with Rastor and Soltur, busy with the telescope and with a mass of calculations on which they had been working. From time to time the professor spoke a few words into the microphone which connected with the loud speaking telephone in the control room, reporting the results of observations to Teddy and giving him accurate information on which to base his corrections of their course. Here in the observatory there was a wall panel on which was mounted a set of indicating and recording instruments that duplicated those in the control room below, as well as a televiser screen which gave full view of that portion of the heavens obstructed by the ship's hull, exactly as if seen from the lower viewing ports.

Ralph saw that Venus was rapidly shrinking in apparent size and that the sun, off to one side, was not much larger than when viewed from just outside Earth's atmosphere. A brilliant flaming orb, casting its streamers of incandescent gases a hundred thousand miles and more into space, it too was receding with incredible swiftness. Ralph glanced at the speed indicator that was graduated in miles per second and saw that its pointer was approaching the fifty thousand mark. The instrument alongside was one with which he was not familiar and he saw that its scale markings were from zero to one thousand and that its slender indicating bar had barely left the lower limit of the scale.

Professor Timken rose from his work and joined Ralph where he stood before the instruments.

"What is this instrument?" Ralph asked him.

"That," said the professor, "is a speed indicator for the higher velocities. The ordinary indicator becomes useless when we reach the speed of light and then we switch to this second instrument whose scale units indicate multiples of that speed. When the needle rests at the figure ten, it means we are traveling at ten times the speed of light; when it is at one hundred, a velocity of one hundred times that of light is indicated."

"Oh," Ralph wrinkled his forehead in a puzzled manner.

The professor laughed. "You are thinking of the old theories of the ultimate velocity of matter?" he asked.

"Frankly, I am," Ralph grinned sheepishly. "Of course, I know that you and Teddy are sure of your ground; that we wouldn't be starting out on this voyage if you weren't. But I'll admit I can't get some of the old-fashioned ideas out of my head. Guess I'll never be classed as a scientist."

"There are many who call themselves such that still cling to the old conception. And this in the face of the final proofs of gravitational characteristics. Why Ralph, it is as simple as the nose on your face—listen: the contraction in the direction of motion that was

propounded in the Fitzgerald-Lorentz hypothesis of a few decades back, was an accepted theory until 1942. We believed, all of us, that a body moving in the universe with half the speed of light was reduced in size until its mass was increased one seventh, that at ninety percent of the speed of light its mass was increased two and one half times, and at ninety-nine percent to seven times the mass when at rest. The same formula showed infinite mass at light's velocity of 186,000 miles a second, from which it followed that the velocity of light was the natural limit for moving matter. But the discovery of the relation between gravity and magnetism disproved all this, for it was found, and is proved by the very existence of the Sorenson air and space craft, that the lines of force that make up a gravitational field consist of energy charges moving with infinite velocity. If it were not so, our universe would fly asunder of itself, the planets would leave their orbits and desert their suns; the suns themselves would draw apart and soon there would be only chaos. For what holds the heavenly bodies in their courses is a balance of centrifugal forces and this very thing we call gravitation. Take our own world, for instance—it has a definite mass and velocity and produces a corresponding centrifugal force in its revolution about the sun. The centrifugal force is exactly balanced by the gravitational attraction between it and the sun, just as if a huge cable connected the two and prevented the earth from leaving its orbit on a tangent as it would do if unrestrained. And that force which holds the two bodies together must act *instantaneously* to be effective; were the energy charges that make up the gravitational tie to travel only at light's velocity, there would be a time lag of more than eight minutes, which would prevent a balance of forces. Such balance would have been impossible to establish in the beginning; there would have been no solar system, no universe, only a vast turmoil of aimlessly darting, disrupting bodies."

"But," objected Ralph, "energy charges are not matter."

"Indeed they are, my boy. All that exists is energy; the atoms of all matter consist merely of concentrations of energy which we call proton and electron. There is no ultimate solidity or substance to anything that exists in the universe as matter; all bodies of substance to anything that exists in the universe as a solid consists of the same thing: energy. Heat, light, electricity, gravity, are composed of these infinitesimal concentrations of energy. The universe itself is nothing but empty space, charged with energy; where the charges are comparatively close together, we have gases or liquids or matter we are pleased to call solids. Nothing exists in this universe of ours excepting energy—and emptiness."

"Mmm, very interesting," grinned Ralph, "and mostly over my head entirely. But what it does mean to me, so far, is this: you contend that matter is energy, and *vice versa*—I've had that explained to me before but it didn't take root—and that the force of gravity is energy traveling at a speed vastly in excess of that of light. From which you deduce, and have proved, that other forms of energy or matter can be made to travel at such speeds. Ergo, the *Blue Streak* can do this and is now well on the way toward accomplishing this very thing."

"Correct, my boy. In another hour we shall have reached a speed of 186,000 miles a second."

Ralph glanced again at the speed indicator and saw that it showed just under sixty thousand miles a second. "The rate of acceleration then is—" he began.

"Approximately 120,000 miles per second per hour," the professor finished for him. "Each one and a half hours of acceleration is roughly equivalent to the addi-

tion of another multiple of the speed of light to our velocity through space."

"We do not feel any sensation of such tremendous acceleration, Prof."

"Of course not. Our internal gravity mechanisms are arranged to compensate for the effects of acceleration or deceleration. Pressure you would otherwise feel is exactly and automatically counterbalanced by the repelling and attracting forces in walls, ceilings and floor plates of the vessel. There can be no bodily discomfort—"

"Breakfast is served," a sprightly voice interrupted him.

Turning, the men saw Mary's blond head thrust in at the door. She was flushed and smiling, obviously much excited over the results of her labors in the galley with Margaret.

"All right, cook," laughed Ralph.

The alacrity with which he and the professor followed her below was frank betrayal of their healthy appetites. And the big Venerians, Soltur and Rastor, were not far behind when they clattered down the stair.

IT was a gala occasion, this first meal together aboard the *Blue Streak*, and all members of the party were gathered about the single long table of the tiny dining saloon. With gravity repulsion energy fixed in the direction of Venus and attraction localized on that portion of the hull that faced toward Procyon, the *Blue Streak* was held to her course automatically and continued on into the heavens with constant acceleration. Only Ralph seemed thoughtful and preoccupied.

"What have you been up to?" Margaret asked him. "You are so sober."

"The prof's been telling me all about the emptiness of space," he laughed, "and has at least convinced me of the emptiness of my head. I guess your hubby will never make a scientist."

Jack Dillon chuckled at this. "And I," he said, "have been asking questions of Teddy until he was ready to send me out through the airlock into the frigid airlessness outside. He was very patient and explicit, but I'm sure I was a very inept pupil—"

"No such thing," Teddy broke in. "I don't mind that sort of a talk, and your questions were very much to the point. The last thing we were discussing, Dillon—before Margaret butted in—is something I have studied extensively. The gravitational field, you understand, is a complicated thing to analyze. It—"

"Here, here," Mary chided him good naturedly, "talking shop at mealtime is tabu. Let that be understood from the beginning—we are expecting to be amused and entertained, Margaret and I, and certainly do not relish a diet of technical hash served up with our food."

"Well taken," the professor spoke up. "I for one, am heartily in favor of dropping scientific discussions at meal time. What say you all?"

"Sure." "Yes." "Right." A chorus of laughing approval came from the men and the two girls exchanged triumphant and delighted glances. To them the dangerous journey was no more than a lark and was to be enjoyed accordingly.

"What'll we talk about?" Steve Gillette asked innocently.

"Oh," said Margaret airily, "coiffures and cosmetics; what the well dressed woman is to wear next spring; gossip about people we know who are not here to listen—and—about the excellent quality of the food and the culinary skill of the *femmes de charge*."

"Fems de—huh!" Steve grunted; then grinning broadly—"Well, anyhow it's a darned good breakfast."

The merriment aroused by this sally set the entire party off into an exchange of repartee that made of the first mealtime gathering a huge success. And the three Venerians seemed to enjoy it as much as the Terrestrians, since their thought reading ability enabled them to appreciate the finer points of humor that would have escaped them had they to rely upon their academic knowledge of the English tongue.

So it was that the time passed swiftly and the more serious aspects of the venture were forgotten for the space of nearly an hour.

Eventually, the professor chanced to raise his eyes to the terrestrial chronometer that was affixed to the wall of the dining saloon, and he pushed back his chair hastily.

"We'll have to excuse ourselves at once, ladies," he exclaimed. "Only two minutes remain until we reach the speed of light."

"And then what?" asked Margaret.

"Nothing of moment, my dear, but there are certain observations to be made and theoretical data to be checked." The professor was already on his way to the door.

That broke up the pleasant sociability of their first meal and sent the men hustling to their various stations. Jack Dillon went below with Teddy, and Ralph accompanied the professor and the two Venerian scientists to the observatory. Steve and Therin returned to their beloved engines and generators. Margaret and Mary resigned themselves to the routine of the galley that was to follow their every meal aboard the *Blue Streak*.

"DO you mean to say this ship has never been tested at a speed beyond that of light?" Ralph asked the professor when they came into the observatory.

"It has not. We did not have sufficient power when she was sent over from Tinus, and then on the trial trip our supply of the radium emanation became so nearly exhausted at one hundred and fifty thousand miles a second, that we had to return. It was not until we received the last shipment of radium from Sorenson that we were sufficiently well supplied. A tremendous amount of power is required to accelerate to this velocity, you know."

"I know." Ralph grew thoughtful as the professor peered into the eyepiece of the telescope. "But why the excitement?—you don't expect any difficulty, do you?"

"No, no,"—absent-mindedly. "No trouble, Ralph. Our computations are sufficient proof . . . merely extrapolations from the previous test results at lower velocities, you understand . . . but we are about to enter a new realm about which nothing really is known. And theories must be checked by observation."

"Hmm." Ralph turned his eyes to the speed indicators. The pointer of the first one had nearly reached the limit of its scale and that of the second was wavering just short of the figure one on the dial. The *Blue Streak* was traveling at a velocity only slightly less than the speed of light itself.

And then they had crossed the line. Ralph was looking out into the heavens through one of the large viewing ports when it happened and was startled no less by the professor's gasp of wonder than by the thing he saw take place out there in the depths of space. For an instant it had seemed that the countless pinpoints of brilliance that were the stars were blurred and unsteady in his vision. And then, for each bright body there was a complementary body that separated itself from its twin and moved rapidly away in a flashing arc that was like the passage of a meteor through Earth's atmosphere. Again the heavens stabilized and there were no more duplicated bodies but an entirely new

arrangement of the familiar constellations. Where brilliant sections of the Milky Way had been, there was now the blackness of empty space, and where no stars had been before, there now appeared the most vivid aggregations of bright bodies. It was as if they had entered a new universe.

"What is it, Prof?" asked Ralph in awed voice.

"The proof of my theories," husked the professor. "We have entered the realm of space-time, a region yet unexplored by man. And Ralph, my boy, space-time is curved, though there has never been proof that the physical universe is so constituted. It is the most notable discovery of the ages."

Rastor and Soltur agreed solemnly as Ralph Prescott stared.

CHAPTER VII

In the Realm of Space-Time

TEDDY CROWLEY'S voice came blaring excitedly from the loud speaking telephone: "What the devil is wrong, Prof? Everything in the heavens is changed; in the telescope down here the sun is no longer center on the cross hairs. In fact, I can't seem to locate it at all. Have we lost our course, or am I crazy?"

"Neither," Professor Timken laughed into the microphone. "Leave all of your adjustments as they are, Teddy. We are still on our course as before—the solar system still repels us and the system of Procyon still draws us onward by the attraction that was established in that direction. The changes you see are due only to the curvature of space-time; all light from the stars, now reaches us over curved paths and the apparent rearrangement of the universe is caused by the differences in distance of the celestial bodies and the length of time required to bring their light to our position in space. Naturally, those bodies farthest from us have been displaced the greatest distance in apparent location, since their curved light paths are of greatest length and therefore of most extensive curvature. The *Blue Streak* itself is traveling in a great circle, the radius of which I shall have calculated presently. When this is done, we shall again have definite knowledge of our position and will be able to locate optically the solar system we have left behind, as well as the one for which we are bound."

"Right-o! It is the confirmation of the latest theories, I see now. But it sure does seem weird—there's not a familiar thing to be seen in the heavens. The Great Dipper, Cassiopeia, Andromeda—every one of the constellations is mixed up and dispersed, its identity lost. I'm to sit tight regardless, though?"

"There's nothing else to do, Teddy. Just hold everything as it is and wait for word from me." The professor returned to the telescope and the loud speaker was still.

Ralph watched as he swung the tube of the powerful refractor in slow arcs that covered many portions of the heavens and made rapid notations of his observations. Rastor and Soltur were taking the slips of paper from him as he filled them with figures, and using his notations as bases of amazingly lengthy and complex calculations. A long period of silence reigned in the observatory as the work went on.

At length, when the indicator showed that the *Blue Streak* was traveling at nearly double the speed of light, Professor Timken left the eyepiece of his instrument and straightened his rugged body, ruefully rubbing his back as he did so.

"Not as young as I used to be, Ralph," he grinned. "I'm mighty glad that I've enough data now, for I'd never be able to unkink myself if I had to keep at this much longer."

"You, old!" scoffed Ralph. "Why say, you're as peppy as the youngest of us. All you need is a little exercise."

Though only fifty-six years of age, the professor had hair and beard of snowy white which made him appear much older at first glance. But his skin was healthily pink and unwrinkled, his eyes bright with the spirit of youth, and his wiry frame of unbelievable strength and vigor. Professor Timken was no older, though he delighted in posing as such before the younger men.

"Which exercise I'll undoubtedly get when we reach our destination," he retorted.

"You've straightened things out—the stars, I mean?" Ralph waved his arm vaguely toward the heavens.

"Oh, I can't say that; it would take many years to classify even a fraction of the new declinations and right ascensions of the stars. Besides, we would need to be stationary in space-time, or at least traveling at constant velocity in a known path. But we will have sufficient data for determining our position and course when Rastor and Soltur have finished their computations."

"I still don't get it," said Ralph. "This business of space-time and the reason the skies look so different. And how did we get into this state? Isn't our existence on the same plane as always?"

"It all goes back to this thing of relativity, Ralph. We are the same as before; the *Blue Streak* and all it contains remain unchanged. That is, when considered and viewed from our present position and velocity in space-time. But the universe itself becomes a differently constituted one—relatively—as soon as our position in it is changing at a speed in excess of that of light. Some fifteen years ago, the scientists—after extensive observational data obtained in California—came to the conclusion that space, as conceivable in the three physical dimensions, is uncurved. They postulated then that it was curved only in the fourth dimension, which is the time-space relationship or space-time, and that is the hypothesis we have just proved. By exceeding the speed of light we have entered the hitherto unexplored fourth dimension."

"You mean we are traveling in time as well as in space?"

"Nothing else, my boy. We are going into the past or future when we move faster than light. Don't you see it? When we left Coris we took one last look at Vusti through the big telescope of the Royal Observatory and the light we saw then had left Vusti about ten and a third years previously, as time is reckoned on Earth. But we are to make the voyage in approximately one lunar month and when we reach Vusti, we arrive there at a period of its existence during which the light being radiated from its surface will not be observable in Coris or Tinus for another ten and a third years; we shall have traveled into the past of Vusti the equivalent of those ten and one third terrestrial years, less, of course, the time consumed in our journey. And when we shall have returned to our homes it will not be possible for us to view the light that was radiated from Vusti during our visit there until approximately ten years have elapsed. Do you see?"

"Y-yes," Ralph didn't see, but sufficient of the professor's explanation had been understandable to give him at least an inkling of the truth.

BEFORE another hour had passed, the entire party was gathered in the control room and an animated discussion was in progress, the subject of which was this fantastic new universe through which they were speeding. The astronomical calculations had been completed and their own solar system as well as that of Vusti had once more been located by the telescopes. Their course had been determined accurately and the

characteristic of its huge arc carefully plotted, in order that the pioneer navigators of space-time might know their position throughout the entire journey.

Ralph Prescott was examining the new chart which had been prepared. "I should think," he said to the professor, "that we might save time by following a straight line course rather than by progressing along this curved one."

"Indeed we could not," replied the professor. "And for precisely the same reason that navigators of the oceans of Tinus may not depart from their great circle routes without lengthening of the mileage. Space-time is curved exactly as the surface of the planets are curved and a projected chart such as the ones we use for navigation must, in each case, show a curved line as the shortest distance between two points."

Mary and Margaret, though professing complete ignorance of the subject, were intensely interested in the phenomenon that, to them, was most easily explained as an optical illusion.

"Is there no danger of colliding with stray bodies out here?" Jack Dillon asked of Teddy.

"That has been taken care of in the design of the *Blue Streak*," was Teddy's reply, "as was done in the case of the earlier vessels. There are incorporated in the ship's mechanisms extremely sensitive detectors which are actuated by the presence of even the smallest of stray bodies that may lie in our path. These detectors automatically alter our course or our speed so that the vessel actually dodges any meteorite or planetoid with which it might otherwise collide. And, when the danger has been avoided, the ship swings back into its true course without any manipulation of the controls being necessary."

"And without a directing human mind?"

"Absolutely. The thing, of necessity, is done more quickly than thought when the speeds are very great. No human brain could function with sufficient swiftness nor human muscles respond speedily enough to avert disaster."

"Marvelous," exclaimed Dillon. "Your detectors then are robots of the utmost intelligence and watchfulness. Mechanical watch-dogs."

"That's about it," grinned Teddy. "And they never sleep, Dillon."

"Oh look—everybody!" Margaret called out from her position at one of the observation windows. "What is it? Professor—Teddy!"

All members of the party hastened to the viewing ports and each searched the skies in the direction indicated by Margaret.

There was no apparent motion of the *Blue Streak* out here in the depths of space-time. She seemed to be suspended motionless in the midst of the void, though the speed indicators showed a velocity of movement more than three times that of light. And, against the black velvet background of the heavens, the myriad brilliant pinpoint of light and the unfamiliar patches of brightness formed an unmoving and unblinking pattern of awe-inspiring magnificence. Their own sun had long since been lost as a separate entity in the vastness of the cosmos and was but one amongst all those millions of tiny gleaming orbs.

"I see it," Ralph exclaimed. "Off there, Professor—see!"

"Yes, yes—a strange sight." The professor dashed to the eyepiece of the radio telescope. "It lies directly in our course," he announced after making a few adjustments. "But we do not seem to be approaching it as rapidly as—Soltur—Rastor!" His voice rose excitedly as he called the two Venerian scientists to the instrument.

As seen with the naked eye, this object Margaret had sighted was merely a larger fleck of brilliance against the background of the universe of space-time. But it was distinctly orange in color and, instead of being a pinpoint or a well-defined orb, was of elongated shape—an ovoid whose length was probably three times its diameter.

"Do you suppose it can be another ethership," whispered Mary.

No one replied and there was palpitating silence in the control room save for the smooth droning sound that came down from the atomic engine-generators above.

"It is a ring," said Soltur in his precise clipped English after breathless moments, "a flattened circular body with a great central opening. And quite obviously traveling at a speed nearly equal to our own."

"In almost the same direction, as well," the professor added, taking Soltur's place at the eyepiece. "A most unusual circumstance, certainly. Let us repair to the observatory and make more accurate observation."

Immediately the three scientists were mounting the iron stair that led to the upper compartments, leaving their companions gazing intently through the lower viewing ports. Teddy monopolized the control room telescope.

Even to the naked eye the flattened orange body appeared to be increasing in size. The *Blue Streak* was drawing nearer to it, albeit slowly. Certainly they were not approaching this weird heavenly visitant with anything like the speed of light—relatively.

"It's no space ship," Teddy averred, his eyes glued to the telescope. "There's an aura that suggests an atmosphere and a couple of bodies near it that seem to be satellites. The body itself looks like a doughnut."

"I, for one, am going to have a look through that telescope," Mary declared, moving to Teddy's side and pinching him playfully. "Here, let the rest of us see."

Reluctantly Teddy yielded his place to her. And, one by one, those of the voyagers who remained in the control room had opportunity of viewing the magnified image, each indulging in expressions of alarm or mere wonder at the sight.

And then the voice of Professor Timken came to them through the loud speaking telephone: "The body is about ten thousand miles across its greatest diameter and is traveling through space at a velocity 3.1 times that of light. Its enormous orbit deviates only very slightly from the great circle course we had been following and we have now swung from our own course into this orbit, this being due to the nearness of the new body and the fact that its attraction for us is much greater than that of the vastly more distant Vusti. At our present rate of acceleration, we shall overtake this body in a very few minutes."

"Let me have the proper sighting angles and I'll correct our course," Teddy called into the microphone.

There was no reply for a moment—then: "Why not visit this body?" the professor suggested. "Or at least slow down when we draw near and circle it so that we may examine its surface."

"Yes, Teddy, let's do!" Margaret Prescott put in enthusiastically. And Mary joined her voice with that of her friend.

"All right with everyone?" Teddy inquired. Getting unanimous approval of the suggestion, he called into the microphone: "Okay Prof.—keep me advised as to speed and direction and I'll decelerate when necessary."

"It's back to the five and ten for us, Therin," grinned Steve Gillette. "Come on, big boy, those engines'll need some attention."

Gleelessly the two expert mechanics made off for the engine room. And the rest of the voyagers were keyed

up with expectancy, for here was an adventure they had not anticipated.

AFTER ten minutes of continued acceleration at the old rate, the orange-hued angular body was rushing toward them with such speed that they were able to observe its rapid increase in size without the aid of the telescope. Still the *Blue Streak* seemed to be hovering a motionless thing in the vastness of the heavens.

"Reduce acceleration twenty percent," the professor's voice sang out from the loud speaker.

"Okay Prof." Teddy manipulated the repulsion controls to reduce the driving force from behind.

There was no change in the apparent immobility of the vessel, although the acceleration indicator fell off to the value of ninety-six thousand miles per second per hour. But the rate of increase in size of the great orange ring was perceptibly slower.

Still the gap that separated them from the strange celestial wanderer was being reduced with great rapidity and, from this time on, the professor's voice came down to them with increasing frequency. Teddy was kept busy at the controls, reducing the attractive forces in the direction of the radiant ring and the repelling energy in the opposite direction until eventually they had reached a point where the orange ring was an enormous body which filled the entire field of vision and the *Blue Streak* was traveling at 3.1 times the speed of light.

The approach indicator showed that they were within a thousand miles of the body. When they had reached this position, Professor Timken and the Corisian scientists came down from the observatory and reported the detailed results of their observations.

"Do you think we can land?" asked Mary Crowley breathlessly.

"If we wish to after we have viewed the surface at closer range," the professor told her, "There is a breathable atmosphere, despite the presence of certain gases which make the body self-luminous, and the surface gravity is little different from that of Coris, due probably to a peculiarity of its density. The body undoubtedly is capable of supporting life, but it may be there is life of such character as to make a landing unsafe."

"Huh!" grunted Steve, who had rejoined them, "We needn't be afraid of anything. We've got the ray projectors and the automatic rifles with the explosive bullets—and the—"

"That's all very well, Steve," Teddy interrupted him, "But we're not spoiling for a fight with any kind of creatures. And we don't *have* to land here, you know—we're not going to, if it means taking any unnecessary risks."

"We'll drop into the atmosphere to see what is there, won't we?" inquired Margaret anxiously.

"Oh, certainly." Suiting action to the words, Teddy dropped the *Blue Streak* swiftly toward the misty orange luminescence of the planet's atmosphere.

In the influence of the body's strong gravitational field, it was found possible to shut down all but one of the *Blue Streak's* engines. Their own artificial gravity energies that had reached out into space were no longer necessary to maintain their present velocity through it of 3.1 times the speed of light. Their motion was maintained by the attraction for them of the strange heavenly wanderer and their only apparent velocity was toward the body itself and was of the order of eight hundred miles an hour when they entered the outer reaches of the glowing atmosphere.

The altimeter commenced functioning and Teddy corrected it for the slight difference in gravity from that of Venus, where the instrument had last been

used. It indicated an altitude of thirty thousand feet now, and he reduced speed until they were nearing the surface at an easy rate.

When they were within a mile, the misty, luminous atmosphere had become of sufficient transparency to reveal the rugged contours of the strange land that spread beneath them. And when they had dropped still lower, the orange light, though soft and mellow, revealed all details of the countryside with the utmost clarity.

All the occupants of the control room were agog with excitement when the *Blue Streak* reached an altitude of five hundred feet and drifted over the surface at less than two hundred miles an hour. This was especially true of the girls, whose enthusiasm was irrepressible. And both of them squealed with delight when the vessel had rounded a particularly steep-sided and rocky mountain to enter a fertile valley, where there was cuddled a city of astounding size and beauty.

"Now I know we shall make a landing," trilled Margaret.

"Maybe!" said Ralph drily, "Who knows as yet whether we'll be welcome?"

Margaret tossed her sleek dark head and smiled provocatively into her husband's solemn eyes. "Who wouldn't welcome us?" she countered, hugging Mary's arm, "Mary and I will dazzle the natives; you'll see."

Which properly squelched Ralph Prescott and brought a twinkle of prideful understanding into his steady gaze. There was no fear, nor the slightest disposition to worry, in Margaret's makeup.

CHAPTER VIII

The World of Perpetual Day

THE *Blue Streak* proceeded along the valley in the direction of the city. It was a colorful landscape that lay beneath them, a riot of pastel shades of yellow and vivid carmines that reminded the travelers of the autumn foliage of Earth. There was a broad river of silvery smoothness along which were regularly spaced and carefully tended farmlands where curious reedlike vegetation with fluffy tufted tops was growing. Here and there along the banks of the winding river were groups of circular dwellings with vertical sides and low conical roofs that gleamed redly as if constructed of burnished copper. In some of the fields where the yellow vegetation was close cropped, were strange animals grazing, quadrupeds with enormously long and powerful hind legs and short dangling forelegs like the kangaroo of Tinus. Like the kangaroo, they covered tremendous distances in long flying leaps and sat erect on their haunches when at rest. But, unlike that terrestrial animal, they appeared to be furless and their bare hides were of startling chalk-whiteness. Their heads were bullet-shaped and earless, surmounting long flexible necks. And these domestic animals were as large as horses and many times swifter in movement.

At several points the travelers observed humanlike beings who came out of the circular dwelling places to stare skyward in open-mouthed curiosity. These beings were attired in long flowing robes of many resplendent colors. Their legs were thus hidden from view, but they stood erect like the peoples of Coris and Tinus and were presumed to be bipeds. Their arms seemed unusually short in comparison to their stature, which appeared to be about the same as that of the men of the earth. Like the queer beasts of the pastures, their skin was of most astonishing whiteness. And the eyes that looked up at the *Blue Streak* were enormous and unblinking, seeming at the distance to be

without lids or lashes. Certainly they had no eyebrows, and the smooth uncovered heads were as bare of hair as was Teddy Crowley's. Barer, for Teddy *did* have a fluffy fringe just over his ears.

The city ahead of them was laid out in a perfect circle and its streets radiated from a great open space in the center like the spokes of a wheel. There were thousands upon thousands of the round dwellings, each with its gleaming red conical roof, and, near the central space, which evidently was a park, there were clustered a great number of structures of the same design but much larger in size. It was quite like the cities of Earth and Venus in this respect, with public buildings and places of business centralized in the heart of its area.

As they drew near to the city, it was evident that there was no air traffic whatever, for there were no provisions for the landing of aircraft nor was any such craft to be seen in the skies. But swift-moving vehicles ranged the broad avenues, while those on foot seemed to be gliding along at a rate very much faster than walking, as if they were mounted on wheels and propelled by motors. And, as the *Blue Streak* drifted by overhead, all eyes were raised skyward as had been those of the rural inhabitants.

A great crowd had gathered in the circular central park by the time the spherical vessel reached it and much excitement was exhibited in the antics and jostling tactics of the robed people. Teddy maneuvered the *Blue Streak* to a point that was directly over the assemblage and then dropped to within thirty feet of their heads, where he let it hover. There was instant ducking of the heads and a wild scramble of the crowd to be away from underneath the strange visitor from the skies. And presently the crowd had spread itself into a huge circle, leaving an open space in its midst that was amply large for a landing.

"What had we better do?" asked Teddy doubtfully.

"Why, land, of course," chimed Mary and Margaret. "These people are civilized. Their faces are friendly. And they are unarmed."

"Tell you what," Steve put in, "Only one of us will go out at first. I'll go out through the airlock with a couple of mentascopes and ask 'em can we have a cup of coffee or something."

Everyone laughed. "No, Steve," said the professor, "that is my job—I shall be the one to interview them first."

"No." "Nothing doing." "I'll do it." Instantly each member of the party was objecting strenuously; each wanted to be the first to land and each had logical arguments to prove that the privilege should be his. Or hers. For Margaret and Mary were as insistent as the men.

As the argument continued, Teddy dropped the *Blue Streak* to the yellow-carpeted sward and the crowd outside closed in on them, pressing curious faces on the windows of the control room. At this range they appeared as gentle and harmless as children—and as inexperienced. There was wonder in those great staring eyes, and bovine placidity, but no hint of unfriendliness or suspicion directed at the visitors.

"We'll all go out," Teddy chuckled. "Professor Timken and myself first, with mentascopes. And the rest of you are at liberty to follow. There's no harm in these people."

BY the time the outer door of the airlock had been unbolted and swung open, the crowd had drawn back, and when Teddy and the professor stepped forth upon the soil of the strange land, one who seemed to be a leader among them glided forward and bowed to his waist, spreading his arms wide in a gesture that

might have indicated obeisance or welcome but not enmity. This one's round face, when he straightened his body and looked at the newcomers, was alight with pleasurable anticipation.

He uttered a few whistling, birdlike sounds that evidently were spoken words and advanced toward the visitors, bowing again and spreading his short arms as he had done before. The press of his people was restlessly moving behind him but respectful silence was maintained amongst them.

Professor Timken smiled and shook his head. "I don't understand you, Mr. Mayor, or whatever your title might be," he said humorously, "and what I am saying must convince you that speech between us is of no avail. But—here—put on one of these and we'll get along."

He placed one of the mentascopes on the ground at the feet of the one who had greeted them, then adjusting another over his own closely cut gray locks. A chirping murmur of interest rose from the crowd and their leader stooped low to examine the contrivance. When the professor had finished adjusting his own mentascopes, he indicated in the best pantomime he could muster that the one who was spokesman for the bald folk should don the other in like manner.

Meanwhile all the other passengers of the *Blue Streak* had come out through the airlock and the chirpings of the bald ones became more insistently clamorous. Their leader turned and silenced them with a single angry gesture.

"He has them eating out of his hand," chuckled Steve Gillette, "Must be he's the biggest racketeer in town, or something like that."

At this stage of the proceedings, a tiny tot, a miniature of the bald adults, wriggled out from the press and glided swiftly to Margaret Prescott, flinging caressing arms about her knees and looking up trustingly into her smiling face. A frantic mother after the child, and a mirthful flittering amongst those of the crowd who had witnessed the incident, served to break the ice and there was no hesitation on either side after that. The one who seemed to be leader had comprehended the professor's gestures and contortions and was awkwardly engaged in placing the cap of the mentascopes on his head. Teddy, who had likewise equipped himself, went to the bald one's assistance and quickly had the instrument strapped in place.

It was thus that the first thought impulse to flash from the scarlet-robed stranger's mind was one of gratitude and appreciation.

The entire stock of mentascopes was quickly in evidence, and, since only ten were available, there were not enough to equip all of the *Blue Streak's* passengers. In the scramble Steve Gillette found himself the only member of the party to go unsupplied and he indulged in appropriate humorous comment.

"What am I," he grumbled, "a stepchild? Here I do most of the work on board and when it comes to getting my share of things I'm left out in the cold."

But no one paid him the slightest attention, for the telepatic communication with the leader of the bald ones was in full progress. Thrip, it developed, was the scarlet robed one's name, and he was the equivalent of a mayor of this city in which the *Blue Streak* had made landing. His people he termed Hercha and the city itself Herch. He made it known immediately that the visitors were looked upon as gods by the Hercha, or at least as beings of supreme intelligence and accomplishment who had come out of the orange mists, and that they were more than welcome in the land of Zeet, in which Herch was situated. He did not question any of the visitors but indicated that he desired them to appear before his council for a parley and the ex-

change of greetings. And when he had raised his arms to his people and chirped a sharp command, the crowd drew back and opened a path through which the visitors might pass. Nothing loath and consumed with curiosity themselves, the entire party from the *Blue Streak* followed Thrip as he led the way across the park toward the greatest of the circular edifices that faced upon it.

CROSSING the broad avenue that surrounded the park, the visitors noted that its surface was composed of soft yielding material and was extremely springy under the feet as if of inflated rubber. There were no curbsings, and the entrances of all buildings were precisely on the street level so there was no necessity for the use of steps. And the reason for this soon became apparent—these creatures of the strange annular world were mounted on wheels; they glided hither and thither with easy swiftness and the soft purring of motors was heard from under their long robes. Certain small four-wheeled and three-wheeled vehicles likewise made use of the building entrances, rolling in directly from the avenue of traffic at considerable speed. And the wheels of these were solid discs, without tires, which accounted for the use of the elastic pavement.

When they entered the ornate administration building with Thrip a crowd of curious Hercha was gathered outside and the visitors sensed from their downward glances and gesticulations that their own lower limbs and the use of them in walking had aroused a great degree of wondering amazement as well as envious admiration. The reason for this was later to become apparent. Inside the building, the visitors were led to the car of a lift by Thrip, who glided swiftly after them through its door. They were carried aloft with the same smooth acceleration displayed by the high speed elevators of Coris and Tinus.

In the council chamber, a group of thirteen Hercha was gathered and these were assembled in a circle awaiting the arrival of Thrip and his guests.

"Dog-gone!" exclaimed Steve Gillette, "Will you take a look at them in their wheel chairs!"

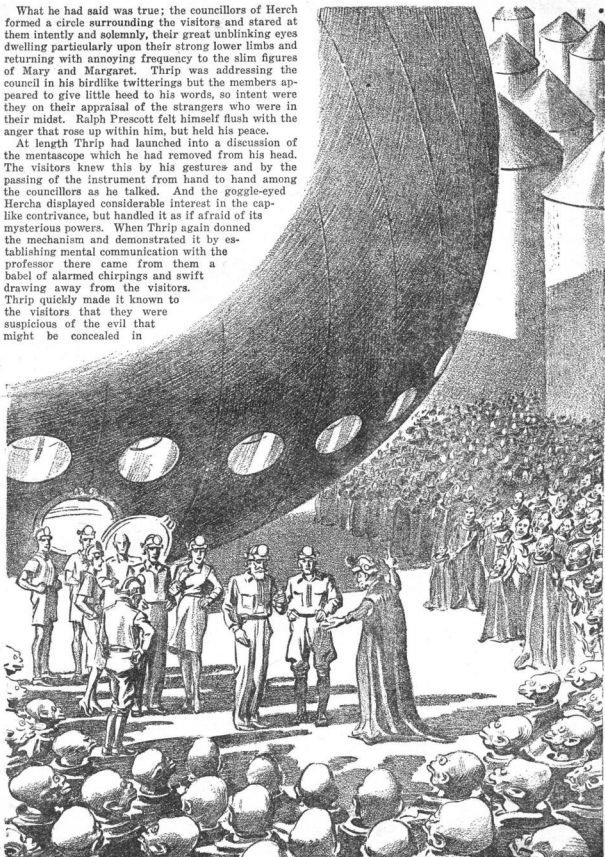
The members of the council had thrown off their long robes and the lower portions of their bodies were revealed in their horrible deformity. Well-built and muscularly developed from the waist up, with the exception of those short arms, they sat strapped into their motor-powered wheeled supports without which it would have been impossible for them to move from place to place. For their legs, two in number, were wasted away and shriveled to the extent of complete uselessness. Encased in tight satiny breeches, these members dangled helplessly before them, the thickness of broomsticks and less than half the length of an Earthman's legs, terminating in metal-encased knobs that bore not the slightest resemblance to human feet. Atrophied probably from ages of disuse. Thrip, when he had removed his own cloak, was seen to be in like predicament, a helpless prisoner of the machine which was at the same time his sitting place and means of locomotion. All of the peoples of the ring-shaped world were thus formed, it developed later, and had been dependent upon their motor-driven supports for more ages than their histories recorded.

"Quit your gawping," growled Ralph, nudging Steve's ribs when he saw that the stocky mechanic was stooping to examine the mechanism of Thrip's "wheel chair," "They'll be embarrassed in a minute—perhaps insulted."

"Well, they're giving us the once-over pretty thoroughly," Steve retorted. But he drew himself erect and gave up his overcurious investigation.

What he had said was true; the councillors of Herch formed a circle surrounding the visitors and stared at them intently and solemnly, their great unblinking eyes dwelling particularly upon their strong lower limbs and returning with annoying frequency to the slim figures of Mary and Margaret. Thrip was addressing the council in his birdlike twitterings but the members appeared to give little heed to his words, so intent were they on their appraisal of the strangers who were in their midst. Ralph Prescott felt himself flush with the anger that rose up within him, but held his peace.

At length Thrip had launched into a discussion of the mentascope which he had removed from his head. The visitors knew this by his gestures and by the passing of the instrument from hand to hand among the councillors as he talked. And the goggle-eyed Hercha displayed considerable interest in the cap-like contrivance, but handled it as if afraid of its mysterious powers. When Thrip again donned the mechanism and demonstrated it by establishing mental communication with the professor there came from them a babel of alarmed chirpings and swift drawing away from the visitors. Thrip quickly made it known to the visitors that they were suspicious of the evil that might be concealed in



It was thus that the first thought impulse to flash from the scarlet-robed stranger's mind was one of gratitude and appreciation.

these contrivances and requested that all of them remove theirs with the exception of Professor Timken. The professor, it appeared, was regarded by them as the leader and spokesman of the strange beings who had come out of the orange mists and it was desired that all contact be established between him and Thrip.

Some of Thrip's geniality vanished under the influence of his council's bickerings, and the professor set about in an attempt to restore it by asking him many questions concerning his own land and by flattering mental comment on what he had seen thus far in Herch. The other members of the *Blue Streak's* party had removed their mentascopes reluctantly and were now grouped closely near Thrip and the professor. There were no chairs, no seats of any kind, for the Hercha did not need them, so they had no recourse but to remain standing. And all watched the flickering thought images on the two mentascope discs and could thus follow sketchily the exchange of ideas between the two principals, although missing the completeness of thought interchange made possible to those who wore the mechanisms.

Most amazingly, it was immediately apparent that Thrip's conception of his own world was entirely fallacious. He pictured it as a vast plain, a plane surface with no boundaries, and looked upon it as the sole dwelling place of intelligent beings in existence. It was his universe, the only universe, and his mind could encompass the idea of no other realm. He had not the faintest conception of a cosmos wherein a multitude of habitable bodies might exist. Nor was he able to visualize the heavens or the darkness of night, for the orange mists closed the boundary of his vision from the former and provided perpetual day for his people which made impossible the existence in his mind of an idea of the latter. There was no word in his tongue to convey the thought of darkness save that for the lack of light that was met with when enclosed in a hidden chamber where the artificial lighting used only in such inner rooms had failed of its function. And that word conveyed more of terror and despair than of the absence of light. His world, the only world, was called Kirpin and its inhabitants Kirpina. Herch, he indicated was only one of many thousands of cities, and was of comparatively small size and in an isolated location. In many portions of Kirpin, it appeared, the density of population was greatly in excess of that in the most thickly settled regions of Earth or Venus and in these sections the civilization and evolution of the Kirpina had progressed to stages much more advanced than in outlying districts such as that in which Herch was located. He boasted of the arts and scientific accomplishments of these more favored peoples.

"Huh! And they think Kirpin is all there is to the universe and all there is of existence," commented Steve scornfully, "And they haven't even developed aviation!"

"Shut up!" hissed Teddy, who had observed one of the councillors casting evil looks at Steve, "Want to get us in trouble?"

The irrepressible mechanic subsided, mumbling.

Dwellers of the mist, Thrip termed the visitors in thought translation of his words of address, and his pictured conception of them included the spherical form of the *Blue Streak* as their dwelling place. His mentascope disc imaged it as a vessel bobbing about perpetually on a heaving surface of orange and eventually descending from its heights to the level of Kirpin. A sort of a punishment of the gods, he took it to be, and indicated his belief that they themselves had been gods but had found disfavor with the Supreme Being of the mists and were condemned to existence as Kirpina.

"Not so good," Ralph whispered to Margaret. "He thinks we are fallen angels. Our coming seems to fit in with their religion, somehow, and we may find ourselves in difficulties."

Thrip turned from the professor to address the council and his chirpings were in high-pitched tone and obviously aroused the members to new doubts and wonderings.

"Tell him about us," hissed Ralph, placing his lips close to the professor's ear, "Tell him about our own world and about Venus. Let him know of the great distance from which we come and describe our people and our cities, our war equipment and such—"

"Yes, I'll try." But a frown of perplexity creased Professor Timken's brow as Thrip faced him anew.

Ralph saw by the swiftly changing images of the mentascope that the professor was doing as he suggested, and he saw too that Thrip's facial expression changed gradually from politely interested surprise to frank disbelief. And, by the time Professor Timken had conveyed descriptions and visualizations to him of the planets of his own solar system, and of the cities and peoples of New York and Seritanis, the chief executive of Herch was retorting with vigorous objections. On the professor's insistence that he be permitted to continue his story, Thrip waved him into silence with an imperious gesture and turned once more to address his council.

Horrid faces and angry murmurings greeted his words, it being only too apparent that the councillors were moved to new and deeper mistrust of the visitors. At length one of them spoke up with an air of determined conviction and with many facial contortions. His words were greeted noisily and with obvious approval by the others.

Thrip nodded solemnly and again gave his attention to Professor Timken. Apologetic chattering came from his lips, and across the disc of the mentascope he wore were flashed images of a mist-wreathed mountain-top temple and of black robed creatures who paraded before its smoking altar.

"It has been decreed," the professor explained to his party, "that we appear before the priests of Ara. Our story is to be told to them as quickly as we can reach their temple."

"Suppose we refuse," blurted Steve.

"We dare not refuse," was Professor Timken's reply, "for I have read dark warning in the depths of Thrip's consciousness—threats of dire consequence he had not realized he was betraying. We must humor these people until opportunity of getting away is presented."

The others agreed and into Ralph Prescott's mind there came memories of the forebodings which had assailed him before he took Margaret from Earth. He drew her close to his side.

CHAPTER IX

The Priests of Ara

POLICE officers of the Hercha had taken possession of the *Blue Streak* ere the adventurers were returned to the park. They saw with amazement, as a way for their passage was opened up through the crowd, that a ramp had been constructed to enable these wheel-mounted creatures to enter the airlock and that members of them already crowded the control room.

Thrip explained to Professor Timken that his guardians of law and order had been instructed to direct them to the shrine of the priests of Ara and that they were virtually prisoners who must obey the orders of their

guards under penalty of a swift and horrible death. "But, if we are immortal?" the professor smiled, undaunted.

"Whurrup!" With this unintelligible exclamation, Thrif tore the mentascope from his bald pate and flung it to the yellow sward, whereupon there was no further understanding of his cluckings. But it was obvious that he had been greatly angered for he glided off into the crowd of onlookers without so much as looking back or bidding the visitors farewell.

Steve Gillette laughed raucously though mirthlessly, and his outburst was the signal for violent demonstrations on the part of the mob of Hercha who surrounded them. But the place was alive with scarlet-robed police and they drove back the threatening natives while others of their number hustled the adventurers into the *Blue Streak's* airlock.

"Whew!" exclaimed Teddy Crowley when he looked down from the ports of the control room. "We can be glad we're out of that. Perhaps their priests will display a bit more of intelligence."

"I hope so," said the professor wryly, watching the police as they battled with the infuriated rabble in the park.

And then they witnessed something that chilled their blood in their veins. One of the Hercha had gone berserk and was fighting a red-robed officer with swift piston-like thrusts of his short arms. The policeman was toppled from his wheeled support to sprawl ignominiously and helplessly on the yellow turf. Whereupon another of the officers produced a spherical metallic object which flashed sudden flame that bathed the pugnacious one in momentary lurid light. And in an instant of time the victim had shrunk into an unrecognizable cindery mass.

"Oh God!" moaned Margaret Prescott, covering her eyes, "that is horrible. Let us go."

Mary Crowley was suddenly expostulating with one of the police inside, her voice raised in anger. Teddy, turning swiftly, saw she was being threatened with one of the round flame-spouting weapons and that all of the police in the control room were likewise armed.

"Take it easy," he warned softly. "We'll have to do as they say until we can turn the tables."

Steve Gillette, for once, held his peace.

The red-robed one who seemed to be directing the activities of the police was making signs to the professor, indicating that he wished to be provided with one of the mentascopes. Professor Timken complied with his pantomimed request and adjusted one of the mechanisms over his head. And when this was done, the orders of the police of Herch were quickly issued.

Having learned the several duties of the *Blue Streak's* crew by his mental questioning of the professor, the police captain sent each to his place under guard. Those who could be of no assistance in the voyage through Kirpin's atmosphere he quartered in the lounge with a special detail of his men and these included the girls, Jack Dillon, and the big Venerians, Rastor and Soltur, whose great stature had been a source of wonder to all the Hercha. Steve and Therin were at their places in the engine room. He allowed Ralph and the professor to remain in the control room with Teddy. Since there were no lifts in the *Blue Streak*, he had forced the stalwart Venerians to carry those of his guards who were assigned to the upper decks and this they did with none too good grace, stumbling intentionally and causing many furies of excitement and threatnings of the flame weapons as they mounted the iron stairways. Eventually the arrangements suited the Herch police captain and he gave the order to proceed.

"A fine pickle," Ralph whispered to Teddy as the

Blue Streak was lifted from her position to drift away over the stunted yellow shrubbery of the park, "And no way of getting out of it."

"Yes, but our chance will come. Wait."

The guards were watching them closely, weapons in hand, and their captain was engaged in earnest telepathic communication with Professor Timken. The professor brought the officer to the instrument panel and explained to him the functions of the several devices used in atmospheric navigation. And when the red-robed one had grasped the idea of the ordinary magnetic compass, he quickly gave his instructions.

"We are to travel east by northeast," the professor translated, "for a distance of about three thousand terrestrial miles. And the captain says we are to make it snappy, or words to that effect."

Teddy flung the *Blue Streak* high into the orange-lighted mists with such acceleration as to bring exclamations of alarm from their guards. He grinned maliciously as he saw the look of fear that came across the chalky countenance of the captain, but sobered instantly as the spherical flame thrower was directed at him.

"It is all right," the professor said hastily, pointing once more to the instruments and grasping the captain's arm. "The speed of our vessel is terrific, that is all. See, officer, the compass still indicates the correct course and we are proceeding in that direction as swiftly as possible. . . ."

Illustrative images flickered across the disc of his mentascope as the professor explained in detail and the police captain's facial expression changed slowly to one of satisfied conviction as the unfamiliar words of his tutor were translated by the thought impulses that came to him. But Ralph and Teddy chuckled inwardly as they observed the continued alarm of the others—these police of Herch were not too enthusiastic over the prospects that lay before them in this duty to which they had been assigned.

AFTER a time Teddy found that he could maintain a speed of nearly a thousand miles an hour at a comparatively low altitude without undue heating of the *Blue Streak's* hull. This, apparently, was made possible by some lubricating quality of the orange mists which assisted materially in reducing atmospheric friction. Thus it was that they were able to speed toward their destination at a level where the luminous atmosphere was sufficiently transparent to permit a view of the strange land that unrolled so swiftly beneath them.

Now they were skirting a rocky shore where a vast city sprawled, a city many times the size of Herch and with circular structures that towered like the skyscrapers of Earth. Now a broad lake sparkled down there and was gone, now a mountain range loomed up before them and it was necessary to increase altitude to pass over its lofty peaks. A fertile valley; a forest of stunted red and yellow shrubbery, tangled and matted to the likeness of the densest jungle; other cities that flashed by with increasing frequency, broad roadways connecting them and many vehicles that seemed to crawl over their lustrous surfaces—such was the land of the Kirpina.

The police captain consulted a map he had with him and gave new orders correcting their course slightly. But his demeanor now showed only approval and a growing belief in the integrity of his charges. He relaxed and was content to engage in telepathic conversation with the professor regarding his own land, though steadfastly refusing to let his companion dwell on the subject of far-away worlds or of the coming audience with the priests of Ara. His minions remained stolidly by with their weapons ready for instant use and it was

evident from their reluctance to look downward through the floor ports that the fear of extreme height still had them in its grip.

As they progressed, the cities of Kirpin were of larger and larger size and so closely built as almost to present the appearance of continuous, close-packed habitation. And then, abruptly, these were left behind and the *Blue Streak* swept out over an endless desert of bleached sand that stretched off to the mist-shrouded horizon. The police captain consulted his map once more and jabbered excitedly to the professor as he indicated a point of location.

"Reduce speed, Teddy," Professor Timken directed. "He advises that we are nearing Ara. Correct your course one point to the north."

"Right-o." Teddy manipulated the controls and the droning of the single atomic engine that was in operation slid down the scale to a considerably lower pitch. The chalky sands below unrolled at greatly lessened speed.

Presently there appeared before them a lone mesa whose flat top reared itself into the orange mists fully ten thousand feet above the desert's level. It was necessary to increase altitude in bringing the *Blue Streak* to a point above it.

"It is Ara," the professor relayed to Ralph and Teddy, "We have arrived."

"And now the real trouble commences," muttered Ralph pessimistically, "I never did hold with these priests of strange and barbarous cults. They're fakirs and—and cold-blooded killers."

THE temple on the plateau below was constructed entirely differently from the dwelling places and public buildings of the Kirpina. True, it was circular in shape, but there was a huge central court, likewise circular, and the roof of the enclosing structure was raised in countless black spires instead of the usual smooth contour of reddish metal. And in the center of the court was a strange object, a huge mound covered with the encrustation of ages and showing torn sections in several places which opened into the interior and revealed a cellular structure where rusty latticed metal beams sagged and were twisted with what once had been metal plates of considerable thickness.

"Great guns!" ejaculated Teddy. "Why, Ralph, it looks—it is, I vow, the wreck of an othership. Some adventurers of another age, another world, succeeded in entering the realm of space-time and were wrecked here. And these Kirpina have founded their religion on this circumstance—I see it all now. No wonder they thought we—"

He broke off and stared at Ralph. Their guards had, each and every one, placed the backs of their left hands to their foreheads and were reciting some outlandish litany as the *Blue Streak* hovered over the desert shrine. The professor had touched a warning finger to his lips but in his eyes was the light of comprehension and an expression of awed wonder.

In a great open space before the temple was an altar from which a pillar of black smoke arose to mingle with the orange-lighted mists, the same altar they had seen in the disc of Thrip's mentascope. And surrounding it was a circle of the black robed priests, their hands spread wide and white faces upraised to the sphere that drifted above their heads.

Off in the distance to the east Ralph saw a long line of black specks that moved slowly over the desert sands toward the mesa of the shrine. A pilgrimage! Somehow his throat constricted as he thought of those unfortunate wanderers of space-time who had met their fate in this lonely spot and whose memory had provided the foundation of the religion of this alien race of

highly civilized and yet essentially barbarous people.

Teddy dropped the *Blue Streak* to a gentle landing not far from the altar and awaited further instructions of the Herch police captain.

These were not long in coming, and the entire party of adventurers had soon emerged from the airlock and set foot on the plateau of Ara. The priests remained by their altar and kept up a continuous bowing and spreading of arms as if each were indulging in an oriental salaam as practised on earth. The Venerian members of the party were assigned to the task of assisting the police guards from the airlock to the level rock surface of the plateau.

When all had disembarked, a single priest, taller than the rest and of extremely dignified demeanor, glided forth from the circle and approached the *Blue Streak*, holding the back of his left hand to his forehead and bowing repeatedly as he neared the visitors. His first act, when he had reached them, was to speak sharply to the captain of police, whereupon all of the officers cast their spherical weapons in a heap at his feet.

Ralph breathed easier and Steve Gillette indulged in a broad grin.

The girls, who had not evidenced the slightest alarm through it all, were in the best of spirits and quite openly thrilled over the turn in events. It was an adventure to be looked upon as goddesses.

The police captain, now humble and deferential, engaged in a lengthy conversation with the priest who faced him, finally turning to Professor Timken and asking him for another mentascope. This was provided and quickly adjusted to the priest's head. And then this black robed dignitary of Ara took things into his own hands. Swift, experimental questionings of the professor convinced him of the efficacy of the instrument, the functions of which evidently had been explained to him by the officer. After which preliminary, he directed the members of the police detail, including their leader, to enter the great portal of the temple and indicated that they were to leave their weapons where they lay. Without question, the Hercha obeyed. The priest then addressed himself to the professor, salaaming five times in rapid succession, and conveyed to the visitors his invitation—not a command—to enter the circle of priests before the altar.

A wailing rhythm of chanting was commenced by the priests when the visitors approached the altar and all excepting the High Priest, as the one with the professor proved to be, prostrated themselves on the smooth-worn stone flagging. And the High Priest touched each of the seven Terrestrians and three Venerians on the forehead with the gleaming knob of a light baton he carried—apparently a ceremony of recognition or sanctification. The monotonous chant ceased abruptly and the lesser priests arose and marched solemnly in through the portals of the temple, their tread measured and heads bowed low.

"Looks like we're sacred goats, or something like that," chuckled Steve Gillette. "Wonder what's next on the program."

"Hush," said the professor, who had been engaged in earnest mental communication with the High Priest. "It seems we are being highly honored by the priests of Ara—deified, almost. We are requested to enter the sacred confines of the inner court, and it is my opinion that we will benefit greatly." A puzzled frown belied his words and it was evident that he spoke mostly for the benefit of the High Priest, who watched the disc of his mentascope closely.

"What else could we do but comply?" Ralph Prescott mumbled, "we're in their power, whether or not we have enough sense to realize it."

"Pessimist!" Margaret chided him. Her eyes were

starry with excitement as she looked up at him, and Ralph made it a point to remain close by her side after that.

In the great inner court of the temple they halted before the huge mound of crumbling oxidized metal that once had been a ship of space. There was no doubt of it now. For, not only did the construction of those portions of the great sphere which still remained intact bear out Teddy's original supposition, but a definite history of the coming of this vessel out of the mists in past ages was pictured on the great wall of the temple that enclosed them. The story of the religion of Kirpin was blazoned there in patterns of colored tile—cunningly and artistically contrived representations of a series of miraculous events that began with the coming of that first great sphere from out the orange light-mists. And conceptions of great numbers of such globes as the habitations of the gods atop the sea of mists. Images of the gods themselves as creatures of stalwart build and with strong active legs on which they walked erect. Predictions even of the second coming of a sphere from the mists. And sacrifices! Kirpina and god-beings with two sound legs being flung from the rim of the mesa . . .

"Good Lord!" Ralph groaned, "they mean to—" He bit off his words and watched the scene being enacted by Professor Timken and the High Priest.

The professor was shaking his head vigorously, his eyes on the flickering images of the High Priest's mentascope disc. And then he burst forth in swift angry speech which, of course, was unintelligible to the black robed one but which carried with it the proper thought impulses and mentascope visualizations.

"It is untrue," he declared. "We are not of this realm of the orange mists but creatures of a world far removed from Kirpin. So far removed, oh priest of Ara, that many lifetimes of travel in your swiftest vehicles would be required to reach it. We are not gods or devils, but men like yourselves save for the difference in our nether limbs. We visited Kirpin only as a stopping place on our way to still another and yet more distant world. We crave only to be allowed to continue on our way."

"Ayapa! Ayapa!" the High Priest shouted.

"Ayapa!" the lesser priests echoed. They were closing in on the visitors in an ever constricting circle.

"Ayapa," the professor snarled. "He says we are blasphemers; that there is no world save Kirpin. That the gods of Kirpin's mists have cast us off and that for this we must be sacrificed. Our lives are forfeit that the wrath of these gods of theirs may be appeased."

"Is that so!" bellowed Steve Gillette. There was a sharp crack as his fist shot out and toppled one of the priests from his wheeled pedestal. And then Steve was streaking for the exit of the court, a number of the black robed priests gliding swiftly in pursuit.

"Now he's done it!" Ralph grunted. Sudden confusion reigned in the court—a swift closing in of the priests about them—and he drove a hard fist into the white face of one who had reached for Margaret.

"Ayapa! Ayapa!" the priests were shouting.

Professor Timken was down, writhing on the flagstones and yelling an unintelligible warning. Ralph saw the three Venerians battling valiantly, saw Jack Dillon go down, saw Teddy striking out in defense of Mary. And then a priest's face was before him, evilly leering. Something flashed out from under his robe, a swishing cord or wire that wrapped itself swiftly around Ralph's body, pinning his arms to his sides in an instant of time. The swishing continued and Margaret was bound fast to him. He kicked mightily and lost his balance; fell crashing to the pavement, carrying Margaret with him.

Dazed by the fall, he knew only that a bedlam of fighting was surging about them. For a moment only it continued and then there were no sounds save the triumphant shoutings of the priests of Ara.

"Ayapa! Ayapa!"

CHAPTER X

What Happened on the Mesa

THE exultant yelling of the priests trailed off into a throbbing and ominous chant as Ralph's head cleared. He tried twisting his body slightly in order to ease Margaret's discomfort as much as possible but found he was unable to move.

"Are you all right, Midge?" he husked. So tightly were they held together that he could not even move his head into a position which would enable him to see her. But he knew by the pressure of the small body against his own that she was painfully cramped by the entwining cords.

"Y-yes," was her whispered reply, "Excepting for these wires; they cut into the flesh deeply."

"Wires, eh? Can you move your hands?" Ralph, straining as he might, was barely able to wriggle a finger. But his muddled brain was beginning to function normally once more.

"A little, but the wire hurts my wrists. I can do nothing." No hint of fear was in Margaret Prescott's voice, only incredulous wonder. "Do you really think they mean to do away with us?"

Ralph turned his gaze to those of their companions who were within his field of vision. The professor lay there in the center of the court, helplessly enwrapped in wires of white metal of a lustre not unlike that of aluminum—wires that circled his body from head to foot. Therin and Rastor were wound round in like manner, clamped back to back and struggling furiously and futilely. Mary Crowley, in a twisted heap only a few feet from Ralph's eyes, was so entangled in a web of the wire that her knees were pressed tightly under her chin. None of the others were in view.

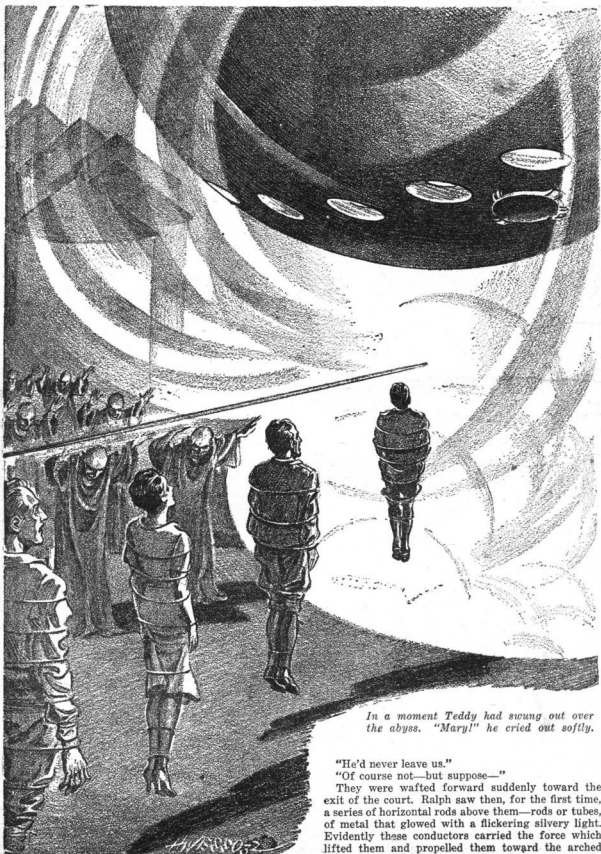
"It doesn't look too hopeful," he conceded, "but you never can tell. Our chance may come yet."

"Look—the professor!" Margaret gasped, "Can you see him?"

"Yes, good Lord!" Ralph turned his eyes once more toward the remains of the ancient space ship and saw the professor, still firmly enmeshed, rise stiffly to an erect position. He was on his feet now, swaying drunkenly. Now his feet had left the pavement and he hung there in mid-air, suspended beside the battered and rusted hull by some unaccountable force the priests were using. "They, too, have found the secret of nullifying gravity," Ralph whispered.

The chanting in the court lowered in pitch and volume until it was like the buzzing of a swarm of angry bees. And the High Priest, with the mentascope still in place atop his ugly head, was approaching Professor Timken with his short arms upraised. Others of the black robed ones had closed in, all with arms lifted high, and Ralph saw the combined bulk of Rastor and Therin roll over lightly and swing into the same upright suspended position as the professor's. Then he too, with Margaret tied helplessly to him, was swung aloft.

Ralph saw Teddy then, his face contorted with rage, likewise tied and suspended. Soltur was in the same fix, and Jack Dillon. But Steve Gillette was nowhere in sight and Ralph remembered the break he had made for the exit. His heart leaped within him. "What if Steve made a getaway?" he whispered to Margaret, "to the Blue Streak?"



In a moment Teddy had swung out over the abyss. "Mary!" he cried out softly.

"He'd never leave us."

"Of course not—but suppose—"

They were wafted forward suddenly toward the exit of the court. Ralph saw then, for the first time, a series of horizontal rods above them—rods or tubes, of metal that glowed with a flickering silvery light. Evidently these conductors carried the force which lifted them and propelled them toward the arched doorway. This was no conquering of gravity as Teddy

Crowley had conquered it but an actual suspension from the overhead rails by an attracting force which acted upon the wires surrounding their bodies. The sensation was much as if they were floating upright in the waters of a slowly moving river.

Ralph saw that the rails extended through the first archway into the temple proper, thence to the outside through the main outer portal. He thought grimly of his visit to a slaughter house many years before. There, close by the stock yards of a great American city, he had seen rows of fattened porkers dangling from just such rails, propelled to as sure and hardly less horrible end. Scalded, shaved, half-dismembered, before the outcries of their final agonies had entirely ceased.

In the open air an astonishing sight greeted them. The *Blue Streak* had left the ground and was hovering just beyond the rim of the plateau. The Herch police, again in possession of their weapons, were grouped near the shining sphere, directing a barrage of fire toward the entrance port. Ralph saw several incandescent splashes on the metal rim of the manhole where dazzling pencils of flame contacted.

"It's Steve!" he gasped. "He's inside. Have they got him already? He should have moved out of range."

His answer came in a stuttering blast from a swiftly opened viewing port higher up in the hull. The Herch police went down like cattle under the burst from a French automatic rifle in Steve's able hands.

But even as the weapon of the explosive bullets spat forth its first message of death, the High Priest's voice rang high in a shrill command. The *Blue Streak* was hurled away from the mesa as if by a powerful blast of air and went off over the desert, out of control. A cloud of dense green vapor drifted lazily away from the rim of the plateau at the point where the engagement had taken place.

Teddy was just ahead of Ralph in the line of captives dangling from the charged supporting rails. "See that, Ralph?" he called back, "Guess the ship is done for, too. These priests have plenty of tricks up their sleeves."

"Yes, it looks bad."

The chanting of the priests had risen with renewed vigor upon the flinging back of the ethership from their domain and now carried an undertone of blood-thirsty fanaticism. Ralph saw from the corner of his eye that a second set of the supporting rails was carrying other captives out past the altar toward the rim of the plateau at another point. Kirpina, these others were, and their robes had been stripped away, leaving the atrophied lower limbs to dangle ludicrously from networks of the white wire which encircled their bodies. It was evident that the Kirpina went to the sacrifice willingly, for there was exaltation in their upward-turned faces and their lips moved in unison with the chanting of the priests.

Around the altar, from which a column of black smoke now rose high, the priests were circling. Halting rhythmically and spreading their arms wide at each break in the monotony of the chant. Now the first of the Kirpina victims had reached the rim of the plateau. The rail from which he was suspended by the invisible tie extended out into the void above the desert, and his body swung out over the dreadful depth. Two miles beneath him lay death, and yet this strange human of Kirpin raised his voice in a final shout of triumph. The voyagers from Coris and Tinus watched with bated breaths.

And then, as the *Blue Streak* had been hurled outward, the wire-wrapped body flung away, rising until it was silhouetted against the bright orange mists high above them, only to turn over slowly and fall into the abyss with ever-increasing acceleration.

Very quickly it was lost to view below the mesa rim. "Oh, oh," moaned Margaret, "there is another just behind him. A dozen of them—moving—moving to their death."

"Yes," husked Ralph, "And we—" He bit off his words, for he had not the heart to continue. And inwardly he cursed himself for bringing Margaret on this mad journey.

A wisp of green vapor had drifted away from the plateau rim as the first victim was thrown outward; the second of the Kirpina was now moving toward the end of the rail, swaying—chanting rapturously. Quite obviously this was a signal honor. Ralph wondered if they would finish with their own kind before conferring the same dubious honor upon the supposedly deposed gods of the mists.

"Look!" Teddy exclaimed suddenly, "look at the *Blue Streak*. Steve has righted her—good old Steve."

It was true. The spherical vessel had ceased its erratic lurching and was poised in the orange mists perhaps a mile from the mesa of the priests of Ara. Then with startling swiftness she shot upward and was lost to view.

"Steve has something on his mind," gloated Ralph. "I don't know what he can do, but I'll wager he will figure out something." His spirits rose.

There came a break in the chanting, an exultant shout, and the second sacrifice of a Kirpina zealot had been accomplished. With unceasing vigor the priests circled the altar. Ralph, as he watched the gliding movements of the black robed ones, wondered anew as to the source of power for those motors beneath them.

A third sacrifice flung outward screaming. Not so fervently religious, this one, as the last.

"Ralph, I—I can't stand it," Margaret quavered, "It's too—"

"I know, Midge,"—gently. "Close your eyes."

Time passed all too swiftly, and soon but three of the Kirpina were left dangling from that other set of rails. Ralph Prescott, his head strained back, raised his eyes to the orange-lighted mists, hoping to see the *Blue Streak* drive down to the rescue. But there was no sign of the silvery blue sphere.

At length only one of the Kirpina was left and the suspended line of Earth-folk and Venerians began moving slowly forward toward the edge of the precipice. Teddy Crowley was first, Ralph and Margaret next in line, and behind them was Soltur. Beyond that, Ralph was unable to see. But he knew that all of them were there—waiting bravely for the inevitable. All excepting Steve.

The last of the Kirpina flung outward; vanished shouting.

In a moment Teddy had swung out over the abyss. "Mary!" he cried out softly.

"Yes, Ted," came the clear reply from the rear. But Ralph thought he detected the trace of a choking sob as her voice dwelt upon the name of her husband.

The break in the chant. In an instant Ted Crowley would be hurled to his death. And then a screaming something came down from the orange mists, a huge bulk that flung directly toward them—toward Teddy Crowley—toward the altar of Ara. A terrific force bore them back. Teddy dove back against Ralph and Margaret, and they in turn were flung back to crash violently into Soltur. An ear-shattering explosion followed, a roar that seemed to arise from the rear of the temple, a detonation that somehow released the energy which held them aloft and let them all drop awkwardly to the pavement. Teddy fell well within the edge of the plateau.

Momentary silence, and then came a chattering and yelping from the priests and the few remaining Herch

police that would have put to shame a flock of magpies.

Still unable to move a muscle, Ralph rolled his eyes so he could see the circle of priests around the altar. Most of them were waving their short arms frantically, lurching in their wheeled supports as if attempting to move themselves forward. But there was no movement of the vehicles that were their means of locomotion—each and every one of them was rooted to the spot he had occupied at the time of the blast. The High Priest had torn off his long black robe and was reaching down into the mechanisms of his rolling chair, fumbling aimlessly as if in an effort to make the motors operate.

Ralph laughed wildly. It had come to him in a flash that Steve Gillette had somehow managed to cut off their source of power and rendered helpless priest and police alike. The explosion had done it—their central power plant was destroyed. And that was why the energy had left the supporting rails above the captives, why they had all fallen to the pavement. But how Steve had known was a mystery.

Teddy was shouting like a maniac in his ear, and, rolling his eyes in their sockets until the pain was almost unbearable, Ralph could make out the curved lower hull plates of the *Blue Streak*. She was sinking gently to a landing.

Mary Crowley sobbed softly somewhere nearby.

STEVE came running with a huge wire cutter as soon as he had landed the vessel. "Watch out for the weapons of the police!" shouted Teddy.

"Huh!" Steve grinned. And he walked back to one of the officers from Herch, twisted the weapon from his hand, and pushed the fellow over in a helpless heap. "These are no good either," he gloated. "See this?" He pressed the release of the weapon without result, then tossed it contemptuously at its owner. "All operate from the same broadcast power," he explained briefly, "and the transmitter is out of whack—for keeps."

He went to work swiftly then, first cutting the wires which bound Mary Crowley, since she of all of them was most painfully cramped. It was the work of only a few minutes to release them all.

"There you are," he exulted when the work was finished. "Now let's see the bunch of you do a war dance."

Ralph chuckled ruefully. His muscles still were numbed from the tightness with which he had been bound, and it was with painful effort only that he managed to turn his body and rise to a sitting position. That done, he did his best to help Margaret. All of them were in like condition, Mary worst off of all. She was utterly unable to move for many minutes and Teddy dragged himself inch by inch to her side.

But the numbness soon wore off and the voyagers regained their feet one by one, gathering in a group by the lower side of the *Blue Streak*.

"How did you do it, Steve?" demanded Teddy. "What in—"

"Aw, that can wait," was the grinning mechanic's response. "Let's get away from here before something else happens."

"Yes." "Right." "You bet."—came a chorus of approval.

"Only a moment," the professor put in. "I should like to leave a last message with the High Priest and ask him a question."

He strode forward to face the leering black robed one who still wore, inconspicuously enough, the mentascope. "Well, my good friend," the professor began, "I see—"

But the wrathful priest tore the mentascope from his head and threw it to the pavement. Further conversation between them was impossible, but a stream of

shrill speech issued from the writhing lips of the High Priest and he spread his arms wide, raising his eyes to the orange mists as if calling down the wrath of his gods upon these who had dared to rebel against their will.

Professor Timken stared a moment, then: "Bah!" he exclaimed in disgust, "Bah!" Placing his two hands against the High Priest's chest, he pushed the black robed one over, leaving him to sprawl ignominiously at his feet. Turning his back then, the professor picked up the mentascope and dusted it off carefully as he walked back to join his laughing friends. "I'm ready to leave now," he announced with the utmost gravity.

And it did not take long for the voyagers to scramble through the manhole to the *Blue Streak's* interior.

A LITTLE later, when the vessel had shot up through the mists and was speeding away from the ring-shaped planet, all members of the party were gathered in the control room.

"Come on now, Steve," said Teddy, who sat at the controls, "tell us all about it. You did a fine job and I for one want to know how you managed and how you knew what to do."

"It was easy. As soon as I righted the ship out there over the desert—after they'd blasted me away with that young cyclone of theirs or whatever it was—I went up into the mists and came down back of the temple where I nosed around to find their power broadcast transmitter. Then I went up again a ways and came back in front of the temple. Still up quite a ways, you understand. Drifting down, I saw that the devils had you, Teddy, just setting to drop you into the squashed pile at the base of the mesa. Wurrh! I dove straight for you and a second before I would have struck you I gave her full repulsion energy and shot up over your head. The repulsion drove you back to safety, you see, though I was afraid you might get banged up in the process. But the rest was a cinch; I just kept going until I was over their measly power plant and dropped a Frenchite bomb on it. And I laughed my head off—almost—when I saw how wild it made the priests not being able to move their wheel chairs. It was the funniest thing you ever saw—"

"So I imagine," the professor interrupted drily. "But how in time did you know these motors of theirs were operated by broadcast power? How did you know—?"

"Well, I'll tell you," Steve drawled confidentially. "First off—remember when Ralph bawled me out back there in Thrup's council room?—I took a peek at the insides of one of those wheel chairs and saw the collecting coils that fed the motors. They had to pick their juice out of the air. And then, when we were on the way to Ara, I got one of the guards talking about his flame thrower—told him how good it was and how much it interested me. He opened up after a while and spilled the fact that it, too, was operated by the power broadcasts. See?"

"Yes, so far," spoke up Teddy. "But this broadcast power must be used in all parts of Kirpin. What made you think that the destruction of the local transmitter at Ara would do the trick? Suppose there was still power obtainable from another point?"

"Ha! I asked the same question of that guard and he put on a long face. But he admitted that the range of their transmitters was not extremely great. Said there were millions of them all over the planet and that, in thickly populated regions, their circles of radiation overlapped fully. But that out in the desert there had been some difficulty in getting complete overlap—that the transmitter of Ara overlapped only three others, so that there were only three ways of approach,

one of which we were following. I knew then that his flame thrower and his wheel chair would work throughout the trip, but knew as well that none of those three overlapping circles of radiation could reach Ara of themselves. See now?"

Mary and Margaret laughed delightedly.

"Yes, I imagine all of us see now, Steve," Professor Timken mumbled. "And we see likewise who it is that has the brains of the party. I, for one, would never have thought to examine the mechanism of the wheeled support nor to question the guard. And I wish to say right now, before you all, that our lives—"

"Aw rats!" grunted Steve, "Any one of you—"

But the vociferous objections of the rest drowned out his abashed protests and the succeeding half hour was noisy with demonstrations of gratitude and affection.

Steve Gillette, when eventually he escaped to the engine room, was flushed uncomfortably and speechless with confusion.

CHAPTER XI

The Journey Resumed

THE *Blue Streak* was several millions of miles from her course when observations were taken after leaving Kirpin's atmosphere. To Ralph this seemed to be inconsistent with the professor's former statement that the orbit of the ring-shaped planet very nearly coincided with the curved path they had been following in the journey toward Vustl. But Professor Timken explained that a few million miles was a mere nothing when compared with the vast distance equivalent to more than ten light years, and the setting down of the figures quickly convinced Ralph that this was a fact. After all, they had left Kirpin with its own velocity of 3.1 times that of light and were now accelerating swiftly to still greater speed.

Kirpin soon was but one of the myriad light flecks of interstellar space, distinguishable from its fellows for a time on account of its orange color, then vanishing utterly as far as unaided human vision was concerned. With the great mass of that body behind them, Teddy found he could increase the former rate of acceleration considerably and was thus able to return very quickly to their original course as well as to make up the time they had lost during their exciting visit.

By the end of the second day life on board the *Blue Streak* had settled down to a well ordered routine. Terrestrial chronometers were used entirely in the calculations of the scientists as well as for regulating the three eight-hour watches and setting meal times. And many hours were found available for pleasant recreation. There was no sensation as of traveling through this realm of space-time with the terrific acceleration that was theirs; the vessel hovered motionless in the silence and frigidly and airlessness of the cosmos, her interior comfortably lighted and warmed and with a pure atmosphere of her own as well as internal gravity conditions that were suitable to the Venerians as well as the Terrestrials. The adventurers occupied a little world of their own, a tiny body lost in the vastness of space and seemingly as immovable as their own worlds appeared to be when they were at home. The aspect of the heavens about them changed so gradually that only by consulting the instruments of the control room and observatory were they convinced of the tremendous distances being covered each hour.

It was only at the midday meal that all of them were gathered together, this meal being breakfast for the watch coming on duty, supper for those coming off duty, and dinner for those enjoying the recreation period. Jack Dillon soon made himself a favorite at

these functions for he had a ready wit, a courtly yet not effeminate manner, and an unsurpassed store of anecdotes which, in the telling, never failed to touch the spark to a rapid fire of sprightly conversation. He had, as well as the qualities which found favor with the ladies, the happy faculty of ingratiating himself with the scientists of the party, for Jack Dillon was a persistent questioner and displayed great interest and not a little of understanding in scientific matters. The first distrust of him had been entirely dispelled.

On the fifth day, when the vessel had reached a speed eighty times that of light, the midday meal was interrupted by the second unusual occurrence of the voyage. Jack Dillon was engaged in a bit of his customary sparkling repartee with Mary and Margaret when the vessel thrummed to the swiftly increasing vibration of one of the machines in the engine room below. And a slight lurching of the table told them of some untoward change in the motion of the ship. The light conversation ceased abruptly.

"It's nothing," Teddy Crowley hastened to state, "only another body in our path has caused the functioning of the automatic controls which change our course to avoid collision. No cause for alarm."

Nevertheless, Teddy had risen from his seat and was starting for the control room. Most of the others followed him, only Professor Timken and his two Corisian associates repairing to the observatory instead.

TEDDY'S first act when they reached the control room was to consult his instruments. "Strong attraction in direction of hull section seven twenty-nine," he muttered, "and a three point change in direction to compensate. But no change in our acceleration. Great guns, yes! It's falling off!"

At the same time there was observed a slight lowering in pitch of the atomic engines' usual drone. Steve Gillette made a dive for the engine room companionway and was gone.

"What is it?" asked Ralph, at Teddy's side.

"Can't tell yet. Wait." Methodically Ted Crowley was checking the readings of his instruments and the setting of the controls.

Jack Dillon was at the eyepiece of the navigating telescope, which instrument he had learned to operate well. The girls glued their eyes to the main observation port, not forgetting that Margaret had been the first of all of them to sight the planet Kirpin. Therin, naturally, had followed Steve above.

"Peculiar thing," whispered Teddy. "The locus is shifting. First there are attraction indications to the east, then to the west—now, see this Ralph—we have an indication from behind."

Ralph Prescott saw with amazement that most of the instruments were acting erratically, their indications irregular and shifting in some cases over the entire range of the scale. Even the velocity of the ethership seemed to be varying widely and rapidly—a thing that was impossible on account of the inertia. Ralph knew that considerable time would be required to accomplish speed fluctuations of the extent indicated.

"The instruments have gone wrong," he said with conviction. "No changes such as these can be taking place." His gaze strayed to the observation port. Out there the heavens were motionless; unaltered.

"Yes—they've gone wrong," admitted Teddy. "Everything seems to have gone wrong. Listen to the engines."

The droning sound from above was changing pitch in a weird manner, alternately rising to a shrill tone that almost reached the upper limit of audibility and falling to a point so low in the musical scale that it was little more than a stuttering rumble.

Still nothing could be seen through the thick quartz glass of the ports, nor had Dillon anything to report from the radio telescope.

And then, abruptly, the drone of the atomic engines ceased entirely—they had gone completely dead. Perspiration stood on Teddy's forehead in great beads.

"See anything yet, Professor," he called into the microphone.

"Not yet—at least I'm not sure. Wait a moment," came the voice from the loudspeaker.

