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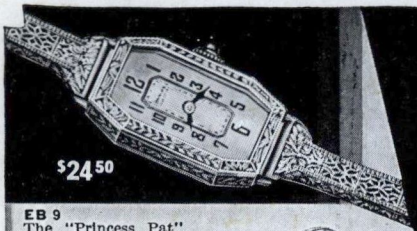
By CHARLES W. DIFFIN



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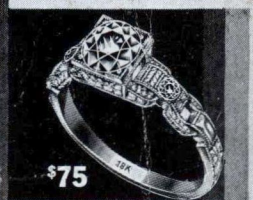

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VOL. II, No. 3

CONTENTS

JUNE, 1930

Single Copies, 20 Cents (In Canada, 25 Cents) **Yearly Subscription, $2.00**

Issued monthly by Publishers' Fiscal Corporation, 80 Lafayette St., New York, N. Y. W. M. Clayton, President; Nathan Goldmann, Secretary. Entered as second-class matter December 7, 1929, at the Post Office at New York, N. Y., under Act of March 3, 1879. Title registered as a Trade Mark in the U. S. Patent Office. Member Newsstand Group—Men's List. For advertising rates address E. R. Crowe & Co., Inc., 25 Vanderbilt Ave., New York; or 225 North Michigan Ave., Chicago.

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LISTERINE *ends* halitosis

"Help—help—the eyes—the eyes!"

Out of the Dreadful Depths

By C. D. Willard

ROBERT THORPE reached languidly for a cigarette and, with lazy fingers, extracted a lighter from his pocket.

"Be a sport," he repeated to the gray haired man across the table. "Be a sport, Admiral, and send me across on a destroyer. Never been on a destroyer except in port. It . . . would be a new experience . . . enjoy it a lot. . . ."

Robert Thorpe seeks out the nameless horror that is sucking all human life out of ships in the South Pacific.

In the palm-shaded veranda of this club-house in Manila, Admiral Struthers, U. S. N., regarded with undisguised disfavor the young man in the wicker chair. He looked at the deep chest and the broad shoulders which even a loose white coat could not conceal, at the short, wavy brown hair and the slow, friendly smile on the face below.

A likable chap, this Thorpe, but lazy—just an idler—he had concluded. Been playing around Manila for the last two months—resting up, he had said. And from what? the Admiral had questioned disdainfully. Admiral Struthers did not like indolent young men, but it would have saved him money if he had really got an answer to his question and had learned just why and how Robert Thorpe had earned a vacation.

"You on a destroyer!" he said, and the lips beneath the close-cut gray mustache twisted into a smile. "That

would be too rough an experience for you, I am afraid, Thorpe. Destroyers pitch about quite a bit, you know."

He included in his smile the destroyer captain and the young lady who completed their party. The young lady had a charming and saucy smile and knew it; she used it in reply to the Admiral's remark.

"I have asked Mr. Thorpe to go on the *Adelaide*," she said. "We shall be leaving in another month—but Robert tells me he has other plans."

"Worse and worse," was the Admiral's comment. "Your father's yacht is not even as steady as a destroyer. Now I would suggest a nice, comfortable liner. . . ."

ROBERT THORPE did not miss the official glances of amusement, but his calm complacence was unruffled. "No," he said, "I don't just fancy liners. Fact is, I have been thinking of sailing across to the States alone."

The Admiral's smile increased to a short laugh. "I would make a bet you wouldn't get fifty miles from Manila harbor."

The younger man crushed his cigarette slowly into the tray. "How much of a bet?" he asked. "What will you bet that I don't sail alone from here to —where are you stationed?—San Diego?—from here to San Diego?"

"Humph!" was the snorted reply. "I would bet a thousand dollars on that and take your money for Miss Allaire's pet charity."

"Now that's an idea," said Thorpe. He reached for a check book in his inner pocket and began to write.

"In case I lose," he explained, "I might be hard to find, so I will just ask Miss Allaire to hold this check for me. You can do the same." He handed the check to the girl.

"Winner gets his thousand back, Ruth; loser's money goes to any little orphans you happen to fancy."

"You're not serious," protested the Admiral.

"Sure! The bank will take that check seriously, I promise you. And I saw just the sloop I want for the trip . . . had my eye on her for the past month."

"But, Robert," began Ruth Allaire, "you don't mean to risk your life on a foolish bet?"

Thorpe reached over to pat tenderly the hand that held his check. "I'm glad if you care," he said, and there was an undertone of seriousness beneath his raillery, "but save your sympathy for the Admiral. The U. S. Navy can't bluff me." He rose more briskly from his chair.

"Thorpe. . . ." said Admiral Struthers. He was thinking deeply, trying to recollect. "Robert Thorpe. . . . I have a book by someone of that name—travel and adventure and knocking about the world. Young man, are you *the* Robert Thorpe?"

"Why, yes, if you wish to put it that way," agreed the other. He waved lightly to the girl as he moved away.

"I must be running along," he said, "and get that boat. See you all in San Diego!"

THE first rays of the sun touched with golden fingers the tops of the lazy swells of the Pacific. Here and there a wave broke to spray under the steady wind and became a shower of molten metal. And in the boat, whose sails caught now and then the touch of morning, Robert Thorpe stirred himself and rose sleepily to his feet.

Out of the snug cabin at this first hint of day, he looked first at the compass and checked his course, then made sure of the lashing about the helm. The steady trade-winds had borne him on through the night, and he nodded with satisfaction as he prepared to lower his lights. He was reaching for a line as the little craft hung for an instant on the top of a wave. And in that instant his eyes caught a marking of white on the dim waters ahead.

"Breakers!" he shouted aloud and leaped for the lashed wheel. He swung

off to leeward and eased a bit on the main-sheet, then lashed the wheel again to hold on the new course.

Again from a wave-crest he stared from under a sheltering hand. The breakers were there—the smooth swells were foaming—breaking in mid-ocean where his chart, he knew, showed water a mile deep. Beyond the white line was a three-master, her sails shivering in the breeze.

The big sailing ship swung off on a new tack as he watched. Was she dodging those breakers? he wondered. Then he stared in amazement through the growing light at the unbroken swells where the white line had been.

HE rubbed his sleepy eyes with a savage hand and stared again. There were no breakers—the sea was an even expanse of heaving water.

"I could swear I saw them!" he told himself, but forgot this perplexing occurrence in the still more perplexing maneuvers of the sailing ship.

This steady wind—for smooth handling—was all that such a craft could ask, yet here was this old-timer of the sea with a full spread of canvas booming and cracking as the ship jibed. She rolled far over as he watched, recovered, and tore off on a long, sweeping circle.

The one man crew of the little sloop should have been preparing breakfast, as he had for many mornings past, but, instead he swung his little craft into the wind and watched for near an hour the erratic rushes and shivering haltings of the larger ship. But long before this time had passed Thorpe knew he was observing the aimless maneuvers of an unmanned vessel.

And he watched his chance for a closer inspection.

THE three-master *Minnie R.*, from the dingy painting of the stern, hung quivering in the wind when he boarded her. There was a broken log-line that swept down from the stern, and he caught this and made his own boat fast. Then, watching his chance, he drew close and went overboard, the line in his hand.

"Like a blooming native after cocoanuts," he told himself as he went up the side. But he made it and pulled himself over the rail as the ship drew off on another tack.

Thorpe looked quickly about the deserted deck. "Ahoy, there!" he shouted, but the straining of rope and spars was his only answer. Canvas was whipping to ribbons, sheets cracked their frayed ends like lashes as the booms swung wildly, but a few sails still held and caught the air.

He was on the after deck, and he leaped first for the wheel that was kicking and whirling with the swing of the rudder. A glance at the canvas that still drew, and he set her on a course with a few steadying pulls. There was rope lying about, and he lashed the wheel with a quick turn or two and watched the ship steady down to a smooth slicing of the waves from the west.

And only then did the man take time to quiet his panting breath and look about him in the unnatural quiet of this strangely deserted deck. He shouted again and walked to a companionway to repeat the hail. Only an echo, sounding hollowly from below, replied to break the vast silence.

IT was puzzling—inconceivable. Thorpe looked about him to note the lifeboats snug and undisturbed in their places. No sign there of an abandonment of the boat, but abandoned she was, as the silence told only too plainly. And Thorpe, as he went below, had an uncanny feeling of the crew's presence—as if they had been there, walked where he walked, shouted and laughed a matter of a brief hour or two before.

The door of the captain's cabin was burst in, hanging drunkenly from one hinge. The log-book was open; there were papers on a rude desk. The bunk was empty where the blankets had been

thrown hurriedly aside. Thorpe could almost see the skipper of this mystery ship leaping frantically from his bed at some sudden call or commotion. A chair was smashed and broken, and the man who examined it curiously wiped from his hands a disgusting slime that was smeared stickily on the splintered fragments. There was a fetid stench within his nostrils, and he passed up further examination of this room.

Forward in the fo'c'sle he felt again irresistibly the recent presence of the crew. And again he found silence and emptiness and a disorder that told of a fear-stricken flight. The odor that sickened and nauseated the exploring man was everywhere. He was glad to gain the freedom of the wind-swept deck and rid his lungs of the vile breath within the vessel.

He stood silent and bewildered. There was not a living soul aboard the ship—no sign of life. He started suddenly. A moaning, whimpering cry came from forward on the deck!

Thorpe leaped across a disorder of tangled rope to race toward the bow. He stopped short at sight of a battered cage. Again the moaning came to him—there was something that still lived on board the ill-fated ship.

HE drew closer to see a great, huddled, furry mass that crouched and cowered in a corner of the cage. A huge ape, Thorpe concluded, and it moaned and whimpered absurdly like a human in abject fear.

Had this been the terror that drove the men into the sea? Had this ape escaped and menaced the officers and crew? Thorpe dismissed the thought he well knew was absurd. The stout wood bars of the cage were broken. It had been partially crushed, and the chain that held it to the deck was extended to its full length.

"Too much for me," the man said slowly, aloud; "entirely too much for me! But I can't sail this old hooker alone; I'll have to get out and let her drift."

He removed completely one of the splintered bars from the broken cage. "I've got to leave you, old fellow," he told the cowering animal, "but I'll give you the run of the ship."

He went below once more and came quickly back with the log-book and papers from the captain's room. He tied these in a tight wrapping of oilcloth from the galley and hung them at his belt. He took the wheel again and brought the cumbersome craft slowly into the wind. The bare mast of his own sloop was bobbing alongside as he went down the line and swam over to her.

Fending off from the wallowing hulk, he cut the line, and his small craft slipped slowly astern as the big vessel fell off in the wind and drew lumberingly away on its unguided course.

She vanished into the clear-cut horizon before the watching man ceased his staring and pricked a point upon his chart that he estimated was his position.

And he watched vainly for some sign of life on the heaving waters as he set his sloop back on her easterly course.

IT was a sun-tanned young man who walked with brisk strides into the office of Admiral Struthers. The gold-striped arm of the uniformed man was extended in quick greeting.

"Made it, did you?" he exclaimed. "Congratulations!"

"All O.K.," Thorpe agreed. "Ship and log are ready for your verification."

"Talk sense," said the officer. "Have any trouble or excitement? Or perhaps you are more interested in collecting a certain bet than you are in discussing the trip."

"Damn the bet!" said the young man feverently. "And that's just what I *am* here for—to talk about the trip. There were some little incidents that may interest you."

He painted for the Admiral in brief, terse sentences the picture of that day-

break on the Pacific, the line of breakers, white in the vanishing night, the abandoned ship beyond, cracking her canvas to tatters in the freshening breeze. And he told of his boarding her and of what he had found.

"Where was this?" asked the officer, and Thorpe gave his position as he had checked it.

"I reported the derelict to a passing steamer that same day," he added, but the Admiral was calling for a chart. He spread it on the desk before him and placed the tip of a pencil in the center of an unbroken expanse.

"Breakers, you said?" he questioned. "Why, there are hundreds of fathoms here, Mr. Thorpe."

"I KNOW it," Thorpe agreed, "but I saw them—a stretch of white water for an eighth of a mile. I know it's impossible, but true. But forget that item for a time, Admiral. Look at this." He opened a brief case and took out a log-book and some other papers.

"The log of the *Minnie R.*," he explained briefly. "Nothing in it but routine entries up to that morning and then nothing at all."

"Abandoned," mused the Admiral, "and they did not take to the boats. There have been other instances—never explained."

"See if this helps any," suggested Thorpe and handed the other two sheets of paper. "They were in the captain's cabin," he added.

Admiral Struthers glanced at them, then settled back in his chair.

"Dated September fourth," he said. "That would have been the day previous to the time you found her." The writing was plain, in a careful, well-formed hand. He cleared his throat and read aloud:

"Written by Jeremiah Wilkens of Salem, Mass., master of the *Minnie R.*, bound from Shanghai to San Pedro. I have sailed the seas for forty years, and for the first time I am afraid. I hope I may destroy this paper when the lights of San Pedro are safe in sight, but I am writing here what it would shame me to set down in the ship's log, though I know there are stranger happenings on the face of the waters than man has ever seen—or has lived to tell.

"ALL this day I have been filled with fear. I have been watched—I have felt it as surely as if a devil out of hell stood beside me with his eyes fastened on mine. The men have felt it, too. They have been frightened at nothing and have tried to conceal it as I have done. And the animals. . . .

"A shark has followed us for days—it is gone to-day. The cats—we have three on board—have howled horribly and have hidden themselves in the cargo down below. The mate is bringing a big monkey to be sold in Los Angeles. An orang-outang, he calls it. It has been an ugly brute, shaking at the bars of its cage and showing its ugly teeth ever since we left port. But to-day it is crouched in a corner of its cage and will not stir even for food. The poor beast is in mortal terror.

"All this is more like the wandering talk of an old woman muttering in a corner by the fireside of witches and the like than it is like a truthful account set down by Jeremiah Wilkins. And now that I have written it I see there is nothing to tell. Nothing but the shameful account of my fear of some horror beyond my knowing. And now that it is written I am tempted to destroy— No, I will wait—"

"And now what is this?" Admiral Struthers interrupted his reading to ask. He turned the paper to read a coarse, slanting scrawl at the bottom of the page.

"The eyes—the eyes—they are everywhere above us — God help—" The writing trailed off in a straggling line.

THE lips beneath the trim gray mustache drew themselves into a hard line. It was a moment before

Admiral Struthers raised his eyes to meet those of Robert Thorpe.

"You found this in the captain's cabin?" he asked.

"Yes."

"And the captain was—"

"Gone."

"Blood stains?"

"No," but the door had been burst off its hinges. There had been a struggle without a doubt."

The officer mused for a minute or two.

"Did they go aboard another vessel?" he pondered. "Abandon ship—open the sea-cocks—sink it for the insurance?" He was trying vainly to find some answer to the problem, some explanation that would not impose too great a strain upon his own reason.

"I have reported to the owners," said Thorpe. "The *Minnie R.* was not heavily insured."

The Admiral ruffled some papers on his desk to find a report.

"There has been another," he told Thorpe. "A tramp freighter is listed as missing. She was last reported due east of the position you give. She was coming this way—must have come through about the same water—" He caught himself up abruptly. Thorpe sensed that an Admiral of the Navy must not lend too credulous an ear to impossible stories.

"You've had an interesting experience, Mr. Thorpe," he said. "Most interesting. Probably a derelict is the answer, some hull just afloat. We will send out a general warning."

He handed the loose papers and the log book to the younger man. "This stuff is rubbish," he stated with emphasis. "Captain Wilkins held his command a year or so too long."

"You will do nothing about it?" Thorpe asked in astonishment.

"I said I would warn all shipping; there is nothing more to be done."

"I think there is." Thorpe's gray eyes were steady as he regarded the man at the desk. "I intend to run it down. There have been other such instances, as you said—never explained. I mean to find the answer."

ADMIRAL STRUTHERS smiled indulgently. "Always after excitement," he said. "You'll be writing another book, I expect. I shall look forward to reading it . . . but just what are you going to do?"

"I am going to the Islands," said Thorpe quietly. "I am going to charter a small ship of some sort, and I am going out there and camp on that spot in the hope of seeing those eyes and what is behind them. I am leaving to-night."

Admiral Struthers leaned back to indulge in a hearty laugh. "I refused you a passage on a destroyer once," he said, "and it was an expensive mistake. I don't make the same mistake twice. Now I am going to offer you a trip. . . .

"The *Bennington* is leaving to-day on a cruise to Manila. I'll hold her an extra hour or two if you would like to go. She can drop you at Honolulu or wherever you say. Lieutenant Commander Brent is in command—you remember him in Manila, of course."

"Fine," Thorpe responded. "I'll be there.

"And," he added, as he took the Admiral's hand, "if I didn't object to betting on a sure thing I would make you a little proposition. I would bet any money that you would give your shirt to go along."

"I never bet, either," said Admiral Struthers, "on a sure loss. Now get out of here, you young trouble-shooter, and let the Navy get to work." His eyes were twinkling as he waved the young man out.

THORPE found himself comfortably fixed on the *Bennington*. Brent, her commander, was a fine example of the aggressive young chaps that the destroyer fleet breeds. And he liked to play cribbage, Thorpe found. They were pegging away industriously the sixth night out when the first S.O.S. reached them. A mes-

sage was placed before the commander. He read it and tossed it to Thorpe as he rose from his chair.

"S.O.S.," said the radio sheet, *"Nagasaki Maru,* twenty-four thirty-five N., one five eight West. Struck something unknown. Down at the bow. May need help. Please stand by."

Captain Brent had left the room. A moment later, and the quiver and tremble of the *Bennington* told Thorpe they were running full speed for the position of the stricken ship.

But: "Twenty-four thirty-five North," he mused, "and less than two degrees west of where the poor old *Minnie R.* got hers. I wonder . . . I wonder. . . ."

"We will be there in four hours," said Captain Brent on his return. "Hope she lasts. But what have they struck out there? Derelict probably, though she should have had Admiral Struthers' warning."

Robert Thorpe made no reply other than: "Wait here a minute, Brent. I have something to show you."

HE had not told the officer of his mission nor of his experience, but he did so now. And he placed before him the wildly improbable statement of the late Captain Wilkins.

"Something is there," surmised Captain Brent, "just awash, probably—no superstructure visible. Your *Minnie R.* hit the same thing."

"Something is there," Thorpe agreed. "I wish I knew what."

"This stuff has got to you, has it?" asked Brent as he returned the papers of Captain Wilkins. He was quite evidently amused at the thought.

"You weren't on the ship," said Thorpe, simply. "There was nothing to see—nothing to tell. But I know. . . ."

He followed Brent to the wireless room.

"Can you get the *Nagasaki?"* Brent asked.

"They know we are coming, sir," said the operator. "We seem to be the only one anywhere near."

He handed the captain another message. "Something odd about that," he said.

"U. S. S. Bennington," the captain read aloud. "We are still afloat. On even keel now, but low in water. No water coming in. Engines full speed ahead, but we make no headway. Apparently aground. *Nagasaki Maru."*

"Why, that's impossible," Brent exclaimed impatiently. "What kind of foolishness—" He left the question uncompleted. The radio man was writing rapidly. Some message was coming at top speed. Both Brent and Thorpe leaned over the man's shoulder to read as he wrote.

"Bennington help," the pencil was writing, "sinking fast—decks almost awash—we are being—"

In breathless silence they watched the pencil, poised above the paper while the operator listened tensely to the silent night.

AGAIN his ear received the wild jumble of dots and dashes sent by a frenzied hand in that far-off room. His pencil automatically set down the words. "Help—help—" it wrote before Thorpe's spellbound gaze, "the eyes—the eyes—it is attack—"

And again the black night held only the rush and roar of torn waters where the destroyer raced quivering through the darkness. The message, as the waiting men well knew, would never be completed.

"A derelict!" Robert Thorpe exclaimed with unconscious scorn. But Captain Brent was already at a communication tube.

"Chief? Captain Brent. Give her everything you've got. Drive the *Bennington* faster than she ever went before."

The slim ship was a quivering lance of steel that threw itself through foaming waters, that shot with an endless, roaring surge of speed toward that distant point in the heaving waste of the Pacific, and that seemed, to the two silent men on the bridge, to put

the dragging miles behind them so slowly—so slowly.

"Let me see those papers," said Captain Brent, finally.

HE read them in silence.

Then: "The eyes!" he said. "The eyes! That is what this other poor devil said. My God, Thorpe, what is it? What can it be? We're not all insane."

"I don't know what I expected to find," said Thorpe slowly. "I had thought of many things, each wilder than the next. This Captain Wilkins said the eyes were above him. I had visions of some sky monster . . . I had even thought of some strange aircraft from out in space, perhaps, with round lights like eyes. I have pictured impossibilities! But now—"

"Yes," the other questioned, "now?"

"There were tales in olden times of the Kraken," suggested Thorpe.

"The Kraken!" the captain scoffed. "A mythical monster of the sea. Why, that was just a fable."

"True," was the quiet reply, "that was just a fable. And one of the things I have learned is how frequently there is a basis of fact underlying a fable. And, for that matter, how can we know there is no such monster, some relic of a Mesozoic species supposed to be extinct?"

He stood motionless, staring far out ahead into the dark. And Brent, too, was silent. They seemed to try with unaided eyes to penetrate the dark miles ahead and see what their sane minds refused to accept.