"Good Lord!—the whole panel is dead," exclaimed Ralph, pointing to the instrument board.

It was true: every instrument and recording device registered zero. Therin and Steve Gillette, clattering down the iron stair from the engine room, reported all mechanisms completely paralyzed. Not a rotating part in all of the *Blue Streak's* apparatus was turning over!

The men stared at one another with bleak countenances.

"See anything, Margaret?" Ralph called softly in the dead silence.

"No." Both girls turned from the port with amazement written large on their pretty faces. "But—but something feels funny," went on Margaret, raising her hands to her hair, "See—I'm electrified—like a cat with its back rubbed."

The sleek blackness of her head was disarranged with the motion; whisks of soft hair separated and stretched out to cling to her fingers. So quiet were the others that the crackling was distinctly audible.

"That's it," said Teddy, "we're in the midst of some powerful electrical disturbance of space. Or in a cloud of minute electrified particles. That's what stopped the—"

"Hold on!" came Dillon's voice from the telescope, "I think I see something. Look at this Ted—"

The rest of his sentence was drowned out by the booming of the professor's voice from the loudspeaker: "We've seen them, folks, a huge cloud of living creatures all around us. They're closing in on us."

"What!" yelled Teddy, "Living creatures? And traveling through space at eighty times the speed of light?"

"And why not?" The professor's reply was weighted with reproving dignity. Nothing that might be encountered in the universe was an impossibility to Professor Timken. "They are organisms of an unknown nature, it is true, and probably not more than accumulated and concentrated charges of energy. But of physical reality nevertheless, here in space-time. And, as far as their rate of speed is concerned, do not forget that velocity as such is only relative. They don't know (even if they have perceptions) that they are speeding through the cosmos at this terrific rate. No more than do we, cooped up here in the ether ship. To them their speed is related only to the nearest body to them—the *Blue Streak*—and the rate at which they are coming toward us is comparatively slow."

"So!" Steve Gillette's facial expression was so comical that the others in the control room laughed, relieving the tension.

"I see one!" Mary Crowley called out from the viewing port. "Two! A dozen—a thousand."

The rest of them crowded to the port and watched the strange visitants draw near. From all sides they were drifting toward the *Blue Streak*, slightly luminous transparent ovoids, each with a nucleus of intense pulsating brilliance. One bumped against the thick glass of the port, flattening to a disc perhaps three feet in diameter, clinging there like a jellyfish, its queer silvery transparent substance quivering to the pulsations of the central nucleus. The lights of the control room snuffed out abruptly—even the emergency storage

battery current had been neutralized by the radiations of the strange creatures whose habitat was in the emptiness of interstellar space. Another of the weird organisms flattened to the glass and the combined light of the two nuclei cast eery flickering shadows in the control room.

"Why—why, they're like huge amoebae," exclaimed Margaret. "They are harmless enough."

As she spoke, the first of the two visitants slowly divided into two separate entities, each half provided with its own brilliant nucleus that pulsed sluggishly at first and then more rapidly until it had attained full vigor.

"Harmless?" breathed Ralph, "With our power shut off?" He was thinking of the possible length of time that might elapse until their supply of oxygen gave out, with the pumps not working.

Another and another of the jelly-like blobs came to join the first ones and soon the ports of the control room were almost entirely covered with them. The combined light from the many bright nuclei served to illuminate the control room to full brilliance. There was a weird whispering in the air of the control room. Dry cracklings came from the movements of the occupants and when any of them touched another, a stinging spark was the result. Ralph Prescott felt the short hairs at the back of his neck standing out—vibrating so rapidly as to cause a distinct smarting of the skin in which they were rooted.

"Say Prof," Teddy called into the microphone, "what do you make of it?"

There was no reply, since the loud speaking telephone was likewise out of commission. But at that instant Professor Timken tumbled into the control room, with Rastor and Soltur following him. Rather, they drifted in, clinging to stair rail and stanchion to maintain their equilibrium as well as they might in the practically gravityless condition which now pervaded the *Blue Streak*. With the paralyzing of their primary power, the artificial internal gravity had likewise left them and all of the passengers were obliged to move with extreme caution, making their way from point to point by gently pushing some stationary object to propel themselves in the right direction and being sure there was an equally substantial object to grasp when they had reached their desired destination.

The professor examined with interest the creatures that flattened themselves in countless numbers against the vessel. "Concentrations of energy, undoubtedly," he pronounced, "yet capable of spontaneous mass motion and irritability, the essential qualities of life. Alive they are, unquestionably, and—"

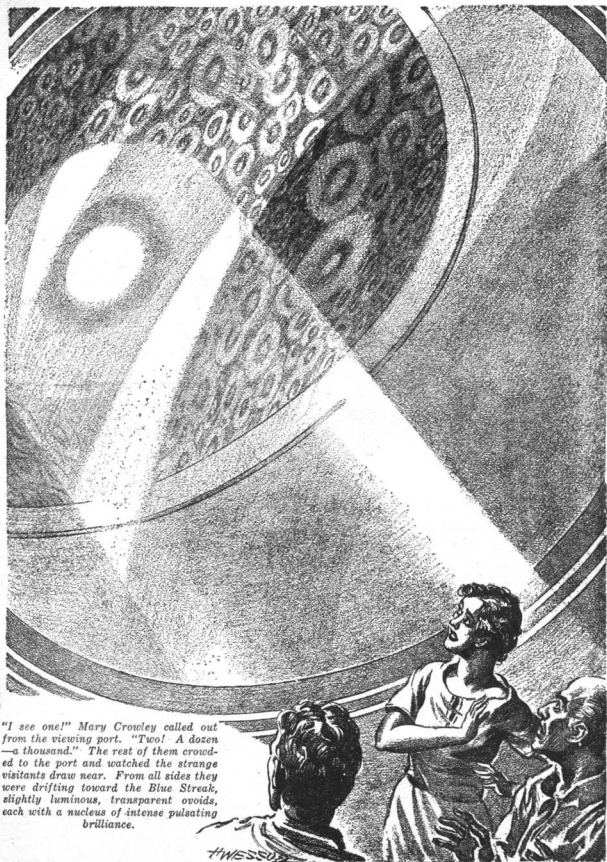
"No lectures now, Prof," Ralph interrupted him. "What are we to do about them? We can't drift here in space forever at eighty times the speed of light. How will we get rid of them? The oxygen, you know, will not last many hours."

"Yes, yes, it is a serious matter, isn't it?" Professor Timken was suddenly awake to the fact that he had permitted his scientific interest to outweigh and overshadow all thought of their safety. "If only we had our power, we might cast them off by using full repulsion on all points of the hull."

"But we haven't our power," Ralph retorted impatiently.

"How about the ray projectors in our arsenal?" suggested Steve.

"No, their charges will be neutralized as well." The professor was thinking deeply. "Let me see now; our only chance is to discharge these creatures somehow—to short circuit the energy that is within them so they will be destroyed by their own internal forces. But that is a difficult problem."



"I see one!" Mary Crowley called out from the viewing port. "Two! A dozen—a thousand." The rest of them crowded to the port and watched the strange visitants draw near. From all sides they were drifting toward the Blue Streak, slightly luminous, transparent ovoids, each with a nucleus of intense pulsating brilliance.

"You think they are, perhaps, charged somewhat after the fashion of a Leyden jar?" asked Jack Dillon, who was remembering some of the elementals of the scientific education he had been receiving during the past few days.

"Yes, yes" the professor returned absentmindedly, "something of that nature, only many times more potent. By George, Teddy!"—turning to the young inventor, "I believe I have it. Here on the glass of the ports the creatures are insulated, but you can be sure they are being very careful on the hull plates—keeping their individual bodies separated, I mean, so as not to discharge from one to the other through the circuit which a metallic plate would complete. And, Teddy, each hull plate of the vessel is insulated from its fellows, is it not?"

"Certainly. Otherwise we could not direct our attractive and repulsive energies."

"And a lead from each hull plate communicates with the main control board?"

"Of course." Teddy flung his arm out in excitement and nearly lost his balance as a result. "I'm beginning to get you, Prof. You want me to interconnect the plates a few at a time and so place a great number of the creatures in multiple to add their charges until—"

"Exactly." Professor Timken was as excited as was Teddy Crowley. "Try those around the main viewing port first, so we can observe the result."

In a moment Teddy was at the hull plate segregating panel, depressing groups of its organ-like keys in rapid succession.

"Keep away from the ports," the professor warned as the girls moved as if to press their faces to the thick glass. "I expect that a considerable amount of heat will be generated if this is successful."

A commotion seemed to have arisen amongst those of the jelly-like creatures nearest the rim of the main port. Their nuclei glowed with increasing brilliancy and they drew away from the port rim as if its proximity were annoying.

"A few more plates," the professor urged.

Teddy depressed another group of keys. And then a blinding flash encircled the port. Those of the creatures nearest the rim vanished in blinding eruptions of incandescence; those more closely grouped near the center of the glass shriveled swiftly to less than half their former volume and their nuclei dimmed and pulsed at a much lower rate. And a wave of heat was communicated to the control room, intense heat that penetrated the double hull and raised the air temperature to an uncomfortable point.

"That's the stuff!" chortled the irrepressible Steve Gillette, "Give it to them up around the middle or topside."

Teddy pressed other keys as fast as his fingers could reach them. "Look at the instruments!" he gloated. "The wattmeters are registering the discharges."

What he said was true, for at each interconnection of several new groups of plates there were violent surges indicated by the corresponding instruments on the main panel. It was thus possible to watch the destruction of the unwelcome visitants without actually seeing it. As Teddy continued with his manipulations of the controls the temperature kept on rising within the vessel. This, with the increasing percentage of carbon dioxide in the air caused by the failure of the oxygen apparatus, served very quickly to make breathing difficult.

"Think you'll have to let up?" asked Ralph anxiously.

"I believe we've nearly rid ourselves of them," Teddy replied. "What do you think, professor?"

"They have left the control room ports entirely," was the measured reply. "Evidently these creatures are

possessed of some measure of intelligence and the survivors are leaving before it is too late."

But there was no renewal of the primary power of the *Blue Streak*. Apparently enough of the creatures remained to maintain the paralysis of the machinery their coming had occasioned. Teddy continued to depress the keys of the segregation board.

The control room was in darkness save for a faint red glow that came from the rims of the ports.

"Golly!" exclaimed Steve. "The outer hull is red hot. Look at those clamp rings."

The rims of the ports were heated to a cherry red and the air in the control was becoming unbearably. They were suffocating; perspiration ran from their pores under the intense heat. Ralph Prescott saw Margaret sag and sway weakly; drift helplessly from the stanchion she had been holding to. He reached out his hand and drew her to him.

Then came blessed relief. The control room lights flashed on and the welcome drone of the atomic engines came to their ears. Cool air came down through the ventilating ducts—fresh air that revived them and brought with it the assurance that the last of the uncanny visitors had left them. Full gravity took hold of them gradually as the generators came up to speed. The *Blue Streak* was again in full possession of all her normal functions.

Steve and Therin raced up the stairs to their beloved engines.

"And that's that," said Teddy, wiping his brow with the back of his hand. "Many more such experiences and we'll all be fit for the coroner. Only there wouldn't be any coroner."

"Pooh," retorted Mary, smiling a little uncertainly. "That was nothing. Just wait until we get out around Vusti."

Teddy winked delightedly at Ralph.

"Do you know," the professor was saying regretfully, "I should like to have had the opportunity of examining a specimen of—"

"I suppose," broke in Teddy, "you'd like to have stayed a while on Kirpin as well—studying the natives and such. And the orange mists and the secrets of the mesa of Ara."

"I would indeed,"—solemnly. "I am still much puzzled concerning many things observed during our stay on that unfortunate planet; more particularly I should like an explanation of the surface lighting—how it is that we saw desert sands a bleached white and the skins of the Kirpina as well, under a light that was distinctly orange in hue. I should like to have analyzed the spectrum of that orange light. And I should like to return—"

The girls giggled and Professor Timken flushed in embarrassment.

"You would wish something like that," laughed Ralph, "Some day, Prof, you will find yourself in the heart of a volcano, looking around with an asbestos hat on your head for signs of life. You—"

But the professor had fled to the upper regions. And Soltur and Rastor, grinning broadly, followed him.

CHAPTER XII

Out Around Vusti

AGAIN the established routine of the *Blue Streak* was resumed and the remainder of the voyage was passed pleasantly and without undue excitement. But Ralph Prescott, mindful of the experiences when riding the planet Venus of the menace of the Kellonians and of the more recent ones on Kirpin, set about to take stock of the resources provided by the

small arsenal of the vessel. He said nothing to the others of the party but made a careful inventory of the weapons and ammunition which had been provided by Teddy and Steve in the original stocking of the vessel. He was delighted to find that they had the old cathode ray projectors and the automatic rifles of the Kellonian campaign. They had a familiar feel about them and he well knew the effectiveness of both, especially of the rifle at long range when used with the explosive bullets containing the terrifically powerful Frenchite. A pang at the memory of Captain French came over him as he recalled the development of the high explosive which bore his name, how the captain had worked day and night with Professor Timken in producing this compound that contained more destructive force in a single ounce than could be effected by a ton of trinitrotoluol.* And the energy projector was there—the one with which they had destroyed the galdons or space ships of Kellos. Besides, there were automatic pistols designed for the same Frenchite ammunition as the rifles. Gas grenades; Frenchite bombs of various sizes, some of which were large enough to destroy a battle fleet; suits of armor and helmets of several materials, some of which seemed to be of lead; case upon case of ammunition for the rifles, and charged cylinders for the ray projectors—all these he found, and more. There were curious weapons of a sort he had never seen—torpedos, these seemed to be, and he presumed they were loaded with Frenchite. But these torpedos were winged as if for aerial use and were provided with separable butts that contained vacuum tube apparatus similar to the regular ray projectors. He would have to ask Teddy about these. In any event, they were well provided with tools and arms for offensive or defensive warfare, and Ralph vowed to himself they would make no more landings with the expectation of a peaceful reception as they had done on Kirpin.

Outside of this secret activity, Ralph spent the greater part of his time as a general assistant, dividing his duties between the laboratory and control room. His scientific education was progressing by leaps and bounds, astronomical calculations becoming less and less mysterious as the days passed and his experience increased. He knew the internal mechanisms of the *Blue Streak* from the smallest and most delicate instrument to the largest machine on board—at least he was sufficiently familiar with their functions and construction to discuss them intelligently and to aid in making the few necessary repairs and adjustments. Then there was the kitchen police, since, with three watches, only one of the girls was on duty at a time for certain of the meals.

Strangely enough, Jack Dillon had chosen duties almost exactly paralleling his own and was becoming almost as proficient in all of them. Dillon, he decided, was a good fellow and a most democratic one for a man of his wealth and position on Earth. His only peculiarity was the periodical shutting of himself off from the others—not that he would leave them and confine himself to his cabin, but there were hours at a stretch when he would become morose and uncommunicative, even when in the presence of Mary and Margaret. And at such times it seemed that he was not one of them but an aloof personage who regarded the rest of them as strangers—as inferiors almost. But when these moods had passed and he was himself once more, they could have wished for no more congenial and interesting a companion. Unfortunately, these moods were becoming more frequent as the journey progressed.

Toward the end of the sixteenth day the *Blue Streak* reached the unthinkable velocity of two hundred and forty times the speed of light. Ralph was in the ob-

servatory when the indicator needle reached that mark and he set about to calculate its equivalent in more familiar terms. Two billion, six hundred seventy-eight million, four hundred thousand miles a minute. A minute! The figures stared at him mockingly as he stared out through a nearby port at the heavens and saw them apparently motionless to view. He could not convince himself that the *Blue Streak* was moving at all. It poised there in the vastness of space-time, an inert and moveless thing. But, day by day, they had noted definite changes in the stars—separations visible to the eye in many cases, visible only with the greatest magnification of which the telescope was capable in others. Of course!—relativity. Here in their own little artificial world there was no abnormal motion. To them the sphere was motionless, but to an observer on one of those stars out there in the blackness—puff!

Ralph must have exclaimed the last aloud, for Professor Timken laughed merrily. "Why the blue study?" he asked.

"Just thinking, that's all. Of the stillness out here and the emptiness; of the infinitesimal unimportance of such beings as ourselves in the enormity of creation. Of many things, Prof."

"Hm." The professor joined him and, together, they stared out into the infinite. "My boy, no man can fail to be impressed by this continued contemplation of the wonders of nature. Especially so, the man who studies the stars. I have spent my lifetime in such study while you have scratched the surface of such knowledge as has come to mankind regarding this great universe of ours. And I tell you in all honesty that more of its mystery and grandeur, more of its awe-inspiring complexity and hugeness is borne in upon my consciousness each day—perhaps each hour that I work. Like yourself, I am humbled before it all, a mere nothing in the great scheme of things of which the heavens are a symbol..."

They fell silent, gazing together at the diamond-studded black velvet of the cosmos.

AFTER a time, Teddy Crowley's voice came up from the loudspeaker. "When do we commence deceleration, Professor?" he called.

Guiltily, Professor Timken cast a quick glance at the indicator. "Bless my soul," he ejaculated, "we have passed the mid-point of our journey. You may decelerate at once, Teddy, keeping the velocity constant at two hundred and forty times that of light for a matter of ten minutes before slowing down gradually to a rate of deceleration equal to that at which we accelerated."

"One hundred and twenty thousand miles per second per hour?" asked Teddy superfluously.

"Correct. And hold to the present course."

The loudspeaking telephone became silent as Ralph and the professor returned to their contemplation of the heavens. There was no change in the apparent motionlessness of the *Blue Streak*, only a very slight tremor of the floor plates as the energies were reversed. No slightest indication was there that they were hurtling into infinity with velocity never before conceived of by man—nor accomplished by man.

"I'm wondering about that ancient ethership that was wrecked on Kirpin," the professor said, after a space. "No telling whence it came; and no estimating its age, although my guess would be that it has not existed for more than a few centuries of our time. Even though it be of non-corrosive metals—so-called—it could scarcely have remained in as good condition after a much longer time. Certainly not for thousands of years. And we'll never know—never. It is just another mystery of space."

At this juncture Jack Dillon walked into the observatory, carrying a thick volume with his finger inserted

*Commonly known as T. N. T.

between the leaves to hold his place. Professor Timken smiled understandingly.

"I see you have been deep in some study, Jack," he said. "What is it this time?"

"Radium; the element we are searching for. You see, I never have known much about it, excepting its monetary value and, vaguely, something of its therapeutic properties. I've been trying to read up on it lately and find that I am very much confused on some points. I should like to ask you a few questions, if I may."

"Certainly, my boy, certainly."

Something in Dillon's manner warned Ralph that one of his strange moods was upon him; a certain icy hardness of his exterior that was difficult to define. A vernal glitter in the close-set eyes. Traces of his original distrust of the man returned, but Ralph cast off the feeling almost at once.

"As I understand it, Professor," Dillon began, "pure radium is a white metallic element whose atomic weight is 226, atomic number 88. It must be preserved out of contact with the air, and dissolves in practically all acids. It is a member of the uranium-radium-lead disintegration series, being itself produced by the disintegration of its immediate parent ionium and disappearing upon its disintegration into the gas radon. In other words, it is unstable and is continually undergoing this process of transformation. Am I correct?"

"Perfectly, my boy."

"And, the activity of radon is about 100,000 times that of an equal weight of radium?"

"Correct."

"In what form do you expect to find this radium when we reach the planet of the Procyon system?"

What was Dillon driving at?—Ralph wondered.

"That is something I can not answer," was the professor's reply. "But certainly in great quantities. Perhaps in some extremely rich ore with which we are not familiar; possibly in solution—a chloride or bromide, it may be. That remains to be seen, Jack."

"At any rate, you expect to find it in a much more concentrated natural condition than on earth or Venus, don't you?"

"Yes. Otherwise we should not be making this journey."

"The physiological effects of such great quantities as you hope to find are unknown?" Dillon persisted.

"That is true, but we are well prepared to insulate ourselves from the most powerful emanations. We have the leaden suits with oxygen helmets of the same material—everything."

"Hm—lead. Lead is the end product, is it not? It is the sole material safe against the harmful emanations and the only one which can be used to transport the stuff—for containers, I mean?"

"W-well, not exactly the *only* material, but the most practical." The professor, too, was puzzled by Dillon's questioning.

"But, regardless of the form in which the radium may be found, it can be safely carried in lead containers, can it not? And, if highly concentrated as you expect, a very small quantity of the material will be of immense value?" Dillon's gaze was far off in the heavens as he spoke, and his voice was dull and lifeless.

"My answer to the first question is yes," was the professor's reply. He hesitated and looked queerly at his interrogator. "And, as far as the dollar value is concerned, Dillon, I can only say it will be fabulous. I know the stuff is there in quantities far beyond any conception of wealth in our own world or in Venus. The ransom of empires or of entire planets is there for the taking. Whether or not we shall be able to take it, is another matter. We will do our best. But why do you ask all this?"

Jack Dillon seemed to come out of his daze. "Oh, only as a matter of interest, Professor," he replied in a startled manner. "Furthering my technical education, you know. And thank you for the information—thank you—" His voice trailed off apologetically as he left them and sidled through the door.

Professor Timken looked after him with wide eyes. "Now, what in time do you suppose is coming over him?" he exclaimed. "He acts like a crazy man, if you ask me."

"Just what I was thinking," agreed Ralph. "But perhaps it is only the confinement. He's been reading too much, for one thing."

They let it go at that, but were to remember the incident in the days to come.

THE *Blue Streak* continued on her course. Day by day her velocity decreased as they drew near their destination. And eventually, on the thirty-first day, they passed from the realm of space-time into the more familiar universe of the three physical dimensions—once more they were traveling at a speed less than that of light. But, even here, there was a difference; the old familiar constellations marked the skies as when viewed from Coris or Tinus—in all directions save directly ahead. Here before them was a spreading out and losing form of the constellation Canis Minor, the "Little Dog" of the heavens; and Procyon, its brightest star, was by far the largest object in view—a great sun looming ever larger in their vision. At last the adventurers were out around Vusti.

As they neared this solar system, that was so remote from their own, the observatory became the point of interest aboard the *Blue Streak*. Professor Timken, with the aid of Soltur and Rastor—and possibly more hampered than helped by the eager offices of Ralph Prescott and Jack Dillon—was busily engaged in checking his observations relative to the various bodies surrounding Vusti. With size and mass of the seven planets determined, they made rough calculations of the characteristics of their orbits, then set about naming them. In doing this, the professor decided to use Corisian terms, in each case descriptive of the body named. Thus the twin planets were called Mosin-ita and Mosin-ton (Twin-A and Twin-B) while the greatest planet of all, which was sixth in distance from the sun Vusti, was designated as Lloxan (Mammoth). Besides these there were Xur, Mynta, Antaji, Ryzin, and Ap—eight bodies in all, counting the twin planets as two of the number. Several of the planets had satellites, but these had not been catalogued when the *Blue Streak* swept into the orbit of the twins Mosin-ita and Mosin-ton.

Spectrographs had shown tremendous radioactivity over a great part of the surface of Mosin-ita, so their course was set for that body. Revolving about a common center of gravity, the planets Mosin-ita and Mosin-ton moved as a single body in a nearly circular orbit that was fifth in distance from the sun Vusti. Separated by scarcely more than one million miles, the primary revolution of the twin bodies was extremely rapid. In addition, each of the twins rotated on its own axis, the axes of the two being inclined at almost exactly the same angle. These motions, combined with the revolution about their sun involved a degree of complexity which was entirely beyond the mathematical ability of Ralph or Jack.

But the *Blue Streak* had soon approached so closely that all such considerations were forgotten in contemplation of the surfaces of the bodies. Mosin-ton was turning away from them, and Mosin-ita soon loomed before them as a gigantic sphere which filled the entire heavens with its immensity. It was of slightly

reddish tinge, like their own planet Mars, but showed here and there great splotches of jet black like the oceans of Venus. A network of silvery tracings covered the red portions, seeming to be a complicated system of natural waterways or possibly metallic veins like the rays of Earth's moon. The great globe flung madly toward them.

As they drew near the surface, all members of the party gathered in the control room. It soon became apparent that the side of Mosin-ita which faced them was entirely barren of vegetation. The silvery tracings proved to be narrow streams which wound their way from rocky crags and broken mountain ranges to wander aimlessly over the torn red flatlands and eventually disappear in great chasms or craters which obviously opened into the interior of the strange planet. These rivers scarcely widened throughout their tortuous lengths, proving there was little if any drainage from the surrounding territory. The absence of clouds likewise showed that there was a minimum of moisture in the atmosphere, if indeed there were an atmosphere. The narrow streams apparently rose from the bowels of Mosin-ita only to remain a while on the surface before again vanishing into the regions from whence they had sprung.

Dropping to an altitude of about twenty miles, the *Blue Streak* drifted along the bleak coast of one of the inky seas. A vast expanse of smooth, red shore sloped down to the tossing black waters from an endless palisade of crumbling rock-strewn cliffs. Inland, as far as the eye could reach, there was the dry-rot and desolation of ages.

"No atmosphere as yet," the professor announced from his station at the manometer which communicated with the outside. "It appears that Mosin-ita has been a dead world for thousands of years."

As if in contradiction of his pronouncement, Mary Crowley pointed from the viewing port and exclaimed in excitement—"See there, people, a sea serpent or a whale is coming in toward the shore!"

The object she had indicated was a huge mound of pale mottled blue that heaved up from the black waves and progressed slowly shoreward. At first there was only the mound with a frothing trail to mark its movement; then the thing had reared up knoblike appendages fore and aft, waving these slowly to and fro at the end of slender members that raised them to a height of perhaps a hundred feet from the waves. The creature was the size of an ocean liner of *Tinus*! Obviously alarmed by the nearness of something the visitors were unable to see, the queer monster shifted end for end with a sudden whipping of the waters into a whirling foam, and headed for the open sea, submerging gradually as it left the shore.

"Ugh!" Margaret Prescott shivered. "I hope that fellow has no relatives on land."

Professor Timken laughed. "No fear of that," he averred. "Any life that remains on Mosin-ita is in the depths of the sea."

They were now within four miles of sea level and the manometer registered a vacuum outside of approximately 97 percent.* It was hardly likely that the remaining atmosphere of Mosin-ita was of sufficient density to support life of a nature with which they were familiar. It would be necessary to land in space suits.

Dropping to fifteen thousand feet, Teddy turned the *Blue Streak* inland and followed the dry bed of what had been a large river in ages gone by. For a few miles they followed this until it brought them to a deep gorge through which its waters had once flowed. Like all of the rocky land over which they had passed, the gorge

was brick red in color, its sides showing strata of varying surface and tint, the dark softer portions in a crumbled state that left great ragged ledges and channels. Swiftly they passed through the gorge and swung into a broad valley that was ringed with majestic peaks and in the midst of which were massed the broken pillars and ruined towers of an ancient city. For a moment this was revealed to their gaze in the brilliant sunshine of Vusti; then a tornado-like wind had whipped up the red dust of the surrounding plain and hidden the ruins from view.

"Oh!" breathed Margaret ecstatically. "A city of the dead! We must land and explore it."

"We'll do nothing of the kind," Ralph said firmly. "And this is as good a time as any to serve notice on all of you that I intend to take charge of things when a landing is made. It *seems* there is no life here, but we don't know, and I mean to see to it that we don't repeat the foolish performance that nearly brought an end to this expedition on Kirpin. I don't wish to presume in assuming this authority, but I believe you all will agree it is mine by right of the success of the Kellonian campaign. Only in the matter of defense, you understand—but this is highly important. And in determining who of us shall take the risks when the time comes. Is this satisfactory?"

Those of the party who had followed his successful leadership in the affair of Kellos gave enthusiastic approval, and the rest assented willingly. Even Margaret had no objection to offer.

CHAPTER XIII

The Radium Desert

WHEN the *Blue Streak* proceeded out over the ruined city and left the valley for the flatlands beyond, Professor Timken engaged himself with an instrument he had designed especially for the locating of distant radium deposits. This was a combination of a super-sensitive electroscope and a beam transmitter of etheric waves which was capable of sending out a narrow ray of impulses along which the disturbances caused by powerful radium emanations were returned to the detecting apparatus. As they progressed, the professor swung the projector of his beam continuously in a wide arc, noting with care the varying indications of the electroscope in its small glass enclosure.

Teddy was at the controls and he kept the vessel's speed at the usual cruising one of two hundred miles an hour. His instruments had been corrected and readjusted for the gravity and atmospheric conditions of Mosin-ita. The magnetic and inductor compasses both functioned perfectly, showing the presence of a powerful magnetic pole. The surface gravity of the planet was low, being about six-tenths of that of *Tinus*. And the atmosphere proved to be extremely rare, even at an altitude of less than a thousand feet. And, even in the blinding light of Vusti, the outside temperature was only a few degrees above freezing.

The passengers all kept constant watch of the barren landscape as it unrolled its dreary wastes beneath them. Out here, beyond the range of mountains that skirted the coast, there was nothing but desert land, a vast expanse of rolling plains that were covered with powdery red sand which was continually agitated and driven into swirling clouds by the gentle breezes. Occasionally they would cross a yawning chasm where the red sand ended abruptly at a queer outcropping of volcanic rock. Beyond that would be the desert.

At the professor's request Teddy changed his course to head in a southwesterly direction toward a low lying

*Twenty-nine inches of mercury, or one inch absolute pressure, about one-tenth of Earth's atmospheric pressure at sea level.

range of hills that were almost obscured from view by heavy mists of sulphurous yellow—dense fogs which clung to the ground and undulated constantly like bodies of water in the fury of a gale. It was from this direction the strongest indications of radium deposits were obtained.

The character of the land changed; the sands disappeared and in their stead was an equally barren expanse of seamed, rocky plain where huge fissures appeared and which was pock-marked with small craters. But, for all the volcanic aspect of the scene, there were no signs of steam or other heated vapors from the interior. They had seen no vapor whatever save for the yellow clouds ahead which were obviously of surface origin. The internal fires of Mosin-ita had long since died out.

Beneath them appeared suddenly a sparkling cascade, a silvery stream that gushed forth from the rim of a chasm and was lost in the dark depths below. In a flash they had passed it and were following the rivulet which fed the small cataract, a narrow brook that tumbled over the rocky slope of one of the low mist-shrouded hills.

"It's the radium!" Professor Timken exclaimed excitedly from his instrument, "in solution. Follow the stream to its source, Teddy."

The stream, which showed a faint greenish luminescence at close range, suddenly widened into a pool that was covered with the curling yellow vapor, then wound its tortuous course down a boulder-strewn ravine over which the *Blue Streak* was forced to rise. At the head of the ravine was another cataract, where the gleaming liquid spilled from a ledge which communicated with the rocky tableland above. Here they found the source of the stream, a circular basin with salt-encrusted rim. The liquid in the basin was violently agitated, and, when the *Blue Streak* had slowed down to hover directly above it, a veritable geyser shot up from its midst, persisted for a few seconds amid a swirling of yellow vapors and then subsided into the depths of the pool. The vapor drifted away lazily with the breeze, clinging to the rocky ground and flowing into the crevices like mustard gas.

"Ralph—Teddy!" The professor was in a fever of excitement. "Let us make a landing here for our initial tests. My instrument shows tremendous activity at this point and it may be we shall have to proceed no further. If there is anything like the concentration I anticipate, we have right here an inexhaustible supply of the precious element. The pressure within is forcing this liquid to the surface, you see, and if—"

At Ralph's nod of agreement Teddy dropped the vessel to a level spot not far from the pool.

"Professor," said Ralph, "Steve and I will accompany you on this first trip through the airlock and will stand guard while you obtain the necessary samples for analysis. I think it extremely unlikely that we shall encounter any living creatures out here, but we'll be prepared for any eventuality. Later we'll send out a larger party to look over the surrounding territory." He turned to Steve, who was grinning elatedly—"What do you say, old man? Let's get into our space suits and the lead insulation and dig up a couple of the old ray projectors."

There was some grumbling among the others as the three repaired to the storerooms and arsenal above, but none questioned the wisdom of Ralph's decision.

TEDDY reduced the internal gravity of the *Blue Streak* to about eight tenths of its former value. Later, when they had become accustomed to their lightened bodies, it would be cut off entirely and only the gravity of Mosin-ita would act upon them. There

was the further consideration of those who were attiring themselves in the space suits and the leaden armor, for these had considerable additional weight to bear and would be enabled to move more readily in the decreased gravitational field.

Steve and Ralph came down first, awkward and bulky monsters in their helmeted space suits, their eyes twinkling through the narrow visors which were covered with the triplex fused quartz that provided insulation against radium emanations. Each carried one of the automatic rifles which had been combined with ray projectors, and in their belts were pistols to supplement the already heavy armament. The others laughed at their warlike appearance.

The professor soon appeared in like attire. He was armed only with an automatic pistol, but carried two heavy black cases and a metal tripod. And his nervous movements showed how anxious he was to reach the outside.

They were not long in passing through the airlock and setting foot on the rocky soil of Mosin-ita. Ralph was convinced from their aerial survey of the land that no living beings remained on the surface, but vivid memories of the sub-surface realm of Kellos imbued him with the utmost caution. Speaking into the small microphone of the helmet radiophone, he warned Steve and the professor to be on the alert.

Professor Timken proceeded immediately to the rim of the pool and commenced setting up his tripod. On this he affixed one of the black cases which he then opened and revealed its contents as an amazing array of meteorological instruments. The other case contained his vessels of lead and glass—chemical paraphernalia with which Ralph was not familiar.

The pool itself was perhaps thirty feet in diameter and its liquid of milky green hue. It was in constant movement as if boiling, and, at three minute intervals, the small geyser in the center became active and spouted for precisely nine seconds by the professor's chronometer. The level space surrounding the pool was not of large extent and was covered with fragments of the red stone which seemed to be everywhere in this region. Across the pool from where the *Blue Streak* rested, rose a steep slope that was crowned by a slender leaning pinnacle which seemed in imminent danger of falling upon them. As to signs of life, there were none.

"Darned if I believe we need to fear any living enemies here," grunted Steve.

Ralph was startled by the sound of his voice in the earphones. "I don't think so, either," he returned, "but we're not going to take any chances."

"Any creature," came the professor's crisp voice, "that can live in this place without oxygen helmet and thorough protection against beta and gamma rays would be a phenomenon. No, boys, I am sure we can forget about any such danger."

"We'll keep ourselves prepared," said Ralph grimly.

He squinted up at the naked sun—Vusti—noting for the first time that its brilliant light was of a cold blue-white. The heavens were almost black, the same as in outer space, due to the extreme rarity of Mosin-ita's atmosphere. Looking thus, he observed that the apparent movement of the sun was extremely rapid; then he remembered that the professor had determined the length of Mosin-ita's day as no more than three and one half hours terrestrial time. Vusti was nearing the horizon with incredible swiftness—soon the night would be upon them. The night of a strange body, more than ten light years distant from their homes! Ralph was impressed anew with the vastness of the cosmos and with the enormity of the thing they had done.

Presently the professor straightened up from his work and snapped shut the lid of his black case. "That's all I want for the present," he announced. "In the laboratory of the *Blue Streak* I shall be able to determine all that we need to know."

"Do you think it's up to expectations?" asked Ralph.

The professor drew near and brought his helmet so close that Ralph could see the jubilant gleam of his eyes through the visor. "My boy, it far surpasses expectations, unless I'm very much mistaken. The preliminary indications are so astounding I can scarcely credit my senses. And I will not believe until I have made more accurate determinations. Let us return to the ship at once."

NO sooner were they inside than Professor Timken was racing up the stairs with his precious black case. The Venerian scientists, Rastor and Soltur, were not long in following. And, when Ralph and Steve had divested themselves of their bulky garments, they were besieged by a volley of questions. There was some good-humored badgering of Ralph, as well, started by Jack Dillon who inquired solemnly if they had found the hunting good.

But Ralph was not to be swerved from his determination that they use every caution in their exploration of the planet, nor would he volunteer any information whatever as to the professor's findings.

"That is for him to tell you," he answered them, "when they have finished their work up there in the laboratory."

"But you're going to let us land," Margaret pouted prettily. "Mary and I—aren't you?"

"I'll have to, I suppose," her husband capitulated. "After we have the professor's report we'll organize things and alternate the parties that go out to the pool. My own hunch is that we'll be here for several days."

Margaret rewarded him with her radiant smile.

"O—oh!" Mary Crowley exclaimed, her blue eyes wide with concern. "It's way past dinner time. Come along, Margaret, we must get busy."

Laughing, the two girls hurried to the regions above.

It was at dinner the professor told them of the success of their quest. "Folks," he said, "we have come far, but have found a store of that which we came after that is immeasurably greater than I had imagined even in my wildest dreams. In this single pool there is a source of more radium than can be used by Coris and Tinus in a century. Why, the salt alone—that which encrusts its rim—contains, at the most conservative estimate, some five hundred pounds of pure radium."

"Pounds!" exclaimed Jack Dillon.

"Yes, pounds," smiled Professor Timken. "No longer will it be necessary for us to measure the element in grams, for we have available a source of supply which makes that tiny unit of measure inadequate and altogether ridiculous. A few days stay at this place, and a bit of hard work, and we'll be able to take back with us sufficient of the element to provide Earth and Venus both with supplies ample for all their requirements during the next decade."

"What does that mean in dollars?" Jack Dillon had half risen from his chair and a vernal glitter was in his eyes. He was flushed with excitement.

A silence greeted his words, Ralph Prescott, scanning the faces about the table, saw astonishment, incredulity—disgust even—in the expressions of his friends. Steve Gillette's brows had drawn close in sudden anger. Dillon dropped into his seat, in no-wise abashed.

"Why Jack, I hadn't figured it out." There was a slight edge to the professor's tone. "An incredible

fortune, you may be sure. Of course there will be a depreciation of the value of radium when this supply comes to Coris and Tinus, but—"

"But there will still be the control of the power industry, and other things." Dillon's jaw was set in grim lines and his close-set eyes were wild. His hands gripped the edge of the table and the knuckles showed white with the tautness of the tendons. He seemed to be a different man from the one with whom they had been associating.

"Y—yes." Professor Timken hesitated. "But, of course, it is understood that this is a joint expedition—of Queen Thalia's and Sorenson's. There can be no question—"

"Of course not." Dillon smiled and relaxed, passing his hand before his eyes as if he had been dazed. "I guess I was just overcome with the wonder of the thing; with its importance."

Those around the table breathed easier. All excepting Steve, who continued to stare at Ralph with an "I told you so" expression.

The professor went on—"The stuff is extremely dangerous to work with and we must use the utmost caution. The liquid contains a very high percentage of various radium salts and there is strong radiation of the very penetrating gamma rays. In addition, there are acids and other impurities of highly injurious character. The thin air is highly charged with radon, which, in itself is an intense source of beta and gamma radiation. Even with our protective equipment, we may not long remain near the pool."

"We can work in relays," Teddy suggested.

"Exactly—we'll have to," the professor agreed. "And my idea is this: we'll first remove the encrusted salt, which can be stored away in the thick lead containers which have been provided. Meanwhile an evaporator will be constructed by those who remain on board ship, and this will be used to remove the radium chlorides, bromides and hydroxides from the solution. With such an apparatus in operation for a few days, we will have an ample supply and there will be a minimum of exposure of any of us to the harmful radiations, since the equipment can be made to operate without attention. We'll merely set it up out by the pool, pumping the liquid to it with power obtained from the engine room of the vessel. I have already made a rough sketch of the evaporating equipment and work on it can be started immediately."

Conversation throughout the remaining courses of the meal was entirely with reference to the work that was ahead of them. Jack Dillon kept silence for a time, and when he again joined the discussion, he seemed to have recovered his normal composure.

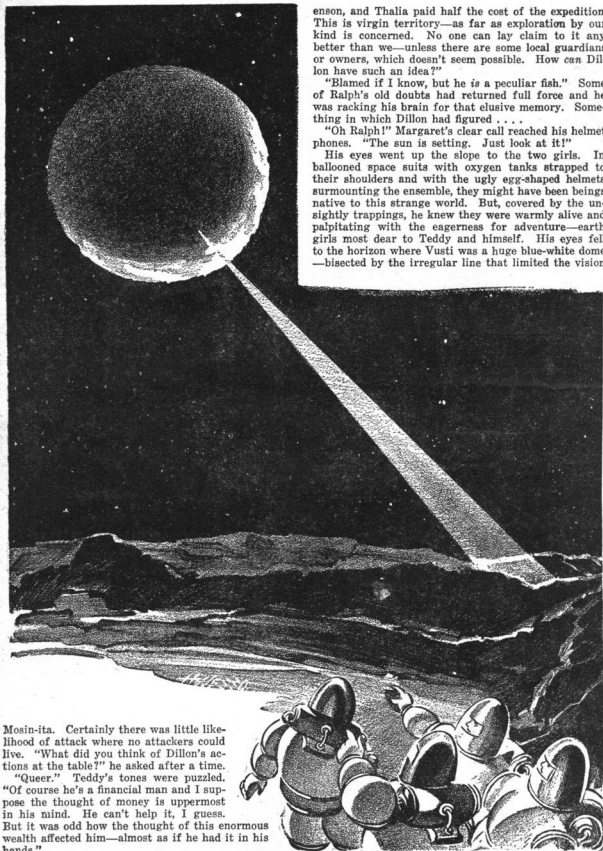
THE next party to venture forth from the *Blue Streak* comprised Ralph and Teddy, the two girls, who had insisted on going, and Soltur and Rastor, who were to start work on the removal of the salt crust from the edge of the pool. The entire party was armed.

Ralph insisted that the girls approach no closer than a hundred feet from the pool and neither of them demurred. They were far too interested in the geological formations about them, in the swift-moving sun, above, and particularly in the slender pinnacle to the rear of the pool. Margaret started clambering up the steep slope and Mary quickly followed.

"We'll have to keep an eye on those two," Ralph laughed. "They'll be climbing that spire, first thing we know, and will be falling off."

"Yes, they're a pair," Teddy's voice came through the earphones, "but they are well able to look out for themselves."

"Oh sure." Ralph was becoming more confident that no difficulties were to be met with during their stay on



Mosin-ita. Certainly there was little likelihood of attack where no attackers could live. "What did you think of Dillon's actions at the table?" he asked after a time. "Queer." Teddy's tones were puzzled. "Of course he's a financial man and I suppose the thought of money is uppermost in his mind. He can't help it, I guess. But it was odd how the thought of this enormous wealth affected him—almost as if he had it in his hands."

"Yes. I wonder if he has any idea he can get hold of it himself."

"How could he? The *Blue Streak* belongs to Sor-

enson, and Thalia paid half the cost of the expedition. This is virgin territory—as far as exploration by our kind is concerned. No one can lay claim to it any better than we—unless there are some local guardians or owners, which doesn't seem possible. How can Dillon have such an idea?"

"Blamed if I know, but he is a peculiar fish." Some of Ralph's old doubts had returned full force and he was racking his brain for that elusive memory. Something in which Dillon had figured . . .

"Oh Ralph!" Margaret's clear call reached his helmet phones. "The sun is setting. Just look at it!"

His eyes went up the slope to the two girls. In ballooned space suits with oxygen tanks strapped to their shoulders and with the ugly egg-shaped helmets surmounting the ensemble, they might have been beings native to this strange world. But, covered by the unsightly trappings, he knew they were warmly alive and palpitating with the eagerness for adventure—earth girls most dear to Teddy and himself. His eyes fell to the horizon where Vusti was a huge blue-white dome—bisected by the irregular line that limited the vision

The light spread suddenly into a huge flare and a stabbing pencil of flame came down from it to contact with the far-off horizon of Mosin-ita.

out there in the desert. And then he saw, coming up from the same horizon only a few degrees away, a gleaming crescent that rose as swiftly as the sun was setting. The delighted expressions of the two girls came to his ears.

"It's Mosin-ton," he called into the microphone, "the planet's twin. Rather like our own moon, isn't it?"

"Much larger though," Teddy put in.

"Yes."

There was silence for a space as they gazed with awe at the swift changing of the sky's aspect. Abruptly there was night, but a most brilliant night, for the light of Mosin-ton was strong and the stars shone steadily, their light hardly obstructed by an atmosphere. The girls came down from their lofty perch and joined their husbands.

"What a beautiful moon it makes," breathed Mary.

Ralph was looking at the darker portion of Mosin-ton. It was in quarter phase or thereabouts, and the shadowed part was only dimly seen. But Ralph thought he detected a spot of light near the edge opposite to the brilliantly illuminated crescent.

"Look Teddy!" he exclaimed. "See that red spot on the other edge? Like an artificial light, I mean."

"Yes, I do."

As Teddy replied, the light spread suddenly into a huge flare and a stabbing pencil of flame came down from it to contact with the far-off horizon of Mosin-ita. A ray or beam of blood red hue that bridged the distance between the two planets, holding them together for a few seconds before it vanished. Coincidentally there was a heavy tremor of the ground beneath them.

"Now, what in the devil's that?" grunted Ralph.

"Nothing; let's go back." Margaret clung to him as she spoke. "Soltur and Rastor are ready with their loads."

They returned to the ship, awed—wondering.

CHAPTER XIV

Jack Dillon Shows His Colors

THE succeeding days were busy ones for the adventurers. It was increasingly evident that they were alone in the radium desert in so far as living creatures were concerned. A peculiar form of vegetation had been discovered by the girls, a sort of semi-metallic moss that grew in the crevices of the red rock formation and was capable of moving its wire-like filaments in a manner suggestive of animal life. But they had seen no animals of any kind, nor any other living thing, so were becoming quite accustomed to the aloneness of their little party in a land quite arid and dead. Comings and goings through the airlock of the *Blue Streak* were frequent and attended with little excitement, and certainly none of the previous caution. Ralph Prescott still insisted, however, that no member of the party leave the ship unarmed.

In the lead lined storeroom of the vessel the supply of pure salts of radium was daily growing in volume. The professor's evaporator, which was a complete apparatus for reduction of the liquid of the pool by evaporation, distillation, and crystallization, functioned perfectly without attendance other than that needed in collecting its product in the lead containers and conveying it to the storeroom. But so rapid was the reduction process that this alone served to keep them busy. A motor driven pump was at work constantly carrying the fluid of the pool to the main retort of the apparatus, and, as the level of the pool was restored by the action of the geyser every three minutes, the process was an endless one. Great care was exercised in preventing the exposure of the workers to the dangerous radiations

of the material they were handling. And the professor made daily examinations of each one of them to make certain there had been no physiological effect.

During each twenty-four hour period there was a succession of sunrises and sunsets on Mosin-ita, as well as the rapidly shifting convolutions of Mosin-ton and its quick changes of phase. These phenomena, of such interest at first, soon became monotonous and occasioned but little notice on the part of the adventurers. And there had been no repetition of the appearance of the strange red light-beam they had seen at the beginning of their first night there.

At length there came the time when the storeroom was full—their work was done. Most of the voyagers were outside of the vessel during the dismantling of the professor's apparatus, and Margaret had led her husband to the ledge for a last sight of the ravine before their departure. The narrow stream of radium fluid, which had not flowed while the apparatus was in operation, was once more winding its way through the tortuous path that led through undulating yellow vapors to the chasm that finally swallowed it up.

"Ralph," her voice came petulantly to him, "this trip hasn't been any fun at all for Mary and me. Here we have made the long voyage to Vusti and have done our share of the work, and what have we seen or done? Nothing. Mosin-ita is a dead world, excepting for the fast-disappearing seas, and we've spent the past six days in the dreariest desert imaginable. Surely we aren't planning to return without exploring some of the other planets?"

"Why—I hadn't thought of it, Midge. But the professor thinks Lloxan and Mynta are inhabited, possibly one or two of the others. We might take a look at these if the rest agree and if things seem to be favorable. I'd rather like to do it myself."

Margaret chuckled. "I knew you would," she said, "and I know the others will want to; Mary and I have been doing a little inquiring."

"I might have known you would," Ralph laughed, "but say—look up there on the slope. Isn't that someone trying to climb the leaning spire?"

Margaret turned her helmeted head. "Why yes," she exclaimed, "it is Jack Dillon—I know him by the long package he carried when he came out. I wondered then what it was, and still wonder."

"It looks like a roll of cloth." Ralph stared at the bulky figure of Dillon as the man climbed laboriously up the steep side of the pinnacle. "Wonder what the fool is up to now."

They walked back to join Teddy and the professor. Ralph raised his arms and pointed up the slope. "Have a look," he muttered into his microphone. "It's Dillon; guess he's gone clean off his head."

They all watched the climber as he neared the tip of the rugged peak, marveling at his agility encumbered as he was by the space suit and wondering as to his purpose. And then Jack Dillon had unrolled his package; he planted on the lofty summit a short staff from which there unfurled the red and yellow flag of the Asiatic Empire of Earth! The dread emblem of that powerful combination which had set its mark of military force and financial aggrandizement upon the entire world of Tinus during the preceding decade. Out here in the wastes of Mosin-ita! It was incredible—Dillon claiming the territory and the radium deposits of this distant world in the name of that mysterious emperor against whom the Powers of Earth were preparing even now.

"Good Lord!" gasped the professor, "the one thing they need to put them in complete power—wealth like this—control of a commodity as important as manufactured energy. And, to think Dillon was in their

employ all this time and that we knew nothing!"

Ralph Prescott suddenly remembered. There had been suspicions of the relations of Dillon and Company with the far-eastern power in some of its shady financial transactions, suspicions quickly hushed by the subservient press. But these had been the memories that so eluded Ralph at first mention of Dillon's name in connection with the voyage. Had he but remembered in time . . .

"A crazy scheme!" he blurted. "They'll never get away with it. We are nine against one out here, and the power of the yellow emperor can not reach us. We'll—"

But Dillon had scrambled down from his perch and was approaching them with long determined strides. He stopped before them and thrust his helmet against Ralph's, eyes blazing through his visor.

"We'll return to Earth now," he snapped. "From this time on I am taking over the expedition in the name of him whose word must be obeyed. Do you understand?"

"No!" Ralph bellowed and lunged forward.

But, quick as a flash, a bright something glinted in Dillon's hand. There was the quick downward sweep of a curved blade, the ripping of the heavy rubberized fabric of Ralph's space suit and a stinging pain in his forearm. His suit collapsed as the oxygen pressure within it was released; his breathing was instantly labored and painful and his eyes smarted from the noxious gases of Mosin-ita's atmosphere.

In a daze of agony he saw Steve and Teddy close in; saw the futile snapping of their automatics—Dillon had withdrawn the charges—saw Dillon back away and fire a single shot from his own weapon, its explosive bullet shattering a nearby boulder. Foxy Jack Dillon—he was not disarmed. And then . . . Ralph's consciousness was slipping away from him . . . two strange figures came out of the *Blue Streak's* airlock . . . short stocky fellows in bulging space suits . . . armed. God!—they had been stowed away on board the vessel . . . Dillon wasn't alone . . .

Utter darkness swept down over Ralph and he knew no more.

WHEN consciousness returned, Ralph saw that he was on the floor of the *Blue Streak's* control room. Pure fresh air filled his lungs at each choking inhalation; his vision gradually cleared, and with the clearing came recollection. He sat up suddenly; saw that his space suit had been removed, and that his wounded forearm was bandaged.

Teddy Crowley was there, and Dillon. No one else was in sight.

"Where are they, you devil?" he demanded of Dillon, struggling to his feet. "If you've harmed them—"

The leering financier waved him back with the blunt nose of a French automatic pistol. "Calm yourself, my friend," he grinned, "your friends are quite safe—and your dear wife. All quite safe. And I wish to assure you that it is the desire of my master to settle this matter quite peaceably—quite. He has no desire to precipitate a world war at this time, nor an interplanetary war in our own solar system. Our seizure of the *Blue Streak* and its cargo is entirely a legal procedure, and it only remains for you to accept the situation gracefully in which event no harm will come to any of you whom I have come to know as friends."

"Friends!" scoffed Ralph, his lip curling. "You call this friendship? Smuggling your hired killers on board and taking the ship by force—it's damned piracy, that's what it is."

Teddy was warning him to silence by violent gestures made behind Dillon's back.

"Again you are wrong," Dillon said softly. "My killers, as you term them, are United States Deputy Sheriffs. The thing is merely a matter of business, as you shall see. John Sorenson, unfortunately, was involved in financial difficulties on account of the enormous cost of his etherships and his losses in operating them. My firm, P. J. Dillon and Company, holds many millions of dollars of Sorenson's paper and has obtained a writ of attachment on the *Blue Streak* and all it contains. All perfectly legal I assure you."

"There is no law out here in space," retorted Ralph, "At least no law of our own people. Your writ is not worth the paper it is written upon."

"You err once more, my dear Ralph." Dillon's voice held the note of a feline purr. "The *Blue Streak* is the property of an American citizen—myself—and, as such, is subject to the laws of the United States of America as soon as we enter the atmosphere of our own world. Meanwhile, as the new master of the vessel, I may find it necessary to hold her by force. I sincerely hope this will not be required. But, in any event, I shall be the law until we land in New York."

"You—you—" Ralph Prescott sputtered in his helplessness. "You the law! You an American citizen! Rather say you are a traitor to your country and a hireling of the scourge of the East. You can't do this thing, Dillon—in a court of law our word will—"

Dillon laughed uproariously. "I see you are slow in coming to your senses, friend Ralph," he chortled. "It is no more than I had expected from one so thick-witted. But you'll come around; you'll come around. I'll leave you to think it over."

Ralph lurched toward him with an ugly snarl as he turned his back and started leisurely up the stairs.

"Psst!" hissed Teddy. "It's no use. Hold everything."

"I'd like to—"

"Can't be done, Ralph. He has two yellow devils up there armed with our weapons. We're in for it, old man."

"But Ted, he can't get away with this. His position is untenable. No court on earth would—"

"Don't be too sure. You forget the present day corruption of our judiciary, and the widespread influence of the Asiatic monster. Why, even these deputies Dillon brought as stowaways—Lord knows how he did it—are Asiatics. And American citizens at the same time. Spies! No, Ralph, I'm afraid we're licked; Sorenson is licked. And hell will be to pay on Earth."

"What about Thalia's interests?"

"Dillon will merely refund the amount invested in the expedition by her government and will then have satisfied his legal obligations at home. That's all he cares about. He knows where he stands at home, never fear."

"But his connection with the Asiatics, Teddy. We can swear to it and he will be arrested as a traitor."

"Nonsense. There is no state of war and therefore no such thing as a traitor. Dillon will maintain the cherished peace of our world by means of his strictly legal claim, then sail away to northern Asia in the *Blue Streak* and renounce his own country. Who can touch him then, and who will be able to withstand the power of the vandals of the East once they are in possession of the radium?"

Ralph Prescott stared, speechless. This Dillon had laid his plans only too well. Not only to encompass the ruin of John Sorenson, but to further the designs of the Asiatics against the remainder of his world. And they had been nothing more than pawns in his game; he and Teddy and the professor, Thalia's scientists—all of them. Suddenly Ralph remembered the sealed packet Sorenson had sent to Teddy. Perhaps—

"Teddy," he exclaimed, "how about the envelope—the one that was not to be opened until you had reached Vusti? What's in it?"

"I don't know," Teddy gasped; it was obvious he had completely forgotten the packet. "I haven't opened it as yet—wait, here—"

Fumbling in his jacket, he drew forth the long envelope and ripped it open with trembling fingers. There was a legal document within, one printed on heavy paper and with an official seal attached. A slip of thinner paper fluttered to the floor and Teddy stooped to retrieve it.

"Dear Teddy," he read aloud before he had straightened, "this is the best I can do in appreciation of your long service and in part payment of compensation long merited by you but which I am unable otherwise to make. By the time you unseal this you will know what action to take. Sorenson."

For a moment he gazed at Ralph with unseeing eyes. Mechanically his fingers had opened the legal document. It was a deed to the *Blue Streak*! "Good Lord!" he husked. "See what Sorenson has done. The old man must have had a hunch."

"And a mighty good one," Ralph exulted. "If the date of this deed is earlier than that of Dillon's lien—check it, Ted—you've got him. It's your ship, your expedition. The spoils are yours to do with as you see fit."

"Not so fast," objected Teddy, scanning the deed. "We must think this over carefully—"

"Well put, friend Teddy," Dillon purred from the foot of the companionway. He had returned with one of his slant-eyed henchmen and was in a jovial mood. "Always think carefully, it—" His eyes fell on the paper in Teddy's hand. "What's this?" he demanded, striding forward.

Ted Crowley straightened his shoulders and gazed fixedly into the too close eyes of the man who had so suddenly revealed himself as their enemy. "It is the end of your little scheme, Dillon," he snapped. "My deed to the *Blue Streak*—recorded in Philadelphia four days before your writ was obtained. I own the vessel, Dillon, not you. What do you say to that?"

"You lie!" snarled the financier. "Let me see it. It's forged. It's a trick."

Knowing the destruction of the instrument would have no effect on the legality of the transfer, Teddy handed it to the wrathful Dillon.

"Where did you get this?" demanded the renegade when he had looked over the deed. But some of the assurance had left him; he recognized that the instrument was entirely in order.

"From Sorenson, where did you suppose?"

"I'll challenge its legality; it's a deed of gift." Dillon was beside himself with anger.

"Re-read the first clause," Teddy advised him calmly, "and you will see that the transfer is made in payment of salaries and royalty due me on certain of my patents, of which patents the numbers are included. No, Dillon, it is not a deed of gift. And you can not attach my property, since I have no obligations with Dillon and Company. You'll have to think up a new one."

Taken aback, Jack Dillon turned to his henchman and chattered a few rapid words in some outlandish tongue of the Orient.

"Very well then," he said stiffly, again facing Ralph and Teddy. "It shall be by force. I remain in charge of the *Blue Streak*."

"You would make war on your master?" Ralph said caustically. "I have heard that the mighty ruler of the Asiatic Empire deals harshly with those who disobey his instructions."

Dillon paled visibly, but held his ground. Seeing

Ralph crouch as if to spring to the attack, he withdrew the automatic from his belt and fingered its trigger lovingly. "I shall take that chance," he retorted evenly. "The treasure carried by the *Blue Streak* should be of some assistance in persuading him whose will must be obeyed. He wants peace, to be sure, but I have an idea he will listen to the reason that is in our cargo of radium. If not—" Dillon shrugged his shoulders suggestively. "—I still believe I can take care of myself and my interests."

But the bleak lines about his mouth belied the boldness of his speech. And the flinching of his slant-eyed companion gave evidence of the fear that was aroused by the thought of acting contrary to the instructions of that mysterious emperor of the Asiatics.

"Crazy," said Teddy. "He thinks he is Napoleon."

AT that instant the *Blue Streak* shivered as under a tremendous impact. The lights of the control room were dimmed by a lurid flare that surrounded them and the vessel rocked to a violent heaving of the surface of Mosin-ita. Dillon's cheeks went gray.

"God!" he whispered. "Why didn't I leave the cursed place? What is it, Crowley?"

Ralph and Teddy rushed to the viewing port. "Scared, are you?" Ralph flung over his shoulder.

Out there in the night of Mosin-ita there was a huge circle of intense red light, cast by a beam that came down to them from out the heavens. The red light, although so brilliant as to outshine any artificial illumination of Coris or Tinus, did not blind them or obstruct their vision in any way. It was a pulsating transparent medium, a ray of some unknown energy through which they could see as if it were a column of brightly lighted colored liquid. And, through its interminable length they were able to distinguish the gleaming half-moon of Mosin-ita's twin.

"Mosin-ton!" gasped Teddy. "It's the red beam from Mosin-ton."

"What does it mean?" quavered Dillon. The Orientals had fled to the upper regions at first sight of the pulsating redness.

"How do I know?" snarled Teddy. "Wait."

Jack Dillon's fearful curiosity was soon satisfied, for a drum-shaped transparent vessel swooped down the red beam and came to rest beside the *Blue Streak*. And in the strange vehicle were manlike beings who stared through the control room windows at the three figures within. Beings of stature greater even than the Corisians; beings whose stalwart forms were covered with overlapping discs of metal that shone like polished cobalt and whose slittike eyes were upon them speculatively. A fleeting glimpse was all they had before the vessel rose skyward.

And then the *Blue Streak* was heaved from her berth as if by some Brobdingnagian hand of the cosmos; heaved mightily and flung into the heavens with such speed as to flatten the three earthlings to the control room floor. But there was no sound from the *Blue Streak*'s atomic engines; she was at the mercy of some mysterious force which was hurling her toward Mosin-ton with terrific velocity.

The red glow was all around them, lighting their faces eerily as they drove on into space. Still they were held fast to the floor by the swift acceleration, for the internal gravity apparatus of the *Blue Streak* had not been functioning. And the hull plates of the vessel set up a wailing vibration in the beam of energy that carried them on.

Teddy Crowley laughed crazily. "Good joke on you, Dillon," he cackled. "Mighty good joke. The kidnapers kidnaped. How does it feel, eh—how do you like it?" There was no reply.

CHAPTER XV

The Metal Men of Mosin-ton

THE journey was swift—as swift as if the *Blue Streak* had navigated it under her own power—but was extremely uncomfortable to the passengers on account of the subjection of their bodies to the full pressure of acceleration and deceleration. A dozen times on the way Teddy struggled to reach the starting mechanism of their internal gravity and compensating apparatus, and a dozen times he failed. Human muscles could not avail against that force which held them fast.

Eventually their movement became less rapid; the vessel slowed down sufficiently to enable them to get to their feet and stretch their cramped muscles. Jack Dillon looked crestfallen.

"Well, what'll it be Dillon—war?" Ralph demanded. "Or do you prefer joining forces against this common enemy? If they are enemies?"

The surface of Mosin-ton spread before them and the *Blue Streak* was drifting down the red light-beam to a huge circular plate from which it emanated. A number of the transparent drum-shaped vessels were beneath them, likewise nearing the great disc of glowing red.

Dillon's gaze was uneasy; he dropped his eyes before Ralph's accusing stare. "I'll stick with you," he mumbled.

"Good," said Ralph. "Now then, up to the arsenal for weapons and mentascope. We'll have to go out and meet them, that's sure."

He was bounding up the stairs on the last word and Dillon followed with Teddy Crowley. A hasty inspection convinced him that Margaret and Mary were unharmed. None of the party had been injured with the exception of Professor Timken, who was nursing a badly sprained ankle that had been caused by the lurching of the *Blue Streak* when first she was flung skyward in the midst of the red beam. Jack Dillon snapped an order that caused his henchmen to sheath their weapons.

Ralph decided they should go out in force to meet the inhabitants of Mosin-ton and armed all of the men excepting Therin and the professor with the small calibre Frenchite automatic pistols. Professor Timken, with his injured ankle, was unable to stand, and Therin was delegated to remain behind in the vessel to care for him and to act as a guard for the girls. Mary and Margaret, although objecting strenuously at first, consented to the arrangement—temporarily. They warned Ralph and Teddy they would have their innings later.

Jack Dillon offered no objections to the arming of the party and seemed to be in a subdued mood. The two Orientals he had so cleverly secreted in the storage compartments of the vessel remained silent and stolid onlookers, apparently unmoved by the change in the situation. Ralph personally supervised the distribution of ammunition and obtained a number of mentascopes from the storeroom. By the time these preparations were completed and the landing party was assembled in the control room, the *Blue Streak* had come to rest on the great metal disc of the red beam of Mosin-ton. Suddenly its lurid glow snuffed out.

A glance at the manometer showed Ralph that a considerable atmosphere was present, its density being about seven tenths of that at the surface of his own world.

"We shall await their demonstrations," he announced. "Why not start our engines and try for a getaway with our repulsion energy?" Jack Dillon said meekly.

Ralph looked over at Teddy, who was shaking his head. "No," said the new owner of the *Blue Streak*. "They'd have that red beam of theirs in action in an instant, and I'm afraid it would be disastrous—the conflict of forces, you know."

"We'd better face them," Ralph decided. "They do not seem to be armed, and really appear to be making friendly advances."

"You never can tell," Dillon mumbled, then subsided.

Ralph thought he saw a meaning look flash from those close-set eyes toward one of the slant-eyed Orientals. But there was no answering gleam of comprehension in the flat face of Jack's henchman, and he decided he must have been mistaken. At any rate, the odds now were greatly against Dillon. And, besides, one of the mail-clad humans of Mosin-ton was gesticulating below the control room window.

"He's beckoning for us to disembark," exclaimed Teddy, "and his hands are empty. He has no weapon of any sort that I can see."

"Yes, and the others have withdrawn to the edge of the disc to show us they are not unfriendly. Palms spread wide, too, all of them. That's clear enough, I think. We'll land. But, remember men, until we are sure, we do not go far from the ship. Be ready to defend yourselves if necessary and to retreat to the vessel at once if I give the word. I'd rather take the chance inside than out, if it comes to anything like that."

The airlock doors were opened wide and Ralph was first to step forth to the gleaming metal of the disc on which the *Blue Streak* was resting. The tall metal-covered being of Mosin-ton advanced toward him with hands outstretched in a curious gesture that could mean nothing but a desire to make friends. And then Ralph saw, with a start, that the big fellow's fingers were covered with the same metallic scales as his body. And his cheeks were the same, excepting of much finer texture. His eyelids, even, were shining metal caps that clicked audibly as he blinked. This was no metal-clad being but a man whose entire bodily covering was metallic, whose joints were of corrugated metal like a sylphon bellows. The metal was a part of him, as of all his kind, and he wore no removable clothing of any sort.

A series of musical sounds issued from his throat, sounds strangely resembling the mellow notes of a violoncello and rising and falling rapidly in smooth tone combinations that fell pleasantly on the ear. Such was the speech of the metal men of Mosin-ton.

The others from the *Blue Streak* were crowding about them, but none of the metal men had come in toward them from the edge of the great disc. Evidently this one was their spokesman and they were leaving the entire matter in his hands. Ralph made haste to adjust a mentascope to his own head and extended another to the metal man.

The big fellow understood instantly and commenced adjusting the caplike contrivance to his glistening cranium. The first thought that flashed from his brain to Ralph's was one of unreserved welcome and friendly curiosity as to the identity of the visitors. There was no dissembling here; the metal man's thought impulses and the images on his mentascope disc were clear and distinct, there being utter absence of the clouding and veiling that indicated an attempt to repress the true feelings of the wearer.

Behind Ralph there was a sudden commotion; Steve Gillette's quick angry voice: "Dillon, you skunk! Trying to—"

They heard the spang of Steve's automatic and the explosion of its tiny pellet against the hull plates of the *Blue Streak* at the rim of the entrance port. The

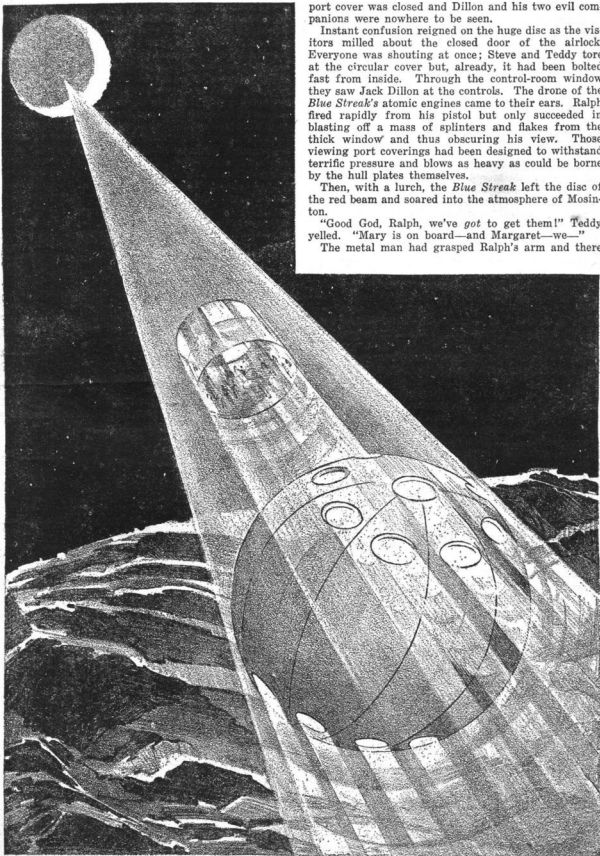
port cover was closed and Dillon and his two evil companions were nowhere to be seen.

Instant confusion reigned on the huge disc as the visitors milled about the closed door of the airlock. Everyone was shouting at once; Steve and Teddy tore at the circular cover but, already, it had been bolted fast from inside. Through the control-room window they saw Jack Dillon at the controls. The drone of the *Blue Streak's* atomic engines came to their ears. Ralph fired rapidly from his pistol but only succeeded in blasting off a mass of splinters and flakes from the thick window and thus obscuring his view. Those viewing port coverings had been designed to withstand terrific pressure and blows as heavy as could be borne by the hull plates themselves.

Then, with a lurch, the *Blue Streak* left the disc of the red beam and soared into the atmosphere of Mosinton.

"Good God, Ralph, we've got to get them!" Teddy yelled. "Mary is on board—and Margaret—we—"

The metal man had grasped Ralph's arm and there



And then the Blue Streak was heaved from her berth as if by some Brobdingnagian hand of the cosmos . . . and flung into the heavens . . .

flashed from his mentascope the command to clear the disc, the assurance that the red beam would capture the escaped vandals.

"Off the disc everyone!" Ralph shouted. "Quick! The red beam'll get 'em. Off, I say."

They were racing then, pell mell, toward the rim where the other metal men were scrambling down out of sight. Over its edge was a runway which encircled the great pit in which the disc swung. The drop to the runway was only a few feet and Ralph's entire party quickly negotiated the leap. The one who wore the mentascope was running toward a domelike building nearby. There came the roar of huge generators from within and the disc of the red beam turned slowly upward to an angle in which it faced the swiftly disappearing sphere that was the *Blue Streak*. And the red beam flashed forth with a wailing note that spoke of the tremendous energy it held.

A moment the *Blue Streak* was bathed in its lurid glare and then, with a violent lurch, it had flung out of the influence and was driving off over the surface of Mosin-ton in another direction. The beam swung around, following it, but the spherical vessel zigzagged with astounding rapidity and successfully dodged it. In another instant the *Blue Streak* had dived into a low cloud bank and was gone.

"They've failed," Ralph groaned. "And Dillon has won. What fools we are!" He stared white-faced at Teddy.

Others of the metal men were about them, endeavoring to communicate with them by means of signs and gestures.

"They want us to enter the dome-shaped building," Steve Gillette interpreted the gestures. "Come on."

In the power plant of the red beam—for such the domelike structure proved to be—they found the metal man who wore the mentascope. He sat before a vertical screen on which the heavens were pictured, and his fingers wandered over a maze of delicate controls that were set in a semicircle about him. Swift questionings flashed from his mentascope when he saw Ralph.

"Here, you'd better get this," Ralph said to Teddy. "He's asking about the construction of our vessel, its source of power and the metals of which it is constructed. You can tell him better than I." He tossed his friend one of the caplike contrivances, and watched the flashing images of the two discs when Teddy had it adjusted.

As the inventor told the metal man of the atomic engines and of the alloys comprising hull plates and other portions of the *Blue Streak* his nimble scaled fingers swept over the controls before him and there was a swift changing of the view on the screen to cover another portion of the heavens.

The manipulator of the apparatus explained to Teddy and Ralph that the red beam was combined with a long range viewing instrument similar to their own radio telescope. It was television perfected to the utmost and capable of nearly as great magnification as the telescope of the Royal Observatory of Seritania.*

IN addition to its other capabilities, this red beam apparatus of Mosin-ton was provided with detectors of electronic and magnetic forces by means of which the presence of metallic objects in space might be ob-

served to a distance of several light years. Originally, the metal men had learned of the presence of the *Blue Streak* on Mosin-ita by an accidental visual observation; now it was necessary to know the characteristics of the sphere's construction in order to make the proper adjustments of the apparatus for locating it in the trackless wastes of the heavens.

Great glittering machines that filled the domed power plant purred and throbbed in rhythm with the motions of the metal-men's fingers, and the screen before him showed an ever-changing panorama of constellations and nearer heavenly bodies as the energies swept the skies in search of the *Blue Streak*. Probably fifty of the metal men of Mosin-ton were gathered around the platform of the controls, keeping respectful and deeply concerned silence. The visitors were a huddled, anxious group close by the manipulator of the mechanisms.

Steve Gillette, impatient to learn more of these strange people, obtained two mentascopes and was soon in mental communication with one of those who remained in the background.

"Do you think your leader will be able to locate our vessel?" he asked.

"It is an extremely difficult matter," came the quick mental response of the metal man. "The universe is large and the ship of space infinitesimally small. I should hesitate to pass judgment on the probabilities. However, our chief scientist will do everything that is possible."

"Suppose he does locate it," Steve worried. "Will he be able to bring it back by means of the red beam?"

"That, likewise, is a question. The beam has a range only great enough to reach the limits of our own solar system. If your ship of space is located quickly, the thing will be possible. Otherwise—"

"Otherwise we're stranded here," said the mechanic gloomily, "and two swell girls are in the power of the worst crook in the universe. Professor Timken, too, and Therin."

It was the questioner's turn to be questioned and Steve was glib and emphatic in his explanation of the situation which had led up to the seizing of the vessel which had brought them. The metal man gave wholehearted attention to the details and expressed an understanding and sympathy that warmed the mechanic's heart.

"What do they call you?—What's your name?" inquired Steve.

Two musical notes were the reply, notes that reminded Steve of the call of the cuckoo. From that time forth the name of his informant became that of the terrestrial bird to the genial earthling.

"Cuckoo—a good enough name," grinned Steve.

"Seems to me we're all going to get along fine." He rejoined his friends. "Just been talking to one of the metal men," he said to Ralph, "and he's for us. They all are."

But Ralph Prescott was too intent upon the screen and the efforts of the chief scientist to heed Steve's chatter. Lloxan, the planet of the Vusti system that was largest of all, loomed in their vision and was gone. Ap, farthest of all in its distance from the sun, was a scintillating green orb with two satellites, stationary for a moment, then moving slowly off the green. And then a brilliant flash, as whitely intense as a magnesium flare, brought a startled trilling note from the chief scientist of the metal men.

"It is your vessel," he conveyed to them, "traveling with inconceivable velocity and almost within the orbit of our outer planet."

There came an instant shrieking of massive mechanisms about them and the red beam shot forth into the

* The musical toned speech of the Mosin-tonians never became understandable to the visitors from our solar system, though they learned later to identify certain simple sequences by which common objects and the names of a few individuals were indicated. The moods of the speakers, however, were more easily interpreted from the tone shadings and accenting of high and low notes, the *large* of righteous indignation, the *ascending* of excitement, the *risando* of doubt, and the *preda* of impatience being most readily understood. In the narrative, any words attributed to the metal men are necessarily rather free translations of the thought images and impulses of the mentascopes.

heavens. With the speed of light its far end drove out into the blackness toward the *Blue Streak*. The watchers held their breath as it progressed with seeming deliberation and sluggishness. The speed of light, and yet it moved slowly! For the distance to Ap was great; more than a half billion miles, they were advised by the metal-skinned scientist, though nearly in inferior conjunction at this time.

Teddy Crowley figured rapidly in his head. Nearly three quarters of a terrestrial hour would be required in reaching out to the orbit of Ap. The beam was too slow! Already the *Blue Streak* would have an acceleration that would take it out of the range of the beam in a very few minutes. The attempt of the metal man was useless!

Haltingly, he told Ralph the facts. In bitter silence the two men watched the efforts of the chief scientist and with sinking hearts they saw the brilliant light point that was the *Blue Streak* as it drew away from the advancing end of the red beam.

And Steve Gillette whispered of the bad news to his companions.

At length the metal man gave it up. The red beam flicked off and the great generators slowed down.

"It is of no avail," his thought message informed them. "This ship of yours has done the impossible in exceeding the velocity of etheric waves. We can not reach it. The thing is the most regrettable and I can only offer, in some slight consolation for your loss, and in the name of my people, a home among us. In time you may be happy here. Or—" He hesitated, obviously deep in thought. "Or, if you will provide us with plans and specifications, perhaps we can build another ship for you, one that will travel as speedily as this one, and in which you may be able to return to your own land."

Teddy brightened somewhat at this, but Ralph Prescott was in the depths of misery and gloominess.

It was an unhappy party the metal men escorted to one of the drum-shaped vehicles which was to convey them to the nearby city.

OF the succeeding journey and events Ralph sensed but hazy impressions. He knew they had entered the flattened circular vessel with the transparent sides; knew that a smaller red beam flashed out from a gleaming disc and catapulted them into the air. He saw a gently rolling countryside slipping away beneath them, a green countryside like that of his own world. The low whisperings of his companions were a meaningless babel in his ears.

Teddy was in earnest telepatic conversation with the chief scientist of the metal men and his lean features were drawn and bleak. But to this Ralph gave no more heed than to the other sights and sounds.

They crossed a broad verdant valley where domed dwellings clustered. Other slender red beams crossed and criss-crossed in the air about them; other flattened transparent cylinders flashed by. A great city spread before them, a city of multitudinous domes and wide avenues whose sides were planted with brilliant-flowered vegetation. But to Ralph Prescott all this meant less than nothing, for Margaret had been torn from his side by a conscienceless and ruthless enemy.

His thoughts were with her, in the far-off heavens, a captive in the speeding *Blue Streak*. He visioned Jack Dillon's leering triumph; thought of the two slant-eyed ones who would do his every bidding. The professor and Therin, he knew, could not prevail against these three, especially with the injury that had temporarily crippled the doughty scientist. Dillon would see to it that they remained unarmed; he would place one of his guards at the door of the arsenal and would

hold it against all comers. Mary and Margaret, he had good reason to remember, were plucky and high-spirited girls. They were afraid of nothing and would resist to the best of their ability. But the odds against them were far too great; if they put up a fight Dillon and his henchmen would not hesitate to murder them. Worse, perhaps.

The transparent vessel had come to rest on a broad plaza in the city of domes. Teddy's voice was in Ralph's ear, rousing him.

"Come on, old man," it husked, "I know exactly how you feel. I feel the same way. But we'll have to make the best of it. Everything possible has been done; everything will be done. And all may not be lost yet. Listen: this chief scientist of the metal men is sure he can duplicate the *Blue Streak* in record time. That's what we've been discussing. They have shops, workmen, all materials we need. And radium—plenty of it. We'll go out after Dillon. He is apt to lose his course; the professor, even, may be able to delay him. We'll get him, you hear? Come on now—buck up—"

But Teddy's voice trailed off in discouragement; he did not believe his own words.

And Ralph was inconsolable.

CHAPTER XVI

On Board the Blue Streak

PROFESSOR Timken's injury, though not serious, was a painful one. The ankle swelled rapidly, and Margaret Prescott insisted that he allow her to bathe and bind it for him. Mary Crowley went to the first aid cabinet for bandages while Margaret was obtaining hot water from the galley. Therin assisted the professor to his stateroom. Meanwhile, the landing party was leaving the airlock below.

The professor fussed and fumed as Margaret removed his shoe and prepared to attend him with all the assurance of a professional nurse. "Confound it," he growled, "it is just my luck to have a thing like this happen at such a time. I'll be laid up for several days, I fear, and will miss some most interesting experiences. These men with the metal hides are, I am sure, a most intelligent race and of great scientific attainment. And friendly, as well."

"You'll not miss anything," Margaret consoled him. "We'll find a crutch, or have Steve make one, and you can hobble out there with the rest—later."

"If they'll permit it," Mary put in drily. "Ralph and Teddy, I mean. They are so almighty careful of us you'd think we were made of china, and they'll be as bad with the professor now that he has been hurt."

Margaret tossed her dark head. "We'll take care of them," she averred. "They'll not be able to hold us for long."

The professor laughed, then sobered. "I wonder how they managed to subdue Dillon. He was as meek as a lamb when they came up from the control room, and those two stowaways of his as well."

"There was something about a paper, a deed," said Therin. "John Sorenson transferred ownership of the *Blue Streak* to Teddy, I believe."

Mary's eyes were starry. "Sorenson is a dear," she said.

"I'll wager Dillon will not give up," the professor stated, shaking his head in doubt. "He would like to do the thing legally if possible, but his natural cupidity is such that he will stop at nothing to get this fortune in radium. You'll see." He winced suddenly. "Ouch, Margaret, that hurts."

"Sorry, Professor, but it has to be tight." Margaret Prescott continued winding the bandage. "It will feel better after a while."

A sharp clang resounded throughout the vessel, a sound as of the vicious slamming of the entrance port cover. Then a muffled explosion that set the floorplates atremble beneath their feet.

"What in time is that?" exclaimed the scientist.

Mary started for the door but Therin was before her. "Wait," he begged, "I'll go down."

They heard the big Corisian clattering down the stairs, but there were no further sounds of an alarming nature.

"Hope we were not mistaken about the friendliness of the natives," Margaret said as she completed the final tying of her bandage. "I can't imagine—"

A familiar sound interrupted her—the rising drone of the *Blue Streak's* atomic engines.

"What—they can't have returned to the vessel—" Mary began.

And then Therin stood in the doorway of the state-room, his honest features contorted with rage. "It's Dillon," he panted. "He and his two satellites deserted the others and sneaked back into the ship. It is plain that they are planning to make away with it."

Mary Crowley choked back a scream. Margaret rose from her task, her dark eyes blazing. Like a whirlwind of fury she was out of the room, bound for the regions below. Mary and Therin followed.

They were stopped at the head of the control room companionway by Dillon's men, who faced them with leveled pistols. By the heaving of the floor they knew that the vessel was already in motion.

"It is very regrettable," said one of the Orientals suavely but firmly. "Orders are that you be confined to your staterooms and we must respectfully request that you retire to them at once."

"What!" stormed Margaret. "Is Jack Dillon so—"

But the muzzle of a pistol thrust her back none too gently and her words were cut short abruptly. Instantly Therin's big hand shot forth and grasped the fellow's wrist, twisting it until he groaned and let his pistol drop to the floor. But it was the big Corisian's last act, for the second Oriental fired point blank into his body. There was the crashing explosion of French-fire within him and Therin was literally blasted apart. His mangled body collapsed in a horrible quivering heap. Mary Crowley cried out with horror, but this did not deter her in the least from grappling with the first Asiatic for possession of the pistol he had dropped. Taking advantage of the confusion, Margaret dived for the companioway and was down the stairs before the other realized what she was doing.

A red glow filled the control room and she had a fleeting glimpse of the great disc beneath them and of a stream of humans racing toward a huge dome nearby. Jack Dillon was at the controls, struggling to drive the *Blue Streak* out of the red beam's influence.

Margaret was upon him then, dragging his left hand free of a glittering lever with a strength born of her fear and anger. "What are you doing?" she raged. "You can't leave them here like this, Jack, you can't do it! Ralph and—and all of them—you—"

But Dillon flung her off so roughly that she lost her balance and fell heavily to the floorplates. Struggling to regain her feet, she was thrown again by a violent lurch of the vessel. The red glow was gone; Dillon had been successful in pulling out of its energy stream and was driving the vessel off over the surface of the planet at a terrific rate of speed. Dodging this way and that with incredibly swift manipulations of the complicated controls to escape the searching finger of red. Increasing the power until the ship screamed through the atmosphere and the air became stifling from the heat of friction. Jack Dillon had profited well by Teddy's instructions.

Margaret sprawled helplessly; was flung again and again to the floor as she tried to rise. For the plunging of the vessel in its mad dodging maneuvers made it impossible to stand erect. Dillon, even though he was well back in the deeply cushioned pilot's bucket seat and was holding to its pedestal with feet entwined in the grillwork, was scarcely able to hold to the controls.

A billowy area of white clouds hid the planet from their view and Dillon shouted gleefully. The *Blue Streak* steadied on her course and the cloud area dropped away beneath them with dizzying speed. He had thrown on full repulsion and the vessel hurtled away from Mosin-ton with the maximum acceleration of which it was capable.

Sitting dejectedly by one of the floor ports, watching Mosin-ton as it changed swiftly from a great bowl to a sphere and then dwindled rapidly in size, Margaret swallowed hard. A painful lump was in her throat and her eyes smarted with the salt of unshed tears. But there was nothing she could do to prevent this thing Dillon had planned so carefully. Later, perhaps. She determined to play for time in which to think things over and to plan.

"Well," she exclaimed resignedly, getting to her feet at last and making a nervous attempt to straighten her disarranged attire. "It seems you have succeeded, Jack." She shrugged her shoulders as he turned to face her with a triumphant grin. "It is a terrible thing for Mary and me, but I guess there is nothing we can do about it."

"That's the stuff," Dillon approved. "You'll find I'm not such a bad fellow after all. I had to do this, Margaret—there was no other way. Even though I hated to leave them back there. And I'll tell you what I'll do: if you and Mary are good little girls, I'll not have you locked up as I intended."

"Thanks," Margaret said drily. But she made a brave attempt to smile.

Dillon's eyes narrowed speculatively. "Mind though," he snapped. "This is no picnic—it's the real thing. And you and Mary had better not try any funny business. My men will be watching your every move, and if I find you are up to anything, I'll lock the two of you in your cabins on synthetic food and water for the entire journey to Earth. Do you understand this?"

"Yes," Margaret dropped her eyes demurely, but scornful fury was in her heart.

LATER she and Mary discussed the situation while they were preparing the first meal Dillon had asked for. They spoke in whispers and used the Corisian tongue, with which both were sufficiently familiar to make an ordinary conversation possible.

"We might put arsenic in their food," Mary suggested darkly.

"We couldn't, even if we wanted to—you know that. Dillon is no fool; he'll make us eat everything we have prepared before he or his men will touch it. Besides, we're not poisoners."

"Of course—I was only joking. But what shall we do?"

"We must talk it over with the professor as soon as we get an opportunity. Perhaps he may be able to suggest something. I'm sure Jack Dillon hasn't learned enough about the operation of the vessel to be able to navigate the entire trip himself. He'll be calling on the professor for help and—"

"You mean we might get him off his course?"

"No, Mary, we'd all be lost then. But—"

A suave voice spoke from the galley door; one of Dillon's slant-eyed minions was there smiling oilyly. "You will please be so kind as to converse in the Eng-

lish tongue hereafter," he purred. "It is the command of the master."

"Very well," said Mary stiffly, her blue eyes flashing fire. This was the one with whom she had scuffled in the engine room.

"It is my desire," he continued, gazing unabashed into her flushed face, "to apologize for the rough treatment it was necessary to use with madame. I trust you will understand the exigency and will pardon your so humble servant. It was a regrettable occurrence."

Mary opened her mouth to speak but no words came. She was too thunderstruck at the fellow's effrontery; too furious with herself and with him to reply. But she found herself nodding stupidly like one of those dolls she had seen with a coil-spring neck. The leering Asiatic bowed himself out.

Margaret giggled hysterically. And then they were laughing and crying by turns, clasped in each other's arms.

JACK DILLON visited the professor in his stateroom. "I've a proposition to make to you," he said flatly. Professor Timken sputtered and shook his fist impotently. With one foot tightly bandaged and propped up on a pillow, he was in no position to offer any physical resistance. Besides, there was the pistol in Dillon's belt. "I'll have no dealings with such as you," he roared. "You're a thief and a murderer, Dillon, and I demand that you return at once to Mosin-ton."

The financier laughed appreciatively and dropped carelessly into an easy chair, lighting a cigarette and exhaling noisily and profusely before replying. "It is no use, my dear professor," he said lightly. "Only consider your position and the position of the young ladies who are, properly, your responsibility. By judicious questioning of the inventor of the ethership and of yourself, I have learned much concerning the operation of the ship and likewise of the navigation of space. But my knowledge still is limited and I must confess that I need your help in bringing the *Blue Streak* safely to Earth. You are in my power, Professor, you and the two women. The arsenal is locked—you have no weapons and are unable to obtain them. I can kill you if I wish, but this is not my desire. I am no murderer at heart; my only ambition is for the utmost in wealth and power in our own fair world. And I want you to do this: I want you to make the necessary observations to set the shortest and swiftest course to our own solar system. In return, when the radium had been landed in a certain mountain fastness of Asia, I promise to turn over to you the *Blue Streak* and to allow you to come back to Vusti for your friends. Isn't that fair?"

"What good is your promise?"

Dillon flared up at this. "You are in no position to question my integrity, Professor. All's fair in love and war—this is war—but I'll keep this promise."

"If I refuse?"—gently, from the professor's pinched lips.

"I'll chance the journey myself,"—grimly, "with the two girls as the only passengers. I can find our world, eventually. It may take two or three months instead of one—time that I hate to lose but will sacrifice if absolutely necessary—but I'll find it. And you'll not be here, Professor. Not in the flesh, at least. You'll be locked in the radium storeroom to die of whatever it is that radium in such intense concentration does to one. And your friends will remain in Mosin-ton."

The professor paled, but was adamant. "Never. I'll not do it," he avowed.

"Not even for the girls?" Dillon's face was close to his own, an evil grin writhing over his features. Professor Timken shuddered. "Not even to assure their safety?" Dillon insisted.

"Why—why, what do you mean?"

"My two Asiatics, Professor, are men of mad impulses and of little scruple. It may be I shall not be able to control them—if you turn down my offer."

"God!—you're worse than I thought, Dillon. If I consent, you'll see to it that—"

"I'll keep my men under control, Professor—it is a solemn promise." Jack Dillon rose, smiling down at the scientist who seemed suddenly to be an old old man.

"I'll do it, I'll do it," rasped Professor Timken. "Get me a crutch, or help me up to the observatory, Dillon, but God have mercy on you if you betray this trust."

"That's better, much better." The greedy financier rubbed his palms together with satisfaction, then, with a sudden change of mood, gripped the professor's shoulders in fingers of steel. "But remember, old boy, one false move on your part is the signal that all bets are off. I'll be watching you—my men will be watching Mary and Margaret. See that you give me the right course. Constantly, mind you. And don't think for a minute that I'm too stupid to catch you in any trick you might try. Get it?"

"Yes, I get it," the professor said hopelessly.

Margaret Prescott looked in at that moment. It had been her intention to inquire as to her patient's condition—and to converse with him on other matters, but she hesitated when she saw his visitor.

"Tell her, Prof, tell her," Dillon demanded.

Haltingly, the professor told of his agreement with their captor. He looked fearfully for signs of disapproval as he talked but was relieved to see Margaret's eyes brighten and a look of hope and satisfaction replace the anxiety that had been in her pretty round face.

"Oh, that is wonderful," she said, turning to Jack Dillon. "At least it is far better than what I had feared. Truly, will you do as you say—let us return for our husbands and the others?"

"Truly. I promise on my word of honor—if you're a good little girl." Dillon smiled down at her with what seemed to be the deepest sincerity.

"And you think they'll be safe on Mosin-ton while we are away?" Margaret asked of the professor.

"I'm sure of it,"—gravely. "The metal men, to me, appeared to be quite humanlike and sympathetic. But—"

"No buts," interposed Dillon, helping the professor from his bunk. "We are already out in the realm of space-time and our course must be plotted." He turned to Margaret. "And I agree with the professor, my dear. Ralph and the rest of them will be quite safe in Mosin-ton until your return. Just forget your fears now, won't you?"

Margaret nodded brightly, but Professor Timken was assailed with grave doubts as he hobbled up the stairs to the observatory on Dillon's arm. To him it had seemed that there was an undertone of duplicity in their captor's speech. And a lecherous gleam in his too close eyes.

HASTENING to join Mary Crowley in the galley, Margaret bubbled over with the news. Mary, with her tall youthful body bent over the electric cooker and her blond head swaying from time to time, seemed to be paying little attention. She offered no comment when the story was finished.

"What's the matter with you?" her friend asked in aggrieved tone. "Aren't you glad?"

Mary straightened, and the wisdom of her newspaper experience was in her level gaze. "I don't trust Dillon," she said flatly, "and it's my idea that we had better get back to the scheme of the poison."

"Mary!"

"I mean it, but I think we should feed it to ourselves."

Margaret flushed hotly as the import of her friend's words became clear. But surely Jack Dillon was not *that* sort. A cold calculating man, and one who would hesitate at no villainy which would further his own ambitions. But it was money and power he craved, not—

A silky voice broke in from the doorway. "The master wishes me to inquire if dinner is ready."

Mary Crowley glared at the grinning Oriental. "Tell him it'll be on the table in ten minutes," she replied savagely. "And get out of here!"

The tension was relieved as the two girls laughed over the quick retirement of the discomfited messenger.

NO untoward incident marked the remainder of the day's journey. Mary, it appeared, had lost much of her suspicion, for she joined her friend in numerous visits to the control room. Jack Dillon acted as if nothing out of the ordinary had occurred and maintained the same respectful attitude toward the girls that had marked his conduct during the trip from Coris. And he was pushing the *Blue Streak* to a greater acceleration than had Teddy Crowley. Each hour that passed increased their speed by the equivalent of the velocity of light. They would make the return journey in about three weeks instead of a month at this rate, and Professor Timken had assured them that the engines were not overloaded in the slightest degree.

When it was time to retire, the two girls decided to occupy the same stateroom together, but Dillon shook his head.

"No," he said, "I don't quite trust you two conspirators. You will have to keep to your old cabins—separated."

"We are trusting you," Mary flared up.

"Ah, but that is different." Dillon would listen to no argument and his minions saw to it that his orders were carried out.

So it was that Mary and Margaret locked themselves in the rooms that now were empty of the companions they had taken for life. Lonesome rooms, and spooky now. And each lay for a long time sleepless and tossing, praying for the safety of their loved ones and hoping that they might be swiftly returned to their arms. Miserable.

Exhausted at length from the dry sobs which racked her, Margaret Prescott fell into restless slumber. And she did not awaken until an unusual sound had broken the stillness of the cabin.

She sat erect, trembling. There had been the clatter of metal against metal; something falling to the floor. Or had she dreamed it? But no, it was not a dream—to her ears came the sound of labored breathing. Someone was in the room. The key!—that had been the sound which aroused her.

Margaret's frantic cry was muffled by the hand which closed down over her lips.

CHAPTER XVII

Despair

IN the city of the metal men of Mosin-ton Ralph Prescott and his party were greeted with the utmost cordiality by the officials and with pondering acclaim by the populace. Conversation was possible only by means of the metasopes, of course, and there was the additional difficulty experienced by the visitors of being unable to interpret the musical sounds which comprised the speech of the metal men into equivalent English or Corisian syllables. However, as Steve

Gillette had done in the case of the native he called Cuckoo, they improvised names for common objects and for the beings with whom they came in contact, these being based on outstanding characteristics or representative of the musical sounds used by the inhabitants.

The chief scientist who had originally welcomed them was addressed by Ralph as Doctor, and so he remained to the rest of the party during their entire association with that great man of Mosin-ton. The city, quite naturally, took the name suggested by its multitude of doomed structures. And the great foundries and workshops outside the city limits became Pittsburgh.

Dome City provided many wonders for the visitors but so great was their anxiety regarding the *Blue Streak* and those on board who were at Dillon's mercy, that little time was given to them in which to explore the many public buildings and other points of interest. Ralph Prescott, urged on by his fears for Margaret, took upon himself the task of organizing the force which immediately went to work on the construction of an ethership having power and speed characteristics similar to those of the *Blue Streak*. His training as a business executive stood him in good stead, for the metal men, although of great scientific attainment and extremely clever in the construction of electrical and mechanical devices, were inclined to be unsystematic and impractical in their planning and in actual execution of work. They were an easy-going lot, more interested in research and development than in efficiency or production. It therefore devolved upon Ralph to organize hastily a staff of assistants whose duties were to coordinate the efforts of all and to keep constant check on the various activities of the various designing and manufacturing units which had in a few hours been assigned to the project through the persuasion of the one they called Doctor.

Teddy Crowley, of course, was to be chief designer and was given a crew of native engineers and draughtsmen. He was the metallurgist in charge, as well, since the secrets of many alloys used in the *Blue Streak's* construction were to be found only in his retentive memory. In his work he was to be assisted by the two Corisian scientists, Soltur and Rastor.

Steve Gillette was assigned duties as a sort of master mechanic, which post was not at all a displeasing one to him and gave him some opportunity of satisfying his curiosity regarding the metal folk and their land before actual manufacture commenced. Teddy had commenced work at once on the main layout drawing and expected to deliver the first of the detail drawings to the shops within six hours of their arrival. Foundries already were compounding the alloys he required. But until the drawings were available and patterns made there could be no castings; machining of parts must needs wait. It was to be intensive high pressure effort, this building of an ethership in a few days' time, but meanwhile there was given to Steve the very chance he would have wished for and he used the intervening time to best advantage.

Provided with metasopes, he and the one he called Cuckoo soon came to be fast friends. And it was from Cuckoo that most of the real information concerning the land of the metal men was obtained.

The metal men of Mosin-ton (later called living robots by the visitors) were, it developed, originally inhabitants of Mosin-ita. They had been creatures of flesh and blood in ages past and were not unlike the people of Venus in stature and appearance at that time. But their home planet, even in those days, was an aging one; its internal fires were slowly dying down and its atmosphere becoming depleted. Then had come the time of disaster when a major disturbance in the

solar system of Vusti caused an alteration in the distance separating the twin planets. They drew nearer, Mosin-ita and Mosin-ton, until excessive tidal forces disrupted a great portion of the already weakened crust of the body then inhabited. Mosin-ita became a world of vast upheavals and deluges. While continents were submerged by the violently agitated seas; whole peoples were wiped out in mighty cataclysms that rent the land asunder and tossed it in new and fearsome formations. Flame and molten materials gushed forth from the interior of the body; beds of the oceans were opened wide by the concussions within and the water drained off to the last remaining sources of internal heat, quenching them with the consequent formation of steam at terrific pressure. A second period of upheavals and widespread disaster followed with the explosions that resulted. And then came the radium solution.

At first the inhabitants who had survived merely moved their homes away from the dangerous geysers and streams; later these became so numerous that it was impossible to escape them. And the radiations from the solution were killing them off by the thousand, powerful radiations such as their scientific men had never encountered and did not know how to counteract. But they worked on the problem and eventually found an insulating alloy with which they covered their bodies for protection.

Ages passed by and a new sort of evolution was taking place, an evolution part natural, part scientifically controlled, until at length the inhabitants came to be creatures with living brains and bodily organs but with cunningly-contrived limbs and body coverings of the protecting alloy. At birth, a child was placed in a huge preparatory institution where his helpless body and brain structure were carefully kept alive in insulated wrappings until full growth was reached. Then the individual was fitted into his mechanical "shell" and provided with the necessary appendages to make him a useful citizen. Truly he was a living robot, for the metal became as much a part of him as was he a part of the metallic whole. Even in his blood there flowed a certain proportion of metal in solution, and the marvelous telegraph network that was his nervous system connected with and controlled the various members and joints of his outer structure.

But the living robots were looking with longing eyes on their neighboring planet; as centuries passed, the atmosphere of Mosin-ita was less and less suited to the needs of the lungs which still remained to them. Mortality came to be higher than the birth rate once more and the race was on the verge of extinction unless they could find a new home. Their astronomers had discovered verdant fields in Mosin-ton and knew of its abundant pure atmosphere. Mosin-ton had not suffered as had its twin. Yet Mosin-ton was inhabited only by lower forms of animal life. If only they might cross the void that lay between!

Then came the discovery of the red beam and the exodus began with a great rush, being completed in less than a thousand of the short days of Mosin-ita. No living thing remained on the hapless planet, but the living robots made occasional trips to their old home to replenish the supply of radium which they, too, had come to rely upon as a source of energy. It was thus they had come to find the strangers and their curious spherical vessel.

Cuckoo's metal eyelids clicked rapidly on the last.

Agape, Steve faced his informant in the great library of Dome City to which he had accompanied him. Much of the historical information was available here in the form of cinematographic recordings and in the minutely detailed sculptural groups that were everywhere to be seen in the huge domed building. But it

was from the thought flashes and the clear-cut images of Cuckoo's mentascope that Steve obtained most of the story.

"Think we'd have time for a turn around the country in your ship of the air?" asked Steve, consulting his watch. Time units here were entirely different yet he was able to transpose them into terrestrial units through the medium of mentascope flashes.

"Most certainly. There are perhaps three hours remaining to us," came the quick response. And the musical *accelerando* of Cuckoo's accompanying speech gave evidence of his eagerness to please.

And so it was that Steve Gillette was the only one of the visitors to make a trip of inspection in one of the transparent ships of the metal men. Later he would be as busy as were the rest of his companions, but he would have a store of information at his disposal with which to regale them. For the time being he forgot their predicament.

STEVE'S interest in the land over which they passed was merely that of a traveler in any strange country. He questioned the metal man incessantly throughout their journey in the small flat cylinder which could move only in the numerous lanes of red beams that formed a perfect network of airways in the lower level which he estimated as one thousand feet above the surface. It was a private vessel, this small one of Cuckoo's, hardly large enough for four passengers, and the two were alone in its transparent enclosure. Their friendship grew.

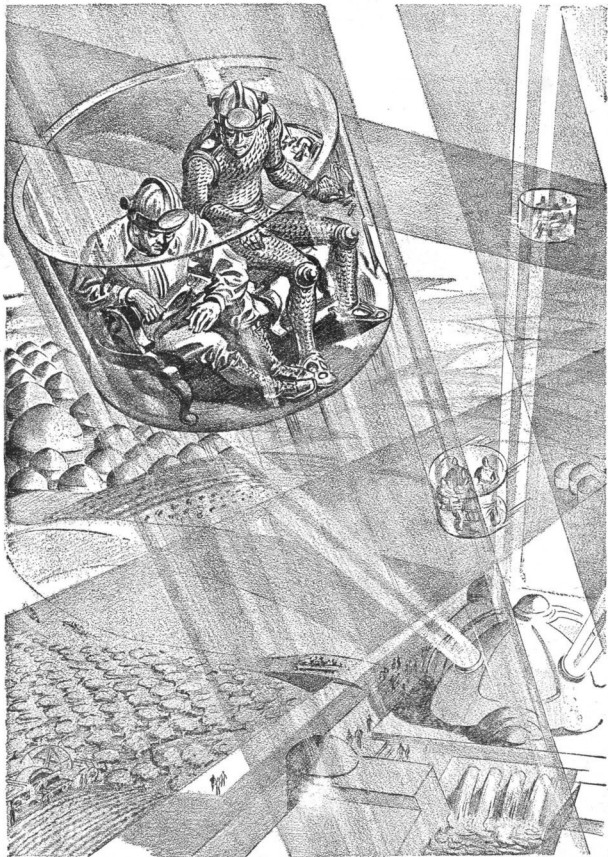
This land the metal men had inhabited for more than ten generations was interesting, not so much for its strangeness as for the evidences everywhere of the courage and enterprise of this race of living robots who had adopted it as their home. Though Steve was no philosopher, a feeling of deep admiration came to him in his awed contemplation of the odds against which this people had fought for survival, and of this their final triumph. Here beneath him were broad fields of cultivated land where great machines performed the labor of a hundred men with ease and despatch; here another of the domed cities, where teeming millions dwelt in peace and prosperity and whose broad avenues were bright with vari-colored foliage; there on the bank of a smooth river a huge power plant from which twin beams of ionized air radiated in all directions to carry the supply of energy to the four corners of a state or province. These twin rays, faintly visible even in daylight as pencils of purplish light, Steve learned had replaced the wire transmission systems about three generations previously. Better even than the power broadcasts of Kirpin on account of their directivity and longer range.

At a red propelling beam that shot up vertically from the surface, they rose to a higher level and passed over a mountain range whose tall crags were reminiscent of the Rockies in Steve's own county. A sudden pang of homesickness assailed him, although he had really expatriated himself by wedding a Corisian girl and settling in Seritanis. Beyond the mountains stretched a blue-green sea whose sands were dotted with the domed dwellings of many beach colonies. His nostalgia increased in intensity. Queer he should feel this way—it had been so long since such pleasures of Earth had meant anything to him.

"Your people," he inquired, turning to his companion, "do they bathe in the waters of the ocean?"

"No, indeed; there are only the regular cleansing mediums which may be used on our metallic coverings. But the ozone-charged air of the sea shore and the mountains is good for our lungs."

Cuckoo beat his chest with an iron fist and it clanged



... There on the bank of a smooth river was a huge power plant from which twin beams of ionized air radiated in all directions to carry the supply of energy to the four corners of a state or province.

startlingly in the narrow confines of the speeding vessel. And the musical notes that accompanied his thought flash were marked with soft regret.

"It is our only physical weakness that remains from the old days," he explained, "and is gradually yielding to treatment."

Steve's homesickness was forgotten and he marveled anew as to the manner of men Cuckoo's ancestors must have been to surmount the many difficulties which had beset them.

A red beam crossing the one they were in now carried them inland once more and they continued the sight-seeing tour. Cuckoo displayed much interest in Steve's country and people and commenced questioning him in turn after the earthman's curiosity had been somewhat appeased. The exchange of thoughts was profitable to both and continued throughout the return journey. These two were to be inseparable friends in the days to come.

WHEN they returned to the great workshop outside of Dome City they reported to Ralph Prescott and learned that they had arrived in time to receive the first batch of detail drawings. These were for parts that were to be manufactured from rolled or bar stock and Steve went to work immediately. Within the hour hundreds of workmen of Mosin-ton were busy at boring mill, forge, press and lathe, making the new parts for the new ship of space.

In a great pattern-shop nearby, metal men were equally busy at their labors on behalf of the visitors. Patterns of minor parts were quickly completed and, before the day was over, were already moulded and being poured. Never had castings of alloyed metals been turned out so swiftly either in the solar system of Vusti or in that of Coris and Tinus. Under stress of the emergency and fired to superhuman effort by the tireless energy of Ralph Prescott, these living robots of Mosin-ton were extremely capable and rapid workmen.

There was no talk of the cost of it all and when Ralph broached the subject to the Doctor, he was greeted by a merry *diminuendo et crescendo* of tone that might have been taken for the laughter of one of his own compatriots. "The value to my people of your designs for this ship of the heavens is far in excess of that of the materials and services rendered," he conveyed to the earthman. "We are in your debt, not you in ours."

"Not my designs," Ralph corrected him, "but those of my friend, who is probably the foremost engineer of my world. And, as far as that is concerned, he is undoubtedly obtaining in exchange for his own ideas equally valuable ones concerning the red beam and others of the developments of your engineers. We are still greatly in your debt, Doctor."

"We will discuss the matter no further." There was reproof and dignity in the metal man's answering thought.

The work went on with unabated vigor, smoothly and without a hitch. The Mosin-tonian workmen were divided in shifts that changed twice in a day. The rotation of Mosin-ton being at one-fifth the rate of that of Mosin-ita, this meant that the natives were laboring approximately nine hours at a stretch. And they worked themselves to their utmost. But the visitors from out the heavens did not rest at all for two entire shifts and were still going strong when twenty terrestrial hours had passed. The Doctor had not left his new friends and had divided his time between Ralph and Teddy. At length, after much persuasion, he brought them together in the laboratory where Teddy Crowley had worked unceasingly and tirelessly. With the men of Earth before him, he remonstrated with them.

"It is absolutely necessary that you obtain some rest," he told them. "All others of your party have long since retired. The two big men of Venus have already slept sufficiently and will be ready shortly to return to their labors. But you two—you can not stand it."

Ralph Prescott raised a haggard face to the metal man. "You do not understand," he said softly. "Those most dear to us are out there in space, Doctor—with a madman—we cannot rest until——"

"The work will go on." There was vigorous *staccato* in the tones accompanying the Doctor's mental retort. "And it will be of no avail to your loved ones if you kill yourselves here. Come now, allow me to show you to the resting places which have been provided."

Teddy looked at Ralph, nodding agreement. His lean face was drawn and his steel blue eyes dull. "We've got to do it," he said grimly. "He's right, Ralph—though I doubt whether I shall be able to sleep."

"Same here." Ralph regarded the metal man thoughtfully a moment. "I—I wonder," he faltered, "if we might return—only for a short while—to the projector of the great red beam. To see if the vessel is still on its course—to——"

"Certainly." The eyes behind the metal lids of the Doctor were suddenly bright with emotion. "It is the very thing with which to reassure yourselves. In a measure at least, for you will know that all is well in so far as the progress of that marvelous mechanism is concerned. We shall leave immediately for the ray station."

BACK at the controls of the marvelous beam which swept the skies, the Doctor quickly had his apparatus in operation. The red ray itself was not used—only the searching energies of the long range viewing instrument. These energies, Ralph and Teddy knew, were practically instantaneous in their functioning and were thus able to reach out and locate the *Blue Streak* even though she were traveling at many times the velocity of light, as she undoubtedly would be.

Breathlessly they watched the viewing screen as the Doctor worked with his controls. There was a shifting of the view in several directions and familiar constellations were imaged before them. A bright section of the Milky Way flashed by—and then the brilliant whiteness of the flare which had previously marked the position of their vessel.

"There she is!" husked Teddy.

"Yes," Ralph answered glumly, "but what does it tell us? We——"

"Only give me time," interposed the Doctor. "I shall be able to tell you of her course and the progress she has already made."

He was busy with his calculations as he transferred the thought.

Gazing into the heavens through the medium of that screen, Ralph was in the depths of despondency. The *Blue Streak* had been out for nearly twenty-four terrestrial hours and would be traveling at a speed at least sixteen times as fast as light. His mind refused to perform the necessary rough calculation of her possible distance from them. It was a hopeless task they were attempting. Even though the ethership they were building in the Dome City workshops was designed with a view to eliminating all unnecessary equipment, even though work was being pushed to the utmost, some four or five terrestrial days would be consumed in the building. They'd never overtake the *Blue Streak*—not in a million years. And Margaret was on board. Jack Dillon—damn him—and those two Asiatics.

Teddy was breathing heavily beside him as he watched the swiftly moving fingers of the Doctor on the buttons of the calculating machine.

A sudden change in the appearance of the tiny magnesium-like flare on the screen brought a startled exclamation from Ralph. The Doctor left off his computations and turned with Teddy to stare at the view.

"It wobbled and lurched," gasped Ralph. "At that speed—how in time could it?"

"Perhaps it was your imagination,"—gently from the Doctor. "You are overtired, my friend. But no, you are correct, the vessel has veered from its course and is running amuck in the heavens."

Quickly he increased the magnification of his instrument until the light-fleck, which had seemed before to be stationary, was seen to be in definite movement.

"Good Lord!—what has happened?" groaned Teddy. "Dillon's probably gone crazy," Ralph chattered. "He's wrecked the machinery or done something equally as bad."

In that instant the light-fleck made a hairpin turn and rocketed off on a new track, then snuffed abruptly out of sight. No sound was in the great power plant of the red beam save the purring of the small generators and the breathing of the three men. It was inconceivable, what they had seen. That a body traveling at many times the speed of light could be seen at all was inconceivable; that it could thus suddenly change its course was more remarkable still. But, in the realm of space-time, queer things are possible—things difficult of comprehension by the mind accustomed to thinking in terms of the three usual dimensions. And the Doctor's viewing instrument had taken them into the realm of space-time as surely as if they had been aboard the swift vessel that was carrying their loved ones to an unknown fate.

"It's all over," Ralph muttered. "They're done for, Teddy."

The silence of utter despair greeted his hopeless statement.

CHAPTER XVIII

The Fate of the Blue Streak

ALL thought of the rest they so sadly needed was forgotten by the two earthmen. The bleakness of deepest despondence was in the white faces they turned toward the Doctor, who bowed his head over the controls of his apparatus in obvious effort to avoid the wretchedness he saw in the eyes of his newfound friends.

"What can have happened?" groaned Teddy. "The *Blue Streak* is as nearly fool-proof as it is possible to make a mechanism. I can not conceive—"

The Doctor's many-jointed metallic fingers were wandering idly across the control keys and a faint flash showed momentarily on the screen before them. It was as if the plane of vision had shifted in a manner suggestive of the folding over of a page in a book.

"It's the ship!" Ralph Prescott exclaimed delightedly. "Doctor—hold that adjustment."

But the tiny light-fleck that marked the position of the *Blue Streak* had once more vanished in the blackness of the cosmos. The metal man now was working furiously with the multitude of keys and vernier controls, explaining in swift thought flashes that the image of the speeding vessel had been lost on account of its sudden change in direction and velocity with the consequent necessity of readjusting the viewing apparatus over a wide range.

The minute flare appeared again, was lost for many minutes as the watchers fidgeted anxiously, then reappeared and was held steadily in view. The Doctor returned to his calculations, making entirely new set-

tings of the machine used for this work of tracing.

"This change in direction," whispered Ralph hopefully, "is it bringing them back this way, Doctor?"

"From preliminary indications, that would seem to be the case. In a moment I shall be able to answer with certainty."

"Can it be the professor has mastered Dillon?" Teddy marveled, "and is returning the vessel? Perhaps with Therin's help—"

Ralph permitted himself the first chuckle in which he had indulged since the *Blue Streak* was whisked from Mosin-ton. "It's possible," he admitted, "with Therin and the two girls—God bless 'em, they're not afraid of anything—he may have done it. Good old Prof!"

But the tiny flare wavered and lurched in their vision even as he spoke. The metal man turned gravely to them from his work.

"The general direction of movement now is toward our solar system," he conveyed to their minds, "but the course is erratic, as if the ship were out of control. The speed is inconstant, as well, making it extremely difficult to compute the characteristics of the curve or, more accurately, curves the vessel follows through space-time. There is a new curve every few minutes and the co-ordinates are impossible of determination. We must wait, my friends."

Ralph and Teddy fell silent after this, their anxiety being shown only by increased nervousness and the deepening pallor of their tense faces under the sun-glo lamps of the control board.

The Doctor worked incessantly with his apparatus, occasionally losing track of the vessel entirely but always relocating it and making new notations with his stylus on the panel beside the calculating machine. He had closed off his thoughts from the earthmen by the simple expedient of removing the mentascope from his polished headpiece. The two visitors exchanged meaning glances when this action was taken by their host.

In his own mind Ralph Prescott was convinced that the Doctor had done this to prevent himself from betraying to them his true feelings regarding the seriousness of the situation. Perhaps this intricate viewing apparatus of the metal men had told the Doctor something he was too considerate to reveal to them. Perhaps, even now, all occupants of the vessel had expired. An indication of the loss of oxygen—if the apparatus was capable of registering such a calamity—would be a sure proof that no one remained alive aboard the *Blue Streak*. Or . . . possibly the passengers were engaged at this moment in mortal combat. Dillon may have neglected to place the automatic controls in operation . . . his experience was only that of an interested on-looker, after all, and this might be expected. . . . In such case the ship might well be expected to follow an erratic course. But, it was unlikely that the Doctor had any real knowledge of what was going on out there in the vessel that drove so madly through the void. Had he such knowledge—at least of a serious disaster within the *Blue Streak*—he would not continue to manipulate the controls of his own apparatus so assiduously or to display such intense interest in his task.

"Teddy, do you think —" faltered Ralph. "I don't think anything,"—wearily. "They're in the hands of fate right now, and there's nothing we can do except hope."

The Doctor readjusted his mentascope and turned to them his expressionless countenance of metal—expressionless in itself yet conveying the deepest friendliness and sympathy by virtue of the highly expressive eyes that looked out from their metallic sockets.

"The motion continues in our direction," he told them, "and the velocity is decreasing at approximately the same rate with which it increased immediately

after they left our atmosphere. I should be inclined to feel encouraged if I were you."

Reaching into a drawer of the console-like control board he produced two large pellets which he held toward them.

"What's that?" asked Ralph doubtfully.

"It is synthetic food such as is used by my people when taking a long journey. Eat it, my friends. If you will not sleep, at least you must provide yourselves with bodily sustenance if you expect to carry on. These pellets provide the greatest rejuvenator of spirits and physical strength that is known to our land."

Each of the earthmen did as he was bidden, then sank back into his cushioned seat to watch the swift movements of the Doctor's glittering fingers and the slowly changing view on the screen. Where the tiny brilliant flare drifted among the dimmer light-flecks that marked the stars.

Ralph found the pellet not unpalatable, and immediately he had consumed it he experienced a new sense of well-being. It seemed that the blood coursed more rapidly through his veins, that his head was clearer—his fear abated. Abruptly came the blankness of complete unconsciousness. The Doctor had drugged them.

WITH satisfaction, the metal-sinewed scientist returned to his labors. Had the construction of his jaw plates permitted him to smile, he would have indulged himself in that humanlike facial contortion. He had completely hoodwinked these flesh-and-blood visitors—and to their own good entirely. It had been an effort, with the brain machine on his head, to deceive them. Undoubtedly he should have been unable to do so had not their senses been so dulled by lack of sleep and by their wretchedness over their lost loved ones. But he had not fretted when he conveyed the assurance that the pellets provided a most remarkable rejuvenating agency. Sleep, he had meant. And sleep certainly would work wonders with these beings from out the heavens.

His own metallic body was much better equipped to operate under terrific stress for long periods of time; its muscles and the activating motors, the pressure-lubricated joints and all moving external parts were tireless because mechanical. The brain and the organs of the senses, the nervous system and the organs of circulation and respiration, which were all that was left to him of the form of his ancestors of bygone ages, were subject to fatigue. But not to the extent of those in the bodies of the visitors. For had not the ages of struggle hardened them to superhuman strength and endurance? Were not the very elements of their cell structures reinforced with metal that had been acquired with the evolution of hundreds of generations of his kind? And the revitalizers, those oscillatory wave mechanisms in his own laboratory, would restore his vitality of mind and physical organs to normal in an instant when the thing was done.

Meanwhile the work in foundry and workshop would continue, for the scientific ones who assisted in the work would remain at their tasks in the regular shifts, and the mechanics and other workmen likewise would carry on without further supervision. For the tall stranger with the curious thatch of light fluff surrounding the smoothness of his head had completed the necessary design work. No time was to be lost in the construction of the new ship of space, even though these two were to sleep for many hours.

And it was possible after all that the vessel now coursing so erratically through space was being returned to the world of the metal men. Working at the controls of the searching energy, the scientist endeavored to visualize the conditions which might exist

on board. The visitors who had been left behind when their vessel was stolen had told him of the relationships that existed between various members of their original party and of the two inimical ones whom they had brought with them unwittingly. The scientist, who had been injured, might conceivably find some means of getting the situation in hand. The females could not be visualized by the metal man, for he had not seen them, but his own heart told him of the regard in which they were held by their mates—these two who slept here so peacefully. This was quite understandable to him, since the metal men are extremely fond of their own mates and are great lovers of family life even though the off-spring must, of necessity, spend many years away from their homes until full stature is attained.

These visitors, he decided, were of nature similar to his own—affectionate, sympathetic, and peace-loving. That there should be one amongst them—three, including the inimical one's minions—who were differently constituted, was a mystery. Perhaps these were from still another world. In any event, it had been a simple matter to determine who of the visitors were in the right.

For an entire day, as measured by the rotation of his own planet, the metal scientist with the human heart and brain remained at the controls while the visitors slept. The spherical vessel of the heavens was now coming in toward his own sun at a distance not greatly beyond the orbit of the outermost planet. And, as it came in under the gravity pull, it seemed that it was under control.

"Good Lord, I've been asleep!"

At sound of the voice he could not understand without the aid of the mechanical brain machine, the metal man turned and saw that one of his guests had awakened.

RALPH PRESCOTT, aroused to swift remembrance, sprang to his feet and peered at the screen of the viewing instrument. "The *Blue Streak*!" he exclaimed amazedly. "It's coming in toward us. Why did you let me sleep through it all?"

The Doctor, readjusting his mentascope, blinked owlishly with a faint clicking of his cuplike lids. "It was the rest you needed, my friend," he returned. "And, since you would not take it of your own accord, I was forced to administer—"

But Ralph, in a fever of hopeful excitement, was shaking Teddy Crowley into protesting wakefulness. "Ted!" he yelled. "The vessel is coming back. They must have recaptured it—or Dillon was persuaded by the girls—or—something. Look!"

Finally aroused, Teddy looked at the screen and was electrified by what he saw. "Right you are!" he enthused. "Oh, I tell you, boy, those two wives of ours are good. And the Prof, too. What a yarn they will have for us when we see them."

"I should not be too enthusiastic if I were you," the metal man broke in. "There is something very peculiar in the motion of the ship—it is as if—"

At that instant the tiny flare on the screen veered sharply from its course and it was necessary for the Doctor to make rapid readjustment of the controls in order to keep it in view. And then the great orb of Lloxan appeared suddenly in a corner of the screen. The *Blue Streak* had come within the outermost orbit, that of Ap, and was headed for the sixth planet, the largest in the system.

"They're crazy!" shouted Ralph. "The speed is far too great for a landing—they'll crash."

"Something is very much wrong," Teddy Crowley was white-faced once more, for well he knew that an experienced hand must control the *Blue Streak* if she was to be decelerated sufficiently for a safe landing.

With bated breath they watched the minute, blue-white flash, as it swung in toward Lloxan. Under the gravitational attraction of that huge body the *Blue Streak* seemed to be accelerating rather than slowing down for a landing.

"Doctor, isn't there something we can do?" groaned Ralph. "Send out the red beam after them, or—"

"Too long a time is required for the beam to reach out to such a distance," the metal man told them. "We can only wait."

"If they do make a successful landing," Teddy inquired anxiously, "is there any chance for them, Doctor? What are the conditions on this large planet of yours?—that is what I really mean."

The metal man's response was grave. "Conditions are not favorable to the existence of your kind, although they might survive if they do not leave the vessel until we can arrive there to rescue them."

"They'll never land safely," Ralph broke in. "Not at this rate."

"Wait," was the Doctor's counsel. "We know nothing of actual conditions on board. Possibly, even now, your friends may be struggling with the enemy for mastery of the vessel. They may—"

The *Blue Streak* lurched suddenly toward Lloxan; then had vanished behind the great orb of that body, apparently nearing the surface as it did so. Immediately the metal man was at a crystal globe that was set in a recess of the control console. The globe lighted with an eery light and faces of others of the metal men appeared in its depths—it was the Mosin-tonian equivalent of Earth's optophone system. The musical voice of the Doctor rose and fell in swift rhythmic cadence.

"I have called for a number of my assistants," he explained as he switched off the instrument. "We shall start for the gigantic planet at once if your vessel does not reappear on this side."

Even as he conveyed the information, the magnesium-like flare came into view on the side of Lloxan's orb opposite to that on which it had vanished. And it swung back, crossing the disc visible on the Doctor's screen, crossed it in the reverse direction. The *Blue Streak* was circling Lloxan as a satellite might circle the great body, but was drawing nearer at each revolution. Decelerating now, it was quite apparent. Obviously the vessel was under *someone's* control and a landing was to be attempted.

THE throb of the great generators of the red beam broke the comparative stillness as the Doctor closed the necessary starting switches. And again the *Blue Streak* vanished behind the great globe she was drawing near. One of the transparent flattened cylinders landed outside the power plant and a number of metal men rushed in.

Again the Doctor spoke into the crystal sphere; then turned to his men and sang out a *staccato* of orders.

"The rest of your companions will be advised and will be brought to us at once," he told Ralph and Teddy. "We shall make the start for the large planet as soon as they arrive."

Meanwhile the *Blue Streak* was once more making a transit of the near side of Lloxan, this time at considerably reduced velocity. The two earthmen breathed easier. But the Doctor had hinted at dangers that might be met with on the planet of the sixth orbit. What awaited the adventurers there?

"Does this planet have an atmosphere?" Ralph asked him.

"It does; a moisture-laden envelope. And extremes of heat and cold due partly to internal fires and partly to light-filtering peculiarities of the atmosphere. There are other things—"

The metal man broke off as one of his engineers called down from a balcony where high tension switch-gear was in operation. Depressing another group of control keys, he swung the levers which operated the trunnion-mounted disc of the red beam outside.

With a mounting shriek, the great ruddy column shot out into the heavens in the direction of Lloxan. All was excitement in the great power plant now; others of the transparent vessels had arrived from Dome City, bringing many metal men in addition to the rest of the visitors. Steve Gillette arrived all out of breath, loudly demanding information. His friend Cuckoo was with him and both wore mentascopes. Rastor and Sol-tur, though of solemn countenance, asked no questions.

A hasty inspection showed Ralph that all of them were armed with the Frenchite pistols they had brought from the vessel when first they landed on Mosin-ton. He smiled grimly—there might be some fighting out there on the huge planet for which they were heading.

Locking the controls of his apparatus to maintain automatic directing of the red beam, the Doctor quickly organized the metal men who were to go along. They had no arms, these living robots, for there were no wars nor dissensions among them. But a number of complicated machines which seemed to be of the ray projector type were rolled down the long tunnel which led to the pit of the red beam disc. Ralph's questioning of the Doctor elicited the information that these were generators of various energies they might need in the rescue work.

The *Blue Streak* appeared once more before the disc of Lloxan that was still imaged there on the screen. Slowly the tiny flare moved—very slowly indeed. Then, when its transit of the body was no more than one-third complete, it vanished utterly.

"They've landed!" exulted Steve. "Dog-goned if I don't hope we find that Therin and the Prof have made mince meat out of Jack Dillon and those yellow boys."

But Ralph and Teddy were not so sure that the landing had been negotiated safely. Although still hoping for the best, their hearts were heavy as they followed the Doctor down the long incline that led to the transparent vessel which was to be hurled out through the disc into the mysterious energies of the red beam.

This vessel of the skies was considerably larger than those used by the metal men in travel over the surface of their planet. It was perhaps sixty feet in diameter and fifteen in height, and the inner walls were dotted with a multitude of gleaming instruments whose use was unknown to the visitors. Some twenty-five of the metal men, including Cuckoo and the Doctor, entered the vessel before the entrance port was closed.

Instantly there came a breeze of pure fresh air from mechanisms that purred on short pedestals adjacent to the inner wall. The roar of the red beam was in their ears, and the vessel lifted to the under side of the disc where a circular opening was provided for its emergence into the heart of the propelling energies.

Another moment and it had passed through and was in the ruddy light above. With a lurch that threw them all flat on the cushions, which had been provided for easing the discomfort of acceleration, the drum-shaped ship of the metal men flung out into the void.

CHAPTER XIX

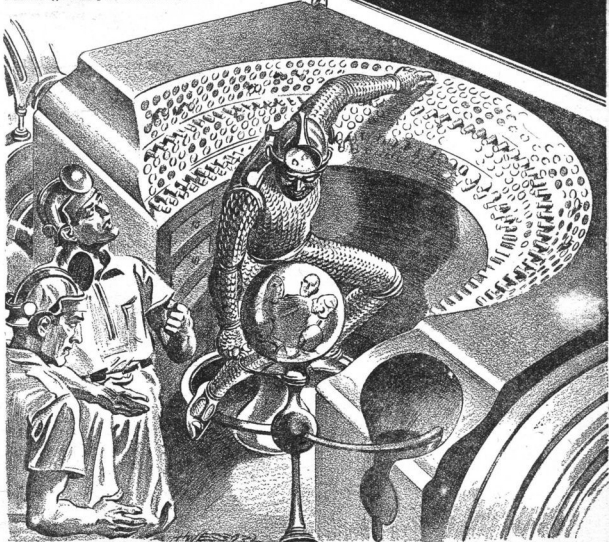
Black Snows of Lloxan

THE voyage in the transparent vessel was made with a far greater degree of bodily comfort than when the *Blue Streak* was taken from Mosin-ita by the same red beam which was propelling them now. This was due, of course, to the deeply cushioned seats

in which the passengers reclined and to a certain measure of gravitational compensation provided by mechanisms of the vessel itself. The living robots, while their science had progress along different lines than the sciences of Coris and Tinus and was in some respects superior, had not the knowledge of gravitational forces which had been utilized by Teddy Crowley in his development of the Sorenson etherships. The velocity attained by this space ship, whose only movement could be in the midst of the red beam, was never more than eighty percent of the speed of light, due to certain unavoidable losses. For this reason, with half the trip required to accelerate to the maximum velocity and the remainder of the time used in decelerating, the average speed was less than seventy-five thousand miles per second and the time required for the journey consequently was nearly two terrestrial hours.*

As they neared the surface of Lloxan, the Doctor got in communication with his operators back there at the power plant by the use of one of the small crystal spheres, whose energies evidently traversed the red beam itself. The visitors did not understand until much later how it was possible to obtain practically instantaneous replies in this manner, for it was necessary to

*Lloxan, in its existing position with relation to Mosin-ton, was at a distance approximating five hundred million miles.



Immediately the metal man was at a crystal globe that was set in a recess of the control console. The globe lighted with an eery light and faces of others of the metal men appeared in its depths . . .

greatly exceed the velocity of light in the impulses which carried the voices across the vast distance. But they assumed at the time that these impulses were similar to those used in the long range viewing instrument of Mosin-ton, which traveled in much the same manner as the gravitational forces that had been so carefully investigated and utilized by Teddy Crowley. In this it was proved later they were correct.

When the transparent vessel was brought to within a mile or so of Lloxan's rugged surface, the Doctor placed one of his ray projectors in service and commenced a systematic search for the *Blue Streak*. This instrument operated similarly to the large one in the power plant and it was not long before he had obtained on its screen the tiny flare which was the indication for which he was searching. Greatly weakened now, whether on account of the lower power of this portable apparatus or because the *Blue Streak* had fallen into some location where mineral deposits neutralized its energies, the flare was indistinct and wavering to view. But the Doctor immediately issued orders to the manipulators of the red beam, and the transparent vessel commenced moving slowly over the surface in the direction of the *Blue Streak*, then speeded up as the beam was swung more swiftly by the distant operators until it was proceeding at a rate of two or three miles a minute.

Like Mosin-ita, this planet was barren of vegetation. But there was none of the appearance of dry rot that had first greeted the visitors from Earth's solar system, none of the evidence of civilizations long extinct or of life of any sort having been present in past ages. At least, that portion of Lloxan over which they first passed gave this impression. The surface, while broken and scarred, was of silvery hue and appeared almost as if covered with a carpet of some yielding stuff that could be identified as neither vegetable or mineral. And the Doctor vouchsafed no explanations—he was too busily occupied with the crystal sphere and various mechanisms of the vessel itself.

Abruptly the scene changed. Vegetation appeared in a broad belt that extended to the horizon in all directions ahead of them, a vivid purple growth that covered the land like a blanket and from which dank vapors rose. The entrance door of the transparent vessel had been opened to conserve manufactured oxygen and the stench of the vast swamp land pervaded the interior. Still they proceeded swiftly toward the tiny flare which was the *Blue Streak*.

"It doesn't look as if there were many dangers to be feared in this place," Teddy whispered to Ralph Prescott.

"We aren't there,"—drily. "Not yet, and you never can tell."

"You're an incurable pessimist," was Teddy's retort. He had brightened considerably as their goal seemed nearer.

"I know it," Ralph admitted gloomily. "I've been getting that way lately. But who in the devil wouldn't?" "Shades of the Kellonians!" Steve's startled exclamation broke in on their conversation. "What do you suppose that is?"

Before them, winging downward from the upper atmosphere, was a huge flying creature with flapping bat-like wings and a bulbous body with trailing tentacles that was in a fearsome manner suggestive of one of the ancient enemies of Venus. But this creature was of immense size and power. Its wing spread must have approached a hundred feet, and there were great gaping jaws whose spread would have been sufficient to encompass the height of the Mosin-tonian vessel and, closing down, crush it like an eggshell.

The metal men rushed about and trundled one of their

ray projectors to the open door. It was quickly placed in operation and the hum of its generators, as they increased speed, drowned out all other sounds in the vessel. But no visible beam shot forth from its rifle-like barrel along which one of the living robots sighted.

As the enormous flying creature of Lloxan swooped down upon them, there came a sharp twang from the mechanism. A huge wing struck the vessel, causing it to careen until the passengers were thrown in a scrambling heap; then the monster emitted a raucous shriek and went tumbling over and over in swift descent. At first it seemed that it had not been injured by that projected ray but when it had crashed to the purple moor with terrific impact it burst into vivid flame and was quickly consumed. As the transparent vessel righted itself and continued on its way, they saw that a large area of the swampland itself was burning violently where the thing had fallen.

"Strong medicine in that machine," grinned Steve, picking himself up and dusting his clothing. "Guess these metal men aren't so slow after all, when it comes to devising weapons of destruction. Oh boy!"

His friend Cuckoo collared him then and went into a lengthy discussion of the mechanism that had done the work.

THE damp belt of purple vegetation slipped behind them as the transparent vessel flung out over the tossing waters of a large sea.

"Hope they didn't land on the water," Teddy fretted. "The *Blue Streak* would roll and pitch until they couldn't hold their feet."

"It that's all there is to worry about—" Ralph began.

Excited mouthings of the metal men caused him to forget his intended comment. The Doctor conveyed the information to Teddy and him that the spherical vessel now was close at hand.

"Just as I feared," Teddy grumbled. "They're afloat."

"Not so," came the Doctor's denial. "The instrument shows conclusively that the ship is on solid ground. We may only hope it is intact and all its passengers safe."

"Excepting three of them," Steve put in darkly.

They had not noticed that the sunlight was dimming for the reason that the ruddy illumination of the beam which carried them was their principal source of light. But it now was seen that a great dark cloud had loomed up along the entire horizon ahead. And the motion of the transparent vessel was becoming unsteady. Even though the power of the red beam held it firmly on its course, it was swayed by a buffeting gale that came up out of the blackness before them. The door had been closed to keep out the chilly blasts but the temperature of the drum-shaped ship of space dropped steadily.

"It is the polar region," the Doctor explained, "and the darkness is caused by the black snows."

"Black snows!" Ralph was incredulous.

"Yes." The metal man's effort to explain by thought transference was not entirely clear. "They are always to be encountered above the vegetation belts of the large planet when the regions of low temperature are reached. The color is caused by minute organisms which are borne upon the breezes and about which the freezing moisture is caused to crystallize."*

"Well, that's a new one on me," exclaimed Teddy Crowley. "Though the explanation seems reasonable

*This phenomenon has been observed on earth, though it is a very rare one. Snow consists of tiny ice crystals formed by the freezing of water vapor in the atmosphere and ordinarily is white, because the crystals are so small that each cell of the retina gets a different impression, the appearance of whiteness being produced by the combination of wave lengths received from the millions of facets. Green, red, blue and black snow has been known to fall, the colors being produced by innumerable fungi, the scientific name for which is *Micrococccus Nivalis*. It is presumed that such fungi are a product of the swampy regions of Lloxan.

enough if I understand it rightly. And I suppose the *Blue Streak* is lost somewhere in this snowstorm of midnight hue?"

"Exactly." The Doctor's reply was accompanied by a solemn tone couplet.

Land had appeared beneath them, a bleak and desolate shore that was immediately swallowed up in the blackness. Their sole illumination was that produced by the red beam. But still the tiny flare was aglow on the screen of the Doctor's portable viewing instrument.

The vessel's speed diminished as the chief scientist of the metal men intoned his orders into the crystal sphere. This way and that it was shifted until it was apparent he had reached the precise position he desired; then it was lowered gently to the surface.

"We are here," the Doctor told them.

On the screen of his viewing instrument the flare that indicated the position of the *Blue Streak* was a broad splotch of light, stationary at last. But outside the transparent vessel was only the circle of red light that marked the circumference of the beam which was kept trained upon them from far-off Mosin-ton. And the black downfall of huge fluffy flakes which cut off all else from their vision.

"Your vessel is close at hand," they were advised by the chief scientist of the metal men, "but it will be necessary to go out into the storm and the darkness to effect the rescue. We have hand lamps of great power, but I fear they will be of little avail."

He handed a tubular object to Ralph who found, upon examining it, that it was not unlike a battery powered flashlight of the sort with which he was familiar at home. "We will go out alone," he announced. "There is no need that any of your kind take the risk, Doctor. And my party is armed, whereas yours is not. There may be a battle with the vandals who have stolen our vessel."

"It is absolutely necessary that I accompany you," the Doctor responded firmly, "since I alone understand the workings of the small magnetic direction finder we shall need in the darkness. As for my men, they may remain behind as you suggest. It may be they will be forced later to send out a searching party for us, even so."

Somewhat doubtful about the expedition, the metal man appeared to be, but he fingered a watchcase instrument that was not unlike a magnetic compass and Ralph saw that its needle pointed strongly in the direction he had previously determined as that in which the *Blue Streak* lay.

Cuckoo was expostulating with Steve, waving his arms vigorously, his musical voice a very tempest of energy and images flickering with rapid success across the disc of his mentascope.

"He insists on going along," Steve explained. "How about it?"

"Oh, very well." Ralph grinned in appreciation of the scene. "But only these two of the metal men, Cuckoo and the Doctor. Let's be on our way."

The door of the transparent vessel was opened and the adventurers made their way out into the icy fury of the black storm. Ralph and the Doctor were in the forefront as they pressed out into the driving gale and it was all the earthman could do to keep the beam of his flash trained on the tiny direction finder in the metal man's hand in order that they might see where they were going. Behind them trooped Steve and Cuckoo with Soltur and Rastor bringing up the rear. Teddy Crowley was a silent battling figure on the other side of the Doctor, his Frenchite automatic gripped tightly in fingers that were numbing rapidly with the cold.

As the Doctor had predicted, there was utter dark-

ness outside the circle of the red beam. This was no ordinary darkness but complete absence of light, a stinging biting darkness that closed in on them in whispering silence. And the footing was extremely precarious, for they found it necessary to wade knee deep in the powdery black stuff that hid an icy surface underneath, which was the cause of a number of bad falls among them as they progressed.

When they had left the circle of red surrounding the transparent vessel of the metal men, the light of the great beam was immediately blotted out. Looking back was the same as looking forward; they could see nothing whatever through the swirling downfall.

"How—far—is—it?" Teddy was panting as he plodded along.

They were clinging to one another now in the Stygian inkiness so that no member might be separated from the party. Plowing forward through the black snows as a compact unit, stumbling, sliding and clutching frantically as one or the other was in danger of being lost. Ralph strained his eyes with the flashlight cast upward but could see nothing of the Doctor's mentascope disc. However, his mental reply to Teddy's question came clearly:

"Only a little way now. Have courage, my friends."

BEHIND him, Steve was clinging to Ralph's shoulder. Suddenly there was a shifting of his grip and a startled exclamation from the mechanic. His hold loosed entirely and Ralph felt wildly for him in the blackness.

"Jupiter!" Steve's voice was muffled, gasping. "A sea lion—he's got me!"

Instant confusion reigned and Ralph's voice rang high, bidding all members of the party to stand where they were. He tried to bore into the blackness with his flashlight, but to no avail. It was like trying to bore a wall with its feeble beam.

There was the foundering of a ponderous body close by, and the choking gasp of Steve. Cuckoo's high pitched tones mingled with the general uproar and the others knew that he and the valiant mechanic were battling together this unknown creature of the black snows.

Ralph flung himself in the general direction of the sounds, brought up short against a smooth-furred monster that was thrashing about with ferocious growlings and with a violence that almost carried the earthman from his feet.

"Steve!" he called. "Where are you?" Feeling about in the darkness, his hand encountered the metal-sinewed arm of Cuckoo. Quick as a flash came the metal man's information that the monster had Steve in its forepaws and had swung him aloft. Cuckoo was pounding at the unheeding brute's flanks with iron fists.

Steve's voice came faintly down from above. Ralph grasped Cuckoo and drew him back as he pressed the muzzle of his automatic into a soft portion of the monster's anatomy. There was the sharp spang of the propelling charge and the terrific detonation of the Frenchite within the huge hulk of the great beast. Ralph and Cuckoo were flung violently to the snow and in the brilliant flash of the explosion that blasted the brute asunder they had a momentary glimpse of its colossal shape and of a slaving tusked mouth that was reared fully fifteen feet above the ground. In that instant of seeing, Steve, limp and bleeding, fell from a sharp taloned claw. And, as the darkness closed in once more, Cuckoo lifted him from the snows and threw his body over his own broad metallic shoulder.

Returning to the group, whose cries directed them, Ralph and the metal man made swift examination of the injured mechanic as best they could in the darkness.

Part of Steve's tunic had been torn away and there was a deep gash across the fleshy portion of his chest. Other wounds, too, but Steve was breathing and his heart beat strongly. He would live, if only they could get him to the *Blue Streak's* medicine chest quickly.

Again the party pressed on through the inkiness of the black storm and now their progress was slower on account of Cuckoo's burden. The needle of the Doctor's compass-like instrument led them forward.

The gale increased in intensity until they could scarcely keep to their feet at all and soon they were waist deep in the dark snows that impeded their progress still further. Occasionally one of their number would lose grip of his neighbor and would cry out to the rest; a frantic search ensuing meant still more delay. And ever the icy blasts bit deeper and deeper into their marrow.

"Where is the vessel?" Ralph groaned despairingly. It seemed they were utterly lost in the black snows of Lloxan, that no power in the universe would suffice to show them the way.

"Have patience, friend," came the Doctor's assuring response. "It is but a little way now, not more than a few steps—"

Teddy Crowley yelled excitedly. "Here it is, folks, right here!" he babbled. "We've found them."

Ralph blundered heavily against a curved wall that rose before him. Feeling along the smooth surface until his fingers reached a welded joint, he knew that it was indeed the *Blue Streak*. Set solidly down in the polar wastes of Lloxan, she was embedded in drifts that rose as high as a man could reach on the windward side.

"Take it easy, Ted," he warned. "We'll have to locate the airlock door first and then watch our step. If Dillon or his men have the upper hand, there'll be a fight. And we've got to get Steve inside."

They circled the great mound that was the *Blue Streak*, searching for the entrance port. On the sheltered side there was very little of the black snow and Teddy was able to crawl underneath the curved hull. He reported that the vessel was set down solidly on her landing rollers and was consequently in the erect position. Whoever had brought her to the surface had maneuvered the controls most skillfully.

The entrance port was covered with many feet of snow and the whole party went to work in the blackness, scooping away the drifted dark mass with their hands. All excepting Steve Gillette, who lay there on the sheltered side of the vessel, still unconscious.

It was exhausting work clearing a path to the point Teddy had established as the location of the manhole entrance. But eventually they reached the side of the vessel and saw dimly a light from within as the last layer of black snow was brushed away. Teddy had miscalculated slightly and they had uncovered the main viewing port of the control room, a few feet from the entrance. The work went on and they widened the path to include the airlock itself.

Ralph pressed his face to the thick glass of the port and saw that no one was in the control room. A faint hum communicated to him through the steel frame of the vessel told him that the lighting generators, at least, were operating. There had been no necessity as yet of resorting to the emergency batteries. His spirits rose.

Impatiently then, he banged lustily on the hull plates with the butt of his pistol, hammered on the resounding metal and shouted at the top of his voice as if in the hope that they might hear him inside.

Teddy Crowley laughed, a hysterical croaking under stress of his own emotion. "They can't hear your voice," he chattered. "Keep on hammering at the plates, if you will—they may hear that—"

A man had walked into the control room, a slant eyed individual who strode to the viewing port and looked directly into Ralph's eyes. One of Dillon's henchmen! He grinned broadly and turned on his heel, vanishing up the iron stair.

"Ted, Doctor—everybody," Ralph called out huskily. "Dillon is in control yet. One of his yellow devils just now appeared in the control room. And they know we have come."

Madly then, heedless of consequences, Teddy Crowley shoved back the last of the black snow from the manhole and commenced battering at the steel cover with bare fist and pistol butt.

Ralph's awful fear for Margaret congealed into a steely determination that Jack Dillon would pay if harm had come to her. Exquisite tortures he might impose upon the debonaire financier flashed across his chaotic mind.

CHAPTER XX

Denouement

NEW faces appeared dimly outlined against the sweating glass of the viewing port. Margaret and Mary—Professor Timken! Quickly they were gone and Ralph yelled to the others in gleeful amazement.

"They're safe! Ted—I saw them." He was at the airlock door then, holding his frenzied friend's arms, trying to bring home to his dazed mind the marvelous news that their loved ones were alive within.

Teddy Crowley's jaw dropped and his eyes, in the dim circle of illumination cast by a flashlight, were the eyes of a man who was coming up out of the depths of despair. "Really," he gasped, "is it really true, Ralph?"

"Nothing else but."

The clanging of swiftly unlatched clamping bolts resounded from within and the manhole door swung outward to let forth two gurgling bundles of femininity who flung themselves into the arms of their men. Ralph and Teddy, silent with emotion, could only hold them close and stare blankly into the smiling eyes of the professor, who stood there in the light of the *Blue Streak's* airlock. It was too good to be true, it seemed.

Cuckoo came staggering to the entrance with Steve's limp form in his metal arms, and the tableau was broken up. Tenderly they carried the injured mechanic up the stairs and deposited him in his own bed—the one he had occupied during the long voyage from Coris. Swiftly the tale of his misfortune was told, and, forgetting all else, the two girls set about to administer the services he so sadly needed.

Professor Timken, hobbling about painfully, was in a state of great excitement. As soon as Ralph had assured himself that Steve was in no danger, he turned to the older man with questioning gaze. They left the cabin and rejoined the others, who had assembled in the engine room below.

One of Dillon's yellow men was there and Ralph's hand fell to the pistol at his belt.

"No, my boy, you do Chan wrong," the professor interposed. "He is our friend and is the one to whom we are indebted for our safety—especially Margaret's."

"Where's Dillon? Where's Therin?" asked Ralph, looking around. He saw that the engine room was a shambles. Several of the vital mechanisms had been wrecked and Teddy was examining them with Rastor and Soltur looking over his shoulder. "What in time happened, Prof?"

"It's a long story. But, first off, I may tell you that Dillon is no more, nor is Therin. And Dai Ling, the other of Dillon's men, was likewise slain."

"Therin was killed—who did that?" Ralph's snapped question was partly in astonishment, partly in savage ferocity.

"Dai Ling—he has paid in full. And Dillon has paid. Ralph, that rascal broke into Margaret's cabin and she was helpless in his hands until Chan heard her muffled outcries." The professor beckoned the impassive Oriental to his side and laid an affectionate arm across his shoulder. "Chan rushed to her stateroom and dragged Dillon away, but Dai Ling came on the run and interfered. There was a free-for-all fight then and Chan was quicker on the trigger than the other two. He killed Dai Ling first and then chased Dillon down into the engine room, which became his execution chamber. You saw the results of some of the Frenchite bullets in the condition of the machinery."

"But—but—" Flabbergasted, Ralph stared at the Oriental. "Why did you do this, Chan?" he queried.

The Asiatic drew himself up proudly. "These were scoundrels," he averred, "and I slew them in justice. You must not judge too harshly of my people, Mr. Prescott. Those of us who are behind the great new Empire with all our hearts and souls are not in favor of violence or of double-dealing. Nor do we countenance the mistreating of women. I slew Dillon for two reasons. Primarily because of the attentions he attempted to force upon Mrs. Prescott, secondarily because he was at heart a traitor to the cause he pretended to espouse. My master had issued definite instructions—if the deal could not be consummated in an entirely legal manner, the deal was off. But Dillon was not in a frame of mind to accept this dictum; he wanted the radium for himself. He was mad with greed and he had corrupted Dai Ling. That is all—had it not been my hand that took his life, it would have been another's for the arm of my master is long."

Chan's features were inscrutable as he finished and Ralph gazed at him wordlessly for long moments. Slowly then, he extended his hand. And the Asiatic took it and pressed it warmly, his face crinkling into a friendly smile.

"Thanks, Chan," said Ralph simply. "You have proved a good friend to me and to mine."

"It was nothing—nothing any gentleman would not have done." A princely dignity was in the Asiatic's reply.

Teddy Crowley joined them and he was bursting with excitement.

"DID you land the vessel, Professor?" he demanded.

"I did, Teddy, and a job it was, too."

"I should think so. Why, half of the essential auxiliaries are out of commission. I don't see how you managed."

Professor Timken grinned joyously. "Oh, Chan and the girls were of great assistance," he said airily. "We managed, all right."

"But—tell me about it." Teddy scratched his head in amazement.

The professor told the story there in the wrecked engine room, and his audience listened spellbound. He repeated what he had told Ralph of the part Chan played in ridding them of Dillon and Dai Ling; then spoke of the despair that had come to them all when they found the *Blue Streak* drifting helplessly out in the void with much of her machinery crippled. He and Chan and the girls had worked on the apparatus until enough of it was in operation to permit of reversing the propelling energies and starting back for the system of Vusti. The piloting of the ship on the return voyage had been a difficult and perilous feat, for her energies were erratic in behavior and variable in intensity. But they had succeeded until they came within the gravitational

influence of Lloxan. Here they were no longer able to control the repulsion energy and were forced to make a landing. And what a landing it had been! But here they were, safe and sound, and mighty glad to be alive.

Professor Timken's bright eyes twinkled as he wound up his story.

"But, man alive!" exclaimed Teddy. "What would you have done had we not arrived on the scene?"

"We'd have reached Mosin-ton in time,"—nonchalantly. "Seeing the black snows outside, we did not venture forth, and were busily engaged in repairing the machinery when you arrived. In a day or two of time we should have had it in such shape that a takeoff could be made, and I'd have landed the ship safely in the land of the metal men. You needn't have worried."

"Needn't have worried!" chuckled Ralph. "Why, you old faker, I'll wager you weren't half as confident as you pretend."

The professor grimaced. "Well, perhaps not," he admitted. "But, at any rate, all's well that ends well."

"Right-o," Teddy agreed.

"But it's not ended," objected Ralph. "There is still the return to our own solar system to be considered, and the disposition of the radium. The *Blue Streak* is yours now, Teddy, and—"

"Forget it. The rest will be easy. And poor old Sorenson will be freed of his worries at last. With Dillon out of the way, his persecution is ended, and with this supply of radium apportioned to him and Thalia, everything will be rosy."

"You'll make no claim to the radium?" Ralph asked this with his tongue in his cheek.

"Say—what do you think I am? Would you?"

"No." An understanding grin accompanied the negative.

"Of course you wouldn't, and neither will I." Teddy Crowley was seriously solemn. "Perhaps I may accept the *Blue Streak*, but that's all the old man can force upon me. The expedition is his, and Thalia's, regardless of his legal maneuverings in the effort to outwit Dillon, and the spoils will go where they rightfully belong. How about it, Chan?" He turned to the inscrutable Asiatic on the last.

"I can speak for my master." Chan's princely dignity returned. "He will have no part of the treasure under these conditions. And the Asiatic Empire will make no demands or lay no claim, either legally or otherwise."

"Attaboy!" Ralph approved.

MARY and Margaret came into the engine room on gaily tripping feet and with faces alight.

"Steve has come around nicely," Margaret announced with pride. "He wants to sit up already and is raging because I won't allow it. And you should see the nice job of stitching I did."

"You—you closed his wounds?" Not yet had Ralph Prescott become accustomed to the resourcefulness of his pretty wife.

"Of course; you wouldn't want to see him so badly scarred, would you? And, remember, I wasn't a nurse for nothing."

"Oh, Margaret, the metal men!" Mary Crowley interrupted excitedly. "We must get acquainted."

Cuckoo and the Doctor had been standing respectfully aloof, patiently awaiting the time when these new friends of theirs should have finished their greetings and explanations. But the two girls, spying them, were immediately enthusiastic over the prospect of meeting them.

Laughing, Ralph and Teddy provided mentascopes and the brides they had feared lost to them forever were soon engaged in animated communication with the plainly embarrassed living robots.

"Guess we'll have to spend some time in Dome City before we go back," said Ralph.

"Of course," Teddy agreed readily. "Another week or so will make little difference either to Thalia or Sorenson. Besides, I think we all need a change and some relaxation."

Professor Timken joined the conversation. "I'm glad to hear you say that," he approved, "and here is one member of the party who might have proved intractable if you decided to do otherwise. I certainly expect to get some personal benefit from this trip and there are many things I wish to know concerning this solar system and concerning the inhabitants of Mosin-ton. You boys can't get away with all the fun and adventure by yourselves."

And so it was arranged. The metal men, overjoyed upon learning that the visitors from afar were to tarry with them a while, assisted in the repair of the *Blue Streak's* essential auxiliaries. There was much work to be done, and the Doctor took advantage of a cessation of the black snowstorm to make his way to his own vessel with the news, returning immediately to his labors. With Vusti shining palely above there was revealed to the adventurers a most surprising thing—the two vessels were separated by not more than two hundred yards where they lay in the somber blanket left by the storm. What they had thought was an endless distance in the blackness of the snowfall was really but a few steps.

And, when the chief scientist of the metal men had returned to the *Blue Streak*, the transparent vessel vanished into the heavens with the swift withdrawal of the red beam.

"You are sending it back!" exclaimed Ralph, who had been watching at the control room ports.

"Yes," the Doctor responded. "They are to prepare a fitting welcome there, my friend. A welcome unattended by alarms, and a greeting which we hope will be but the beginning of a great friendship between our several worlds."

"I'm sure it will," said Ralph fervently. "And, Doctor, my own people will have much to say to those of your land who have been so kind and helpful. We have much for which to thank you already."

NO untoward incident marked the completion of the repairs. The workshop of the *Blue Streak* provided everything that was required in the way of tools, materials, and spare parts. And the damage which had been wrought in the engine room was entirely remedied before the terrestrial chronometer marked the passing of the first day.

When, at length, the vessel took off from her bed of black snow and soared into the skies under complete control, it was without any excitement whatsoever. Confidence had been restored in the minds of all of them and a blissful sense of anticipation had come in to replace the uncertainties and fears of the past few days.

The party had divided, quite naturally, into groups. Many things remained unsaid all around; many a detail of experiences during their separation were yet to be discussed, many a plan to be made.

Teddy Crowley was at the controls with Mary at his side. They were alone for the first time since the finding of the vessel.

"It's wonderful, Ted," whispered Mary. "Wonderful to be reunited and to be out here together, bound for the home of these remarkable creatures of flesh and blood and metal. Our real enjoyment of the trip should date from this time on."

"You're an incurable vagabond," laughed her husband fondly, "and an incurable optimist as well. But I be-

lieve you are correct—and I wouldn't wish you to be any other way."

Mary fell silent, gazing into the heavens and giving way to the spell of its beauties as she always did. The tiny bright orb that was Mosin-ton was out there before them with its more dimly lighted twin.

"And you'll always take me with you on any of these voyages?" she asked dreamily after a time.

"Always."

No further words passed between them for many minutes; none were necessary, since there was complete accord in their thoughts and keen appreciation of the privilege that was theirs by reason of the rapid advance in sciences that were yet in their infancy. New worlds to visit; a wealth of knowledge and experience to be gained—and always to be together. What more could they ask?

IN the observatory, four kindred spirits were gathered together. It had not taken long for Professor Timken to attach himself to the scientist of Mosin-ton. And the two were deeply engrossed in a comparison of astronomical data, with Soltur and Rastor most interested listeners and contributors to the discussion. All wore mentascopes.

"Our world is most remarkably like your own," the metal man told the professor, when the comparison had been made, "and our sciences are similar in many respects. But still we have much to learn from you and from these scientists of your sister planet."

"And we from you," Professor Timken returned. "This intercourse between us that is to be the result of our trip cannot fail to be of great benefit to all concerned. And yet I fear that our social and commercial activities will be a source of wonder and of disappointment to your people when they shall have visited us. And the warrings of certain of our nations. I say this for my own world only, since Coris is unified socially and politically in much the same manner as is your land. In comparison, my own peoples may be considered as far behind in cultural evolution."

"That may be so. But it is not to be wondered at in a civilization so young; in the history of my own kind there are many black pages and many periods of alternate savagery and culture. Many eras of dark despair have been experienced and there were times when the last vestige of humanity seemed about to desert us. But the soul of humanity has triumphed at last with us and it is my belief that it will always be so in whatever world beings of our kind may develop."

"I, too, agree," said Rastor. "In Coris we have been through the selfsame processes. And, while we have not progressed in spirit to as great a degree as have your people, the general trend has been ever toward a higher plane of the inner being."

"And Professor Timken and others from his world have been instrumental in removing the last stumbling blocks from our way," Soltur put in. "The professor may apologize for what he believes to be intolerable conditions existing in Tinus, but he must not forget—"

"That'll be enough of that," the professor growled, flushing hotly. "Suppose we return to the subject of mathematical tensors in the fourth dimension."

The two Corisians exchanged delighted glances, and the Doctor's eyelids clicked rapidly and expressively. The metal man understood and was more than ever interested in these visitors from out of space.

STEVE GILLETTE had refused to keep to his bed. S Mere scratches he called the flesh wounds Margaret had so painstakingly cleaned and stitched. And indeed it seemed that his experience had done him no harm

whatever when he strolled into the engine room where Cuckoo was engaged in an examination of the smoothly purring atomic engines.

"Nice piece of work, that engine," said Steve, readjusting his mentascope. "And you ought to see the power curves we plotted from the tests. Why——"

The metal man straightened his tall form and looked down upon his new friend with amazement. "But," he expostulated, "you should not have left your room; the lady who healed your injuries commanded it."

"Poppycock!" Steve smiled guilelessly into the metal man's eyes. "I know when I'm okay. It was only a bump on the skull that knocked me out, and as for the scratches—piffing. No temperature, and only a little stiffness in the joints to remember the thing by. Why should I stay cooped up in that cabin? This engine, now—look here, Cuckoo, these retorts and the connecting tubes are——"

Bending once more over the apparatus, the metal man forgot all else but the amazing thing his new friend was describing. And the *Blue Streak* hurtled on into the void while they talked.

MARGARET and Ralph Prescott had climbed to one of the small niches in the equatorial belt of the ship where a circular viewing port looked out through the double hull. They, too, had wanted to be alone.

"At first I couldn't believe my eyes," Ralph was saying. "That you had returned safely seemed impossible."