IT was still dark when the searchlight's sweeping beam picked up the black hull and broad, red-striped funnels of the *Nagasaki Maru*. She was riding high in the water, and her big bulk rolled and wallowed in the trough of the great swells.

The *Bennington* swept in a swift circle about the helpless hulk while the lights played incessantly upon her decks. And the watching eyes strained vainly for some signal to betoken life, for some sign that their mad race had not been quite vain. Her engines had been shut down; there was no steerageway for the *Nagasaki Maru*, and, from all they could see, there were no human hands to drag at the levers of her waiting engines nor to twirl with sure touch the deserted helm. The *Nagasaki Maru* was abandoned.

The lights held steadily upon her as the *Bennington* came alongside and a boat was swung out smartly in its davits. But Thorpe knew he was not alone in his wild surmise as to the cause of the catastrophe.

"Throw your lights around the water occasionally," Brent ordered. "Let me know if you see anything."

"Yes sir," said the man at the searchlight. "I will report if I spot any survivors or boats."

"Report anything you see," said Commander Brent curtly.

"You go aboard if you want to," he suggested to Thorpe. "I will stay here and be ready if you need help."

Thorpe nodded with approval as the small boat pulled away in the dark, for there was activity apparent on the destroyer not warranted by a mere rescue at sea. Gun-crews rushed to their stations; the tarpaulin covers were off of the guns, and their slender lengths gleamed where they covered the course of the boat.

"Brent is ready," Thorpe admitted, "for anything."

THEY found the iron ladder against the ship's side, and a sailor sprang for it and made his way aboard. Thorpe was not the last to set foot on deck, and he shuddered involuntarily at the eery silence he knew awaited them.

It was the *Minnie R.* over again, as he expected, but with a difference. The sailing vessel, before he boarded it, had been for some time exposed to the sun, while the *Nagasaki Maru* had not. And here there were slimy trails still wet on the decks.

He went first to the wireless room. He must know the final answer to that interrupted message, and he found it in emptiness. No radio man was waiting him there, nor even a body to show the loser of an unequal battle. But there was blood on the door-jamb where a body—the man's body, Thorpe was sure—had been smashed against the wood. A wisp of black hair in the blood gave its mute evidence of the hopeless fight. And the slime, like the trails on the deck, smeared with odorous vileness the whole room.

Thorpe went again to the deck, and, as on the other ship, he breathed deeply to rid his lungs and nostrils of the abhorrent stench. The ensign in charge of the boarding party approached.

"What kind of a rotten mess is this?" he demanded. "The ship is filthy and not a soul on board. Not a man of them, officers or crew, and the boats are all here. It's absolutely amazing, isn't it?"

"No," Thorpe told him, "about what we expected. What do you make of this?" He touched with his foot a broad trail that shone wet in the *Bennington's* lights.

"The Lord knows," said the ensign in wonder. "It's all over and it smells like a rotten dead fish. Well, we will be going back, sir." He called to a petty officer to round up the men, and the boat was brought alongside.

THEIR return to the *Bennington* again through a pathway of light that Thorpe knew was safe under the black muzzles of the destroyer's guns.

Or was it, he asked himself. Safe! Was anything safe from this devilish mystery that could pluck each cowering human from the lowest depths of this steel freighter, that could drag her down in the water till the radio man sent his cry: "We are sinking! . . ."

He told Brent quietly, after the ensign had reported, of the struggles in the wireless room and its few remaining traces. And he watched with the commander through the hour of darkness while the *Bennington* steamed in slow circles about the abandoned hulk, while her searchlights played endlessly over the empty waters and the men at the guns cast wondering glances at their skipper who ordered such strange procedure when no danger was there.

With daylight the scene lost its sense of mysterious threat, and Thorpe was eager to return to the abandoned ship.

"I might find something," he said, "some trace or indication of what we have to fight."

"I must leave," said Commander Brent. "Oh, I'm coming back, never fear," he added, at the look of dismay on Thorpe's face. The thought of leaving this mystery unsolved was more than that young seeker after adventure could accept.

"I'm coming back," Brent repeated. "I've been in communication with the Admiral — Honolulu has relayed the messages through. All code, of course; we mustn't alarm the whole Pacific with our nightmares. The old man says to stick around and get the low-down on this damn thing."

"Then why leave?" objected Thorpe.

"BECAUSE I am coming around to your way of thinking, Thorpe. Because I am as certain as can be that we have a monster of some sort to deal with . . . and because I haven't any depth charges. I want to run up to the supply station at Honolulu and get a couple of ash-cans of TNT to lay on top of the brute if we sight him."

"Glory be!" said Thorpe fervently. "That sounds like business. Go and get your eggs and perhaps we can feed them to this devil—raw. . . . And I think I'll stay here, if you will be back by dark."

"Better not," the other objected; but Thorpe overruled him.

"This thing attacks in the dark," he said. "I will lay a little bet on that. It left the orang-outang on the *Minnie*

R.—quit at the first sign of daylight. I will be safe through the day, and besides, the beast has gutted this ship. It won't return, I imagine. And if I stay there for the day—live as they lived, the men who manned that ship—I may have some information that will be of help when you get back. But for Heaven's sake, Brent, don't stop to pick any flowers on the way."

"It's your funeral," said Brent not too cheerfully. "The old man said to give you every assistance, and perhaps that includes helping you commit suicide."

But Robert Thorpe only laughed as Commander Brent gave his orders for a small boat to be lowered. A ship's lantern and rockets for night signals were taken at the officer's orders. "We'll be back before dark," he said, "but take these as a precaution."

One favor Thorpe asked—that the ship's carpenter go over with him and help him to make a strong-barred retreat of the wireless cabin.

"And I'll talk to you occasionally," he told Brent. "I tried the key while I was aboard; the wireless is working on its batteries."

He waved a cheery good-by as the small boat pulled away. "And hurry back," he called. The destroyer commander nodded an emphatic assent.

ON board the *Nagasaki Maru,* Thorpe directed the carpenter and his helpers in the work he wanted done. The man seemed to know instinctively where to put his hands on needed supplies, and the result was a virtual cage of strong oak bars enclosing the wireless room, and braces of oak to bar the single door. Thorpe was not assuming any bravado in his feeling of safety, but he was doing what he had done in many other tight corners, and he prepared his defences in advance.

These included weapons of offense as well. As the boat with the destroyer's men pulled back to the *Bennington,* he placed in easy reach in a corner of the room a heavy calibered rifle he had taken from his belongings.

And, still, with all his feeling of security, there was a strange depression fell upon him when the *Bennington's* narrow hull was small upon the horizon, and then that, too, was gone and only the heaving swells and the wallowing hulk were his companions.

Only these? He shivered slightly as he thought of that unseen watched with the devil-eyes whose presence Captain Wilkins had felt—and his men, and the poor terrified ape! He deliberately put from his mind the thought of this; no use to start the day with morbid fears. He went below to examine the cabins. But he carried the heavy elephant gun with him wherever he went.

BELOW decks the signs of the marauder were everyhere, yet there was little to be learned. The slimy trails dried quickly and vanished, but not before Thorpe had traced them to the uttermost depths of the ship.

There was not a nook or corner that had gone unsearched in the horrible quest for human food. And one thing impressed itself forcibly upon the man's mind. He found a lantern, and he used it of necessity in his explorations, but this thing had gone through the dark and with unerring certainty had found its way to every victim.

"Can it see in the dark?" Thorpe question. "Or. . . ." He visioned dimly some denizen of the vast depths, living beyond the limits of the sun's penetration, far in the abysmal darkness where its only light must be self-made. But his mind failed in the attempt to picture what manner of horror this thing might be.

Even in the hold its evil traces were found. There were tiers of metal drums that still shone wet in his lantern's light. Calcium carbide—for making acetylene, he supposed—marked "Made in U.S.A." The *Nagasaki* must have been westward bound.

HE went, after an hour or so, to the wireless room, and only when he relaxed in the safety of his improvised fortress did he realize how tense had been every nerve and muscle through his long search. He tried the wireless and got an instant response from the destroyer.

"Don't shoot it too fast," he spelled out slowly to the distant operator; "I am only a dub. Just wanted to say hello and report all O.K."

"Fine," was the steady, careful response. "We have had a little trouble with our condensers—" There was a short pause, then the message continued, this portion dictated by the commander. "Delay not important. We will be back as agreed. Have picked up *S. S. Adelaide* bound east in your latitude. Warned her to take northerly course account derelict. See you later. Signed, Brent, commanding *U. S. S. Bennington.*"

The man in the barred room tapped off his acknowledgement and closed the key. He suddenly realized he had had no breakfast, and the hours had been slipping past. He took his gun again and went down to the galley to prepare some coffee. It was not the time or place for an enjoyable meal, but he would have relished it more had he not pictured the *Adelaide* and her lovely owner steaming across these threatening seas.

He knew the captain of the *Adelaide.* "Obstinate pigheaded old Scotchman!" "Hope he takes Brent's advice. Of course Brent couldn't tell him the truth. We can't blat this wild yarn all over the air or the passenger lines would have our scalps. But I wish the *Adelaide* was safe in Manila."

HIS explorations in the afternoon were half-hearted and perfunctory. There was nothing more to be learned. But he had seen in his mind some vague outline of what they must meet. He saw a something, mammoth, huge, that could grasp and hold an ocean freighter—against whose great body he had seen the waves dash in a line of white spray. Yet a something that could force its way down narrow passages, could press with terrific strength on bolted doors and crush them inward, wrecked and splintered. Some serpentine thing that felt and saw its way and crawled so surely through the dark—found its prey—seized it—and carried off a man as easily as it might a mouse.

No octopus, no matter what proportions, filled the description. He gave up trying to see too clearly the awful thing. And he kept away from the ship's rail when once he had ventured near. For there had come to him a feeling of fear that had sent the waves of cold trickling and prickling up his spine. Was there something really there? . . . A waiting lurking horror in the depths?

"The eyes," the thought, "the eyes! . . ." And he went more quickly than he knew to his barred retreat where again he might breathe quietly.

THE position of the deserted ship was south of the regular steamer lanes on the TransPacific run. Only a trace of smoke on the northern horizon marked through the afternoon the passage of other craft. It was a long and lonely vigil for the waiting man. But the *Bennington* would return, and he listened in at intervals hoping to hear her friendly signal.

The batteries operating the *Nagasaki's* wireless were none too strong; Thorpe saved their strength, though he tried at times to raise the *Bennington* somewhere beyond his reach.

The sun was touching the horizon when he got his first response. "Keep up the old nerve," admonished the slow, careful sending of the *Bennington's operator.* "We have been delayed but we are on our way. Signed, Brent."

The man in the wireless room placed the oak bars across the door, and tried to believe he was nonchalant and unafraid as he laid out extra clips of cartridges. But his eyes persisted in

following the sinking sun, and he watched from within his cage the coming of the quick dark.

The protecting glare of day must be unbearable to this monster from the lightless depths, and daylight was vanishing. Thorpe's mind was searching for additional means of defense. He found it in the cargo he had seen. The drums of carbide! He could scatter it on the deck—it reacted with water, and those slimy arms, if they came and touched it, could find the contact hot. He took his lantern and went hastily below to stagger back with a drum upon his shoulder.

In the half-light that was left him he forced the cover and then rolled the drum about the swaying deck. The gray, earthly lumps of carbide formed erratic lines. Useless perhaps, he admitted, but the threatening dark forced the man to use every means at his command.

HE was scattering the contents of a second drum when he stiffened abruptly to rigid attention.

The ship, thrown broadside to the wide-spaced swells, had rolled endlessly with a monotonous motion. But now the deck beneath him was steadying. It assumed an abnormal levelness. The boat rose and fell with the waves, but it no longer rolled. There was something beneath holding, drawing on it.

Thorpe knew in that frozen second what it meant. The drum clattered to the rail as he dashed for his room. Gun in hand, he watched with staring eyes where the deserted deck showed dim and vague in the light of the stars and the bow of the ship was lost in the uncertain dark of night.

Wide-eyed he watched into the blackness, and he listened with desperate attention for some slightest sound beyond the splashing of waves and the creaking of spars.

Far in the west a light appeared, to glow and vanish and glow again in the tumbling waters. The *Bennington!* His heart leaped at the thought, then sank as he knew the destroyer's lights would not appear from that direction.

Through a slow hour that seemed an eternity the oncoming ship drew near, and he knew with a sudden, startling certainty that it was the *Adelaide*—and Ruth Allaire—coming on, through and he knew with a sudden, startling into the horror awaiting.

He leaned forward tensely as a sound reached his ears. A ghostly echo of a sound, like the softest of smooth, slipping fabric upon hard steel. And as he listened, before his staring eyes, a something came between him and the lighted yacht.

It wavered and swung in the darkness. It was formless, uncertain of outline, and it swung in the night out beyond the ship's rail till it suddenly neared, waved high overhead, and the cold light of the stars shone in pale reflection from an enormous, staring eye.

It surmounted a serpentine form that took shape in the dim radiance without and came lower in undulating folds to crash heavily upon the deck.

THORPE'S hand was upon the wireless key. He had wanted to warn off the yacht, but not till the thud of the creature on the bare deck proved its reality could he force his cold fingers to press the key.

Then, fast as his inexperience allowed, he called frantically for the *Adelaide*. He spelled her name, over and over. . . . Would the sleepy operator never answer?

The *Bennington* broke in one. "Is that you, Thorpe? What is up?" they demanded.

But Thorpe kept up his slow spelling of the yacht's name. He must get a warning to them! Then he realized that the *Bennington* could do it better.

"Bennington," he called, "Adelaide approaching. I am attacked. Warn them off. Warn them—" His frantic, hissing dots and dashes died immediately. Beneath his feet the *Nagasaki Maru* was rolling again, swinging free to the

lift and thrust of the swells beneath.

"Good God!" he shouted aloud in his lonely cabin. "It's gone for the yacht. "*Adelaide*—turn north—full speed—" he clicked off on a slow, stuttering key. "Head north. You are being attacked!" He groaned again as he saw the *Adelaide's* shining ports swing away from the safety of the north; the ship broached broadside to the waves and came slowly to a stop.

"*Bennington,*" he radioed. "Brent—it has got the *Adelaide*. Help—hurry! I am going over."

He tore wildly at the barred door, and he made a dash across the deck to slip sprawling in a heap against the rail where the slimy traces of the recent visitor stretched glistening on the deck.

HOW he lowered the boat Thorpe never knew. But he knew there was one that the men from the *Bennington* had swung over the side, and tore madly at the tackle to let the boat crash miraculously upright into the sea. He slung the rifle about his neck with a rope end—there were cartridges in his pocket—and he went down the dangling lines and cast off in a frenzy of haste.

What could he do? He hardly dared form the question. Only this stood clear and unanswerable in his mind: The yacht was in the monster's grip, and Ruth Allaire was there on board. Ruth Allaire, so smiling, so friendly, so lovable! Food for that horror from the depths. . . . He rowed with superhuman strength to drive the heavy boat across the wave-swept distance that separated them.

Between gasping breaths he turned at times to glance over his shoulder and correct his course. And now, as he drew near, he saw though indistinct the unmistakable, snakelike weaving of horrible tenuous fingers, rolling and groping about the yacht.

They were plain as he drew alongside. The trim ship rose and fell with the water, while over her side where Thorpe approached swung a long, white monstrous rope of flesh. It retreated like the lash of a whip, and the horrified watcher saw as it went the struggling figure of a man in the grasp of flabby lips. And above them a single eye glared wickedly.

Another vile, twisting arm rose from the afterdeck with a screaming figure in its grasp and vanished into the water beyond the yacht. There were others writhing about the decks. Thorpe saw them as he made his boat fast and clambered aboard.

A WAVE of reeking air enveloped him as he reached the deck; the nauseous stench from the monster's tentacles was horrible beyond endurance. He gagged and choked as the stifling breath entered his lungs.

A huge rope of slippery, throbbing flesh stretched its twisted length toward the stern. It contracted as he watched into bulging muscular rings and withdrew from the afterdeck. The deadly end of it stopped in mid-air not twenty feet from where he stood. The jawlike pincers on it held the limp form of an officer in its sucking grip, while above, in a protuberance like a gnarled horn, a great eye glared into Thorpe's with devilish hatred.

The beak opened sharply to drop its unconscious burden upon the deck, and the watching man, petrified with horror, saw within the gaping maw great sucking discs and beyond them a brilliant glow. The whole cavernous pit was aflame with phosphorescent light. Dimly he knew that this light explained the ability of the beastly arms to grope so surely in the dark.

The eye narrowed as the gaping, fleshy jaws distended, and Robert Thorpe, in a flash that galvanized him to action, was aware that his fight for life was on. He fired blindly from the hip, and the recoil of the heavy gun almost tore it from his hands. But he knew he had aimed true, and the toothless, sucking jaws whipped in agony back into the sea.

There were other arms whose eyes were searching the stern of the yacht. Thorpe plunged frenziedly down a companionway for the cabin he knew was Ruth Allaire's. Was he in time? Could he save her if he found her? His mind was in a turmoil of half-formed plans as he rushed madly down the corridor to find the body of the girl a limp huddle across the threshold of her cabin.

SHE was alive; he knew it as he swung her soft body across one shoulder and staggered with his burden up the stairs. If he could only breathe! His throat was tight and strangling with the reeking putrescence in the air. And before his eyes was a picture of the strong oak bars of his own retreat. Somehow, some way, he must get back to the abandoned ship.

An eye detected him as he came on deck, and he dropped the limp body of the girl at his feet as he swung his rifle toward the glowing light within the opening jaws. The sucking discs cupped and wrinkled in dread readiness in the fleshy, toothless opening. He emptied the magazine into the head, though he knew this was only a feeler and a feeder for a still more horrible mouth in the monstrous body that rose and fell tremendously in the dark waters beyond. But it was typical of Robert Thorpe that even in the horror and frenzy of the moment he rammed another clip of cartridges into his rifle before he stooped to again raise the prostrate figure of Ruth Allaire.

The forward deck for the moment was clear; it rose high with the weight of the writhing, twisting arms that weighed down the stern of the yacht where the crew had taken refuge.

To think of helping them was worse than folly—he dismissed the thought as another great eye came over the rail. Once more he used the gun, then lowered the girl to the waiting boat, and cast off and rowed with the stealthiest of strokes into the dark.

BEHIND him were whipping points of light above the white brilliance of the yacht *Adelaide*. The boat was tossing in great waves that came from beyond, where a body, incredibly huge, was tearing the waters to foam. There were ghostly arms that shone in slimy wetness, that lashed searchingly in all directions, as the monster gave vent to its fury at Thorpe's attack. There were screaming human figures grasped in many of the jaws, and the man was glad with a great thankfulness that the girl's stupor could save her from the frightful sight.

He dared to row now, and his breath was coming in great choking sobs of sheer exhaustion when at last he pulled the senseless form of Ruth Allaire to the deck of the *Nagasaki* and drew her within the frail shelter of the wireless room.

Stout had the oaken bars appeared, and safe his refuge in the barricaded room, but that was before he had seen in horrible reality the fearful fury of this monster from the deep. He placed the braces against the door and turned with hopeless haste to seize the wireless key.

"Bennington," he called, and the answer came strong and clear. "Where are you. . . . Help—" His fingers froze upon the key and the answering message in his ears was unheeded as he watched across the water the destruction of the yacht.

This craft that had dared to resist the onset of the brute, to fight against it, to wound it, was feeling the full fury of the monster's rage. The gleaming lights of the doomed ship were waving lines that swept to and fro in the grip of those monstrous arms. The boat beneath Thorpe's feet was tossing in the waves that told of the titanic struggle. He had meant to look south for some sign of the oncoming destroyer, but in fearful fascination he stared spellbound where the masts of the trim yacht swept downward into the waves, where the green of her star-

board lantern glowed faintly for an instant, then vanished, to leave only the darkness and the starlit sea.

A VOICE aroused him from his stupefaction. "Where am I . . . where am I?" Ruth Allaire was asking in a frightened whisper. "That terrible thing—" She shuddered violently as memory returned to show again the horror she had witnessed. "Where are we, Robert? And the *Adelaide*—where is it?"

Thorpe turned slowly. The insane turmoil of the past hour had numbed his brain, stunned him.

"The *Adelaide*—" he mumbled, and groped fumblingly for coherent thoughts. He stared at the girl. She was half-risen from the floor where he had laid her, and the sight of her quivering face brought reason again to his mind. He knelt tenderly beside her and raised her in his arms.

"Where is the yacht?" she repeated. "The *Adelaide?*"

"Gone," Thorpe told her. "Lost!" A thought struck him.

"Was your father on board, Ruth?"

Ruth was dazed.

"Lost," she repeated. "The *Adelaide* —lost! . . . No," she added in belated response to Thorpe's question, "Daddy was not there. But the men—Captain MacPherson . . . that horrible monster. . . ." She buried her face in her hands as she realized what Thorpe's silence meant.

He held the trembling figure close as the girl whispered: "Where are we, Robert? Are we safe?"

"We may win through yet," he told her through grim, set lips. He realized abruptly that he was seeing the face of Ruth Allaire in the light. He had left a lantern burning! He withdrew his arms from about her and sprang quickly to his feet to put out of the tell-tale light. In darkness and quiet was their only safety. And he knew as he sprang that he had waited too long. A soft body crashed heavily on the deck outside.

THE girl's voice was shrill with terror as she began a question. Thorpe's hand pressed upon her lips in the dark where he stood waiting—waiting.

A luminous something was glowing outside the cabin. It searched and prodded about the deserted deck to whip upward at the audible hiss of wet carbide. Another appeared; the rifle came slowly to the man's shoulder as a pair of jaws gaped glowingly beyond the windows and an eye stared unblinkingly from its hornlike sheath. It crashed madly against the walls of the wireless room to shatter the glass and make kindling of the woodwork of the sash. Thorpe fired once and again before the specter vanished, and he knew with sickening certainty that the wounds were only messages to some central brain that would send other ravening tentacles against them. But the oak bars had held.

He reached in the brief interval for the key, and he sent out one final call for help. He strained his ears against the head-set for some friendly human word of hope.

"—rocket," the wireless man was saying. "Fire rockets. We can't find—" A swift, writhing arm wrapped crushingly about the cabin as the message ceased.

THORPE seized his rifle and fired into the gray mass that bulged with terrible muscular contractions through the window. He fired again to aim lengthways of the arm and inflict as damaging a wound as his weapon would permit.

The arm relaxed, but a score of others took up the attack. Again the sickening stench was about them as gaping jaws gleamed fiery beneath the hateful eyes and tore at the flimsy structure. Thorpe jammed more cartridges into the gun and fired again and again, then dropped the weapon to fumble for the rockets that Brent had given him.

He lighted one with trembling

fingers; the first ball shot straight into a waiting mouth. Another ignited a searing flame of acetylene gas where a wet arm writhed in the hot carbide trail. The man leaned far out through the broken window.

No time to look around. He let the red flares streamed upward high into the air, then dropped the rocket hissing on the deck to seize once more the rifle.

A mass of muscle crashed against the door; it went to splinters under the impact, and only the two oak bars remained to hold in check the horrible tentacles and the darting heads. One mouth closed to a pointed end that forced its way between the bars. The oak gave under the strain as Robert Thorpe pulled vainly at an empty gun. Beside him rose shrieks of terror as the monstrous thing came on, and Thorpe beat with frantic fury with his clubbed rifle at the fleshy snout.

He knew as he swung the weapon that the shrieks had ceased, then smiled grimly in the numbing horror as he realized that Ruth Allaire was beside him. A piece of oak was in her hands, and she was striking with desperate and silent fury at the slimy flesh.

IT was the end, Thorpe knew, and suddenly he was glad. The nightmare was over, and the end was coming with this girl beside him. But Robert Thorpe was fighting on to the last, and he tried to make his blows reach outward to the hateful devilish eye.

He saw it plainly now, for the deck was a glare of white light. He saw the eye and the thick arm behind it and the score of others that made a heaving, knotted mass were brilliant and wetly shining. He could see now how best to strike, and he turned his gun to thrust with the barrel at the eye.

It withdrew before his stroke—the jaws slid backward to the deck. There were sounds that hammered at his ears. "The guns! The guns!" a girl was screaming. Across the deck, where a searchlight played, huge arms were lashing backward toward the sea. The waves beyond had vanished where a monstrous body shone wetly black in a blinding glare.

And the man hung panting, helpless, on the one remaining bar across the doorway to look where, beyond, her forward guns a spitting stream of staccato flashes, the *Bennington* tore the waves to high-thrown spray. Her four clean funnels swung far over as the slim ship, with her stabbing, crashing guns, swung in a sweeping circle to bear down upon the black bulk slowly sinking in the searchlight's glare.

The vast body had vanished as the destroyer shot like one of her own projectiles over the spot where the beast had lain. And then, where she had passed, the sea arose in a heaving mound. The big ship beneath the watching man shuddered again as another depth charge grumbled its challenge to the master of the deeps.

THE warship went careening on an arc to return and throw the full glare of her searchlights on the scene. They lighted a vast sea, strangely stilled. An oily smoothness leveled waves and ironed them out to show more clearly the convulsions of a torn mass that rose slowly into sight.

Thorpe in some way found himself outside the cabin. And he knew that the girl was again beside him as he stared and stared at what the waters held. A bloated serpent form beyond believing was struggling in the greasy swell. Its waving tentacles again were flung aloft in impotent fury, and, beneath them, where their thick ends jointed the body, a head with one horrible eye rose into the air. A thick-lipped mouth gaped open, and the gleam of molars shone white in the blinding glare.

The twisting body shuddered throughout its vast bulk, and the waving arms and futile staring eyes dropped helpless into the splashing sea. Again the revolting head was

raised as the destroyer sent a rain of shells into its fearful mass. Once more the oily seas were calm. They closed over the whirling vortex where a denizen of the lightless depths was returning to those distant, subterranean caverns—returning as food for what other voracious monsters might still exist.

The man's arm was about the figure of the girl, trembling anew in a fresh reaction from the horror they had escaped, when a small boat drew alongside.

"They're safe," a hoarse voice bellowed back to the destroyer, and a man came monkeywise up a rope where Thorpe had launched his boat.

And now, as one in a dream, Thorpe allowed the girl to be taken from him, to be lowered to the waiting boat. He clambered down himself and in silence was rowed across to the destroyer.

"Thank God!" said Brent, as he met them at the rail. "You're safe, old man . . . and Miss Allaire . . . both of you! You let off that rocket just in time; we couldn't pick you up with our light—

"And now," he added, "we're going back; back to San Diego. The Admiral wants a word of mouth report."

Thorpe stilled him with a heavy gesture. "Give Ruth an opiate," he said dully. "Let her forget . . . forget! . . . Good God, can we ever forget—" He stumbled forward, heedless of Brent's arm across his shoulders as the surgeon took the girl in charge.

ADMIRAL STRUTHERS, U.S.N., leaned back from his desk and blew a cloud of smoke thoughtfully toward the ceiling. He looked silently from Thorpe to Commander Brent.

"If either one of you had come to me with such a report," he said finally, "I would have found it incredible; I would have thought you were entirely insane, or trying some wild hoax."

"I wish it were a damn lie," said Thorpe quietly. "I wish I didn't have to believe it." There were new lines about the young-old eyes, lines that spoke what the lips would not confess of sleepless nights and the impress of a picture he could not erase.

"Well, we have kept it out of the papers," said the Admiral. "Said it was a derelict, and the wild messages floating about were from an inexperienced man, frightened and irresponsible. Bad advertising—very—for the passenger lines."

"Quite," Commander Brent agreed, "but of course Mr. Thorpe may want to use this in his next book of travel. He has earned the right without doubt."

"No," said Thorpe emphatically. "No! I told you, Brent, there was often a factual basis for fables—remember? Well, we have proved that. But sometimes it is best to leave the fables just fables. I think you will agree." A light step sounded in the corridor beyond. "Nothing of this to Miss Allaire," he said sharply.

The men rose as Ruth Allaire entered the room. "We were just speaking," said the Admiral with an engaging smile beneath his close-cut mustache, "of the matter of a bet. Mr. Thorpe has won handily, and he has taught me a lesson.

He took a check book from his desk. "What charity would you like to name, Miss Allaire? That was left to you, you remember."

"Some seamen's home," said Ruth Allaire gravely. "You will know best, if you two are really serious about that silly bet."

"That bet, my dear," said Robert Thorpe with smiling eyes, "was very serious . . . and it has had most serious consequences." He turned to the waiting men and extended a hand in farewell.

"We are going to Europe, Ruth and I," he told them. "Just rambling around a bit. Our honeymoon, you know. Look us up if you're cruising out that way."

"As the madness grew, the two men fought. They were murder mad. The local sub deputy gave his guests the thrill of watching maniacs battling to the death."

Murder Madness

PART TWO OF A FOUR-PART NOVEL

By Murray Leinster

SEVEN United States Secret Service men have disappeared in South America. Another is found—a screaming homicidal maniac. It is rumored that they are victims of a diabolical poison which produces "murder madness."

Charley Bell, of the "Trade"—a secret service organization that does not officially exist—discovers that a sinister system of slavery is flourishing in South American, headed by a mysterious man known only as The Master. This slavery is accomplished by means of a poison which causes its victims to experience a horrible writhing of the hands, followed by a madness to do murder, two weeks after the poison is taken.

Bell, of the secret "Trade," strikes into the South American jungle to find the hidden stronghold of The Master—the unknown monster whose diabolical poison swiftly and surely is enslaving the whole continent.

The victims get relief only with an antidote supplied through Ribiera, The Master's Chief Deputy; but in the antidote there is more of the poison which again in two weeks will take effect. And so it is that a person who once receives the poison is forever enslaved.

Bell learns that Ribiera has kidnaped

Paula Canalejas, daughter of a Brazilian cabinet minister—himself a victim—who has killed himself on feeling the "murder madness," caused by the poison, coming over him. Bell corners Ribiera in his home, buries the muzzles of two six-guns in his stomach, and demands that he set Paula free.

CHAPTER VI

IN this room the electric lights were necessary at all times. And it occurred to Bell irrelevantly that perhaps there were no windows because there might be sometimes rather noisy scenes within these walls. And windows will convey the sound of screaming to the outside air, while solid walls will not.

He stood alert and grim, with his revolvers pressing into Ribiera's flabby flesh. His fingers were tensed upon the triggers. If he killed Ribiera, he would be killed. Of course. And men and women he had known and liked might be doomed to the most horrible of fates by Ribiera's death. Yet even the death or madness of many men was preferable to the success of the conspiracy in which Ribiera seemed to figure largely.

Ribiera looked up at him with the eyes of a terrified snake. There was a little stirring at the door.

"Your friends," said Bell softly, "had better not come close."

Ribiera gasped an order. The stirrings stopped. Paula came slowly into the room, quite alone. She smiled queerly at Bell.

"I believed that you would come," she said quietly. "And yet I do not know that we can escape."

"We're going to try," said Bell grimly. To Ribiera he added curtly, "You'd better order the path cleared to the door, and have one of your cars brought around."

RIBIERA croaked a repetition of the command.

"Now stand up—slowly," said Bell evenly. "Very slowly. I don't want to die, Ribiera, so I don't want to kill you. But I haven't much hope of escape, so I shan't hesitate very long about doing it. And I've got these guns' hammers trembling at full cock. If I get a bullet through my head, they'll go off just the same and kill you."

Ribiera got up. Slowly. His face was a pasty gray.

"Your major-domo," Bell told him matter-of-factly, "will go before us and open every door on both sides of the way to the street. Paula"—he used her given name without thought, or without realizing it—"Paula will go and look into each door. If she as much as looks frightened, I fire, and try to fight the rest of the way clear. Understand? I'm going to get down to a boat I have ready in the harbor if I have to kill you and every living soul in the house!"

There was no boat in the harbor, naturally. But the major-domo moved hesitantly across the room, looking at his master for orders. For Ribiera to die meant death or madness to his slaves. The major-domo's face was ghastly with fear. He moved onward, and Bell heard the sound of doors being thrust wide. Once he gave a command in the staccato fashion of a terrified man. Bell nodded grimly.

"Now we'll move. Slowly, Ribiera! Always slowly. . . . Ah! That's better! Paula, you go on before and look into each room. I shall be sorry if any of your servants follow after you, Ribiera. . . . Through the doorway. Yes! All clear, Paula? I'm balancing the hammers very carefully, Ribiera. Very delicate work. It is fortunate for you that my nerves are rather steady. But really, I don't much care. . . . Still all clear before us, Paula? With the servants nerve-racked as they are, I believe we'll make it through, even if I do kill Ribiera. There'll be no particular point in killing us then. It won't help them. Don't stumble, please, Ribiera. . . . Go carefully, and very slowly. . . ."

RIBIERA'S face was a gray mask of terror when they reached the door. A long, low car with two men on the chauffeur's seat was waiting.

"Only one man up front, Ribiera," said Bell dryly. "No ostentation, please. Now, I hope your servants haven't summoned the police, because they might want to stop me from marching you out there with a gun in the small of your back. And that would be deplorable, Ribiera. Quite deplorable."

With a glance, he ordered Paula into the tonneau. He followed her, driving Ribiera before him. There seemed to be none about but the stricken, terrified servant who had opened the door for their exit.

"My friend," Bell told the major-domo grimly, "I'll give you a bit of comfort. I'm not going to try to take the Senhor Ribiera away with me. Once I'm on board the yacht that waits for me, I'll release him, so he can keep you poor devils sane until my Government has found a way to beat this devilish poison of his. Then I'll come back and kill him. Now you can tell the chauffeur to drive us to the Biera Mar."

He settled back in his seat. There were beads of perspiration on his forehead, but he could not wipe them off. He held the two revolvers against Ribiera's flabby body.

THE car turned the corner, and he added dryly:

"Your servants, Ribiera, will warn your more prominent slaves of my intention of going on board a yacht. Preparations will be made to stop every pleasure boat and search it for me. So . . . tell your chauffeur to swing about and make for the flying field. And tell him to drive carefully, by the way. I've still got these guns on a very fine adjustment of the trigger-pressure."

Ribiera croaked the order. Bell was exactly savage enough to kill him if he did not escape.

For twenty minutes the car sped through the residential districts of Rio. The sun was high in the air, but clouds were banking up above the Pao d'Assucar—the Sugarloaf—and it looked as if there might be one of the sudden summer thunderstorms that sometimes sweep Rio.

Then the clear road to the flying field. Rio has the largest metropolitan district in the world, but a great deal of it is piled on end, and Rio itself built on most of the rest. The flying field is necessarily some miles from even the residential districts, for the sake of a level plain of sufficient area.

The car shot ahead through practically untouched jungle, interspersed with tiny clearings in which were patchwork houses that might have been a thousand miles in the interior instead of so near the center of all civilization in Brazil. Up smooth gradients. Around beautifully engineered curves.

BELL put aside one revolver long enough to search Ribiera carefully. He found a pearl-handled automatic, and handed it to Paula.

"Worth having," he said cheerfully. "I wonder if you'd mind searching the chauffeur: with that gun at his head I think he'd be peaceful. You needn't have him stop."

Paula stood up, smiling a little.

"I did not think I lacked courage, Senhor," she observed, "but you have taught me more."

"*Nil desperandum,*" said Bell lightly. He relaxed deliberately. Matters would be tense at the flying field, and he would need to be wholly calm. There was little danger of an attempt at rescue here, and the necessity of being ready to shoot Ribiera at any instant was no longer a matter of split seconds.

He watched, while, bent over the back of the front seat, she extracted two squat weapons from the chauffeur's pockets.

"Quite an arsenal," said Bell as he pocketed them. He turned pleasantly to Ribiera. "Now, Ribiera, you understand just what I want. That big amphibian plane of yours is fairly fast, and once when I was merely your guest you assured me that it was always kept fueled and even provisioned for a long flight. When we reach the flying field I want it rolled out and warmed up, over at the other end of the field from the flying line. We'll go over to it in the car.

"And I've thought of something. It worried me, before, because sometimes if a man's shot he merely relaxes all over. So while we're at the flying field I'm going to be holding back the triggers of these guns with my thumbs. I don't have to pull the triggers at all—just let go and they'll go off. It isn't so fine an adjustment as I had just now, but it's safer for you, as long as you behave. And you might urge your chauffeur to be cautious. I do hope, Ribiera, that you won't look as if you were frightened. If there's any hitch, and delay for letting some fuel out of the tanks or messing up the motors, I'll be very sorry for you."

THE car swooped out into bright sunshine. The flying field lay below, already in the shadow of the banking clouds above. Hangars lay stretched out across the level space.

Through the gates. Ribiera licked his lips. Bell jammed the revolver muzzles closer against his sides. The chauffeur halted the car. Paula spoke softly to him. He stiffened. Bell found it possible to smile faintly.

Ribiera gave orders. There was a moment's pause—the revolver muzzles went deeper into his side—and he snarled a repetition. The official cringed and moved swiftly.

"You have chosen your slaves well, Ribiera," said Bell coolly. "They seem to occupy all strategic positions. We'll ride across."

The gears clashed. The car swerved forward and went deliberately across

the wide clear space that was the flying field. It halted near the farther side. In minutes the door of a hangar swung wide. There was the sputtering of a not-yet-warmed-up motor. The big plane came slowly out, its motors coughing now and then. It swung clumsily across the field, turned in a wide circle, and stopped some forty or fifty feet from the car.

"Send the mechanic back, on foot," said Bell softly.

Again Ribiera found it expedient to snarl. And Bell added, gently, while the throttled-down motors of the big amphibian boomed on:

"Now get out of the car."

Tiny figures began to gaze curiously at them from the row of hangars. The mechanic, starting back on foot, the four people getting out of the car, the big plane waiting. . . .

WITH his revolver ready and aimed at Ribiera's bulk, Bell reached in the front of the car and turned off the switch. The motor died abruptly. He put the key in his pocket.

"Just to get a minute or two extra start," he said dryly. "Climb up in the plane, Paula."

She obeyed, and turned at the top.

"I will cover them until you are up," she said quietly.

Bell laughed, now. A genuine laugh, for the first time in many days.

"We do work together!" he said cheerfully.

But he backed up the ladder. There was a stirring over by the hangars. The mechanic who had taxied the plane to this spot was a dwindling speck, no more than a third of the way across the field. But even from the distant hangars it could be seen that something was wrong.

"Close the door, Paula," said Bell. He had seated himself at the controls, and scanned the instruments closely.

This machine was heavy and large and massive. The boat-body between the retractable wheels added weight to the structure, and when Bell gave it the gun it seemed to pick up speed with an irritating slowness, and to roll and lurch very heavily when it did begin to approach flying speed. The run was long before the tail came up. It was longer before the joltings lessened and the plane began to rise slowly, with the solid steadiness that only a large and heavily loaded plane can compass.

UP, and up. . . . Bell was three hundred feet high when he crossed the hangars and saw tiny faces staring up at him. Some of the small figures were pointing across the field. The big plane circled widely, gaining altitude, and Bell gazed down. Ribiera was gesticulating wildly, pointing upward to the soaring thing, shaking his fist at it, and making imperious, frantic motions of command.

Bell took one quick glance all about the horizon. Toward the sea the sun shone down brilliantly upon the city. Inland a broad white wall of advancing rain moved toward the coastline. And Bell smiled frostily, and flung the big ship into a dive and swooped down upon Ribiera as a hawk might swoop at a chicken.

Ribiera saw the monster thing bearing down savagely, its motors bellowing, its nose pointed directly at him. And there is absolutely nothing more terrifying upon the earth than to see a plane diving upon you with deadly intent. A panic that throws back to nonhuman ancestors seizes upon a man. He feels the paralysis of those ancient anthropoids who were preyed upon by dying races of winged monsters in the past. That racial, atavistic terror seizes upon him.

Bell laughed, though it sounded more like a bark, as Ribiera flung himself to the ground and screamed hoarsely when the plane seemed about to pounce upon him. The shrill timbre of the shriek cut through the roaring of the motors, even through the thick padding of the big plane's cabin walls that reduced that roaring to a not intolerable growl.

BUT the plane passed ten feet or more above his head. It rose, and climbed steeply, and passed again above the now buzzing, agitated hangars, and climbed above the hills behind the flying field as some men went running and others moved by swifter means toward the shaken, nerve-racked Ribiera, on whose lips were flecks of foam.

Bell looked far below and far behind him. The incredible greenness of tropic verdure, of the jungle which rings Rio all about. The many glitterings of sunlight upon glass, and upon the polished domes of sundry public buildings, and the multitudinous shimmerings of the tropic sun upon the bay. The deep dark shadow of the banking clouds drew a sharp line across the earth, and deep in that shadow lay the flying field, growing small and distant as the plane flew on. But specks raced across the wide expanse. In a peculiar, irrational fashion those specks darted toward a nearly invisible speck, and encountered other specks darting away from that nearly invisible speck, and gradually all the specks were turned about and racing for the angular, toy-block squares which were the hangars of the aeroplanes of the city of Rio de Janeiro.

Little white things appeared from those hangars—planes being thrust out into the open air while motes of men raced agitatedly about them. One of them was suddenly in motion. It moved slowly and clumsily across the ground, and then abruptly moved more swiftly. It seemed to float upward and to swing about in mid-air. It came floating toward the amphibian, though apparently nearly stationary against the sky. Another moved jerkily, and another. . . .

JUST before the big plane dived into the wide white wall of falling water, the air behind it seemed to swarm with aircraft.

In the cabin of the amphibian, of course, the bellowing of the motors outside was muffled to a certain degree. Paula clung to the seats and moved awkwardly up to the place beside Bell. She had just managed to seat herself when the falling sheet of water obliterated all the world.

"Strap yourself in your seat," he said in her ear above the persistent tumult without. "Then you might adjust my safety-belt. We'll be flying blind in this rain. I hope the propellers hold."

She fumbled first at the belt beside his upholstered chair, and only afterward adjusted her own. He sent a quick glance at her.

"Shouldn't have done that," he said quietly. "I can manage somehow."

The plane lurched and tumbled wildly. He kicked rudder and jerked on the stick, watching the instrument board closely. In moments the wild gyrations ceased.