"Didn't think I could take care of myself, did you?" Margaret accused him.

"No, frankly, I didn't. And I don't now. What would you have done if it hadn't been for Chan?"

Margaret Prescott had no answer for this save to cling the closer to her husband's side.

"Sorry we came?" she asked archly after a moment of silence.

"Even after this—no—I'm glad. I wouldn't have missed it for anything, Midge. But it has taught me a lesson, this Dillon affair. In the future, you'll be with me at all times—no more leaving you behind, whatever the circumstance. And I won't be too sure that all the perils are to be anticipated outside."

"And you don't expect to make a drab home body of me ever again?"

"Who could? Who'd want to?" Ralph Prescott had yielded at last to the inevitable, to the call of adventure in space that had them both in its spell.

And Margaret's silvery tinkle of laughter was his reward.

Chan, the inscrutable, was alone in the library, immersed in a weighty volume entitled "Hydro-electric Power Generation in Isolated Territory." Wholly oblivious of his surroundings and giving no thought to the marvels of the universe or of the vessel that carried him.

The *Blue Streak*, a thing manmade and inanimate, yet throbbing with tremendous energy, drove on through the blackness toward Mosin-ton.

THE END



RADIO REVELATIONS

Before John's new receiving set
I listened, half-expecting
The music of the spheres to get,
Some stellar fugue or canzonet,
Man's chatter intersecting.
Instead, from empyrean heights
Celestial gossip drifted;
The greater and the lesser lights
It seems have frolics, feuds, and fights,
Even as the less uplifted.

"It's scandalous how Orion goes,"
Quoth Vega in high dudgeon,
"Can't he afford some pants and hose?
Or is it that he loves to pose
In just his belt and bludgeon?"
Then Vesta scolded, "Listen, pray!
Those wild beasts—where's their cager?
As I went down the Milky Way
To get my Pasteurized Grade A
He bit me—Ursa Major!

Of course, surprised, I had no show—
I whacked him with my slipper,
But Aries, Serpens, Scorpio
And Taurus joined the scrap and so
I brandished the Big Dipper.
Then pranced up Sagittarius
And shot them! How I kissed him!
We two then harnessed Pegasus
To Charles's Wain—absurd old bus—
And ranged the Solar System.

Now don't tell, Dearie, on your word
Of honor as a planet;
The cause of Mars' red face I've heard
Is booze! He's sure the gay old bird—
It's years since he began it."
Then burst forth Vega, "What's the use
Of Luna's mad endeavor
To change her figure and 'reduce'
When in one month—the silly goose—
She'll be as round as ever!"

"There's Berenice! She's marcelled her hair!
Her cute dog-star she's leading.
Here kid—take Cassiopeia's Chair.
What news?—You don't say! Did they dare?
Young Comet pinched for speeding?
Well! Well! I've, too, a tale to stir;
Now Venus is no pattern,
We all know that, but Jupiter
Is worse—I'm not much blaming her—
She has eloped with Saturn!

"Of course she's flirted lots, my dears,
But Saturn's been her 'steady.'
He has a bad 'case' it appears,
Old softy! Why he's had for years
A choice of rings all ready!"

"This Radio!" I rejoiced, "what fun!
And cheaper than a movie."
Just then John's voice boomed like a gun,
"Wake up, old girl—it's half past one.
And put the cat out, Lovey."

—JULIA BOYNTON GREEN

The King and the Pawn

By Seven Anderton

HOW many have not at one time or another been convinced that we could do a much better job at governing a people for their ultimate happiness than the man in power would ever execute! Some of us have perhaps made very careful and elaborate outlines for a perfect Utopia. How many of us, if actually given the opportunity to carry out our own plans, would accept the opportunity? It would seem, at first thought, that any one of us, who was sincere in his convictions, would have the courage to carry them out—but would you? Perhaps you will be able to answer that question better after reading this amazing novelette.

Illustrations by MOREY.

CHAPTER I

LEE BAGLEY, Washington correspondent for one of the world's largest news-gathering agencies, climbed the stairs to his apartment above a little shop on F street northwest. It was past midnight on one of those soft seductive nights common to the nation's capital in early spring. The newspaperman had been walking the streets for hours, prevented from sleeping by one of the persistent hunches that had given him the nickname of "Hunch" Bagley among his associates.

Bagley had built a reputation as one of the best newspaper men in the world, largely by following his many hunches. His present hunch however, could not be followed. It refused to lead anywhere. It amounted only to an unshakable feeling that something unusual was about to happen.

"My bones keep telling me that hell is about to break loose in large chunks," muttered Bagley as he mounted the stairs, "but damned if I can get an inkling of what it is that's going to happen."

Unlocking the door of his quarters, Lee switched on the lights. A queer thrill ran through the newspaperman as he saw that a letter had been thrust under his door during his absence. Mail seldom came to his rooms. He sensed a connection between this letter and the hunch that had refused to lead anywhere.

Picking up the missive, he noted that the envelope had been sealed with a splotch of red wax in which an

odd design had been impressed. He ripped open the envelope and read:

"My dear Mr. Bagley:

"This will, I hope, reach you sometime Thursday night. If it does, you will have a week or ten days in which to arrange your affairs before I send for you.

"Three days have now passed since I took upon myself the task of actively ruling the world. The rulers and chief executives of all nations were duly notified of my intentions at least a week before I assume command. I am sorry to say that all of these rulers and executives have chosen to ignore the notice and have failed to comply with my requests.

"As a result, several of them are now regretting their lack of vision and the rest have not long to wait.

"On Tuesday night I gave a little demonstration for the benefit of these obstinate executives. I fancy that demonstration has cured a number of my unruly subjects of an inclination to ignore me or class me as a harmless lunatic. What I caused to happen may also interest you as a newspaper man.

"On the night mentioned, I removed fifty million dollars in gold from the *Leviathan* in mid-ocean. The crew and passengers of that ship, as well as many officials of several governments, are still wondering how the thing was done. The gold was a secret shipment, having been sent to the United States as a payment on certain European war debts. In spite of the secrecy employed and the precaution taken to guard the shipment, it is now in my possession. I appropriated it in mid-ocean

The envoy swept the official, Lee, and the group of officers with a glance, in which there was amusement and defiance.



LEWIS O'LEARY

without violence to any person and in such a manner that even those guarding it are unaware of what happened.

"The high officials of all governments concerned are now aware that the gold has been taken and they are driving their secret service men frantic with demands that something be done. They have done all in their power to keep the story from the press and, so far, have been able to do so because I did not care.

"The time has now come, however, for the masses to be informed that they are henceforth to serve a new master. I am giving the story to the press of the entire world not later than Saturday and I take this means of giving it to you slightly in advance. I do this because I believe that it will please you and because it suits my purpose.

"What I have told you is the unvarnished truth and you can easily verify my information through any one of a number of the high officials in Washington with whom you are acquainted. You have but to show one of those officials this letter and he will not dare to withhold the truth from you. If you should meet a refusal, I promise you that I will strike another blow that will loosen the tongue of even your close-lipped president.

"Do with this information as you will, but bear in mind that it will be in the possession of every newspaper in the world by Saturday. It makes no difference whether you choose to beat the rest of the world into print with this story or not.

"However, you do figure in other plans of mine. As I informed you at the beginning of this letter, I shall send for you within ten days. Until then I am

"Sincerely,
"H. M. KING OF THE WORLD."

CHAPTER II

"A DECIDEDLY interesting letter to say the least," muttered Lee as he lighted a cigarette. Then he read it again, after which he tucked the remarkable epistle in the inner pocket of his coat and sat for some time blowing cloud after cloud of smoke at the ceiling.

Finally he rose and again sought the street. The letter had dispelled all thought of sleep and he decided to take another stroll while he pondered on its contents. Lee always thought more clearly when his long legs were in motion. An hour passed while he walked aimlessly about the streets of the sleeping city. Once he muttered to himself:

"At least it is some satisfaction to know that the old hunch wasn't kidding me. And I'll eat my shirt if there isn't more trouble behind that letter than appears on the face of it."

It was nearing three o'clock when Lee saw something that caused him to step quickly from the sidewalk and flatten himself against the trunk of a huge tree. Hidden in the deep shadow cast by the tree trunk, Lee watched eight men emerge from a house in the middle of the block ahead and enter two autos parked at the curb.

Lee recognized the men as the cream of the United States secret service and he knew that the house was the dwelling of one of the high officials of the government. As the autos sped away down the silent street Lee stepped from his hiding place. A few moments later he was ringing the doorbell of the house from which the men had emerged.

Handing his card to the servant who opened the door, Lee requested him to ask his master if he would pardon the hour and grant a brief interview on a very important matter. In a few moments the servant returned and led the way to the library at the rear of the house.

Secretary Belden, a tall, lean man with hair almost white and with keen gray eyes set deep under heavy brows, sat at a huge table in the center of the room. His lips were closed in a grim line under the close-cropped gray mustache and his long bony fingers gripped a heavy paper knife. Without rising, the official shook hands with Lee and motioned him to a chair. The servant withdrew and closed the heavy doors.

"I'm glad to see you, Bagley," said Belden, "although I can't imagine the mission that brings you at this hour."

Lee took a cigar from the box held out by the official. He lighted the weed and settled himself comfortably in his chair.

"It was my intention to call on you in the morning," he said, "but I was out for a stroll and happened to see the top notchers of the secret service leaving your house. I decided to make my call at once and here I am."

Taking the letter which he had found at his apartment from his pocket, Lee handed it to the official.

"This will explain my visit," he said.

Belden read the letter and as he did so, a frown gathered on his face. Lee puffed slowly on his cigar and waited. When the official had finished reading, there was a heavy silence in the room. He returned the letter to Lee and then tapped a small bell that stood on the table.

When the servant appeared, Belden requested whiskey and soda and silence again settled in the room, not to be broken until the drinks had been served and the two men were again alone.

"Well?" Lee put the word as a question after he had taken a sip of his liquor.

"If I tell you all I know concerning the *Leviathan* affair and this self-styled 'King of the World' who claims responsibility for it," asked the official, "will you promise not to quote me in your story?"

"Gladly," answered Lee. "In fact, I am not certain that I shall write a story. I think you will admit that I have a personal as well as possible professional interest in this affair."

Belden finished his drink. He then lighted a cigar, leaned back in his chair and began.

"The governments of the world" he said, "first became aware of the existence of this man who calls himself the 'King of the World' about two weeks ago. At that time messages were delivered to the rulers and heads of all nations. These messages informed the rulers and their cabinets and counselors that this man had appointed himself to rule over the entire earth.

"The messages went on to say that resistance would not only be useless, but that it would not be permitted. The man declared that one government was enough for one world and that henceforth he would be that government. He alleged that he was in a position to enforce his commands—that he could and would at any time paralyze utterly any move toward resistance.

"His self-appointed Majesty requested that the men at the heads of all governments at once announce through the press their willing allegiance to him. Having done this, they were to await further orders from their master.

"Needless to say, those messages were regarded as having been written by an idiot or a maniac. Little attention was paid to them until it was learned that they had been sent to every ruler in the world almost simultaneously and that the message received by each ruler and his counselors was written in the native tongue of the ruler to whom it was delivered. The methods of making certain of direct delivery were also ingenious.

"Following this discovery, efforts were made to locate

the source of the messages but all efforts were in vain. The messages announced that the new king would take active charge of the world on Monday, last. Monday came and nothing happened. Then Tuesday night brought the theft of the gold from the *Leviathan*, mentioned in your letter. I may honestly admit that there has been considerable consternation in government circles since."

Belden paused to relight his cigar.

"I can imagine," smiled Lee. "Would you mind telling me what you know of the details of that theft?"

"There is very little to tell," answered the secretary.

"A certain European nation had arranged to make a payment of fifty million dollars in gold to the United States. It was planned to send the money secretly. The *Leviathan* was chosen for the transport. The gold was packed in small boxes marked copper engravings and stored in a specially prepared hold on that ship. There were but fourteen men in the world who knew of the shipment—at least, so it was believed.

"Tuesday night, while the *Leviathan* was in mid-ocean, something happened. Nobody seems to know what it was, but about midnight, every living soul on the ship lost consciousness in the twinkling of an eye. It was five hours later when a steward, who was the first person to do so, regained consciousness. He found all other persons on the ship sleeping.

"The others were roused at once and without difficulty. All who were not in their berths when the thing happened, were found in deep slumber, right where they had been when they were overcome. As soon as the captain and the purser were awakened, they rushed to the hold where the gold had been stored. The hold had been dynamited and the gold was gone!

"We were notified by wireless and what I have told you about the matter is all I know—at least, until after the *Leviathan* docks at New York at ten o'clock in the morning."

"You say the hold was dynamited," observed Lee. "Did no one hear the explosion?"

"According to my information, no one heard or saw a thing," answered Belden.

"It doesn't seem possible," mused Lee. "But 'the world do move.'"

CHAPTER III

BEFORE Belden and the newspaper man had finished talking, dawn was creeping in around the drawn curtains of the library. Just as Lee was preparing to depart, the doorbell rang. A servant passed along the hall and in a few moments entered the library with a letter, which he handed to the official. Lee caught a glimpse of a smear of crimson wax impressed with a peculiar seal.

"A message from His Majesty," he laughed.

A frown gathered on Belden's face as he reached for the paper knife and slit the envelope. He read the single typewritten page and then handed it to Lee. It read:

"Esteemed Sir—

"I have found it necessary to take charge of your detail of secret service men. I feared that the missions to which they had been assigned might not fit in with my plans. You will oblige me by making no attempt to assign others to the tasks these eight men will be prevented from doing. If you heed my wishes in this matter, it will be much better for all concerned, and I will release your men in a month or less. If you continue obstinate, what happens will be your own fault.

"As I dictate this, I am aware that you are in conference with Mr. Lee Bagley. I must inform you that I have chosen Mr. Bagley to fill an important post at

my court in the near future. It might be well for you to bear this in mind in whatever dealings you may have with him between now and the time when I call him to his post. The autos from which I had your secret-service men removed are parked at the corner of Twenty-second and G streets northwest.

"I shall have further word for you in a day or two. Until then I remain,

"Sincerely yours,

"H. H. KING OF THE WORLD."

"I seem to be scheduled for an illustrious future, whether I like it or not," grinned Lee as he returned the note to Belden. "If you will pardon my sudden departure, I'm going to dash over and see if those cars are where that note says they are."

"Wait until I order my car and I'll go with you," said Belden, touching a bell.

They found the cars empty and parked at the curb when they reached the designated corner. There was no sign of the secret service men who had driven away from Belden's home in the autos.

"I'd honk the horns to see if I could locate any of your hired men," said Lee, "but I have a hunch it would be a waste of time."

"So do I," admitted Belden grimly. "Those men were going to the flying field to take planes for New York. They were supposed to be there for the arrival of the *Leviathan*."

"Let's go back to your home and call the field," suggested Lee. "We can find out whether they arrived there."

Back in Belden's library the official was informed over the phone that the ordered planes were warmed up and waiting, but that the passengers had not arrived. Belden cancelled the order for the planes and hung up the receiver.

"What next?" he said in an exasperated tone as he faced Bagley and began to mix whiskey and soda for himself and the newspaper man.

"As soon as I put away that drink," answered Lee, "I'm going to bed and collect a lot of overdue beauty sleep."

"Then you are not going to turn the story over to your organization?" queried Belden.

Lee tossed off his liquor. "No," he answered. "I have a feeling that His Majesty will keep his word and give it to the press of the world at large by Saturday and perhaps I should be keen enough in the service of my organization to have put over the scoop. Just the same I'm not going to do it. I have a democratic dislike to taking orders from a king. I shall probably see you again soon if nothing prevents."

Smiling grimly, Belden led Lee to the door and bid him good morning.

CHAPTER IV

LEE BAGLEY was utterly devoid of that modern affliction, nerves. When he went to bed he slept.

It was a few minutes past three o'clock the following afternoon, when the jangle of the telephone on a stand at his bedside broke his slumber. He rolled over and dragged the instrument into the bed.

"Bagley speaking," he growled.

"Hello, sleepy head," laughed a feminine voice over the wire. "Have you forgotten that we have a tennis court reserved for three fifteen, or are you afraid to take your beating like a man?"

"Great Scott, Eileen," ejaculated Lee. "Is it three o'clock?"

"It certainly is," rippled the voice. "What sort of a party were you on last night?"

"You'd be surprised," answered Lee. "But seriously, Eileen," he continued, "we will have to pass up our tennis for today. I must have a talk with you on a very important matter which I do not wish to discuss over the telephone. Where shall I meet you in half an hour?"

"I will be at your apartment in ten minutes and make your coffee while you are dressing," came the answer. "Leave your door unlocked."

"But—" began Lee.

"But, your maiden aunt—" interrupted the voice. "I'm coming."

Lee heard the click that told him the connection was severed. He grinned as he put away the phone. Stepping into his slippers, he unfastened the outer door of his quarters and dived into the bathroom. Before he had finished shaving, he heard the self-appointed cook enter the apartment and soon the aroma of coffee reached his nostrils.

Twenty minutes later he was seated at the table in the living room with a tasty breakfast spread before him. Opposite him, curled up like a kitten in a big, leather-upholstered chair, sat the girl whose phone call had shattered his sleep. Her name was Eileen Ware. She was a slender, dark-eyed girl with smooth, olive skin and a latin cast of features. Her body was small but supple and well formed. She was in her early twenties and she was dressed in a tennis outfit that testified to hard use. Her glossy, black hair, caught with a green ribbon, hung in a riot of curls down her back.

"Gosh, Eileen," said Lee as he wrecked an egg, "you certainly are a sight to cure sore eyes."

"Never mind the flattery," retorted the girl. "I am waiting for you to explain why I find you in bed at an hour when you are supposed to be facing me across a tennis net."

Lee grinned. He was fond of this girl, more fond than he cared to have her know. She was the only child of a very wealthy statesman and moved, when she cared to, in Washington's most exclusive social circles. Lee knew that for some time her ambitious mama had been laying plans to marry the fair daughter to a title. It had been rumored lately that success was almost to crown the mother's efforts.

Lee and Eileen had met two years before at a reception for her father, where Lee had been present in his rôle of reporter. A friendship ripened between the two and had flourished in spite of the disapproval of the girl's ambitious mother.

Eileen had a will of her own. She was a very positive young person and the social whirl held little appeal for her. Since her acquaintance with Lee Bagley had ripened into friendship she had become keenly interested in his work. She had helped him not a little on many occasions in ferreting out elusive stories and bits of information. Lee had a high regard for the keen brain of the girl and called upon her for aid and advice more and more often.

"I was a very busy man last night," Lee told Eileen between mouthfuls. "I was notified, during the wee small hours, of my appointment to be counselor to the King of the World."

The soft, dark eyes of the girl met Lee's twinkling, blue ones steadily. She was never sure how to take this friend of hers. So little of him was on the surface.

"Isn't that nice?" she replied. "Perhaps, if you can get promoted to Prime Minister or Prince, mama will let you call at the house."

"That is an advantage in the situation that had as yet escaped my attention," smiled Lee. Then his face grew sober. "Eileen," he continued, "you are the only woman to whom I have ever entrusted information that

I desired to go no farther. My confidence in you has always been justified. I have always found in you an able and intelligent helper, when we have worked together. I am now up against what I believe to be the toughest proposition that I have ever tackled. I am in great need of a friend upon whom I can depend absolutely. I am pretty certain that I shall soon be mixed up in some affairs not of my own choosing; that I am about to become the victim of circumstances over which I have no control."

Lee paused to light a cigarette. The girl sat silent waiting for him to continue. That was one of the things that drew Lee to Eileen. She never spoke out of her turn. He exhaled a cloud of smoke toward the ceiling and continued.

"Because I feel that I can trust you above all others," he told her, "I am going to place in your possession certain information and ask you to carry out certain instructions in case anything happens to me. Before I go farther I want to warn you that I feel that I am about to antagonize something or somebody, sinister and powerful."

"There may be an element of danger and there will undoubtedly be difficulties in what I am about to undertake. If you feel that you do not care to face this possible danger and certain difficulty, I wish you to say so and I will seek help elsewhere. I might add that the service I shall ask will be not to myself but to the whole of humanity."

As Lee paused, Eileen leaned forward. Her eyes were sparkling.

"Lee Bagley," she said, "just you try to leave me out of anything that promises to be interesting and exciting."

Admiration shone in Lee's eyes. Eileen always rang true. From a drawer of the table, he took the letter he had received on the previous night and handed it to her. She read it and returned it. Lee then told her in detail of the events of the preceding night. Until nearly five o'clock, the friends remained in conference. Among other things, they pored over an intricate cipher which Lee diagrammed on a sheet of note paper. When the girl was certain that she had memorized the key, Lee tossed the diagram into the ash tray and touched a match to it.

"Be sure you don't forget that," he cautioned. "We may never use it, and again, it might come in handy."

"It's stored safely in the old gray matter," the girl assured him. "Gee, I'm all excited. Don't you dare leave me out of anything."

"I won't if I can help it," laughed Lee. "And now I've got to get busy."

One of Washington's sudden Spring showers was pouring down when they left Lee's apartment. Eileen's car stood at the curb. She offered to drop Lee at his office.

At the office Lee found a message from Secretary Belden whose guest he had been in the wee hours of the morning. The message requested that he call at the home of the official at six o'clock. Lee glanced at his watch. He had fifteen minutes. He called a taxi and began a hurried inspection of his mail.

CHAPTER V

PROMPTLY on his arrival, Lee was ushered into the library where Belden awaited him. The servant brought liquor and cigars and departed.

"What has happened?" queried Lee, lighting a cigar.

"Plenty," was the grim retort.

"What about the secret service men?"

"Gone. Apparently vanished into thin air."

Lee mused a moment. "What else?" he asked.

"The captain and the purser of the *Leviathan*," answered Belden, "arrived from New York at noon by plane. They have made their report but there is nothing in it, that you do not already know. The facts seem to be unchanged in statement."

Lee puffed his cigar thoughtfully. "Our friend, the king," he remarked, "seems to do things thoroughly. Was anyone missing from the ship?"

"No one," answered the official. "The passengers and crew were all present when a check was made on the morning after the ship was robbed."

"What about stowaways?" queried Lee.

"You may be sure," was the answer, "that special care was taken as to that before the ship was allowed to sail with such a cargo."

Lee sat silent while the official mixed whiskey and soda. "This thing has me going around in circles," growled Belden. "It's like fighting a ghost. It leaves you with a helpless and rather foolish feeling."

"It does at that," agreed Lee. "I tell myself that I have no intention of becoming a member of the court of this self-styled king, but at the same time I find myself wondering if I should not notify my head office that I may not be here long."

A faint smile flitted across the face of the official. "I should imagine you would be in somewhat of a quandary," he said. "At least you should not find the coming week dull."

"I don't fancy I shall," replied Lee, "but I shall endeavor to remain on my job if possible. I have no desire to become the subject of a king, not even of the sovereign of the globe."

"Nor I," smiled Belden, "but when I remember that eight armed and able bodied secret service men were kidnapped last night without so much as a disturbance, I am forced to wonder whether you will not depart from Washington, whenever His Majesty decides that he needs you."

Lee nodded his head. "Yes," he said, "and when I realize that several tons of gold were removed from a crowded liner in the middle of the ocean, I cannot help wondering what is to happen next. By the way, has it occurred to you that His Mysterious Majesty must have been in the city last night and that he may be here now?"

"It has," answered Belden, "but that gives nothing to work on. Either you or myself might meet him on the street and we would not know but what we were passing some government clerk."

"That is true," agreed Lee. "I am forced to admit that the fellow has us guessing."

There was a tap at the library door and a servant entered with a message which he handed to Belden. It bore the strange crimson seal that marked it as a message from the ominous king. A frown gathered on Belden's face as he read the typewritten page. When he had finished he handed it to Lee.

"I am to have a visitor," remarked the official. "I should like you to remain and meet him."

The letter to which Lee turned his attention read:

"Esteemed Sir—

"I have just ordered the story of the beginning of my reign and of my activities since to be delivered to the press of the world Saturday morning. Further attempts to suppress this news will be futile.

"I have also ordered my Washington envoy to pay you a visit and impress upon you certain facts and make certain arrangements. You may expect him at eight o'clock tonight.

"I advise you to make no attempt to have this man arrested or detained. You would probably find such a thing impossible and if, by chance, you should succeed,

I would not permit my subject to remain your prisoner until sunrise. It is time for you and all others from whom I shall require service to learn that my orders must be obeyed and that resistance is useless.

"It will be wise for you to receive my envoy in a gracious manner. I promise you that he will bring to you some interesting and enlightening information. He will also offer some advice that you and your colleagues will do well to heed.

"Sincerely,

"H. M. KING OF THE WORLD."

Lee's eyes were twinkling when he finished the message. "I shall be delighted to meet your caller," he said. "Have you decided upon the form your reception shall take?"

Belden's face was grim. "I have a good mind," he replied, "to take the bull by the horns and have the fellow arrested the moment he shows up."

"In your place," said Lee. "I should do much the same thing, except that I believe I would first hear what the chap has to say. It might prove useful as well as interesting."

"There is something in that," admitted Belden after a few moments of thought. "I believe that is what I'll do."

A short conversation over a private wire with the Secret Service department was all that was necessary to prepare for the arrest of His Majesty's envoy. By pressing with his foot on a button, the official was assured of the presence of a dozen officers in his library almost immediately.

The button, which was hidden by a corner of the rug beneath the table, was tested and found to be working. Lee and the official then sat down to await the arrival of the guest.

CHAPTER VI

PROMPTLY at eight o'clock the servant brought the official a card which told him that Mr. Carl Boyd, Washington ambassador of His Majesty, the King of the World, desired an audience.

"Show him in," said Belden.

The man ushered in by the servant was of medium stature and slender. He had blue eyes and a ruddy complexion and was dressed in a neat, dark, business suit. There was a quizzical smile on his face, as he shook hands with Lee and Belden. He seated himself at the invitation of the official and accepted a cigar.

"Do you object to the presence of Mr. Bagley at our interview?" inquired the host as he moved his foot so that his toe was near the hidden button.

"Not in the least," replied His Majesty's envoy. "In fact, I am delighted that Mr. Bagley is present. And now, if I may hold the floor for a time, I have a message to deliver and a request to make on behalf of His Majesty, my master."

"We shall be pleased to listen," declared the host.

"I am instructed by His Majesty," began the envoy, "to extend his best wishes to you and your colleagues at the helm of the United States government and to outline for you his plans for the future of the world under his rule."

"Your master," said Belden smiling grimly, "seems to have firm faith in his ability to succeed in this rather fantastic undertaking. His audacity at least is to be admired."

"Let me assure you that my master's success is as certain as the sunrise," answered the envoy earnestly. "Someone had to learn the lesson taught by the great war. The man who learned that lesson is the man I now serve and whose reign as the first king of the world

will mark a long step in the progress of humanity. While yourself and the rest of the world's intelligent men have been tangled in the maze of politics and blinded by the petty affairs of a greedy world, my master has been preparing to release that world from the bondage of its folly.

"In the fifteen years that have passed since the close of the World War, my master has perfected his plans and trained and educated his aids, until there can be no possibility of failure. I tell you in all sincerity that the present machinery of government and war will shortly be a forgotten thing. My master has the world in the palm of his hand and to resist his wishes is as foolish as it would be to try to halt the tempest with a chain. I give you my word that the vast armies and navies of the world are as powerless against my master, as a child's pop-gun would be against those armies and navies."

"You ask us to take a lot on faith," remarked Belden as the envoy paused to relight his cigar.

"I do not think so," answered the envoy. "My master has shown you certain small examples of his power and will show more if it becomes necessary. I believe that you will admit that the affair of the *Leviathan* was a fair sample of my master's ability to accomplish the apparently impossible."

"That," retorted Belden, "was certainly a most high-handed example of piracy on the high seas, and, I will admit, has its baffling side. It seems to occupy a unique place in the annals of crime."

The envoy frowned slightly. "My dear sir," he said, "the confiscation of that gold was not a crime. It was merely the first step in the gathering in of the world's entire supply of gold by my master. As soon as all the gold has been turned in, it is His Majesty's intention to issue new coin and do away with the present complicated system. The new coin will have the same value throughout the entire world, thus doing away with the exchange system and its accompanying evils. That particular lot of precious metal was taken in the way it was for the purpose of giving obstinate politicians an example of what my master can do."

"And what other reforms does your master plan?" inquired the secretary.

"Many," answered the envoy, "but it is his intention to put them into effect slowly and without revolutionary methods. Present methods are to be changed in an orderly manner and better ones substituted for them. The first step is for all the nations of the world to acknowledge allegiance to my master and take their places as provinces in one great dominion instead of separate nations."

"And how does your master propose to bring this about?" asked Belden.

"By convincing England and the United States that resistance is foolish and useless," was the answer. "Once England and America lead, the rest of the nations will follow with very little persuading."

"Does your master believe that he can force England and the United States to take such a step against their wills?" was Belden's next query.

"Rather let us say," smiled the envoy, "that he is certain that he can convince those nations of the wisdom of such a step. And now I must conclude my mission and depart, for other affairs of His Majesty demand my attention. My master has instructed me to obtain an interview with your master, the President, and his Cabinet for the purpose of discussing this matter of allegiance to His Majesty. I have come to ask you if such a conference can be arranged for Monday."

"On Saturday, the press of the world will tell the story of my master having assumed the throne of the world and of the things he has done since. I am in-

structed to tell you that daily, from now until my audience with the President and his Cabinet is granted, my master will give a demonstration of the folly of resistance to his commands and requests. I must remind you that my master has only the good of the entire world at heart, and that it is his great desire to attain his end without harm to the person or property of anyone.

"Nevertheless, it will be well for you to bear in mind that my master is at the throttle of the most powerful engine in the world and that that engine can be equally constructive or destructive. You may expect the demonstrations of which I have spoken and I will await your early reply to my request. I have taken a suite at the Raleigh Hotel and you may communicate with me there. I thank you for the audience you have granted me and now I must leave."

As the envoy rose from his chair Lee Bagley saw the left foot of the official move slightly and knew that the bell hidden by the rug had been pressed. Belden rose and insisted that the parting guest be served with liquor. The envoy reseated himself and the official turned his attention to the decanter and glasses.

Before the mixing of the drinks was completed, the heavy doors of the library opened and a dozen men filed in. It was an ominous and silent procession. The men were all large and there was about them an air of determination and grim purpose. The envoy raised his eyebrows and turned to his host.

"I would venture a guess," he smiled, "that the intention and purpose of these gentlemen is to deprive me of my liberty."

"Your guess is accurate," answered Belden as he extended a liquor glass toward the envoy, "but I hope that the arrival of our friends will not interfere with your enjoyment of what is, I assure you, very good liquor."

The envoy lifted the glass and swept the official, Lee, and the group of officers with a glance in which there was amusement and defiance.

"To the good health of my captors," he proposed.

The three tossed off the toast. As Lee lowered his glass from his lips a mist seemed to gather before his eyes and he blinked them to clear it away, but it remained. Suddenly he seemed very tired and he felt his knees about to buckle under him. He turned his face toward the group of officers and as he did so he felt himself sinking to the floor and then all was darkness.

CHAPTER VII

LEE returned to the world of consciousness to feel a rough hand shaking his shoulder. He felt very drowsy and wished whoever was shaking him would stop it and let him sleep. Then his wits began to clear and he opened his eyes to find himself lying on the floor of the library. He sat up and looked about.

Secretary Belden sat in a chair beside the table reading a note. The officers, one of whom had awakened Lee, were grouped about Belden and Lee noticed that all were present. The only person missing from the room was the man the officers were supposed to have arrested. Then he noticed that the official was smiling at him. He scrambled to his feet, grinning rather foolishly.

"What happened?" he asked. "Where is His Majesty's envoy?"

"I have just been reading a note," replied the official, "in which I am informed that the gentleman has returned to his hotel."

"Then you did not arrest him?" Lee's wits were still foggy.

"It seems that we did not," growled Belden.

He turned from Lee and dismissed the officers, say-

ing that he would have further orders for them later. When the officers had departed rather sheepishly, Belden turned to Lee and handed him the note he had been reading when Lee was awakened.

"Be seated and read that," he invited, "while I see what has become of all my servants."

Lee dropped into a chair and read:

"Sir—

"I thank you for the excellent liquor and am truly sorry to disappoint you in your desire to have me arrested.

"As you read this you will probably begin to realize that the attempt to deprive me of my liberty was ill advised. It was also rather impolite, in view of the fact, that I had told you my master's affairs demanded immediate attention.

"I beg of you to realize that such methods can avail you nothing against my master's weapons. Had you been able to accomplish my arrest I would not have remained a prisoner an hour. It will be some time after midnight when you read this and you and your officers will, no doubt, feel somewhat foolish, but you must not blame me. You were warned.

"I shall be at your service after eight o'clock in the morning at my hotel. I must warn you that any attempt to disturb me before that hour will be attended with disaster. I advise you to abandon any idea of arrest in connection with myself. Try to realize that the day of violence is, or soon will be, past. The methods you have always believed most effective have become obsolete.

"I hope for early word from you concerning my audience with the President and his Cabinet. Thanking you again for your hospitality, I remain,

"Sincerely,

"CARL BOYD."

As Lee finished reading the note, Belden returned to the library. He took a chair facing Lee.

"What do you make of it?" he asked.

"I don't know," answered Lee. "Have you any idea what took place—what put the bunch of us out?"

"I haven't the slightest notion," the secretary admitted, "except that it was probably the same thing that put everyone aboard the *Leviathan* to sleep while the gold was being removed."

Lee indicated a clock on the mantel. "We were out about five hours," he said, "and it is evident that our guest was immune to whatever it was by which we were overcome. I would give a good bit to know the nature of that same thing."

"And I," retorted Belden, "would pay something to know what the next move is to be."

Lee rose. "I know what my next move is to be," he declared. "I am going on the war path. I have no objection to a man appointing himself king but I have decided that this one has taken in too much territory. I object to any man appointing me a pawn. I am going out to wire my concern to relieve me indefinitely. I am then going home to put on my war paint and lay my plans to go after the scalp of His Majesty."

The official rose to escort Lee to the door.

"As you know, Bagley," he said, "I have great respect for your ability and if you need money to carry out whatever plans you lay, I want you to feel free to call upon me. This man has made himself a menace to all government and order and whoever runs him to earth will do the world a great service. I wish you speedy success."

They were at the door. "I shall keep your offer in mind," said Lee, "and I may take advantage of it at any time."

It was two o'clock in the morning when Lee left the

home of the official, but he wandered the streets for two hours, lost in deep thought before he returned home.

He had formed a plan.

CHAPTER VIII

BEFORE noon of the following day, which was Saturday, one topic of conversation absorbed the entire world. The press of the world in screaming headlines and bold type told the peoples of all nations of the sinister and mysterious thing that menaced their governments. Editorial pens told the people of the world's republics that their freedom—their precious institution of self-government—was threatened by a madman who had appointed himself king of the entire world. Citizens of nations ruled by monarchs were reminded of their sacred duty to their king and country.

The news columns told in detail of the mysterious, lawless, and threatening things that had been done since the preceding Monday, when an arch-fiend had proclaimed himself sovereign of the world.

A copy of a proclamation, sent to the press of every nation of the world at approximately the same hour by the self-styled king, was printed in full in the leading papers of nearly every city. The radio flung the news to the far corners of the earth. His Majesty's message to his mystified "subjects" read:

"My people—

"After long years of preparation the time has come for me to assume the throne of the world. Henceforth my edicts are to be obeyed without question. It is my intention to rule my domain wisely and well. It shall be my purpose to maintain peace and prosperity in the world during my reign.

"I shall try to make the brotherhood of man something beside a pretty but empty phrase. As rapidly as possible I shall endeavor to rid the world of its follies, shams, and false ideals.

"When these things are accomplished, man's inhumanity to man will cease to wrap the world in sorrow, and the true meaning and purpose of life shall become apparent to all men. I am aware that I shall meet with opposition in the task I have undertaken, but I assure you that all such opposition will be useless. My preparations have been too carefully made and my power is too great to admit of failure. Through the press you will read today of certain things I have caused to happen since the beginning of my reign. These things should give some idea of my power and my determination. Today I shall give another and still more convincing demonstration of my ability to enforce my commands.

"At five o'clock, London time, every living thing in London shall lose consciousness and remain in deep but harmless sleep for a period of five hours or more. I have warned the city in order that preparations for the emergency may be made. If the people of the city show the good sense I expect them to show, there will be no harm done. I have pointed out to them that no machinery which requires the supervision of human hands and brains should be in operation at five o'clock. The city must at that hour be prepared for its five-hour nap and if any of its citizens ignore my warning, I shall be sorry, but the blame for anything that may happen because of disobedience will be their own.

"If those in power in the nations of the world do not assure me of the allegiance I have demanded it will be necessary to further impress them with my power. I hope, however, that today's events in London will cause the light to dawn upon these officials and leaders.

"Bear in mind that it would be as simple a matter for

me to exterminate all life in London this afternoon as to take away consciousness over a period of five hours. I have no desire to kill. On the other hand I would rid all men of such a desire. It is because of my lack of any desire to destroy or to do violence that I have spent years in developing a weapon that will leave men powerless without destroying them or causing them pain.

"It must become apparent that an unconscious man is to all intents and purposes a dead man. During the five hours today that all London's population will be unconscious I could blast open and empty the vaults of the Bank of England. I could loot the treasure houses of the city as I recently looted the hold of a treasure bearing ship in mid-ocean. I shall do none of these things. My only purpose is to convince the politicians and greedy rulers of the world that it is vain to resist me. I will be obeyed. The sooner the world accepts that fact the better it will be for the world. I ask my people to believe that I have at heart nothing but the good of this world. I also advise that they bring to bear upon their stubborn politicians and leaders pressure that will result in the speedy recognition of my reign.

"H. M. KING OF THE WORLD."

Lee Bagley sat in his quarters and read the message of His Majesty aloud to Eileen Ware. Lee and Eileen had been in conference since nine o'clock and it was now a few minutes past eleven. Lee glanced at his watch.

"Five o'clock in London," he remarked, "is noon here. In less than an hour something is going to happen in London. I wonder if it is possible for the same thing that happened to me last night to happen to the entire population of London?"

Eileen smiled. She curled up in the big chair opposite Lee.

"Weird things seem possible to His Majesty," she said. "In the light of what has happened, there is something convincing about his message. I believe that if I were in London at five o'clock I should prepare to spend five hours in slumber."

There was a twinkle in Lee's blue eyes as they met Eileen's dark ones.

"I shouldn't wonder but what you would be doing the wise thing," he chuckled. "Nevertheless, I have made up my mind to pit such puny strength as I possess against this being who so cheerfully admits that he is invincible. I shall carry out my plan for leaving here tonight and I shall conceal myself in the place and manner I have described to you. I fancy His Majesty will seek me in vain despite his mysterious power.

"You will be my only contact with persons here in Washington and elsewhere. You must be very careful to obey the instructions I have given you. In communicating with you, I will use the cipher that only you and myself know and with your aid I expect to give His Majesty a run for his money."

For a long moment Eileen was silent, regarding Lee with serious eyes.

"Lee," she said, "I want you to promise me one thing. Please take good care of yourself. You are so reckless and I do not want to lose the best friend I have."

"Don't worry," said Lee. "I will look out for myself. And now let us go out and have a bite of lunch, while we wait for news of what happens in London."

CHAPTER IX

LEE and Eileen were finishing their dessert in a restaurant on Pennsylvania avenue at twenty minutes after twelve when a boy wildly crying an extra appeared in front of the place. Lee joined the

rush for the door and presently returned with a paper.

The huge, black headlines informed the reader that London had suddenly ceased to respond to the outside world over the wires and the radio. In the restaurant, food was forgotten and at every table someone was reading aloud. Lee read to Eileen.

"At one minute past five in London," the article ran, "which is one minute past noon in Washington, London wires suddenly went dead and the voice of a radio announcer ceased in the middle of a sentence. At the time that they ceased to function, the wires and the radio were sending the rest of the world word that four monstrous air craft had appeared over the city.

"The planes came at a terrific speed and from the southwest," the newspaper story went on to say. "Having given out this information the wires and radio suddenly ceased to function and an ominous silence had been the only response to the frantic efforts of other points in the world to reopen communication with the British capital.

"Intrepid fliers had volunteered to rush to London by plane, but due to warnings that such an attempt would only cause the wrecking of the plane and the death of its passengers, the attempts had been forbidden.

"The mysterious person who calls himself the King of the World," continued the story, "has notified the authorities of all nearby places that the pilots of any train, auto, plane or other carrier attempting to enter London during the six hours between five and eleven o'clock will merely commit suicide.

"Fearing that there may be truth in these warnings, it has been decided to delay for six hours any attempt to enter the stricken city. In the meantime hundreds of expeditions are ready to start for London by air, water, rail, and highway as soon as it is deemed safe."

When Lee finished reading the article, Eileen leaned across the table.

"Lee," she begged "I wish you wouldn't fly in the face of this man or devil or whatever he is. I am afraid for you. What chance have you against a power that can accomplish with such apparent ease such things as this 'King of the World' has accomplished?"

Lee's face was grave. "It may be that I can do nothing," he answered, "but the least I can do is to try. Something inside me rebels against the thing that threatens to happen. For some reason I feel that I would rather die fighting this thing than to live in the same world with it or as a part of it. If you feel that you do not wish to go on as we have planned, I am willing to permit you to withdraw from our bargain. As for me, there is nothing left but to carry on."

Eileen's level gaze met that of Lee. "You know," she declared, "that I will not withdraw."

Lee reached across the table and pressed her hand. Then he arose and led the way from the place. At the door, he helped Eileen into her car and reminded her that she was to be at his quarters without fail at seven that evening. Fifteen minutes later Lee was at the home of Secretary Belden, the scene of early developments in the drama.

When he was ushered into the library, Lee found himself in the presence of the entire Cabinet of the President and of several other important officials. Seated at the table in the center of the group was the Washington Ambassador of His Majesty, King of the World.

"Glad you got here, Bagley," said Belden. "We were just ready to open a conference with Mr. Boyd, whom you probably remember."

Lee grinned and nodded a greeting to the assembled gentlemen. "I am glad," he said, "to have the privilege of being present."

When Lee had taken a chair indicated by the host,

the envoy of His Majesty rose and spoke to the assembly.

"I am aware," he began, "that you gentlemen are no doubt curious and perhaps anxious concerning what has happened in London. I am glad to be able to relieve both your curiosity and your anxiety. London is merely taking a nap.

"If my master's warning was heeded, there will be no damage done and no one will be the worse for the experience when London awakens sometime before midnight. This thing has been done to London, simply for the purpose of convincing the ones who remain skeptical that it is useless to resist His Majesty.

"I now have something to tell you gentlemen. While you were eating your mid-day meal the Prime Minister of England was in London. Before you eat your dinners this evening he will be in Washington. He will have no memory of his trip but he will be in no way harmed. It was my master's wish that he be brought here in order that he might confer with you and the President.

"I am further instructed to inform you that all activities on the part of my master shall cease for one week while he awaits notice through me that England and America are willing to set an example to the rest of the world by swearing allegiance to the throne of my master. During the week I shall be at your disposal and try to answer any questions that you may care to ask."

As the envoy paused a cabinet member rose to his feet. "Am I to understand," he asked, "that the Prime Minister of England will be in Washington within six hours after he leaves London?"

"I promise you," answered the envoy, "that the Prime Minister will be in Washington before seven o'clock this evening and he will tell you himself that he was in London at five o'clock, London time."

The cabinet member dropped into his chair. "If that occurs," he exclaimed, "I will vote to swear allegiance to His Majesty, or the long-tailed devil himself, in exchange for a promise of safety for my fellow citizens."

The envoy laughed. "Really, gentlemen," he said, "in a manner I sympathize with you. I can appreciate how you must feel to suddenly find yourselves so helpless, but I assure you that the time will be short until every one of you will hail the reign of my master as the greatest blessing that ever came to the world."

The envoy bent his gaze upon Lee. "Mr. Bagley, whom you all know as a brilliant man and an able writer, will soon be advisor and spokesman to His Majesty," the speaker continued. "When he is called to that post, I assure you that Mr. Bagley will tell you that what I have just said is true. In the meantime I shall be awaiting at my hotel your answer to His Majesty's proposal."

There was silence until the host returned from showing the envoy to the door and then discussion waxed hot for more than two hours. At five o'clock Lee Bagley finished a long discourse in which he told the assembled officials that he was about to voluntarily depart from Washington as the first step in a plan he had laid to bring home the scalp of the would-be sovereign of the world.

"I cannot tell you where I am going or what I am going to do," he said, "because I believe that it were better for my plans that I maintain absolute secrecy. I must now be off and when next I see you gentlemen I hope it will be to deliver into your hands our friend, the enemy. I feel that what in most cases would be help, would only hinder in this scrape. New problems require new solutions. I now bid you gentlemen goodbye and all I can ask of you is to wish me luck."

After all had shaken hands with Lee and he had de-

parted, the group of officials resumed their deliberations.

"I have a deep respect for Lee Bagley and his ability," said a cabinet member, "but I fear that he has taken on a bit too heavy a load this time. I know that I would not care to play a lone hand against His Mysterious Majesty."

"I must admit that I share something of the same feeling," declared the host, "but I have known Bagley a long time and something about the man gives me faith in him. He may not succeed in his avowed purpose of capturing the enemy, but if I were His Majesty I would feel uneasy just at present. I do not believe that the word 'impossible' is in Bagley's vocabulary."

CHAPTER X

IT lacked a few minutes of seven that evening when Eileen Ware's car drew up at the curb before the shop above which Lee's apartment was located. She ran up the stairs and burst into the living room to find Lee just closing a bag that he had been packing. Lee set the bag on the floor at the end of the table and led Eileen to a chair.

"The pawn," he laughed, "is all set to go forth on the trail of the king."

A faint smile flickered on Eileen's face, but was gone in a moment.

"Lee," she said, "I have promised to do all that you have asked of me. I shall keep my promise. I wish I could dissuade you from going ahead with what you planned, but I know that any such effort would be vain. But, Lee, I have a favor to ask of you. I have a serious matter to discuss with you before you leave."

Lee had dropped into a chair opposite her and his face was as grave as that of Eileen.

"I am listening," he said, "and you know that I will do anything you ask provided that it is possible in connection with my present task. With that task I cannot allow anything to interfere."

Eileen came over and seated herself on the arm of Lee's chair. For a moment she looked steadily into his eyes.

"Lee, I have been waiting for two years for you to ask me to marry you," she said. "I love you and I believe you know it. I know that you love me, in spite of the fact that you have never told me so. I am not going to wait any longer. I shall wait two minutes for you to propose, and if you do not, I shall."

Lee grasped the girl by the shoulders. Her face flushed but her dark eyes held his without wavering.

"Eileen," cried Lee, "have you gone crazy?"

"My mental condition is not the subject of discussion," the girl replied. "One minute of your time is gone, sir."

Lee tightened his grip on the girl's shoulders. His mouth opened and then closed again in a firm line. There was a moment of silence.

"Lee Bagley," said Eileen in a firm voice, "will you be my husband?"

Lee leaped to his feet and forced the girl into the chair. She was blushing furiously but her eyes still met his unflinchingly. For a moment he stood glaring down at her before he snapped his answer.

"I will not!"

Eileen's eyes fell. Her lips trembled and her voice was shaky when she spoke.

"Don't you love me, Lee?"

He swept the tiny figure from the chair and into his arms. Eileen burst into tears and buried her face in his shoulder. Lee's tongue seemed paralyzed and he could not utter either a protest or a word of comfort.

He was gripped with that feeling always aroused in a man by the tears of a woman he loves. He crushed the slender, sobbing figure gently in his arms and buried his face in the dark, fragrant ringlets of hair that lay against his shoulder.

Lee's back was toward the door. Neither he nor the girl were aware when the door opened and an arm was thrust into the room.

Suddenly Lee felt his knees growing weak. He lifted his head. The lights seemed to have grown dim. He decided that he had better sit down and tried to say as much to Eileen. Then the world vanished.

CHAPTER XI

THE first thing of which Lee Bagley became conscious was a low, purring sound. Slowly the sound identified itself as the drone of powerful motors. As one half asleep, Lee's ears for several minutes drank in the steady pulsing and then, swiftly, his other senses returned. He found himself lying on what seemed to be a couch. He could feel a slight vibration—apparently caused by the motors. He sat up and shook his head to waken himself. He saw that he was in a small, low room with a door in either end and a leather upholstered bench extending the full length of each side. He had been lying on one of these couches. As Lee's vision cleared he saw a man sitting on the other and smiling across at him. Lee knew that something was wrong but he couldn't seem to make up his mind just what it was.

The chap on the opposite bench was a tall, well built fellow with the bearing of a soldier in the pink of condition. He was clad in a neat fitting uniform of steel blue with leather puttees and a close fitting cap of the same material as the uniform.

"Who are you?" Lee demanded.

"I am Captain Naylor," came the answer, "pilot in the air service of His Majesty, King of the World."

Then everything came back to Lee. He grinned at the pilot as he began to search his pockets for a cigarette.

"So I am on my way to my new job," Lee remarked. "I am bound to confess that if His Majesty never does me another good turn he pulled me out of one devil of a pickle when he snatched me away from my diggings."

"How so?" inquired the pilot with evident interest.

"He saved me from having to answer a question," smiled Lee, "which I was not prepared to answer, but which it seemed impossible to evade. By the way, where is Eileen and what happened to us?"

Lee's companion laughed. "If you mean the girl who was with you when we came for you," he answered, "we left her on the davenport in your apartment. She should be waking up by this time."

Lee was silent for a few moments as he tried to think of what Eileen would do and think when she regained consciousness in his apartment and found that he was gone. With a shrug of his shoulders he finally turned again to the pilot. He had faith in Eileen's sense.

"And where am I?" he asked.

"You are in one of His Majesty's planes," answered the pilot, "and I should say about directly over the Isthmus of Panama."

Lee pondered. "How long has it been since we left Washington?" he asked.

"About five hours."

"We must be moving," he remarked.

The pilot stepped to the end of the small room and glanced at an array of dials behind a glass.

"Just now," he announced, "we are making six hundred miles an hour."

"Lee whistled. "Might I look out?" he inquired.

"You could see nothing," was the answer. "We are five thousand feet up and it is dark."

"When do we reach our destination?" was Lee's next question.

"In about two hours."

"Is His Majesty expecting me?"

"Our orders are to make you comfortable until morning. I believe you are to meet His Majesty then."

"Do you mind telling me," inquired Lee, "just how you got me and why His Majesty changed his mind about allowing me a week in which to put my affairs in order?"

"As to His Majesty's plans, I am at liberty to tell you nothing," answered the pilot. "All I know is that we were given orders to stop in Washington on our way home from putting London to sleep and bring you to His Majesty's stronghold."

Lee dragged thoughtfully on his cigarette.

"I suppose," he remarked, "that you also brought the Prime Minister of Great Britain to Washington, according to His Majesty's promise."

The pilot nodded affirmatively.

"Would you mind telling me just how that London stunt was accomplished?" queried Lee.

"It was a simple matter," smiled the pilot. "We just flew over the city with a fleet of four planes and dropped a couple of hundred packages of His Majesty's private sleeping potion. A couple of minutes later the entire population of London had ceased to worry about anything and were enjoying a nap that nothing could disturb for five hours or more. The other three planes then returned to His Majesty's stronghold and we made a landing in the Thames. His Majesty's London ambassador was waiting and led us to the home of the Prime Minister. We took possession of that slumbering gentleman and he had not awakened when we left him in a parked car in front of the British embassy in Washington. I should like to have seen his face when he awakened and found himself in Washington."

Lee chuckled. There was certainly an amusing element in the methods of His Majesty.

"And you flew from London to Washington in about five hours?" Lee inquired.

"About that."

"How did you find me in Washington?"

"His Majesty's ambassador, Mr. Boyd, led us to your apartment."

"How did you accomplish my capture?"

"Tossed a small package of His Majesty's sleeping potion into your room," grinned the pilot. "Then we went in and carted you out. We also brought the bag you had packed."

"Did no one see you carrying me from my apartment?" asked Lee.

"Yes," grinned the pilot. "There were a number of people about who started to investigate as we were loading you into Boyd's car, but they all went suddenly to sleep on the sidewalk. It must be aggravating to go to sleep just when you are rushing to the aid of a fellow mortal in distress."

"So I should imagine," said Lee dryly. "How is it that Boyd and the rest of you are able to play around with this sleeping potion and not share the same fate as those to whom you administer it?"

From a pocket in his tunic the pilot produced a small leather case and opened it. In it lay two small objects resembling silver bullets with small holes in each end.

"With these in one's nostrils," the pilot informed Lee, "one breathes a trifle less easily but is immune to sudden slumber."

"From which, I gather," said Lee, "that His Majesty's sleeping potion is a gas."

"Yes, you are correct. It is a gas," he agreed.

"It must require a great quantity to overcome a city as large as London," Lee remarked.

"Not so much," declared the pilot. "Two bombs the size of baseballs were lullaby enough for the *Leviathan*."

"And for London?"

"About two thousand, each one about twice as large."

Lee was silent while he mused on this potent weapon in the hands of His Majesty. The pilot opened a cabinet beneath the bench upon which Lee sat and produced glasses and a bottle of excellent wine. As they sipped at the liquor Lee closed his eyes and tried to realize that despite his determination to resist, he was plunging through the air a mile above the earth at the rate of six hundred miles an hour on his way to the stronghold of the King of the World.

Suddenly Lee's ears told him that the motors were slowing down. The pilot rose and moved toward the end of the compartment.

"We are circling for the landing field," he said. "Do you wish to come into the control room while we settle down?"

"I should be glad to," answered Lee as he rose and followed the pilot through the door.

CHAPTER XII

THE room they entered was about the size of the one in which Lee had awakened. It was cluttered with levers and switches, dials and gauges. Busy with this control apparatus was another man clad in a uniform identical with that of the first pilot.

"Meet my mate, Captain Payne, Mr. Bagley," said Captain Naylor.

Lee shook hands with the second pilot. Captain Naylor threw a switch and the control room was plunged into darkness except for a subdued bluish light shed on the switches and levers by a shaded lamp just above them.

"Look down," said Captain Naylor.

Lee obeyed and was gripped by a most uncanny feeling. He saw that the floor upon which he stood was glass or some other transparent material. Far below him and apparently rising rapidly toward him he beheld a brilliantly lighted field, evidently a huge natural meadow in the midst of a dense forest. Lee stood silent gazing at the fast nearing field.

Except for the occasional click of a switch or lever there was silence in the darkened control room. As the field or meadow, which was the destination of the plane drew nearer, Lee saw that several men had emerged from a long barrack-like building at one end of the field and were moving toward its open center. At the end of the field opposite the building from which the men had emerged Lee saw another large building with a smaller one on either side of it.

During all the time that Lee had been watching it seemed to him that the plane must be settling straight down. Now the field seemed to have come within a very short distance and Lee was aware of the quickening of the motors. He could see that the plane was now circling. Suddenly the roof of the barracks-like building seemed to pass within a few yards of Lee's feet and then he felt a slight jar and knew that they were on the ground and no longer moving.

Captain Naylor switched on the lights in the pilot room.

"We are down," he informed Lee. "This way out."

Lee followed the pilot back through the compartment behind the control room and presently was descending a flight of portable steps that had been placed against the side of the giant plane. He reached the ground at

the heels of the pilot and glanced back at the monster craft that had brought him from Washington.

It was an awe-inspiring sight as it sat poised like a huge bird in the middle of the brightly lighted field. It towered at least twenty feet above Lee's head and the black, cigar shaped body, Lee judged, was over eighty feet long. It was of the monoplane type and the rakish wings extended more than thirty feet on either side of the body. Lee turned from contemplation of the plane to find himself facing a medium-sized man, who bowed in the manner of a typical British servant.

"Your pardon, Mr. Bagley," said the man. "I am Harvey, appointed to your service by His Majesty. If you are ready I will show you to your quarters."

Lee saw that the man was already in possession of the bag that had been packed for his flight from His Majesty's reach. Memory brought a grin to Lee's face.

"I'm ready," he said. "Lead on."

The servant led the way toward the end of the huge level field, where the large house stood flanked by the two smaller ones.

The dense forest, which completely surrounded the field, seemed to almost overhang the three log houses. They were of the bungalow type with deep verandas.

Light streamed from the windows of the large bungalow and of one of the small ones. Into this smaller one the servant led the way. There were four rooms and bath in the house as Lee discovered when shown about it by Harvey.

"As I told you, sir," said Harvey, "I have been appointed to your service by His Majesty and I hope you will find me satisfactory. I am instructed to tell you that His Majesty has not yet retired and would be pleased to receive you if you care to come to his quarters. His Majesty stated that his message is not to be construed as a command, should you wish to retire at once."

Lee grinned. "As soon as I have made the acquaintance of my wash bowl I shall be pleased to meet His Majesty," he said.

"Very well, sir," answered Harvey. "I will unpack your bag. The quarters of His Majesty are next door. You have only to ring the bell."

Ten minutes later Lee rang the bell for admittance to His Majesty's domicile. A servant, stiff and correct as Harvey, came to the door and ushered him in with the same ceremony as he would have shown Lee into the home of some fashionable, Washington dowager.

Although he had interviewed men of international importance with no more qualms than he felt when talking with flighty daughters of millionaires, Lee found himself approaching His Majesty's rooms as if he were entering the den of some monster. He was nervous with apprehension as he crossed the threshold into the mystery man's room.

But the man who came to meet him, with hand extended, looked like anything but a devil. He was certainly cast by nature in a kingly mould. Lee grasped the outstretched hand of His Majesty and felt his own crushed in a grip like that of a vise. His Majesty stood two inches more than six feet and was broad of shoulder and slender of hip. He was blond and tanned by much exposure to sun and wind. His eyes were blue and deep set beneath heavy, blond brows. His features were clear cut and regular. He reminded Lee of a painting of some Norse God. He was coatless and wore a soft, flannel shirt, corduroy riding breeches and tan boots.

"I am delighted to meet you, Mr. Bagley," said His Majesty in a deep and pleasing voice. "I have known and admired you through the works of your pen for years, but the pleasure of shaking your hand has been denied me until now. I am sorry if you found my summons lacking in ceremony and I shall try to make

up to you many times over for any inconvenience I have caused you."

Lee smiled as he took a chair indicated by His Majesty. His fears were gone and he was at ease again.

The room in which they sat was large and furnished in a magnificent manner. The walls were lined with books. His Majesty seated himself opposite Lee and a servant appeared with wine.

"I waited for you," smiled His Majesty, "in the hope that you would feel fit for an interview. The sleep which you must have had coming from Washington, despite its involuntary nature, has the quality of restfulness in most cases."

Lee's smile broadened as he sipped his wine. "I am glad you did wait for me," he said. "I assure you I feel quite fresh and you may surmise that I have a consuming curiosity concerning many things."

"No doubt," answered His Majesty, rising as the servant appeared at the door. "But I have ordered food and I fancy you are in a mood for it. Let us eat before we talk."

Lee followed the kingly man into a well appointed dining room where they seated themselves before a substantial meal. The food disposed of, they returned to the library where the servant served coffee before the open fire and departed.

"Now," said His Majesty, when they were comfortably settled, "if you feel like listening I will tell you why I sent for you and why I have undertaken the task of governing the world."

"My ears ache with impatience," declared Lee.

CHAPTER XIII

HIS Majesty lighted a long, slender cigar and flicked the match into the fireplace.

"When you came to the door," he continued, "I had just finished reading a letter from my Washington ambassador. He wrote that you were present when the attempt to arrest him was made in the home of Secretary Belden. That must have been a rather disappointing affair from the viewpoint of Belden and his officers."

"It was," smiled Lee, remembering.

"Are there any questions you wish particularly to ask, or shall I just sketch my plans and my reason for bringing you here to help me?" asked His Majesty.

"Do you kidnap all your aids and put them to work whether they are willing or not?" inquired Lee. "Or is my case an exception?"

"Again I apologize for the lack of ceremony in my summons," laughed His Majesty. "I might have sent Mr. Boyd to ask you to accept the post I am going to offer you, but I thought I could save time and trouble by bringing you here. Let us not say that I have kidnapped you. I have not the slightest doubt but that you will be glad to accept my offer when I have explained it to you. Should you refuse, however, I assure you that I shall make no effort to force you to accept. You may depend upon me to provide your transportation back to Washington at any time you desire to go."

"With that understanding I shall be delighted to listen to your offer," declared Lee.

"Fine," said His Majesty. "As a beginning, I must tell you something of what led me into this undertaking. I am American born and I served with the United States army during the World War. It was during those two years in the trenches that it first occurred to me that almost anybody could do a better job of running the world than was being done. I used to lie on my soggy blanket in a leaky dugout or a filthy billet and think what I would do if I were in a position to command those who were commanding the world.

"After six months in the trenches I transferred to the air forces. I was not particularly anxious to battle with the Kaiser's buzzards, but I had reached the point where anything that would get me out of the mud now and then looked good to me. At the air-base I met and became the friend of a chap named Bronson. Bronson loved planes. He lived with them and worked with them all his waking hours. I believe he dreamed of them at night.

"Bronson was not a fighter. He loved planes so well that he almost wept when he saw one wrecked in battle and the way he went about the task of repairing an injured plane made me think of a nurse attending a badly wounded man. Bronson shared my tent and he would talk to me for hours concerning the planes he would build if he had the time and money. He pictured for me radical departures in construction and principles and raved about the dumb War Department that had turned a deaf ear to his suggestions.

"When the big fuss ended I was shipped back to the country I had served and handed my discharge. I had no kin except my father. My mother died when I was four. At the time I went to France my father was a moderately wealthy man. When I returned he told me that he had made millions in war time investments. Father died suddenly, less than two months after I came home, and when the estate was settled I found myself in possession of more than three millions in gilt edged securities.

"A few weeks after my father's death I met Bronson on Seventh Avenue in New York. He had been discharged and was on the trail of a job. I took him into a restaurant and fed him and he told me of the super-plane he longed to build and expressed his intention to seek a place where his idea could be worked out. He said that if some one would give him the time and the money he would construct a plane capable of treble the speed of any yet built and able to make four times the distance on the same amount of fuel, that any plane yet built could do. I asked him how much money it would cost to build such a plane and he said it could be done for a hundred thousand dollars. I told him I would put up the money if he would let me help him with the construction.

"When he was convinced that I was in earnest, he went wild with enthusiasm. The following day we began preparations for the building of the plane.

"Bronson did not want it known that the plane was being built until it was finished so we went to an isolated spot in northern Maine where I bought a large area and we imported labor and built a large hangar. Material and tools were taken there without regard to cost and Bronson fell to work like a demon.

"We began work on the plane in April and by the latter part of August it was nearing completion. Bronson remarked one day in his enthusiasm that the nation to which we sold our plane could rule the world. The thought lodged in my mind and awakened memories of the dreams I had dreamt in France.

"Business took me to New York shortly afterward and I put up for a few days at the town house that had been the home of myself and my father since my boyhood. One morning before I was out of bed there came an insistent ring at the door. I had no servant so I put on a robe and went to the door. I was greeted by an elderly man who asked me to grant him an interview concerning some unfinished business with my departed father. He said he was a chemist and his name was Extein.

"I invited him in and he waited in the library until I dressed. He told me that my father, shortly before his death, had given him a sum of money to conduct certain experiments through which he hoped to produce

a gas for use in warfare. He had believed that he could produce a deadly gas so concentrated and potent that enough could be contained in a pint flask to exterminate all life within a radius of one hundred yards.

“EXTein then told me that he had concluded his experiments and regretted to report that he had failed. He went on to inform me that the gas was a success in all but one detail. It would render its victims unconscious for a period of four or five hours but it was not deadly.

“By questioning him I learned that he had perfected a gas that would in a twinkling permeate the atmosphere for blocks if the contents of a pint flask were released. It would cause all animal life with which it came in contact to lose consciousness for about five hours, after which consciousness would return and the victim feel no ill effects whatever.

“Then he told me that the funds furnished by my father had been exhausted, but that he felt sure that, if I would advance him another thousand dollars, he could yet add the quality of deadliness to the gas he had produced.

“I laughed at him. I told him I had enjoyed his story but that it did not appeal to me as being worth a thousand dollars. He appeared offended and wanted to know if I doubted his having produced the gas that he had described to me. I told him frankly that I did. He then took from his pocket a small tube of thin glass melted together at both ends. It was about two inches long. He told me that if he were to drop the tube on the floor and break it we would both lose consciousness instantly and remain unconscious for five hours or more. I began to think I was dealing with a maniac and told him that I still was not convinced, but that he need not give a demonstration.

“Then he suddenly flung the tube on the floor about half way between us where it broke into small bits. As the tube broke the old man told me to try to stand up. I tried and as nearly as I can remember I got half way to my feet. When I awoke I was sprawled in the chair and it was late afternoon. The old man sat opposite me sleeping soundly, but awakened when I shook him. As soon as he was awake he asked if I still doubted what he had told me. I admitted that all doubt had vanished from my mind. He then repeated that for the paltry sum of one thousand dollars he was certain he could make the gas deadly to animal life.

“I took the bloodthirsty old devil out to dinner. During the course of the evening I convinced him that so far as I was concerned his gas was a complete success, and that if he would sell me the formula and enter my employ his future prosperity was assured. I learned that only common, plentiful and cheap chemicals were needed for the manufacture of the gas and I took the old chemist and a supply of the necessary materials with me when I returned to Maine a few days later.

“When we arrived we found that Bronson had finished the plane and had taken it out for a trial flight that had proved it a success. He told us that it was capable of such terrific speed that he had been unable to let it out to its limit and would not be able to do so until he had rebuilt the fuselage to protect the pilot and passengers. We went up again that evening and learned that Bronson had spoken the truth. Bronson set about the reconstruction of the fuselage and Extain and myself helped as much as we could.

“Toward the middle of September we took the plane up again and found that it was capable of a speed of five hundred miles an hour. By grace of an atomizing apparatus Bronson had invented, the powerful engines could be operated under full load and burn but four

gallons of ordinary gas per hour. The plane was also so constructed that it could land on either land or water.

“I had by then become certain that I could make my old dreams of ruling the rulers of the world come true, and the idea of crowning myself King of the World took definite form in my mind.”

His Majesty ceased speaking while he filled glasses with wine. Lee accepted his glass with thanks and sipped the liquor in silence. Presently His Majesty again took up his story.

“I decided,” he went on, “that I must have a secure and isolated stronghold in which to perfect my plans in secrecy, my planes, and my harmless but effective weapon. I took Bronson and Extain into my confidence and they agreed with me and were enthusiastic over the scheme. The next day at dusk we took to the air with an extra supply of gas aboard and headed south. Shortly after dawn we made a landing on the spot where you alighted tonight.”

Lee placed his empty glass on the table at his side as His Majesty paused to light a cigar.

“In just what part of the world are we?” I asked.

“As nearly as I can tell you,” answered His Majesty, “we are near the northern boundary of Bolivia on the eastern slope of the Andes.”

“Thanks,” said Lee. “I beg your pardon for interrupting.”

“Not at all,” said His Majesty. “The place suited our purpose and we decided to establish headquarters here,” he continued. “It is amply protected by nature from an invasion except by air and red tape and politics have prevented the perfection of planes of a sort to endanger this stronghold. We established ourselves here and began the bringing in of supplies. I had definitely decided to become king of the world and for ten years I have labored here to that end. The task of preparation has been great but it is now complete and the nations that have wrangled and slept, while I worked, are now at my mercy.

“As soon as we were located we brought in a stock of chemicals and equipped a laboratory. Extain then set about the task of construction a mask that would protect us from the slumber gas. We worked incessantly for two years and many were the involuntary naps we took before he stumbled upon a simple neutralizer that is effective when placed in the nostrils. It is an aluminum tube no larger than a large bean.

“In the meantime I began to gather and instruct my ambassadors. Bronson collected and brought here a crew of brilliant young mechanics who fell in with our plans at once and they set about the construction of a fleet of four planes.

“I brought my father’s extensive library here and Bronson made weekly trips and brought in bundles of the world’s leading papers. I applied myself to reading the suggestions of the world’s great thinkers and writers and to laying plans to put their remedies for the ills of the world into effect.

“I had a dozen able interpreters kidnapped and brought here and converted them to my cause. With their help I made disciples of brilliant young students selected from every nation of the world. After they were instructed and had sworn allegiance to me, these men were sent back to the capitals of their many countries to act as my ambassadors when I was ready to begin my active rule.

“I now have one of those ambassadors in each capital of the world. I have four planes like that which brought you from Washington. I have manufactured and stored away enough gas to put the entire world to sleep at one time. I have assumed charge of the affairs of the world and I cannot be halted in my purpose.”

"It certainly appears that you have the whip hand," admitted Lee as His Majesty paused, "but where do I come in?"

"I have brought you here," answered His Majesty, "because I need your help in putting the finishing touches on my plans and your advice in meeting such emergencies as may arise in putting the new order of things into effect."

"I am not laboring under any delusion that I am ordained by God to this task. I know full well that I am not an intellectual giant. I am simply a man upon whom it has dawned that the world must be compelled to do what it knows should be done. I have been fortunate enough to have placed in my hands the power to enforce such commands as I may see fit to give."

"It is my hope to convince you that I have not taken this step through any desire for power or fame, but for the good of the world. I think you will admit that I have not been prompted by greed, because I had much more money than any one man needs. I could have lived out my life in luxury and idleness. Instead, I have chosen a gigantic but thankless task."

"In an article written by you I once read that a man who sets out to save a world that has crucified its saviours since the dawn of time is none the less a fool because he happens to be a hero. I know that I am not a hero. Perhaps I am a fool, but the die is cast and I shall play out the game."

"During the last nine years I have read faithfully all that has been written by the leading thinkers and writers of the world. I have studied the remedies proposed by those thinkers for the ills of the world and the world's opinions of those remedies. In that manner I have determined the things I would do for the world, and the order of their importance."

"Whenever a man of brains has pointed out an evil and outlined a remedy for it, I have read carefully what he had to say and then what the other thinkers of the world had to say on the same subject. If the consensus of opinion was that the evil was really an evil, and that one or more of the suggestions for the cure of that evil were sound, I put the administering of that remedy on the list of things I must do."

"As time passed, Mr. Bagley, I discovered that you were first to propose and stoutest to defend the great majority of practical remedies for the social, political, and economic evils that afflict the world. I learned that you were most often first to detect the follies of mankind and the most persistent enemy of those follies. Over there on the shelf I have scrap books containing everything you have written during the past nine years."

"I am honored," smiled Lee.

"Which proves that you are not in your home country. You are a prophet, Mr. Bagley," chuckled His Majesty. "More than that, you are a wise man, a man of clear vision and a man of courage. For many years you have been pointing out the ills that afflict mankind. Day after day, with unwavering patience and steadfast purpose, you have told all who cared to read in a clear and simple manner how to do away with those ills. They have read what you have written and have agreed that you were right, but they have done nothing about it. You have pointed out for them the road to happiness and contentment and they have answered, 'Yes, we see it but we must go somewhere else just now.'"

"Mr. Bagley, it is my ambition to reward the long years of patient and unrewarded effort on your part. You have told your fellow men the truth and shown them the way to achieve the fullness of life and they have gone blindly on, praising your wisdom but heedless of your advice. That is over. I have learned the

lessons you strove to teach mankind. I have become a convert to your gospel—and I am the King of the World!

"You have pleaded with mankind in vain. Through me you shall command—and be obeyed. They have refused to be led. They shall be driven and your wisdom shall control the lash. That is why I have brought you here. I wish the world nothing but happiness and I know that in that we agree. I need your wise counsel and clear vision in order that my rule shall be wise and just. You shall be my chief counsellor and I will bring here such others of the wise men of the world as you may desire to consult."

"It is my plan to standardize the editorial pages of all the world's newspapers and you shall dictate the policy of those pages. You shall be chief of the staff of able thinkers that will prepare them daily. You will thus be able to go ahead teaching the world as you have in the past. The difference will be that you will be able to enforce the reforms you have suggested and will suggest."

"I realize keenly the power of the press. A very wise man, as I have been told, once remarked that if he could make the newspapers of a land, anyone who wished could make its laws and religions, and he would still rule the land."

"Because I believe you to be the best newspaper man in the world I want you to put into concise messages through the press the plans for its betterment that we shall make."

His Majesty paused and sipped at his neglected wine. There was a peculiar gleam in his eyes as they clung to Lee's face.

"I should be more than human," said Lee slowly, "were I not flattered by what you have told me. There is truth in what you have said as to man loving his follies even to the point of discounting their cost. The human ear is deaf to good advice. Nevertheless, you suggest to me a method to which I have given no thought. You would force humanity to embrace the things upon which it has placed the stamp of its approval, but failed to embrace. Because I have pointed out that man would be happier and more contented if he were to do a certain thing of his own free will, I am not sure that happiness and contentment would result if he were forced to do that thing."

CHAPTER XIV

HIS MAJESTY had listened closely to every word that fell from Lee's lips. It was evident that he had great respect for the opinion of the newspaper man.

"Am I to understand," he inquired, "that you are not certain that it would be wise to force the world to apply the remedies for its evils that all peoples are agreed would be effective; that the world has agreed should be applied, but has neglected to apply?"

Lee was thinking hard. He had expected to meet a madman and he had met a disciple. Here was a man who wanted to make a sick world take the medicine which Lee had for years been begging it to take. His Majesty looked upon the world as a stubborn child refusing to swallow a dose that would save its life—and he proposed to save its life regardless of its objection.

"I would prefer to wait until I have thought these things over before I give you my opinion," said Lee. "In the meantime I wonder if you would tell me briefly what immediate action you have planned; what changes in the scheme of things you propose to inaugurate in the near future."

"I shall be glad to do so," said His Majesty. "First I plan to cause the destruction of all battleships and

weapons of war. The armament of the world must be hauled to the junk heap. This is the first step in ridding the world of the folly of wars.

"Boundary lines must be abolished and all laws restricting man's movement about the world done away with. Man must not be prohibited from going where and when he chooses, because he was born in some particular part of the world. He cannot choose his birthplace but he is entitled to choose his home site.

"I shall call in all the precious metal in the world and return it in a new coinage that shall have the same value in every part of the world. That will do away with the exchange system and its manifold attendant evils.

"I shall abolish fashion and all its accompanying ills by designing one mode of dress for all people. With your help I shall devise a way to prevent the oppression of the weak by the strong. I shall strive to bring about a condition where all men will be servants to mankind but no man will be a slave to another man. I shall strive, in ways that have been pointed out by yourself and other leaders in the world of thought, to rid the world of greed, pride, superstition, folly and all the other things that go to make up its burden of sorrow and suffering."

Dawn was creeping in the windows as His Majesty ceased speaking.

"You have certainly laid out a wonderful plan and the result of what you propose should be interesting in any case," said Lee. "If you were to succeed in nothing else your reign should at least banish boredom from the world. I hope that you will grant me some time for thought before I express myself further on this very important question.

"Take all the time you wish," answered His Majesty. "I have given the rulers of the nations of the world a week in which to declare allegiance to me or take the consequences. I hope that you will have grasped the situation by that time and be able to advise my future moves. And now, perhaps, you would like to get some rest. Today is Sunday and a day of absolute leisure here. I trust that you will find your quarters comfortable."

"I fancy I shall," replied Lee as he rose and followed His Majesty to the door.

As they stepped out on the veranda of His Majesty's quarters, Lee glanced at his watch. It was a quarter to five.

"Is my time correct here?" he inquired.

"It is," answered His Majesty. "We are about due south of Washington."

For some time the two men stood silent drinking in the beauty of the morning. To the east the dawn painted the sky roseate above the semi-tropical forest enclosing the clearing where His Majesty's stronghold nestled. Westward, rose the majestic peaks of the Andes kissed by the bloody lips of dawn. The air was cool and fresh and bore the sweet odor of the dewy forests.

"I shall have breakfast at two o'clock if you care to join me," said His Majesty as Lee moved away in the direction of his newly assigned quarters.

"Count on me," answered Lee.

As Lee stepped into his quarters Harvey rose from an easy chair where he had been napping.

"Will you retire now, sir," inquired the servant, "or do you desire breakfast?"

"I'm going to bed," answered Lee. "You may bring me a glass of wine now and awaken me at noon. I will join His Majesty for breakfast."

Harvey brought a glass of Burgundy and departed. Lee sat in silence while he slowly drank the wine. Then he rose and with a shrug sought his bedroom.



"We will now pick up the weapons," said the king. "Proceed according to previous orders..."

CHAPTER XV

IT was a few minutes past noon when Harvey rapped on the door of Lee's room and asked if he should draw a bath.

"Yes," answered Lee, "make the bath cold and bring me hot, black coffee."

Lee found his things unpacked and in fifteen minutes he had bathed, shaved, dressed and was drinking his coffee in his cozy living room.

"Is it safe to venture into the woods for a stroll?" he inquired of Harvey.

"It is if one does not go too far and carries a compass," answered the servant. "I have a small compass which I will bring if you wish."

"Bring it, please," said Lee. "I want to stretch my legs."

Harvey fetched the compass and informed Lee that there was an untimbered knoll about fifteen minutes walk due west, and from which one could get a beautiful view of the surrounding country. In less than fifteen minutes Lee was on the knoll.

Harvey had spoken the truth concerning the view, but Lee gave little time to the scenery. He had sought solitude for the purpose of thinking and he sat down on a jutting rock and gave himself over to his mental labor.

Half an hour later when he rose to return to the stronghold he had decided what his course should be. He had girded his mental loins for a battle of wits with His Majesty.

He realized that it would be no mean battle, but he told himself sternly that victory must be his. He must save the world from the things with which it was threatened by the man who had appointed himself its ruler.

Despite its seriousness, Lee smiled as he considered his situation. Here he was, determined to keep the man who called himself the king of the world from trying to drive the world into the same heaven or harbor toward which he had himself spent years trying to lead it. His faith in the remedies that he had suggested during his years of writing were unshaken. He was, however, certain that man must not be driven into heaven. He must go willingly and reach the goal by his own efforts. One might point the way but one might not carry the traveler to his destination.

Lee was determined to prevent His Majesty from carrying out his plans. Just how he was going to do this he was not certain, but he it said for his courage that he never once harbored the thought of failure. He must not fail!

Lee realized that his main hope of being able to outwit His Majesty lay in the confidence that His Majesty placed in Lee Bagley. He must not destroy that confidence. Therefore it was necessary that he return to Washington before Monday noon, lest Eileen Ware carry out the original instructions he had given her in regard to rousing the secret service on his behalf if she did not hear from him at that time.

He realized, also, that speedy action was imperative if he was to succeed in thwarting His Majesty, but he was decidedly hazy on what that action should be.