"The beginning of this," he said evenly, "is going to be hectic. There'll be lightning soon."

Almost on his words the gray mist out the cabin windows seemed to flame. There was thunder even above the motors. But the faint, perceptible trembling of the whole plane under the impulse of its engines kept on. Bell kept his eyes on the bank and turn indicator, glancing now and then at the altimeter.

"We've got to climb," he said shortly, up where the lightning is, too. We want to pass the Serra da Carioca with room to spare, or we'll crash on it."

There was no noticeable change in the progress of the plane, of course. Rain was dashing against the windows of the cabin with an incredible velocity. Rain at a hundred miles an hour acts more like hail than water, anyhow, and Bell was trusting grimly to the hope that the propellers were of steel, which will withstand even hail, and a hope that the blast through the engine cowlings would keep the wiring free of water-made short circuits.

BUT the air was bad beyond belief. At times the plane spun like thistledown in a vast and venomous

flood that crashed into the windows with a vicious rattling. Lightning began and grew fiercer. It seemed at times as if the plane were whirling crazily in sheer incandescent flame. The swift air-currents at the beginning of a tropic thunderstorm were here multiplied in trickiness and velocity by the hills of the Serra da Carioca, and Bell was flying blind as well. The safety-belts were needed fifty times within twenty minutes, as the big ship was flung about by fierce blasts that sometimes blew even the rain upward for a time. And over all, as the amphibian spun madly, and toppled crazily, and fought for height, there was the terrific, incessant crashing of thunder which was horribly close, and the crackling flares of lightning all about.

"I'm going to take a chance," said Bell curtly above the uproar, with the windows seeming to look out upon the fires of hell. "I think we're high enough. The compass has gone crazy, but I'm going to risk it."

Again there was no perceptible alteration in the motion of the ship, but he fought it steadily toward the west. And it seemed that he actually was passing beyond the first fierce fringe of the storm, because the lightning became—well, not less frequent, but less continuous.

AND suddenly, in a blinding flare of light that made every separate raindrop look like a speck of molten metal, he saw another airplane. It was close. Breath-takingly close. It came diving down out of nowhere and passed less than twenty yards before the nose of the amphibian. It glistened with wet, and glittered unbearably in the incredible brightness of the lightning. Every spot and speck and detail showed with an almost ghastly distinctness. But it dived on past, its pilot rigid and tense and unseeing, plunging like a meteor straight downward. The golden, irridescent mist of rain closed over its body. And it was gone.

Ten minutes later Bell was driving onward through a gray obscurity, which now was no more than tinted pink by receding lightning-flashes. The air was still uneven and treacherous. The big plane hurtled downward hundreds of feet in wild descending gusts among the hills, and was then flung upward on invisible billows of air for other hundreds of feet. But it was less uncontrollable. There were periods of minutes when the safety-belts did not come into use.

AND later still, half an hour perhaps, the steadiness of the air gave assurance that the plane was past the range of the Serra da Carioca and was headed inland. He drove on, watching his instruments and flying blind, but with a gathering confidence in an ultimate escape from the swarm of aircraft Ribiera had sent aloft in the teeth of the storm to hunt for him. The motors hummed outside the padded cabin. The girl beside him was very quiet and very still and very pale.

"We want to get out of this before long," he said in her ear," and then we can find out where we are, and especially begin to make some plans for ourselves."

Her eyes turned to him. There was a curious stiffness in her manner. It might have seemed reserve, but Bell recognized the symptoms of a woman whose self-control is hanging by a thread. He smiled.

"Hold on a while yet," he said gently. "I know you want to cry. But please hold on a while yet. When we reach friends. . . ."

Her hands went to her throat, and he could feel the effort of will that kept her voice steady.

"Friends? We have no friends." She managed a smile. "The Senhor Ribiera explained to me when I arrived at his house how it was that no questions would be asked about my disappearance. My father is dead. The newspapers this morning said that it was not known whether he killed himself or was assassinated. The

Senhor Ribiera has given orders to his slaves. The newspapers of this afternoon will inform a horrified world that you and I, together, murdered my father that we might flee together with such of his riches as he had actually gathered together for me to take away. We are murderers, my friend. Cables and telegraph wires are reporting the news. The daughter of the Minister of War of the Republic of Brazil was assisted by her lover to murder her father. She has fled with him. Now —where are we still to find friends?"

BELL stared, for the fraction of an instant. One thought came to him, and was checked. The Trade does not exist, anywhere. The Trade would not help. And murderers are always duly handed over when the Government of the United States is requested politely to do so by another nation. Always. And so far as the whole civilized world was concerned they were murderers. Even the employees of the flying field who were not subject to The Master would swear to the strictly accurate story of their escape together.

"It is just scandalous enough and horrible enough," said Bell quietly, "to be reprinted everywhere as news. You're right. We haven't any friends. We're up against it. And so I think we'll have to hunt down and kill The Master. Then we'll be believed. And there are just two of us, with what weapons we have in our pockets, to attack. How many thousands of slaves do you suppose The Master has by now?"

And, quite suddenly, he laughed.

CHAPTER VII

THE sun was sinking slowly when the plane appeared above the valley. There was only jungle below. Jungle, and the languid river which now flowed sluggishly into a wide and shallow pool in which drowned trees formed a mass of substance neither land nor marsh nor river. The river now contracted to a narrow space and showed signs of haste, and even foaming water, and then again flowed placidly onward, sometimes even a hundred yards in breadth. Shadows of the mountains to the west were creeping toward the opposite hill-flanks, darkening the thick foliage and sending flocks of flying things home to their chosen roosts.

The sound of the plane was a buzzing noise, which grew louder to a sharp drone as it seemed to increase in size, and became a dull monotonous roar as it dipped toward the waters of the stream. It floated downward, very gently, and circled as if regarding a certain spot critically, and resumed its onward flight. Again it circled, anxiously, now, as if the time for alighting were short.

It seemed to hesitate in midair, and dived, and circled upstream and came down the valley again. It sank, and sank, lower and lower, until the white of its upper wings was hidden by the tall trees on either side.

A *jabiru* stork saw it from downstream, solemnly squatting on four eggs which eventually would perpetuate the race. The *jabiru* was about forty feet above the water and had a clear view of the stream. The stork squatted meditatively, with its long, naked neck projecting above the edge of its nest.

THE plane dipped ever lower, its reflection vivid and complete upon the waveless stream below it. Ten feet above the water. Five—and swift ripples from the rush of air disturbed the unbroken reflections behind. It was almost a silhouette against the mirrored appearance of the sunset sky. And then a clumsy-seeming boat body touched water with a vast hissing sound, and settled more and more heavily, while the speed of the plane checked markedly and its motors roared on senselessly.

Then, abruptly, the plane checked and partly swung around. The *jabiru*

half-rose from its eggs. The motors were bellowing wildly again. As if tearing itself free, the plane sheered off from some invisible obstacle, one of its wing tip floats splashed water wildly, and, with the motors thundering at their fullest speed, it went toward the shore with a dragging wing, like some wounded bird.

It beached, and the *jabiru* heard a sudden dense silence fall. A man climbed out of the boatlike body. He walked to the bow and dropped to the shore. He peered under the upward slanting nose of the boat-thing. The *jabiru*, listening intently, heard words.

Then, quite suddenly and quite abruptly, and generally with the unostentatious efficiency with which Nature manages such things in the tropics, night fell. It was dark within minutes.

THE noise of Bell's scrambling back onto the deck of the amphibian's hull could be heard inside the cabin. He opened the door and slipped down inside.

"There ought to be some lights," he said curtly. "Ribiera did himself rather well, as a rule."

He struck a match. Paula's eyes shone in the match-flame, fixed upon his face. He looked about, frowning. He found a switch and pressed it, and a dome-light came into being. The cabin of the plane, from a place of darkness comparable to that of the jungle all about, became suddenly a cosy and comfortable place.

"Well?" said Paula quietly.

Bell hesitated, and took a deep breath.

"We're stuck," he said wryly. "We must have struck a snag or perhaps a rock, just under water. Half the bottom of the hull's torn out. There's no hope of repair. If I hadn't given her the gun and beached her, we'd have sunk in mid-stream."

Paula said nothing.

"Things are piling on us," said Bell grimly. "In the morning I'll try to make a raft. We can't stay here indefinitely. I'll hunt for maps and we'll try to plan something out. But I'll admit that this business worries me—the plane being smashed."

HE passed his hand harassedly over his forehead. To have escaped from Rio was something, but since Paula had told him Ribiera's plans, it was clearly but the most temporary of successes. Cabinet ministers are not so commonplace but that the scandalous and horrifying crime that was imputed to Bell and Paula would be printed in every foreign country. Newspapers in Tokio would include the supposed murder in their foreign news, and in Bucharest and even Constantinople it would merit a paragraph or two. Assuredly every South American country would discuss the matter editorially, even where The Master's deputies did not order it published far and wide. There would be pictures of Bell and of Paula, labeled with an infamy. In every town of all Brazil their faces would be known, and those who were The Master's slaves would hunt them desperately, and all honorable men would seek them for a crime. Even in America there would be no safety for them. The Trade does not exist, officially, and a member of the Trade must get out of trouble as he can. As an accused murderer, Bell would be arrested anywhere. As worse than a mere murderess, Paula. . . .

She was watching his face.

"This morning," she said queerly, "you—you quoted *'Nil desperandum.'*"

Bell ground his teeth, and then managed to smile.

"If I looked like I needed you to say that," he said coolly, "I deserve to be kicked. Let's look for something to eat, and count up our resources. The thing to do is, when you fall down—bounce!"

He managed a nearly genuine grin, then, and to his intense amazement, she sobbed suddenly and bent her head down and began to weep. He stared at her in stupefaction for an instant, then

swore at himself for a fool. Her father. . . .

HALF an hour later he roused her as gently as he could. It was helplessness, as much as anything else, that had made him leave her alone; but a woman needs to weep now and then. And Paula assuredly had excuse.

"Here's a cup of coffee," he said practically, "which you must drink. You can't have had anything to eat all day. Have you?"

That question had haunted him too. She had been a prisoner in Ribiera's house for half an hour, possibly more. And Ribiera had in his possession, and used, a deadly, devilish poison from some unknown noxious plant. Its victim took the poison unknowingly, in a morsel of food or a glass of water or of wine. And for two weeks there was no sign of evil. And then the poison drove its victim swiftly mad—unless the antidote was obtained from Ribiera. And Ribiera administered the antidote with a further dose of poison.

If Paula had eaten one scrap of food or drunk one drop of water while Ribiera's captive. . . .

She understood. She looked up suddenly, and read the awful anxiety in his eyes.

"No. Nothing." She caught her breath and steadied herself with an effort of the will. "I understand. You tried not to let me fear. But I ate nothing, touched nothing. I have not that to fear, at least."

"Drink this coffee," said Bell, smiling. "Ribiera was a luxurious devil. There's canned stuff and so on in a locker. He was prepared for a forced landing anywhere. Flares and rockets will do us no good, but there are a pair of machetes and a sporting rifle with shells. We don't need to die for a bit, anyhow."

PAULA obediently took the coffee. He watched her anxiously as she drank.

"Now some soup," he urged, "and the rest of this condensed stuff. And I've found some maps and there's a radio receiving outfit if—"

Paula managed to smile.

"You want to know," she said, "if I can endure listening to it. Yes. I—I should not have given way just now. But I can endure anything."

Bell still hesitated, regarding her soberly.

"I've heard," he said awkwardly, "that in Brazil the conventions. . . ."

She waited, looking at him with her large eyes.

"I hoped," said Bell, still more unhappily, "to find this place Moradores, where you said you had some relatives. I hoped to find it before dark. But before I landed I knew I'd missed it and couldn't hope to locate it to-night. I thought—"

"You thought," said Paula, smiling suddenly, "that my reputation would be jeopardized. And you were about to offer—"

Bell winced.

"Of course I don't mean to act like an ass," he said apologetically, "but some people. . . ."

"You forget," said Paula, with the same faint smile, "what the newspapers will say of us, Senhor. You forget what news of us the cables have carried about the world. I think that we had better forget about the conventions. As the daughter of a Brazilian, that remark is heresy. But did you know that my mother came from Maryland?"

"Thank God!" said Bell relievedly. "Then you can believe that I'm not thinking exclusively of you, and maybe we'll get somewhere."

Paula put out her hand. He grasped it firmly.

"Right!" he said, more cheerfully than ever before. "Now we'll turn on the radio and see what news we get."

INTO the deep dark jungle night, then, a strange incongruity was thrust. Tall trees loomed up toward the stars. A nameless little stream

flowed placidly through the night and, beached where impenetrable undergrowth crowded to the water's edge, a big amphibian plane lay slightly askew, while a light glowed brightly in its cabin. More, from that cabin there presently emerged the incredible sound of music, played in Rio for *os gentes* of the distinctly upper strata of society by a bored but beautifully trained orchestra.

The *jabiru* stork heard it, and craned its featherless neck to stare downward through beady eyes. But it was not frightened. Presently, instead of music, there was a man's voice booming in the disconnected sounds of human speech. And still the *jabiru* was unalarmed. Like most of the birds whose necks are bald, the *jabiru* is a useful scavenger, and so is tolerated in the haunts of men. And if man's gratitude is not enough for safety, the *jabiru* smells very, very badly, and no man hunts his tribe.

BELL had been listening impatiently, when a sudden whining, whistling noise broke into the program of very elevated music, played utterly without zest. The sound came from the speaker, of course.

He frowned thoughtfully. The whistling changed in timbre and became flutelike, then changed again, nearly to its original pitch and tone.

Paula was not listening. Her mind seemed very far away, and on subjects the reverse of pleasurable.

"Listen!" said Bell suddenly. "You hear that whistle? It came on all at once!"

Paula waited. The whistling noise went on. It was vaguely discordant, and it was monotonous, and it was more than a little irritating. Again it changed timbre, going up to the shrillest of squealings, and back nearly to its original sound an instant later.

Bell began to paw over maps. The plane had been intended for flight over the vast distances of Brazil, and there was a small supply of condensed food and a sporting rifle and shells included in its equipment. Emergency landing fields are not exactly common in the back country of South America.

"Here," said Bell sharply. "Here is where we are. It must be where we are! No towns of any size nearby. No railroad. No boat route. Nothing! Nothing but jungle shown here!"

HE frowned absorbedly over the problem.

"What is it?" asked Paula.

"Someone near," said Bell briefly. "That's another radio receiver, an old fashioned regenerative set, sensitive enough and reliable enough, but a nuisance to everyone but its owner—except when it's a godsend, as it is to us."

The music ended, and a voice announced in laboriously classic Portuguese, with only a trace of the guttural tonation of the *carioca*, that the most important news items of the day would be given.

Paula paled a little, but listened without stirring. The voice read—the rustling of sheets of paper was abnormally loud—a bit of foreign news, and a bit of local news, and then. . . .

She was deathly pale when the announcement of her father's death was finished, and she had heard the official view of the police reported—exactly what Ribiera had told her it would be. When the voice added that a friend of the late Minister of War, the Senhor Ribiera, had offered twenty contos for the capture of the fugitive pair, who had escaped in an airplane stolen from him, she bit her lip until it almost bled.

"I KNOW," he said abstractedly." "It's as you said. But listen to that whistle."

The news announcement ceased. Music began again. The whistling abruptly died away.

"I just found some coils," said Bell feverishly, "that plug in to take the place of the longer-wave ones. I'm going to try them. It's a hunch, and it's crazy, but. . . ."

There were sharp clickings. The radio receiver was one of those extraordinarily light and portable ones that are made for aircraft. In seconds it was transformed into a short-wave receiver. Bell began to manipulate the dials feverishly. Two minutes. Three. Four.

The speaker suddenly began to whine softly and monotonously.

"Regeneration," said Bell feverishly, "on a carrier-wave. It can't be far off, that receiving set."

Suddenly a voice spoke. It was blurred and guttural. Infinitely delicate adjustments cleared it up. And then. . . .

Bell listened eagerly, at first in triumph, then in amazement, and at last in a grim satisfaction. Reports from Rio on a short-wave band of radio frequencies were passing from Ribiera to some other place apparently inland. It was Ribiera's own voice, which quivered with rage as he reported Bell's escape.

"I do not think," he snapped in Portuguese, *"that full details should be spoken even on beam wireless. I shall come to the* fazenda *tomorrow and communicate with The Master direct. In the meantime I have warned all sub-deputies in Brazil. I urge that all deputies be informed and instructed as The Master may direct."*

ANOTHER voice replied that The Master would be informed. In the meantime the deputy for Brazil was notified.

This list of bits of information chilled Bell's blood. This man, of Venezuela, had been denied the grace of The Master by the deputy in Caracas. He would probably use the passwords and demand the grace of The Master of sub-deputies in the State of Pará. To be seized and Caracas informed. The deputy in Colombia desired that the son of Colonel García—upon a hunting-party with friends in the Amazon basin—should be attached to the service of The Master. His father had been so attached, and it was believed had smuggled a letter into the foreign mail warning his son. If possible, that letter should be intercepted. And from Paraguay the deputy requested that the family of Senor Gomez, visiting relatives in Rio, should be induced to regard the service of The Master as desirable. . . .

The orders ceased abruptly. Ribiera acknowledged them. The whining whistle cut off. And Bell turned to Paula very grimly indeed.

"Pretty, isn't it?" he asked in a vast calmness. "Apparently every nation on the continent has some devil like Ribiera in charge of the administration of this fiendish poison. Every republic has some fiend at work in it. And they're organized. My God! They're organized! The Master seems to supply them with the mixture of poison and its antidote, and they report to him. . . ."

PAULA nodded.

"That was what my father had written down for you," she said quietly. "Any man who can be lured to eat or drink anything these men have prepared is lost. He gains no pleasure, as a drug might give. He is entrapped into a lifetime of awful fear, knowing that a moment's disobedience, a moment's reluctance to obey whatever command they give, will cause his madness."

"I'm trying to think what we can work out of this," said Bell shortly. "Some things are clear. There's a radio receiving set nearby, which listened to those short-wave reports. Within five or six miles, at most. We're going to find that tomorrow. And there's a central point, a *fazenda,* where one may talk direct with The Master, whoever and wherever he may be. And—judging by Ribiera—my guess is that The Master has the same hold upon them that they have on their underlings. Ribiera is too arrogant a scoundrel to make obsequious reports if he were not afraid to omit them." He was silent for

a moment, thinking. Then he said abruptly, "Try to get some sleep, if you can. That pistol of Ribiera's—you have it handy? Keep it where you can reach it in the dark. I'm going to watch, though."

Paula settled herself comfortably, and looked queerly across the dimly lit little cabin at him.

"My friend," she said with the faintest of quavering smiles, "Please do not reassure me. I have the courage of endurance, at least. And—I do not fear you."

IT seemed to Bell, listening in the darkness that fell when he turned off the switch, that she stayed awake for a long time. But when she did sleep, she slept heavily.

Bell had a raft of canes afloat beside the amphibian when she waked. He was sweat-streaked and bitten by many insects. He was tired, and his clothes were rags. But the raft was nearly twenty feet long, it would easily float two persons and what small supplies the plane carried, and it could be handled by a long pole.

"Hullo," he said cheerfully when she climbed on top of the waterlogged hull of the plane. "We're nearly ready to start off. I'm sorry I can't advise you to try to refresh yourself in the river. There are some fish in it that are fiends. One of them took a slice out of the side of my hand."

"*Piranhas!*" she exclaimed, and was pale. "You should have known!"

Piranhas are small fresh-water fish of the Brazilian rivers, never more than a foot and a half long, which prove the existence of a devil. Where they swarm in schools they will tear every morsel of flesh from a swimmer's body as he struggles to reach shore, and leave a clean-stripped skeleton of a mule or horse if an animal should essay to swim a stream.

"I'll ask, next time," said Bell ruefully. "I'd planned a swim. But if you'll fix some coffee while I finish up this raft, we'll get going. I don't think we're far from some place or other. I heard what sounded suspiciously like a motor boat, about dawn."

SHE looked at him anxiously.

"Of course," said Bell, smiling, "if the boat belonged to whoever listened in on the Rio broadcast *and* the short-wave news, he won't be especially friendly, though he should be glad to see us. But I've been studying the map, and I have a rather hopeful idea. Let's have coffee."

He grinned as long as she was in sight, and when he went into the cabin of the plane he seemed more cheerful still. But the idea of floating down this nameless little jungle stream upon a raft of canes was not one that he would have chosen. It was forced upon him. To travel through the jungle itself was next to impossible with a girl, especially as they were dressed for city streets and not at all for battling with dense and thorn-studded undergrowth. And to stay with the plane was obviously absurd. Sooner or later they had to abandon it, though the moment they did desert it they would be encountering not only the impersonal menace of the jungle, but the actual enmity of all the human race. The raft was the only possibility.

IT floated smoothly enough when they started off, with Bell working inexpertly with his long pole to keep it in mid-stream. He was, of course, acutely apprehensive. In country like this a rapid could be expected anywhere. The jungle life loomed high above their heads on either side, and the life of the jungle went on undisturbed by their passage. Monkeys gaped at them and exchanged undoubtedly witty comments upon their appearance. Birds flew overhead with raucous and unpleasant cries. Toucans, in particular, made a most discordant din. Once they disturbed a tiny herd of peccaries, drinking, which regarded them pugnaciously and trotted sturdily out of sight as they came abreast.

But for one mile, for two, the stream flowed smoothly. A third. . . . And Paula pointed ahead in silence. A dug-out projected partly from the shoreline. Bell wielded his long pole cautiously now, and drew closer and ever closer to the stream bank. Paula pointed again. There was even a small dock—luxury unthinkable in these wilds.

The raft touched bottom. And suddenly from somewhere out of sight there came a horrible and a bestial sound. It was a scream of blood-lust, of madness, of overpowering and unspeakable rage. Following it came cackling laughter.

Paula went white.

"The *fazenda*," said Bell softly, "of the sub-deputy who was listening in on Ribiera last night. And it sounds as if someone were very much amused. Some poor devil. . . ."

Paula shuddered.

"I'm going ashore," said Bell, smiling frostily. "There's nothing else to do."

CHAPTER VIII

CROUCHED at the edge of the jungle, where the clearing began, Paula heard four shots. Two in quick succession, and a wait of minutes. Then a third, and another long wait, and then the last. Then silence. Paula began to shiver. Bell had helped her ashore from the raft and insisted on her waiting at the edge of the jungle.

"Not that you'll be any safer," he had told her grimly, "but that I may be. One person can move more quickly than two. And if I'm chased I'll plunge for the place you're hidden, and you can open fire. Then the two of us might hold them off."

"Why?" Paula said slowly.

And Bell caught at her wrist.

"Don't let me hear you talk like that!" he said sharply. "We're going to beat this thing! We've got to! And being desperate helps, but being in despair doesn't help a bit. Buck up!"

He frowned at her until she smiled.

"I will not despair again without your permission," she told him. "Really. I will not."

He found her a hiding-place and went cautiously out into the clearing, still frowning.

HE had been gone five minutes before the first shot sounded, and quite ten before the last rang out dully, and was echoed and re-echoed hollowly by the jungle trees. And Paula lay waiting by the edge of the clearing, Ribiera's pearl-handled automatic in her hand—Bell had carried the rifle from the plane. Small insects moved all about her, and she heard soft rustlings as the life of the jungle went on over her head and under her feet, and terror welled up in her throat.

She was trembling almost uncontrollably when Bell came back. He walked openly toward her hiding-place.

"Paula."

She came out, trying to steady her quivering lips.

"We're all right," said Bell grimly. "This is the *fazenda* of a sub-deputy. I suspect, also, it's an emergency landing field for Ribiera on the way to that place he talked to last night. There's a two-place plane here with both wheels and floats, in a filthy little shed. It seems to be all right. We're going to take off in it and try to make Moradores, where your people are. What's the matter?"

Her face was deathly pale.

"I thought," she said with some difficulty, "when I heard the shots—I thought you were killed."

Bell shook his head.

"I wasn't," he said grimly. "It was four other men who were killed."

HE led her carefully past the house. It was a fairly typical *fazenda* dwelling, if more substantial than most. It was wholly unpretentious, with whitewashed walls, and the effect of grandeur it would give to natives of this region would come solely from the number of buildings. There were half a dozen or more.

"I killed four men," repeated Bell coldly. "And I'm damned glad of it. That scream we heard. . . . I know pretty well what happened here last night. Remember, Ribiera spoke of using a beam-wireless to make his report. He must have had a short-wave beam set somewhere on the outskirts of Rio, aimed at whatever headquarters he reports to. He's going up to that headquarters some time today, by plane, of course. He needed emergency landing fields along the route, and here he picked out a native and made him a sub-deputy. Charming. . . ."

Moving past the buildings, Paula caught sight of massive wooden bars set in the side of a building. Something crumpled up and limp lay before them.

"Don't look over there," said Bell harshly. "There was a woman in this house and she told me what happened, though I'd guessed it before. The sub-deputy was here last night with a party of friends. Newly enslaved, some of them. He entertained them. . . . Up at Ribiera's place a girl told me she and her husband had been shown a Secret Service man. He went mad before their eyes. It was an object-lesson for them, a clear illustration of what would happen to them if they ever disobeyed. I imagine that something of the sort is used by all The Master's deputies to convince their slaves of the fate that awaits them for disobedience. The local man had brought a party up to watch two men go mad. After that sight they'll be obedient."

HE reached a shed, huge, but in disrepair. Monster doors were ajar. Bell heaved at them and swung them wide. A small, trim, two-seated plane showed in the shadowy interior.

"This is for emergency use," said Bell grimly, "and we face an emergency. I'll get it out and load it up. There's a dump of gas and so on here. You might look around outside the door, in case the one man who got away can find someone to help stop me."

He set to work checking on fuel and oil. He loaded extra gas in the front cockpit, a huge tin of it. Another would crowd him badly in the pilot's cockpit in the rear, but he stowed it as carefully as he could.

"The local sub-deputy," he added evenly, "has added to the thrill by having the two men put in one cage. He let his guests observe the progress of the madness the damned poison produces. And presently, as the madness grew, the two men fought. They were murder mad. The local sub-deputy gave his guests the thrill of watching maniacs battling to the death. He left early this morning with his party, and I imagine that everyone was suitably submissive to his demands for the future. There were four men and a woman left as caretakers here. I found the four men before the cage, baiting the poor devil who'd killed the other last night. That's why we heard the scream. When I came up with my rifle they stared at me, and ran.

"I GOT one then, and as a matter of mercy I put a bullet through the man who'd gone murder mad. The"—Bell sounded as if he were acutely nauseated—"the man he'd killed was still in the cage. My God! . . . Then I went looking for the other three men. Wasting time, no doubt, but I found them. I was angry. I got one, and the others ran away again. A little later the third man jumped me with a knife. He slit my sleeve. I killed him. Didn't find the fourth man." Bell moved to the front of the plane. "I'll see if she catches."

He swung on the stick. It went over stiffly. Again, and again. With a bellow, the motor caught. Bell shouted in Paula's ear.

"We'll get in. Use the warming-up period to taxi out. We want to get away as soon as we can."

He helped her up into the seat, then remembered. He rummaged about and flung a tumbled flying suit up in the cockpit with her.

"If you get a chance, put it on!" he shouted. He stepped into a similar outfit, reached up and throttled down the motor, and kicked away the blocks under the wheels. He vaulted up into place. And slowly and clumsily the trim little ship came lurching and rolling out of the shed.

THE landing field was not large, but Bell took the plane to its edge. He faced it about, and bent below the cockpit combing to avoid the slip stream and look at his maps again, brought from the big amphibian. Something caught his eye. Another radio receiving set.

"Amphibian planes," he muttered, "for landing on earth or water. And radios. I wonder if he has directional for a guide? It would seem sensible, and if a plane went down the rest of them would know about where to look."

Paula reached about and touched his shoulder. She pointed. There was a movement at the edge of the jungle and a puff of smoke. A bullet went through the fusilage of the plane, inches behind Bell. He frowned, grasped the stick, and gave the motor the gun.

It lifted heavily, like all amphibians, but it soared over the group of buildings some twenty or thirty feet above the top of the wireless mast and went on, rising steadily, to clear even the topmost trees on the farther side of the stream by a hundred feet or more.

It went on and on, roaring upward, and the jungle receded ever farther below it. The horizon drew back and back. At two thousand feet the earth began to have the appearance of a shallow platter. At three thousand it was a steep sided bowl, and Bell could look down and trace the meandering of the stream on which he had landed the night before. Not too far downstream —some fifteen miles, perhaps—were the squalid, toy sized structures of a town of the far interior of Brazil. He never learned its name, but even in his preoccupation with the management of the plane and a search for landmarks, he wondered very grimly indeed what would be the state of things in that town. If in Rio, where civilization held sway, Ribiera exercised such despotic though secret power, in a squalid and forgotten little village like this the rule of a sub-deputy of The Master could be bestial and horrible beyond belief.

EASTWARD. Bell had overshot the mark the night before. Before he had located himself he was quite fifty miles beyond the spot Paula had suggested as a hiding place. Now he retraced his way. A peak jutting up from far beyond the horizon was a guiding mark. He set the plane's nose for it, and relaxed.

The motor thundered on valorously. Far below was a vast expanse of thick jungle, intercepted but nowhere broken by occasional small streams, and now and then the tiny, angular things which might be houses. But houses were very infrequent. In the first ten miles—with a view of twenty miles in every direction—Bell picked out no more than four small groups of buildings which might be the unspeakably isolated *fazendas* of the folk of this region.

"Ribiera was coming this way," he muttered.

He fumbled the headphone of the radio set into place. The set seemed to be already arbitrarily tuned. He turned it on. There was a monotonous series of flashes, with the singing note of a buzzer in them. A radio direction signal.

"Ribiera's on the way."

Bell stared far ahead, without reason. And it seemed to him that just then, against that far distant guiding peak, he saw a black speck floating in midair.

HE pulled back the joy stick. Detached, feathery clouds spread across the sky, and he was climbing for them. Paula looked behind at him, and he pointed. He saw her seem to

stiffen upon sight of the other aircraft.

In minutes Bell's plane was tearing madly through sunlit fleecy monsters which looked soft and warm and alluring, and were cold and damp and blinding in their depths. Bell kept on his course. The two planes were approaching each other at a rate of nearly two hundred miles an hour.

And then, while the harsh, discordant notes of the radio signal sounded monotonously in his ears, Bell stared down and, through a rift between two clouds, saw the other plane for an instant, a thousand feet below.

The sun shone upon it fiercely. Its propeller was a shimmering, cobwebby disk before it. It seemed to hang motionless—so short was Bell's view of it—between earth and sky: a fat, glistening body as of a monstrous insect. Bell could even see figures in its cockpits.

Then it was gone, but Bell felt a curious hatred of the thing. Ribiera was almost certainly in it, headed for the place to which he had spoken the night before. And Bell was no longer able to think of Ribiera with any calmness. He felt a personal, gusty hatred for the man and all he stood for.

HIS face was grim and savage as his own plane sped through the clouds. But just as the two aircraft had approached each other with the combined speed of both, so they separated. It seemed only a moment later that Bell dipped down below the clouds and the other plane was visible only as a swiftly receding mote in the sunlight.

"I wonder," said Bell coldly to himself, with the thunder of the motor coming through the singing of the air route signal, "I wonder if he'll see the ship I cracked up last night?"

Paula was pointing. The shoulder of a hill upthrust beneath the jungle. The tall trees were cleared away at its crest. Small, whitewashed buildings appeared below.

"Good landing field," said Bell, his eyes narrowing suddenly. "On the direct route. Fifty miles back there's another landing field. I wonder. . . ."

He was already suspicious before he flattened out above the house, while dogs fled madly. He noticed, too, that horses in a corral near the buildings showed no signs of fright. And horses are always afraid of landing aircraft, unless they have had much opportunity to grow accustomed to them.

The little plane rolled and bumped, and gradually came to a stop. Bell inconspicuously shifted a revolver to the outer pocket of his flying suit. Figures came toward them, with a certain hesitating reluctance that changed Bell's suspicions even while it confirmed them.

"PAULA," he said grimly, "this is another landing field for Ribiera's emergency use. It sticks out all over the place. Relatives or no relatives, you want to make sure of them. You understand?"

Her eyes widened in a sudden startled fear. She caught her breath sharply. Then she said quietly, though her voice trembled:

"I understand. Of course."

She slipped out of the plane and advanced to meet the approaching figures. There were surprised, astounded exclamations. A bearded man embraced her and shouted. Women appeared and, after staring, embraced. Paula turned to wave her hand reassuringly to Bell, and vanished inside the house.

Bell looked over his instruments, examined the gas in the tank, and began to work over his maps in the blazing sunlight. He cut out the switch and the motor stopped with minor hissings of compression. The maps held his attention, though he listened keenly as he worked for any signs of trouble that Paula might encounter.

He was beginning to have a definite idea in his mind. Ribiera had talked to a headquarters somewhere, by beam radio from Rio. Beam wireless, of course, is nothing more or less than a

concentration of a radio signal in a nearly straight line, instead of allowing it to spread about equally on all sides of the transmitting station. It makes both for secrecy and economy, since nearly all the power used at the sending apparatus is confined to an arc of about three degrees of a circle. Directed to a given receiving station, receiving outfits to one side or the other of that path are unable to listen in, and the signal is markedly stronger in the chosen path. Exactly the same process, of course, is used for radio directional signals, one of which still buzzed monotonously in Bell's ears until he impatiently turned it off. A plane in the path hears the signal. If it does not hear the signal, it is demonstrably off the straight route.

BELL, then, was in a direct line from Rio to the source of a radio direction signal. Fifty miles back, where the big amphibian had crashed, he was in the same air line. To extend that line on into the interior would give the destination of Ribiera, and the location of the headquarters where direct communication with The Master was maintained.

He worked busily. His maps were in separate sheets, and it took time to check the line from Rio. When he had finished, he computed grimly.

"At a hundred miles an hour. . . ." He was figuring the maximum distance which could plausibly be accepted as a day's journeying by air. He surveyed the maps again. "The plateau of Cuyaba, at a guess. Hm. . . . Fleets of aircraft could practise there and never be seen. An army could be maneuvered without being reported. Certainly the headquarters for the whole continent could be there. Striking distance of Rio, Montevideo, Buenos Aires, La Paz, and Asunción. Five republics."

CERTAINLY, from his figures, it seemed plausible that somewhere up on the Plateau of Cuyaba—where no rails run, no boats ply, and no telegraph line penetrates; which juts out ultimately into that unknown region where the Rio Zingu and the Tapajoz have their origins—certainly it seemed plausible that there must lie the headqaurters of the whole ghastly conspiracy. There, it might be, the deadly plants from which The Master's poison was brewed were grown. There the deadly stuff was measured out and mixed with its temporary antidote. . . .

Paula came back, a young man with her. Her eyes were wide and staring, as if she had looked upon something vastly worse than death.

"He — Ribiera," she gasped. "My uncle, he owned this place. They—have him here—alive—and mad! And all the rest. . . ."

Bell fumbled in the pocket of his flying suit. The young man with Paula was looking carefully at the plane. And there was a revolver in a holster at his side. An air of grim and desperate doggedness was upon him.

"This is—my cousin," gasped Paula. "He—and his wife—and—and—"

THE young man took out his weapon. He fired. There was a clanging of metal, the screetch of tortured steel. Bell's own revolver went off the fraction of a second too late.

"You may kill me, Senhor," said the young man through stiff lips. His revolver had dropped from limp fingers. He pressed the fingers of his left hand upon the place where blood welled out, just above his right elbow. "You may kill me. But if you and my cousin Paula escaped. . . . I have a wife, Senhor, and my mother, and my children. Kill me if you please. It is your right. But I have seen my father go mad." Sweat, the sweat of agony and of shame, came out upon his face. "I fought him, Senhor, to save the lives of all the rest. And I have spoiled your engine, and I have already sent word that you and Paula are here. Not for my own life, but. . . ."

He waited, haggard and ashamed and desperate and hopeless. But Bell was

staring at the motor of the airplane.

"Crankcase punctured," he said dully. "Aluminum. The bullet went right through. We can't fly five miles. And Ribiera knows we're here—or will."

CHAPTER IX

THERE was the sound of weeping in the house, the gusty and hopeless weeping of women. Bell had been walking around and around the plane, staring at it with his hands clenched. Paula watched him.

"I am thinking," she said in an attempt at courage, "that you said I must not despair without your permission. But—"

"Hush!" said Bell impatiently. He stared at the engine. "I'd give a lot for a car. Bolts. . . . How many hours have we?"

"Four," said Paula drearily. "Perhaps five. You have smashed the radio in the house?"

Bell nodded impatiently. He had smashed the radio, a marvelously compact and foolproof outfit, arbitrarily tuned to a fixed short wave-length. It was almost as simple to operate as a telephone. There had been no opposition to the destruction. Paula's cousin had disabled their plane and reported their presence. He was inside the house now, sick with shame—and yet he would do the same again. In one of the rooms of the house, behind strong bars, a man was kept who had been an object-lesson. . . .

"Is there any machinery?" asked Bell desperately. "Any at all about the place?"

Paula shook her head.

"It may be that there is a pump."

Bell went off savagely, hunting it. He came back and dived into the cockpit of the plane. He came out with a wrench, and his jaws set grimly. He worked desperately at the pump. He came back with two short, thick bolts.

He crawled into the plane again, tearing out the fire wall impatiently, getting up under the motor.

"We have one chance in five thousand," he said grimly from there, "of getting away from here to crash in the jungle. Personally, I prefer that to falling into Ribiera's hands. If your cousin or anybody else comes near us, out here, call me, and I'll be much obliged."

THERE was the sound of scraping, patient, desperate, wholly unpromising scraping. It seemed to go on for hours.

"The wrench, please, Paula."

She passed it to him. The bullet had entered the aluminum crankcase of the motor and pierced it through. By special providence it had not struck the crankshaft, and had partly penetrated the crankcase on the other side. Bell had cut it out, first of all. He had two holes in the crankcase, then, through which the cylinder oil had drained away. And of all pieces of machinery upon earth, an aircraft motor requires oil.

Bell's scraping had been to change the punctured holes of the bullet into cone shaped bores. The aluminum alloy was harder than pure aluminum, of course, but he had managed it with a knife. Now he fitted the short bolts in the bores, forced the threads on them to cut their own grooves, and by main strength screwed them in to a fit. He tightened them.

He came out with his eyes glowing oddly.

"The vibration will work them loose, sooner or later," he observed grimly, "and they may not be oil tight. Also, the crankshaft may clear them, and it may not. If we go up in the ship in this state we may get five miles away, or five hundred. At any minute it may fail us, and sooner or later it will fail us. Are you game to go up, Paula?"

SHE smiled at him.

"With you, of course."

He began to brush off his hands.

"There ought to be oil and gas here," he said briefly. "Another thing, there'll

probably be some metal chips in the crankcase, which may stop an oil line at any minute. It's a form of committing suicide, I imagine."

He went off, hunting savagely for the supplies of fuel and lubricant which would be stored at any emergency field. He found them. He was pouring gasoline into the tanks before what he was doing was noticed. Then there was stunned amazement in the house. When he had the crankcase full of oil the young man came out. Bell tapped his revolver suggestively.

"With no man about this house," he said grimly, "Ribiera will put in one of his own choice. And you have a wife and children and they'll be at that man's mercy. Don't make me kill you. Ribiera may not blame you for my escape if you tell him everything—and you're hurt, anyway. Either we get away, and you do that, or you're killed and we get away anyhow."

He toppled two last five gallon tins of gasoline into the cockpits—crowding them abominably—and swung on the prop. The engine caught. Bell throttled it down, kicked away the stones with which he had blocked its wheels, and climbed up into the pilot's cockpit. With his revolver ready in his lap he taxied slowly over to a favorable starting point.

THE ship rose slowly, and headed west again. At three thousand feet he cut out the motor to shout to Paula.

"One place is as good as another to us, now. The whole continent is closed to us by now. I'm going to try to find that headquarters and do some damage. Afterwards, we'll see."

He cut in the motor again and flew steadily westward. He rose gradually to four thousand feet, to five. . . . He watched his instruments grimly, the motor temperature especially. There were flakes of metal in the oil lines. Twice he saw the motor temperature rise to a point that brought the sweat out on his face. And twice he saw it drop again. Bits of shattered metal were in the oiling system, and they had partly blocked the stream of lubricant until the engine heated badly. And each time the vibration had shifted them, or loosened them. . . .

They had left the big amphibian no earlier than nine o'clock. It was noon, when they took off for the *fazenda* of Paula's kin. But it was five o'clock and after when they rose from there with an engine which might run indefinitely and might stop at any second.

Bell did not really expect it to run for a long time. He had worked as much to cheat Ribiera of the satisfaction of a victory as in hopes of a real escape. But an hour, and the motor still ran. It was consistently hotter than an aero engine should run. Twice it had gone up to a dangerous temperature. One other time it had gone up for a minute or more as if the oiling system had failed altogether. But it still ran, and the sun was sinking toward the horizon and shadows were lengthening, and Bell began to look almost hopefully for a clearing in which to land before the dark hours came.

Then it was that he saw the planes that had been sent for him and for Paula.

THERE were three of them, fast two-seaters very much like the one he drove. They were droning eastward, with all cockpits filled, from that enigmatic point in the west. And Bell had descended to investigate a barely possible stream when they saw him.

The leader banked steeply and climbed upward toward him. The others gazed, swung sharply, and came after him, spreading out as they came. And Bell, after one instant's grim debate, went into a maple leaf dive for the jungle below him. The others dived madly in his wake. He heard a sharp, tearing rattle. A machine-gun. He saw the streaks of tracers going very wide. Gunfire in the air is far from accurate. A machine-gun burst from a hundred yards, when the gun

has to be aimed by turning the whole madly vibrating ship, is less accurate than a rifle at six hundred, or even eight. Most aircraft duels are settled at distances of less than a hundred yards.

It was that fact that Bell counted on. With a motor that might go dead at any instant and a load of passengers and gas at least equaling that of any of the other ships, mere flight promised little. The other ships, too, were armed, at any rate the leader was, and Bell had only small arms at his disposal. But a plane pilot, stunting madly to dodge tracer bullets, has little time to spare for revolver work.