By the time he reached the stronghold and made his way to the quarters of His Majesty, Lee had flung all scruples to the winds. Lone champion of the world against a man who had declared himself its master and utterly in the power of that man, he told himself that there was no means he would not employ to gain his end.

"Lee Bagley," he muttered to himself as he crossed the veranda of His Majesty's quarters, "use your head. It is between the king and yourself—and the pawn

must checkmate the king and end the game a winner."

With a delicious breakfast between them, Lee and His Majesty sat in the latter's cozy dining room. Every ounce of Lee's gray matter was on guard as he opened the conversation.

"I have come to the conclusion," he remarked, "that I am about to enter upon the greatest adventure of my life."

As he made the remark, Lee watched the face of the man opposite him closely. He saw that his words had been taken as he had meant them to be.

"Good," said His Majesty. "I am glad that you reached your decision so quickly." It did not seem to occur to him that Lee's decision might be other than what he had wished it to be.

Lee weighed his next words carefully. "You must realize," he said, "that the scope of the undertaking which you propose swept me beyond my depth for the moment. It required a little time for me to grasp the tremendous possibilities of the power you are prepared to wield. Even now that I have decided to undertake the greatest task of my life I must ask you many questions and gain much more information before I can function effectively."

There was a light of triumph in the eyes of His Majesty.

"You have but to ask your questions and they shall be answered, if it is possible for me to answer them," he declared.

"There is so much I wish to know that I hardly know which question to ask first," smiled Lee. "Let us delay them all until we have breakfasted." Then to change the subject and to gain time he remarked, "You have certainly fixed yourself comfortably here."

"Yes," answered His Majesty. "We are snug, although building this stronghold was no small task. All the material was brought here by plane except the logs. We brought workmen from Spain. They thought they were building a hunting camp in interior Africa for an American millionaire. They finished their task and returned to Spain without suspecting the truth. As you notice, we have all modern conveniences including electric lights."

"And most excellent cooks," grinned Lee.

"We have but one cook now," said His Majesty. "Since my ambassadors returned to their posts we are a small crew here at the stronghold. There are only Bronson, eight pilots, four mechanics who attend the planes, Exteins, his three assistants, our two servants, the two servants who look after the rest of the quarters, you, myself, the cook and his helper."

Lee made a quick calculation. The stronghold was manned by twenty-four men beside himself.

"We are a small crew to be pitting ourselves against the world," observed Lee smiling.

"We are small but secure," answered His Majesty. "As I told you before, nature has made this spot inaccessible from all but air approach. Let us have our coffee in the library and I will convince you that we are absolutely safe from any attack from the air."

In the library His Majesty pointed to a switch on the mantel above the fireplace.

"That switch, or any one of a dozen others at various places about the stronghold, will release from ten tanks enough slumber gas to instantly put to sleep all animal life within two miles of the stronghold or in the air for several thousand feet above that area.

"Now let us go to the laboratory. I want you to meet Extein and his staff and see additional defense against an air invasion."

His Majesty led the way to the house on the opposite side of his headquarters from that allotted to Lee Bagley, noted that this house was roofed with a dome similar

to those to be seen on observatories. Upon entering they were greeted by a gaunt, stoop shouldered, elderly man in shirt sleeves and wearing a rubber apron. His Majesty introduced him as Professor Exteint. They followed him into the laboratory where they met three intelligent appearing young men who were introduced as assistants to the chemist. Then they mounted a small flight of steps and found themselves in the dome that Lee had noted. In the center of this dome, on a pivot carriage, was a strange apparatus. It resembled a huge machine gun except that its barrel was made of glass.

"This," said His Majesty, "is the most effective anti-aircraft weapon in existence. Exteint invented and built it. It directs a ray that will instantly paralyze the ignition of any motor at more than five miles distance."

Lee studied the weapon, trying to grasp what His Majesty had said. If it would do what was claimed for it, the airplane was rendered useless as a war craft.

"How does it work?" asked Lee.

His Majesty stepped to the instrument and turned a switch. There was a hissing sound and the heavy, glass barrel of the weapon was filled with what seemed to be green fire. An amber ray began at its muzzle and reached away into the air, a long pencil of light that extended beyond the reach of the eye and seemed to melt into the blue sky.

"Operation is simple," explained His Majesty. "From its position the gun can project its ray in all directions. It will not harm a person, but it will instantly put out of commission any electric apparatus upon which it is brought to bear."

"And you say it is effective at more than five miles?"

"Yes," answered His Majesty. "You see, we are pretty well shielded from attack. If it becomes necessary we shall inform the public of the manner in which we are protected and I fancy no aviator will care to drive a plane into our vicinity with hostile intent."

Lee was forced to admire the ingenuity of the man. "I am inclined to agree with you," he laughed.

CHAPTER XVI

HIS MAJESTY and Lee Bagley continued their tour of inspection. The newspaper man was introduced to the entire personnel of the stronghold and shown through all the buildings and workshops. He noted everything carefully and asked many questions, storing away information he might later find useful.

The sun was sinking toward the peaks of the Andes when Lee and his host returned to His Majesty's living room. His Majesty invited Lee to be seated and took a chair himself. The servant brought cold drinks flavored with mint.

"What you have seen today should pretty well convince you that success in putting our plans into effect is inevitable," remarked His Majesty.

"You have certainly accomplished some remarkable things," answered Lee. "I admit I am very much impressed. And now if I may ask a favor, I should like very much to go to Washington for a few days before taking up such duties as you have arranged for me. I left some very urgent personal matters in a rather chaotic condition."

His Majesty shot a keen glance at Lee and did not answer for a few moments. Then a smile spread over his features.

"I see," he grinned. "The young lady with whom you were engrossed when my messages came for you."

Lee remained silent and allowed His Majesty to assume that his guess had hit the mark.

"Ah, well," chuckled His Majesty, "I have no quarrel

with love. How long do you wish to remain away?"

"At least three or four days," answered Lee.

"And I suppose you wish to go at once—tonight?"

"If I may."

"Very well," nodded His Majesty. "You shall start as soon as we have had dinner. You will thus reach Washington at midnight. And now I will tell you of a little task I plan to do on Friday, because I fancy you will want to return in time to be in on the fun. I am going to stop the civil war now in progress in Nicaragua."

"You're going to stop a war!" ejaculated Lee.

"Certainly," smiled His Majesty. "I warned both the President of Nicaragua and the leader of the rebel army that if the war was not stopped before Friday morning I would stop it. It has not been stopped and I learn from my representatives on the ground that the leaders of both factions intend to ignore my orders. They will learn Friday that orders from me cannot be ignored successfully."

"But how can you stop a war with only a score of men to help you?" queried Lee.

"There will be but four men besides you and me in the expedition," answered His Majesty, "and you will only be an onlooker. Stopping the war will not be difficult. Have you forgotten what happened to London?"

"Hardly," answered Lee. "But what is to keep the armies from starting to fight again as soon as they awaken?"

"If I told you all that is going to happen," smiled His Majesty, "you would not have so much fun watching it. I take it for granted that you will want to return in time for the activities?"

"Rather," said Lee. "I've seen lots of things in my day but I have never watched five men stop a good, healthy war. I certainly don't want to miss it."

"Then report to Carl Boyd's headquarters at the Raleigh Hotel in Washington at ten o'clock sharp on Thursday night," said His Majesty. "Boyd will take you to the plane that will bring you back here in time to accompany our pacifying expedition."

Lee nodded his head. His Majesty's servant appeared to announce dinner.

"Good," said His Majesty. "Please tell Mr. Bagley's man to pack his master's bag and instruct Captain Naylor and Captain Payne to have a plane ready in an hour. They are to take Mr. Bagley to Washington."

The servant departed and Lee followed his host to the dining room.

"I will regard it as a favor," said His Majesty as they seated themselves at the table, "if you take every opportunity to give out information during your visit to Washington that will speed the success of my plans."

"It might be well to impress the American people and their rulers with the fact that this stronghold cannot be taken. It may save considerable trouble and prevent the loss of valuable lives."

Again Lee nodded. His Majesty kept up a fire of instructions and suggestions until the meal was finished. Then Lee went to his own quarters to prepare for his return to Washington.

"Captain Naylor will call for you when the plane is ready," said His Majesty at the door. "I'll see you in the wee hours Friday morning. I suggest that you get some sleep aboard the plane while you are returning as we will be off for Nicaragua shortly after you arrive."

"I'll remember," promised Lee.

An hour later Lee sat in the cabin of the same plane that had brought him to the stronghold. The aircraft was plunging northward through the night at a

terrific speed. Lee marveled at the bullet-like pace of which the ship was capable as he thought that he would be back in Washington at midnight. The mighty motors ran so smoothly that only a low drone reached Lee's ears. Their vibration was so slight that it could hardly be felt in the mahogany finished and leather-upholstered cabin. Lee shrugged and settled himself to read a magazine taken from an assortment on a rack at the end of the room. He was still reading when Captain Naylor came to tell him they were nearing Washington.

"Where do we land?" asked Lee.

"In a field north of Manassas, Virginia," answered Naylor. "Mr. Boyd will be waiting with an auto to take you to Washington."

Lee glanced at his watch. It was fifteen minutes before midnight. The drone of the motors had softened and Lee knew the plane was circling for its landing. Presently they were down and Lee found himself shaking hands with Boyd.

"I am informed that I greet you as a colleague," smiled Boyd, leading the way to a large car parked near where the plane had landed.

"How did you get your information and how did you know I was coming?" countered Lee.

"His Majesty informed me by radio," answered Boyd, showing surprise. "Didn't you know that we keep in touch by radio on a wavelength unused by any other station?"

Lee confessed that he had not learned of the radio.

"My stay at His Majesty's stronghold was rather brief and very busy," he reminded Boyd.

"I must tell you something about Miss Ware," said Boyd. "His Majesty informed me that you returned on her account. She came to see me early in the morning after you were taken away by His Majesty's pilots. She demanded that I tell her what had happened to you. I told her that you had been taken to His Majesty's headquarters. She departed in somewhat of a huff when I declined to reveal the location of those headquarters. She left vowing that she would find you. After learning tonight that you were on your way to Washington, I tried to locate her and tell her you were returning. I was unable to find her. I hope you will have better luck."

Lee's heart sank. Something told him that Eileen was rushing into some sort of trouble in her zeal to aid him. The car was tearing along the road at high speed but Lee wished it could fly. With eyes glued to the road he answered Boyd's questions absently until the car at last drew up before his quarters.

"Well, good night," said Boyd as Lee stepped from the car. "I suppose I am to expect you at my quarters at ten o'clock Thursday night if I do not see you before?"

Lee nodded his head and rushed upstairs to his rooms. He found a note on the library table. It read:

Dear Lee:

I am writing this Sunday evening, just twenty-four hours since you vanished. I have seen Carl Boyd and learned that you have been taken to the stronghold of the king person. I realize that all the plans we made have gone awry, so I will do nothing about them until I get in touch with you.

I have explained things to Colonel Lindholm and he has agreed to help us. Secretary Belden told me of the threat of His Majesty to stop the war in Nicaragua on Friday. I have a feeling that I can perhaps get in touch with you there. Colonel Lindholm has placed himself and his new plane at my disposal. We hope to be able to follow one of His Majesty's planes to its lair in case the plans being

laid by the allied nations to capture the king at Nicaragua should fail.

"We leave for Nicaragua late tonight and should be there at dawn. Colonel Lindholm desires to go at once in order to look over the ground and assist with the plans of the United States air forces now in the field. I am writing this in case you should by chance come home before Friday. If you should do so, you can reach me through the American consul at Nicaragua. I love you.

"Eileen."

As he finished reading the letter, realization of how deeply he loved Eileen swept over Lee. He sat down and was lost in deep thought for almost half an hour. Then he picked up the telephone and sent a message to Eileen in care of the American consul as she had directed. The message told her that he would be in Washington until Thursday night and asked her to return at once.

Lee was glad that Eileen had chosen Colonel Lindholm as her escort. Lindholm was the premier flier of America and a long and brilliant record lay behind him despite his youth. Lee counted the daring flier among his closest friends and had great faith in his ability and good judgment.

Eileen had said that the allied nations were preparing a trap for His Majesty in Nicaragua. He wondered what the nature of the trap would be and decided to ask Secretary Belden in the morning. Then he went to bed.

CHAPTER XVII

AFTER an early breakfast the following morning, Lee called Secretary Belden on the telephone. Upon hearing Lee's voice, the drowsiness left the officials' tone.

"Bagley!" he exclaimed. "What happened to you? Where have you been? How did you get back to Washington? Eileen Ware and Colonel Lindholm have gone to Nicaragua hoping to get trace of you. Come to my home as quickly as you can."

"I'll be over in five minutes," laughed Lee. "I'll answer all your questions then."

At the Belden home Lee told the official all that had happened to him since they last met. Belden listened intently and asked numerous questions.

"And you do not believe this self-appointed king is a madman?" he asked as Lee finished the tale of his visit to His Majesty's stronghold.

"On the other hand," answered Lee, "I consider him a remarkably intelligent person. His executive ability amounts to genius and he has that quality about him that inspires almost fanatical loyalty in his subordinates. He has gathered about him master mechanics and scientists and the result of their decade of work and research is astounding. The fact that the man has built in the middle of an almost unexplored wilderness a stronghold that a score of men can hold against the combined attack of all the powers of earth is in itself impressive."

"Then you believe that stronghold impregnable?" asked Belden.

"I'm afraid it is," answered Lee. "At least until a mask is invented that will render the wearer immune to His Majesty's slumber gas. As you probably know, all gas masks now in existence, except His Majesty's tubes, are useless against it. And then there is the remarkable anti-aircraft ray gun."

"Well," said Belden, "are you still of the opinion that you can outwit His Majesty and overcome him single handed?"

"I am still of the opinion," answered Lee, "that I stand a better chance than an army. I can, at least, work from the inside and I have the confidence of His Majesty, which is a powerful weapon in itself."

Belden regarded Lee long and earnestly. "I wonder," he said finally, "if I should tell you of the plans now under way to prevent His Majesty from interfering in the Nicaragua situation Friday. I would not like to seem to distrust you, but you must remember that, by your own admission, you have been offered a very tempting proposition. I don't think for a moment that you would betray our years of friendship by acting as a spy for this renegade king. However, there are those who might be suspicious. So I am going to ask that you do not let it be known that I have given you any information."

"My lips are sealed," answered Lee. "But you need tell me nothing if you would rather not."

"I'm going to tell you," declared Belden, "because I believe you are sincere in your determination to outwit and capture this man. The situation is this:

"Aided by most of the other big powers of the world, the United States is preparing for a showdown with His Majesty at Nicaragua. All of the most modern anti-aircraft weapons are being rushed there and twenty of the army's new radio controlled planes will be ready for use. The control apparatus for those planes will be operated by men housed in an air-tight steel and glass compartment, supplied with oxygen from huge tanks. This will protect the operators from the slumber gas, as you call it. The radio controlled planes will be loaded with high explosives and sent aloft to collide with the planes of the renegade. If it is impossible to bring about the collision, the explosives in the plane can be set off by radio when the craft is near enough to the enemy ship to wreck it.

"The war zone is also being covered with new anti-aircraft guns that will hurl a five-pound bomb nearly five miles straight up. The bombs have time fuses and may be exploded at any altitude. Battleships, soldiers, and marines are being rushed to the scene by all the great powers. I believe this renegade king will find a very warm reception if he attempts to carry out his threat."

"Something tells me," said Lee, "that you are all underestimating His Majesty. I fear that you are going to great trouble and expense for nothing."

"You seem almost a disciple of this renegade," said Belden, a dark frown gathering on his face.

"By no means," answered Lee. "Despite the fact that I shall probably be a passenger in one of His Majesty's planes, I wish you the best of luck. Honestly, however, compels me to admit that I believe you are doomed to fail. Pardon me for smiling, but you must admit there is an element of humor in this thing."

"Damned if I can see it," growled Belden. "Do you mean to say that after what I have told you, you still intend to go back and accompany His Majesty's expedition?"

"I have no choice in the matter," said Lee, "if I am to keep His Majesty's confidence until I see an opportunity to strike. Besides, I repeat that I do not feel that you are going to capture or harm His Majesty—or even keep him from stopping this war. Until you have seen His Majesty's equipment in operation, it is hard to believe that such advances in science have been made."

"Do you know how he plans to proceed on Friday?" asked Belden.

"I do not," answered Lee. "I asked some questions, but His Majesty said I would enjoy watching the affair more if I did not know what was going to happen."

All I can tell you is that His Majesty told me his expedition would consist of but four men beside himself and me. Only two of his planes are to be used."

"Well," said Belden grimly, "if we don't get him Friday there will be little choice but to admit him our master and acknowledge his rule. However, a lot of things can happen yet."

"And probably will," smiled Lee.

CHAPTER XVIII

TIME seemed to fly during the balance of the week. No word came from Eileen and Lee grew frantic with anxiety. He kept the wires hot with inquiries. Reports made it evident that the new super-plane bearing Colonel Lindholm and Eileen had not arrived in Nicaragua. The plane had not been sighted since its takeoff from Washington. Other army and navy planes scouring the path over which it was supposed to have flown, found nothing. Lee's worry over the girl he loved at times almost drove from his mind all thoughts of his determination to thwart the renegade king.

Meanwhile there were no further demonstrations upon the part of His Majesty, and preparations for the coming struggle in Nicaragua went rapidly ahead. Then came Thursday night and Lee went to the Raleigh Hotel to keep his appointment with Carl Boyd. He found His Majesty's envoy waiting and was received at once. Boyd poured drinks and motioned Lee to a chair.

"I see you are prompt," smiled the envoy, glancing at his wristwatch. "We will have a few minutes to visit before we start to meet the plane that is coming for you. The landing is to be made in the Potomac tonight. I see by the evening papers that no trace has yet been found of Colonel Lindholm and Miss Ware."

Lee shook his head. Despite the gloomy opinions expressed by the press, he still clung to hope that the girl and her escort were safe. He cursed himself for getting Eileen into such a mess.

"I envy you your trip tomorrow," continued Boyd. "I would give anything to be at the scene of action, but His Majesty's command keeps me at my post."

"I expect an interesting time," said Lee, "although I understand I am to play only a spectator's part. Have you heard from His Majesty today?"

"Yes," answered Boyd. "He called me three hours ago to give me the time and place of the plane's landing. When you have finished your drink, we had better be on our way. The pilots have orders to waste no time in returning to headquarters."

As Lee and Boyd, in the latter's auto, pulled away from the curb before the hotel, two cars that had been parked across the street also got under way. Boyd smiled and glanced at Lee.

"So we are to be followed," he said. "I suspected as much. Our secret-service friends evidently deduced that you would be returning to His Majesty tonight. They probably think they can make trouble for the plane that comes for you. Well, let them have their fun."

Glancing back, Lee noted that the two high-powered cars were following them closely. Both the pursuing cars were filled with men and Lee had no doubt they were armed to the teeth. Boyd, smiling confidently, drove directly to a portion of the Potomac bank where numerous small pleasure craft were moored at private docks. Boyd turned in at one of these landings. The pursuing cars sped on past.

"Wonder what has become of our friends?" asked Lee as the small but speedy motorboat into which they

had climbed moved out over the dark surface of the placid river.

"They'll be on our trail in a few moments," chuckled Boyd. "They have a fast cutter up the river a short way. It is armed with machine guns and a three-inch rifle."

The tiny boat skimmed along for more than a mile and then Boyd suddenly stopped the motor. When the noise of their own motor stopped, Lee could hear the deep voice of a powerful marine motor behind them. His eyes made out the huge bulk of the cutter bearing down upon them in the darkness.

From a place beneath the seat of the boat, Boyd produced a queer weapon. It looked like a shotgun except that the barrel was some three inches in diameter. Boyd opened a chamber in the breech of the weapon and inspected it. He snapped it shut and again started the motor of the small craft.

"Take the wheel a moment," he said, "and keep her pointed at those two green lights you see ahead."

Lee took the wheel and Boyd turned to face the stern of the boat. He lifted the gun to his shoulder and sighted it at the cutter, now about two hundred yards behind. There was the sharp sound of escaping air as the envoy pulled the trigger. A second later there came the tinkle of breaking glass from the direction of the cutter.

"Bull's eye," chuckled Boyd. "Slow down and pull against the side of the cutter when it catches us. I'll go aboard and attend to the machinery to prevent a wreck and the drowning of some of those sleeping beauties."

"I gather," said Lee, "that you have just gassed our friends. How about me? Won't I be overcome?"

"No," answered Boyd, "by the time the cutter overtakes us the gas zone will have been left behind. Here she comes. You'll have to swing over to the left. She has begun to veer since the helmsman went to sleep."

Lee swung the small boat over as directed and was soon rubbing sides with the cutter.

Boyd stood up and reached out for the rail of the larger craft.

"I'm going to run her aground," the envoy called back as he swung aboard. "Follow and take me off. You can come along side in that boat when the keel of this one is in the mud."

Boyd disappeared into the cabin of the cutter and Lee heard the engines stop. He followed the larger craft as she swung toward the shore under the momentum she carried.

"Well, that's that," laughed Boyd as he climbed into the motorboat a few minutes later. "Those fellows surely meant business. There are twelve of them aboard, all wearing gas masks and armed to the teeth. Well, their boat will stay there in the mud until they wake up."

Lee smiled as he imagined that awakening. Boyd took the wheel and opened the motor. Two miles farther on they came upon one of His Majesty's huge planes sitting majestically on the dark bosom of the river.

"Good luck," called Boyd as Lee clambered aboard. The pulse of the plane's mighty motors began to beat. Captain Naylor closed and fastened the door through which Lee had entered and almost instantly the giant plane took the air. Lee glanced at his watch. It was ten minutes past eleven.

"I will make down one of the berths in case you wish to sleep," offered Captain Naylor. "His Majesty plans to leave for Nicaragua within an hour after we arrive at headquarters."

"Never mind, thank you," answered Lee. "I feel that I shall not try to sleep."

CHAPTER XIX

IT lacked an hour of dawn when the plane reached His Majesty's stronghold. As Lee stepped from the ship he beheld two of its mates poised nearby. His Majesty shook hands with Lee delightedly.

"I am sorry that you were unable to find Miss Ware," said the king. "However, I hope she is safe. Colonel Lindholm is an able flier and while he may have had difficulty of some sort, I am confident that he will turn up. As soon as today's task is accomplished, I shall start a search for him and Miss Ware. It is my plan to add Colonel Lindholm to my air corps. I hope you are not weary. We are ready to start to Nicaragua at once."

"Lead on," smiled Lee. "I'm too interested to know whether I am tired or not."

As His Majesty led the way toward the other two planes, Lee noticed that both of the waiting craft were equipped with a peculiar undercarriage. This consisted of a couple of dozen rods of some bright metal running lengthwise of the plane. The undercarriage was almost as long as the fuselage of the plane and cleared the ground just enough to leave the landing gear free to function. Lee followed His Majesty aboard one of the planes.

"We will be over the scene of hostilities in Nicaragua within an hour after dawn," said the king, as they settled themselves for the ride.

"There is something I would like to discuss with you during the trip," said Lee, "if our conversation cannot be overheard."

"Go ahead," answered His Majesty. "Both pilots are busy in the control room."

"What I wish to say is that I cannot bring myself to endorse the aims you have outlined," began Lee. "I feel that it is only fair to tell you the result of my deliberations of the past few days. I admire you sincerely and I almost reverence the work you have done, but down in my heart I feel that what you propose is not the best thing for the world."

"Are you trying to say that you do not wish to aid me?" asked His Majesty, looking at Lee with a puzzled expression on his handsome face.

"I mean that I feel it my duty to oppose that of which I cannot approve," said Lee. "In the face of the flattering offer you have made me, the only fair thing to do is to tell you how I feel. I am ready to admit that I do not see how you are to be prevented from carrying out your plans, but I also feel that you must be prevented from so doing. I feel it my duty to do all I can to aid those who oppose you. For that reason I must warn you that you reveal your secrets to me at your own risk. Feeling as I do, I cannot honorably continue to remain your aid. I wish that after the events of today are finished, you would permit me to return to Washington."

While Lee was speaking, His Majesty sat as one frozen. Unbelief of what his ears were hearing was written on his face. He was silent for several minutes after Lee finished.

"Bagley," His Majesty said finally, "I cannot tell you how deeply grieved I am by what you have just told me. I realize that you are not a man who speaks until he has weighed his words well. You have rather taken my feet from under me, I have built so strongly upon your counsel and aid. I am burning to go into this matter thoroughly, but cannot at the present moment take my attention from the matter in hand. I know that you are a man of honor and feel it unnecessary to ask your promise not to try to interfere with this morning's undertaking."

"You have my word on that score without asking for it," answered Lee. "The fact that I voluntarily returned to be in on this thing should convince you that I believe you will succeed in this venture. I freely give you my parole until the events of today are finished. After that I fear that you must look upon me as an active opponent."

"I can say very little more just now," said His Majesty, "as we will soon be over the field of action. Of course, I am hoping earnestly that you will change your mind. Perhaps today's events will help to alter your view."

"Perhaps," said Lee soberly, "but I hardly think it likely."

"In fifteen or twenty minutes we should be able to get a view of our reception committee," said His Majesty, glancing at his watch. "Let us drop the matter for the time being. Please excuse me for a few moments."

He turned toward the door leading to the pilot room. In five minutes His Majesty returned. In his hand he carried two sets of powerful glasses. He handed one pair to Lee.

"If you will come into the pilot room with me," said the king, "you will be able to get a clear view of the fun."

Lee followed. In the pilot room His Majesty pointed downward. Through the transparent floor and front wall of the control room, Lee beheld a wonderful scene. Daylight had crept over the earth below them. When he focused his glasses, Lee saw that they were over a battlefield.

Lee had flown over war-torn France a number of times, having made use of his hobby of photography to get himself appointed as an official army photographer. The scene below him had a familiar look. All the panoply of grim death struggle was spread over the rolling terrain below. Lee sensed that the dense, semi-tropical foliage hid many more fighting men and their weapons. A thousand feet or so below His Majesty's planes, about a score of small aircraft circled like huge silver birds. Lee guessed that they were the radio controlled craft loaded with explosives of which Secretary Belden had spoken.

"ISN'T it amusing?" chuckled His Majesty. "Below us are assembled the prize war machines of the entire world. The nations of earth have for a moment forgotten to bicker and have joined hands in an attempt to prevent me from stopping a war that several of them have made ineffectual attempts of their own to halt. You will notice that we have approached in a line directly over the center line of the Isthmus of Panama, thus thwarting any plan of the battleships massed on both coasts to do us harm. We are flying at a little less than five thousand feet and will soon be over territory in which the most effective of the world's anti-aircraft guns are waiting to have a try at us. As we are well within their range, they must be silenced before they begin to fire. Those planes below us are radio operated and loaded with high explosives. The idea of their operators is to crash them into us or bring them near enough to wreck us by exploding the load they carry. You will notice that they are climbing toward us now. It is time for us to go into action. Watch closely and you will see some very interesting things happen in the next few moments."

His Majesty stepped to one side of the control room and opened a cabinet containing radio apparatus. He threw over a switch and turned a dial until a small bulb above the cabinet glowed green.

"Hello, Clark," he said, speaking into the cabinet.

"Yes, Your Majesty," came the answer from the set. Lee knew that Captain Clark was in command of the other plane which accompanied them. He could see the big craft some distance ahead and a few hundred feet below them.

"Those planes below are loaded with high explosives," said His Majesty into the cabinet. "Blow them up quickly."

"Yes, Your Majesty."

"Now watch these planes," said the king, turning toward Lee. "The other plane is equipped with a smaller model of the anti-aircraft gun which you saw at the stronghold. We could stop the motors of those planes and send them crashing to earth to explode among our enemies. Since it is my wish to avoid bloodshed if possible, we shall blow them to atoms in the air. There goes the first!"

Far below Lee saw one of the climbing planes suddenly lose its shape and disappear in a puff of white smoke. A moment later another disappeared in the same manner. In ten minutes the air was clear of all but His Majesty's craft. Lee stood staring down through the smoke haze that had so short a time before been a fleet of battle planes.

"Simple, was it not?" smiled His Majesty, turning again to the radio cabinet. "Well done, Captain Clark," he went on. "We will now begin to drop slumber gas at the rate of a bomb every twenty seconds from each plane. Cover the territory thoroughly. Remember previous orders."

"Very well, Your Majesty," came the answer over the radio.

"Watch below, Mr. Bagley," said His Majesty, stepping to Lee's side.

As Lee watched, the air below them began to fill with glass globes that glistened in the morning sun as they fell in ever increasing numbers toward the distant earth. The globes were dropping from both of His Majesty's planes with clocklike regularity.

"Mars has had his frolic in Nicaragua," remarked His Majesty. "There goes his lullaby. When he wakes up the war god will discover that a chronic crimp has been put in his style."

Suddenly there was an explosion that slightly jarred the big ship. Several fragments of a bomb that had exploded just ahead of the plane crashed against the bullet-proof glass that made the front end of the control room.

"The anti-aircraft guns got started," smiled the king. "They were only withholding their fire until they saw what their radio planes were going to accomplish. There will be no more of those bombs, however. The gun crew that sent that one up is probably asleep now."

It seemed that His Majesty was correct. The two giant craft continued for about ten minutes more to circle over the battleground, dropping a constant rain of the glass bombs. As they circled they were rapidly settling down. Through his glasses, Lee could see clusters of men in uniform lying on the ground as if dead. Artillery stood silent and the horses and mules lay stretched where they had fallen when the slumber gas got in its work. The entire countryside seemed to be covered with a faint haze. There were no further signs of resistance.

"It's all over but the shouting—or should I say the snoring," chuckled His Majesty. "The only persons not asleep in the battle area are possibly those in the oxygen supplied refuge, where the control apparatus for those radio planes was housed. The battleships on the coast do not dare bombard the area because they would only snuff out the sleeping armies."

"What is the next move, if I may ask?" queried Lee.

"I think you asked me some time ago what was to keep the sleeping armies from fighting again as soon as they awakened," smiled the king. "I will now show you."

His Majesty stepped again to the radio cabinet and called Captain Clark.

"We will now pick up the weapons," said the king when Clark answered. "Proceed according to previous orders and make the job thorough."

"Very well, Your Majesty," answered the pilot.

"Perhaps you have noticed the apparatus carried beneath both planes," said His Majesty, turning to Lee. "They are gigantic electro magnets, an improvement over any before constructed. We will now fly over the battlefield at an altitude of about one hundred feet—and the magnets will do the rest. Watch the magnets now. The pilot has just turned on the power."

Lee looked down through the transparent floor at the shining bars of the giant magnet. The plane was skimming over the field, just safely above the tree tops. Suddenly weapons of all sorts began to leave the ground and leap upward to crash against the bars of the magnet where they hung. The sight was uncanny.

THE ship was soon carrying a tremendous load, consisting of rifles, revolvers, sabers, machine guns and many other steel objects. There were frying pans, pots and kettles, and even a set of harness, lifted by its steel fittings.

"That's a load," said His Majesty. "Let's go dump it."

The hum of the motors suddenly grew louder at the order of the king. The plane climbed rapidly and headed out to sea. Ten minutes later it was over the open water. At an order from His Majesty the current was cut off and the magnet dropped its load. The entire conglomeration plunged downward and disappeared in the brine.

For more than two hours the two planes worked at sweeping the battle area of weapons.

"When we are finished," smiled His Majesty, "they will have to fight with their fists or beanshooters—and that will not shed much blood."

Lee could not restrain a chuckle. This was disarmament with a vengeance. The League of Nations should have His Majesty for a bailiff. Suddenly there was a cry from the pilot at the controls.

"Yonder comes a plane," said the pilot, "a couple of miles away to the northeast."

A moment later both Lee and His Majesty had focused their glasses on the approaching ship. Lee gave a little cry. He recognized that silver monoplane with its bright blue nose. It was Colonel Lindholm's new super-plane.

"Get above that plane," His Majesty ordered the pilot. "Get directly over it and stay there."

Lee continued to hold his glasses on the approaching plane. He felt that Eileen Ware was aboard it. His Majesty turned to the radio cabinet and called Captain Clark.

"As soon as we are in position above the plane that is coming from the north," ordered His Majesty, "you will stop his motor."

"What are you going to do?" cried Lee. "If you contemplate harm to that plane, I withdraw my parole here and now."

"Be calm, Mr. Bagley," smiled His Majesty. "I promise you that no harm shall come to either Miss Ware or Colonel Lindholm. I sincerely admire the courage with which the Colonel attempts the impossible. I merely intend to take him home with me."

As far as withdrawing your parole is concerned, if you become obstreperous we will simply flood this ship with slumber gas and put you to sleep. All of us but yourself are wearing neutralizers. I assure you that you will enjoy yourself much more and see much more that will interest you, if you remain docile and awake."

Lee stood silent, watching the approaching plane. Confound His Majesty! There was something about him that one was forced to admire, even when one was angry with him. The calm manner in which he disregarded and swept aside threatened or attempted resistance was aggravating. At the same time it was convincing.

By grace of its far greater speed the giant plane was soon flying directly over the smaller one. Lee, looking down through the floor knew that the two figures looking up through goggles were Eileen Ware and Colonel Lindholm. His Majesty spoke to the pilot at the controls.

"Prepare to pick up that plane," said the king. "Captain Clark will stop its motor at any moment now."

The king had hardly ceased speaking when Lee saw Colonel Lindholm turn his attention quickly to the controls of his plane. Then the silver-winged plane with its two occupants seemed to rise suddenly and in another moment it was clinging tightly to the monster magnet beneath His Majesty's ship. The giant craft had picked up the smaller one as a hawk might pick up a flying sparrow. Through the transparent floor, Lee looked down into the face of Eileen Ware. The girl had removed her goggles and as she made out Lee's features she smiled. Her lips moved and Lee saw that she was speaking to Colonel Lindholm. The colonel looked up and smiled as he saw Lee peering down at them.

"Let us now go back to the cabin and invite your friends to come aboard, Mr. Bagley," said His Majesty. "I am anxious to meet them."

Five minutes later Eileen and the young colonel stood in the cabin of the huge bird of prey that had picked them and their speeding plane out of the air. Lee kissed the girl as he helped her into the cabin and then turned to grip the hand of Colonel Lindholm. He then introduced His Majesty who stood smiling at the meeting.

With continental grace the renegade king lifted Eileen's hand to his lips before turning to offer his hand to the flier.

"I'm pleased to meet you," smiled Colonel Lindholm, "but I would rather our positions were reversed."

"That is a feeling that will, I hope, soon pass," said His Majesty. "I do not want you to feel that you are a prisoner. Rather I want you to consider yourself a member of my flying corps and one of my counsellors. I have great respect for your courage and ability and wish to reward them as they deserve to be rewarded."

"Nothing doing," smiled the flier. "You forget that I am an officer of the army of the United States. Until my country acknowledges your rule, you are only an outlaw to me. I am willing to admit that you are a remarkable renegade and have accomplished some remarkable things. Just the same, I am your sworn foe, until I am reliably informed that my country has accepted your proposition—and I do not think that likely."

"Very well, colonel," answered His Majesty. "As you will. I am disappointed in the stand taken by America. I had hoped that the United States would long since have seen the light. Please make yourselves comfortable. We will have lunch at my stronghold."

His Majesty disappeared through the door leading



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to the pilot room. Colonel Lindholm turned to Lee who stood with his arm about Eileen Ware.

"Well, Bagley," said the ace, "have you enlisted under the flag of this self-styled king?"

"No," answered Lee. "I am here under protest, the same as yourself."

"What are we going to do about it?" demanded the colonel.

"I fancy that we are going to His Majesty's headquarters to have lunch," smiled Lee. "He has a disconcerting way of carrying out his plans regardless of how others may feel about them. You have probably noticed that."

"I have," remarked the flier. "He did not even take the trouble to disarm either Miss Ware or me. Why shouldn't we shoot him down and put an end to this business?"

"My chief objection," replied Lee, "is that we should be likely to put an end to ourselves at the same time. Even if we could kill or capture His Majesty and the two pilots of this plane, none of us can operate the ship and we would be snuffed out when it crashed."

"Grant that," argued the colonel, "it would finish this renegade and restore the world to normalcy."

"It might," said Lee, "and it might only transfer his power to worse hands. Anyhow, I vote against it. I look forward to getting a lot of enjoyment out of life yet."

"What do you think, Eileen?"

"It would be a shame to shoot him," said the girl. "He's so handsome."

Both men laughed at Eileen's remark. They were still laughing when His Majesty returned to the cabin and announced that they would arrive at the stronghold within an hour.

"I have ordered lunch to be ready on our arrival," said His Majesty. "In the meantime, let us drink to the safe nesting of the dove of peace in Nicaragua." He produced a bottle and wine glasses from a little cabinet.

"I never expected to live to be served by a king," smiled Eileen as she accepted her glass.

His Majesty smiled back at her as he raised his glass. Conversation turned to the things that had happened in Nicaragua that morning.

Colonel Lindholm and the king carried on most of the conversation.

Among other things the colonel explained the disappearance of himself and Eileen. He told how they had purposely landed in the wilderness some distance north of the battlefield. They had hidden the plane with brush and leaves and took up their vigil intending to follow His Majesty's planes to their base if the defense plans of the allied nations failed.

"What about my plane?" asked the flier after some time.

"Are we still carrying it?"

"No," answered His Majesty. "We dropped it into the sea. It was a war machine and all war machines must be done away with."

Lee Bagley shot a glance at Colonel Lindholm. There was murder in the eyes of the ace as he gazed at the renegade king. Bagley knew the colonel's attachment to that plane and understood the rage that must be boiling in his soldier heart.

"Besides," continued His Majesty, "I must remind you that I am ready to place one of these ships of mine at your command whenever you see fit to join forces with me."

Colonel Lindholm did not answer and there was silence in the cabin, while the plane settled down beside its mates at the stronghold.

WHEN a most excellent lunch had been disposed of, His Majesty rose and led his three prisoner-guests to his comfortable library. The servant brought coffee.

"I am going to beg once more, gentlemen," said the king, "that both of you reconsider and accept the posts I have offered you. I will gladly answer any questions you wish to ask concerning my plans, if you wish further enlightenment. I think both of you understand that I have nothing but the good of the human race at heart. You have both seen a number of demonstrations of my ability to enforce my edicts. I implore both of you to accept the parts I offer you in the forming of those edicts."

"What about Miss Ware?" asked Lee.

"Women have played with politics long enough," answered His Majesty, smiling at Eileen. "They were cut out for different work than governing the world. The rulers shall henceforward be men. If Miss Ware wishes to remain with us, she will be welcome—everywhere but in the councils. If she does not wish to remain, she shall be taken wherever she wishes to go."

There was a peculiar light in Eileen's eyes when the king ceased speaking, but she said nothing.

"I have nothing more to say than what I have already said," announced Colonel Lindholm. "If I remain here it must be as a prisoner. I can take no part in your audacious understanding."

"And you?" asked His Majesty, glancing at Lee.

"Colonel Lindholm has voiced my sentiments," answered Lee. "I must oppose what you propose—even though opposition avail nothing."

A puzzled look came to His Majesty's eyes and he shook his head slowly.

"You do not hold so high an opinion of women?" put in Eileen.

"Indeed I do," smiled His Majesty. "I hold so high an opinion of them, that I would save them from the thankless task of governing idiots and swine."

"What do you propose to do with us now?" inquired Colonel Lindholm.

"Since it seems that I can gain nothing by keeping you here," answered the king, "I shall send you back to Washington, or wherever you choose to be taken."

"When?"

"Tonight, if you wish."

"That's what I call the last word in contempt of your enemies," laughed Lee. "Captured—offered a job which we refuse—and turned loose to do our damndest to thwart your plans. Truly a kingly gesture."

"I see nothing so wonderful about it," answered His Majesty. "If several hundred million like you are powerless to obstruct my path, why should I hesitate to let two more join them?"

"It was a straw that broke the camel's back, you know," remarked Eileen, bringing a laugh from the three men.

"Then we may count upon being returned to Washington tonight?" asked Lee.

"Yes," answered the king, "but before you go I desire to show Colonel Lindholm about the stronghold as I did with you last week. I want to impress upon both of you the impregnable position I hold. It will do no harm to have those who oppose me hear from your lips of the powers I command. Also it might help to cause one or both of you to decide to rejoin me at some future date. I want to repeat that my offer stands. Either or both of you have but to notify my Washington ambassador, Carl Boyd, of your desire to return to me."

"I shall be delighted to inspect your stronghold, particularly the planes," said Colonel Lindholm. "But if I ever voluntarily return it will be as the chosen representative of the people of the United States when they have acknowledged your rule."

"Much as I would enjoy another look about," said Lee, "I must confess that I cannot remain awake much longer. I haven't slept since before I left Washington. If I may be excused, I believe I will sleep while the rest of you inspect the place."

Thus it was agreed and Lee went to the quarters that had been his since his first arrival. The rest of the party started on their tour of the stronghold. Lee kicked off his shoes and flung himself on his bed and was asleep almost the moment his head touched the pillow.

Lee had been asleep about four hours when he was awakened by a hand on his shoulder shaking him roughly. He sat up and beheld Lindholm standing over the bed.

"Wake up, Bagley," said the colonel. "I'm on the warpath. Listen closely and don't talk back. We've got to move fast. I've started a move to capture the crowd that runs this place. This would-be king took us all over the dump and showed us all its works. Miss Ware is now with him in the library at his quarters. I came over with your servant to waken you for dinner. As soon as we were inside the house I rapped your man over the head with the butt of my gun and laid him out. He's in the other room safe for a few minutes at least. I searched him and found a pair of those jiggers that fit in the nose and counteract this slumber gas."

THE colonel extended a hand in the palm of which lay a pair of the bullet-shaped neutralizers.

"What's the idea?" asked Lee, now wide awake.

"Did His Majesty show you the switch over the mantle that will flood this place with slumber gas?" countered the colonel.

"Yes," answered Lee.

"All right," said the flier. "Put these things in your nose and we will go back. When we get into the library I'll ask the big fellow some questions and keep his attention. You work around and throw that switch. I'll be watching and when you throw it I'll hold my breath. I can hold it two minutes in a pinch and that will give me time to get the pair of neutralizers which our king carries in his vest pocket. The big boy says the gas will overcome everybody within two miles of the stronghold in fifteen seconds after the switch is thrown."

"Because the jiggers make breathing difficult when in the nose, only three men in the place wear them at all times as a precautionary measure. They take turns and I have no idea which three are wearing them at the present time. I know that the big fellow isn't wearing his because he put them back in his pocket after he showed them to us. Get your shoes on and let's go."

"But—" said Lee.

"Don't argue, man," cried Colonel Lindholm. "Let's get going. We can talk after that switch is thrown."

A few minutes later Lee and the colonel entered the library where His Majesty sat in conversation with Eileen.

"I hope you are refreshed and hungry, Mr. Bagley," greeted the king.

"I am, thanks," answered Lee.

"Dinner will be served shortly," said the king, "after which your plane will be ready."

"I have another question to ask," said Colonel Lindholm, taking a chair where His Majesty was obliged

to turn his back to the mantle in order to face him.

"Yes," said the king.

Lee stepped past His Majesty as though he meant to take a vacant chair that stood near the one in which Eileen was sitting. The gas switch was but four steps away. Lee's lips suddenly set in a firm line. A moment later he had reached the switch and closed it. He turned quickly to see His Majesty looking in his direction as he tried to rise. There was a mixture of anger and astonishment in His Majesty's expression. He opened his lips as if to speak, but no sound came. His knees seemed to crumple under him and he slipped to the floor, asleep.

When Lee had reached for the gas switch, Colonel Lindholm had grasped his nostrils with a thumb and forefinger and closed his lips tightly. Now he knelt beside the prostrate form of His Majesty and quickly extracted a small leather case from the king's vest pocket. A moment later he had thrust a pair of the neutralizers into his nostrils and stood facing Lee. Eileen Ware lay limp, sleeping quietly in the chair where she had been sitting.

Lee started to speak, but noticed the colonel's tightly compressed lips and remembered that he might be overcome by the gas if he opened his mouth. Colonel Lindholm drew a pencil and a letter from his pocket.

"Don't talk for half an hour," he scribbled on the back of the envelope. "Gas supposed to dissipate in fifteen minutes, but we play safe."

Lee read the note and nodded his head. The colonel started to write something more, but dropped his pencil and turned toward the library door as a step sounded beyond it.

Suddenly His Majesty's personal servant stood in the doorway. His eyes took in the situation with one startled glance and he spun on his heel to leave. Evidently the fellow was one of the three detailed to wear the neutralizers that day. As the man turned, Colonel Lindholm sprang and brought him crashing to the floor with a tackle about the thighs. In a moment the colonel was astride the fallen servant sinking steel fingers into his windpipe. After choking the struggling man for a few seconds the flier freed one hand and gripping the fellow's nose high up with his thumb and finger, forced the neutralizers from his nostrils. The servant immediately subsided into quiet slumber. The colonel rose smiling and picked up his pencil.

"If we are in luck," he scribbled, "there are only two more of these outlaws conscious. Watch the door while I take a look out of the windows."

Lee took up his post at the library door and Colonel Lindholm moved to a window that gave a view of the huge clearing. After one look from the window he drew his automatic from his pocket and motioned for Lee to approach. Through the window, Lee saw two men, both in the uniform of His Majesty's pilots, approaching from the direction of the barracks at the far end of the field. Colonel Lindholm had picked up his paper and pencil. He pointed to a high-powered hunting rifle that hung above the library door. Lee obtained the rifle and opened the magazine, finding it full.

"I'll halt those fellows fifty yards from the door," wrote the colonel. "You stand at this window with the rifle. Use it if you have to."

Lee nodded and took his place at the window, which was open. He could easily thrust the barrel of the rifle through the screen if need should arise. Colonel Lindholm moved away in the direction of the front door.

The two men were approaching rapidly. They were near enough that Lee could recognize them as the

pilots, Naylor and Clark, when the colonel opened the door and ran to meet them with his automatic covering them. The two men halted in evident astonishment. Lee surmised that they must have thought the gas had been released through some accident. Otherwise they would not have approached in so careless a manner.

At a gesture from the colonel both men elevated their hands. Lee saw that Colonel Lindholm was motioning to him with his free hand. He hurried out to the colonel's side.

"What does this mean, Mr. Bagley?" asked one of the prisoners as Lee came up.

Lee glanced at his wrist watch. More than twenty minutes had passed since the throwing of the gas switch. Evidently it was safe to talk.

"It means that Colonel Lindholm and myself are in possession of this place and you are our prisoners," answered Lee.

"Take their belts and tie their hands behind them," said the colonel.

Lee obeyed and the two prisoners were then marched into the house.

TWO hours later Lee and the colonel paused to look upon what they considered a good job well done. Twenty-four prisoners, still sleeping, lay bound to as many beds in the big barracks. Each was securely trussed up in addition to the ropes that bound him to the bed. The two victors were taking no chances.

"I've got to hand it to you, Colonel," said Lee. "Your middle name is certainly action. What's next?"

The colonel glanced at his watch. He grinned at Lee as he turned to leave the room.

"These chaps are good for more than two hours in slumberland yet," he said. "Let's go to the house and wreck that dinner that is on the table."

They found the food and ate hungrily. When they had eaten their fill, Colonel Lindholm led the way to the library. Eileen still slept in the big chair. Lindholm walked to a cabinet at one end of the fireplace and opened its door. A microphone and numerous dials and gauges were exposed.

"While we wait for everybody to wake up," he smiled, "we will try to get in touch with the United States and tell them of our victory. While you were snoozing this afternoon, our host demonstrated this apparatus for our benefit. He allowed me to broadcast a message that he said would be picked up at many points in the United States. I announced that we were all safe and would be in Washington tonight. I think the big boy left it set just as I used it, except for throwing the main switch. He told us that you had not been shown the radio, so I will explain it to you. He has a double station here, so fixed that he can broadcast and receive at the same time. The aeri-als are placed at some distance in different directions from here. That is why you have not seen them. I'm going to try to broadcast a message and then try to pick up an answer if they hear me."

While Lee watched and listened with keen interest, the colonel threw in the switch and spoke into the microphone.

"Hello, somebody in the United States," said the flier. "Colonel Lindholm speaking. Lee Bagley and myself are in possession of the stronghold of the man who calls himself the King of the World. We have made prisoners of the renegade and his entire gang. We intend to bring them to Washington in one of their own planes. We will leave here sometime near midnight and should be in Washington by morning.

"I am sending this message in hopes that it will be

picked up and the proper authorities notified. I will repeat what I have said and then try to pick up an answer. If I have been heard, will some of the most powerful stations try to tell me so?"

The colonel repeated his message and then threw the switch and went over to the receiving cabinet which was at the other end of the fireplace.

For more than an hour both the colonel and Lee worked with the unfamiliar receiving set, but were unable to make it function at all. Then Eileen stirred in her chair and gave a little sigh. A few moments more and she was awake and demanding to be told what had happened.

Between them the two victors told her of their coup and its results.

"I think you might have gotten me a pair of those things and let me in on the fun," chided Eileen. "I didn't come down here to sleep when there was any excitement going on."

The men laughed and advised Eileen to partake of some of the food still on the table in His Majesty's dining room.

"We want to start home with our prisoners as soon as they are awoken so that we can press a pilot into service," said Colonel Lindholm.

While the girl ate, the colonel made another attempt to get something on the receiving set, but his efforts were vain. The three of them then went to the barracks where the prisoners were. As they drew near the building they could hear voices. The prisoners were awake.

"You do the talking, Bagley," said the colonel. "I'm not gifted with gab."

"Anybody that can get results the way you do, doesn't need to be articulate," laughed Lee.

As the captors entered the barracks the talking among the prisoners suddenly stopped. There was an ominous silence as Lee, followed closely by Eileen and Colonel Lindholm, entered the prison room. His Majesty lay bound to the third cot from the door in a very unmajestic manner. He turned eyes in which fury struggled with grief toward his captors.

"Well?" said the erstwhile Monarch of the Globe.

"It is my duty to inform you," announced Lee, "that you are all prisoners of the United States. I am sorry that we are compelled to cause you discomfort, but we can take no chances until you are delivered into safe keeping."

"You damned — — —," snarled one of the captives.

"That will do, Collins," said His Majesty in an icy voice. "Profanity will avail you nothing. Be quiet, all of you. Remember what I have told you and let me speak for us all. I still have some trumps in this game."

"We have a proposition to make," said Lee when quiet again fell in the room.

"I am listening," replied the king.

"You must realize," said Lee, "that it will be very uncomfortable for all of you, if we are compelled to keep you as you are now for days or even weeks, until an expedition from the United States can come to our aid. In spite of all we could do under such circumstances you would probably suffer considerably. All that can be avoided if one of your pilots will consent to operate a plane and take us to Washington. The trip will require less than six hours. If you agree, we will load you all aboard the plane that was made ready for the trip last evening. We will then release one pilot and guard him until he lands us on the Annapolis field. What do you say?"

"Otherwise," said His Majesty, "I suppose we must

remain bound as we are until you are reinforced."

"I see no other alternative," answered Lee. "We would, of course, feed you as best we could and release you one at a time for short intervals. Nevertheless, as I said before, your discomfort would be great."

"All right," said His Majesty after a brief silence. "Put us aboard the plane."

It was more than an hour later when the prisoners were all stowed as comfortably as possible aboard the giant ship. Captain Naylor was released and entered the control room under guard of Colonel Lindholm who stood gun in hand and never once took his eyes from the pilot. A pair of neutralizers had been procured for Eileen. As an extra precaution all three captors placed the protectors in their nostrils before boarding the plane.

Captain Naylor turned his attention to the controls and the mighty motors began to throb. Soon the big craft rose from the field and pointed its nose northward into the night.

His Majesty and six of the other prisoners were in the cabin and the rest lay in the huge after-compartment. The door between the cabin and the control room was tied open and all the lights in the ship burned brightly. Lee and Eileen, sitting in the cabin, could see Captain Naylor at the controls and Colonel Lindholm, grim-faced, on guard. For five minutes the plane climbed skyward while the silent pilot worked with his controls. Then Captain Naylor suddenly called out:

"ALL right, Your Majesty."

His Majesty met Lee Bagley's eyes. A peculiar triumphant light glowed in the orbs of the erstwhile monarch.

"I will now take command of the situation once more," remarked His Majesty, lifting his voice to make sure Colonel Lindholm would hear. "It may be for the last time—be that as it may. Captain Naylor now has his hands on two levers. I advise you to listen to me before making any move that will compel him to act. When we awakened to find ourselves prisoners, I foresaw that you would attempt this method of delivering us to Washington. I tell you now that we will never reach the United States alive. Certain parts of the framework of this plane are packed with a very powerful explosive. The explosive was placed there when the plane was constructed so that the ship might be destroyed in case it ever fell into enemy hands. Nothing but fire will explode it. One of the levers now held by Captain Naylor will set off a fuse that will set off the explosive in exactly five minutes. Once that lever is thrown there will be no way to prevent the explosion which will tear this ship to atoms. The other lever will flood the ship with slumber gas so that we will all be asleep when the end comes. If Captain Naylor is forced to throw those levers, I advise you to remove your neutralizers and go to sleep. You may release us and live, or we will all die together. If you release us, I give you my word that I will take you to Washington and set you free as I originally intended. It is now up to you."

Lee felt a sinking sensation at the pit of his stomach as he gazed into the blazing eyes of the bound monarch. He glanced into the control room and saw Captain Naylor standing white-faced and grim with his hands gripping two small levers above the rest of the control apparatus.

Eileen gave a little cry and Lee looked into her terrified eyes and knew that he was defeated. For himself, he might have chosen death—but there was Eileen.

Lee licked his dry lips and looked again at the bound king. He was trying to frame an acceptance of His

Majesty's offer when Colonel Lindholm brought matters to a crisis. The soldier saw no alternative to removing the menace to his country at the cost of his own and a couple of other lives. Before Lee could utter a word the gun in the colonel's hands barked its defiance of death and Captain Naylor pitched to the floor, throwing both levers as he fell.

A blue haze seemed to instantly fill the cabin and control room. The captives relaxed as the slumber gas brought its merciful oblivion.

"Good-bye," murmured His Majesty as his lids fluttered and closed over defiant eyes.

Lee felt like a man in a dream. He felt Eileen clinging to him frantically and tried to realize that less than five minutes remained of life. His eyes sought the control-room and he saw Colonel Lindholm at the controls. He heard the colonel calling to him and his wits suddenly cleared.

"Get to the door and be ready to open it when we hit," shouted the colonel. "This bus was only eighteen hundred feet up when I fired. I'm bringing her down fast. We may be able to get clear. God knows what is below, but we'll hit it in another minute. I'll try some kind of a landing. I've stopped the motors. When we hit, get out of that door quick and get away from this ship as fast as you can. I'll follow you."

Colonel Lindholm stood at the controls operating the joy stick which, he had been told that afternoon, was handled on this plane the same as on any other. He was heading for the earth in as nearly a nose dive as he could hope to pull the plane out of to make any sort of a landing. He glanced at his wrist watch.

"Two minutes gone," he shouted, as Lee, drawing Eileen with him, reached the door in the side of the cabin. "We are almost down. Get set. I'm going to straighten her out."

Lee's right hand grasped the nickel-plated handle of the door. His left arm was about Eileen. After her first cry of fright the girl had not uttered a sound. A few seconds passed in ghastly silence—seconds that were rapidly bringing nearer the blast that would tear to atoms the majestic plane that had suddenly become a death trap. Then there was a slight jar as the plane touched something besides air—then another and harder jolt and then—crash! They were down with a sudden stop that plunged the plane into darkness and almost tore Lee's grasp loose from the door. He recovered his balance and opened the door.

"Move!" cried the voice of Colonel Lindholm in the darkness. "Three minutes gone!"

Lee lifted Eileen and thrust her through the door ahead of him. He then sprang out to fall sprawling beside Eileen in a tangle of vines and underbrush. The girl was struggling to her feet. Lee rose and grasped her hand.

"Hurry!" he panted. In his ears that last cry of Colonel Lindholm's was echoing over and over. Three minutes gone!

As Lee tore his way through the brush and tropical growth that barred his way, he heard a noise in the jungle behind him and realized that the courageous colonel had left the plane. Blindly Lee fought on. Eileen was now beside him, helping him tear a path through the jungle away from the crashed aircraft. The girl's breath was a series of sobs.

It seemed that they had been struggling through that tangled vegetation for an hour when the world appeared to suddenly burst into flame. Giant hands seemed to lift them and hurl them headlong into the tangled growth ahead. Lee heard a scream from Eileen. Then his head struck something and blackness swallowed him.

CHAPTER XXI

THE world was insufferably hot—all except something cool that lay upon Lee's head. He moaned and opened his eyes. Eileen was kneeling over him. Her dark eyes were looking anxiously into his face. The cool something on his forehead was Eileen's hand.

Lee struggled to rise. His head ached and black spots danced before his eyes.

"Lie still, dear," said Eileen softly.

"Where's the colonel?" asked Lee, gaining a sitting position.

"Right here, old man," came the voice of Colonel Lindholm as the flier stepped into view. "Take it easy. You'll be all right soon. You got a nasty blow on the head."

Lee felt his aching skull and looked about him. He sat under a tree at the edge of a small natural clearing. Dawn was just breaking through the jungle. Lee's eyes fell on a familiar figure lying nearby. It was His Majesty.

"How—what?" said Lee, looking from His Majesty to Colonel Lindholm.

"I managed to get him out," explained the colonel. "Grabbed him and threw him out. Then put him on my shoulders and followed the path you and Eileen broke. Just before the explosion I ran into the trunk of a large tree. I put it between us and the plane just as she went up."

"The others?" asked Lee.

"We'll bury what we can find as soon as you feel fit to help," answered the colonel. "The explosion dug the hole for us. It was some blast—literally blew the ship to smithereens."

Lee's eyes sought Eileen. Like the clothing of the Colonel and Lee, the girl's clothing was torn to shreds.

"Well," smiled Lee, "you didn't sleep through this."

They all laughed and Lee rose unsteadily to his feet. He looked down at His Majesty.

"Is he hurt?" asked Lee.

"No," answered the colonel. "He's still sleeping."

"Why don't you unbind his hands?"

"I want him under control until I see how he behaves when he wakes up," answered the flier.

"Gosh, I'm thirsty," said Lee, licking his dry lips.

"There's a spring right over at the other side of this clear spot," said the colonel. "I found it a bit ago. Animals have been drinking at it, so I took a chance. It hasn't hurt me."

"Lead me to it," said Lee.

"Me too," said Eileen.

Colonel Lindholm led the way to the spring and Lee dropped to his stomach and drank deeply of the cool water that gushed up among some rocks. Eileen laughed and followed suit.

"I feel better now," said Lee, rising. "What's the next move? How far are we from the wreck?"

"There isn't any wreck," answered the colonel. "There is only a place where it was. We are in quite a pickle, if you stop to think. We are somewhere in a jungle—the Lord only knows how far from civilization. We haven't a bit of food and only one gun and only eleven cartridges for the gun. I think we had better go back to where our prisoner is and hold a council of war."

Back under the tree where lay the still sleeping captive, Colonel Lindholm brushed off a large flat rock. At his request all three emptied their pockets on the rock. The collection contained Colonel Lindholm's gun and its ammunition, two pocket knives, a pencil, a fountain pen, nine matches, seven cigarettes, a wallet

and a handful of gold pieces along with some silver coins. . . .

"The most useless thing of all," laughed Lee as he laid down the money.

"Next to these," said Eileen, adding to the collection a small leather case containing a powder puff, some powder, a mirror, and a lipstick.

"Now," said the colonel as they all seated themselves on the ground beside the rock, "let's size up the situation. Our best hope is that the message I sent over the radio last night was picked up in the United States. In that case help will be on its way by air shortly. We may expect it in a few days. The tough part of it is that we don't know whether that message was heard or not."

"Just the same, I suggest that we remain right here where there is water until help has had a chance to arrive. We will have to build a shelter of some sort. We must also start a signal fire and keep it burning day and night. During the day we will have to keep green leaves and grass on the fire to make a dense white smoke, easily sighted by a plane. It is my guess that we can find berries and wild fruit and birds' eggs enough for food and save our ammunition against an emergency. What do you think, Bagley?"

"Your plan sounds sensible," answered Lee. "There is no point in taking to the jungle in an attempt to get anywhere until we are sure help is not coming by air. A plane could land in this clearing. Also our signals could be more easily seen from here. If we got out into this jungle, a plane might pass over us a dozen times without seeing us."

A stir from their captive attracted the attention of the trio and a few minutes later they were grouped about His Majesty as he awakened. In a puzzled manner the captive looked up at the faces above him. Then he tried to move his hands and found them still bound.

"Sorry," said Colonel Lindholm, "to keep you trussed up. We are all in pretty much of a pickle and we will be glad to remove your bonds if you will promise not to try to escape."

"Take them off," said His Majesty simply. "What happened?"

The bonds were quickly removed and the situation explained to the fallen monarch. Sorrow brooded in the eyes of His Majesty as he was told of the fate of the ship and the rest of its passengers. He listened in silence to everything, until the plan for making camp at the clearing was outlined.

"I believe I can improve upon that plan," said the prisoner. "As I recall it, we were in the air not more than fifteen minutes from the time I took off at my stronghold. We hardly had time to get up speed. I should say that we are within a long day's march of the stronghold. By climbing a tall tree where I can get a look at the mountains, I believe I can lay a course that would bring us out there."

"By George, that's sense!" cried Lee.

"It is," agreed Colonel Lindholm, "except that none of us, except His Majesty, are fit to make a day's march without sleep."

"True," assented Lee.

After more discussion it was decided that Lee and the colonel would perform the necessary gruesome rites at the scene of the wreck and then build sufficient shelter for one night after which they would spend the rest of the day and the night in resting up for the return to the stronghold. After a breakfast of fruit and berries, they set about their work.

It was a hungry and weary quartet that reached the deserted stronghold just after sundown on the following evening. Starting at the break of dawn, they

had battled their way through the dense forest all day long. Two days of subsisting on berries and without sufficient water had worn them down. Garments of all were in a sad condition.

The three men had taken the brunt, shielding Eileen in every manner possible, but the girl was ready to drop from exhaustion. Nevertheless, she insisted on doing her part in preparing food and coffee.

When the food had been disposed of, they all went into the library to discuss their situation. Eileen sank into a huge easy-chair and was asleep almost instantly. The men smiled and went on with their talk.

"It would have simplified things greatly for me," smiled His Majesty, "if you had left me in the plane night before last. However, I'm glad you didn't as it has dawned upon me that I owe it to my ambassadors to warn them of the collapse of my plans and aid them in any way I can. I have given you my word to remain peacefully captive. In fact, I am more anxious to get to Washington than you are. I have a bargain to drive with the Government and I want to get the whole thing over with. I suggest that I be allowed to use the radio to broadcast a message to my ambassadors, telling them that the game is played out. Then I will get in touch with the United States and you may notify them that we are coming to Washington tomorrow. What do you say?"

Lee and the colonel exchanged glances. The colonel nodded his head. The captive king went to the radio and the messages were broadcast as he had directed. Lee did the speaking when the message was sent to the United States and concluded by asking that several powerful stations in the United States try to reach them if the message was picked up.

His Majesty turned his attention to the receiving apparatus and after fifteen minutes of tinkering with it, was rewarded by bringing in a voice evidently speaking for their benefit.

"—if you succeed," the voice was saying, "the planes which were preparing to start in search of you will delay their start until day after tomorrow. In case you have not arrived by that time the expedition will start out. If you have heard this message please broadcast a message to that effect. All stations that picked you up before are standing-by. This is Station WOR at Newark, New Jersey."

The voice ceased and His Majesty turned his eyes toward Lee.

"Now, if you will take the microphone again and tell him that we are in touch with WOR," he said, "I will stay on the receiver and we can converse with them."

Two hours later it was arranged that the party, in one of the giant planes piloted by His Majesty, would start for the United States at dawn, planning to land at Annapolis before noon. An expedition ready to start by air from Washington was to be held up. Then Eileen was awakened and told of the arrangements and all retired for much needed sleep.

The captive king was allowed to sleep unbound, the only precaution taken being that Colonel Lindholm shared his bed, after searching the room thoroughly to make sure no slumber gas bombs were hidden in it.

The fallen monarch had given his parole and both Lee and the colonel were convinced of his sincerity in accepting his defeat as complete. They could not help admiring the philosophical manner in which the man bowed to fate.

"I must confess that I have very little stomach for the task of turning you over to the authorities," said Lee to His Majesty, as the party sat at breakfast the next morning. "I believe Colonel Lindholm shares my feeling to a great extent."

"However there seems to be no other way out." "Don't worry about me," smiled His Majesty. "I am ready to go. I fancy that I will be able to look out for myself."

It was noon when the big plane discharged its four passengers on the landing field at Annapolis. Soldiers and middies held back the cheering thousands that had gathered. The king and his captors were taken in charge by a group of marines and a reception committee of high government officials and hurried to Washington.

The following morning Lee Bagley and Eileen Ware were present by invitation at a hearing granted at his own request to the man who had aspired to rule the world. Colonel Lindholm joined Lee and Eileen as they entered the chamber where the hearing was to be held. Never had offender been heard before a more distinguished group of men than gathered to hear this one.

Lee felt again that deep admiration for the man whose schemes he had thwarted as His Majesty rose to address his judges. There was an air of conscious power about the man, even as he stood before the men who now held his fate in their hands.

Vitality seemed to have reached its perfection in the splendid body that moved with the easy grace of a panther and his personality seemed to crowd the room in which the hearing was held. His keen blue eyes searched the faces of his audience for a moment before his deep and pleasant voice broke the silence.

"I am grateful for this hearing," he said. "I am aware that while I am not on trial I stand before the men who shall in the end decide my fate. It is my hope to avoid public trial and to speedily bring to a close this chapter. I stand before you, a victim of too much confidence in myself. In honor to my captors I wish to remind you that Mr. Bagley, because of my confidence in him, has been able to accomplish, with the aid of Colonel Lindholm, what the combined armies and navies of the world would have found impossible."

"I hold no grudge against Mr. Bagley or Colonel Lindholm. The admiration, I have always had for Mr. Bagley, has, on the other hand, increased during the past few days. I had intended to put into effect the theories and suggestions of Mr. Bagley for the betterment of the conditions of mankind. I believe that Mr. Bagley will testify that my intentions toward my fellow men in what I meant to do were of the best. The approval of the world's leading thinkers and of many who are present in this room has been placed upon the theories that I meant to put into practice. I seem to have been unfortunate in that I had the courage of my convictions."

"Now that my house of cards has been so successfully demolished by Mr. Bagley and Colonel Lindholm, I come to you with a proposition. I have no desire to rot in one of those moral pest-houses, called prisons, which I would have in time abolished. I am prepared to ask for a different fate and to offer a price that I believe you will consider."

"I alone know the whereabouts of the gold that was taken from the *Leviathan*. The chemist, who produced my slumber gas, is dead and I alone know the formula of that most humane and effective weapon. I alone know the formula of the compound used in the neutralizers that give man immunity from the effects of that gas."

"I am willing to turn over to the United States this information, which with my superplanes, will make the nation invincible. I am willing to do this in return for the privilege of exile on a small island in the Pacific group owned by the United States. I hold the

show a nation (Continued on page 425)

Crusaders of Space

By Paul Chadwick

***P**ERNICIOUS chemical devices or concoctions, as the case may be, in the hands of unscrupulous persons, might just as easily and effectively wreak complete destruction to vast hordes of civilized people as this much-talked-of chemical warfare that seems to be the logical method of fighting in any future great war. Our new author here suggests something amazingly simple for the destruction of limited numbers of combatants in order to protect what is otherwise planned for the good of humanity.*

CHAPTER I.

A Call from the Master

MARK TRAVERS trembled with suppressed excitement as he read the code message that dropped on his desk from the mouth of the ethergraph. It was from Theobald Zanton, mysterious head of Planetoid Chemicals, Inc., the man who guided the vast organization like an aloof but all-powerful monarch.

Young Travers had visited the company's branch depots on many planets during his five years as an inspector; but he had never seen Zanton. No one with whom he had come in contact had laid eyes on the amazing scientific genius whose ambitious enterprises extended over the whole solar system.

But now came this strange summons, direct from Zanton himself, calling him. It was the most extraordinary thing that had happened to Travers since he had started working for the company. His hands shook as he put his testing instruments away in their leatherette cases and left his office.

When he reached the street and walked toward the huge central vestibule of the Planetoid Building he began whistling to keep up his courage. A stray shaft of sunlight filtered down through the maze of intersecting avenues overhead. It touched his lean, bronzed face. An express on the Interborough Vacuum Monorail disgorged a motley group of passengers. The doors of the glistening tube swished shut. The flexible cars swept on at six hundred miles an hour toward the green Vermont suburbs.

Travers nervously turned into the Planetoid Building's main concourse and entered one of the great elevators. There was moisture on the palms of his hands now.

The prospect of coming face to face with Zanton

actually unnerved him. What sort of man was Zanton? How would he look and talk and act? What possible reason had he for wanting to interview a mere inspector?

The elevator stopped at the seventh hundredth floor of this most modern of skyscrapers. Travers was a little pale now. But he straightened his broad shoulders and walked forward resolutely.

A pretty girl secretary ushered him down a long corridor. There was a small private lift at the end of it which took him up to the tower room seven hundred feet higher.

Then a voice came from a concealed loudspeaker somewhere above the door.

"Mr. Zanton is expecting you. He will see you at once. This way please."

Travers held his breath as he entered Zanton's office six thousand feet above the street. He blinked in the clear light that came unimpeded through the panels of ultra- and infra-ray glass surrounding the tower room. It was deathly quiet up here. So quiet that the voice of the little man sitting behind the huge metal desk cracked in Travers' ears like static.

"Mr. Travers, I believe. Sit down, please."

Travers was thunderstruck for a moment at the appearance of the great Zanton. He hadn't known just what to expect. A Colossus of a man perhaps; a personality so imposing that he would feel as though he were in the presence of a god.

Instead, Zanton was below medium height and mild looking. He peered at Travers from behind old-fashioned, gold-rimmed spectacles. There was nothing to indicate his extraordinary character save the bright intelligence of his gray eyes and the dynamic quality of his high-pitched voice.

"You are wondering why I called you here, Mr. Travers. You are wondering whether I'm going to reprimand you about something—perhaps fire you."

Travers nodded and his face flushed; he was embarrassed that Zanton had read his thoughts so easily. A smile passed over the great scientist's face. Then he sobered.

"People envy me because I'm the head of one of the largest chemical concerns in the universe. They don't even guess at the problems and worries I have. They think I'm as peacefully aloof from life as the stars in the Milky Way."

"Yes, sir," stammered Travers.

"Well, that's not the case at all. I'm a heavily burdened man. My business has become so large, that I have little time for my own researches any more. I have to trust to well-meaning but often incompetent assistants. And now that I've become so successful, the jealousy of certain business rivals has grown almost fanatical. But that isn't all. Right now I have a greater and more personal worry. My son has been stricken ill just as he was on the eve of completing a chemical process, upon which the salvation of the human race may easily depend. He was carrying on his researches at one of our company's frontier experimental stations, where climatic conditions were ideal and where he could work in absolute secrecy."

Zanton stopped speaking and stared fixedly at Travers.

The young man's blue eyes did not waver.

"Isn't there any one out there to help him?" he asked.

"Yes, he has a small band of faithful technicians with him. But each is a specialist in his own line. There is no one else, outside of my daughter and myself, who fully understands the process. I can't go to him, much as I'd like to. But my daughter has volunteered to make the trip and continue this important work."

Travers nodded. "There shouldn't be any cause for worry in that," he said. "An escort of space patrol ships can accompany her."

Zanton frowned uneasily. "It may not be so simple. The work, as I told you, has been carried on in secrecy. But somehow or other rumors of it have leaked out. There are very few people I can trust. Besides that, any ship I send to the satellite where Harvey is working will be followed. Strategy will have to be used. That's why I need your help."

Travers looked puzzled now. He spoke bluntly.

"What makes you think you can trust me?" he asked.

The gray eyes of Zanton showed a faint gleam of amusement.

"A good question," he said. "You don't know, of course, that all of my employees are put under secret surveillance when they first go on the company's pay roll. I have five thousand trained operatives to do that. After a few months the rank and file of the workers are left alone. Those with vicious tendencies are carefully observed, as well as those showing definite promise. I have here a tabulated report of your activities during the last five years. Nothing is left out, even down to your most trifling habits and characteristics. Your honesty is unquestioned. Your bravery was proved by the way you carried on your work on Mars when that planet was in a state of internecine civil war. You protected the company's interests then, and you have never been known to divulge our affairs to outsiders."

Travers flushed at these compliments. He started to stammer that he didn't deserve them. But Zanton waved him into silence.

"It isn't a question of praise or blame," he said. "It's merely a scientific chart of human behavior in certain specified environments. What I want to know

is whether or not you are willing to help me."

"Certainly," said Travers.

"But you aren't acquainted with the facts yet," answered Zanton. "Have you ever heard of Hulgur?"

Travers nodded quickly.

"One of the barbarous, anthropoid men from Venus—a raider who hides his acts of piracy behind a pretense of peaceable commerce."

"Yes," said Zanton. "The greatest scoundrel in all space. There's nothing so viciously criminal that he will stop at it—though he's always managed to keep out of the clutches of interplanetary law. I'm certain he's preyed upon my merchant fleet again and again. I regard him as a personal enemy, and he has sworn to ruin me. But a bigger issue than that is at stake now. To gain his ends, the sacrifice of a human life means nothing to him. He would gladly commit a million murders to learn the exact nature of the thing my son has been working on. You understand then that his presence in space constitutes a menace, so terrible that it cannot be exaggerated?"

"Yes," said Travers. "I understand you now; but if your daughter isn't afraid to make the trip to the satellite you refer to, I'm not afraid to help you in any way I can."

Zanton smiled again, then suddenly raised his voice. "Do you hear that, Paula?"

There came a low laugh from behind a screen which Travers had noticed when he first came into the room. The screen moved slightly and one of the most startlingly beautiful girls that Travers had ever seen made her appearance.

She was small and dark, vibrant with intelligence and vitality. Her eyes were like soft shadows reflected in the water of a deep forest pool. They were fringed by long lashes. Masses of wavy hair framed the smooth oval of her face. Her delicate, sensitive mouth held both strength and humor. Her manner as she came forward was friendly and tomboyish.

She smiled and held out her hand. "Pardon me for eavesdropping, but dad asked me to do it. He insists on being thorough about everything. He wanted me to observe you while I was unseen just as I would a specimen under a microscope."

Travers mumbled a conventional phrase. He gripped her small warm hand. He hoped his smile of frank admiration made up for his awkward silence. He would gladly accompany such a girl out into distant space, even if death waited at the end of the voyage.

After they had chatted together for some moments, Zanton asked his daughter if she would mind leaving Travers and him alone for a bit. When Paula had gone, Zanton got up from his desk and came close to Travers. Travers arose also. The great scientist's head did not reach above his shoulder. Zanton's face was working now. He seemed all at once pitifully old, worried and human.

He laid his hand on Travers' arm. His voice was husky when he spoke.

"You've seen Paula, Travers! Her mother was just like her. She means more to me than anything else in the world. More even—though I'm wicked to say it—than this great process that my son is working on. But even scientists are human. I want you to watch over her, Travers. Help her in every way. When you reach the experimental station, you will be able to give great practical scientific aid, because of your experience at my various depots. But, before that, Paula's very life may be in your hands. You'll learn later exactly what I mean. Promise me you'll do your best."

"I promise," said Travers, his eyes gleaming with a fire of determination that was almost fanatical.

Zanton silently gripped his hand for a moment. Then his voice grew businesslike again.

"Very well," he said. "Be at the company drome at six this evening. Go to hangar No. 7. Ask for Igor Wendel. You will be in charge of the ship while you are on it, but he will be your chief navigator. You will find sealed orders waiting for you in the ship. Paula will be there. Good-by, Travers, and good luck."

CHAPTER II.

The Spy Ship

TRAVERS didn't open his orders until the earth was far astern, a beautiful luminous crescent against the cobalt curtain of the ether void. Paula was in the main cabin with him as the great multimotored cruiser hurtled itself silently through space. She leaned over his shoulder as he broke the seal on the envelope and looked at the message.

The words were written by Zanton himself. They were terse and to the point.

Dear Travers:

In the keel compartment of the ship, you are now on, a small two-place torpedocopter is stowed away. This craft is provisioned and powered for twelve hours flight. A touch of the button release will allow it to slide through the tube into space.

At position AX-2740, on the arc of the coordinates Saturn and Neptune as you are passing the planet Uranus, you and Paula are to leave the mother ship. Head straight for the satellite Oberon. When you have reached its atmosphere, Paula will direct you to the experimental station.

The large ship will continue on its way to Neptune. In this way I believe it will be possible for you and Paula to land unobserved and unmolested on Oberon. As a precaution, however, I have equipped the torpedocopter with a light automatic ray gun. I advise also that you carry small arms with you.

Travers eyes were snapping with excitement as he looked up. The secret orders and the care with which Zanton had arranged for the landing on Oberon, one of the four satellites of the planet Uranus, appealed to his sense of the dramatic.

"Your father never misses a trick, does he?" he said.

Paula smiled. "Not very often—and this time he certainly can't afford to. The thing that my brother has been working on is too frightfully important. Didn't Dad tell you about it?"

"He didn't mention any details," said Travers. He was curious, but didn't intend to question the girl. It was for her to speak first.

"There's no reason why you shouldn't know now," she said. "Dad and Harvey are trying to save the human race from the slow starvation threatened by the increasing scarcity of vitamin A. A cheap and plentiful source must soon be found or the situation will be too terrible to think about. My brother has almost perfected an extraction process, which Dad started five years ago. He plans to build factories on every planet and put the new product on the market next spring within the reach of all."

Travers nodded. He'd heard startling rumors of the crisis which humanity was approaching. It threatened to be the greatest catastrophe the human race had ever experienced—even greater than the Comet Gas Disaster of 2045.

"I see," he said. "No wonder your father is willing

to run the risk of sending you to Oberon. No wonder he's taken such pains. Imagine what would happen if the formula were stolen and exploited by some unscrupulous profiteer!"

The girl clenched her hands fiercely. "Yes," she said, "and that's just what Hulgur would like to do. It would soon make him the virtual ruler of the universe. He could starve whole peoples into submission. He could sell the product at prices that would put the gold of all the planets into his hands. He's worse than the selfish grafters who almost wrecked earth, way back in the early 20th century."

She got up and paced the cabin, swinging her lithe, slim body from side to side with quick, excited steps.

"Don't worry," said Travers, "your father seems to have prepared for every emergency. We'll get to Oberon safely and finish up your brother's work."

At that moment the door of the corridor leading to the control room opened. A slight, gray-haired man stood in the threshold. It was Igor Wendel, chief navigating officer. His face was grave now. He saluted respectfully and came forward.

"There's another ship behind us, sir. She's following directly on our course. We sighted her a few minutes ago. I thought you'd want to know."

"Yes," said Travers. "Thanks, Wendel."

He shot a glance at Paula and saw the look of worry in her eyes.

"Don't be alarmed," he said. "Your father anticipated this and has prepared for it."

But he had a sense of uneasiness himself as he followed Wendel into the control room.

The micro lens of the radio-vision instrument was set in position. Travers looked into the eyepiece and frowned. The oval, iridescent dot of the strange ship was plainly visible. It was still so far distant that he couldn't make out any surface details. But the stationary appearance of the craft proved that it was traveling their own route without any deviation.

There was no doubt in his mind that it was the ship of Hulgur, or one of his hirelings, spying on their movements. He saw the wisdom of Zanton's plan now. At the distance apart the two ships were traveling it would hardly be possible for Hulgur to see the torpedocopter when it left the mother craft—unless Hulgur had a radio-vision device more powerful than any Travers knew about. That was what worried him.

"Would you like me to speed up?" asked Wendel as he saw Travers' growing anxiety.

"No, not yet. Wait till we approach the point where Miss Zanton and I are to take off. Then give the ship all the speed she's got. We'll see if we can't shake that infernal spy out there."

Travers paced the floor of the control room. He came back again and again to stare into the eyepiece of the radio-vision mechanism. The strange craft was still there, exactly the same distance away, as the delicate measuring lines on the eye lens showed. The unknown ovoid, glowing against the darkness of interplanetary space, took on a sinister aspect to Travers. He remembered what Zanton had said—that human life meant nothing to Hulgur.

An hour passed with no change in their relative positions. The point AX-2740 was only two terrestrial hours away. Paula came up and joined Travers and Wendel. She, too, looked into the eyepiece. She said little, but Travers could see that she was worried.

He went down into the keel compartment after a time and examined the torpedocopter, familiarizing himself with the controls.

It was a beautiful little machine of the most advanced type, with a gravity-regulator box, as compact and deli-

cate as a watch. The ray gun was almost concealed in the streamlined hood so as to add as little as possible to their resistance. The two seats for Paula and himself were deeply cushioned and comfortable.

Ordinarily, it would have been a pleasure to operate such a craft, but now Travers was speculating only on its efficiency. He knew that, deadly as it was, the small-calibre automatic ray gun would be as useless as a toy pistol, when pitted against the big weapons carried on a full-sized space ship. It would be false security to depend on it. Their only chance of reaching Oberon safely in the torpedocopter would be through strategy.

A cold sweat broke out on his forehead when he considered the responsibility that rested on his shoulders. He was not only to guard and pilot the most charming girl he had ever met, but he was an important link in the chain of events that might save or destroy vast numbers of the human race.

He went to the control cabin again as the hour for their take-off approached. Wendel looked at him soberly. "She's still hanging onto our tail, sir," he said.

Travers stared at his watch, then nodded.

"Now's the time to see if we can't outdistance them," he said. "Full speed ahead, Wendel."

The veteran navigating officer slowly slid the barium control lever on the gravity box forward to the quadrant stop. The only indication of their increased speed was a vaguely sensed pulsation through the whole metal body of the ship. But Travers knew that they had jumped ahead five hundred miles in the space of a second.

He went to the radio-vision eyepiece again, hoping that the strange ship had shrunk to some extent. Then he muttered fiercely. It, too, had speeded up, proving that Hulgur had held power in reserve all the time.

He watched anxiously as they approached AX-2740. The great sphere of Uranus was visible now off to their left. The four satellites looked like golden fruit floating in space. Yet still the strange ship kept pace with them.

Travers felt sure now that Hulgur had them under observation in a radio-vision device that might even detect the fishlike form of the torpedocopter dropping from its tube.

He looked at his watch once more. His face was as bleak as a piece of granite when he turned back to Wendel.

"There's only one thing we can do," he said. "Turn on the G valve, Wendel. We'll take off in a dust screen."

Wendel's expert hand instantly responded. He touched a small valve at the extreme left of the complex instrument board. There came a hissing sound. Travers bent over the radio-vision eyepiece and saw the strange ship suddenly disappear from sight behind a cloud of dancing, whirling phosphorescent particles.

Their own craft had emitted millions of atoms charged with alpha rays. It had concealed itself like a giant squid throwing out a trail of dark liquid to hide it from its enemies. Travers knew that Hulgur couldn't see their outline now. It would be a miracle if he saw the torpedocopter speed out of that dust cloud which was already a hundred miles in circumference. And yet Travers had his misgivings. The cloud of alpha charged particles was a dead giveaway. It told that they had cause for wishing to remain hidden.

But there was no time for worry. The big moment was at hand. He spoke quietly to Paula. Wendel heard and drew himself up to a smart salute.

"Good luck to both of you," he said. "Give my regards to your brother, Miss Zanton."

A look of fear came into Paula's eyes for a moment. Then she left the control room, walking by Travers' side down to the keel compartment of the big ship.

There was a brave smile on her lips as she stepped into the tiny interior of the torpedocopter.

Travers saw that she was comfortable, then got in himself and closed the circular airtight door. He watched his dials for a moment to see that the oxygen mixture they were breathing was just right. Then he put his hand on the control bar and touched the button release.

There came the sharp hiss of compressed air, and their tiny craft shot out into space—shot through the whirling cyclone of alpha particles surrounding the big ship.

For a full two seconds they plunged madly on through the blinding hail of atomic dust, to burst at last into the clarity of space with a million stars gleaming and the great sphere of Uranus glowing near by like a jewel.

Travers stared back through the small ports and saw the dust cloud surrounding their own mother ship receding till it was no more than a speck. They were out alone in the great sea of ether.

But his delicate man-made instruments enabled him to steer as well and accurately as did ancient navigators on some terrestrial ocean of the dim past.

The yellowish disk of Oberon crawled across his finder screen and came into the exact center between the crossed hair lines. Travers breathed freely again as he held the control bar steady.

Then he felt a hand on his shoulder and heard Paula's voice speaking in his ear.

"Look—what's that out there?" she said.

Travers turned his head and stared in the direction she was pointing. "A chill ran up his back. He was oppressed with a sudden sense of catastrophe."

A tiny, glowing pinpoint of light showed off to their left. It was coming nearer and nearer. Another ship!

The one which had followed them all the way had been only a blind then—only one of a pair of spy craft. And this one, flying parallel with them all the time, had seen the torpedocopter emerge from the screen of atomic dust.

Travers' fingers whitened on the control bar as his muscles tensed. And at that precise moment a thing happened which made him cry out. The disk of Oberon on the screen before him began to spiral around. It moved toward the lower corner of the screen, and the ghastly truth dawned on him that their space craft was out of control.

At first he thought there was something radically wrong with the internal mechanism. But, as the nose of the machine turned slowly, he understood.

A pinpoint of light replaced the sphere of Oberon on the finder screen. It moved toward the center. Hulgur was drawing them off their course, was forcing them toward his own ship by means of some sort of hellish magnetic ray. They were virtually his prisoners already.

CHAPTER III.

Among the Apemen

TRAVERS fought the controls every foot of the way. He struggled till beads of perspiration gathered on his forehead and his eyes ached from watching the dancing pinpoint of light on the finder screen.

He tuned in on gravitational cross-currents from Uranus, Neptune and Jupiter, and he managed once

to change his direction until Hulgur's ship showed down in the lower left corner of the screen. But the power unit of the torpedocopter was not equal to the task of combating the terrible pull of the magnetic ray.

Steadily, relentlessly, the nose swung round again and the image of Hulgur's ship grew larger and larger. It increased in size till it burned in the center of the screen like the baleful eye of some cyclopan giant.

Travers turned and looked at Paula. Her face was white and set; yet she said nothing, gave him no advice and expressed no fear. She seemed to trust implicitly to his operation of the tiny craft.

But the force of the magnetic ray increased until the controls froze in Travers' hands. The pull was so great that they sped toward Hulgur's ship until it seemed that they would be dashed to pieces against its metal sides.

At the last minute, however, the power of the ray decreased. They floated up to the cruiser and touched it with a clang of metal.

Instantly a huge connecting arm reached out and clamped down upon them. It was followed by a flexible tube seven feet in diameter, composed of hundreds of interlocking concentric sections. The mouth of this pressed against the circular exit of the torpedo type craft. It was all done with uncompromising quickness and precision.

Travers' face was pale with fury. His tense fingers went instinctively toward the ray gun at his hip. But Paula touched his arm.

"Don't, she said. 'It's no use. Hulgur has all the advantage on his side.'"

A voice reached them from outside, substantiating what she had said. The words were spoken in Ranko, the universal language of the interplanetary traffic, but they had a thick unhuman quality.

"Will you come aboard quietly—or shall we fill you with gas?"

"We surrender," said Travers hoarsely. "What do you want?"

He unsnapped the exit cover and blinked at the bright lights inside the boarding tube. Two members of Hulgur's crew were there. Paula gave a gasp of horror when she saw them. They were large, broad-shouldered, brutish-looking men, of a type far different from the inhabitants of earth. Their legs were bowed, their skin matted with coarse hair, and their faces more like those of anthropoid apes than of men. Yet they had enormously high foreheads such as no ape ever possessed.

Travers knew that they were of a paradoical breed whose mental development paralleled that of Homo Sapiens, but whose instincts and emotions were cruelly barbarous and anti-social.

One held a ray-gun in his hand. The other had a wicked looking drilling device with a gas outlet at its end. Hulgur carried on his interplanetary commerce with criminal weapons.

Travers could have killed both of these beast-men; but he saw the folly of it. Others would swarm into the tube. Paula's life would be endangered in the mêlée.

"Hands up," said the one with the ray gun gruffly. Travers obeyed while the creature reached forward and disarmed him. "Now come into the ship. Hulgur demands your presence."

Travers followed Paula through the boarding tube and into the body of the huge space-cruiser. It was ostensibly a cargo ship; but he saw that its interior was largely given over to warlike devices.

They were led along a corridor to a cabin aft. An

anthropoid man with a heavy, bestial face sat at a table. He did not rise at Paula's entrance. Instead, his ape-like eyes, shadowed by unhealthy looking pouches of loose flesh, fixed themselves upon her covetously. He lifted one hand and scratched the top of his head in a peculiarly simian gesture.

"Hulgur," said Paula furiously. "You've gone too far for once. The interplanetary code carries penalties for such acts as this."

Hulgur's lips came back from his long teeth. He chuckled until his flabby cheeks shook like jelly. He did not take his eyes off her.

"I am a sportsman," he said in a rumbling, guttural voice. "For high stakes I am willing to take long chances. A lovely creature like you, for instance, is a prize worth having—even if I get nothing else."

Travers, pale and trembling, stepped forward. He glared into the apeman's obese, repulsive face.

"You are a fool as well as a criminal, Hulgur. You can't get away with this. The patrol ships will blast you to pieces."

The sky pirate's eyes swiveled toward him for a moment. They were filled with cold ferocity and disapproval.

"We don't need this young man with us," he said. "He's nothing but the woman's pilot. Destroy the control box on his torpedo ship and put him back into it. He'll have a good time drifting through space until he dies of starvation."

Two of Hulgur's crew stepped up to carry out his order; but Paula spoke coolly.

"You're wrong, Hulgur. Travers is an expert scientific worker. He was on his way to help my brother when you forced us off our course."

Hulgur laughed again.

"That's a good story, pretty one. If it's true, he can stay with us. If you are lying, we can dispose of him later."

"And what are you going to do with me?" asked the girl with a tremor in her voice.

"You and I are destined to become better acquainted," said Hulgur. "I have long hoped to find an earth woman worthy to enter the seraglio of the great Hulgur. The fantastic emotions of your type amuse me. But right now I am more interested in what your brother is doing. You were headed for Oberon. We'll continue there and you can introduce me to him. I want to talk business with him—and business always comes before pleasure in this mercenary age."

Paula's eyes snapped. Her voice was coldly scornful. "You know I'll never introduce you to my brother," she said. "No matter what you do to me. His work is more important than my life."

Hulgur clapped his huge paws together delightedly. "You show excellent spirit," he said. "It is just what I expected. But your brother will have something to say on the matter; he may be more 'human,' as you call it."

His tone suddenly became hard. He turned and snapped orders to the loathsome crew around him.

"Bring in the radio-vision transmission outfit and the ethergraph," he said. "Get in touch with OBX-922."

Travers saw that this horrible ape-like creature's skull housed as fine a scientific brain as any on earth. It made the whole thing seem like a ghastly nightmare.

There came the sharp buzz of machinery in motion. Men entered carrying a box-like object with coils of flexible cable trailing from it. They snapped the ends of the cable into sockets along the cabin walls.

A voice suddenly sounded from an overhead speaker. "This is OBX-922. What do you want, and who are you?"

The apeman at the table took up his desk microphone. "Hulgar speaking. We have intercepted Paula Zanton on her way to your research station. I have her on my ship now. I demand an interview with her brother."

"He is ill," came the answer.

"Not too ill to see me. Let me speak to him."

A moment of silence followed, then a hoarse, worried voice sounded.

"Hulgar, what's this? What did you say?"

"That's Harvey!" cried Paula hysterically. "Don't answer, Harvey—it's a trap." She tried to run forward and snatch the microphone from Hulgar's hand, realizing that it was a directional instrument and that her warning had not reached her brother's ears. But two of the apemen caught her.

Hulgar laughed and repeated his message.

"I don't believe you have my sister," came Harvey Zanton's excited voice. "You're a criminal and a liar, Hulgar. I'll see that you're exiled to the outer frontiers for this."

"All right—look!" Hulgar's tone was coldly cruel.

He leaped from his table desk, pointed the directional microphone toward Paula, and snapped his fingers in some sort of signal. The cry of warning that rose to her lips was stifled in a shrill scream of pain as the two apemen holding her twisted her arms savagely. At the same instant another one of Hulgar's creatures pointed the lens of the radio-vision instrument at her. The scene was reproduced thousands of miles away in the sickroom where her brother was.

Young Zanton's voice sounded a moment later. It had a broken, beaten note.

"All right, Hulgar. I'll see you if you come alone. But if you hurt Paula any more, I'll dedicate the rest of my life to running you down and killing you."

"Switch off communication at once," ordered Hulgar. "Head for Oberon. We land there within the hour."

He was grinning triumphantly, and leering at Paula like a malicious satyr.

"You coward," hissed Paula. "You don't dare attack the station. You're afraid of their ray defenses."

"That isn't entirely correct," said Hulgar. "I have no doubt I could force them into submission; but in doing so, I might destroy your brother's excellent work. It's that I'm interested in. Therefore I'm going alone to interview him. I expect to find him in a very reasonable mood. He'll be worrying about his little sister's safety. You know I have a bad reputation with women."

"And you'll bargain with him?"

"Yes—in my own way," said Hulgar softly.

A look of terror came into Paula's face. She swayed for a moment as though she were going to faint. Travers knew that she suspected treachery.

Then he saw Hulgar reach out and grab the girl, taking advantage of her momentary collapse, and press a kiss on her provocative lips. The apeman was grinning wantonly.

A mist of red seemed to drop before Travers' eyes then. A surge of such fierce hatred swept over him that he threw caution to the winds. In a sudden burst of energy he tore loose from the two men holding him and leaped forward. He was intent on one thing only—to crash his knotted fist against Hulgar's gross, simian face.

There was a sharp crack as his knuckles flattened flabby flesh against bone. For an instant he saw the startled expression in Hulgar's eyes, as his head snapped sidewise under the terrific impact of the blow.

Then something struck Travers from behind with

a force that nearly broke his neck. He had a sensation of snipping over and over and sinking into a quicksand of darkness. All thought and feeling left him and he passed into a void of unconsciousness as deep as that of the space through which the ship was traveling.

CHAPTER IV.

Green Menace

WHEN Travers awoke, there was a roaring sound in his ears and his body was bathed in sweat.

At first he thought both phenomena were caused by the blow on the head he had received. Then he grasped their true significance. External pressure had heated up the cruiser's hull, making the temperature rise within. The noise was wind howling outside, augmented by the sound of laboring machinery. The space ship had entered Oberon's atmosphere.

The fact that he could hear the ship's mechanism so plainly made Travers suddenly alert. He discovered he was not tied, and got up. Close to his eyes was what appeared to be the small ventilator grating of a door. He stooped and looked through this.

Then he saw that he was in a small closet just off the cruiser's power room.

The huge gravity power units were suddenly shut off. There came the high, complaining whine of an auxiliary atomic turbine. This meant that the cruiser had penetrated far into the satellite's atmosphere and was now reconnoitering at less than one hundredth its former speed.

It meant that Hulgar would soon be carrying out whatever treacherous thing it was, which he planned against Paula and her brother. It meant that in a short time he would be master of all humanity.

Travers felt himself trembling with an emotion more powerful than any he had ever known. It was a mixture of anger, hurt pride, and a great fear that it was too late to save the universe from the dictatorship of this gross ape-like creature. The fate awaiting Paula was almost too sickening to speculate upon. That she would become Hulgar's plaything, until he tired of her, there could be little doubt.

Travers pressed against the door, and found, as he had expected, that it was locked. But it seemed to be frailty built, not intended for use on a prison room. Hulgar must have thought so little of his prisoner's strength and initiative, that he had let them stick him in this metal closet among the greasy rags and old oil cans. Travers ground his teeth in sudden fury.

Then he began groping in the semi-darkness until his fingers closed over metal. It was a chisel-like tool of some sort.

He stuck the end of this forcibly in between the frame and the edge of the door near the lock. Then, believing that the noise of the turbine would drown whatever sounds he might make, he pushed with all his strength against the door and pulled back on the handle of the tool. He heard the sharp snap of the breaking lock as the door flew open.

The back of the man-ape operating the turbine was turned. With no one watching him, Travers was able to slip out into the corridor.

Throwing personal safety to the winds, he made his way back toward the section where he believed Hulgar's cabin to be. His face was as bleak as granite. He still clutched the chisel-like tool. The crew must be at their various stations, now that a landing was soon to be made. This would account for the emptiness of the corridors. He wondered where Paula was.

Then he saw a strip of light in front of him which did not come from the tubular illuminating system overhead. It issued from the crack of a door standing ajar.

Travers' movements became as cautions as those of a stalking panther. He seemed to freeze in his tracks when he had come near enough to the door to look in. The room was the ship's laboratory.

Hulgar was there and another man-ape—a wizened, gnome-like creature, with a neckless head resting directly on narrow shoulders. He wore thick-lensed glasses, which gave his eyes a monstrous appearance. His face was as simian and loathsomely evil as Hulgar's own.

Before them on a small enameled table was several glass vials and syringes. Hulgar had the sleeve of one arm rolled up. As Travers watched, the wizened man-ape lifted a delicate hypodermic syringe and thrust its needle-point into Hulgar's hairy flesh. He pressed the plunger home.

Was the sky-pilot a drug addict, Travers wondered? If so, he would surely use some method more modern than this. The needle-syringe as a medium for administering drugs was practically obsolete, though it was still used for serum and vaccine injections. Perhaps Hulgar feared some sort of infection on this little-known satellite.

But the actions of the two beings in the room made Travers wonder still more. He stared fascinated while the wizened gnome laid down the syringe, walked to a cabinet standing against the wall, and took out a square metal box. He placed it on the table, reached in with one claw-like hand, and drew out a black cylinder about five inches long. This he held up for Hulgar's inspection, while his lips moved like a professor's in a lecture room.

Travers could hear little of what was being said; but he saw the uneasy look on Hulgar's flabby face. The man-ape reached out and took the cylinder. The grin that spread his thick lips seemed like an assumed one with an undercurrent of fear behind it.

Then they both turned and came toward the door where Travers stood. He backed away, but not before he had heard a snatch of their conversation more clearly.

"Better than lethal gas," the wizened ape-man was saying. "You will have no trouble leaving it. When the fools learn of its existence, it will be too late. And have no fears if any accident should occur. The injection has made you immune. There will be only the discomfort."

Travers started to raise his wrench with the desperate intention of attacking Hulgar as he came through the door. But at that instant there was a movement at the far end of the corridor. A member of the ship's crew was approaching. Travers ducked into a branch corridor. He could take no chance now of being caught again—not until he had learned the secret of that black tube in Hulgar's hand and discovered for what devilish purpose it was meant.

When Hulgar and the member of the crew had both disappeared, Travers went back to the door of the laboratory room. The gnome-like ape-man was still inside. Without hesitation Travers entered.

The wizened one whirled. When he saw Travers, his hand reached toward a sharp-pointed pair of scissors lying on the table. He brought them up like a weapon. There was a snarl on his lips.

But Travers was too quick. He battered them from the creature's hand and knocked him down with a single blow. The ape-man crumpled into a corner. Travers approached the black metal box cautiously.

He lifted the lid and saw two other cylinders like the one Hulgar had taken.

He picked one of them up and examined it. There was a screw cap at one end with a hole to one side of the center, like that of a closed pepper can. The hole could obviously be opened by turning the screw cap.

As he held the cylinder close to his face, Travers became aware of a faint noise inside. He put the tube to his ear, and could hear the sound plainly. It was a soft rustling, as though myriads of tiny feet were moving restlessly over the inner surface of the tube. His fingers toyed experimentally with the screw cap, while an inner sense warned him that he was in the shadow of some ghastly danger.

Then a choking voice spoke from the floor. The wizened man had regained his senses and was staring up at Travers with horror-filled eyes.

"Don't open it," he said hoarsely. "Tell me what it is or I will," answered Travers. "Quick—or I'll turn the cap." His fingers moved as though to carry out the threat.

The ape-man on the floor gave a squeak like a terrified rat.

"Fool," he said, "it is filled with Mortifer beetles—thousands of them. One bite and you are dead, with their vile eggs hatching in your flesh. If you open the hole they will bore through the membrane at the end in less than two minutes and kill us all."

Travers understood now. Mortifer beetles came from the equatorial jungles of Venus. He had heard of them before, heard that their ferocity in attacking human beings was only equaled by the deadliness of the poison they carried. Hardly larger than the head of a pin, each secreted an amount of venom equal to the virus of a million pneumonia bacilli. He understood, too, the awfulness of Hulgar's plan, why he wanted to interview Harvey Zanton.

He stared down at the tube in his hand as though hypnotized, thinking of the havoc that this small cylinder could cause.

A movement glimpsed from the corner of his eye aroused him from his unpleasant reverie. There was a flash of sharp metal through the air, a snarl of bared teeth. Hulgar's wizened aid had taken advantage of Travers' momentary preoccupation to launch another murderous attack.

The ape-man had regained the scissors. Travers moved just in time.

His face showed no emotion now. He was filled with a cold determination to destroy this gnomelike creature, who dealt in the deadliest of poisons and who had no more right to live than had a vicious reptile.

His fist swung up for the second time. The inhuman monster struck out savagely. But Travers' blow was quicker. It caught Hulgar's aid on the side of his simian head, spinning him off his feet. He crashed against the metal wall of the room and there was a sound like a breaking egg as his skull crunched against the unyielding steel. Travers stared down at him for a moment, then slipped the tube of Mortifer beetles into his pocket and turned toward the enameled table.

The syringe that the evil technician had used on Hulgar was still there. But it was partially empty now. There were several bottles of colorless liquid on the table top, yet Travers couldn't be sure which was the right one. A vague plan was forming in his mind; but he had to think of Paula. Her safety must be assured first of all.

He spent some moments trying to ascertain which bottle corresponded to the anti-venin in the syringe. Without a careful laboratory analysis it seemed almost impossible to tell.

Finally he took a chance and filled the syringe up from one of the bottles which was partially filled; but his former plan now seemed too risky to undertake.

He slipped the syringe into his pocket, then went to the door of the corridor and stuck his head out. There was no one in sight; but the sound of the distant atomic turbine had suddenly changed. Its shrill whine had increased to an even higher pitch. Travers recognized it as the note made when such a power unit is pulling sharply against gravitational force. The cruiser was landing.

This was verified a moment later by the sudden vibration which shook the whole ship followed by a slight jarring shock. Then there was silence except for the movement of feet along the metal corridors.

Travers crept out of the laboratory door and moved along the corridor. If he could only locate Paula!

But he heard the sound of approaching footsteps. He was forced to duck into the shadow of a metal bracing stanchion. To be caught now would rob him of his only possible chance to outwit Hulgur.

He spent five minutes playing hide and seek along the corridors before he realized the hopelessness of his idea of locating Paula. She might be locked in any one of a hundred rooms on this huge cruiser. Even if he found her prison chamber, what chance had he of getting her out?

Then came the thought of that greater cause he was serving, the cause of humanity itself against the bestial Hulgur, would-be dictator of the Universe. He must warn Harvey Zanton against Hulgur's demoniac plan. A wild hope arose within him that this might still be possible.

He crept forward cautiously, straight toward the center of the cruiser where the cargo hatches were, until he saw light streaming through an open port. It was the daylight of Oberon, and he got a glimpse of sunshine and thick, green vegetation beyond.

But he also heard the sound of voices. Members of the crew were outside, sunning themselves after the long trip. He looked out and saw them squatting on their heels in a semicircle close to the hatchways. It would be impossible to get by their spitting ray guns.

Travers turned quickly and walked the breadth of the ship. He approached the closed ports on the opposite side. No one was in sight here. With swift, sure fingers he opened one of the ports and slipped out. The cruiser was now between him and the crew. He moved along its side toward the bow and saw in the distance, above the green of the thick forest, the tops of several domelike buildings—the Zanton Experimental Station.

When he had walked cautiously to the bow, he made out a flat, even roadway leading from the landing space to the buildings. A hundred yards along it was a figure—Hulgur, carrying the deadly Mortifier beetles, and on his way to interview young Zanton.

There was only one thought in Travers' mind now—to overtake the man before his terrible plan could be put into effect. But he knew that Hulgur was armed. To run along the open road after him would be fatal. He would be seen by both Hulgur and his crew and would be pierced by a death ray before he had gone fifty feet. The only other way was to run through the forest.

Travers did this at once, gliding into the thick canopy of leaves. Then he struck out parallel with the road and ran as he had never run before—ran until his breath came in gasps and his lungs pained him in Oberon's humid air.

The trunks of trees seemed to come toward him at express-train speed. He dodged in and out and kept

on, knowing that he would soon be ahead of Hulgur. When he caught up with the ape-man, he planned a stealthy maneuver toward the edge of the road where he could lie in wait with his wrench.

The vegetation around him was strange; foliage of grotesque shape, odd-looking cork-like bark on the trees, queer plants and flowers under foot. But the ground was even and firm. He had no trouble in his desperate race to overtake Hulgur—not until some sort of growth caught his toe and suddenly tripped him. He lay for an instant gasping for breath, then started to pick himself up.

But he discovered that something had hold of one foot. He looked down. The green tendril of a plant had become twisted around his ankle. He reached out to free himself; but, to his amazement, another green, twining creeper curled itself around his arm.

He twisted his torso erect then, a sudden fear dilating his eyes. All around him he saw more snake-like tendrils pointing in his direction. Those farthest away were bending and twisting like serpents. The nearest ones were fastening themselves upon his legs, curling over and around, reaching hungrily for the upper part of his body.

The ghastly realization dawned upon him that he had come in contact with some sort of horrible man-eating plant, that in a minute or two more he would be hopelessly trapped like a small animal in a snare.

CHAPTER V.

Hulgur's Handiwork

HE began tugging till the veins in his forehead stood out. He tried to wrench his right arm free, at the same time holding his left high, so that the half-dozen sinuous creepers reaching for it would have no chance to get a grip.

But the tendrils of this rapacious plant were composed of tough, elastic fiber. They possessed prehensile nerves and something more—the ability to sense the presence of their prey even at a distance. He had fallen directly into the center of a circular bed of them. He could not doubt the strange sixth sense they had, when he saw the sea of waving tendrils on all sides of him.

The creepers around his left arm stretched, but would not give up their grip. When he clutched at them involuntarily with his left hand, he narrowly missed having that caught, too.

He could hear an uncanny, horrible rustling whisper all around him as the plants moved and strained on their stems. They must have been in repose when he stumbled into them. Now they were alert and hungry for prey.

Sweat streamed from his face. He had all he could do to keep himself from shouting for help; though Hulgur and his men were the only ones who would hear, and if he fell into their hands his death would be just as inevitable.

In sheer panic he reached across with his left hand, made a dive into his right pocket and gripped the chisel-like tool. It was the only metal cutting edge he had, the only thing with which to attack the sinister plant save his bare hands.

And he knew now that he was being slowly drawn down as more and more creepers added their weight and strength to those which already had hold of him.

He struck down with the blade of the chisel, not with any clear notion that it would help him, but because he felt he must do something to fight back.

Then a sudden surge of hope flared up within him.

When the chisel came in contact with one of the tough green creepers, the tendrils relaxed and drew back, curling up as a sensitive plant on earth would do.

He began striking right and left with a fury that nearly exhausted him. A score of tendrils withdrew from him; but fresh ones took their places. At the end of ten minutes' battle, he was hardly better off than before.

Now he tried desperately to get control of his own emotions; to reason this thing out. An icy calm took the place of the rage and fear that had gripped him. He saved his strength and began raining blows on the creepers more systematically. At length he freed his right arm, but it was almost paralyzed, and he couldn't hold the chisel in his right hand for some minutes.

The slow battle continued. He struck at the creepers until he had cleared a circle around him and almost freed his legs. Those that he had hit were curled up. It seemed almost that they were nursing their wounds and glaring at him in sullen hatred.

But he knew they had no eyes. It was through a sense of odor or vibration that they were aware of his presence.

At last he stood up, trembling, and weak in the knees. Through a tangle of stems he now saw something white gleaming against the livid green of the verdure. The sweat broke out afresh on his forehead.

The white object was the bone of some large animal. He saw others, too, a femur and a grinning skull—the bones of creatures that had been slain and consumed by this bed of horrible, carnivorous vegetation.

The sight made him realize that he was still trapped, that now, with every plant in the bed alert and waiting for him, he might never escape. The clear floor of the forest fifty feet away looked like some promised land that he would never reach.

He lost all track of time as he slowly beat at the creepers in front of him. Once a feeling of dizziness overtook him. He almost fell, and knew that if he did so, his bones would be added to the others there among the poisonous-looking green stems.

Foot by foot he drove the tendrils back. His chisel bruised the pulpy fiber. Like the heads of long retracting snakes, the tendrils quivered and curled up. He had hopes of clearing a path to safety. And yet it could hardly be called that. The plants in his wake soon recovered. His victory over them was short-lived. But the cleared circle at least changed its location. It was creeping nearer to the edge of the bed.

The knowledge that he would now be too late to warn Harvey Zanton nearly made him loose his head again. He stepped too close to the edge of his safety circle and a long lithe creeper curled around his leg. He struck at the plant as he would have struck at the head of a cobra.

He never knew how he kept up that apparently endless battle. It seemed to him that he fought the green tendrils through an eternity of suffering and mental agony. It seemed that he would never break through. And when at last he did come to the end of the bed; when there were no more creepers before him, he collapsed in a dead faint of exhaustion on the forest floor.

The cool of the evening was upon him before he managed to pull his senses together. He staggered to his feet, feeling bruised and sore in every joint.

His teeth started chattering as he remembered the nightmare he had come through. His eyes looked sunken

and feverish. But he remembered Paula and the horrible plan of Hulgur. He groaned aloud when he realized he had been unable to stop it.

In a faltering, zig-zag course he moved toward the roadway. But he kept his eyes open for more of the man-eating plants. Once he saw a bed of them, awake now that night was almost here, their creepers erect and swaying like a nest of evil, green snakes.

Then he came to the road and moved along its edge till he was close to the buildings of the experimental station.

In a cleared space behind the station some men were working. He rubbed his eyes and came nearer before he saw they were Hulgur's bestial creatures. Then he saw what they were doing—filling up freshly dug graves. Even as he watched, a limp body was dumped unceremoniously into the last one. Hulgur's plan had worked. He had ruthlessly murdered young Zanton and his aids, and now his vicious crew were disposing of the victim's bodies.

Travers, standing there with hollow eyes and torn clothing, raised his fist and shook it at those unseeing, beast creatures. For a moment a feverish madness gripped him and he mumbled terrible curses. Then his lips ceased moving, his arms dropped to his sides. He waited, crouching and watching, until the gruesome task had been finished, and Hulgur's henchmen had moved back into the buildings of the research station.

He had no doubt that Hulgur had cleared the Mortifier beetles out with some sort of fumigating gas, or perhaps the beetles died after biting their victims and laying their eggs. He wasn't sure enough of their habits to say. He was only certain that they had served Hulgur's satanic purpose.

Ocboron's short day had fled. It was nearly night now. The shadows were deep, and Travers moved up to the wall of the first building. It was made of metal with a rounded domelike roof above. No doubt defensive ray guns were housed in this and others like it; but they had done Harvey Zanton and his men no good. The deadly insects had penetrated to every nook and cranny.

One door was open, showing that Hulgur felt safe now he had cleared the station of all human life.

Travers' weakened body trembled when he made the discovery. His eyes glowed as he entered the building, gripping the chisel in one scratched and bleeding hand.

There came the sound of footsteps. An aid of Hulgur's appeared, strolling along the entrance hallway. Travers pressed himself against the wall, close to a vertical pipe. His fingers tightened over the chisel handle till the fingernails went white.

At the last instant, Hulgur's ape-man saw him. He went for the ray gun holstered at his side. But it was too late. Travers was upon him. He brought the chisel down with a sickening crack. The man dropped, and his ray gun clattered harmlessly to the floor.

Travers snatched it up, his face working. He had one deadly weapon now. He was still at a pitiful disadvantage, still hopelessly outnumbered and certain to fail. But he had intended attacking Hulgur with the wrench alone. Now, with the ray gun in his hand, he felt as strong as ten men.

But caution was still necessary. He must find Hulgur, and find out what had become of Paula, whether she was here now, or still on the ship.

Sounds of revelry reached his ears. He walked forward until he came to a large central chamber. This was the station's recreation room, with musical instruments and books for the technicians, when they were off duty. Hulgur's men had found the depot's

store of medicinal liquor and were drinking, dancing and roaring out obscene songs. They were all brutal, ape-like creatures with unshaven faces, a hideous pirate crew, but there was none there more wicked and cunning than their leader.

Their drunken state made Travers suddenly half sick with fear. What of Paula? Was she with Hulgur now? Was he in the same orgiastic state as his men?

A sudden cry in a girl's voice answered his questions. It was followed by a piercing, terrified scream, which made the muscles in Travers' face contract and sent him forward on the run.

CHAPTER VI.

Winged Death

THE scream was repeated. It guided Travers' feet down a branch corridor with several doorways opening on either side. He heard exultant cries from the recreation room behind it. Hulgur's ape-men had heard the scream, too, and were expressing their approval of their leader's conduct.

There came sounds of a struggle close at hand now, then another cry, more frantic than either of the others. There was a sobbing note in it. Travers flung the door of the room open and stepped in.

What he saw was not unexpected; but it made him draw his breath in with a fierce hiss.

Hulgur had his arms around Paula Zanton. He was trying to press hungry kisses on her mouth, while she, with head thrown back and fists clenched, was striking at his ugly, leering face, now unwholesomely mottled from the liquor he had drunk.

Paula's own face had a marble whiteness, showing the strain she had been under. There was an inflamed spot on her right arm close to the wrist where Hulgur's fingers had dug into her.

They both turned as Travers entered.

Paula's eyes grew bright with sudden hope. Hulgur's neck muscles swelled in fury. His gaze darted to the ray gun in Travers' hand. Suddenly he pivoted the girl about and held her in front of him as a shield.

It was a craven act, but showed fox-like cunning. As he held the girl easily with one hairy arm, Hulgur's other hand now crept toward the weapon at his own side.

Travers stood as if frozen, unable to act even though he knew that a spitting death ray would strike him down in the space of a few seconds. His body was weak from the ordeal he'd been through. Little of Hulgur was visible behind Paula's figure, for the ape-man was crouching down behind his human shield. Travers dared not risk a shot that would strike Paula. Yet the thought came that she would be better off dead than left to this creature.

He was brought to his senses by the upward flash of Hulgur's ray gun. For the fraction of a second the gun was trained upon him. He braced his body for the death-dealing shock of the ray. Then, at the moment the gun flashed violet light, Paula's hand swept up. The gun was elevated. The hissing ray passed over Travers' left shoulder, searing through the panel of the door behind him.

Hulgur swore profanely. Paula squirmed and lurched to one side.

In that instant, faster than human eye could follow, Travers' right arm whipped out. He had been a dead shot in the service. He had never let his marksmanship deteriorate. And now his weapon hissed with deadly surety.

A spot of livid blue appeared over Hulgur's right

eyebrow. His eyes seemed to bulge from their sockets. His unshaven jaw sagged open. He looked as though someone had just told him a staggering bit of news.

Then his gun dropped from lifeless fingers and he crashed over backwards, falling against a table littered with bottles and specimen cases. The table tipped over, the glassware fell to the floor in a shattering cacophony of sound that echoed through the corridors outside.

The silence that followed lasted for a moment only.

The sounds of revelry from the central chamber had ceased abruptly. Now cries of excitement broke out. A stampede of running feet followed. Hulgur's murderous crew were coming to investigate the cause of the noise.

Travers' eyes swept the room for a possible place of concealment for Paula and himself, but could find none.

Then he rushed to the door. But the sea of bobbing, unkept heads was already in sight. There was a strong animal odor in the air. He and Paula were trapped, at the mercy of a band of inhuman devils, who would literally tear them to pieces when they found that their leader had been slain. Travers' ray gun would take toll of some; but with it he could not hope to stem the avalanche of destruction that was sweeping upon them.

He shut the door and shot home the small bolt that would hold for a few moments only. With his face white and set, he walked over to Paula.

She was smoothing the hair from her forehead with one shaking hand. Her eyes met his bravely. There was even a faint smile on her pale lips. For a moment her fingers rested on his arm and he felt a great surge of emotion within him—the old atavistic instinct to protect and cherish a weaker being of the opposite sex. He kissed her lightly on the lips once.

She too heard the approaching stampede of Hulgur's crew. She seemed to realize that there was nothing to be done, that she and Travers must go to their deaths together. But her voice did not falter when she spoke.

"It is for a good cause, Mark."

He thrilled at that. It was the first time she had used his given name.

He did not answer; but his tense fingers darted into his coat pocket. They came out holding a metal syringe. She looked at it incomprehendingly at first, then nodded.

"It is better than being torn to pieces by those devils," she said huskily.

He understood what she meant. She thought he was offering her a painless way of escape through self-destruction. He shook his head.

"Not that, Paula. This may mean life for us. I don't know—but I have a terrible plan—our only chance."

Still unaware of his meaning, she nevertheless held her arm out with the trustfulness of a child. He jabbed the needle into her soft flesh, pushing the plunger halfway down the barrel. He withdrew it and jabbed it into his own arm. He wasn't sure that this was the right vaccine.

Voices sounded directly outside the door now. Hulgur's name was shouted several times. The cries became more insistent. Then, when there was no answer, some member of the crew caught hold of the doorknob and shook it.

"Anything wrong, master?" asked a hoarse voice.

Travers did not answer. He shifted his ray gun to his left hand. His right hand plunged into his coat pocket.

(Continued on page 425)

Beyond the Veil of Time

By B. H. Barney

*C*ONJURERS in magic and performers of miracles really do some of the apparently impossible things they claim. What they don't divulge, however, is the fact that science plays a great part in their sleight-of-hand tricks. One well-known magician undertook on several occasions—and succeeded—to duplicate any phenomenon shown by mediums, spiritualists, et al. What a furore some magician could create in some backward country! And perhaps that is the way some savage religions are born.

Illustrated by MOREY

IN the lonely fastnesses of the Peruvian Andes came to me the first half-thought that grew into the idea which, in its own frightful fashion, threw wide the gates to the strange road that led to the mighty walls of Amnester, the Sacred City, and on to the unthinkable caverns of the Golden Mountain, within whose depths reared the terrible Altar of that dread mystery, "The Flame"; where sat the Lord of Life and the Lord of Death, enthroned among the Dreammakers, gazing ever into the fathomless pit where writhed the Serpent, guardian of the Altar.

First and foremost I am a mathematician, and I have always considered mathematics my serious life-work. However, like most of my ilk, I have a penchant for meddling in other branches of science. I take an active interest in botany and zoology, but my pet hobby is archæology. I have always been greatly interested in the storied Inca races of South America, and I have spent many enjoyable vacations exploring the ruins which stand eternal monument to the industry and engineering skill of this once great people, whose tragic decline forms a sad but attractive chapter in history.

While conducting some research work along the shores of Lake Titicaca, I had acquired information which set me out on a wild journey to discover a fabled ruined city in the Andean fastness to the north-east; ruins which, it was said, no white man had ever visited.

However, I had about reached the conclusion that I was the victim of a yarn intended to entertain credulous strangers, for with my Indian guides I had been prowling

along gloomy canyons and cloud-high passes for weeks with no other results than frostbite and incipient snow blindness. My decision had been to give orders to back-track for Cuzco the following day, when in a mountain-walled valley, little more than a fertile gorge, we discovered a tribe of mountain Trigullos.

The Trigullos are the direct descendants of the old Incas, and this tribe is, I believe, of the purest blood, untainted by inter-racial breeding.

I had arrived at an opportune time, for the natives were suffering from a malignant form of influenza that was killing them like flies. In my medical kit was a goodly supply of nitroglycerin, strychnine and morphine tablets, also a small quantity of camphorated oil in hermetically sealed tubes—preparations for just such an emergency, pneumonia and kindred diseases being a scourge in these regions. By hard work and judicious use of the drugs, I was able to check the epidemic and save a number of sufferers who had been given up for dying. By so doing, I earned the eternal gratitude of the tribe.

I soon found that in these Trigullos I had discovered a mine of interesting information in the form of curious legends and beliefs which, I felt, completely justified my arduous trip. I explained to my new friends the object of my journey into their country, but my mention of a ruined city was met by a singular silence. I had about given up hope of learning anything that might prove or disprove the legend and had decided to set out on the return journey. Seated in my



"For God's sake, what are those things?" demanded Dan, drawing his automatic and crouching tensely . . . Seated upon its back, and apparently guiding its movements, was a man . . .

shelter tent I was tabulating and checking notes when the flap was raised and, out of the silvered velvet of the night, strode Huayan, Chief of the tribe.

He was one of the finest appearing natives I have ever seen, more than six feet tall, straight as an arrow and graceful as a willow wand. He was fair for an Indian, being little darker than myself, bronzed as I am by years of outdoor life. Taking him all in all, I could easily believe his claim to direct descent from Manco Capac, first king of the Incas and founder of Cuzco. At my gesture of invitation, he seated himself and spoke.

"Oh, Father of Wisdom"—the title which the Trigullos had bestowed upon me—he began in Aimara, the sacred language of the priests. "Who, unlike the other men of your race, seeks not the Tears of the Sun (gold) but only knowledge, to you I will disclose that which has not been revealed since time upon time before Manco Capac tore from the granite breast of Father Andes the first stone of the Holy City. Tomorrow I will lead the way to the ruins of a city which was old when Manco Capac and Mamao Olo came down from the heavens to found the Inca race, which saw the Army of the Heavens (the stars) take their places one by one, and whose people have vanished long ages ago.

"Question me not, Father of Wisdom, rest and make ready: tomorrow I point the way."

CHAPTER II

The Whispering Gorge

IN the gray light of dawn we started, Huayan leading the way, a small body of picked warriors following.

My own guides he would not permit to accompany us, so they remained behind in the valley, and well content to do so, I think.

Just as we reached the summit of a peak, the golden rim of the sun pushed over the Andean wall and as the Indians stretched forth their arms and chanted a song of greeting, into my mind crept the reply of Atahualpa, last king of the Incas, to the Christian priest: "Your God was put to death by the men to whom he brought life; but mine still lives in the heavens and shines upon his children."

For three days we traversed such a region as it had never before been my bad luck to encounter; trails where it seemed possible to step off to the clouds; ways that hugged beetling precipices on one side with a sheer drop of thousands of feet on the other; sky-high passes where the rarefied air made physical effort exhausting, where glittering snow fields blinded and the winds ate into one's very bones.

On the fourth day we began to descend, and by noon we were at an elevation of less than seven thousand feet, threading our way through a gloomy canyon whose towering walls formed little more than a channel for a foaming stream that rushed onward with a surge and sweep of hissing black water. Between stream and wall was a path hewed in the living rock, a path barely wide enough for us to creep along like flies on a ledge.

"Patience," spoke Huayan in a low voice as I forged ahead to his side, "only a little farther."

A few hundred yards of scrambling and slipping, then around a bulging curve we crept out of the gloom of the gorge into a flood of sunshine.

At first I was blinded by the sudden radiance, then, as my eyes became accustomed to the glare, I paused in amazement. Truly here was enough to astonish any explorer.

We stood upon a flat stone platform roughly rectangular in shape, a hundred yards wide by twice that in length, the sides breaking off abruptly in jumbled

masses of stone, as if some convulsion of nature had flung this tiny plateau up from the surrounding level. In front, the descent was more gradual and a semblance of a trail led to the valley floor. This valley was walled by towering mountains and we eventually found that it was about ten miles in width by thirty in length. Park-like forests dotted it; the stream, which turned from the gorge at a sharp angle to dash foaming down the side of the platform, ran a silver ribbon set in banks of emerald. At the foot of the valley reared a mighty peak in lone and awful majesty, its rounded summit glittering with snow; and far down the valley, full twenty miles distant but seeming nearer in the clear air, were shadowy ruined walls. It was the fabled city which I had sought.

Beautiful and peaceful was this walled valley, but, as I gazed, a coldness crept about my heart, and I shivered in the warm sunlight. A nameless menace seemed to hang over this shut-in place, a vague threat, a misty, unseen presence of evil.

The deep voice of Huayan broke upon my reverie.

"Here, Father of Wisdom, was a city whose people lived and loved and died. Here wisdom grew and flourished, and with it evil, a dread and terrible evil that fed upon the souls of men, waxing ever greater, until one came from out the veil of time and vanquished it for a space; but the Presence still abides in this place, and none may encroach upon that Presence.

"Come, we will descend to the trees and make a fire so that we may eat, for the night is soon upon us. In the morning, we will leave this place, lest evil befall."

"But, Huayan," I expostulated, "I desire to examine those ruins."

"My friend," he replied, "I have spoken; the season of the storm is at hand and my people murmur. Soon the passes which we traveled will be blocked with snow, and this valley will be a place of death. Return with me on the morrow and when the sun of a new year warms the breast of Father Andes, come again and Huayan will guide you hither."

With this I was forced to be content.

One final episode of this eventful day impressed me greatly. We had reached the edge of the plateau when the rays of the setting sun struck full upon the summit of the great snow mountain which barred the far end of the valley. With magical suddenness the vast snow fields changed from pearly white to shimmering gold, a scene beautiful and awesome beyond description.

The effect on the Trigullos was remarkable. With the exception of Huayan, they prostrated themselves and lay motionless. The Chief drew himself up to the full of his stately height and began a strange wild chant in Aimara.

I had always prided myself in my knowledge of the sacred language, but this invocation left me groping in a maze of unfamiliar words; only dimly could I sense the meaning of the whole.

It was old—old with an ancientness that smote the listener with a vision of earth youngness, of newly-created peoples counting the stars as they blossomed in the black vault of the heavens, building and achieving in the light of newborn suns, dreaming dreams of youth, watching the fresh-turned leaves of eternity glow with the inscribed records of worlds just made. It was the anthem of a people groping in darkness but straining toward the light and finding it good.

That night we feasted on the flesh of a small deer that I bagged in the growth along the stream. We were sitting close to the warmth of the roaring fire, for there was a crisp chill in the air. In the velvet sky the great glowing stars seemed to brush the mountain summits and the valley glowed with a silvery radiance. Such wild and savage beauty I had never before seen

in all my wanderings, and my throat ached with the poignancy of it.

I did not sleep well, tired though I was; grotesque dreams haunted me and peopled the darkness with vague and terrible shapes. The threatening evil seemed to pierce the veil of unconsciousness and chill me with foreboding. Nor did my companions fare better, and we were early astir, although it was imperative to wait until well after sunrise before entering the black mouth of that eerily whispering gorge that was the gateway to this place.

While standing on the stone platform, watching the vague ruins emerge from the morning mists, there came to me the first faint glimmering of the idea which sent me back to civilization with a definitely formed plan for piercing the veil of mystery which hung mysteriously over these shadowy relics of a forgotten people.

CHAPTER III

"The Gypsy Trail"

BACK again in my laboratory I calculated, derived formulas and bumbled until my strange creation was complete.

In this age of radio nearly everyone has some knowledge of the theory of vibrations and have heard of the contention advanced by many scientists that the vibratory impulses of all sounds are registered indelibly, and, if the proper apparatus be assembled, could be called back in their original form.

I merely went a step farther and worked on the theory that all motion is recorded in like manner and can be recalled and reproduced in much the same manner as the moving picture is thrown upon the screen. I proved mathematically the contention to my own satisfaction and constructed a machine that I was confident would bring about the desired results.

It was natural to suppose that success could be best obtained where solt ite and little movement had been the rule for an extended period of time, so I considered the lonely, mountain-ringed valley, which had so interested me, an ideal locality for the experiment.

The sun was warming the mountains, when I again faced north-east from the mighty walls of Cuzeo. I was accompanied by an escort of native guides and a train of pack mules loaded with supplies for several months' stay in the mountains. They also carried the carefully packed parts of my invention.

Our first objective was Huayan's village, and with unerring instinct my guide led the way through the tangled maze of mountains, which we had traversed many months before. We were about a day's journey from the rendezvous and were seeking a suitable place to camp for the night when, as we scrambled down a steeply winding bit of trail, the tang of wood smoke stung our nostrils and to our ears came the sound of singing:

Back to the road again, again,
Out of a clear sea track
Follow the cross of the Gypsy Trail,
Over the world and back.

Now who on earth could be singing "The Gypsy Trail" in this wild solitude? And singing it in a cultured voice of uncommon depth and sweetness!

Around a bend in the trail we swung to where a little clump of woodland bordered a tinkling, crystal-clear stream. Close to this stream a fire burned brightly, and beside the fire a man was busy with frying pan and coffee pot. At the sound of our approach he quickly stood erect and I caught the lightning flicker of a hand to the big service automatic hung low on

his right thigh. A swiftly appraising glance, the hand dropped and a quizzical smile curved the lips and brightened the steady gray eyes.

"Come on to supper," he called in a hearty voice, "coffee's just boiled!"

There was real welcome in the invitation and that smile was infectious; so with a word of directions to my Indians to pitch camp nearby, I walked over to the fire.

"I am Dr. Richard Nelson," I introduced myself, "and I am heartily glad to meet up with a white man in these hills."

"Dr. Nelson!" he exclaimed, "not by any chance Dr. Nelson the mathematician and consulting engineer?"

"Well," I smiled, "I believe I have some slight reputation along those lines."

"By George, this is wonderful!" he cried, shaking my hand in a steely grip. "Your paper that was read before the last meeting of the Mathematical Society interested me greatly. But I'm forgetting myself. I am Dan Bradford, originally from Virginia, now from most anywhere, sometimes civil engineer, at present amateur gold hunter and seeker after the thing-that's-just-over-the-next-hilltop."

"Sit down, Doctor"—hauling out a rasher of bacon and busily slicing off strips—"you must eat supper with me while your men are pitching camp. This bacon is prime, there's johnny-cake baking under the ashes—you know we make *real* johnny-cake in Virginia—and the coffee is strong enough to walk away. I want to hear first-hand your explanation of that theory of groups."

So it was that I met Dan Bradford of Virginia—Dan Bradford with his voice of an angel, his soul of a leprechaun and his courage unafraid. One of those bright spirits that follow the dim trails with a smile for Fate, a laugh for Love, and a jest for the teeth of Death!

We talked until far into the night, and I realized a growing liking for this tuneless wanderer, who was as familiar with a hundred out-of-the-way places of the world as he was with the works of celebrated mathematicians.

"Finished putting in a bridge down in the valley a month ago," he stated laconically. "Decided I'd worked long enough for a spell and thought I'd try a little prospecting in these hills. They always did interest me; many's the time I've gazed up at these gray old fellows and wondered what was hidden behind them. And as the shadows would come creeping up the slopes at evening, seem's they'd whisper, 'Come and see! Come and see!' So here I am, on the trail to nowhere again."

"I was born in Virginia, took my degree at the University; built a few bridges and things in various parts of the world, did a little mining, served with the Escadrille and won my wings during the war, and came through without a scratch. Just turned thirty and haven't a thing in the world to worry about."

In turn I explained the object of my own mission and what I hoped to accomplish. He was enthusiastic, for the thing appealed to his romantic nature, and he expressed a decided belief in the feasibility of the project.

The upshot of the matter was that I invited him to join me. He accepted my invitation after only a moment's pondering.

"Strange how our preconceived ideas of people and things are shattered by actuality," he continued in a musing voice. "I've always pictured Dr. Nelson as a little wizened old fellow, who spent most of his time around mahogany-furnished consulting offices or poring over ponderous mathematical works. I certainly did

not expect to find him a black-bearded giant with the arms and shoulders of a prize fighter, and not much older than myself."

"Well, Dan," I laughed—he had insisted that I address him thus—"I do not generally wear the beard; it is a concession to frostbite and these infernal winds. I was an athlete during my college days, and ripping up old ruins in various inaccessible parts of the world does not tend to fatty degeneration—that may account for the arms. As I lack a couple of years of being forty, I am hardly due to be wizened for a while, at least."

Late the next evening, we reached the village and were warmly welcomed by the Trigullas, who are a friendly, hospitable people, although possessed of a dignity in their dealings with strangers that is often mistaken for coldness.

I presented Dan to Huayan who acknowledged the introduction with grave politeness; and when the bronzed Virginian and the stately leader stood face to face, I thought I had never before seen two finer appearing men.

In height they were identical; steady gray eyes gazed straight into piercing black; the dark mane of the chieftain was not more luxuriant than the clustered locks of the engineer, which curled over his finely shaped head like those of some old statue. The features of each were regular and clean cut.

The hand of the Indian swept up in a strange salute and he nodded gravely to me.

"You choose well, Father of Wisdom. Here is one worthy to wear the plumes of the caraqueques."

With difficulty I repressed an exclamation of astonishment: only a student of Inca customs and beliefs could appreciate the greatness of the compliment. For the caraqueques were those mystic birds which, say the Incas, were but two in all time and on all the earth, which appeared at the coronation of each new king and gave him two of their feathers to adorn his head-dress.

CHAPTER IV

The Face in the Flame

THE rays of the setting sun were making a golden glory of the snow fields on the mountain crest when we emerged from a final clump of woodland and paused a few hundred feet from the outer wall of the city.

Mighty, broken, gray with age, it towered more than fifty feet in height and full thirty in width, stretching across the valley as far as the eye could reach, a rampart of great squared blocks, sinister, menacing.

Ancient, ancient beyond belief was this stupendous creation of a vanished people. I have stood within the Pyramid at Gizeh and felt the impression of vast age exude and press upon me like a tangible force; but it was as nothing compared to that which hung over these frowning battlements. The dark eyes of Huayan burned like coals as he gazed upon the bleak surface glowing redly in the last rays of the sun, while Dan crooned softly one of his weird lyric legends, as was his wont when greatly moved by something.

The Indians had helped us to establish our camp and build a comfortable shack on the little stone platform by the mouth of the gorge; then they had departed with the mules, promising to return at the end of two months, leaving the three of us to ferret out the mysteries of this haunted place as best we could.

It was too late to attempt any exploration of the ruins that night, so we camped in the shadow of the wall. There was a chill about us that was not of the high altitudes. Into our hearts crept a coldness that the leaping flames of the fire could not drive out. The

shadowy, undefinable phantasm of evil hung over us as a presence and though we laughed at the suggestion, we could not cast it off.

The next morning we passed through the ancient gateway set in its broken cyclopean pillars and entered the silent streets. The stone flags rang beneath our feet, the echoes whispering eerily from mighty buttress and overhanging projections and running murmuringly along vast squared walls built with a mathematical precision and a massiveness that spoke volumes for the skill of the long dead engineers who planned and constructed them.

Old, old was the city, built on a scale of magnificence that dwarfed the spacious structures of the Incas; for plain it was, that this was no monument to the genius of the descendants of Manco Capac. The architecture was different, was far more beautiful: exquisite carvings graced the walls, murals of hunting scenes, of battles in which men rode huge, grotesque monsters. Great was my astonishment, upon examining these carvings more closely, to find an uncanny similarity between the sculptured creatures and the reconstructed likenesses of the prehistoric herbivorous dinosaur, the iguanodon. Here was mystery indeed. Had these ancient people a knowledge of geology that would compare favorably with that of the present age? And why had they placed figures of men astride those of creatures vanished from the earth before the advent of man? Perhaps the imagery of some weird religious belief; perhaps but the whim of a great artist, who was privileged to do as he pleased.

The gigantic proportions of the structures astounded us. Here were temples greater than the House of the Serpent in Cuzco; fortresses before which the tremendous Sacsay-Huaynam shrank to insignificance: on all sides were relics of departed grandeur in an iron-hard stone that had defied the ravages of time for untold ages.

In vain I looked for sculptured representation of the sun; this symbol, omnipresent throughout the cities of the Incas, was nowhere apparent.

Across the faces of many of the temples weaved strange carvings, grotesque figures as are found in the Javan pantheon, nightmare conceptions of evil. Graven on a broad, low slab between the stately columns of a colossal temple we found—*The Face*.

Strangely beautiful it was, a masterpiece in stone, and yet with a sinisterism that smote the heart as if it were something dread and unclean. A face emerging from a living flame. Emerging, but in some undefinable way incorporated, insomorphous with flame, and beautiful as flame is beautiful—a fearful, fascinating beauty.

I moved closer to better examine this wonderful example of the sculptor's art, and as I leaned forward, from the fretted surface of the slab reared a grisly, spotted shape. I heard Dan's cry of warning, and as I recoiled from the deadly menace, sensed that lightning flicker of his hand, that I had noted at the mountain camp. A streak of flame leaped from his side, a sharp report shattered the stillness and at my feet writhed the headless body of a short, thick snake with markings unlike those of any species with which I was familiar.

"A narrow escape, oh Wise One," spoke the deep voice of Huayan as he gazed at the twitching shape; "here was death in a dreadful form."

"How is it named, Huayan?" I queried. "I have never beheld its like."

"It is the Guardian Serpent of The Flame," he answered. Then, his eyes brooding, dream-filled: "Even thus, sayeth the legend, perished the evil of The Flame, stricken down in its might even while attempting further evil."

"Well," I said with feeling, "no matter how the thing

is named, I guess I owe my life to you, Dan. That was one of the finest shots I ever saw."

The engineer flushed at my words and waved a deprecatory hand.

"All luck, Doc, I had to take a chance, and things broke for us, that's all. I don't like snakes, anyway. Let's look around and see if there's any more of 'em."

We investigated closely, but unearthed no more of the reptiles, so, after examining the strange carving, we moved on.

Everywhere we found the beautiful symbol of evil, but were fortunate to encounter no more of the deadly guardians.

The next day we returned to the plateau, and for several weeks Dan and I labored diligently at assembling the machine, the Chief hunting and fishing to replenish the larder.

CHAPTER V

The Girl of the Luminous Curtain

FINALLY all was ready, and I decided, weather permitting, to make the attempt the following noon. A clear sky was essential, for I relied on sun-heat to furnish the required power for operating the machine.

Through an opening in the cabin porch roof rose a funnel-shaped pipe, set with carefully arranged reflectors and lenses which would gather the rays and concentrate them on the heat motors below. The outer end of the funnel was provided with a lever-operated slide which regulated the admittance of the rays and governed the activity of the machine.

The fateful day dawned clear and noon found the sun's rays pouring from a cloudless sky when I took my place beside the strange creation of shining wheels and drums with its flaring projector pointing toward the distant ruins that glowed redly in the sunlight.

That morning we had all taken part in an expedition to bag a mountain lion, whose lair Huayan had discovered the day before. Due to this fact we were wearing our cartridge belts, heavy service automatics and hunting knives, having neglected to remove them in our eagerness to take advantage of the directly overhead sun.

Thus, to an inconsequential bit of sport, we doubtlessly owed our lives during the amazing adventures that followed.

It was with some misgivings that I grasped the controlling lever as the sun neared the zenith. Forces had gone into the making of this thing that even I did not thoroughly understand, and I was not positive that I could control them once they were loosed. I had outlined the situation in its entirety the night before, and my companions were unanimous that the chance be taken. The Virginian with his carefree, devil-may-care nature was ready for anything, just so it promised excitement; while of late the Chief seemed to live in some rarefied atmosphere of "prophecy-to-be-fulfilled" and appeared positive that whatever happened must be for the best. So without further hesitation I pulled the lever, uncovering the aperture about half way. This would be sufficient, I judged, to admit light rays enough to generate the required power.

Slowly the glistening wheels and bell-shaped drums began to revolve. A faint hum became apparent, rapidly increasing in volume; not loud, but with a piercing, vibratory quality that seemed to eat into the very bones.

From the projector streamed a cloud of tiny, dancing particles: sunbeam motes they seemed to be, flashing, sparkling, ever increasing in number. They filled the

air, blotting out the valley, mountains and distant ruins. Came a faint sighing, a mournful whisper that shuddered about us, lifting and wafting over the deep, vibrating hum that was shaking the very earth. The cloud of light-particles shifted, trembled and receded, forming a vast polychromatic curtain stretched across the valley. Louder and louder grew the mournful sighing. The curtain brightened, shimmering tentacles of light played across its surface, coruscating spirals weaving back and forth, lambent tongues, flaring, writhing, scintillating with an unearthly radiance. Splendrous pools of ghostly luminosity, like unto curdled moonbeams, formed in the nitid depths and across them flickered mighty shadows vast as the wings of Israfil, which are so wide, say the Arabs, that the world can cower beneath them like a nestling. Floods of opalescence gushed forth, pulsing streams, swirling, coiling, spraying ruby and emerald drops of living fire.

A feeling of mighty exultation seized upon us, lifting, exalting. We were gods rushing amongst the stars, drenched in the light of new-born suns, hurtling creations through the immensities of interstellar space. The brain reeled from the effect of it. It was spiritual intoxication.

Brighter and brighter glowed the curtain, a vast sheet of lambent flame shot with intense rainbows of sparkling, pulsing light. Plumes of radiance raced across it, interlacing, weaving, flaring out in dazzling beams of varicolored lightning. The mournful sighing grew in volume, changed to a rushing roar. The luminous curtain blazed and flamed, grew, filled the heavens! Before it formed a vague whirling of shadows, rushing, rushing, streaming ever onward. It grew, the shrouding light-mists swept away and revealed it—a country of marl extending forever.

"What is it?" gasped Dan. "The primal whirl of the cosmos?"

"I don't know," I whispered, "but I do know we can't stand much more of this. I'll have to shut the thing off."

My brain was reeling as I spoke and my limbs shook as with palsy. I knew I could not keep a grip on consciousness much longer, and the others were in as bad shape. Dan's face was chalky white, and the pupils of his eyes were dilated enormously, while the Chief was clinging to a stanchion and looking more like a dead Trigullo than a live one.

"Just a minute longer, Doc," croaked Dan; Huayan nodded feeble agreement.

Across the face of the curtain began to weave vague, unnameable shapes. Ghostly edifices formed, dissipated and ceased to be. Figures dimly moved and were swallowed up. In the sparkling depths a shape formed, grew, brightened! The shrouding light-mists swept away and revealed the figure of a girl—a girl whose great black eyes were as gold-flecked pools of liquid light, whose hair was the misted night of the storm-cloud, whose lips were as red as the royal coral. From white, tenderly rounded breasts, to dainty high-arched feet she was swathed in a filmy, clinging robe that naively revealed the sweet curves of her body. Entwined in the shadowy masses of her hair was a wreath of blooms, white with the whiteness of moon-flame.

Beautiful, beautiful beyond words was that flower-like face framed in the swirling, opalescent flame.

On Dan's countenance was the look of one who after untold ages sees at last his heart's desire. Nor did it seem strange to me. This was as it should be, I vaguely thought.

The radiance wreathed about the figure, the glorious eyes grew dreamy, a smile curved the tender lips as the long, graceful hands fluttered upward. Then suddenly the eyes darkened and widened, a fleeting expres-

sion of terror filmed the exquisite features. The light-mists, pulsed, rolled and blotted out the vision.

The roar of the cosmos grew in volume, the vast reaches of the marl rushed past faster and faster, the soul-shaking hum deepened. Dan turned a ghastly face to me; a contortion of a smile twisted his lips—"Wasn't she a wonder, Doc? What scared her?"—and slumped gently forward on his face.

I glanced at Huayan. He was stretched flat on the rough floor, unconscious. Blindly, I reached for the lever; my groping fingers searched, faltered, closed upon it, and as my knees buckled under me—*pulled!*

Instantly the piercing hum rose to a scream; the roar of the cosmos filled all space and shook the worlds. The curtain writhed, shook, split asunder! An all-engulfing blaze of dazzling white light! A crash, the rending apart of creations! Vast rushing shadows! Blackness and oblivion.

CHAPTER VI

Across the Ages

I WAS uncomfortably warm, my head ached abominably, my eyes burned and smarted. What in the world had happened to me! This was not my bunk on which I lay. Returning memory. The luminous curtain? The machine? I had pulled the lever instead of pushing it. Must have blown the machine up. Dizzily I sat up, a wave of nausea sweeping over me. The vertigo quickly passed, and as my vision cleared I gaped in amazement.

Where was I? Gone was the shack, the machine, the plateau itself. I lay on the valley floor—or what it seemed should be the valley floor, although there was nothing in sight that in the least resembled the familiar scene on which my eyes had been accustomed to gaze for the past few weeks.

All about towered a monstrous vegetation like unto nothing I had ever seen before. I felt an amazement growing to something akin to awe: the vista was a *Fata Morgana* of plandom. A forest of fern walled me in—fern to the unheard of height of fifty feet! Spangled over the fronds were nets of blooms and cataraacts of blossoms strange in shape, pulsing, glowing, shining like jewels; a shattered rainbow cascaded in a torrent of fiery drops. I rubbed my aching head and stared, my brain reeling.

Behind me sounded a groan; my companions were regaining consciousness. Dizzily they sat up, felt of their aching heads and stared.

"Where—where are we?" muttered Dan. "Looks like Heaven; hot enough for the other place, though. What happened, Doc?"

"More than I can say," I answered, "I just woke up. Looks as if we had been transplanted to the land of the Jinn."

"Perhaps we've been unconscious or delirious for a long time and the Indians returned and carried us to the lowlands for some reason or other," he offered.

"No, that theory won't hold water; our clothes are not changed in any way. Why, even my wrist watch is still running, and it reads two o'clock—it was about twelve when we started the experiment. What do you think about it, Huayan?"

The Trigullo smiled his cryptic smile and shook his head.

"Well, let's make a move and investigate," exclaimed Dan, struggling to his feet. "Lord, I feel as if I had been pulled through a knot-hole!"

We hauled off our heavy coats and opened our shirts at the throat, for the air was hot and sultry, totally unlike the bracing climate of the high valley we had

known for the past weeks. I observed that the light which filtered through the shrouding vegetation held a faintly reddish tinge.

Over a carpet of living gems we strode—flowers of a dazzling, varicolored brilliance.

"Seems to me the cliff should lie this way," said Dan. "The ground slopes upward, too. Perhaps we can get up to where we can get a look at things: let's go this way."

He was right. As we proceeded, the fern growth thinned, and soon we caught a glimpse of the cliff gleaming dully through the fronds.

"Good Lord!" suddenly exclaimed the engineer, "Look at the sun!"

Dazedly we stopped and stared. Directly overhead, through a rift in the fronds, shone the great luminary: the sun, yet strangely unfamiliar. Larger it seemed and of a reddish hue, such as is given by smoke or haze. But we instinctively felt that this was not the redness of smoke nor haze; the air was crystal-clear. This ruddy tinge was of the orb itself. Dan threw his hands wide in an expressive gesture of helplessness. Words were useless.

To the base of the cliff the grade was sharp and we panted in the humid air as we clambered upward. In the shadow of the cliff we turned.

The growth obscured the valley, but far down it, towering to the rose-tinted heavens, was a mighty, truncated cone from whose summit rose a steady plume of dark smoke.

"Can that be Old Goldy?" gasped Dan.

"If it is, he has changed into a darn active volcano,"

I answered grimly. A solution of the mystery had gradually dawned on me—a solution so utterly preposterous that I hesitated to advance it. Instinctively I felt that Huayan knew; his bearing was of one who feels no surprise, only wonder at strange events.

"Well, Doctor, what's the answer?" queried Dan. "You're the man-o-wisdom of this outfit."

I took a long look at the distant, smoke-crowned peak before answering. Then with a deep breath I plunged in.

"There is only one solution I can give, Dan, and it will sound like the telling of a hashish dream. As I mentioned in the beginning, forces went into the making of that infernal machine that, for all my study, I did not understand. When I pulled the slide wide open instead of closing it, as I had intended, Heaven alone knows what powers I loosed.

"You know that time is the true fourth dimension upon which depends the other three: all matter has length, breadth and thickness, and in addition, something without which the other three could not exist—duration. Time is a dimension which exists just as truly as the others, although it is hard for us, unaccustomed to regard it as such, to picture time that way. We think of time as something transient, when in reality it is just as tangible and permanent as length or breadth. This is a strange place for such a dissertation, but I am trying to prepare you for my explanation. Now, if my definition of time is correct, the past and the future must exist in unison with what we term the present. Granting this statement to be correct, I have only one solution for our mystery. In some manner, we have been projected into the future or retrograded into the past, presumably the latter, as our experiment dealt with it."

Huayan nodded gravely, while Dan gave vent to a long whistle of amazement.

"Judas Priest!" he exclaimed; "then we may be alive a million years before we were born!"

"Something like that," I grinned.

For a moment the engineer looked grave, then he

gave a joyous laugh that resounded in the distance.

"This is better than I expected," he cried, a reckless light in his gray eyes. "There's no one left behind to mourn me, and from what you told me of your antecedents, Doctor, you are in a similar position. I understand that Huey, too, is a wifeless orphan. So why worry. We ought to find new things, or rather, old ones, and there should be plenty of excitement. Everything's lovely and the goose hangs high."

His gayety was infectious; I laughed outright, while the Chief smiled gravely, as was his wont when he was pleased. After all, what was there to be cast down about? Science was my god, my only love. If I never returned to our own time, there was no one to care. Already I was tingling with eagerness to examine the amazing plant life which rioted about us; and who knew what other wonders awaited our eyes. What greater good fortune could a scientist ask?

Dan was speaking again: "The most important thing right now, to my mind, is to get something to eat; I'm half starved!"

At this remark I too became conscious of an outrageous hunger, as well as an extremely disagreeable thirst.

"Let's take stock of what equipment we have and then get down into the growth and try to find the wherewithal for a square meal," I proposed.

A hurried inventory revealed in the matter of armament our automatic pistols, something over two hundred cartridges and a heavy hunting knife each. We each had a supply of tobacco, some matches, a few cigarette papers and a couple of pipes. Huayan discovered a small packet of salt in one of his pockets. In addition to his knife, Dan had slung to his belt a small guarded hatchet-axe which had proven its worth on so many occasions that he was seldom without it. I had a notebook and a fountain pen, while the engineer also possessed a pen, notebook and a couple of pencils. These things with the small pocket medical case I always carried were the extent of our equipment for this momentous journey.

"Why, we're rich!" exclaimed Dan. "Just think, if we hadn't been wearing our guns! Blessings on that tomat of yours, Huey, even if we didn't get a shot at him. Come on, boys, let's hit the jungle."

Without more ado we plunged into the monstrous fern growth, treading the varicolored carpet of flowers, while all about us swooped gorgeous butterflies and tiny, brilliant-plumaged birds.

I noticed that while all colors of flowers prevailed, white and yellow predominated, and white and yellow are the primal flower colors. Here was something which, combined with that strange reddish sun, hinted that we had been cast untold ages into the past. I pondered this matter as we walked along. What animal life we should encounter was problematical, but it might be of an extremely formidable nature. I remarked as much to my companions and we agreed that a close watch on our surroundings at all times was imperative.

We were suffering greatly from thirst and the sound of running water was most welcome to our ears after we had walked some distance from the cliff base. We were rapidly approaching the stream, when Dan, who was a little in advance, suddenly halted and held up his hand in a warning gesture. We crept cautiously forward in obedience to his beckoning and crouched beside him, peering through the screening fronds in amazement.

Directly in front of us was a clearing stretching to the banks of a small stream. Upon the grass and flowers, which carpeted this tiny glade, fed three creatures. Plainly they were deer, but such deer! Larger than the largest elk, they were snow white in color except

their tails, which were black. Two were does, while the third was a stately male with superb branching antlers. It was a wonderful and beautiful sight and for a long time we gazed, loath to spoil the picture.

"It's a shame to shoot them," whispered Dan, "but we've got to eat. Both together, Doc; we'll take the doe on the left."

At the sharp crack of the automatics, the great male and one of the does crashed madly through the growth in headlong flight, but the other leaped convulsively once and crumpled to earth.

Exultantly we ran to the slaughtered beast, and very soon a delectable haunch of venison was cooling in the surprisingly cold waters of the stream while three hungry adventurers gathered dried fern fronds for a fire.

The shadows were lengthening as we prepared our meal, and soon darkness fell with tropical suddenness. Never had I enjoyed a supper as I did this one; the journey across the ages, however it was accomplished, had left us famished and we did ample justice to the steaks of the unfortunate deer.

We cooked a quantity of the flesh after we had satisfied our appetites, for it was apparent that raw meat would not keep long in this climate, and we did not know when we would be fortunate enough to make another kill. Splashes in the stream from time to time denoted fish of some nature, which advanced hopes for a replenishment of our larder from this source if others failed.

CHAPTER VII

A Visitor

WE decided to divide the night into watches, for we did not know what dangers might not menace us in this land of vegetative monstrosities, that could produce such deer as the creature we had slain.

I elected to stand first trick and seated myself comfortably beside the fire which I replenished from time to time with stout chunks cut from the dried bases of the ferns. My companions flung themselves on beds of fronds and immediately slept the sleep of exhausted men.

The moonless night was silent save for occasional splashes in the stream and now and then a weird bird-cry from the depths of the growth.

I was dog-tired and it was with difficulty that I kept my eyes from closing as the minutes dragged slowly by. The events of the past twelve hours streamed through my mind in grotesque panorama and I found it impossible to think consecutively concerning them. What forces had I loosed when I pulled the slide wide open? How had we made the unbelievable transition across the gulf that separates the past from the present? Who and what was the girl who had appeared so weirdly upon the luminous curtain? Thinking on the sweet beauty of her and Dan's look as he gazed upon her loveliness, I hoped that we had been cast into the age in which she had her being. And why not? It must have been that particular period of time with which the machine had been dealing when the cataclysm had occurred. Perhaps we should find her after all. If we did, what would be our reception from the race that she represented?

Then again we may have been cast into some tremendously remote one, prior to man's appearance on the globe. In truth, what we had seen and experienced gravely suggested the probability of this: that fiery sun; the gigantic growth of fern; the great preponderance of primal colors in the flowers; the proportions

of the single specimen of animal life we had encountered—all led to the supposition that this was an era of earth youngness which antedated man and his works.

Well, we should soon know, if we found it possible to exist under the circumstances: science has held that man could not have survived on the globe during the earlier periods, when ferocious reptile and animal life roamed the face of the land and swam in the waters. But science was not considering man as the highly developed creature of the twentieth century. Between the ape-like thing with his stone axe and throwing stick, and ourselves, armed with powerful automatic pistols and keen knives, there was a tremendous gulf. Also, we possessed an ally of which primitive man doubtlessly knew nothing—fire—an additional safeguard on which we could count in times of peril.

One thing was certain, if we did manage to survive and sometime return to our own age—and I was not altogether hopeless of accomplishing the transition—if I were able to find some fundamentals with which to work—we would have participated in such an epic of adventure as had never been the fortune of man since time began. Stupendous!

My train of thought was rudely interrupted by a crashing in the fern growth. Instantly I was wide awake and crouched by the fire, ready pistol in hand. I could see nothing, but from the direction of the clearing edge came the shuffle of stealthy pads, as of some great animal attempting to move silently. Now I could hear breathing, a slow, steady pant, loud and sustained, denoting a monstrous organism. Some great creature was approaching.

Leaning over, I lightly touched my companions. At once they sat up, blinking in the firelight, grasping their weapons.

"What is it?" whispered Dan.

"Don't know yet," I answered. "Something's prowling around the camp; acts as if it might rush us. Are those eyes shining over there to the left? Wait a minute!"

Cautiously I gathered an armful of the light, dry fronds we used for bedding and cast it on the fire. Instantly the flames leaped high, and in the glare we caught a glimpse of a vast squat shape, a horrible warty, slobbering toad-muzzle and saucer-shaped, phosphorescent eyes. The reptilian scales of the thing glittered iridescently in the firelight and on the powerfully muscled forelegs gleamed long, sharp claws. With a gesture of indescribable menace it reared on its hind legs until it seemed to hang directly over us, glaring like a demon from the pit. Then, with a mighty snort it wheeled and crashed away into the darkness.

We drew long breaths and stared into each other's blanched faces. "Whew, but that was a beast!" exclaimed Dan. "What was it, Doc?"

"I can't say for sure, Dan, but I would judge it some type of carnivorous dinosaur, one of those mighty reptiles which science tells us peopled the earth during the Mesozoic and Tertiary periods, and which were the most terrible forms of life that ever existed on our globe.

"I guess that settles it," I continued, "we have evidently been shot back, Heaven alone knows how many million years, doubtlessly to a time long before man's appearance on the scene. That is, according to the contention of science that man could not have lived in conjunction with the enormous carnivorous life forms of the secondary period. It looks like we are in a position to prove or disprove the contention, for here is the dinosaur, and here are we to argue the thing out with him. We came out ahead in the first encounter, anyway.

"I very much doubt, though, that our guns will be of any use against the brutes; the life-centers of these creatures are very vague, largely located along the

ganglia of the spinal cord, to be precise, and bullets would probably not slay them quickly enough to prevent their doing damage. Fire and tall trees, if there are any, will be our best bets. There is one thing in our favor: they are practically brainless, no power of reasoning whatever, and we should be able to easily outwit them. What we must guard against is coming on them suddenly, or being caught without fire after dark."

"I certainly wish I had a rifle," growled Dan. "I believe I'd back my express against the beastie—he would have a good sporting chance, though.