BELL had but one advantage. He expected to be killed. He looked upon both Paula and himself as very probably dead already. And he infinitely preferred the clean death of a crash to either the life or death that Ribiera would offer them. He flattened out barely twenty yards above the waving branches that are the roof of the jungle. He went scudding over the tree tops, rising where the jungle rose, dipping where it dropped, and behind him the foliage waved wildly as if in a cyclone.

The other planes dared not follow. To dive upon him meant too much chance of a dash into the entrapping branches. One plane, indeed, did try it, and Bell scudded lower and lower until the wheels of the small plane were spinning from occasional, breath taking contacts with the feathery topmost branches of jungle giants. That other plane flattened out not less than a hundred feet farther up and three hundred yards behind. To fire on him with a fixed gun meant a dive to bring the gun muzzle down. And a dive meant a crash.

A STREAM flashed past below. There was the glitter of water, reflecting the graying sky. A downward current here dragged at the wings of the plane. Bell jerked at the stick, and her nose came up. There was a clashing, despite her climbing angle, of branches upon the running gear, but she broke through and shot upward, trying to stall. Bell flung her down again into his mad careering.

It was not exactly safe, of course. It was practically a form of suicide. But Bell had not death, but life to fear. He could afford to be far more reckless than any man who desired to live. The plane went scuttling madly across the jungle tops, now rising to skim the top of a monster *ceiba,* now dipping deliberately.

The three pursuing planes hung on above him helplessly while the short, short twilight of the tropics fell, and Bell went racing across the jungle, never twenty feet above the tree top and with the boughs behind him showing all the agitation of a miniature hurricane. As darkness deepened, the race became more suicidal still, and there were no lighted fields nearby to mark a landing place. But as darkness grew more intense, Bell could dare to rise to fifty, then a hundred feet above the tops, and the dangers of diving to his level remained undiminished. And then it was dark.

BELL climbed to two hundred feet. To two hundred and fifty. With more freedom, now, he could take one hand from the controls. He could feel the menace of the tumultuously roaring motors in his wake, but he was smiling very strangely in the blackness. He reached inside his flying suit and tore away the front of his shirt. He reached down and battered in the top of one of the five gallon gasoline tins in the cockpit with the barrel of his revolver. He stuffed the scrap of cloth into the rent. It was wetted instantly by the splashing. Another savage blow, unheard in the thunder of the motor. In the peculiarly calm air of the cockpit the reek of gasoline was strong, but cleared away. And Bell, with the frosty grim smile of a man who gambles with his life, struck a

light. The cloth flared wildly, and he reached his hands into the flame and heaved the tin of fuel overside.

The cloth was burning fiercely, and spilled gasoline caught in midair. A fierce and savage flame dropped earthward. Spark on the cloth, and the cloud of inflammable vapor that formed where the leaking tin fell plummet-like, carried the flame down when the wind of its fall would have blown it out.

The following planes saw a flash of light. They saw a swiftly descending conflagration tracing a steep arch toward the tree tops. They saw that flaming vanish among the trees. And then they saw a vast upflaring of fire below. Flames licked upward almost to the tree tops. . . .

Bell looked back from two thousand feet. Wing-tip lights were on, below, and disks of illumination played upon the roof of the jungle above the fire. The three planes were hovering over the spot. But a thick dense column of smoke was rising, now. Green things shriveling in the heat, and dried and rotted underbrush. Altogether, the volume of smoke and flame was very convincing evidence that an airplane had burst into flame in midair and crashed through the jungle top to burn to ashes beneath.

BUT Bell climbed steadily to five thousand feet. He cut out the motor, there, and in the shrieking and whistling of wind as the plane went into a shallow glide, he spoke sharply.

"Paula?"

"I am all right," she assured him unsteadily. "What now?"

"There's a seat pack under you," said Bell. "It's a parachute. You'd better put it on. God only knows where we'll land, but if the motor stops we'll jump together. And I think we'll have to jump before dawn. This plane won't fly indefinitely. There's just one chance in a million that I know of. There'll be a moon before long. When it comes up, look for the glitter of moonlight on water. With the wing-tip lights we may—we *may*—manage to get down. But I doubt it."

He moved his hand to cut in the motor again. She stopped him.

"If we head south," she said unsteadily, "we may reach the Paraguay. It is perhaps two hundred miles, but it is broad. We should see it. Perhaps even the stars. . . ."

"Good work!" said Bell approvingly. "*Nils desperandum!* That's our motto, Paula."

He swung off his course and headed south. He was flying high, now, and an illogical and incomprehensible hope came to him. There was no hope, of course. He had had, more than once, a despairing conviction that the utmost result of all his efforts would be but the delaying of their final enslavement to The Master, whose apparent impersonality made him the more terrible as he remained mysterious. So far they seemed like struggling flies in some colossal web, freeing themselves from one snaring spot to blunder helplessly into another.

But the moon came up presently, rounded and nearly full. The sky took on a new radiance, and the jungle below them was made darker and more horrible by the contrast.

And when there were broad stretches of moonlit foliage visible on the rising slopes beneath, Bell felt the engine faltering. He switched on the instrument board light. One glance, and he was cold all over. The motor was hot. Hotter than it had ever been. The oil lines, perhaps the pump itself. . . .

PAULA'S hand reached back into the glow of the instrument board. He leaned over and saw her pointing. Moonlight on rolling water, far below. He dived for it, steeply. The wing-lights went on. Faint disks of light appeared far below, sweeping to and fro with the swaying of the plane, bobbing back and forth.

It seemed to Bell that there had been nothing quite as horrible as the

next minute or two. He felt the overheated, maltreated motor laboring. It was being ruined, of course—and a ruined motor meant that they were marooned in the jungle. But if it kept going only until they landed. And if it did not. . . .

White water showed below in the disks of the landing lights' glow. It tumbled down a swift and deadly *raudal*—a rapid. And then—black, deep water, moving swiftly between tall cliffs of trees.

Bell risked everything to bank about and land toward the white water. The little plane seemed to be sinking into a canyon as the trees rose overhead on either side. But the moonlit rapid gave him his height, approximately, and the lights helped more than a little.

HE landed with a terrific crash. The plane teetered on the very verge of a dive beneath the surface. Bell jerked back the stick and killed the engine, and it settled back.

A vast, a colossal silence succeeded the deafening noise of twelve cylinders exploding continuously. There were little hissing sounds as the motor cooled. There was the smell of burnt oil.

"All right, Paula?" asked Bell quietly.

"I—I'm all right."

The plane was drifting backward, now. It spun around in a stately fashion, its tail caught in underbrush, and it swung back. It drifted past cliffs of darkness for a long time, and grounded, presently, with a surprising gentleness.

"Do you know," said Bell dryly, "this sort of thing is getting monotonous. I think our motor's ruined. I never knew before that misfortunes could grow literally tedious. I've been expecting to be killed any minute since we started off, but the idea of being stuck in the jungle with a perfectly good plane and a bad motor. . . ."

He fished inside his flying suit and extracted a cigarette. Then he lit it.

"Let's see. . . . We haven't a thing to eat, have we?"

THERE was a little slapping noise. Bell became suddenly aware of a horde of insects swarming around him. Smoke served partially to drive them off.

"Look here," he said suddenly, "we could unfold a parachute and cover the cockpits for some protection against these infernal things that are biting me."

"We may need the parachute," said Paula unsteadily. "Does—does that smoke of yours drive them away?"

"A little." Bell hesitated. "I say, it would be crowded, but if I came up there, or you here. . . ."

"I—I'll come back there," she said queerly. "The extra cans of gasoline here. . . ."

She slipped over the partition, in the odd flying suit which looks so much more odd when a girl wears it. She settled down beside him, and he tried painstakingly to envelope her in a cloud of tobacco smoke. The plague of insects lessened.

There was nothing to do but wait for dawn. She was very quiet, but as the moon rose higher he saw that her eyes were open. The night noises of the jungle all about them came to their ears. Furtive little slitherings, and the sound of things drinking greedily at the water's edge, and once or twice peculiar little despairing small animal cries off in the darkness.

THE jungle was dark and sinister, and all the more so when the moon rose high and lightened its face and left them looking into wierd, abysmal blackness between moonlit branches. Bell thought busily, trying not to become too conscious of the small warm body beside him.

He moved, suddenly, and found her fingers closed tightly on the sleeve of his flying suit.

"Frightened, Paula?" he asked

quietly. "Don't be. We'll make out."

She shook her head and looked up at him, drawing away as if to scan his face more closely.

"I am thinking," she said almost harshly, "of biology. I wonder—"

Bell waited. He felt an intolerable strain in her tensed figure. He put his hand comfortingly over hers. And, astoundingly, he found it trembling.

"Are all women fools?" she demanded in a desperate cynicism. "Are we all imbeciles? Are—"

Bell's pulse pounded suddenly. He smiled.

"Not unless men are imbeciles too," he said dryly. "We've been through a lot in the past two days. It's natural that we should like each other. We've worked together rather well. I—well" —his smile was distinctly a wry and uncomfortable one— "I've been the more anxious to get to some civilized place where The Master hasn't a deputy because—well—it wouldn't be fair to talk about loving you while—" he shrugged, and said curtly, "while you had no choice but to listen."

SHE stared at him, there in the moonlight with the jungle moving about its business of life and death about them. And very, very slowly the tenseness left her figure. And very, very slowly she smiled.

"Perhaps," she said quietly, "you are lying to me, Charles. Perhaps. But it is a very honorable thing for you to say. I am not ashamed, now, of feeling that I wish to be always near you."

"Hush!" said Bell. He put his arm about her shoulder and drew her closer to him. He tilted her face upward. It was oval and quite irresistibly pretty. "I love you," said Bell steadily. "I've been fighting it since God knows when, and I'm going to keep on fighting it—and it's no use. I'm going to keep on loving you until I die."

Her fingers closed tightly upon his. Bell kissed her.

"Now," he said gruffly, "go to sleep."

He pressed her head upon his shoulder and kept it there. After a long time she slept. He stirred, much later, and she opened her eyes again.

"What is it?"

"Damn these mosquitos," growled Bell. "I can't keep them off your face!"

CHAPTER X

FOR four hours after sunrise Bell worked desperately. With the few and inadequate tools in the plane he took apart the oiling system of the motor. It was in duplicate, of course, like all modern air engines, and there were three magnetos, and double spark plugs. Bell drained the crankcase beneath a sun that grew more and more hot and blistering, catching the oil in a gasoline can that he was able to empty into the main tanks. He washed out innumerable small oil pipes with gasoline, and flushed out the crankcase itself, and had at the end of his working as many small scraps of metal as would half fill a thimble. He showed them to Paula.

"And the stars in their courses fought against Sisera," he quoted dryly. "Any one of these, caught in just the right place, would have let us down into the jungle last night."

She smiled up at him.

"But they didn't."

"No. . . . God loves the Irish," said Bell. "What's that thing?"

Paula was fishing, sitting on a fallen tree in the cloud of smoke from a smudge fire Bell had built for her. She was wearing the oily flying suit he had found in the shed with the plane, and had torn strips from her discarded dress to make a fishing line. The hook was made out of the stiff wire handle of one of the extra gasoline tins. "Hook and leader in one," Bell had observed when he made it.

HE was pointing to a flat bodied fish with incredible jaws that lay on the grass, emitting strange sounds even in the air. It flapped about madly. Its jaws closed upon a stick nearly half an inch thick, and cut it through.

"It is a *piranha*," said Paula. "The same fish that bit your hand. It can bite through a copper wire fastened to a hook, but this hook is so long. . . ."

"Pleasant," said Bell. Something large and red passed before his eyes. He struck at it instinctively.

"Don't!" said Paula sharply.

"Why?"

"It's a *maribundi* wasp," she told him. "And its sting. . . . Children have died of it. A strong man will be ill for days from one single sting."

"Still more pleasant," said Bell. "The jungle is a charming place, isn't it?" He wiped the sweat off his face. "Any more little pets about?"

She looked about seriously.

"There." She pointed to a sapling not far distant. "The *palo santo* yonder has a hollow trunk, and in it there are usually ants, which are called fire-ants. They bite horribly. It feels like a drop of molten metal on your flesh. And it festers afterwards. And there is a fly, the *berni* fly, which lays its eggs in living flesh. The maggot eats its way within. I do not know much about the jungle, but my father has—had a *fazenda* in Matto Grosso and I was there as a child. The *camaradas* told me much about the jungle, then."

Bell winced, and sat down beside her. She had Ribiera's pearl handled automatic within easy reach. She saw him looking at it.

"I do not think there is any danger," she said with a not very convincing smile, "but there are *cururus*—water snakes. They grow very large."

"And I asked you to fish!" said Bell. "Stop it!"

SHE hauled the line ashore, with a flapping thing on the end of it. Bell took the fish off and regarded her catch moodily.

"I'd been thinking," he said moodily, "that Ribiera suspects we're dead. I'd been envisioning ourselves as marooned, yes, but relatively safe as long as we were thought to be dead. And I'd thought that if we lived a sort of castaway existence for a few weeks we'd be forgotten, and would have a faint chance of getting out to civilization without being noticed. But this. . . ."

"I will stay," she said steadily. "I will stay anywhere or go anywhere, with you."

Bell's hand closed on her shoulder.

"I believe it," he said heavily. "And—if you noticed—I had been thinking of letting down the Trade. I'd been thinking of not trying to fight The Master any longer, but only of getting you to safety. In a sense, I was thinking of treason to my job and my government. I suspect"— he smiled rather queerly— "I suspect we love each other rather much, Paula. I'd never have dreamed for anyone else. Go over to the plane and don't fish any more. I'll rustle the food for both of us."

She stood up obediently, smiling at him.

"But kill that *piranha* before you try to handle it," she advised seriously.

Bell battered the savage thing until it ceased to move. He picked it up, then, and sniffed the air. Paula had been in a cloud of acrid smoke. She could not have detected the taint in the air he discovered. He went curiously, saw a broken branch overhead, and then saw something on the ground.

HE came back to the plane presently, looking rather sick.

"Give me one of the machetes, Paula," he said quietly. "We brought them, I think."

"What is the matter?"

He took the wide-bladed woods knife.

"A man," he said, nauseated. "He either fell or was thrown from somewhere high above. From a plane. He was United States Secret Service. There's a badge in his clothes. Don't come."

He went heavily over to the spot beyond the smudge fire. He worked there for half an hour. When he came back there were earth stains on his hands and clothing, and he carried a

very small brown package in his hand.

"He had a report ready to send off," said Bell grimly. "I read it. It's in code, of course, but in the Trade. . . ."

He set to work savagely on the engine, reassembling it. As he worked, he talked in savage, jerky sentences.

"The Service man at Asunción. One of the seven who vanished. He'd learned more than we have. He was caught—poisoned, of course—and pretended to surrender. Told a great deal that he shouldn't, in order to convince The Master's deputy. The key men in nearly every republic in South America are in The Master's power. Paraguay belongs to him, body and soul. Bolivia is absolutely his. Every man of the official class from the President down knows that he has two weeks or less of sanity if The Master's deputy shuts down on him—and he knows that at the crook of the deputy's finger he'll be assassinated before then. If they run away, they go murder mad. If they stay, they have to obey him. It's hellish!"

HE stopped talking to make a fine adjustment. He went on, somberly.

"Chile's not so bad off, but the deputy has slaves nearly everywhere. Ecuador—well, the President and half of Congress have been poisoned. The man I found was trying to get a sample of the poison for analysis. He'd learned it was unstable. Wouldn't keep. The Master has to send fresh supplies constantly all over the continent. That accounts for the deputies remaining loyal. If The Master had reason to suspect them, he had only to stop their supply. . . . They couldn't stock up on the deadly stuff for their own use. So they're as abjectly subject to The Master as their slaves are to them. No new slaves are to be made in Paraguay or Bolivia, except when necessary. It's believed that in six months the other republics will have every influential man subjected. Every army officer, every judge, every politician, every outstanding rich man. . . . And then, overnight, South America will become an empire, with that devil of a Master as its overlord."

He lifted one of the oil pumps in place and painstakingly tightened the bolts that held it.

"Picture it," he said grimly. "Beasts as viceroys, already taking their pleasure. Caligulas, Neros, on viceregal thrones all over the continent. . . . And every man who shows promise, or shows promise, or shows signs of honor or courage or decency, either killed or sent mad or. . . ."

PAULA was watching his face closely.

"I think," she said soberly, "that there is something worse."

Bell was silent for an instant.

"For me," he said bitterly, "it is. Before The Master dares to make his coup public, he must be sure that there will be no foreign interference. So, he must establish a deputy in Washington. A relatively few chosen men, completely enslaved, could hold back our Government from any action. Leaders in Congress, and members of the Cabinet, working in defense of The Master because of his defeat would mean their madness. . . . He would demand no treason of them at first. He would require simply that he should not be interfered with. But his plans include the appointment of deputies in the United States later on. I don't think he can subdue America. I don't think so. But he could—and I think he would—send whole cities mad. And if you think of that. . . ."

HE was silent, working. A long, long time later he swung on the propeller. The motor caught. He throttled it down and watched it grimly. The motor warmed up to normal, and stayed there.

"It will run," he said coldly. "Those two plugs in the crankcase may come out at any time. I've tightened them a little. They'd worked loose from the

vibration. But—well. . . . That Service man was heading for Asunción. He'd been found out. They probably shot him down in midair after he'd gotten away. His plane may be crashed anywhere in the jungle within a mile or so. And I've two bearings on the *fazenda* where Ribiera went, now. One from Asunción through here, and one from Rio. I want to go back there tonight and dump burning gasoline on the buildings, to do enough damage to disorganize things a little. Then I'm going to try to make it to a seaport. We can stow away, perhaps."

He shut off the motor.

"We'll start at dusk. There'll be lights there. This report says it's nearly a city—of slaves. We want the darkness for our getaway."

Paula looked at the sky.

"We have three hours," she said quietly. "Let us cook and eat. You must keep up your strength, Charles."

She said it in all seriousness, with the air of one who has entire confidence and is merely solicitous. And Bell, who knew of at least three excellent reasons why neither of them should survive until dawn—Bell looked at her queerly, and then grinned, and then took her in his arms and kissed her. She seemed to like it.

And they lunched quite happily on *piranha* and *pacu*—which is smaller—and drank water, and for dessert had more *piranha*.

THE long afternoon wore away slowly. It was hot, and grew blistering. Insects came in swarms and tormented them until Bell built a second and larger smudge fire. But they fastened upon his flesh when he went out of its smoke for more wood.

They talked, as well as they could for smoke, and looked at each other as well as they could for smarting eyes. It was not at all the conventional idea of romantic conversation, but it was probably a good deal more honest than most, because they both knew quite well that their chance of life was small. A plane whose motor was precariously patched, flying over a jungle without hope of a safe landing if that patched-up motor died, was bad enough. But with the three nearest nations subservient to The Master, whose deputy Ribiera was, and all those nations hunting them as soon as they were known to be yet alive. . . .

"Would it not be wise, Charles," asked Paula wistfully, "just for us to try to escape, ourselves, and not try—"

"Wise, perhaps," admitted Bell; "but I've got to strike a blow while I can." He was staring somberly at the little plane, fast upon a mud bank, with the tall green jungle all about. "The deputies and all their slaves have their lives hanging by a thread—the thread of a constant supply of the antidote to the poison that's administered with the antidote. The deputies—Ribiera, for instance—don't realize that. Else they wouldn't dare do the things they do. But let them realize that the thread can be broken, and what their slaves would do to them before they all went mad. . . . You see? Let them learn that a blow has been struck at the center of all the ghastly thing, and they'll be frightened. They'll be close to mutiny through sheer panic. And there may be slip-ups."

IT was vague, perhaps, but it was true. The subjection of the poisoned men and women was due not only to terror of what would happen if they disobeyed the deputies, but to a belief that that thing would not happen if they did obey. If Bell could do enough damage to the *fazenda* of The Master to shake the second belief, he would have shaken the whole conspiracy. And a conspiracy that is not a complete success is an utter failure.

It was close to sunset when they heard a droning noise in the distance. Bell went swiftly to the cockpit of the plane and searched the sky.

"Don't see it," he said grimly," and it probably doesn't see us. We're all right, I suppose."

But he was uneasy. The droning noise grew to a maximum and slowly died away again. It diminished to a distant muttering.

"What say," said Bell suddenly, "we get aloft now? We'll follow that damned thing home. It's going from Asunción to that place we want to find. This is on that route. Whoever's in it won't be looking behind, and it's close to darkness."

PAULA stood up.

"I am ready, Charles."

Bell swung out on the floats and tugged at the prop. The motor caught and roared steadily. While it was warming up, he stripped off the rest of his shirt and tore it into wide strips, and tied the rags in the handles of the gasoline tins in the two cockpits.

"For our bombs," he explained, smiling faintly. "You'll want to wear your chute pack, Paula. You know how to work it? And we'll divide the guns and what shells we have, and stick them in the flying suit pockets."

He made her show him a dozen times that she knew how to pull out the ring that would cause the parachute to open. She climbed into the front cockpit and smiled down at him. He throttled down the motor to its lowest speed and shoved off from the mud bank. Clambering up, while the plane moved slowly over the water under the gentle pull of the slow-moving propeller, he bent over and kissed her.