"Well, I guess His Nibs has departed for parts unknown, so you chaps had better get some sleep. I'll finish my cigarette and stand guard the next trick. Go to bed, Doc."

In the morning, we discovered that the remainder of the deer's carcass had disappeared. Evidently our nocturnal visitor had carried it off with as much ease as a cat would a mouse. Fortunately we had placed the cooked meat near the fire; otherwise we would have been short on breakfast.

"Cave bears, sabretooth tigers, mastodons!" chortled Dan, slapping Huayan on the back. "What you say, old sobersides? Let's go hunting!"

CHAPTER VIII

The Man-ape

AFTER breakfast we set off down the valley, following the general direction of the stream, for we did not care to be far from water in this humid air; besides, there was the faint chance that we had fallen into the time of the people who built the city whose ruins were at the bottom of all this trouble.

The air was sweet with the perfume of flowers and quivered with bird cries, while butterflies, like bits of rainbow, fluttered from bloom to bloom. The heat was not the oppressive heat of the tropics of our own age and we thrilled with the zest of life. All about us towered the gigantic fern, slender pedicles, surmounted by fantastic spore cases shooting high over all. We were constantly discovering new wonders of plant life, and frequent pauses to examine these made progress slow. But, as Dan remarked, we had already proven that time did not mean much, so we proceeded leisurely.

After several hours of travel, the fern began to be supplanted by gigantic flowering trees. These forest giants towered hundreds of feet and were festooned with creepers and orchid-like arboreal plants. Soon the fern growth disappeared altogether and we were passing beneath wide-spreading boughs that swept low over our heads. The interlacing branches shut out the sun's rays and a sultry twilight enveloped everything. The birds had disappeared, but their cries floated eerily down from the vast heights of the upper growth, accentuating the hush that surrounded us. There was also a change in the flowers: the varicolored blooms had vanished; here were only the primal yellow and white blossoms.

We felt more secure here with easily accessible branches that would furnish a safe refuge from the giant reptiles, should we chance to suddenly run across a day prowling specimen; and it was due to this feeling of security that tragedy very nearly overtook us in these dim, cloistered aisles.

While amid the fern, we had kept together for mutual protection, but here we spread out more, each examining that which happened to attract his interest. I had lagged quite a little ways behind and was stooping over a curious specimen of algae when I heard a slight rustling in the growth above. Instinctively I

straightened, just as two great gnarled hands gripped my head and face. It was the movement of springing erect that saved my life; for the hands missed the throat grip that would have choked the life out of me before I could have uttered a sound. As it was, my head was twisted around on my shoulders and my neck was in danger of being broken. Frantically I tore at the clutching hands, but my strength, far greater than that of the average man, was as nothing. With a last despairing effort, I freed my mouth enough to gasp out a strangling cry. Before my eyes was a film of rosy bubbling mist, in my ears a thunderous roaring; I felt myself raised from the ground and into the branches of the great tree that sheltered my assailant. Faintly I heard the crack of a pistol; the grip on my head loosed and I dropped heavily to the ground. Over me catapulted a gigantic hairy figure to lay with outstretched arms and legs twitching in death throes. Dizzily I sat up, my neck feeling as if it would never again be straight.

Dan and Huayan were rushing toward me, smoking pistols in their hands.

"Are you all right, Doc?" exclaimed the former. "Lord, I thought you were a goner! Your head was twisted clear around."

The Chief said nothing but his strong fingers massaged the bruised muscles of my neck with a touch as gentle as a woman's. In a few minutes I was able to move my head without pain, and barring a slight stiffness, appeared none the worse for the adventure.

"What the devil is this thing?" Dan wanted to know. "Looks like an ape and looks like a man. We both hit him, Huayan; here's a hole between his eyes and another in his chest: guess this is one varmint that can't stand up against a gun."

As Dan said, the thing pertained to both man and ape: the forehead was low and receding, the jaw very pronounced; but the teeth were even and rather small, not in the least like those of an ape. The face was almost free of hair and was whitish and pimply. The arms were abnormally long, the hands gnarled and extremely muscular, the feet plainly prehensile. The heavily paunched trunk and the short, bowed legs were covered with a growth of fine, grayish hair. The creature had no tail. Its stealthy attack gave proof of intelligence of a sort.

We kept a sharp lookout after this, but it appeared that the creature was a lone specimen, for we observed no trace of others.

All the long, sultry day we toiled through the dim, cathedral-like passages. Far above the gorgeous birds shrieked and called—they never sang—while at times one would flash like a cluster of jewels between the flowering branches. At times, stealthy rustlings overhead would draw our gaze in quest of possible man-apes, but we saw nothing save some tiny creatures that resembled squirrels, except that their tails were long and sinuous like those of monkeys.

Late in the day the tangled jungle gave way to scattered groups of trees and clumps of undergrowth, until at last we forced our way through a final interlacing fringe and reached the edge of a wide level plain. Silently we stood and gazed, too filled with astonishment for words.

Through a flower dotted expanse the silver ribbon of the stream wound its way; to right and left, as far as the eye could reach, stretched the unbroken line of the forest, and at the far end of the valley the smoke-crowned mountain lifted its massive bulk.

But it was none of these that held our awed gaze. Glowing redly in the last rays of the setting sun, frowning, menacing, seeming to exude a vague evil, there towered a mighty rampart that marched in som-

ber majesty across the sweep of the valley. *The wall of the ruined city!* But now, unbroken, no trace of a breach in its granite face, tremendous, radiating power. At least seven miles distant, in the clear air it seemed much nearer, and we could see what appeared to be twinkling lights along its summit; perhaps reflections from the arms of unseen watchers.

"Well," observed Dan after a long look, "things are picking up. Seems that man is in existence after all, and from the appearance of that wall, I would say that he has progressed a bit. Wonder what kind of a reception we'll get? What do you think about it, Huayan?"

"I think," answered the Chief, "that we had better seek out a place to camp, for darkness comes apace."

As I gathered wood for a fire, I pondered over the fact that since our arrival in this age, our bronzed companion had spoken almost wholly in Aimara. However, he was a master of the sacred language, and his rounded periods and stately metaphors were very beautiful. Somehow they seemed to possess a singular fitness under the circumstances, as if this was the time and place to which they rightfully belonged.

Dan fashioned a serviceable hook from a piece of stiff wire found in one of his pockets, and that evening we feasted royally on scaly ganoid fish that swarmed in the waters of the stream.

Over our pipes we discussed the day's adventures and speculated on what the morrow would bring forth. That man existed was now indisputable, and the mighty wall was indubitable evidence that he had reached a plane far above that represented by the slain man-ape, it being preposterous to think that these creatures could accomplish such an architectural feat. Science of our own age had contended that the giant reptiles had vanished long before man made his appearance on the earth. However, our adventure of the night before proved that man and the great primates were co-existent at this period of time.

Of these things and others we talked, the forest looming blackly behind us, in front the towering mass of the fire mountain blotting out the stars. The slow column of smoke rolled from the summit, touched with a faintly rosy light that rendered it plainly discernible. Dan sat gazing at the somber bulk, his eyes brooding, dream filled.

"It affects me like a presence," he mused, "a malignant presence, sinister and inconceivable, reaching out to envelop us in some dread spell. I believe the darned thing's haunted!"

"That's the Irish in you, Dan," I smiled. "By the way, doesn't that light appear to be growing brighter?"

"It is getting brighter," he answered. "Perhaps the internal, or infernal, fires are going to stage an exhibition. Good Lord! Look at that!"

This last was literally shot out of him in an excess of astonishment.

From the summit of the volcano had blazed a beam of dazzling light, a snowy shaft of pulsing luminescence that cleaved the darkness like a rapier of flame, paling the very stars as it shot straight into the black vault of the heavens. All about us mourned a vast sighing, like to the susur of the incoming tide, a shuddering whisper that shook the air, gripping the heart with icy fingers, like the rustling of unseen, haunted souls that could find no peace and sobbed their loneliness and despair. Faintly through the melancholy suspiration weaved tiny crystal harp notes, icily sweet, unspeakably sad, while the pillar of light flamed and coruscated.

Into our hearts crept a numbing dread, a feeling as of evil unspeakable that menaced not only life but the soul itself.

Slowly the mighty flare dimmed and sank, the sighing died to a sobbing breath; was gone.

Silently we sank back beside the fire, too utterly amazed for words.

"Well, Doc," said Dan, at length, "what's the explanation for that?"

"I've stopped trying to explain things," I answered. "There isn't any use. The only thing to do is take what comes and make the best of it. We will try and get into that city tomorrow; then perhaps we will gain some knowledge of this day and age—if we live long enough. Heavens above! Now what?"

From the dark wall of the forest had arisen a terrific screaming, hoarse snarl and a tremendous crashing of underbrush. Some grim tragedy of a primeval world was being enacted. For several seconds the terrible shrieks rent the air, then suddenly they ceased and could be heard only the chuckling snarl punctuated by a crushing sound, as of great bones being crunched by mighty teeth. This, too, died away and the night silence reigned again.

"I believe one of Doc's overgrown toads made a kill," murmured Dan in an awed voice. "Wonder what the natives around here do for excitement on quiet nights like this! Well, I'm going to bed! I've had enough for one day. Call me for second trick, Doc."

CHAPTER IX

Amnestar

THE great reddish sun blazed down, the mighty wall gleamed under the pouring rays and the distant line of the forest wavered mistily. Since early dawn we had been traversing the undulating plain and now were little more than a mile distant from the huge rampart which lifted its massive granite bulk across our path. We had not found the going easy, due to the riotous growth of rank grasses that at times reached to our shoulders. Also, in places we had found the ground decidedly marshy. Now the character of the soil was changing; the grass had almost disappeared, giving place to moist clay, literally covered with great two-toed tracks which I recognized as the imprints of some form of dinosaur. This did not add to our peace of mind, for should we meet one of the great reptiles, here in this open space, we would be hard put to it to defend ourselves.

Closer and closer loomed the wall. We could now see the lines of a mighty gate set between cyclopean pillars. Upon the flat top of the wall, figures were running excitedly about. Evidently our advance had been noted. Suddenly the massive gates swung back and from the opening dashed a troop of monstrous, grotesque shapes.

Larger than the largest elephant, their gait was a series of gigantic bounds. As they swept down upon us, we saw that they were using only their powerful hind limbs for purposes of locomotion, their short forepaws being held clear of the ground. Their heads waved gently too and fro on slender necks, their reptilian scales glittered naevously in the sunlight and their strongly muscled forelegs were armed with knife-edged, curving claws. Truly terrifying was their appearance as they hurled themselves across the short space that separated us from the city wall.

Seated upon their backs and apparently guiding their movements were men.

"For God's sake, what are those things?" demanded Dan, drawing his automatic and crouching tensely.

"Steady, Dan," I cautioned; "They're dinosaurs—the great herbivorous dinosaur, Iguanodon, that flourished during the Tertiary period, harmless and easy to tame. It's the riders we've got to watch; but hold your gun hand. These people may prove friendly."

On came the reptiles! All at once they ceased their

gigantic leaps and advanced at a leisurely walk, swaying their gentle deer-shaped heads in rhythm. At a distance of about twenty paces they halted and one slightly in advance of the others knelt, laying its head on the ground. Down the sloping neck the rider exultantly slid and advanced toward us, holding up his hand, palm outward in the universal, all-age gesture of peace.

Of about middle height, he was plainly enormously powerful, with the broad shoulders, narrow waist and flat hips of the athlete. His skin was very fair, his eyes that blue which is seen in the summer seas, his hair of the purest gold. His features were finely formed and of cameo-like regularity.

He was clothed in what appeared to be chain mail of some coppery metal which glowed redly in the sunlight. This garment hung from his shoulders in the form of a closely fitting shirt and was belted at the waist by a broad black belt. The leg coverings were of the same stuff as the shirt and swathed the feet as well. To the belt was hung a heavy short-sword and a peculiarly shaped dagger. Clapsed about his throat was a necklace of glittering blue stones; his insignia of leadership, we learned.

His companions were clothed much of the same except that they wore caps of burnished metal and carried heavy spears much like the stabbing assegais of the Zulus.

Ten paces distant the golden man paused, voicing a question. Much to my astonishment, I understood the words. They were Aimara, the sacred language of the early Incas, but different. More complex in structure and in some undefinable way archaic, the language was to the Aimara with which I was familiar, as is pure Castilian Spanish to the Spanish of the Mexican people.

"Whence come ye, strangers," spoke the deep musical voice, and what seek ye at the gates of Amnestar the holy?"

Stepping forward a pace I answered: "We come from a great and distant country, we come seeking knowledge, and we come in peace."

A smile flitted across the handsome features, those features that were so classically regular, but on which I sensed a vague, undefinable tracing of cruelty, the unconscious cruelty of the beast.

"Ye speak my language strangely," he made reply, "and your words are stranger still; but ye come to a proper place seeking knowledge when ye come to Amnestar, city of The Flame, where dwell the Lord of Life and the Lord of Death. But peace is a fleeting thing that oft departs for want of place to stand upon. Come, I, Lotha, Commander of the Guard, bid you welcome—for my part at least."

He turned and paused, the slight smile wreathing his thin lips.

"What about it?" I asked, after rapidly translating the gist of the speech for Dan. "Shall we take a chance?"

Dan stepped forward with a shrug of his broad shoulders.

"Let's go!" he exclaimed blithely. "We can't camp out here forever, and there ought to be something to eat in there, anyway. Lead away, General, on with the dance!"

This last with a twinkle of his gray eyes to the waiting warrior.

The golden man did not understand the words, but he caught the spirit of the reply and he smiled again, this time a real, friendly smile that disclosed fine white teeth.

"A man, this," he said, nodding his head approvingly.

Abruptly he strode to his strange mount, swung a-straddle the long neck and as the creature reared

erect, slid gracefully into the saddle. A word of command, the cavalcade wheeled and set out for the city at the odd shuffling walk. And in the rear, we followed.

The great gate swung open, we passed between the giant pillars that frowned on either side and the port closed with a hollow, menacing clang.

CHAPTER X

The Lords of Life and Death

GRAY and gold was Amnestar, a forest of temples and palaces. A ruling city, isolated, powerful and evil, levying rich tribute from the wide lands beyond the mountain. The Holy of Holies of a great people. Cold and stately rose the great openings and mighty columns, while the reddish sunlight shimmered on fretted pillar and plated gold.

People lined the broad street along which we passed, all of a mold common to that in which the golden warrior was cast: yellow haired, fair of skin and blue of eye. The women were beautiful, their burnished hair bound about their heads in coronels from which flashed jewels. They wore loosely flowing robes which reached barely to their knees and on their feet were beautifully made sandals laced high about the ankles with golden laces. The arms were bare and the garments were cut very low at the neck.

"Some chickens!" whispered Dan. "Doc, this place suits me fine. Wonder where that black haired girl is; none of this bunch could hold a candle to her. Think we'll find her?"

I smiled and shook my head, but in my heart was a feeling that the sweet-faced vision of the screen was to play a great part in our lives here in this evil, beautiful city, so whitely golden in the sunlight.

The garments of the men were much the same as those worn by the women, the texture of the goods being slightly coarser and more fitted for service. White was the predominant color in the clothing of both sexes, but I noted here and there robes of a wonderful scarlet, others of blue, edged with gold.

On the faces of all I sensed that touch of latent cruelty that slightly marred the comely features of our friend, the Captain of the Guard.

I noted also that more than one pair of bright eyes glowed with a softer light as they gazed upon Dan's tall, lithe figure and handsome face. Evidently a million years or so had made little change in women.

For a short distance Lotha led the way along the broad granite thoroughfare; then the cavalcade turned into a quieter side street and in a few minutes halted before a wide, low building, set well back from the roadway. Here his strange steed knelt, obedient to some command unperceived by us, and the rider slid to the ground as before. The escort continued down the street, the unmounted brute ambling after. The Captain turned to the building and smilingly bade us enter.

Massive doors swung back at our approach and clanged behind us as we entered a long passageway that glowed with softly diffused light. I tried to ascertain the source of this peculiar light as we walked along but could not. It did not come from the walls nor from any visible aperture. It seemed to emanate from the air itself, a mellow radiance incorporated in the atmosphere. There was an uncanny feeling that this strange liminescence streamed through and through one.

For what seemed a very long way, the passage wound and turned; then it abruptly debouched into a spacious room suffused with the same golden brightness.

After the days of hardship we had recently undergone, the effect of this comfortable apartment was sin-

gularly pleasing. That it was a man's room and a soldier's was plainly apparent, but there was the homelike air that bespoke long occupancy and thoughtful care. Deep chairs were upholstered in dark leather—carefully treated dinosaur hide we learned—there were wide couches along the wall and at the lower end a table covered with a snowy cloth.

Through a door our guide conducted us to a smaller room where a pool of clear water dimpled in the soft glow. While we bathed, two attendants in the uniform of the Guard entered and deposited white robes and immaculate linen.

"Please accept the garb of my country while your own garments are being properly cared for," smiled Lotha.

We found the loosely flowing robes very comfortable, but the effect of our automatics and heavy cartridge belts was incongruous to say the least.

Lotha gazed curiously at these appurtenances but said nothing; nor did we vouchsafe any explanation for the present.

Upon entering the larger apartment, we found an appetizing meal awaiting us; to which, needless to say, we were prepared to do ample justice. There was an excellent roasted meat, which Lotha informed us was flesh of the iguanodon, vegetables much resembling sweet potatoes and peas and a variety of fruits, all strange to us but most delectable. The attendants filled our glasses from large crystal flacons which contained a sparkling drink that was refreshing and exhilarating.

"But a soldier's rough fare," said our host. "I trust you will be able to assuage your hunger. Tomorrow you shall be served as befits a guest."

We assured the Captain that there was no need for apology concerning his hospitality, and the havoc we wrought among the vields substantiated our words.

As we ate, we learned something of the city and the surrounding country. Between the metropolis and the sacred mountain to the east were cultivated lands and stretches of open forest where grazed herds of gentle herbivorous dinosaurs, which furnished food and served as beasts of burden. The fern jungle and the forest through which we had passed were seldom visited by the people of Amnestar, being infested with carnivorous dinosaurs and were the haunts of strange, deadly creatures that Lotha called *caraquas* and which I identified with the man-ape. Also, the country beyond the western cliffs was inhabited by savage, warlike tribes that at times poured into the valley and would have long since overrun the sacred city, were it not for the great wall and Lotha's strong legion of warriors. To the east of the sacred mountain was open, fertile country, where dwelt the people of Pacama, a strong and cultured nation, great in wealth and power and wisdom, governed by the "Powers" of Amnestar the Holy, although there was a nominal king and council who held court in the inland capital city of Quetta.

Lotha talked freely, telling us of the customs of his country, its history and traditions, and of the lands that bordered it. Quaint and curious were some of the legends of this people of the earth-youngness.

Once I asked a question concerning the great mountain to the east, but even as the Captain opened his lips to reply he blanched slightly and over his face flitted a curious expression of listening. His eyes darkened and I noticed his long white hands grip the table top. His lips moved as if in inaudible reply to a command.

"Ask me not of that, my guest," he said. "Something perhaps you shall hear anon—if the Lords so will," he finished in what was almost soliloquy. Soon after the completion of the meal, he left us with a smile and a promise for the morrow.

The attendants cleared away the remains of the feast and spread white coverings over the couches. Then they too retired and immediately the golden luminescence died to a mellow, restful twilight.

"What do you think of it, Doc?" asked Don as we lay enjoying a final smoke before going to sleep.

"Well, I'm just about past thinking at all," I answered. "Things are coming altogether too fast. One thing's sure; there is something wrong with this place; I can feel it."

"I wonder what our yellow-headed friend meant by that crack about the Lords?" pondered the engineer. "Did you notice his queer listening attitude just before he spoke? You would almost think someone was speaking to him in tones we couldn't hear."

"I've been puzzling over that, too," I answered. "Huayan, is there anything in the traditions handed down by your people that might relate to this place?"

"Yes," replied the deep voice of the Trigullo, "there is a legend that says the ruined city, which now rests in the future, was once the home of a race of golden men great in power and wisdom, who worshipped Evil and spewed forth Evil over the earth to envelop it as do the poisonous vines of the lower jungles. And it would seem that we have fallen among those golden men."

"Aye, and there was a prophecy also, but of that I may not speak as yet; for to me it appears that a fulfillment shall take place. All things will reveal themselves in time, so let us sleep."

But just before my lids were locked in slumber it seemed to me that a Presence entered the room, stood before my couch and gazed—gazed into the innermost recesses of my mind and read what was there. I could see nothing, and as I struggled to rise, a heavy blanket of unconsciousness rolled over me and swept me into the land of nothingness.

GREAT columned halls, vast passages, merging one into another mellowly glowing with the mysterious, golden radiance, our footsteps ringing on polished slabs of granite to echo from vaulted ceilings.

Refreshed by a good night's rest, bathed and shaved, our hunger appeased by an excellent breakfast, we followed Lotha through the spacious corridors. We were clothed again in our own garments which had been carefully cleansed and repaired.

Before a blank wall of gray stone our conductor paused. He raised his hands high above his head in a peculiar gesture of salute and his lips moved, but no words came. The massive wall wavered as a windswept curtain, a misty radiance played across its dull-toned surface, and then—it was not! Just that exactly; one instant a solid granite barrier confronted us, the next there was no wall there. It did not slide away, sink into the floor nor rise. It merely ceased to be. For long seconds we stood and stared.

A mighty circular enclosure, greater far than that of the Colosseum at Rome, spread its uncummed expanse before us. I felt giddy; it was soul-shaking; tier on tier they sloped from the circular walls to the far distant barrier—myriads of white faces, the golden-haired dwellers of the city. From the portal where we stood sloped a wedge shaped passage glitteringly floored in white.

My scalp prickled and a coldness gathered about my heart, for at the broad end of the wedge, far down the shimmering aisle, reared a mighty altar black as the heart of a storm cloud, grim, forbidding, flanked by two columns of coldly glowing flame.

Behind the altar and slightly raised above it was a dais, and here upon massive thrones sat two figures, black robed and hooded, dimly seen at that distance.

But I knew—like a cold hand it gripped me—the Lord of Life and the Lord of Death!

At a gesture from Lotha we walked down the white-paved lane to the foot of the altar.

Some few paces in front of the altar stood a man, a golden man slightly taller than Lotha and of the same powerful build. He was clad in a flowing robe, girded in at the waist by a circlet of shimmering blue stones. Set on his clustering locks was a wreath of pale, waxen blossoms that glowed wanly against the yellow curls. Straight featured and beautiful was his face; but on that cameo-like countenance pride and ambition sat enthroned, and a terrible cruelty, the unthinking cruelty that marred the features of all these people. Here it was accentuated and abetted by a trace of cold calculation. Somberly he gazed upon us, and gazed, too, from the lofty dais, those dread hooded figures whose hidden eyes seemed to search our innermost thoughts and read them as a printed page.

"Whence come ye, strangers, and what seek ye?"

Like deep toned organ notes the words rolled forth.

As the accepted leader of the party I answered: "We come from a far and mighty country. We have heard of the glory of Amnestar and her wisdom, and we desire to see this glory and drink of the wisdom. We come in peace, asking only a traveler's welcome."

For some seconds the high priest meditated this reply. Then he spoke again in that deep organ-like voice.

"Are ye all giants in your country?"—I have mentioned that my companions are tall men, and I am five inches over six feet. So it was not surprising that the Pacamians, who never attained a height greater than five feet eight inches, should look upon us as giants.

"Aye," I answered, "we have many giants, some of the body, some of the mind; and their works are gigantic also."

My reply seemed to impress the golden man, for a slight frown and a thoughtful expression crossed his comely face. Then his countenance darkened and his eyes flashed as he turned to Huayan standing grave and impassive on my left.

"And how is it there is one with you whose face is the face of a *curca*?" He literally spat the word that I afterwards learned meant slave—"conquered-one-whose-less-than-the-beasts."

Coldly the great Trigullo gazed on the white faced priest.

"*Mamaca!*" (eunuch, sexless one) he said in a tone of quiet contempt.

He was wrong, the priest of The Flame being allowed to marry, a fact to which was due a great many complications where we were concerned, but just the same his epithet was a terrible insult to the great ecclesiastic. With face grown positively livid, the priest took a half step forward, his hands closing upon the hilt of a curiously curved knife at his girdle.

Huayan stood like a statue, his arms folded across his broad chest, but never was man nearer death than was the servant of The Flame at that moment. Dan's right hand was hovering above his thigh, the fingers tense, claw-like, his whole body strained in a rigid attitude. I had seen his marvelous gun-play, and I would have given little for the golden man's chances for life—for all our chances, for that matter, as I felt assured that the death of the priest would be the signal for our own extinction.

Perhaps the hierophane sensed his danger, perhaps came a message that we could not hear; anyway, his hand dropped and he turned to the great black altar and those dread figures that sat enthroned above.

"We have heard, oh, Holy Ones!" he cried.

For long moments we stood before the altar, waiting.

The great multitude was hushed, the priest remained in his attitude of salute; the ghostly flames writhed silently and the terrible cowed figures on the dais gazed.

Then slowly the flame column upon the left sank to the floor, was blotted out, while that upon the right glowed brighter and seemed to expand. A long trembling sigh from the assembled people, the priest turned a face of baffled fury toward us, strode behind the altar and disappeared. A mist began to gather before the shrine, a mist of opalescence that grew and thickened as we watched, then rolled upward hiding the black horror and the figures on the dais.

"Come," said Lotha, "the Lord of Life has conquered—for the present at least."

CHAPTER XI

The Flower Maiden

BACK along the gently sloping aisle we strode; but now the occupants of the long terraces were not silent. Whispers and subdued laughter greeted our ears and bright eyes gazed upon us with no enmity. The assembled people seemed well pleased with the judgment, no matter how adversely it had affected the High Priest.

"Looks like we're in good with the *hoi poloi*,* anyhow," muttered Dan as we followed our soldier to the wide door.

"Yes," I answered, "and in bad with the priests; and I think they run this country. Why did His Eminence take such a violent dislike to you, Huayan?"

"I think the inhabitants of the mountain country to the west of this valley—they of whom the Captain spoke last night—are a dark race, even as are my people," replied the Triguilo.

"That's logical, Doc," agreed Dan. "Ask the general about it."

Lotha, in a few words, verified the surmise. Aside from his greater stature, Huayan was quite like the swarthy, black-haired people of the hills, with whom the people of the city were often at war. The religious beliefs of these tribes were different from those of the Pacamians, which naturally created an added bitterness of feeling among the priestcraft.

That afternoon Lotha announced that if it be our pleasure, he would show us something of the city of Amnestar.

Truly it was wonderful, this white and gold city of The Flame. The buildings were massive but graceful, built of a red granite that took an extremely high polish and, due to some quality of the reddish sunlight, from a distance shone with a dull coppery hue that gave the impression of burnished metal. Here and there, in striking contrast, reared a temple of white marble glowing rosily. The streets were very wide, paved with great stone slabs.

Engineering problems seemed to be solved solely by means of the pulley, the roller and the inclined plane: so far as we could learn, there was no machinery, as we moderns define machinery, but I caught myself wondering if machinery was needed where was present such phenomena as the vanishing door in the Hall of Justice and the opalescent light which seeped from the air itself.

The transportation facilities of these people were crudely at variance with their imposing structures. The prevailing beasts of burden in this land were small white deer resembling, except for the discrepancy in size, those gigantic creatures of the fern forest.

The little beasts bore loads and drew queer, little

two-wheeled chariots, which were easily graceful as fairy carts.

Bridges of wonderful workmanship spanned the stream that wound through the city, and on the sparkling waters floated great white birds resembling swans, but far greater than any swans I had ever seen.

And to the east, the mighty bulk of the fire mountain brooded like a spirit of evil incarnate.

Just as the last rays of the reddish sunlight were bathing the mountain and its gloomy smoke crown in bloody radiance, we drew rein before a mighty temple. It was at no great distance from the eastern wall and on the side facing the mountain was a wide portico whose roof was supported by immense black columns on which were graven in a strange, fantastic work of white and gold that marvelous sculpture, the Face in the Flame.

Silent and lonely was this vast cathedral set in the shadow of the sacred mountain; its lines were austere and beautiful, a majesty clothed it, the majesty that mantles the Holy of Holies of a people. For this was the Temple of the Flame, and here at sunset gathered the city's dwellers to do homage to their god.

I noticed that other chariots were wheeling into place behind us and that white-robed people were filling the great empty space to the left. Silently they came, golden haired, flower crowned, like players in some Bacchanalian drama.

From the interior of the temple came the sound of a wild, sweet chant, swelling to a triumphant fullness, dying to a sobbing whisper of sadness unutterable. Nearer and nearer it came; the massive, bronze doors swung open and issued gray-clad priests chanting as they walked, each bearing a wand shaped like a serpent. To left and right they streamed to form a living wall along the outer edge of the portico. Then came hierophants clad in somber black and bearing small harps whose strings gave out crystal bell notes that blended exquisitely with the voices of the singers. Followed long lines of young girls in flowing robes of deepest purple, their yellow tresses unbound and shimmering about their cameo-like faces in a mist of burnished gold. In ranks they formed behind the priests, their hands folded upon their breasts, their eyes downcast in reverence.

And then *she* came!

A swelling of crystal notes from the harps, the silvery voices of the priestesses raised in a melody of aching sweetness, and down the aisle between the line of votaries glided a swaying graceful figure clad in garments of sheerest white. The figure of a girl—and such a girl! She was taller than the golden priestesses and as alien to them as night is to day. For while the clinging, diaphanous robe revealed an exquisitely proportioned form of dazzling fairness, her eyes were great pools of black light and her hair a clouded shadow, wherein the rays of the dying sun struck ruddy flashes. Her lips were a splash of crimson against the whiteness of her face.

On her tiny, high-arched feet were golden sandals held with silvery laces that encircled slender ankles, and in the dusky curls were entwined white, waxen blossoms, like lotus in a forest lake. In her arms, pressed close to her breast as a mother would hold a child, she bore a cluster of these same flowers.

To the edge of the portico she came and stood looking out over the assembled people, a slight smile curving her sweet lips. And from that vast throng rose a shout that thundered on the silence like a pean of demi-gods:

"*Losaya! Hail to the Flower Maiden!*"

Again she smiled and slightly inclined her high-held, shapely little head. Then her eyes wandered to where we stood in our fairy chariots, stunned by the beauty

* The people in general, the many.

of this living realization of the girl of the luminous veil. In the wide eyes shone wonder as she looked on my great form and on the dusky, commanding countenance of Huayan. Then her gaze swept to where Dan stood tall and graceful beside the Captain of the Guard. And there before the Temple of the Flame their eyes first met.

The slender hands of the Flower Girl clasped tightly the cluster of white blossoms and her slight form quivered. Then a wave of color swept over her graceful throat and petaled face. Long lashes veiled the glorious eyes and she turned hurriedly toward the towering bulk of the mountain whose summit still glowed redly, although its base was mantled in purple shadows.

Swiftly the darkness closed. The chanting and the harp-notes sounded eerily through the gathering dusk. Suddenly silence, and from the floor before the Flower Maiden sprang a column of white flame like to those fires that glowed before the black altar in the Hall of Justice. Vividly the scene was lighted up by the pale radiance: the hair of the votaries gleamed like molten gold, while the Flower Maiden appeared the very Spirit of Night. Slowly she raised her white, rounded arms and with a gesture of infinite grace let fall the waxen blossoms one by one into the shimmering column that pulsed before her.

The blooms paused in mid-air on touching the pillar, were suspended as in a jet of water. Brightly the petals glowed, shot through with veins of quivering light; then they grew misty, trembled and were gone. The column sank to the floor, the darkness leaped forward and the chanting began anew, fading into the distance as the votaries glided from the portico, dying at last in a sweet, faint thrill of bell notes.

CHAPTER XII

The Altar of the Flame

THE next few days passed uneventfully but pleasantly. We drove about the city in two fairy chariots placed at our disposal, attended a banquet in our honor and made the acquaintance of a number of dignitaries.

Sometimes Lotha accompanied us on our pilgrimages; at other times a young lieutenant, Chassa by name, who wore a perpetual smile and whose handsome face bore no traces of the latent cruelty that marred the features of the majority of this, otherwise comely, race. He and Dan became inseparable and I used to smile at these queer pals, one short and stalwart, yellow of hair and blue of eye, the other so tall and dark. Each had the engaging grin that twisted his lips quizzically and filled his eyes with little dancing lights. The way they butchered English and Aimara between them was something awful to listen to, for Dan was teaching his companion our tongue, while Chassa was perfecting the Virginian in the language of Pacama.

Dan adroitly questioned the soldier about the Flower Maiden, but he did not learn much except that she was of royal blood and very largely her own mistress, being answerable only to the Lord of Life, whoever that outlandish being might be.

There had always been a Maid of the Flowers, said Chassa. She was always chosen of royal blood, and for some reason, just what he was not certain, was always black of hair, a great rarity among these people, occurring only in the families of certain great nobles of the land, whose blood was pure, those of the race that had originally "raised this land from chaos," as he quaintly put it.

It appeared that the nation was made up of more than one people, many countries having been conquered

and brought into subjection from time to time. The land to the east was a great land extending to the far off waters of a sea; I thought this land might possibly be the Atlantic of our time.

To the south was another nation, also mighty, with which the country had often made war, although peace existed at this time and had prevailed for some years. To the north and west were savage lands infested with terrible monsters and beast-like men, and of these lands the people of Pacama knew little. It was almost impossible to explore them and they were let severely alone by all except certain adventurous nobles who went there to hunt the beasts, or on queer trips of knight-errantry for the glory of their ladies, or in the accomplishment of some vow; showing that people do not change much in a million years or so and that going "a-grailing" as Mark Twain would have put it, was not confined to later days.

We learned that the power of the priests was almost absolute, and a shadow crossed the face of the young soldier as he spoke of this.

"They teach the people to be cruel," he cried vehemently. "They have corrupted the noble faith of our fathers to their own selfish ends; they are traitors. "But it would be worth my life for this to be heard," he continued with a somewhat wry smile. "Blasphemy is punishable by death. So you see, my friends, I trust you. But even so they may hear of it—the Lords have strange powers and use them in unexpected ways. Searchers of Souls they are; they can read men's thoughts as I can read the images and the cords. And The Flame knows all."

I questioned him concerning this thing he called The Flame, but he could not tell me much. It was the deity of the priests, and through them of the people, although the worship was not strong outside the Sacred City.

There was also a far higher "God" who was acknowledged—a vast, shadowy Being who was paramount, but who took no active interest in people or their affairs, who was manifested in the earthquake and other great convulsions of nature. I shrewdly suspected that both The Flame and the Lords were really crafty members of the sacerdotal college made up to look the part.

The Flame, said Chassa, had its abode in the heart of the sacred fire-mountain, where at stated intervals it held court while sacrifices were offered to the accompaniment of fitting ceremonials. All the city's populace were required to be present at these rites, and, he said, we would shortly learn the nature of them, as we would be present at the next ceremony, which would be held very soon. More he would not tell us, saying his orders relative to this matter were very precise.

We learned that the government of the land was a sort of restricted monarchy. Nominally, the king and the council ruled the land, but the actual rulers were the priests under the Lords and The Flame. Amnestar was the real capital.

It seemed that there was some sort of rivalry between the two Lords and that they strove in some manner for the lives of those brought before them. The columns of flame were their symbols, as well as their instruments of execution; and from the actions of these columns were interpreted their decisions. For the Lords never spoke, never made any gesture, sitting dread and motionless beneath their black coils while the high priest questioned and issued orders.

The mysterious golden light and the vanishing stone that so impressed me were closely guarded secrets of the priests, their operation known only to the initiate.

Altogether it appeared the priests were just about "it" in this country, which I felt boded no good for us. We evidently had them puzzled to a certain extent and

they didn't yet know just what to make of us. Also, it appeared that we had become something of popular favorites with the people, and this gave the ecclesiastics pause. It was plain they did not desire to kick up an unnecessary row. Already, as often happens among semi-civilized peoples, a whispered legend was spreading over the city, a legend that said we were those spoken of in an ancient prophecy, those who would lead the people unto peace and greatness.

This was all very well where the populace was concerned, but it is a well proven fact that religious leaders do not welcome new leaders who are liable to change the accepted order of things and perhaps shear them of a measure of their power. The coils were tightening about us and it would take some skillful maneuvering on our part to avoid becoming sacrifices or something to that devil-god who was held in such high esteem.

We found a grain of comfort in the fact that Lotha, the powerful Captain of the Guard, was our friend. He, like Chassa, secretly despised the priests and their ways. That he would say a word in our defense was certain, nor would this word be taken lightly. For like the Praetorians of Rome, the Guard was very nearly all-powerful in the city, and while Lotha was no Tigilinus* in other respects, he resembled that unworthy in that his Guardsmen would follow him to the death, regardless of the commands of the priests or anybody else.

The whole situation was uncomfortably tense, and the inaction was trying on the nerves of all of us. So we welcomed the news, when one morning the golden warrior informed us that the following night the ceremonial of The Flame would be enacted in the Temple of the Mountain and that he had orders to convey us thither to witness the justice of Amnestar.

Dan was highly elated, Chassa having whispered, his eyes dancing, that Losaya would be there. Chassa was a very irreverent young man, who worshipped no other god than the keen sword that hung by his side, in the use of which he was a master. But although he did not worship The Flame, he feared it, frankly admitting it was something he did not understand.

"It has power," he said to me, "terrible power that it uses in terrible ways. None knows whence it came, and it is not human, at least not human in the sense that we are. I think it is a being accursed."

Night had fallen and the luminous twilight enveloped the city in its aureate glow when Lotha at last appeared. The streets were silent and deserted, the bronze-shod hoofs of our little coursers ringing sharply on the flags and sending whispering echoes stealing up frowning bastion and parapet.

Straight to the eastern wall we flew, and there a mighty gate, twin to that which had admitted us to the city, opened with rattle and clang, to thunder shut after we had sped swiftly through.

Over a broad, firm roadway our course led, and now the golden radiance was left behind and only the glow of the tropic stars and a lurid reflection from the smoke cloud hovering over the crest of the peak lighted our way. On and on we raced, the somber bulk of the mountain seeming to hang over us and envelop us in its shadowy mass. Up the towering sides the roadway led until the gallant little beasts were forced to slow to a walk. At last the crisp crunch of lava needles told us we were ascending the cone of the volcano proper. Another hour and suddenly we rounded a sharp curve and drew up before a frowning, stupendous cliff. No break or opening seemed its surface; apparently it was all of the virgin rock of the mountain.

Lotha descended and stood before the grim escarp-

ment, a tiny, lonely figure in all that vastness. Slowly he raised his arms in that strange gesture of salute which we had noted before the rock door in the Hall of Justice. A misty light played across the surface of the cliff, a shimmer of radiance and then before us was a glowing golden opening some fifty feet in height and the width of the roadway. The Captain sprang into the chariot, the steeds dashed forward and the golden glow enveloped us. Turning, I saw only a wall of blackness; the strange portal had closed.

As we sped along, I scanned the passage closely and came to the conclusion that it had been hollowed out by rushing gases from the bowels of the volcano. The floor was smooth and level, the roof lofty, veiled in shadows where the radiance dimmed, and upon the polished sides weaved strange weird carvings. Quite suddenly we debouched into an enormous chamber.

Here, in orderly rows, were numbers of chariots like our own, the little steeds contentedly munching fodder.

Across the chamber Lotha led us to another black stone wall. Again the fleeting radiance played across the adamant surface and again a doorway opened before us; black, velvety hangings swept majestically aside and we stood on the threshold of another hall. Astonished, we stood and stared at this, the most remarkable thing we had encountered in this land of remarkable things.

A colossal amphitheatre that dwarfed even the mighty Hall of Justice—a stupendous nave whose gleaming walls were misty in the distance, whose roof was but dimly seen even in the flooding golden radiance, an awesome chancel hollowed out within the heart of the mountain.

Within the vast enclosure was a multitude, golden-haired and flower crowned, their robes gleaming in the mellow light. It seemed to me that the entire population of the city must be here; their numbers were legion. Silently they sat on curving benches that rose tier on tier to the walls of the cloister, their gaze fixed on what was before us at the far end of a long, flower-strewn passageway between the curving tiers.

An altar before which the great sacristy of the Hall shrank to insignificance. Not black, as was the other, but of a bloody red, a red that shrieked of tragedy and dark deeds. Above this altar was a dais, and upon this dais sat those dread, hooded shapes. But this time they were not alone. Grouped around them were figures clothed in silvery robes that shimmered and scintillated like pulsing light-waves. The faces were of an unearthly beauty and white as marble, the eyes of deepest blue, wide and unwavering, and the hair of a pale silver, not the silver of age but a gleaming ash that flamed whitely in the radiance. Ethereal, disembodied they seemed, their expression rapt, unseeing. There they sat, like spirits brought to earth—the Dream-makers of the Lord of Death.

On either side of the altar soared pillars of flame, the symbols of the Lords, and before the altar was a fretted wall of white marble, the height of a tall man's waist.

All this I saw in one swift glance as we paused upon the threshold. Then we were moving slowly along the broad avenue between the tiers.

"I don't like the looks of this place, Doc," muttered Dan. "Get your gun ready."

I didn't like the looks of it either, but there was nothing to do but go ahead and trust to Providence and good luck.

Straight to the marble wall Lotha led us and then turned to the right. As we reached the barrier, I leaned over it and gazed down, down, depth upon unthinkable depth—into a pit that extended to earth-heart. Far, far below I could see what seemed to be a gigantic ser-

* Head of the Praetorian guards in Rome in the reign of Nero. He committed suicide in the reign of Otho.

pent of golden fire, a pulsing, living thing that writhed as if in torment. Up from the depths swept the sound of a sibilant hiss.

Dan swore softly and Huayan muttered something that certainly was not a prayer. Even his iron nerves were shaken by this glimpse of hell-fire.

Around the pit Lotha led us and up a flight of steps to the dais. Here we found seats on a broad divan which was already occupied by nobles and officers of the Guard, among whom we recognized our friend Chassa.

For what seemed a very long time no word was spoken. The silence was intense, broken only by a prolonged hiss that drifted up from the pit at intervals.

"The Guardian is restless," whispered Lotha. "It bodes ill."

A mighty bell-note thundered through the stillness like a flaming sword of sound. From the vast audience breathed a sigh and from the pit wafted a shuddering hiss.

The shimmering figures of the Dream-makers suddenly emerged from their posture of rapt detachment; animation lighted their pale, beautiful countenances. Rising to their feet, they began a stately, graceful dance in time to an icy-sweet rhythm of harp notes that swelled and sobbed like a paean sung by spirits of joy and sorrow. As they danced their silvery garments spread out about them in a shimmering cloud from which the golden radiance struck showers of scintillations.

As the dance continued these sparks of light grew thicker until the air of the dais seemed filled with them. The quivering points clung to each other, curdled, formed a glistening curtain, behind which the figures of the dancers were but vague, whirling shadows.

Upon this curtain pictures began to form, illusive at first, dreamy fantasms that existed and yet did not. Then they grew clear, and with their clearness came a remarkable illusion of time, space, and distance: we were gazing upon other worlds, upon unknown creations spread out in their entirities. Mighty stars rushed through the black expanses of the heavens, great suns blazed and thundered, nebulae swirled in coruscating glory, galaxies were born, existed through eternities, died and passed into the nothingness.

All this we sensed rather than saw—the stupendous epic of a creation. Back of the whirling immensities was a Something, before which all else sank to insignificance, in the face of whose terrific calm our spirits were as nothing. Somehow, I knew—this was Destiny enthroned above the stars, the Eternal, the Omnipotent.

The picture changed; gone were the rolling planets and the whirling suns. It was our own world, and yet such a world as our eyes had never looked on. Steaming seas that writhed beneath a blazing sun, seas where titanic tempests lashed the murky waters into mountains of white-maned thunder. Water, water, water! sobbing, raving, whispering; and lonely, oh, so lonely!

Change! Great oozing mud flats rising from the receding waters; vast forests of reeds that rustled in the lonely winds; lush grasses clothing the higher slopes. Higher the mud banks rose; the reeds became fronded planets that shot away heavenward; larger they grew, they multiplied, expanded; and now the steaming lands were covered with a wealth of green and studded with blooms of white and yellow. But lonely, oh, so lonely. The enormous plants sway gently in the sunlight, the turbid waters lap the muddy shores.

Something moves within the wall of green! A head appears, a monstrous lizard head. A body emerges, long, low, covered with scales that glitter like pearl in

the sunlight. The thing steals to the water's edge on padded feet, and as it lowers its baleful head, another head appears from the sullen flood. Long rows of teeth flash, a mighty tail lashes the waves to foam, terrible forms rear locked in mortal combat.

The picture blurs; change, change, change! The waters have receded now, the green life is winning. And other life is here also: lizard and snake, great hairy beast and flaming-feathered bird vie with one another for the land.

A figure stealing through the underbrush, swinging lithely to the safety of overhanging branches; a hairy thing, brute mishapen—but *Man!* The Lord of all Creation is stretching forth his puny arms to grasp the young world in the pygmy gripe that shall in time encompass all.

Fitting scenes of wonder: tribes that roam the lush, green land, gnarled nomads of the swarming forests and the grass-grown plains. They grow and multiply, their wanderings are less. Rude dwellings, caves and mud-walled huts; green lodges in the tree tops; Now groups of habitations; palisades and hedges; low stone walls. The picture blurs. Mighty citadels, vast escarpments, palaces and temples, great castles crowning lonely crags; cities that teem with life. Gold, jewels, sculpture; wealth and power. Mighty pageants pass before our eyes, nations grow in greatness and power. Dust and decay: the jackal howls in the roofless palace of the king, owls nest beside the temple walls; ruin, desolation, death! New life: builders that rear the mighty walls of cities that are upon the ruins of cities that were—the Giant Pygmy feels his strength and bids defiance to nature's self. And the terrific Countenance that shadows all seems to smile a benediction of approval. Formless somethings, shadows, wraiths, vast images that beat upon the curtain with impotent hands, rushing voids, stark immensities; all are there.

"The future is not theirs to read," whispered Lotha by my side.

The veil of light points thinned and vanished, the whirling figures of the Dream-makers were stilled, the bell-notes thundered and we sank back, stunned and amazed by this pictured saga of the eternities.

Faint with distance, wreathing through the air in a delicate tracery of sound, began a sweet and languorous chant. Louder and louder it swelled; heavy hangings swung on the wall behind the dais, as through the opening moved a line of graceful figures—the priestesses of the Temple. Right and left they filed to stand in gold and purple ranks flanking the seats of the Dream-makers. Between the long lines the High Priest, Shasta, walked with stately tread, descended the broad steps to the summit of the great red altar and stood with arms raised as in benediction.

The chant swelled to a triumphant paean, the bell-notes thundered, and like the dawn-wind through the mists came the Flower Maiden, her cloud of night-black hair streaming over her snowy robe, the waxen blossoms not more white than the rounded arms that clasped them. With infinite grace she glided to the edge of the altar and stood there gazing down into the awful abyss, the white flowers pressed close to her breast.

Music of unearthly sweetness swelled and vibrated, the bell-notes pealed and the silvery voices of the priestesses rose in golden harmonies. The dark-eyed girl leaned forward and I felt Dan stiffen to iron as her slender figure poised over the terrific void.

And through it all the black-robed figures sat motionless and the ashen Dream-makers gazed with faces rapt and eyes aglow, their spirits winging away to the strange domains which they created for themselves from out their own consciousnesses.

Slowly the girl extended her arms and the waxen blossoms fell one by one into the pit. Up from the chasm shot a beam of dazzling light and from the assembled multitude burst a cry that shook the walls of the mighty cavern; a mighty paean of acclamation, of greeting, a wild exultant note that throbbed with joy and thrilled with dread.

A feeling of exultation seized me; I felt myself grow, expand, power flowed through me like an electric current, strange thoughts filled my brain, my heart beat madly. But in some remote corner of my being was a chilling dread, a premonition of evil, a warning voice that whispered all was not well.

The beam of light thickened, curdled, blinding sparks of radiance shot from it, glowing filaments of light.

Shrouded at first, but glowing clearer as the coruscating spirals drifted away, appeared in the misty flame a face. A face that was human and yet not human, that was neither man nor woman, god nor devil, a *thing*! Beautiful it was with an unearthly beauty that chilled and gladdened; and evil, evil, evil! All the dark and sinister passions of mankind were embodied in that wondrous countenance, all man's lusts and cruelties; and by its beauty they were glorified and made desirable. The body, if body it possessed, was hid in the swirl of flame-light that pulsed and writhed about the exquisite features.

The thing swayed and turned rhythmically, now facing the dais, now the tiers where thronged the multitude. Suddenly it whirled and paused motionless, its eyes fixed on Dan.

God, those eyes! Blue pools of light, the very personification of beauty. Meltingly tender they were, like the eyes of a lovely woman, but in their depths was a mockery, a chilling something that whispered of a soul that was dead.

Within the eyes grew a command, a pleading command that promised, that spoke of glad surrender. They were all woman now. Thus must the eyes of Lilith have seemed to Adam in the Garden.

Slowly the Virginian rose to his feet, while I sat as if turned to stone, utterly powerless to prevent the tragedy. The ghostly melodies swelled, took on a triumphant note as the tall figure stepped toward the altar. Sweetly the eyes smiled on him, they seemed to stretch forth lovely arms to draw him close in an embrace of heavenly love and tenderness. Step by step he advanced, crossed the altar and paused on the very verge, while I groaned in spirit and cursed the invisible chains that held me powerless.

Even as he swayed forward over the gulf, the Flower Maiden spoke, her glorious eyes swimming with tears, her white arms outstretched in a gesture of piteous appeal. Soft as the music of a golden bell the beautiful voice rang through the mists of melody:

"Choose!"

At the sound Dan started as one awakened from a dream. His eyes lost their fixed stare, and the flashing smile, I loved so well, leaped to his lips. He whirled from the thing in the pit and with one swift movement swept the slender girl into his arms.

Instantly the column of fire-mist sank, the swelling music ceased. From the people rose a swelling murmur through which the voice of the High Priest cut like a knife of sound.

"Sacrilege!" he screamed, "blasphemy! Death to the profaner of the shrine!"

In an instant Huayan and I were on our feet, pistols out. I heard the clang of Lotha's sword against its scabbard and a roar of voices from the tiers as the priest stepped forward, brandishing his curved dagger. With a swift movement Dan thrust the girl behind him, his automatic flashed forth to cover

the priest. Stark tragedy hovered in the air.

With a blinding flash the column to the right of the altar flared forth in a sheet of flame, a whispering lance of light sped between Dan and the advancing priest, flashed and vanished.

As if turned to stone, Shasta halted, his eyes fixed on the hooded figure that sat motionless on the right.

"I obey," he croaked through livid lips.

Then shout upon shout rent the stillness of the amphitheatre:

"Hail to the Flower Maiden and her accepted one! Hail to Losaya!"

Once again the Lord of Life had intervened.

CHAPTER XIII

Losaya

SHYLY the Flower Maiden slipped from Dan's embrace, casting a demure, half-fearful glance at the hooded figure of the Lord of Life sitting somber and impassive as before. Only it seemed to me the robed figure bent slightly forward in a gesture of compassion. The girl appeared to see it also, for the apprehensive look left her face and she glanced proudly at Dan, as Lotha stepped forward and smilingly touched him on the arm.

"Come," said the Captain, "you shall speak more with her later."

"Yes, go with Lotha," urged the girl as Dan hesitated. "The people murmur."

The vast throng was indeed growing restless, and with another flashing smile and a whisper of words that brought the color to Losaya's cheeks, he descended and again took his place by my side.

Slowly the columns of flame sank, the bell-notes died away in silvery whisperings and the flower-crowned dwellers filed from the nave in long orderly lines. The priests and priestesses marched with stately tread through the curtained portal, the angry-faced High Minister at their head and with a glowing smile for Dan, the Flower Maid glided after like a sunbeam questing a cloud.

"Come," said Lotha, "we will refresh ourselves and rest. The dawn approaches."

Through the doorway in the rear he led us, leaving the vast temple to the hissing whisper of the Guardian and the dread majesty of the Lord of Life and the Lord of Death.

"Doc, was that thing really there?" murmured Dan to me as we walked along the broad passageway. "Or did we imagine it because of some devilish mesmerism by that crowd on the platform? It nearly had me; I couldn't do a thing but walk to it; in fact I didn't want to do anything else until Losaya spoke. She saved me from that pit of hell-fire. Isn't she a little wonder, though!"

"I saw it plain enough," I answered, "and it certainly looked alive. But it may have been only a picture thrown on the flame by our thoughts. I wish to God I really knew."

In a little rock-walled room we slept dreamlessly on wide skin-covered couches and awakened later to do full justice to a breakfast of venison, fruit and little bread cakes, fresh from the ovens and much resembling corn muffins.

Lotha and Chassa shared our meal but refused to answer any questions, saying that all would be explained and that we would see Losaya soon. Whereupon Dan groaned with impatience, as any lover of any age would do under like circumstances.

It was a shy and blushing Losaya that greeted us in the wide, softly lighted apartment to which Chassa led

us. The Flower Maiden was seated on a slightly raised dais, looking in her snowy robes and gem-encrusted coronet more the queen and the priestess than ever. About her were gathered several of her golden-haired attendants, now all smiles and impish humor; not in the least like the stately habited votaries of the night before.

This was not strange, however, for despite the abominable acts that were committed in its name, the religion of The Flame had nothing gloomy or restraining about it. Rather it was characterized by gay, malicious mockery, a subtle, cynical humor that looked away from rather than toward the serious things of life. The priests and priestesses were allowed to marry, and upon the birth of a child were relieved of all religious duties, if they so desired, reverting back to civil life. Nor were they restricted to their own ranks in choosing a mate, although this was customary.

As we afterward learned, long years of precedent had established the custom of the Flower Maiden mating with the High Priest of the college. But she was not bound to do so; in fact her wish in this matter was inviolable law (the precedent had been broken by Losaya's mother).

Indeed, I was not long in coming to the conclusion that the religion was in the beginning a truly noble faith and had been corrupted either by this devil-god or its followers.

Anyway, this morning Losaya was a very confused and self-conscious girl, hot at all the half-divine priestess who had proudly received the acclamations of the people the night before.

At our approach, she gracefully descended from her throne, smiling and blushing, and gave her hand to Dan as she greeted us, inquiring if we had rested well and if all possible had been done to insure our comfort.

Then to Dan, whose eyes were devouring her:

"You may sit beside me here, if you will, and tell me how you came to this my country, and if it is your will to remain for long."

"Faith and I'll never leave it now, or at least not alone!" exclaimed the Virginian so fervently that Losaya blushed more hotly than ever.

Then, at the sound of something suspiciously like a giggle from the direction of the grouped priestesses, she drew herself up very haughtily and cast an imperious glance toward the offenders, who immediately tried to appear extremely innocent and not in the least interested in the proceedings about the dais.

Dan seated himself on the low step and he and the Flower Maiden were soon oblivious to all that was going on around them.

So taking Huayan by the arm I strolled over to where Chassa, surrounded by a group of laughing priestesses, was holding forth at great length on some subject that was evidently both interesting and amusing to his audience. The maidens were slightly constrained at first, but they were women, and curious; so Huayan and I were soon besieged with questions that taxed our ingenuity to answer:

"Were the women of our land all tall and dark like ourselves?"

"Did they dress as did the women of Amnestar?"

"Could they marry as they pleased?"

"Did the men of our land take more than one wife?"

"Were our women beautiful?"

And a thousand and one things more. Most of the bombardment was directed at me, for the grave Triguillo answered briefly when at all.

Very fair were these young votaries and I will have to admit I was thoroughly enjoying myself, when suddenly there was a startled exclamation from one of the girls and a hush fell over the little group, a hush

through which we plainly heard the golden voice of the Flower Maiden:

"And is not there some fair woman of your own land to whom your thoughts return at times?"—Oh, the age-old question of a maid to a man!

Then a sardonic intonation from the direction of the doorway, and turning, I beheld Shasta, his arrogant countenance made blacker yet by the hate and jealousy that stormed in his blue eyes.

"An audience is granted, oh, Flower Maiden," he rasped, "and you have little time in which to prepare."

"The message has already been brought to me; I will not delay the Lords," answered the priestess, her sweet voice quivering with anger she did not attempt to conceal.

The priest bowed coldly and with a lowering glance at Dan, who returned it with interest, vanished into the passageway.

"Oh, I hate him, I hate him!" exclaimed Losaya passionately. "And I fear him also: he is wicked; he came but to spy!"

"Well, perhaps the Lords will measure strength at last," she murmured, half in soliloquy, "and the Lord of Life is powerful."

"You must leave me now, my guests," she said to us, a smile breaking the somberness of her face like a flash of sunlight. "An audience is granted certain great chiefs and nobles, and custom requires me to be present."

Whereupon she extended her hand for Dan to kiss, but that impetuous young man promptly gathered the Flower Maiden into the clasp of two very capable arms and kissed Losaya where nature intended kisses to be placed. So that when at last he released her, she fled blushing and starry-eyed to a little door that evidently led to her own private boudoir, if such a word may be used in connection with these strange dwellings in the heart of a volcano.

The Captain of the Guard joined us in our own apartment and Chassa's graphic account of the happenings in the reception room brought a smile to his lips, but he frowned and looked grave when told of Shasta's coming.

"We must watch these priests," he said. "They are treacherous, and I fear that the long threatened struggle between the priests of Amnestar and the rulers of the land will flare forth at last. The priests are strong—aye, very strong, and they have The Flame to help them, and perchance the Lord of Death. Well, we are strong also, and I think we can depend on the Lord of Life for assistance, and no small assistance at that."

"Lotha," I asked, "just what are the Lords? Are they not men like ourselves?"

A strange expression of indecision, a flickering shadow of troubled doubt, passed over the Captain's face, and he was silent for so long that I thought he was going to ignore the question.

"My friend, I do not know," he said at last. "As far as we have any knowledge, the Lords have always been. No man has seen their faces, no man has heard their voices. They act through the columns of light; the High Priest is their voice; the Flower Maiden attends them. We know the Lord of Life is just, can read men's souls and thoughts, can slay from afar. But seldom does he slay, and then only to protect those whose cause is just. To the Lord of Death is given those whom the Lord of Life desires not to protect; and the Lord of Death slays quickly and mercifully with the lance of light that wafts men's souls into the nothingness from which they came. The people say that the Lord of Death takes these souls unto himself, but of this I do not know. We know little of the Lord of Death or his powers, and because of this he is terrible. I know that



For an instant he stood bathed in the snowy radiance, his bones clearly visible, his body glowing like an alabaster lamp.

he favors the High Priest, Shasta; and the belief is that between the Lords is rivalry—aye, and hatred, but that a decree by One who is greater than they forbids them to harm one another. Also, there is a whisper of punishment meted out to certain high, proud spirits who angered the One, and for their sins were cast out from their high estate and doomed to abide in the world of men until their sin and the results thereof should be destroyed by one sent to fulfill an appointed destiny. However, this is but the shadowy legend of a people, and none may say it true or otherwise. Yet this I know: the Lords have power, and they are terrible."

I was greatly impressed by this bit of folk lore with its parable, which was so like the one that threads our own Christian belief.

CAPTER XIV

A Blow in the Dark

SOON Lotha departed on one of his interminable military missions, and with Chassa for a guide, we set out to explore the passages and caverns that honeycombed the mountain.

Never had I seen anything that could remotely compare with this stupendous work of nature. There were rooms in which the walls and ceilings could be but dimly seen even in the pervading golden radiance, so great were their dimensions. There were passages that flamed and sparkled as if all the precious stones in the world had been sprayed upon their walls. There were pits that must have led to the center of the earth; and in some of these we could see as it glowed that strange fire that marked the abyss that yawned before the great altar.

I began to experience a lively apprehension lest these tremendous vaults father other and greater dangers than The Flame and the two Lords. That they did was forcefully impressed upon us in short order.

We were just passing from a narrow gallery into a wide cavern when black robed figures darted from a dim corridor. Knives gleamed and with a warning shout Chassa whipped out his heavy sword and struck with unbelievable quickness. I heard the weapon crunch through flesh and bone and a piercing yell echoed through the caves.

"Back," screamed Chassa, slashing at the black demons who leaped grimly from the shadows. "Back or we die! Ye are unarmed."

He was slightly mistaken in this last. The attack had been so sudden and unexpected that for an instant we were paralyzed with astonishment, and, had it not been for the instinctive sword play of the trained warrior, we would have been cut down without a chance to strike a blow. But the brief respite was all that was necessary.

Our comrade's cry had hardly left his lips when fire streamed from the muzzle of Dan's automatic. Nor were Huayan and I much behind him. Almost as quickly as it was launched, the attack had failed. Half a dozen black robed figures strewed the floor of the passage, and the rest were in wild flight, shrieking in terror as they went. Dan sent a couple of bullets whining over their heads to speed them on their way and then turned with a grim laugh to where Chassa stood white-faced and staring, his bloody sword gripped in a shaking hand.

"What—what manner of men are you to cast flame and death from your naked hands?" he gasped.

In the excitement, Chassa had failed to note the pistols.

"We did not come to this land altogether unarmed, friend," I answered. "We have some little store of wis-

dom in our country. I think our enemy, the High Priest, will have something to ponder on when his assassins make their report. That is if they are indeed his hirelings."

"No doubt as to that!" exclaimed this soldier passionately. "Who else would do this thing? Who else in the land would dare to offer violence to the chosen of the Flower Maiden? This means war. Your lives are in danger, my friends, and you will need this strange power which is yours, if you are to survive. Tell me how you slew these men with flame, even as do the Lords."

We were sure we could trust Chassa, so we explained the mechanism of the pistols, cautioning him, however, not to divulge his knowledge.

The soldier readily appreciated the enhanced value of the weapons so long as they remained a mystery to our enemies and promised to say nothing.

Lotha's excitement was great when informed of what had happened, and he agreed with Chassa that an open rupture with the priests was imminent.

"However," he said, "as yet we know nothing for certain. We can only wait. Tonight there is a ceremony and the dispensing of what Shasta and his priests term justice. You will see the justice of Amnestar, my friends, and the seeing will not be pleasant; but there is no help for it, and the knowledge may prove useful at some time. I will be near you on the dais, and for your life, do nothing, no matter what may occur. The Lord of Death holds sway at this ceremony, and he is terrible in anger. After this ceremony is over, we shall see."

CHAPTER XV

The Justice of Amnestar

WHITE faces, a trembling blur of countenances. Thousands upon thousands they banked solidly, tier on tier, up to the far distant outer walls of the mighty fane. The people of Amnestar were here to witness the vengeance of their god; and the ministers of the god were here, as ever, the personification of intolerance.

In crimson now was clad the High Priest of the Temple; bands of scarlet slashed the snowy robes of the hierophants; the purple tunics of the priestesses were edged with red. The Flower Maiden alone wore stainless white. And as ever and always, those dread figures that sat motionless in their somber majesty were clothed in lifeless black.

There was a tenseness in the air, a sense of impending catastrophe, a feeling that tragedy lurked in this cloistered place with its strange columns of flame and its hissing pit that housed a something that was not of the green earth that smiled beyond these eternal walls. Death was here—death and something else, something totally different from the great Bringer of Peace.

Idly my gaze swept the vast hall, noting the symmetry of the carven walls, the mighty sweep of the doomed roof that showed dimly so far above our heads. I noted, too, that here and there great stalactites hung pendant, their corrugated columns gleaming in the light. There were many of these and they added materially to the impressiveness of the scene; they seemed so cold and lone in all this vastness, like swords of Damocles suspended over the heads of the worshippers. Instinctively I glanced up to see if we were favored by such a strikingly appropriate symbol.

There was none directly above us, but over the pit hung a mighty inverted cone that looked as if it might have been drawn from the void itself, like the stopper

from a bottle. I could not help smiling at the absurdness of the fancy; as if any machinery manipulated by human hands could lift that tremendous mass of stone and suspend it in such a manner.

The thing fascinated me, and I found myself studying its structure closely. I discovered that the mass differed in shape from its fellows: it was fashioned like an hour glass. That is, from the greatest circumference, what would have normally been the base, it curved sharply inward, adhering to the roof by a comparatively slender continuance that looked like a mere thread against the immense flare of the false base.

A curious phenomenon indeed, a freak of the riotous gases that had hollowed out this place during titanic convulsions in the dim past.

The thunderous diapason of the bell-notes recalled me from my contemplation, and I turned to the drama that was unfolding on the dais.

The Dream-makers were again weaving their weird dance; but this time with results totally different from those attending their former performance. Again the misty, opalescent screen formed, but this time there were no pictures limned thereon. Instead, there were waves and spirals of color. Flaming and billowing, the aching tinction writhed before our eyes, whirling our senses in tune with their endless gyrations.

The effect was terrible; the mind reeled under the blazing bombardment and the emotions soared to indescribable heights of reaction.

Emerald, rose, orange, turquoise and amethyst—undulating prisms stormed before our eyes, seeming to envelop our spirits and make us even as the coruscating chromatism that bathed us. Gradually the color waves grew harsher and more nerve searing; at first I had felt but a mild exhilaration, a rather pleasant intoxication of the senses as the rosy mists merged to soft greens and mauves. Came a sense of irritation, a feeling of enmity against all things, a creeping desire for vengeance upon something or someone formless as yet. The feeling became stronger as the lurid purples and livid yellows became more intense. A harsh murmur was welling from the great amphitheatre, the growling beast-note of the mob—the blood note. I tore my gaze from the swirling color-mists and glanced at my companions. Their faces were set in harsh lines, their eyes gleamed, their breath came hot and short. The expressions of the Guardsmen were the same, only more accentuated, crueler; but on the countenances of Lotha and Chassa was only cynical amusement slightly tinged with contempt: they were not under the spell of the color waves. At once the influence left me also and remained only a feeling of nausea. The priests were masks of evil and the face of Shasta was the face of a devil; but the Flower Maiden was white as death, and in her eyes was anguish unspeakable.

Darker and darker grew the mist of color until it was a weaving flood of red—red of the smoke-veiled sun, red of devouring flame, red of slaughter, red of blood, blood, blood! The mutter of the people grew to a snarling roar, a savage animal growl for prey. The dancers whirled in a bloody mist, the bell-notes clanged and thundered and the vast concourse howled like wolves eager for the kill.

Suddenly the two awesome pillars of flame flared high in a burst of dazzling light. Instantly the dancers were still, the bloody color waves vanished, the bell-notes and the whining chant of the multitude were silenced. The air was tense as finely drawn wire and in the fierce white light the eyes of the votaries glared like those of hunting beasts. Dan sagged back in his chair with a trembling sigh that was almost a sob, his face curiously white and wan. The madness had left him, as it had also left Huayan.

The bell-notes thundered in one tremendous burst of roaring sound and from the portal at the rear of the dais emerged figures—stalwart priests in black robes slashed with scarlet, and in their midst three figures: a woman and two men.

The woman was very fair; her hair was the gold of the morning sunlight and her skin was dazzling white, but in her wide blue eyes was terror. She was bound with golden chains, as were her companions.

To the light-bathed summit of the altar they were dragged, their shackles were struck off and they were left alone with the High Priest whose countenance was that of an exultant demon.

In the deathly hush the words of the High Minister of The Flame pealed through the mighty hall like sounding organ notes:

"Behold, ye people of Pacama. Behold the profaners of a Shrine. Witness to the justice of Amnestar, oh, people—witness and be warned!"

A full-throated roar gave back from the multitude: "We bear witness, oh, Minister!"

"What say ye, blasphemers?" thundered the priest. "What say ye that ye should not be a sacrifice to the Holy One ye desecrate?"

The woman clung in terror to the younger man and neither spoke; but the other, a finely featured, nobly proportioned man of middle age, answered in a voice of scorn and hatred:

"What say we, false priest of a false god? This we say to you, perverter of the truth: We die, the victims of your lust and cruelty; but you, too, shall pass, your power shall be broken, here shall be broken the power of the Thing you reverence, and he who sits there in robe not so black as the sin upon his soul, here shall he—"

The pillar on the left flamed to the vaulted ceiling and from the blazing column shot a single rapier-ray of searing light. Full upon the chest it struck the speaker; for an instant he stood bathed in the snowy radiance, his bones clearly visible, his body glowing like an alabaster lamp. Then he vanished utterly and completely. Not even a heap of ashes remained; he just ceased to be.

Silence, a ghastly silence of terror, then the booming notes of the High Priest:

"Behold the justice of Amnestar, oh, ye people; behold oh, ye strangers from afar! Behold the might of the Lord of Death—behold and be afraid!"

Like an echo to the words the deathly sweet chant of the priestesses burst forth. A dreamy light-mist began rising from the pit. It grew and thickened, curdling to a silvery beam of liquid light that shot up to the great stalactite, bathing it in a ghostly radiance that revealed every pit and seam in the rock. A chiming of liquid harp notes, a whispering beat of melody that muted all about us, and appeared in the misty radiance—the Face!

Sweetly human it was, and beautiful, so beautiful. In the wondrous eyes was a wistful appeal, a longing, a promise of joys inconceivable. Full on the man and woman it gazed, and the eyes were calling, calling.

Like walkers in a dream the pair stepped forward like creatures moved by a will other than their own; and on their faces was terror, and longing. Another step—I felt Dan rise in his seat, heard Lotha's hissing whisper of warning, felt Huayan's iron grip on my arm. "You cannot help them," breathed Chassa close behind me. "Wait, our time is not yet."

And now the fated pair were at the altar's verge, leaning over the awful chasm where swayed that terrible, beautiful thing which lured them to destruction. Forward they stepped, into the pulsing beam of light!

For an instant they paused there in the glow, then

with a terrible shriek they shot downward; and, a fearful mask, on which was portrayed all the evil, all the lusts, all the cruelty of a world, the Face sank after them. The light ray vanished, up from the depths winged a horrible, malignant hiss, while all about us mourned a sighing whisper, a shuddering thing of woe unspeakable, through which pulsed crystal harp notes, icy sweet, piercing.

Silence; then the thundering voice of the High Priest:

"Behold the justice of Amnestar the holy! Behold the justice of The Flame!"

Trembling, sick, sweat pouring from me, I sank back in my chair, the vision of that awful mask of cruelty burned upon my brain as if the fires from which it rose had seared it there. Dan was swearing to himself and vowing to shoot Shasta and the Lord of Death before the night was over.

"Doc, that is what they intended for me!" he rasped. "All right, Lotha, I'll be good, but this is just a little bit more than a man can be expected to stand. Did you see the look on that thing, Doc? It's the devil, that's what it is. I never did believe in one, but I do now, and that Shasta is an imp of the first water. I'll see if he can stop lead, yet!"

I felt much the same as did Dan, but I knew that any move on our part would be fatal not only to ourselves but to the cause which our friends of the Guard had espoused. I believed now that the Flame was a mere figment of the imagination, called forth by those master-mesmerists, the Dream-makers; but that ray of light which the Lord of Death knew so well how to handle was something very real. There was nothing supernatural about that; it was but the application of some natural force. However, this did not in the least detract from its destructive capabilities.

Again the bell-notes thundered, and the multitude joined in a swelling, triumphant chant. Slowly the priestesses filed from the dais and in their wake swayed the Flower Maiden, her head bowed, her glorious eyes swimming with tears. One appealing, tremulous smile she cast to Dan as she reached the portal, then vanished with her attendants. Shasta followed with stately tread, his eyes glancing neither to right nor left, his face alight with a horrible satisfaction. Still chanting, the worshippers left the amphitheatre, and last of all we and the silent Guardsmen walked slowly from the dais in the wake of the ashen Dream-makers. But soundless, motionless, the black-cowled figures of the Lords sat gazing into the hellish chasm that gaped before the bloody altar.

CAPTER XVI

War

IMMEDIATELY on reaching our apartment, Lotha left us. His lieutenants went with him; only Chassa remained, and he seemed in a state of intense excitement.

"What's the matter, old man?" asked Dan. "What's in the wind?"

"Wait," was his sole reply, "we will know soon."

Very soon we did, for shortly a wrathful Lotha returned.

"Escaped!" he replied tersely to Chassa's question. "He either suspected or was informed of our plan. Instead of going to his apartments, he vanished into one of these mole burrows. It is useless to search; there are a thousand avenues of escape known only to the priests. Shasta has fled to some one of his inland temples, there to gather his forces. He will strike soon. The Guard can hold the city, of that I am sure, but I

fear for the rest of the land: our king is not a strong man, and the army has been weakened by continued peace. These warrior priests are men and fighters, that I must say, and they hold high courage. Were it not for the Guard, Shasta would triumph with hardly a blow.

"Strange, is it not, my friends, that Shasta should have created that which may be his destruction? The Guard was fostered by him and made what it is to defend the city from the attacks of the tribes of the western mountains; and now the Guard alone stands between this ambitious priest and the dominion that he craves."

"Ah," murmured Chassa, "but Shasta erred when he requested that the younger brother of the king be made Captain of the Sacred Guard. Brothers oft are made of different stuff, and Lotha, Prince of Huatha, is not Amartes, King of Pacama.

"Would that he were!" he muttered, apparently as an afterthought.

"Na, my friends, do not speak treason against our king," answered Lotha sadly. "My poor brother is weak, I know, but he is just, or was before this devil of a priest wormed himself into his confidence.

"But come, make ready; Losaya journeyed with us to Amnestar, and she is no doubt waiting."

Through the silver beauty of the night the fairy chariots swept back to the sacred city. Losaya, smuggled in between Dan and myself, was a different Losaya from the slightly imperious lady of the mountain temple; her laughter rang in the misted stillness, and her voice was as silvery as the moonlight. She was just a very sweet and attractive woman, happy with the man she loved, and she seemed more desirable than ever. I was almost moved to envy Dan his good fortune, and told him so, much to the amusement of the Flower Maid.

"Ah, my friend," she said, "but you do not know Losaya: 'I have a most terrible temper, and I talk too much, and I am very silly, and—' Here Dan stopped her lips most effectively in the fashion approved of lovers; whereupon she scolded him for his audacity and began asking numerous questions concerning his past life, hinting that he knew altogether too much about love-making to have lived as blamelessly as he protested.

All too soon we reached the golden twilight of Amnestar and left Losaya at the white-walled palace of the Flower Maiden, about which Lotha posted a strong guard.

We found that Shasta had moved with swiftness. His priests had already left the city in fleet chariots, bound for no one knew where. The officer in charge of the gates had thought nothing of the sudden exodus, for the priests were wont to depart at all times on missions that called them to the widely separated temples of the interior.

All day long the streets resounded to the tramp of armed men: the glittering legions of the Guard thronged the squares and lined the broad summit of the wall. The gates were heavily manned, for Lotha was taking no chances on a surprise attack. His force was greatly outnumbered; there were but ten thousand of the Guard, while Shasta could put thrice that number in the field.

There were other garrisons throughout the country, and some of these would remain loyal, but others were under the influence of the priests.

Lotha considered that the real conflict would be between Shasta's priestly forces and the Guard; the crafty ecclesiastic would strike swiftly, before the people of the country were fully aroused and prepared to take sides. With the sacred city in his possession and the Guard destroyed, he would hold the whip-hand

and the people would flock to his standard, it being customary in this age as in others for the unthinking to rally to a winner.

Toward evening, scouts returned with the information that the priests of the many temples were on the move and that Shasta, with a force of several thousands, lay at the site of the great temple of Trinticola, about half a day's march from Amnestar.

This temple, Lotha explained, was in reality a great fortress, and its garrison of priests numbered more than a thousand. It was the center of a circle which comprised a number of temples so grouped as to form a widespread defense of the sacred city on the western circumference of the circle.

It seemed to me that the great wall which surrounded the city would be ample safeguard against any attack, but Lotha was not so sanguine.

"They will have engines," he said. "They will build towers that can creep close to the wall, and machines that will cast great stones in our midst. The wall is high and broad, but it can be scaled and even breached by determined men. Shasta is a determined man and his priests will follow him with fanatical zeal. We will find it no easy task to hold the city, but hold it we will. We will let Shasta break his strength against the wall; then we will crush him. That is if the Lord of Life can hold the Lord of Death and not permit him to enter the struggle. I think the Lord of Life is the stronger, but if he is not and the Black Lord lends his power to assist Shasta, none may say what will be the outcome."

This was very disturbing and that night, as I gazed at the glowing summit of the first mountain, I wondered what would be the result if the two Lords entered the combat with their devilish light rays. I felt certain that the things could annihilate an army with as little effort as the one had wafted the condemned blasphemer into the nothingness. And the question arose: could these creatures be slain by human agencies? It was preposterous to think otherwise; all the training of a life devoted to science rose to refute the possibility of their being invulnerable. But in the back of my mind was a sense of uneasiness that I could not shake off: what if there was a spirit world, or a world of beings different from ourselves, whose physical and mental equipment varied so radically from ours that they were immune to death as we understand it? The prospect was rather terrifying, especially as it appeared probable that we were to engage in conflict with one of these creatures.

Dawn disclosed a development that drove such vague conjectures to the background. The danger of the Lords was problematical, but there was nothing problematical to what the sparkling flood of morning sunlight revealed. The plain to the east glittered with the weapons and the burnished armor of a vast host that advanced steadily to within a few hundred yards of the city wall. Bugles shrilled, cymbals clashed and the army broke ranks and began to make camp.

At least thirty thousand, we estimated there were. Clouds of cavalry hovered on their flanks, their mounts the fleet little deer-steeds and the ponderous herbivorous dinosaurs that moved with such grotesque swiftness. There was no confusion; with orderly promptitude tents were erected and fires started. At the center of the infantry line rose a pavilion of purple and gold, and over it waved a white banner emblazoned with a golden device, which Lotha said was a reproduction of the Face in the Flame. Captains could be seen coming and going, and ere long the stately figure of Shasta himself, clad in flashing armor, his tawny head bare to the sunlight, appeared, and he gazed long and earnestly at the city that dared defy him. Every inch

the soldier he looked, and we almost forgot his villainy in admiration of the impressive figure he made at the head of his legions.

"Doc, this alone is worth coming a million years to see," said Dan, his gray eyes flashing with excitement. "Shasta's a man, I'll say that for him. He is going to make things interesting for us, and we're going to make them interesting for him, too. I've a notion to take a shot at him for luck; it would be a little like murder, though, richly as he deserves it. Rather a long shot for a pistol, anyway, and we don't want to detract from the impressiveness of our guns by registering any misses. Perhaps I'll get a chance at him when the ball formally opens, and then I'll even up that little dance on nothing he planned for me up there in the mountain.

"Say, Doc, you look like a picture I once saw of Richard the Lion-heart as the Black Knight; that sword is as long as one of these fellows is tall."