"For luck," he said in her ear.

The next instant he settled down at the controls, glanced a last time at the instruments, and gave the motor the gun.

THE plane lifted soggily but steadily and swept up-stream toward the rolling water of the *raudal*, which tumbled furiously about an obstacle half of stones and shallows, and half of caught and rotting tree trunks. It rose steadily until the trees dropped away on either side and the jungle spread out on every hand. It rose to a thousand feet and went roaring through the air to northward, while Bell strained his eyes for the plane on ahead.

It was ten minutes or more before he sighted it, winging its way steadily into the misty distance above the jungle. Bell settled down to follow. The engine roared valorously. For half an hour Bell watched it anxiously, but it remained cool and had always ample power. Paula's head showed above the cockpit combing. Mostly she looked confidently ahead, but once or twice she turned about to smile at him.

The sun seemed high when they rose from the water, but as it neared the horizon its rate of descent seemed to increase. They had been in the air for no more than three-quarters of an hour when it was twice its own disk above the far distant hills. Almost immediately, it seemed, it had halved that distance. And then the lower limb of the blazing circle was sharply cut off by the hill crests and the sun sank wearily to rest behind the edge of the world.

It seemed as if a swift chill breeze blew over the jungle, in warning of the night. The trees became dark. A shadowy dusk filled the air even up to where the plane flew thunderously on. And then, quite abruptly, stars were shining and it was night.

BELL remembered, suddenly, and switched on the radio as an experiment. The harsh, discordant dashes sounded in his ears through the roaring of the motor. A beam of short waves was being sent out from his destination. While he was on the direct path the monotonous signals could be heard. When they weakened or died he would have left the way.

But they continued, discordant and harsh and monotonous, while the last faint trace of the afterglow died away and night was complete, and a roof of many stars glittered overhead, and the jungle lay dark and deadly below him.

For nearly half an hour more he kept on. Twice he switched on the instru-

ment board light to glance at the motor temperature. The first time it appeared a little high. The second time it was normal again. But there was little use in watching instruments. If the motor failed there was no landing field to make for.

A sudden faint glow sprang into being, many miles ahead. The pinkish glare of many, many lights turned on suddenly. As the plane thundered on the glow grew brighter. An illuminated field, for the convenience of messengers who carried the poison for The Master to all the nations which were to be subjected.

The glow went out as Bell was just able to distinguish long rows of twinkling bulbs, and he saw the harsher, fiercer glow of floodlights. He reached forward and touched Paula's shoulder. Conversation was impossible over the motor's roar. Her hand reached up and pressed his.

Then he saw other lights. Bright lights, as from houses. Arc lights as from storage warehouses, or something of the sort. A long, long row of lighted windows, which might be dormitories or perhaps sheds in which The Master's enslaved secretaries kept the record of his victims.

THE earth flung back the roaring of the little plane's motor. Bell had but little time to act before other planes would dart upward to seek him out. He dived, and the wing tip landing lights went on, sending fierce glares downward. Twin disks of light appeared upon the earth. Sheds, houses, a long row of shacks as if for laborers. A drying field, on which were spread out plants with their leaves turning brown. A wall about it. . . .

"The damned stuff," said Bell grimly.

He swept on. Jungle, only jungle. He banked steeply as lights flicked on and off below and as—once—the wing tip lights showed men running frantically two hundred feet below.

Then a stream of fire shot earthward, and Bell held up his hand and arm into the blast of the slip stream. It blew out the blaze that had licked at his flesh. He stared down. The gas can had left a trailing stream of fluid behind it as it went spinning down to earth. All that stream of inflammable stuff was aflame. The can itself struck earth and seemed to explode, and the trailing mass of fire was borne onward by the wind and lay across a row of thatch-roofed buildings. An incredible sheet of fire spread out. The stuff in the drying yard was burning.

Bell laughed shortly, and flung over another of his flaming bombs, and another, and the fourth. . . .

HE climbed for the skies, then, as rectangles of light showed below and planes were thrust out of their lighted hangars. Four huge conflagrations were begun. One was close by a monster rounded tank, and Bell watched with glistening eyes as it crept closer. Suddenly—it seemed suddenly, but it must have been minutes later—flame rushed up the sides of that tank, there was a sudden hollow booming, and fire was flung broadcast in a blazing, pouring flood.

"Their fuel tank!" said Bell, his eyes gleaming in the ruddy light from below. He shut off his landing lights and went upward, steeply. "I've played hell with them now!"

A thousand feet up. Two thousand. Two thousand five hundred. . . . And suddenly Bell felt cold all over. The instrument board! The motor was hot. Hot! Burning!

He shut it off before it could burst into flames, but he heard the squealing of tortured, unlubricated metal grinding to a stop. He leveled out. It was strangely, terribly silent in the high darkness, despite the roaring of wind about the gliding plane. The absence of the motor roar was the thing that made it horrible.

"Paula," said Bell harshly, "one of those plugs came out, I guess. The motor's ruined. Dead. The ship's go-

ing to crash. Ready with your parachute?"

IT was dark, up there, save for the glare of fires upon the under surface of the wings. But he saw her hand, encarmined by that glare, upon the combing of the cockpit. A moment later her face. She turned, light-dazzled, to smile back at him.

"All right, Charles." Her voice quavered a little, but it was very brave. "I'm ready. You're coming, too?"

"I'm coming," said Bell grimly. Below them was the city of The Master, set blazing by their doing. If their chutes were seen descending. . . . And if they were not. . . . "Count ten," said Bell hoarsely, "and pull out the ring. I'll be right after you."

He saw the slim little black-clad figure drop, plummetlike, and prayed in an agony of fear. Then a sudden blooming thing hid it from sight. Thick clouds of smoke lay over the lights and fires below.

Bell stepped over the side and went hurtling down toward the earth in his turn.

(To be continued)

He aimed it, and the Thing gripping him was hurled back upon the others.

The Cavern World

By James P. Olsen

"IMPOSSIBLE! What sort of creatures would they be, that could live two miles beneath the surface of the earth? Surely, Asher, you are joking!"

R. Briggs Johns, mighty power back of Stan-America Oil Corporation, looked at Blaine Asher closely, expecting to see the chief geologist and scientist of the company laugh. But Blaine Asher did not laugh. Serious, his rather thin face grave as he leaned his tall, muscular body above a torsion machine he was adjusting, there was nothing to indicate he had the faintest idea of a joke.

A great oil field had gone dry—and Asher, trapped far under the earth among the revolting Petrolia, learns why.

"Why damn it, Asher!" Johns insisted wrathfully, "you don't really mean that.

And"—he took a nervous turn around the laboratory—"if such a wild thing were possible, what has that to do with our trouble? You haven't led me on to spend a million dollars drilling a thirty-six-inch hole, just so you could test a fantastic theory?"

"You know better than that." Asher wiped his hands and leaned against a table. Johns, looking into the cool gray eyes of the man before him, did know better. Blaine Asher was more than just a geologist or scientist. Well he might be termed a master geo-metallurgist. Johns nodded, wiping beads of perspiration from his brow.

"You say impossible—and want to know how those creatures cause this field, the largest oil field in the world, to start going bone dry over night. All right:

"Remember how you laughed when I told you that oil would some day be mined instead of pumped or flowed from the earth? You couldn't see how one central shaft could be sunk, then tunnels run back underneath the oil strata, tapping the sand from the bottom and letting the oil run down to be pumped out one shaft. Yet, that way, we would get *all* the oil, instead of the possible one-eighth of the total amount as we get by present methods.

"Now, you have seen that done. And you said that was impossible."

"YES," Johns objected, "but those test wells we mined were only a few hundred feet deep. Wells in this field are eight thousand feet deep! Think of the heat, man! You can't do it. And as for people—"

"Your great field has suddenly gone dry, almost in a month's time," Asher stopped him. "What is happening here can happen elsewhere. Only, formations in this field are more suited to there being life—or something—below us. Stan-America is going broke. Many others have already gone broke. Still, that oil couldn't have gotten away.

"As for heat—yes, we know that oil is hot when it comes up from the oil sand at eight thousand feet, or from ordinary wells at three to six thousand feet. But"—Asher lit a cigarette and inhaled deeply—"*gas* coming out of the same well is *cold!* So cold it forms frost inches thick on pipes and tanks.

"Rock pressure—the pressure of the earth—forcing up the gas, causes that. Why couldn't that same pressure cool great caverns below the granite cap below the oil sands? It could. For that matter, I know that same pressure will generate useful power. I'll show you that in a minute."

"All right!" Johns chewed his cigar almost savagely. "Say, then, that you can work down there, nearly two miles underground; granted that we can tunnel from beneath the sands and pump more oil from one central shaft than we now do from fifty wells—what has that to do with this posh about a race of people?"

"They are not people, perhaps." Asher grinned at the "there, I've stuck you!" look on Johns' face. "Let's say, rather, creatures. Have you ever met Lee Wong, the great Chinese scientist, or his Russian geological collaborator, Krenski? No?

"WELL, I have. I met them in Paris in 1935—five years ago. They're brilliant men, and they've prepared some wonderful papers. Brilliant, I said: they are also dangerous. They claim, you know, that the fossils we now drill up come from a lost race—people who went *into* the earth while man, like us, was coming up onto the earth from the water. Some claim those fossils have been on the surface at one time, and were silted over. But eight thousand feet is a lot of silt, Johns: ever thought of that?"

"Good God!" Johns gasped hoarsely. "You almost make me believe you are right. But, supposing there is such a race of things—what will you do?"

"This." Asher drew back a curtain that was stretched across one end of the laboratory. "You know I was

working on a cage in which to descend into that eight-thousand-foot well you've drilled—the well you're going to use to try and find why this field is suddenly gone dry. This is it."

Johns stared, shook his head wonderingly and stared again. Before him, ready to be transported to the well that was larger than any ever drilled before, stood what Blaine Asher called his Miner, for want of a better name.

A thick steel tube, it was. Twelve feet long and large enough around that a man might stand inside of it. The top was welded on in much the manner a top is welded on an ordinary hot-water heater, and had connections for hose in it. At the height of a man's eyes heavy windows were set in, and in one side was a door just large enough to admit a man's body. This door sealed tight the minute it closed.

"It looks like—like some sort of a deep sea diving outfit," Johns said as he walked around the braces that held the Miner upright. "But all those gadgets inside and on the bottom—?" He indicated the strange instruments that could be seen when the door was opened, and the queer glass tubes that projected from the very bottom.

"PRESSURE-POWER units—my own invention," Asher told him. "For ten years I've been working on this. I knew that some day I would want to explore the oil caverns beneath the earth, so I made ready.

"As I told you, rock pressure, or earth pressure, is a tremendous thing. It is power, so I figured how to use it. Under artificial pressure, I have tried out my Miner and its equipment.

"Those tubes sticking from the bottom contain something you are familiar with: non-burning and non-explosive helium gas. I have discovered a way, by their use, to create power that will melt away rock or iron—literally dissolve it into nothing! Not in an hour, or minutes. In seconds, Johns!

"The pressure of the earth acts as my generator. The pressure action on the filaments of platinum, and several compositions I have no time to explain now, causes heat. Call it friction of compressed air, if you wish. As neon gases carry an electric spark, so does this helium carry the power generated by earth pressure. The pressure below earth acts on the delicate coils and points of my generator. This bit of power is carried into the helium tubes, and by a system of vacuum power, is increased millions of times. Thus, the tiny spark of a cigar lighter would electrocute a hundred men!"

"I—you mean somewhat like a violet ray is increased in the lightning tubes?" Johns strove to grasp the foundation of the thing.

"Yes, the foundation of it all—with the earth's pressure the power motive," Asher nodded. "So, after my Miner is on the bottom of our well, I can burn—or dissolve—a room as large as this laboratory in a few minutes. The whole thing is no mystery after you learn it—not nearly so much as radium, or radio, was. Merely creating a spark of electricity and fanning it through a vacuum and a conductor of massed gases."

"But"—Johns had unconsciously dropped his voice to a whisper—"what of these strange creatures? How would you deal with them? Damn it, Asher, I think I'm beginning to believe this nutty idea of yours. Any man who can generate power with the pressure of air as it is packed by earth must know what he is talking about!"

"I have but one protection against anything down there that tries to harm me," Asher said simply. "That is this—see?"

WHAT he held up looked like an old-fashioned six-shooter. It was fitted with a platinum-sealed box in the place where a cylinder would have been. The barrel looked like some queer, blue glass.

"Do you see that test tube?" Asher pointed to a glass tube on a table a few feet away. "Now watch."

He pressed a tiny ratchet under his thumb. A snapping, buzzing noise filled the laboratory. Johns gave an exclamation of wonder and awe. Quickly, the test tube started to melt into a pool of molten glass. Asher increased the pressure of his ratchet trigger. The tube was knocked to the floor.

"Static electricity — always some form of electricity," said Asher grinning at the astonished oil baron. "Conductor coils here," he continued as he tapped the sealed cylinder, "are charged much as a flash-lamp battery. The charged conductors attract the static electricity of the air, and, in a manner similar to the action of the power generator, increase power. There is a slight difference: by turning quick power on my static gun, I can cause the charge to knock down and merely electrocute, as I knocked the half-melted tube from the table."

"I can understand that, a little," Johns sighed profoundly. "It's the same juice that causes a gasoline truck to catch fire if you don't have a ground chain on it somewhere. But, just the same, I claim it's remarkable."

"Not half as remarkable as what I expect to find two miles down when I descend to-morrow." Asher had a dreamy look in his eyes. "I wonder: new ways to get petroleum wealth . . . a strange people. . . ."

"MEN,"—Asher, a tight-fitting asbestos composition suit covering him from foot to neck, spoke tersely—"when you get me on bottom, stop every bit of machinery, and don't dare pull up until I give the signal. If I'm down there the entire day, all right. But"—he smiled, trying to make light of the danger—"if I don't signal within thirty-six hours, pull up anyhow."

From the bull-wheels of the drilling rig Asher spooled out some of the air-hose cable through which air blown over ice would be pumped into the Miner; then when the long steel cylinder was over the hole and ready, he turned to the company officials and government scientists and engineers around him in the boarded-up derrick.

"Possibly I can get a survey in an hour. Perhaps I'll have to come back to the surface and make adjustments to my equipment. That remains to be seen. . . . Now, let's get low."

He adjusted a helmet over his head. It looked much like the helmet worn by a sea diver, except that it had no connecting hose for air. The windows in the helmet, which contained pressure lights, worked on the same principle as the disintegrating rays of the Miner. When Asher turned the ratchet that set the little pressure machine into motion, a violet-tinged green ray of great lighting power shot out and increased, by weight of air, or atmosphere beneath the earth, the power of one tiny spark a million times.

Without ceremony or farewell, Asher crawled inside his tube. The door was closed and he fastened it from inside. For a moment, wild panic assailed him. But he fought it off, becoming again less the feeling human and more the cold calculator of advanced science. The light from outside, coming in through the windows of the Miner, was shut off. The long steel cage clanked against the sides of the special casing in the well, and Blaine Asher was on his trip into a lower world never before visited by man.

That was what Asher believed. But, had he known what waited for him, two miles into the bowels of the earth. . . .

AT five hundred feet, the descent stopped, giving him time to adjust himself to the pressure change. The gas and oil had been cased out of the hole. That is, the casing had been run on through the producing strata, shutting it off. Asher signaled by buzzer, and a stream of the ice-washed air flowed down to him.

Three thousand feet! Six thousand feet! More than a mile down! Sweat

poured from his body in streams, and the air coming into the Miner through the hose did not relieve him. It was hot—almost unbearably so. His ears were roaring. The dark of his tube was relieved as he turned on his pressure lamps. He adjusted the pressure discs over his ears by twisting a thumbscrew on his helmet, and the pounding of his eardrums ceased.

Gasping, he watched the depth meter in front of him. It did not seem as if he was moving, but the indicator now showed more than seven thousand feet. It moved around slowly and more slowly; trembled at eight thousand—and stopped.

Like the snapping of a man's fingers, the temperature inside the Miner changed. Asher was now fifty feet below the bottom of the oil and gas sands, and if his theory about rock pressure worked. . . . It *was* working. Frost was forming on the inside of the Miner!

"I'm right—right—right!" Asher thought, elated, sending his buzzer signal up to those so far above. The icy air through his hose changed to air of normal temperature. He signaled for slack in the lowering cable, then prepared for the greatest test of all.

Cramped, with hardly room to move, he studied his gages. Helium tubes at the proper pressure for compressing the tiny spark of the pressure generator, so it would flare a million times stronger under the action of the vacuum tubes; diamond and cut-glass tubes in the bottom of the Miner, thermoed with layers of quicksilver: everything cleared, everything ready.

HIS hand shaking, Asher pushed the tiny switch that brought his filament points trembling together under the atmospheric pressure so far underground. A tiny spark danced and throbbed through the tiny glass tube before him, beginning to buzz as it started the circuit of increasing coils, and soon humming and vibrating as the helium and vacuum tubes swelled it to full power. Spark after spark, increased almost beyond imagination, followed one after another. The Miner throbbed and shook.

White-faced, Asher touched the little lever that opened the blasting outlets in the bottom. Almost instantly the Miner dropped a full six inches—went on, down to a foot. Asher, pride of success choking him, pulled the lever hard over, which brought some of the tubes beneath him spreading out, to blast away the earth on each side of him.

He signaled for more and more slack as the depth indicator showed he had burned, or disintegrated, his way down to thirty feet beyond the original bottom of the hole. He was below the bottom of the protecting wall of casing now—at the mercy of the pressure of two miles of earth.

Slowly, setting all his bottom tubes to cutting away on all sides of him, he started hollowing out enough room to step out into. His lights, when he looked through the windows, showed ghostly on earth ten feet on each side of him. Ten more minutes and he had created a room nearly twenty-five feet square—a man-made cave, two miles below the surface.

There was something akin to awe in the feelings of Asher when he opened the little door, crawled out and stood erect. The pressure lamps in his helmet lit up the room he had made. There were no sounds, just a vague, ringing silence.

Then so quickly that it robbed him of his senses, two things happened. A hundred yards away from the well in which he had descended, another well, drilled by another oil company, was shot. Three hundred quarts of nitro-glycerine were sent off in the hole.

ASHER screamed and clamped his ear discs down tight. It seemed the very gods of thunder were shrieking and raging in his head; every nerve

and fiber in his body throbbed and tingled with the hellish vibration.

On his knees, where the shock had thrown him, in darkness beyond description, Asher realized the lights from the Miner no longer shone out. Frantically, he adjusted the small lights in his helmet and got them to sending off their rays again. Then, an icy hand seemed to squeeze his heart, turning his blood to ice-water in his veins. He cursed himself for not foreseeing that some company might shoot a well close by, while he was underground.

He turned. The Miner was all right, but Blaine Asher was trapped! For the walls of the hole below the bottom of the casing had caved. Thirty feet of rock, sand and conglomerate matter were between him and the bottom of the pipe.

He was trapped—two miles below the earth. There was no hope of rescue, the hope that miners feel in deep shafts. There could be no rescue for Asher. No one could get to him. He cried out his horror, fighting to keep from swooning.

The helmet hampered him. He turned on a small pressure lamp attached to the belt at his waist, and chanced taking the helmet off. Dank and nauseous was the air that he breathed, since it no longer came through the filters in his helmet. But it was air that would serve, nevertheless.

A crackling, rumbling sound caused him to turn quickly. Eyes wide, he stared at the long crack that was opening before him.

Asher was between two layers of granite—one layer under him, and another above him, just below the oil sands. Now, as the crack between these two layers widened, he could see it slope downward until it ended in a great cavern that stretched endlessly away beyond the beams of his light.

IT wasn't this crack that caused Blaine Asher, an iron-hearted man of science, to choke and sag down to a sitting position, his knees refusing to support him. No—it was the terrible, Godless, unbelievable *Things* that scurried around in the smooth rock hall that stretched away into the cavern.

Frozen with soul-chilling fear, Asher stared with eyes that bulged. What were they? Spawned neither of God nor Satan—what could they be? Black-skinned—or was it skin?—like rubber, with round bodies, like black basket balls inflated to triple size; bodies that seemed to ripple, distort, swell and contract with life within life.

Short, foot-long stems that must have been legs, ending in round balls that served as feet, no doubt. Tentacles, Asher would have called them, six feet in length, thick as mighty cables and dotted with suckers like the tentacles of an octopus. And heads—Asher gagged and vomited!

Not heads. Just masses of the black body substance as large as the two fists of a man. In each head was a crooked black gash for a mouth. There were no eyes that Asher could see. Yet, these Things seemed to see one another, and emitted strange, chill, squeaking sounds!

As Asher watched, the Things sensed his presence. A half hundred of them rose and started toward him. They did not walk, nor did they crawl. Undulating, contorting strangely, they came on with incredible speed, long tentacles waving before them; slithering on the rocky floor of the cavern; making those odd squeaking noises.

As they neared him, Asher sprang to his feet, backing up against the pile of cavings beside the Miner. A long tentacle whipped out and wrapped around his leg. A short, snout-tentacle quivered toward his face. There was strength beyond imagining in the grip on him.