I laughed, but felt a trifle pleased, at that. Lotha had insisted on outfitting us in the wonderful chain mail he himself wore; and the armorers had labored night and day to that end, for on account of our great height there was nothing ready made that we could wear. The smiths had taken it on themselves to provide weapons which they considered suitable, and for me had been fashioned a mighty, double-edged broadsword fully five feet in length but so perfectly balanced that in my great hands it was as easily wielded as a rapier. It appeared that at last my great strength might be put to some practical use.

Dan and Huayan were similarly accoutered, and striking figures they made in their glowing armor and glittering weapons. Our guns and cartridge belts were somewhat incongruous in this medieval setting, but were too valuable to be discarded for the sake of appearance.

CAPTER XVII

The Attack

ALL day long the camp was a scene of feverish activity: engines of warfare were assembled and elaborate preparations made for storming the walls. We could see great wooden towers growing under the hands of the builders, while catapults for casting stones and machines, which Lotha said would throw darts with great force and accuracy, appeared as if by magic along the front of the camp site. The implements for conflict of these people were strikingly similar to those used by early medieval races of our own historical age and I was intensely interested in all these preparations from a scientific point of view as well as from a more personal angle.

Engines similar to those used by the enemy were mounted on the walls and quantities of spears and missiles were placed ready to hand. The storehouses of the city were amply provisioned, so we had no fear of famine, especially as our Captain anticipated that Shasta would bend all his energies toward the capitulation of the city with the least possible delay: the warrior held that failure to immediately take Amnestar would be fatal to the plans of the High Priest, as the king would undoubtedly dispatch troops to the aid of his brother, and without the added prestige of a signal victory over the Guard, Shasta could not hope to rally sufficient reinforcements to withstand such an attack. We were in for stern fighting in the near future.

That night huge fires were lighted on the walls and the guard was doubled; but although sounds from the enemy's camp told of unceasing activity, the dark hours passed peacefully and we enjoyed a good night's rest despite the excitement under which we labored.

Dawn found us awake, however, and after a hurried breakfast, we resumed our stations on the wall. Chassa was with us and in excellent spirits. He was a born soldier and never happier than when he was in the midst of conflict or under the promise of it soon to come.

The sun had hardly cast its first reddish rays over the smoky crown of the mountain when a fierce blare of trumpets and a wild clashing of cymbals sounded from the enemy's camp; it was the signal for the attack.

Line after line of glittering soldiery formed and moved toward the wall. The great towers that frowned at regularly spaced intervals crept forward with a steady, inexorable movement that made them appear doubly menacing; the long, snaky javelin casters kept pace.

Silently the glowing lines advanced. Then the cymbals clashed again and from the ranks of the warrior-priests burst a wild and savage chant, a fierce battle song that chilled the blood; for its tones were cruel—evil.

Lotha glanced apprehensively along the line of Guardsmen who stood ready to defend the wall.

"It is the Death Song of The Flame," he whispered to me. "I fear its effect upon my men; from childhood they have been taught to dread it."

I followed his gaze and myself noted the evil influence of the chant over the Guardsmen. Cheeks that had been ruddy and glowing were pale; eyes that had sparkled with zest of battle were lackluster, strong hands that had held sword and spear so firmly now trembled. It was the religious fear, as old as man himself—the fear of the unknown.

Suddenly, above the chanting of the priests, rose another song, a song carried by a heavenly-sweet baritone and a thundering bass that was like a mighty wind sweeping the mountain peaks.

Standing on a watch tower that rose high above the level of the parapet, Dan and Huayan flung this glorious challenge to the advancing host.

God! how they sang, and such a song! The words, which the Trigullo had evidently taught the Virginian at some time or other, were Aimara, and the spirits of all the red-blooded fighting men of all time seemed to live in those rolling syllables. Mighty-thewed men of the caves shook their ponderous clubs of stone and strode to meet the mammoth face to face; skin-clad giants hurled their bronze tipped spears in the face of advancing hosts and went raving down to death, dealing destruction with their naked hands; bearded vikings leaped from their dragon-ships to crush the opposing shield-wall with axe and blade and flashing javelin; fair-haired men of the North flung themselves in wild abandon upon the iron-faced legions of imperial Rome; gay cavaliers in scarlet clad and gold rode with song and jest to death on stricken fields, while Glory strode before, gathering the souls of men as a maiden garners roses!

I found myself pounding on the wall with the hilt of my mighty sword and roaring out a measure in time with the beat of the swelling rhythm. All about me men were singing, wordless refrains, improvised chants of defiance, swinging peans of victories to be. Eyes that the moment before had been dull and fear filled now glowed with the light of battle, color flamed in pallid cheeks, sinewy hands brandished weapons and shook them in the face of the oncoming cohorts.

The long lines of the attackers wavered, took on a ragged appearance, their step had lost the confident swing; they seemed hesitant. The priests had ceased their chanting and captains could be seen hurrying along the ranks, ordering them anew, laboring to restore the lost confidence.

"They have saved us," exulted Lotha. "Shasta has lost; the attack will fail and after he has exhausted himself on our defenses, we will sally forth and crush him.

"Strange how small a thing the fate of a nation hinges on: without their song our men would have gone down to defeat, slain by their own nameless fears. Now they would dare the Lord of Death himself and hurl their challenge to The Flame!

"It will be a battle, though: see, the catapults are going to try a fight of stones."

The Captain was right: the great engines crashed and ponderous missiles hurtled through the air; but the range was great and only a few reached the wall, doing no damage.

Onward pressed the glittering lines; now the casting machines were at work and spears began to whistle through the air. Our men lay close behind the protecting embrasures and the first volleys of javelins failed to find a mark. Our own engines went into action and cheers went up as a number of men in the front ranks of the attackers fell and a catapult on one of the enemy's towers was knocked to pieces by a huge stone.

But by this time the towers all along the line had crept up within range and we began to suffer from the bombardment. Stones crashed against the parapet, breaching it in places, while darts found their marks and the air resounded with yells of pain and rage mingled with the crash and thud of the projectiles in a devilish pandemonium. The towers were very close now, and although several had been destroyed by our catapults, there was still an alarming number of them, their catapults thudding, their platforms swarming with men who cast spears and stood in readiness to fling bridges upon the wall as soon as the distance was not too great. Lotha was fully aware of the danger and had ordered his forces accordingly. Under cover of the parapet, which had admirably withstood the battering of the catapults, men concentrated where the towers would reach the barrier, and everything was in readiness to give the besiegers a warm welcome when they boarded us. Dan, Huayan and I were grouped where the royal standard flew and Lotha stood giving orders to his picked lieutenants who dared death to carry them to all parts of the line of defense.

We had not up to this time used our side arms, our Captain advising that they be saved for a dire emergency, should one arise, when their telling effect might be of the greatest importance. A wise strategist was this golden-haired leader, one who was fully aware of the psychological value of surprise, and prepared to make capital of anything that might offer.

Things were beginning to get very warm on the wall; stones and javelins whizzed by in storms, altogether too many finding marks. A man on my immediate left dropped, screaming horribly, a six-foot javelin driven through the lower part of his chest; a stone shattered the crest of the parapet near by and showered us with small fragments that did no real damage but were not pleasant. The towers crept forward in spite of the stones and javelins with which we peppered them. Almost before we realized it, a score of bridges crashed upon the summit of the embrasure and we found ourselves engaged in desperate, hand-to-hand struggle with a raging swarm of wild-eyed, golden-haired priests who poured on the wall in spite of our efforts to cast off the gangways and stem the flood of warriors that rolled down them.

It was fierce and bloody work; the priests fought with the mad abandon of fanatics and the Guardsmen with the courage of desperation. No quarter was asked or given: it was death to the fallen and red slaughter for the living. We cast them over the parapet to fall

crushed and broken on the ground fifty feet below; we beat them down with sword and axe; we pierced them with stabbing spears—but still they came. Their captains led them, urging them on with fierce cries and wild, weird chants; where one fell, two leaped forward to take his place. All along the line the conflict raged; more towers gained the wall and new legions flung down to meet our reserves who poured from the protecting guard stations to beat them back. To and fro across the thirty-foot width of summit the battle raged; now we drove them to the verge of the parapet; now we were forced almost to the unprotected inner edge of the wall. It began to look as if we would be swept over to destruction and the city would fall.

During all the swirl and storm of fighting I had watched sharply for the stalwart form of the treacherous High Priest: I desired nothing better than to test his vaunted strength and skill in single combat and see if he could stand before the sweep of the mighty sword that leveled opposing warriors like grain before the reaper. I am not a skilled swordsman, but I am quick for a big man and my strength is such that the armor and opposing blades of the comparatively slight Pacamians were as nothing before it. I left a red trail of slaughter behind me as I raged across the summit. Dan and Huayan were also taking heavy toll, the one a cool, crafty swordsman who knew every trick of the trade, the other a savage demon gone berserk with lust of conflict. Through it all I somehow felt that Shasta was my particular prey, and I fought with this one object in view: to come to grips with the villain who was responsible for all this needless killing.

All of a sudden I saw him. Down the landing bridge of a great tower he swept, his rich armor gleaming in the sunlight, his mighty blade cleaving a path before him as he leaped to the wall, his thundering organ voice pealing out encouragement to his men. With a shout, I started for the spot, Dan and Huayan close behind me.

Slashing, stabbing, parrying, our weapons mowing a swath, we ripped our way through the seething mass, our goal the parapet edge where Shasta towered looming to his followers and urging them to drive the Guardsmen from the wall.

The priests interpreted our intentions and the pick of their warriors thronged to oppose us. A forest of swords ringed the stand of the leader and try as we would, we could not break their defense. Man after man fell before our onslaught; our blades were red from point to hilt; but still others swarmed to take the place of the fallen. My arm grew weary with constant effort, my golden armor was slashed and dented, I was bleeding from half a dozen minor wounds; and still those yellow-haired demons leaped to meet my swinging blade. A swirl of fierce fighting in our rear prevented Lotha from sending reinforcements to assist us and we were gradually being hemmed in on all sides by blood-mad priests who were willing to dare almost certain death to come to grips with us. A booming note from the High Priest, an answering yell from his warriors, and came a rush that swept us back by its very weight of numbers. I stumbled over the body of a dead priest, slipped in a pool of blood and in an instant was down with a dozen frantic swordsmen hacking at me. I flung up my blade to ward off the blows, but it was beaten down; a sword grazed my forehead, bringing blood and slightly dazing me. Dimly I realized that this was the end; bloody points gleamed before my eyes.

The rattling crash of an automatic, the menace of steel whipped away and I heard cries of pain and terror.

Dashing the blood from my eyes I struggled to an elbow. Dan and Huayan were standing over me, pour-

ing a withering fire into the faces of the priests. Bodies strewed the ground and men were fleeing madly back across the landing bridge. I dropped my sword, dragged out my gun and blazed away at the retreating forms.

This was too much. All along the line the panic spread; men fled shrieking from the wall, swamping the gangways, several of which gave way under the strain, crashing to the ground with their screaming loads. The retreat became a rout as the Guardsmen recovered from their amazement and leaped after the fleeing priests, shouting and smiting. Some of the towers pushed off and began to move slowly toward the distant camp, but many were abandoned, their occupants escaping by way of the lower doors, and these our catapults soon knocked to pieces.

Huayan helped me to my feet, wiping the blood from my face with a white handkerchief he had by some miracle managed to keep clean. Dan, after anxiously inspecting my wounds and finding them trivial, began raging at his luck and marksmanship.

"Doc, the devil or something saved him," he stormed. "Just as I pulled trigger, a soldier stumbled in front of him and took the slug, and next shot I stepped in some blood and slipped as I fired; then that gang swept him into the tower and I lost him. Of all the devilish luck and poor shooting! Is that troublemaker always going to escape?"

That Shasta had won free was certain, for shortly we perceived him at a distance, striving with voice and gesture to bring some semblance of order to his demoralized forces. Dan tried a couple of shots for luck, but the distance was too great, and the only result was to cause Shasta to move hurriedly farther from the wall.

"If I only had a rifle," growled the Virginian, "I'd settle this matter once for all. What do you say now, Lotha?" he called to the Captain of the Guard, who had just come up.

"Again you have saved us!" exclaimed the golden warrior, his blue eyes sparkling. "Shasta had all but won. I doubt if we could have driven him back without such loss as would have crippled us. Now it is he who is crippled. He has lost thousands of his best warriors and the remainder are disheartened, and fearful of the 'Flaming Death,' as they name your means of slaying from afar. I doubt if he will try again, and our reinforcements should come soon. We may even stage a counter-attack, although our losses have been heavy. Now, what is this excitement approaching, I wonder?"

From the broad avenue that ran through the city to the western gate came the sound of shouting and we could see a troop of mounted Guardsmen approaching.

"They are from the garrison at the western gate," exclaimed the Captain in an anxious voice. "I wonder, can disaster have overtaken us there? Ah, one wears the uniform of the king's own guard; it is a courier who has circled Shasta's camp and entered the city. Now we shall hear some news."

We did, much more startling than any of us expected, the Captain especially.

To the inside doorway of the gate tower the little cavalcade swept with clashing hooves. Hurriedly they dismounted; the countersign was given, the warriors filed in and shortly emerged upon the summit of the wall.

Straight to where we stood, they came, a stalwart figure accoutered somewhat differently from our own troops, in the lead. His armor was covered with dust, his face sweat streaked; but his bearing was high and noble, and I noted that around his neck he wore the circlet of blue stones that was always the insignia of high rank. A pace distant, the warrior dropped to one

knee and raised a hand in customary royal salute.

"Hail to Lotha, King of Pacama!" he shouted in a deep voice that carried far along the wall.

A look of astonishment spread over the face of the Captain of the Guard, a look tinged with misgiving; his officers edged nearer, their faces alight with eagerness.

"What means this, *arnasta*, why address me in a manner due only to my brother?" he inquired sternly.

"Sire," answered the officer, "yestermorn your brother, the king that was, died by an assassin's hand, and your brother was without issue. Of the royal blood remains only Lotha of Huatha, now ruler of Pacama."

For a moment the Captain bowed his head, and when he raised it, his eyes were wet and on his face was sadness, but a new dignity clothed him and he looked every inch a king.

"My poor brother," he said in a low voice, "that you should meet death in such a manner!

"This is Shasta's work," he continued in fierce tones. "Death shall be his portion; I shall show no mercy. Tomorrow we march against this villainous priest and crush him and all that are with him!"

"Aye, Lord," answered the warrior, "he dies; half an hundred thousand men march even now to aid the king. The dawn should bring their van."

CHAPTER VIII

The Lord of Life

AFTER giving orders relative to the care of the wounded and the posting of guards for the night, Lotha bade the courier accompany us and we descended to the city. As we passed along the lines of battle-stained warriors, hands flung up in the royal salute and the gray walls echoed to thunderous cheerings for the king.

Over the simple repast, with which we satisfied our ravenous hunger, we learned the details of the assassination.

Our couriers had successfully evaded Shasta's patrols and reached the court with the news of the insurrection. The king had at once dispatched the Royal Guard and other troops hastily summoned, to the aid of his brother. Almost on the instant of their departure he had been struck down by a priest of The Flame who had in some manner gained admission to the royal palace.

The affair savored of a plot to do away with the entire royal family—the king by assassination and his brother in battle when the sacred city fell before Shasta's onslaught. The hand of the High Priest could be plainly seen: should both Lotha and his brother, the king, meet death, the country would be without a ruler of royal blood, and Shasta, who was one of the great nobles of the land in addition to his priestly office, at the head of a victorious army and with Amnestar in his possession, would have found it easy to seize the reins of government and proclaim himself king by right of conquest and succession. It was a masterly scheme and bade fair to succeed, but circumstances beyond the control or understanding of the High Priest had conspired to defeat him.

The truth of the matter was, Shasta lost his head, over what has caused the downfall of greater and wiser men than this ecclesiastic—a woman. Had it not been for the insane passion of this ancient Richelieu for the Flower Maid, Losaya, and his frenzied jealousy because of her preference for Dan, he would undoubtedly have refrained from action until his plans had fully matured and he would have been in a position to quickly gather a far larger force than that with which

he attacked us. Then his priests within the city would have struck at the same time as did his accomplices at the capital, his army would have been before the gates of Amnestar, his troops would have commanded the seat of civil government, the king and his brother would have been slain and the country would have fallen into the lap of the ambitious minister like a ripe plum. But because of a girl's dark eyes, an intricate network of plans was destroyed and an empire lost. Well, it was doubtless not the first time such a thing had happened, and certainly not the last time that it would befall some contender.

All these things I pondered that night before I fell asleep, my interest in the drama keeping me awake, tired though I was, and when at last I slumbered, it was to dream of gigantic golden priests who wore crowns and wielded death rays that were ever just grazing me with their searing beams.

We were up betimes, despite a good deal of stiffness from minor wounds, and after breakfasting, immediately sought our position on the wall. Here a wonderful and inspiring sight met our eyes. All was confusion in the camp of our enemies, and with good reason. For marching out of the rose and gold of the morning sunlight were rank upon rank of soldiery, their armor glinting, their weapons mirroring the rays of the reddish orb of day. Silently they came, silently, save for the creak and clang of their equipment and the muffled thunder of their tread. They voiced no chant, no trumpets heralded their approach; grim, purposeful men they were, who had a stern duty to perform and who went sternly about it.

In the van was a great company mounted on the gigantic dinosaurs. Gold and crimson was their armor and equipment; the trappings of their mounts were rich and seemed to accentuate the monstrous appearance of the great reptiles that padded soundlessly forward, their deer-shaped heads swaying rhythmically on their slender necks.

"The Royal Guard," spoke Lotha. "Aside from my men here, who are second to none, the finest troops in the land; and there are ten thousand of them. Shasta is between the Pit and the Altar: he is doomed. See, the captains go forward under flag of truce."

From the great purple tent moved a group of officers bearing a white banner in their midst; evidently an embassy seeking terms of surrender. But look as I would, I could not make out the stalwart form of the High Priest. Did he prefer to remain in his tent, scornful to ask mercy of his conquerors, or had he fled, leaving his subordinates to suffer the consequence of his treachery?

Bugles rang out and the advancing host halted with a rattle and clang of equipment. Their ranks seemed legion—far as the eye could reach extended the gleaming columns, and the signaling bugles grew faint and far with distance as the orders were relayed from battalion to battalion. Silently they stood as the delegation of priests approached their van. A word of command sounded, the priests halted and from the ranks of the Royal Guard rode forth a rich caparisoned officer.

A colloquy ensued, the text of which we could not hear because of the distance, but the gist of it was plain. Repeatedly the officer gestured to the tower, where floated the blue flag of the Commander of the Guard: he was delivering the ultimatum that all decisions were in the hands of the king, that on his word rested the fate of the insurgents; that surrender must be unconditional and without delay.

With a gesture of submission, the spokesman for the priests turned and raised his hand. Slowly the banner of The Flame drifted down from where it waved in

front of Shasta's tent, and the gold and scarlet insignia of Pacama soared upward in its place.

From the ranks of the soldiery who lined the wall rose a wild, exultant cheer; from the mighty army thundered back a crashing answer and fifty thousand swords flung back the morning light in royal salute to the king.

Swiftly the loyal legionaires encircled the camp, while the group of commanding officers rode sedately to where the great bronze gates flung wide and a guard of honor filed forth to welcome them to the city.

We descended from the wall and took up a station close to the entrance, Lotha slightly in advance, the officers of the Guard flanking him.

Through the wide gateway rode the glittering captains, dismounting agilely and making low obeisance.

"Hail to your Majesty!" spoke the leader in a deep voice that held hearty friendliness for a comrade, as well as respect to an honored superior. "We trust that you have not been unduly discommoded by these rascals; but," with a twinkle of his blue eyes, "if my memory serves me right, the Captain of the Sacred Guard was never averse to a friendly bickering."

"Greetings, Nanta," smiled the king. "You come in good time indeed, and we are ever glad to welcome an old comrade to Amnestar. First of all behold here my friends, the strangers from a far country, of whom you have no doubt heard some things. Were it not for them I fear your king would not be here to greet you; he would have ere now bowed before the One who is King of Kings."

Warmly did the Commander of the Royal Guard and his companions acknowledge the introduction. Although they were great nobles they were first of all soldiers who looked with high favor upon courage and brave deeds. That they had a great affection for Lotha was plain; they respected him not only for his high office but also for his sterling qualities as a warrior and a leader of the people. To these men he would ever be the commander, the staunch comrade and true friend, be his fortunes high or low.

With very little pomp or ceremony, we set out for Lotha's apartments to discuss the situation and decide on the fate of the rebels. The king was disposed to deal leniently with them, for he considered them largely dupes of the High Priest. That that unworthy had escaped was evident, and I believe our leader was relieved; for at heart, despite his fierceness in battle, he was a kindly man and not given to vengeance.

We had almost reached our apartments, when there was a commotion in front and Chassa, the lately appointed Captain of the Guard, who had ridden ahead to make some necessary preparations for the entertainment of our guests, appeared supporting a bloody, disheveled Guardsman who reeled from weakness and wounds. The usually pleasant face of the new Captain was black as a thunder cloud and his voice shook with rage as he called to us:

"Sire, that villain, Shaster, last night entered the city by way of the small postern gate, where the stream passes under the wall, slew the guard posted at the palace of the Flower Maiden, except this man wounded sore and left for dead, and carried off Losaya, none knows whither."

For a moment consternation reigned. Dan swore luridly and his curses were more than equaled by those of the old Commander of the Royal Guard, whom, it appeared, was a kinsman to the Flower Maid and loved her dearly. He and Dan were for chasing off in immediate pursuit without giving thought as to direction, and Chassa was equally hot headed. Lotha quelled the disturbance with an imperious gesture.

"Wait, my friends," he said. "We must fight guile

with guile; there is no use exhausting ourselves by aimless effort. The priest is cunning and will have covered his tracks well. Let us question this man, then look over the ground and strive to discover some clew as to where Shasta may have fled with his captive."

This advice was too excellent to be disregarded.

The wounded Guardsman could tell us little. Shortly before the dawn, he said, they had suddenly been set upon by silent men, who struck them down without warning. Just as he fell under a sword stroke he had recognized the black-browed face of Shasta among the attackers; then another blow had rendered him unconscious and when he recovered his senses day was breaking. Hastily he investigated the interior of the palace, his fears confirmed when he found the bodies of the slain female attendants of the Flower Maiden. Of Losaya there was no trace.

"I do not think he will harm her, or at least not for a while," said the king. "He really loves her and unless he is aroused to senseless cruelty by her repulsing his advances, he will hardly do her hurt. The question is, where has he taken her?"

It was then that inspiration came to me.

"Lotha," I said, "is it not reasonable to believe that he would immediately hasten to his great stronghold, where he can expect aid from his supposedly all-powerful allies, The Flame and the Lord of Death? Would he not make for the caverns of the sacred mountain?"

The king smote his thigh with a gauntleted hand and uttered a sharp exclamation.

"How stupid of me not to have thought of it at once! Of course he will go there. Chassa, order the swiftest of the chariots; we will settle this matter once for all. I had resolved to be merciful, but for this act Shasta dies. It is the king who speaks!"

Through the streets of the city we raced, a strong body of Guardsmen following close, out through the broad gateway, past the camp of the subdued priests and the great army of the king, into the wide, smooth highway that led up the flanks of the grim mountain. Dan and Huayan were in the chariot to my right, which was driven by Chassa, while I was beside the king, who was his own driver and without a peer at guiding the fleet little beasts.

From time to time I glanced to where the Virginian sat gazing ever ahead, and a little shiver would course along my spine at the expression on my friend's face. Gone was the quizzical smile and the roguish gleam that usually featured his gray eyes. The eyes were now a smoky green that glowed, as I imagine fire under ice would glow. His face was bleakly gray and spelled—death!

Still, in my mind persisted the feeling that the renegade High Priest was not for him, but was my own particular prey.

At splendid speed the gallant little beasts bore us up the winding road, but in our impatience it appeared a very snail's pace. Shasta had hours start; even now he should be at the caverns. What would be the fate of Losaya at the hands of the half-crazed fanatic? The thought of the powerful Lord of Life comforted me somewhat; but the memory of that devilish mask floating in the ghostly radiance of the Pit filled me with a dread foreboding. What if after all it were only a figment of the imagination, conjured up by the mesmeric minds of the Dream-makers? What if the Lord of Death was all-powerful? Would not our victory over Shasta be futile after all? Man may not contend with spirits, or creatures with the powers and attributes of spirits. The minister of The Flame might well triumph in the last. It was only in the calm face of the warrior-king beside me that I found comfort.

The sun had slanted to the west, the purple shadows had crept up the gleaming slopes of the fire mountain and now we were fleeing through the pale silver that a thin slice of moon cast wanly. Landmarks began to tell us that the entrance to the caverns was not far away.

"Aye, we are close," answered Lotha to my question. "Pray to the One that the Lord of Life be not shorn of power, for without his help I cannot raise the portal."

"What do you mean, Lotha," I asked, "what is the secret of these mysterious barriers?"

"Time alone unthinkable," answered the king, "the Lords placed the gates of frozen light at the entrances to their abodes; here at the mountain caverns, before the Hall of Justice and at other places where they choose to dwell at times. Death flies from these gates at a touch, and none can move them. Only the Lords know the secret and it is by the will of one or both of them that the door to their home is opened. Certain ones among us are given the power to commune with the Lords from afar; such a one am I. I can send my thoughts to them and they can send theirs to me when they so desire. Rarely is a message sent—one came that night, so long ago, when we talked there in my quarters—and when one comes, we must obey. I trust the Lord of Life will raise the portal when I call, but if he does not, we are helpless."

"Lotha—can the Lords die, think you?"

A flicker of indecision swept over the king's face and he was long in answering.

"I do not know," he said at last. "But this I believe: as we know death, the Lords cannot die; but they are, I think, subject to change. Their span of life is perhaps so infinitely greater than ours that we would say death is not for them. Some time, long ago, they came into being; some time, I know not when, they will pass as all things pass, to begin life anew in some unknown way. So far as we can tell they have always been, and what they are none know. It is they who teach the Dream-makers their arts, it is they who make the golden light that turns night into day, it is they, perchance, who called The Flame into being, for I think they hold power over it, and it is they who will sit in judgment at this quarrel of ours with Shasta—unless One who is greater than they sees fit to intervene."

"However, we will play our own parts as we see best," he continued with a quizzical smile, "though we be but puppets on the stage."

That Lotha was a good deal of a fatalist was plain to be seen, but he also possessed faith in his own powers.

His words had given me much to think about; my scientific axioms were tumbling about my ears, and I was more than ever impressed with how little we know of this world of ours.

However, there was little time for scientific conjecture; the portal was at hand. The king reined in the quivering steeds, and sprang to the ground to stand in an attitude of intense concentration before the ghostly gray surface of the stone, or what appeared to be stone, but was evidently something very different.

For me it was a moment of tensest suspense. Would the Lord of Life hear the call of the king, or was he subservient to the dread Lord of Death and unable to assist the enemies of the Black Lord's followers?

For what seemed a very long time the golden warrior stood before the barrier, and nothing happened. Then, just as bleak despair was creeping into my heart, the surface of the portal shimmered with a faint, silvery radiance. The wan glow pulsed, quivered, and before us was a square of golden luminescence that beat against the pale moonlight as if straining to engulf it.

The king leaped to the driver's post of our chariot, a sharp word of command to the snowy beasts and we were sweeping along the broad gallery that led to the mighty amphitheatre in which the drama was drawing swiftly to a close. Into the first great hall we charged, leaped from the vehicles and rushed to the entrance of the nave.

Again a ghostly barrier loomed before us, but this time only for an instant; it would seem that the Power within was awaiting our coming. On the threshold we paused. The great hall was empty now, but on the lofty dais sat the black-cowled Lords, and the ashen Dream-makers were there, silent, rapt, weaving their uncanny spells.

Upon the lofty altar stood two figures—Shasta and the Flower Maiden.

She stood facing him, her trim body proudly erect, her dainty head with its wondrous dusky mist of waving hair, flung proudly back; even at this distance we could see the scorn and loathing pictured on her face.

Shasta seemed to be arguing with her and appealing to the Lords for support.

Suddenly with a furious gesture he started toward her, his clutching hands outstretched, his face working with passion. Lithe and graceful as a bird on the wing, she eluded him, and as he blundered past darted to the very edge of the altar, there to stand poised on the verge of the awful pit. Plainly as words spoke her pose: rather than submit to the profanation of his hands, she would cast herself into the ghastly depths.

All this had happened in the instant that we stood hesitating at the threshold of the portal. Even as we rushed forward, as the High Priest paused uncertainly, the misty radiance gushed from the pit and there before us in all its devilish beauty flamed the Face!

In our forward stride we faltered, stunned by the uncanny appearance of the awesome, evil thing. Then with a snarling oath Dan headed for the crimson altar.

"Come on," he flung over his shoulder. "To hell with the thing! We'll settle this once for all!"

Down the long aisle we strode while the weirdly beautiful thing in the pulsing stream of light swayed and turned, the blue pools of its eyes glowing and darkling, coruscating spirals of ashen light weaving about its unearthly loveliness. I felt my heart grow chill; those eyes were calling, calling; but I shook the feeling off and followed blindly in the wake of the tall Virginian who strode steadily forward, his face a mask of hate, his cold eyes fixed on the villainous priest, who stood gazing straight toward the swaying wonder of The Flame as if awaiting some signal. Her beautiful face alight with newborn hope, Losaya poised on the verge of the crimson altar like a spirit from on high hovering over the mouth of Hell.

Nearer and nearer we drew; the tension was unbearable, my nerves were stretched to the breaking point. Dan's hand hovered claw-like over the black butt of his automatic, his eyes never leaving the form of Shasta.

We were not ten paces from the curving rail that abutted the pit when without warning the pillar of flame to the left of the altar flared high in a burst of shimmering radiance.

Crash on crash of thundering reports, slashes of gold and crimson fire, as Dan poured shot after shot straight at the black-cowled figure that sat so silently upon the left of the dais. Even as he fired the death ray hurled from the flashing pillar!

Straight before us sped the lance of light like a sword of vengeance. By inches only did the hissing stream pass us by. It jerked, wavered, then upward it shot to strike in a dazzling flare right on the base of the mighty stalactite that hung directly over the flam-

ing pit. For an instant the light played on it and we could see the veins and graining of the interior of the rock. Then the slender base vanished like mist before the sun and downward fell the gigantic mass.

Into the misty pillar of flame clove the rounded point. A crash as of the rending apart of worlds, a dazzling flare of luminosity, and before us was but a ragged shaft of splintered stone projecting from what had been the awful pit of The Flame. The Flame itself had vanished, whether destroyed or imprisoned in its terrible home, we could not know.

Again the destroying lance of light twitched and wavered; it appeared bereft of a guiding hand. In a wide arc it swept across the glittering roof of the place; then abruptly it fell—fell and centered squarely on the black-cowled figure of the Lord of Death.

The ebony robes flashed forth in dazzling blue light at the fiery touch; for an instant the Black Lord shimmered in a coruscating glory, then he vanished, utterly, as if he had never been. Like the beam of a cinematograph the death ray snapped out, the pillar to the left sank and was gone. For an instant silence reigned, then pandemonium broke loose.

Shrieking like lost souls, the ashen figures of the Dream-makers fled from the dais and with them fled trembling priests, whom we had not noticed in the excitement.

With what seemed a single bound, Dan reached the dais and as Losaya swayed up the altar steps, caught her in his arms. Lotha, Huayan and I hurriedly mounted the dais steps and the Guardsmen rushed in pursuit of the fleeing priests. For the instant we had forgotten Shasta and when we remembered him he was nowhere to be seen. Again had the wily High Priest escaped just when his capture seemed imminent. Lotha ordered a search, but there was little hope of overtaking the fugitive in these gloomy caverns, the secrets of which were so thoroughly familiar to him.

During all this tumult that silent figure on the dais had never moved. Still in that posture of eternal watching it sat, and suddenly we all swung around to face it, turned by no volition of our own. A command had come, clear and unmistakable, to each one's brain, and each obeyed. Slowly we walked to that dread shape, walked like somnambulists, Dan and Losaya a little in advance. Directly before the throne-like seat they halted, and with one accord knelt. Paused also the king, Huayan and I, while the awe-struck Officers of the Guard grouped close behind.

The cowed figure moved slightly, then with a gesture of infinite yearning and compassion two white and graceful hands, beautiful hands, hands in which an angel might well have found pride, reached out and touched the bowed heads of the two who knelt as little children there.

And, oh, the wonder of what was there revealed! That which we called the Lord of Life was a woman—a woman wondrous fair and good we knew, just as we instinctively knew that the Lord of Death had been a man and evil. Vaguely I wondered would she lift her veil, this woman who was spirit, too, and intensely I desired that she should.

But no, only for an instant the lovely hands caressed the bowed heads of the man and maid who knelt in love before her. Then the hands drew back and Dan and Losaya rose and faced us.

The Flower Maid's eyes were misty pools of love and adoration, and upon the Virginian's handsome face was a nobility and tenderness that had not been there before. Gravely they smiled upon us, their hearts too full for words, and with us left the dais and the altar to seek the fair and lovely world beyond these gloomy caves of tragedy and death. Last through the doorway

of the nave, I turned to gaze once more upon that lonely figure on the dais. I felt the smile that passed across the unseen features, and to my heart came peace. When next I looked only the shimmering surface of the mysterious portal met my glance.

CHAPTER XIX

The Endless Quest

IT was truly a joyous party that drove gaily down the mountain trail. Dan and Losaya were in that state of ecstatic bliss common to lovers of all times, while the Guardsmen were happy in the destruction of the dreaded Lord of Death and the equally feared Face in the Flame. That these mysterious creations had been destroyed completely they were confident, and by some manner of reasoning they gave us three adventurers the credit.

That Dan's shots had been largely responsible, I, too felt confident; evidently the Lord of Death, whatever he had been, was not completely immune to a bullet. He had been affected enough to cause him to lose control of the deadly ray which had been his destruction and that of The Flame as well. But I still clung to my belief that the face in the Flame had been but a vision called up by the Dream-makers, who, we had learned, were priests who led a strange, isolated existence, trained in their uncanny arts by the Lord of Death himself.

Lotha appeared happier that he had been at any time since the death of his brother and was full of plans for the reorganization of the government and the reestablishment of the noble worship of the one great God his forefathers had venerated.

"We shall need strong hands and ready minds," he said as we were grouped together beside the trail, eating of the provisions the soldiers had collected from the bountiful supplies in the great cavern, while the little beasts rested and munched their fodder in the golden light of the early dawn.

"A wise and masterful man is needed to govern this great city of Amnestar," continued the king, "one whom the king can trust and rely on, and here"—laying his hand on Dan's shoulder—"is such a one. Salute his Eminence, the Governor of the Sacred City."

The cheers that followed were all that could be desired.

"Also," went on the ruler, "Chassa, Captain of the Guard, will want a lieutenant worthy of such a leader, and you, my friend," he said to the stately Trigullo, "are that lieutenant."

"And last of all," he smiled, "the king has need of a man mighty of arm and keen of brain to stand ever at his right hand to advise and guide, one on whom he can lean in times of doubt, one who will be a pillar of strength at all times."

Whereupon he placed his hand on my shoulder and stood smiling at his cheering officers, while Losaya embarrassed me the more by flinging both her lovely arms about my neck and kissing me squarely on the lips.

"Truly, Lotha, I am unworthy of this great honor you have done me," I said when the tumult had died down somewhat, "and I will endeavor not to cause you to regret your decision; but really, my friend, I ask nothing more than to explore this great country of yours and study its wonders."

"All this you shall do," answered the king. "We will go to the great jungles that clothe the banks of the mighty river to the east and there you shall see buried beneath the green wall, cities that were old when Amnestar was yet a dream. We will slay the savage beasts of the fern forest and of the mountains to the

west and give battle to the fierce ones who live there. We will labor together to make my people great and happy, for they are your people now and you are one with us."

That night Dan and Losaya were married by a priest of the ancient faith and I was much impressed by the beauty and simplicity of the service. The people of Pacama do not believe in lengthy engagements, and I heartily approve their wisdom.

It was after bidding the happy couple good night that I walked the deserted streets of Amnestar, pondering the strange events that had occurred during the short weeks we had spent in this wonderful age. Suddenly I saw a furtive figure steal from the shadow of a great temple. As it turned I recognized Shasta. He saw me at the same instant and with a snarl of hate turned and fled along the silent street with me hotly in pursuit. Along the broad way we raced without word or outcry; I had no desire to arouse others, as I wanted this rascal for my own, and he, of course, refrained from advising other enemies of his presence.

Into the open doorway of a great building he darted; through dimly lit corridors I followed. For long minutes we sped along these ghostly aisles, then the priest dashed through an opening and I found myself in the great Hall of Justice where first we had seen the Lords. Straight for the black altar fled the priest, reached it and disappeared behind its bulk. When I was but a few paces distant he appeared again on the summit, stooped and fumbled with something, then flung erect with a diabolical cry of triumph.

With a shuddering roar there flamed at the left of the altar that awesome column of white fire which housed the death ray of the Lord of Death. For an instant I was paralyzed with amazement; then I whipped my automatic from its holster and even as the death ray leaped fired once, twice, at the snarling thing on the altar.

I saw the black hole open between his eyes and the blood spurt forth; then a blinding flare of light, a crashing, rendering sound, a falling through utter space—blackness and oblivion!

A SENSE of cold, a feeling of intolerable loneliness. I opened my eyes to a flood of white light utterly unlike the ruddy radiance of Pacama or the golden glow of Amnestar's night. Above me was an arch of stainless blue from which shone a pale sun that seemed to hold no warmth.

Painfully I got to my feet and glanced about. All around were broken walls and shattered columns; through a gap I caught a glimpse of rolling forest. With cold dread clutching my heart I stumbled to the opening and gazed toward the east.

There, rearing to the azure heavens was a mighty peak whose summit glittered whitely in the morning sunlight; no plume of smoke soared above it; in lone and awful majesty it stood.

Then I knew: somehow I had been hurled through the ages again and into our own day and time. Dully I accepted the fact, my brain was numbed. Gathering my

scattered faculties I set out for the wall and the wooded land beyond. Just as the evening sunlight of the second day gilded the soaring peak of the dead volcano I reached our old camping site at the mouth of the whispering gorge.

Nothing was changed; the shack was there, silent, deserted, the same as when I had left it in the marvelous manner related. Only, on the little covered porch was a twisted mass of metal—all that remained of the machine with which I had probed the secrets of the dead past.

I prepared a meal from the plentiful supply of tinned foods and ate ravenously, for I was weak with hunger. Then utterly exhausted I flung my aching body on a bunk and slept dreamlessly.

The sun was high when I awakened and as I was preparing my breakfast I heard voices. Going to the door I met my friends, the Triguillos, who were returning promptly on schedule.

They showed little surprise at the absence of Dan and their Chief, nor at my attempted explanation of what had happened to them. They seemed to think it perfectly natural that this haunted valley had claimed victims in some awesome manner. I believe the marvel to their minds was that I should be alive.

I AM lonely tonight; a year has passed since I left the grim and silent Andes that hold so well the strange secrets entrusted to their care. I have almost completed the chronicle of the strange experience that was mine among their granite desolation.

Beside me as I write stands the counterpart of the machine that hurled me back through the misty veil of time to an age when the earth was young. It glitters evilly in the soft rays of the laboratory lamps, and the reflected lights of the shining drums and wheels seem to mock me. For between me and my desire is a wall, a shadow-wall that held me back. Because I cannot as yet tell at what degree the machine must operate before I can safely make the transition from this age of ours into that other that holds all that is dear to me. Should I make the attempt without this vital knowledge I might destroy myself completely, or worse, cast myself into some period of time as remote from the age of Amnestar and Pacama as this is. I have studied and experimented, and though as yet the thing eludes me I will not despair.

But at times I wonder will I ever again in this world meet with those loyal friends with whom I trod the rose-gold paths of high adventure; will I have the opportunity of studying those entrancing mysteries that exist in that land of ruddy sunlight—the mystery of The Flame, of the Dream-makers and their weird powers; of those strange rays of light whose incredible energies hurled me through the centuries to this particular movement of time; the mystery of She whom men called the Lord of Life, whose wondrous hands haunt my dreams, whom I feel to be a woman altogether lovely and desirable.

Will these things be granted me? Only time can tell me that.

THE END

The King and the Pawn

By Leven Anderton

(Continued from page 383)

title to this island myself at present. The eight secret-service men, you have sought in vain since I appropriated them, are now on my island and still wondering how they got there. The escort who takes me to the island can bring those men back. In addition to what I have asked for myself I ask full pardon for all the others who have served me and still live.

"I have taken enough of your time. I offer the information I have for the things I have used. I still have means of my own sufficient for the needs of my lifetime. All I ask is that the things for which I am willing to pay be taken to my island with me and that my books, now in my former stronghold, be brought there."

The rest is soon told. In a few days the proposition made by the fallen monarch was accepted. Further pardon offered to the erstwhile King of the World, because of his record as a soldier, was refused by him.

"I prefer," he smiled, "the solitude of my island to life among such a race—to being part of such a grotesque civilization."

Lee and Eileen were among those who gathered about the huge plane some weeks later as it prepared to bear its former owner to his exile. Colonel Lindholm was at the controls of the huge craft. Under His Majesty's tutorship the colonel had learned the mechanism of the monster ship. Just before he entered the plane the exile gripped Lee's hand in a long hard clasp. There was a peculiar expression in his eyes as he said goodbye and turned away.

As the plane sped rapidly away toward the west Lee drew Eileen close to his side and they stood gazing in silence until distance swallowed up the craft.

"Something tells me," said Lee, "that the world has not yet heard the last of His Majesty."

Eileen laughed and pulled Lee toward her car, parked nearby.

"You and your hunches," she laughed. "I can beat you a game of tennis."

"Let's go," laughed Lee. "I'll beat you a love set before I go to the office to see if I can get my job back."

THE END

Crusaders of Space

By Paul Chadwick

(Continued from page 393)

"The Earth girl has killed him," said another voice. "Come on—let us go in and get her."

Something struck the door then. The metal panel shook, the bolt bent. Another blow like that and it would open. The raving horde would be upon them.

Travers withdrew his right hand from his pocket now. It clutched a black tube five inches long. His face was as expressionless as a mask. Deliberately he turned the knurled cap at the end. Just as deliberately he pressed the end of his fingernail through the brown membrane that showed there, then threw the tube down on the floor.

His action was timed to the precise moment that the door burst inward. A dozen evil, ape-like faces widened at the sight of Hulgur's prone figure and the unexpected presence of Travers. Animal snarls came from their hairy throats. Hands flashed downward to holstered ray-guns.

"Drop!" hissed Travers, at the same time giving Paula a shove. She sank to the floor. He himself leaped aside as four streaks of shimmering violet light cracked through the air.

His own gun spoke. Three figures in the doorway tumbled backwards; but more took their places. In the space of a second the doorway was alive with heads and bristling with armament like a redoubt.

But, over and above the shouting of the ape-men and the hissing crackle of the ray guns, there was an increasing, high-pitched whine—the whine of myriad insect wings. Tiny, darting shapes filled the air.

A figure in the doorway suddenly screamed and collapsed. Others clapped their hands to their faces and necks. One spun around and fell forward into the room.

Travers heard Paula give a little scream of pain and fright. He stood frozen in his tracks as two of the winged killers bit his cheek.

For a moment he had an appalling sensation of dizziness. He looked at Paula. She was drooping as though on the verge of fainting. Then she slowly raised her head. His own feeling of illness passed.

The corridor outside was a shambles now. He hoped that Paula wasn't looking. The terrible scene might remain with her all her young life. But these murderous creatures deserved the fate that was overtaking them. They and their leader had slain thousands in their day.

They were aware now of the awful thing that was happening. There was a general turning away from the door, a stampeding down the corridors of the building. But the winged death pursued them. The ape-men fell where they had been bitten, fell as quickly as though a bolt of lightning had struck them. They crumpled up and lay still, slain, ironically enough, by the very same agent their leader had employed to betray Harvey Zanton.

Paula and Travers looked at each other. The Zanton formula had been saved at a terrible price. Young Zanton and his staff were dead. The crew of bestial pirates who had tried to get it that they might become dictators of all humanity had met the same awful fate.

But, in comparison to the lives of the teeming millions out there on those planets, swimming through space, it seemed to Travers that the sacrifice was a worthwhile one. He told Paula so later.

And the girl, resting her head on his shoulder, nodded and gripped his hand in hers. A sense of great peace filled Travers. He had not failed Zanton after all. A patrol ship would land shortly in answer to the ethergram he had sent from the station's transmission set. The secret for which young Zanton had lived and died was safe in the hands of those who revered the great cause for which it was meant.

Into the Mesozoic

By Duane N. Carroll

JAMES CORY was considered, by all who knew him, a queer sort of person. His friends, who had heard his story, said that his terrible experiences had affected his mind. They did not, however, connect his story with experiences, although the story was horrible enough.

Laughter and jests had eventually caused him to keep the tale to himself, so that it was with difficulty that I finally induced him to tell it to me.

It seemed that some years before he had been connected with an ill-fated arctic expedition, and, as nearly as he could ascertain, he was the only member to return. It was, what he claimed to have been his experience while on this expedition that had caused him to be so ridiculed.

In spite of the fact that his tale does seem absurd, I wish to tell it as he told it to me and perhaps in the near future, as man continues to explore the vast frozen stretches near poles, some evidence will be found that will make it appear less like the hallucination of a feeble mind.

He passed lightly over the preparations and departure but became more enthusiastic as he told how, after many difficulties, he and his five companions reached the northern-most end of Axel Heiberg Island—northwestern Greenland.

The Party consisted of Professor K. E. Shaw, who headed the expedition, Ensign H. J. Dillon, Raymond M. Mink, two Eskimo Guides and Cory. These men were all young, energetic and enthusiastic. Each had been carefully selected, Dillon for his knowledge of navigation, Mink as cook and mechanic, Cory as Geologist and Botanist, and the two guides for their knowledge of the country and their dependability.

From this point I will relate the story in Cory's own words as nearly as I can remember them.

* * *

We had left Shei Island one day behind and had had what for those latitudes was mild weather. This had put us in the best of spirits, especially Professor Shaw, who was a born scientist, and was happiest when doing something to advance its cause.

We had traveled steadily; and thanks to the favorable weather and to our guides and dog teams—which were of the best—we had made good progress.

But such conditions could not last. Even now it was snowing and a rising wind was driving it against our faces. The temperature had dropped from thirty to forty below and the guides were advising that we make camp as soon as possible. But when they tested the snow, they found that it was not suitable for igloo making.

Rather than attempt to pass the night in the open we pushed on, hoping to find a place suitable to pitch the tent, which—in spite of its bulk—the Professor had brought for our benefit. He argued that it could be abandoned if necessary. After it had been folded to fit the bottom of one of the sleds, it did not take up nearly as much room as one might expect.

Luck favored us again; we had traveled but a short

distance farther when the guide, who was in the lead, breaking trail, halted and pointed off to the West. Following the direction in which he pointed, I saw a huge mound of snow and ice, its outline just discernible through the blowing sleet. It struck me as being peculiarly located—the country through which we had been passing was entirely level, except for drifts, but I gave it no further thought at the time.

Swinging the dog-teams from the trail, we were soon to the lee of the mound and experienced great satisfaction in finding that it formed a perfect shelter from the wind.

No time was lost in making camp. We left the pitching of the tent to the guides and when they had finished, we had a far cozier shelter than was usual on such expeditions. They had fastened one side of the tent firmly against the mound, using iron pegs provided for the purpose. A piece of waterproof tarpaulin served as a floor on which we spread our sleeping bags. After we had arranged these in a row along one side of the tent, there was ample room left to do our cooking.

We had no need of heavy clothing that night. By burning our oil cooker alternately, we were able to maintain a temperature far above freezing. For a short time we sat on our sleeping bags, smoking and talking, but soon we crawled into our bags for a well-earned rest.

* * *

The next morning there was no apparent change in the weather. The wind was still blowing a gale and the mercury stood at fifty below zero. As we had made such excellent time, and were well provisioned, the Professor decided that it would be best to wait another day, in hope of more favorable conditions on the morrow.

We were rather impatient at the delay, but with such a storm raging, none were opposed to spending another day in our warm shelter. It was this delay that finally led to the condition, which caused us to embark on what was a most terrible and nerve-wracking adventure.

Most of the day had been spent in resting and overhauling our gear. At first, due to our oil cooker, we experienced difficulties with the melting ice, but the ingenuity of the guides solved the problem. By digging small trenches, and leading them down an incline, most of the water was carried away.

Perhaps if the ice had not melted around the pegs, letting the tent down on our heads, we would have continued on our journey, never dreaming of what existed beneath us.

We had crawled from beneath the canvas and were looking for the cause of the accident, when we were greatly surprised to find a section of bare rock exposed in the side of the mound. The ice on this side was not very thick, due perhaps to the fact that it was not exposed to the winds, and the heat from our cooker had melted what ice there was, exposing the rock.

A large fissure, fully three feet in width, was also exposed, and this near the bottom was practically clear of ice. Curiosity prompted me to peer into this opening and, although darkness prevented me from seeing far, I imagined that it must penetrate for a considerable distance. Procuring an electric torch from my pack, I threw its beams into the interior, and was surprised to find that, instead of penetrating straight back into the rock, the fissure formed a sort of tunnel running downward into the bowels of the earth.

Upon learning of my discovery, the Professor also peered into the opening, and then ordered the tent replaced, as nearly as possible, in its original position. When this had been accomplished to his satisfaction, we rolled up the inner wall, fastening it at the top, thus exposing the rock and fissure and giving us the opportunity to examine them in comfort.

Just why he decided to explore the tunnel I never learned, but this he did, in spite of our protests, and immediately uncoiling one of the long ropes which we carried, he fastened it about his body and crawled into the opening.

The rope was necessary as the bottom of the tunnel was covered with ice, and at the beginning sloped at a sixty-degree angle. An attempt to negotiate this without aid would probably have resulted in serious injury.

The Professor's head disappeared from sight and we began to carefully pay out the rope, trying to make his descent as gradual as possible. It was not long before the rope went slack and we received the prearranged signal that all was well. Assuming that he had reached a point where he could move without aid, we waited patiently for the signal to haul up.

There was no way of reaching a definite conclusion as to why the rock was located as it was—apparently alone—but I assumed that it was a huge boulder of disintegration, a rock so hard that it remains, while the surrounding rocks crumble into sediment, and are washed away.

The fissure may have been caused by a primordial quake, or by contraction and expansion, when the terrible cold was settling in polar regions. A temporary rising of temperature, during the day, would cause expansion after the frigid night air had caused contraction.

The Professor had been gone for a good half-hour, and we were becoming anxious, when we finally felt the welcome tug on the rope, and soon had him standing amongst us.

He seemed very much puzzled, and in answer to our many questions informed us, that he had not found the end of the tunnel, nor could he determine its length.

After reaching a point where the tunnel floor sloped but slightly, he had untied the rope from his body and proceeded cautiously on, finally emerging into another and far larger tunnel. Here he had remained for a short time, and then returned.

He would say nothing more regarding his discoveries, except that he intended going down again the next day, and that we could accompany him if we so desired. This pleased us greatly, and as it was now rather late, we crawled into our bags for a good night's rest.

EARLY the next morning we had breakfasted and made ready for our trip. As the Professor had found it quite warm in the tunnel the previous day, he advised us to leave our heavy clothes behind; and to encumber ourselves with only such things as he thought were necessary. The two guides were to

remain behind, to tend camp, and to haul us up the incline when we returned. In a short time all was ready, and the Professor was once more lowered into the tunnel. I followed. After a slide of perhaps fifty feet, I found myself standing on comparatively level ground, beside the Professor. The rope was then hauled back, and Dillon and Mink soon joined us. Without further ceremony, we began to make our way down the tunnel; the Professor leading.

As we proceeded, always downward, the tunnel heightened, and widened until we had ample room to walk erect. The drip from melting frost was continuous. This made the air damp, and the ground muddy, but walking was not difficult; so we were soon standing in the immense cavern, which had ended the Professor's explorations the previous day.

A ghastly, greenish sort of twilight gave the place a weird appearance, aiding observation, and making our flashlights unnecessary except for close inspections. Stalactites and stalagmites were in evidence though not numerous; but they caused my mind to revert to our great limestone caves of Virginia, and Kentucky.

It was evident that this and our noted caves, had been formed in the same manner—by subterranean rivers containing carbon dioxide, entirely dissolving the limestone rocks through which they ran, thus forming irregular caves, and galleries. The rivers would eventually reduce in size—sometimes to mere drippings—leaving the caverns practically free. In this instance a small stream of water trickled down the center to loose itself in the semi-darkness.

We were greatly excited, and anxious to continue our explorations; so when the Professor suggested that we proceed, there was no hesitation. Single file we began walking down the cavern, marveling that such a phenomenon should exist here, under a land of ice and snow. New delights, in the form of peculiar rock formations, met our gaze on every hand, intensifying our curiosity as to what would be revealed beyond.

The light, still retaining its peculiarities, grew brighter as we advanced; and the heat increased until we found it necessary to remove all but our lightest clothing. These we left in a comparatively dry place under a shelving rock, marking the spot well, so that we would be sure to find them when we returned. Unhindered by surplus clothing, we felt more free and were able to make better time.

As we proceeded, the passage as we now called it, widened, and the floor continued to drop, until upon casting a glance upwards, I saw, high above, not the roof, but what appeared to be a thick wall of grey fog. This surprised us somewhat, but we gave it no further thought at the time.

Far greater surprises were in store for us if we had but known. Vegetation had made its appearance in the form of ferns. They were not familiar and though we did not stop to study them at the time, we fully intended to on our return.

A short distance farther, and the passage again narrowed until it was no wider than at the point where we entered. Fog had settled between the walls, forcing us to proceed with caution, as the ground was very irregular, and broken pieces of rock made walking difficult. It was not long, however, before the passage again widened, but the fog remained very thick, making it impossible to see but a few feet ahead. The ground now began to slope downward at a steep angle, which increased as we proceeded, until we were climbing rather than walking.

Great piles of rocks and boulders seemed everywhere, forcing us to detour, or climb over them. The

temperature was steadily rising, and we were drenched with perspiration before we had covered a hundred yards; but as we descended, the fog seemed to be steadily thinning. This encouraged us to hope that it would thin sufficiently to give us a clear view of our surroundings. These hopes soon materialized, for farther down the fog became a light mist, and suddenly we emerged from it altogether.

* * *

Totally unprepared for the scene which now greeted me, I could but stand in astonishment and wonder. That the others were affected likewise, I knew, for not a word was spoken for several moments. Below us—for we were still high on the side of the hill that we had been descending—stretched a low, level land. Not a land covered with ice, and snow, such as we had so recently left, but a land covered by a profuse mass of tropical, or semi-tropical vegetation and trees of a great forest.

I was sure that I gazed on some sort of mirage, and that at any moment now it would fade to be replaced by rock formation such as we had left behind. It was not logical reasoning to believe that such a land existed, apparently underground, and beneath a land of ice and snow. It did not fade, however, although we waited for a considerable length of time. And so, still disbelieving our eyes, we began to make our way toward it.

Our progress was greatly retarded by the jumbled masses of rocks, which had tumbled from above, and formed in great piles wherever they had met an obstacle firm enough to stop and hold them.

The descent was finally accomplished, however. Near the base the hill had leveled considerably. This had aided us to some extent but we had also crossed a large space comparatively free of rocks, which had helped us greatly.

The last few yards were perhaps the most difficult. Here the falling rocks—finding no obstacle of sufficient size to stop them on the clear space—had penetrated the forest for a considerable distance. The vines and creepers had taken advantage of every space between them to reach their tops, where they had tangled together in tangled masses, retarding our progress greatly.

The last barrier was finally surmounted and, greatly relieved, we stood resting on the last deposits of fragmentary rocks. High overhead the fog, from which we had emerged, hung in a thick, grey blanket, hiding whatever might lie beyond.

The forest was real without a doubt—unless I was dreaming. Already the Professor had hurried ahead, and was excitedly examining some of the flora. I was not long in following suit, and we were amazed at what we found.

I will not attempt to describe the various forms of plant life which we found—they were too numerous—but, after closely studying them for some time, we agreed that without a doubt, they were species of plants supposed to have become extinct in the Mesozoic Era.

They were all entirely unfamiliar, except as we had studied their fossilized remains. Some of them, conifers, cycads, and ferns have been found in the form of leaves, trunks and roots, in connection with coal deposited during the Jurassic Age, of the Mesozoic. Wherever these plants predominated, the whole aspect was that of large groups of modern palms, but a trained eye could easily distinguish the difference.

It would be hard for me to describe my feelings at being transferred into the Mesozoic so suddenly,

and I will not attempt it, except to say that I was suddenly nervous. That this was the age of giant land and air saurians, as well as sea reptiles, I knew. The thought that we had seen no sign of them as yet was not entirely reassuring.

We had penetrated the forest but a short distance when we came upon a rather large clearing. The air was warm, and we had had a hard journey, so we threw ourselves down to rest.

Consulting our watches, we were surprised to find that we had not yet consumed a half-day, which pleased us immensely. We did not wish to remain too long for fear of darkness overtaking us before we could find our way back.

All thoughts of food had been forgotten. But at the Professor's suggestion that we have lunch, all discovered that they were very hungry, and began to eat with relish.

You have no doubt, on a cold winter's night, during a period of sleeplessness, heard the shrill long-drawn screams of a locomotive as it tore through the night. That is a partial, but fairly accurate description of the sounds that were now borne to our ears.

Food was instantly forgotten as we tried to determine the direction from which the sounds came. They were approaching rapidly, and soon we would hear the crackling of branches, as something tore through the underbrush in a direction parallel with the base of the hill that we had descended.

Our instinct of self-preservation now became active. Up the trees we went, as our arboreal ancestors did thousands of years before, when danger threatened. There we clung; waiting for, we knew not what.

Events now transpired rapidly. The screams were close by; and from my high perch in the tree, I began to catch glimpses of what at first I mistook for a gigantic bird. I soon saw my mistake however. It was running swiftly, on long slender hind legs, with its long tail carried clear of the ground, forming a balance. It drew closer, and I could not be mistaken longer—a dinosaur—but a small one. I now noticed that in his forepaws he clutched an object resembling a large egg, of which he seemed very careful, as he ran amongst the trees, and bounded over the denser growths of ferns and vines.

But this was not the source of the dreadful screams, I had known for some time. They came from the air, and my eyes were now drawn aloft, trying to catch a glimpse of what could emit such terrible sounds, and bring such apparent terror to the animal fleeing below.

Suddenly it came into view, one of the giant air saurians, of the Mesozoic, Pterodactyl. His great wings, which he moved but little, were fully fifteen feet from tip to tip and resembled those of a bat. His head was triangular in shape, and the jaws were beast-like. His tail, which he seemed to use as a rudder, was long and bony, with a vertical expansion at the tip. In all he presented a most terrifying appearance.

When he first came into view, he was just skimming the treetops, looking down as though trying to follow the movements of his quarry. While in this position, the long jaws opened, exposing rows of long, sharp teeth, and another piercing scream came forth, followed by much hissing.

The less formidable reptile, on the ground, seemed bewildered. He ran to the edge of the clearing, hesitated for an instant, and then attempted to dash across it. This proved to be his undoing. With a hiss like escaping steam, the monster of the air

dropped—long cruel claws shot out, grasping the scaly skin—a snap of the strong jaws near the base of the land-saurian's neck, and he crumpled to the ground where he lay still.

His rage still unappeased, the pterodactyl continued to slash and rend, until the carcass was almost entirely dissected. Then surveying the remains for a moment, he proceeded to make a meal of them; gulping huge chunks of the still quivering flesh, almost whole.

More than once during these proceedings, my hands had almost lost their grip on the limb, from sheer terror. But the sudden realization of what my fate might be if I fell, always strengthened them.

Trying as best I could to calm my nerves, I began to look for my companions; finally locating them all in nearby trees. Their eyes were on the saurians—wondering perhaps, as I was, how we were to retrace our steps, with such monsters roaming the air.

The saurian's actions had led me to believe that we were reasonably safe amongst the trees, and later we found that this was true. These giants could hardly begin to spread their great wings, except in the clearings, and without the use of wings they would be at the mercy of any large carnivore they might meet.

If the smaller saurian had not been so terrified, and had remained in the protection of the trees, he would have probably escaped eventually.

As my nerves calmed, and I became more capable of reasoning, I formed the conclusion that he was one of the small egg-stealing dinosaurs, and that he had chosen the wrong time to make his raid on the pterodactyl's nest. The object, which he had carried in his paws, was undoubtedly the egg; it now lay broken and neglected where it had fallen.

It required but a few moments for the air saurian to feed. In spite of the enormous wing-spread, and great head, the body was comparatively small, and evidently was not able to accommodate a great quantity of food at one time. With a great flapping of wings to gain altitude, he rose almost vertically from the clearing and soared away, to be finally lost in the mist.

The sky was clear once more. Only the mangled body of the dinosaur remained as evidence that I had not dreamed.

I could now breathe freely again; and also stretch my muscles which had become cramped from sitting in such an uncomfortable position so long. I had not moved while the saurian was near, for fear of attracting his attention.

Before leaving our places of refuge, we decided on a definite plan of action. All readily agreed that it would be best to make our escape from the place as soon as possible, arguing that we could properly equip ourselves, and return to finish our explorations, if courage did not fail us.

We had thought of attempting the return under cover of darkness; but when the Professor pointed out that it would be impossible to negotiate the rocks, and find the narrow passage by which we had entered, we rejected the plan.

As to our ability to evade the pterodactyls again, we were doubtful, but the fact, that we had journeyed in un molested, gave us courage. There seemed no other way, but to make the attempt immediately, so the Professor—after cautioning us to be continually alert—slid down from his tree. We followed, reaching the ground safely, where we grouped together, casting nervous glances on all sides, as well as above, from which had come our greatest known danger.

The Professor now expressed the desire to examine

the dinosaur closely. Assuring us that the examination would be of short duration, he began to make his way towards the carcass. We followed closely, still casting apprehensive glances in all directions.

I took the opportunity to tell the Professor of the conclusions I had reached concerning the reptiles. He wholly agreed with me and also named the dead saurian. Upon hearing the name—struthiomimus—I was forced to agree with him. Great was my chagrin at not having recognized the reptile sooner, but I consoled myself with the thought that I had been too frightened to think coherently.

It had been named from the fact that he suggested an ostrich with a long tail. I had often studied its fossilized bones, and also reproductions. Here were the long slender legs capable of great speed; the toothless jaws; the long slender fingers, not at all fitted for tearing, but admirably adapted to carrying smooth objects. The characteristics of the body had always led scientists to believe that he was an egg-stealer, and now it was proven beyond doubt.

He was badly mangled and partly devoured. The bones had been crunched and broken by the pterodactyl's mighty teeth. All of the members were completely torn from the body; and myriads of insects were now completing the work of destruction.

These insects were now annoying us considerably. We had noticed their presence in great numbers ever since we had entered the forest, but, in our excitement, had given them little thought. We could do but little, however, except keep them brushed from our hands and faces. Our chief concern now, was to leave this land as soon as possible. So, with a few hasty remarks from the Professor as to the accuracy science had shown when reproducing the reptiles, we turned away to begin our dangerous journey back.

As we had penetrated the forest but a short distance, we were soon amongst the boulders at the base of the hill, and beginning to make our way toward the clear space.

The peculiar light, which had been very bright since we first viewed the forest, had now paled considerably and the air was cooler. Also the comparative stillness of the land was again broken by screams and walls.

They came from various directions deep in the forest, but whether they were voiced by pterodactyls or some other terrible creature, we could not tell. In spite of the great distance from which they came, I began to feel terror gripping me once more and was forced to exert my will-power to its utmost to prevent myself from stampeding up the hill.

It was plainly seen that my companions were in the same state of mind. Hurried, but frequent glances were cast upward, as again we huddled together for consultation.

We had reached the edge of the clearing and were trying to decide if we should chance crossing it, or take a long detour which would be necessary if we were to stay in the shelter of the rocks. Our impatience to reach the camp, and the diminishing light, led us to take the shorter route. So, hugging the ground as closely as possible, we began to cross—what we now considered—perilous ground. I shuddered to think that, a few hours before we had crossed this space with no attempt at caution.

An ejaculation from Dillon brought my heart to my mouth. He had grasped the Professor's arm and was pointing at the sky. Off to our right; following the direction of his pointing finger, I had no difficulty in discerning three of the dreaded pterodactyls flying in our direction.

They were still at a great distance, but that they had seen us we had no doubt. Hesitating but an instant, we turned and started for the safest refuge we knew—the tree—with all possible speed.

Limbs were risked, and clothes were torn to shreds in the mad dash. The speed of the saurians was great we knew, and, I for one, was thankful that the forest had been left but a short distance behind.

I ran, crawled and climbed, paying but scant attention to the sharp, loose rocks which bruised my feet and legs, or to the thick brush which tore my clothes, exposing the bare flesh to its next contact. Neither did I give attention to the progress of my companions. My hear was dominant. I was capable of giving attention to nothing but the barriers which hampered my progress toward the protecting shelter of the trees.

Louder and louder came the cries of the saurians, spurring me to my utmost exertion. In my imagination, they were close at my back, and more than once, I nearly gave way to the temptation to throw myself to the ground and give up, but a glimpse of the nearest tree gave me new courage.

The winged monsters were very close now, I was sure. Their cries seemed to come from directly overhead, but I did not risk a glance. Fairly throwing myself at a last great boulder, I scrambled up a sloping side, tore through the mass of vines on top and rolled down the other side.

How I crossed the last stretch of broken rock, I never knew. When reason returned, I was deep in the forest but I did not stop here. The dreadful screams of the angry reptiles were still in my ears, but now they seemed to come from a direction off to my right.

None of my companions were in sight, nor could I hear them. Judging that they were being pursued in the same manner as had been the struthiomimus, I began running in the direction from which the screams were coming.

This may sound like the height of folly, but the fear of being left alone in this terrible place was far greater than my fear of the pterodactyls, now that I was amongst the trees.

I ran until I was exhausted and shouted myself hoarse but nowhere did I see or hear my friends. Bruised and tired legs finally refused to bear the weight of my body longer, and I sank to the ground, gasping for breath and listening to the fast receding cries of the saurians. Utter exhaustion dominating the fear in my mind; I dragged my weary body under the low-hanging foliage of a thicket and relaxed.

For a few moments I lay listening. In the distance sounded a perfect bedlam. Other screams and roars now merged with those of the pterodactyls until it was impossible to tell where they began and ended.

Sleep must have claimed me very soon for I remembered nothing more until I awoke with the hum of thousands of insects in my ears and a gnawing hunger. At first I was bewildered, but the realization of my serious predicament soon came to me with sickening force and I crawled from my retreat into the opening.

For a time every move was a slow, painful process, but with continued use my lame muscles relaxed and arms and legs functioned properly once more.

That my many tumbles—taken in my mad dash to escape the saurians—had not resulted in serious injury was indeed fortunate. A broken bone would surely have caused my adventure to end disastrously.

Somewhere I had lost my watch. This vexed me sorely, for I would have given much to know how long I had slept. That considerable time had passed I

was sure. The light was diminishing when I fell asleep, but now it was as bright as I had ever seen it. It was evident that I had slept through the night at least. This had been of great benefit to me. My overtaxed nerves strengthened and I was also able to think coherently.

My hunger finally tempted me to chance eating some of the fruit which grew in abundance all about me. I partook very sparingly at first, for, although they proved very palatable, I did not know what effect they would have on my system.

While eating the fruit, I tried to decide on the best plan of action. My most immediate desire was to find my friends if they had escaped the saurians. Recalling the confusion of cries, which I heard in the direction that they had presumably taken, I feared that the cries of the pterodactyls had attracted fierce land saurians to the spot. If this were true, the chances for unarmed men to escape were very poor.

All sense of direction had left me. I could not even tell whence the last wild cries of the saurians had come. It seemed under the circumstances that the logical course would be to try and return to the point where we had entered the forest. I tried to fix objects in my mind so that I could recognize my starting point if forced to return. My intentions were, not to leave the forest but to follow its edge, hoping to see some familiar object that would give me a clue as to the right course to take.

I will not bore you with an account of the next few hours' wanderings. Suffice to say, that the more I traveled, the worse my position seemed to be, for the thoughts of spending another night alone in this horrible land, placed me on the verge of panic.

In many places I had found the well-worn trails of mighty dinosaurs—occasional well-defined tracks told me this—some were three toed, others five, but all terminated in long cruel claws. Deep furrows, probably made by long heavy tails being dragged along the soft earth were also in evidence. As yet, these were the only signs of life I encountered.

At first I avoided these trails, having no desire to meet the monsters, but as time passed and I saw no other signs of them, I chose one of the narrower trails and began to follow it. I hoped it would take me out of the forest. It seemed worth trying and I was becoming desperate.

I had followed the trail for perhaps half an hour, using the utmost caution; ready to dive into the underbrush or climb a tree at the first indication of danger, when I began to realize that the light was again waning. In a short time I was sure. Driven to desperation I shouted, a long, lusty shout, that vibrated through the forest. Causing a peculiar bird to rise from its retreat voicing its protests.

I was given but a little time to observe this bird but I was almost sure that I had seen a living archaeopteryx, the first known bird. It had the long reptilian tail with feathers protruding from each side, giving it a flat appearance, and I was almost sure that I saw long sharp teeth when its mouth opened. More I did not see.

My shouts had been answered but not by my friends. From no great distance came a cry that fairly froze the blood in my veins, while just beyond a high thicket, but in the same direction, came a sound of low bellowings accompanied by the cracking of branches and the tearing of vines.

Up the nearest tree I scrambled; never stopping until I had reached the topmost branches. Here I crouched trembling, peering through the branches, trying to see what had emitted such dreadful sounds.

hill ran up to meet the first.

On the hill—almost directly ahead—stood a long-headed, stupid looking creature suggesting a rhinoceros. Protruding horizontally from his head were three horns, two long ones, directly above the eyes and a shorter one over a horny beak-like snout. Across the back of his head, and covering the neck, ran a bony frill of armour suggesting a helmet that appeared to form a counterweight for the head and jaws. In all he was a ferocious looking brute.

It was apparent that he had been sleeping in the nearby thicket and upon being awakened by my shout had dashed into the open to investigate.

I had recognized him instantly. Science had named him triceratops. He was supposed to be entirely herbivorous, but now he appeared anything but gentle. The bleary, bloodshot eyes were possessed of a cruel look as they peered from beneath the long tapering horns, trying to locate the source of his annoyance. I was thankful that my shout had caused him to reveal his lair before I had approached closer.

While I had been observing the details, the fearful cries that I had just heard were drawing closer. They came through the forest at frequent intervals, charged with defiance for all to hear. My eyes were glued to the spot where I calculated the creature would appear. What would it be? My question did not remain long unanswered. With a hoarse scream—that nearly caused me to tumble from my perch in fright—there strode into the clearing the King of all Reptiles—the dreaded Tyrannosaurus! Standing fully twenty feet in height, on powerful hind legs, and measuring all of forty feet from his head to the end of the long powerful tail that he carried clear of the ground to act as a balance, he seemed more than enough to strike terror to the bravest heart.

I had expected the triceratops to beat a hasty retreat but I was mistaken. He had flattened himself on the ground, his head thrown back so that the bony frill gave full protection to his neck and shoulders, and the long horns pointed directly at his antagonist. The low grumbling bellows were now continuous and the long powerful tail was swishing back and forth, throwing sticks, dirt and stones in all directions. It was easily seen that this tail was a formidable weapon.

The tyrannosaurus advanced swiftly at first, covering fifteen feet at every stride. As he drew closer, he became more cautious—probably realizing that too care-attack might prove disastrous. For a short time the two brutes seemed to be measuring one another. The tyrannosaurus circled slowly about his opponent, careful to avoid the flying tail. The triceratops shifted his position sufficiently to allow him to see the larger saurian's movements to the sides. The powerful tail prevented any attack from the rear.

These maneuvers lasted but a few moments. The tyrannosaurus began to move rapidly, darting in, inflicting a wound, then springing back, trying to avoid the long horns as much as possible.

The air was fairly shattered by the terrible screams

the triceratops's defense, any immediate danger. The reptile with only three horns, which only downward and forward his point of vantage.

He remained flattened to the ground, he might have had a chance. Evidently he became panicky and decided to try and dislodge his assailant. Gathering his strong legs beneath him, he began heaving his clumsy body upwards. In spite of the larger reptile's great weight, these tactics might have proven successful but as he strained upwards the great head sank slightly downwards. This may have been natural, or perhaps the small brain, concentrating on the leg muscles, forgot for an instant, the muscles controlling the head. At any rate it was the opening that the tyrannosaurus desired. No sooner had the great head lowered than his strong jaws were beneath the bony plate, prying and pushing, until the cruel teeth had secured a firm grip on the smaller saurian's neck, just back of his head.

The battle was now soon over. The tyrannosaurus allowed his body to slide to the ground but still retained his hold. The triceratops, bellowing now from pain, lunged and bucked, but it was useless. With every move the sharp teeth sank deeper and deeper into the flesh. The tyrannosaurus seemed to make a final effort—the strong jaws clamped tighter—there came to my ears a grating sound as the teeth crunched through the spinal cord as the mighty triceratops sank to the ground, to rise no more.

The victor had not come through the battle unscathed. For many minutes he lay beside the body of his kill, recuperating. I had begun to think that he had also received a fatal wound, when the great head lifted, and with a mighty effort, he lurched to his feet.

Blood oozed from long deep slashes in his chest and abdomen, covering the scaly hide with gore. One of the forelegs had been literally torn from its socket and hung by a few shreds of flesh, while the mighty tail dragged limp and useless; at least one of the vertebrae shattered. Lurching and groggy, the giant reptile stood, trying to collect his scattered senses. Suddenly the great jaws opened, and one long, terrible scream rang through the forest. Listening breathlessly I heard it answered from several different directions but at great distances. The saurian, ignoring the answering cries, turned and reeled into the forest, being swallowed almost instantly by the trees and underbrush.

HOW long I remained in my refuge I had no way of knowing—it seemed like ages. I felt that I could never conquer my fear sufficiently to descend.

Hours passed, and still I remained. I finally assumed that the strange land had no night, in the sense that we know it, only a lessening of the light as time passed. I learned that this conclusion was correct.

Loud and fierce cries were now coming from the forest at frequent intervals, and more than once, they

lizards, who was
When he had finish
insects soon finished

How I prayed for
after hour I clung to
cries of hunt and battle.
reptiles were seldom abroad except during these hours
of twilight. So I decided to wait for the full light
of day, and then try again to find my way from the
place.

As weariness overtook me I fixed my body, firmly,
in a crotch of the tree and tried to sleep but I could
only doze. My uncomfortable position would not allow
restful sleep and the occasional cries of the saurians
would bring me, trembling, to my senses.

I finally awoke from one of my dozes, which, my
senses told me was longer than usual, to find that the
light of day had returned. The brontosaurians had
disappeared from the lake, and although I watched
and listened for some time there was no signs of any
saurians.

My body was stiff and lame from so many hours in
an unnatural position, and I was terribly hungry. I
realized that, if I were to escape from this land, I
must do so at once. Another night spent in a tree,
without first attempting to find my way out, was not
to be given a thought.

Making my way to the ground was another slow,
painful process, but I finally accomplished it safely;
starting immediately, I began retracing my steps
over the trail that had brought me to the clearing.

I moved at a brisk pace to limber my aching muscles,
also cautiously, making as little noise as possible, and
casting frequent glances in all directions. Here and
there I paused to pick some of the fruit—I had ex-
perienced no ill effects from that I had eaten the
previous day—and ate it as I traveled.

Great was my dread at being once more within reach
of the saurians. Now that I had seen them my im-
agination pictured a monster in every thicket, awaken-
ing with angry roars at the sound of my footfalls.
These fears did not cause me to falter. I reasoned
that it would be far better to perish by the reptiles
while trying to escape—than to remain and meet the
same fate in—what would probably be—the near future.

It was by merest luck that I found the clearing so
quickly, where we had witnessed the death of the
struthiomimus. I had bent a branch downward in
order to pick some choice looking fruit, which grew
beyond my reach, when—after picking it—I forgot my
caution for a moment, and allowed the branch to re-
turn to its original position with a swish. Imme-
diately, from directly above my head, came a great
flapping of wings and out of the brush flew another
archaeopteryx.

He was very angry, and instead of flying away as
the other had, he flew to a nearby tree and sat glaring
at me. I would not have minded this but he was
making the woods ring with his cries. I feared that
all the saurians for miles around would be attracted to
the spot.

For perhaps one long moment I stood, rooted in my

dislodge me.

ing no longer, I took to flight—blind head-
-nt in which I paid no attention to direction.
My main desire now was to get beyond the range of
the bird's cries.

Fortunately the bird did not follow nor was I
molested in any other way. As I ran the cries grew
fainter until I was no longer able to hear them. Still
I did not stop. I wanted to put as great a distance as
possible between that dangerous spot and myself before
I was forced to rest.

Before I realized it, I was halfway across a clear-
ing that I instantly recognized. Here was the very
spot where the struthiomimus had been killed. His
clean-picked bones still lay almost as the pterodactyl
had left them. For the first time since I had been pur-
sued by those same, cruel monsters did my heart feel
gladness, and, as the long run through the forest had
taxed my strength to its utmost, I retired amongst
the trees; content now to rest for a few moments and
regain my strength.

After a short rest I felt greatly relieved and began
a half-hearted search in hope of finding evidence that
some of my companions had escaped and returned to
the spot. I felt sure that if they had returned they
would have left some indication upon departure.

I spent many precious moments in my search before
giving up. If I reached our camp alive, and they were
not there, I intended to head a properly equipped rescue
party as soon as possible. Reluctantly I turned away
to begin my dangerous journey.

I will not describe the return trip as it was un-
eventful. Fortune favored me at every turn. I found
the heavy clothes which I had left in the passage and,
to my great sorrow the other bundles were there also.
Keeping a sharp lookout I located the small passage
without difficulty, and finally the rope, apparently as
we had left it.

Several times I gave the signal to haul up but,
as there was no expected tautening of the rope, I
pulled myself up, hand over hand.

I was just in time for ice had formed and the open-
ing was nearly closed. I had great difficulty in forcing
my body through but finally accomplished it.

Everything seemed to be as we had left it, but
nowhere could I find the games or the dogs.

Two weeks I spent in waiting before I gave them
up. Had they followed us into that terrible
and been destroyed? I never knew. They could
have been gone more than a day before I returned
have always thought that they did try to find us
met some terrible fate.

Every day was lessening my friend's chance
escape and finally, yielding to my impatience, I
what equipment I would need, and began to make
way to civilization.

I remember making up a pack and starting on,
but that is all. The newspapers have told the re-
the story.

THE END