WITH an almost animal snarl the man from the earth's surface moved to protect himself from these creatures, surely of the lowest living

order. He grabbed into the pocket of his loose asbestos composition suit, and his fingers closed comfortingly around the static gun.

He aimed it, and the Thing gripping him was hurled back upon the others. Crackling, snapping viciously, the charges of electricity that were drawn from the very earth increased in the gun and spumed out like lightning bolts. The Things squeaked excitedly and surged forward. Asher's finger pulled the ratchet trigger full force, and like dew before a strong shaft of sunlight, the gruesome Things were knocked away.

Hating the sight, Asher changed the charge of his gun, cutting the size of the path the volts covered, thereby increasing the potency of the discharge. The piled bodies sizzled, and to Asher's nose came a sulphurous smell. Then, there was nothing at all. . . .

Sick, he put the gun back into the deep pocket and leaned on the wall. He turned around again to the pile of cavings that barred his way from the surface, and dug like a madman with his bare hands. The Miner was weighed down, and he could not use it anyhow. The blasting tubes were on the bottom, and could not be shifted to the top.

Suddenly he stopped his crazed work, raised his head and listened. "My God!" he gasped hoarsely, "am I stark mad?" He thought he must be, for the voice of a human being came ot his ears.

"You will be pleased, Blaine Asher, to turn around! And do not make any foolish moves, I warn you."

"Lee Wong! Krenski!" Asher turned, face to face with the superscientists of whom he had spoken to R. Briggs Johns the day before. Asher shook his head. More of the terrible dream, this meeting two humans down in the earth's core.

"MOST right, honorable Asher." Lee Wong bowed mockingly. He and Krenski were garbed in loose-fitting garments of much the same style as Asher. In their hands, they carried static guns. Not the small gun, such as Asher had concealed in his pocket. More like heavy air drills, they were.

Asher frowned at the lamps they carried. He knew by the dazzling action of the rays that they were pressure lamps. But they gave off much better light than those of his own invention. They had gone him one better there.

"Did—did you see them?" Asher gulped. "And how—how did you get down here? Tell me!" He took a step toward Lee Wong, intending to lay his hand on the Chinaman, to make sure he was live flesh and blood, and not a figment of his disordered brain.

"Stand where you are!" Lee Wong snapped. He held the heavy static gun up and Asher felt a light charge tingle his body. "Those Things of which you speak—I assume you mean the Petrolia. Ah, yes, we see them. Every day, we see them. For us they work. They work, my dear Blaine Asher, tapping upward into the oil sands; sands that are burial places of countless millions of generations of Petrolia; of lost races that once ruled supreme over these underground worlds.

"How simple, to take the oil from below—the oil you want so much above. Someone must do the work. I and Krenski found the Petrolia ready and willing. Being creatures of feeling, with little sense, we were able to bend their dying wills to do our work. You see, we made them feel we would save them, a dying race, from extinction! They do our bidding."

Asher was bewildered by the enormity of the thing. "You mean these Things you have called Petrolia actually work for you? And that you saved them from becoming extinct?"

"EXACTLY," Lee Wong nodded, seeming to be enjoying himself. "Like humans of the surface, Petrolia live on the dead. I mean, wherever we get our living food from the earth, we plant our dead back in that earth. Petrolia are spawned in beds of pe-

troleum. Just as eels seek deep water to lay their eggs, so do Petrolia go to the oil strata to spawn future tribes.

"When we pump out the oil, they have no—shall we say "hatching?"—beds. But now, by tapping and bringing down the oil, we have assured them more spawning pits. They will increase, and we have made them sense it. For that matter, the very oil they breed in, gives them sustenance. That it why they are black fleshed and blooded, and have suckers instead of mouths, as a black man is black through ages beneath hot suns.

"It's easy for us, who are wiser than other men, to figure what oilfield might contain such people. We have a rapid elevator connecting us to the surface. And—"

"Then," Asher almost shouted, "I'm not trapped!"

"No?" Lee Wong wrinkled his forehead quizzically. "You should realize that we cannot allow you to go back to the surface—alive, or any other way. We intend to increase the Petrolia, spreading them to other underground, yet uninhabited worlds. You would spoil that.

"No, you will never return to the surface. They cannot haul your tube to the top, so they will think you perished in it. And"—Lee Wong shrugged—"it might have been better if you had, Mr.—"

"I wouldn't!" the yellow man snarled. He rolled the ratchet of his static gun and Asher was hurled to the floor by the heavy shock. Wisely, he stood up, keeping his hands well away from the pocket in which his own gun rested. He doubted whether his little static gun could compete with the guns of the others, but it was something. They had not thought to search him—perhaps they might not. It was his only hope.

LEE WONG bowed low again, motioning Asher to go ahead. "Now you shall see what we have done. We are proud, and we know you can appreciate our workings. You will be glad to learn why we do as we are doing; you will be intrigued as a fellow scientist. Then, so sad to say, you must perish for having gained that very knowledge."

Asher shrugged, and through half-closed lids he eyed Lee Wong and the rather small, slender Krenski, of the high brow and large head. Then he walked ahead of them. Head up, shoulders back, he walked carelessly down the wide hall—a hall that led into the main cavern of that underground empire.

It was large—fully a hundred feet in a rough square. Not fifteen feet from floor to ceiling at any point, it followed the course of the two layers of granite between which it was sandwiched. Other long halls, or crevices, ran in every direction out of this main cavern. In the walls, in niches and cracks, the superior pressure lamps had been placed, throwing a bright, eery light over it all.

Asher recoiled suddenly at the sight of hundreds of Petrolia that swarmed the hallways, and they seemed to sense another presence beside that of Lee Wong or Krenski. A choked, gurgling sound came from the Chinaman, and they disappeared down the halls, squeaking angrily as they went.

"Our control room," explained Lee Wong waving his hand about him. He pointed to a dozen twenty-four inch pipe-lines that ran along the low ceiling, coming from as many different halls into the room, but all going out the same large hall, larger than the rest. "There are the arteries of our system. There is the oil that is so—shall we say strangely?—missing in your wells." He smiled, a taunting, mocking light in his eyes.

"You well understand how we do it. Above us, just below the oil strata, is a steel, trough-shaped roof. The oil, tapped from below, drains into these, and then into these pipe-lines. If we were working from above, now, we would run it to a central shaft, and

pump it out. We do not want it on the surface, however."

"THEN why in the name of hell do you want it?" Asher barked, a tense note of anger in his voice. "And what do you do with it?" These two were humans. At least, they were in man-form, if not in feeling. And the Petrolia could be handled. Asher was getting mad, and his fear ebbed.

"Come." Lee Wong led the way under the pipe-lines, down the large hall. Krenski, his heavy static gun ready, walked at Asher's back. They came out into another cavern that stretched beyond the powerful lights. The sound of their voices echoed like thunder of the drums of Thor, and Asher realized this cavern might stretch away in Stygian blackness for hundreds of miles.

Asher marveled, for the floor of this cavern dropped at least five feet below the level of the control room or incoming hallways, forming a natural reservoir. A reservoir for the big streams of oil that were pouring into it from the pipe-lines.

The rumble of the oil as it came in and splashed out in a never-ending stream, and the rumble of the oil streams above them as the precious fluid flowed down into the plated drain roof, sounded like the tramp of the weary feet of the damned, as it echoed back and forth across the mighty cavern.

"Our storage." Lee Wong stood at the edge and explained. "Also, as you may see, a concentration incubator, or spawning bed and food storage for our Petrolia."

Blaine Asher looked again at the rippling oil at his feet. He choked brokenly and stepped back a pace. For the oil near the bank was alive! It rippled and splashed, teeming with life. By the strange alchemy of breeding in oil, and living on oil as man lives on bread, that lake of oil was a mass of growing Petrolia. Millions—yes, countless billions—of them! Hideous, foul Things that would be turned loose with the rest in that nightmare world—that would be taken to other buried worlds to start new races.

"BUT why—why?" Asher almost screamed the words at Lee Wong.

"Petrolia will be our armies, protecting our underground wealth," Lee Wong answered him. "They will be our faithful workers, under no command but mine. For, even Krenski has not mastered the over-control it takes to handle them!

"Gradually, as happened to the field we are now under, all oil fields will go dry. We will be getting the oil from below, and putting it in storage in mother earth. Think, Blaine Asher, what it will mean!" There was a fanatical light in Lee Wong's beady eyes.

"A world without petroleum is a world without power. No oil for fuel; no gasoline, lubricants or by-products of any sort. No airplanes could fly; tanks, tractors, oil-burning trains and ships; mechanical appliances—nothing could run. We now take the oil from America. Later, when our Petrolia have increased and we have devised means of moving them, we will go to all oil-producing countries.

"We will secrete the oil and paralyze the world. Now, in Russia and China and India, our societies are organizing and growing. They will handle the weakened, powerless nations, and I shall be ruler of the universe, surface and beneath, with Krenski to aid me, you see. It is wonderful, is it not? And, knowing what you do, having seen what you have, could you call it impossible?"

Blaine Asher groaned. It was not impossible, he knew. Unreal; monstrous—but never impossible. A region of hideous Petrolia; a world stripped of automotive and mechanical power, its fuel held in the hands of a few, far underground—it was terrible to think of.

And Asher the only one who knew.

The only one who could avert such a thing. The fate of an entire world was in his hands. And he would soon die.

Die? No! Blaine Asher swore silently to himself that no power in existence should keep him from destroying these two fiends. It had to be done!

He dared not fail.

"WONDERFUL, stupenduous thing," he forced himself to smile. "I'd like to grasp the hand of the genius who devised and carried out such a wonderful thing."

He took a step toward Lee Wong, right hand extended, his left slipping toward the pocket where his own static gun rested.

Lee Wong extended his own right hand. Something in the chill, flint look of Asher's eyes must have warned him. Even as Asher's fingers closed around his hand, he tried to jerk back.

"Destroy him!" he cried out to Krenski.

Asher dropped to one knee, letting his static gun remain in his pocket. His left hand closed around Lee Wong's wrist as the Oriental tried to pull away. Krenski was bringing the heavy, cylinderlike gun up and aiming it at Asher.

Asher twisted on one knee, his teeth gritted, braced to receive the shock from the gun. He jerked Lee Wong's arm down, heaved and came to his feet. Crying out, arms and legs flailing, the Chinaman catapulted toward Krenski —and just at the instant Krenski fired!

The sickening smell of cindered flesh was in Asher's nostrils as he turned and ran back up the main hallway. He glanced back over his shoulder as he ran, and shuddered at the black mass lying at Krenski's feet. Lee Wong was no more. Wide-eyed, the Russian stared at the thing at his feet. Then, with a fiendish shriek, turned and brought the gun into line on the fleeing Asher.

A crackling charge of electricity singed the back of Asher's head as he dove head first around the corner of the hall into the control cavern. He reasoned that Krenski had sent a full charge after him, and hope kindled higher in his breast. For Asher believed his smaller static weapon was as strong as that of the other. At that, it would be a test, and Asher dared not take chances.

HE crouched in the door of another hallway, waiting. Cursing, Krenski dashed into the control cavern. Asher brought his gun up and fired. But even as he pulled the trigger, a long tentacle reached from the dark crevice behind him and jerked his arm. His charge snapped by the Russian, warning the other that Asher, too, was dealing with powerful electric rays that meant death should they touch.

Asher yielded to the tug of the slimy, sulphur-smelling tentacle, letting it pull him into the crevice, the charges of Krenski's weapon crackling by him, leaving his skin dry, and a powdery sensation in his mouth.

In the shelter of the crevice, Asher turned his gun upon the Petrolia that gripped him. The tentacles fell away, fading to nothingness before the charges that showed quivery blue in the dark. Like catacombs, one crevice opened into another. Asher darted into the next crevice and edged cautiously toward the control cavern.

The angry buzzing and snapping of Krenski's weapon caused him to duck instinctively, although no deadly charges came his way.

"Oh, God!" he heard the Russian's high-pitched voice, agonized, wailing, "they're coming in—they're coming in!"

A squeaking and slithering, now greater than ever, rose above all other sounds. And Asher realized what Krenski meant. Lee Wong had said that only he could control the Petrolia. They were swarming into the control room now. That was what Krenski was shooting at.

The squeaking sounds came up the crevice in which Asher was and a cold,

clammy sweat broke out all over him. He could blast a thousand of them into nothing. But by sheer force, more body than his light static gun could down, they would overwhelm him.

His mind raced swiftly. He remembered the location, out in the control room, of the cage elevator that ran to the surface. It had not been hurt by the glycerine blast that had trapped Asher. The elevator shaft from the control room was cased clear into the cavern floor, and the blast had not jarred this far.

HE wheeled and sent another charge of static electricity into the crevice back of him, then lunged out into the control room. It would be his own weapon against Krenski's, and a chance to gain the bottom of the shaft.

Krenski—piled, charred heaps of the Petrolia around him, which had momentarily cleared the attack—was running across the control room. Like a seething wave, the foul Petrolia undulated from every crevice and hallway, coming in to fresh attack. The Russian, terror lending him speed, raced for the cage at the foot of the shaft that led to the surface. At the same time Asher ran out.

Nearly a hundred feet apart, on opposite sides of the cavern, they stopped. Krenski turned his heavy weapon toward Asher at the same time Asher sent his own gun crackling and snapping out blue, fiery flame.

Side-stepping, now crouching, now dodging to this side and that, they fought their strange duel. Asher's right arm was burned, his hair singed from his head, and his body jarred again and again as Krenski touched him. Krenski, groaning through gritted teeth, suffered burns all over his chest and left leg.

As the Petrolia came on, and the lightning play of deadly electric charges continued, Asher made a discovery. He noticed that the rays, or charges, of the two guns, when they met in mid-air, caused blue flame, and that the charges went no farther.

It did it again. The two charges met, crackled to explosion in the air. Krenski, too, noticed it, and he also noticed that the Petrolia were almost upon them again. Coming on in a wave that could not be hurled back.

HE looked at Asher, and met the dare in Asher's eyes. Straight at each other, neither moving, they shot their static charges. Neither would move: it was a challenge from Asher that Krenski had to meet. One of them would have to die before the other would be able to gain the cage in the shaft. There could be no compromise, and only one man at a time could go surfaceward. If they continued to dodge and fight, the Petrolia would overwhelm them.

Power against power, they fought it out.

Asher's finger tightened on his trigger release until it seemed the skin would split; then he caused his hand to tremble just enough to make his electric charges cover the space in which Krenski's charges traveled. Hissing, spitting, flashing explosions, giving off sounds and light like big explosions of flash powder, the charges met.

Asher tingled from head to foot, and thrilled to the very marvel of the thing. Two deadly beams of electricity, holding each other off!

In one long, continuous flash, the contact point of the charges began to shift. Closer and closer, as the force of superior charges cleaved through the other, the contact points neared Krenski. He saw death upon him, for, in another instant, Asher's charges would hurl his own bolts back upon him. The smaller weapon of Blaine Asher, attracting more static electric currents by reason of having a small attracting battery inside, where the larger gun of the other depended upon magnets for attraction, was triumphing.

Krenski's mustache and light beard singed and curled. He cried out, stepped back, throwing up his arms as death flashed through his body.

HIS gun playing about him, Asher raced toward the big valves and gates that shut off the drain of the pipe-lines. Burning, reeking of sulphur and burned leather, the Petrolia vanished before him. But, as he turned, the drainage system that was robbing the field shut off. They had blocked his way again!

Too many to blast away altogether, they pressed in. Asher leaped forward, feet kicking, left fist smashing out, static gun crackling as if to tell him that nothing could stop them. Tentacles gripped at him, the foul, stinking smell gagged him. But the squeaks of the Petrolia maddened him.

"Squeak, damn you!" Asher shouted wildly, kicking, shooting and hitting, gaining toward the shaft. "Squeak—for all the damned Things that ever bred below the earth cannot stop one surface man!"

He burned and fought his way through and jumped into the cage as his gun electrocuted two of the Petrolia that tried to weave in after him. As he slammed the door, Asher was conscious that something was happening. He hesitated, just long enough to see the cavern start buckling and caving. The pressure of the oil, now shut off, was filling back toward the surface, creating a mighty pressure downward. The surface wells would produce man's power-fuel once more.

Asher slammed the door, turned on the power, and the cage shot upward.

A half hour later, those waiting on the floor of the derrick above the hole in which Asher had gone down, started. Asher, burned, wounded, blood streaming from his battered body, staggered in and collapsed at their feet.

"I CAN'T believe it! Insane! Impossible! Yet, every well in this field has started producing again! And when we went to that old, abandoned wildcat well, we found the shaft opening! I had it covered up, as you ordered."

R. Briggs Johns paced up and down the laboratory floor, talking to Asher, who had just arisen from his bed, two weeks after he had collapsed at their feet in the derrick. Still bandaged, he was a different Blaine Asher. His face was lined, and the hair next to his scalp nearly snow white.

"I'll be able to do some walking around outside in a few days," Asher declared as he cleaned a test tube and placed it in a rack. "I can locate several wells over that underground storage cavern, and you can recover that oil. But you can't mine this field.

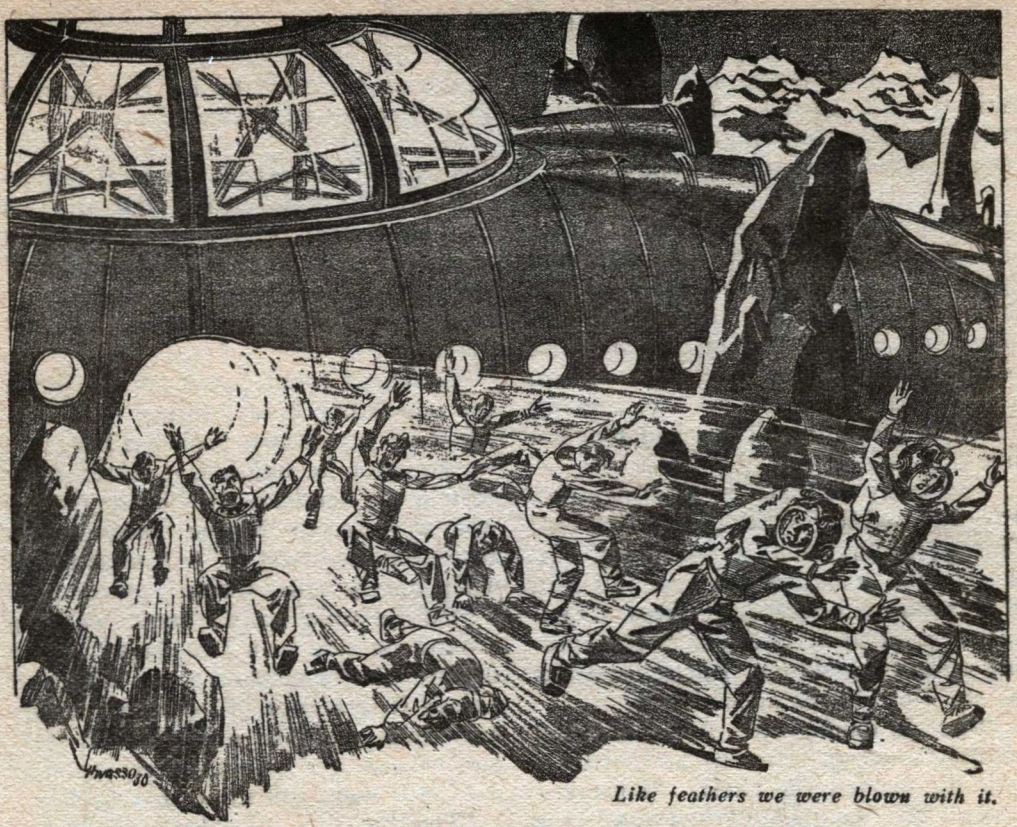
"Twenty years, perhaps, and you can. But it will take that long for those Petrolia to die out. We've got to get the oil out from below to a point where they can no longer spawn. We will apply mining in other fields—but not here!"

"Not here," Johns repeated, shuddering.

"It's up to you to see no one else tries it." Asher lit a cigarette and nodded at Johns. "Get control of the field—anything. Tell the oil men something. But don't tell them the truth. They wouldn't believe you. They would call you raving mad.

"The world does not know. It would not believe. Can we do other than remain silent?"

R. Briggs Johns, sick of thinking of the cavern world and horrible things below them, knew they could not.



Like feathers we were blown with it.

Brigands of the Moon

(The Book of Gregg Haljan)

CONCLUSION OF A FOUR-PART NOVEL

By Ray Cummings

CHAPTER XXXIV

The First Encounters

IT seemed, with that first shot from the enemy, that a great relief came to me—an apprehension fallen away. We had anticipated this moment for so long, dreaded it. I think all our men felt it. A shout went up:

"Harmless!"

It was not that. But our building withstood it better than I had feared. It was a flash from a large electronic projector mounted on the deck of the brigand ship. It stabbed up from the shadows across the valley at the foot of the opposite crater-wall, a beam of vaguely fluorescent light. Simultaneously the search-light vanished.

The besieged Earth-men wage grim, ultra-scientific war with Martian bandits in a last great struggle for their radium-ore—and their lives.

The stream of electrons caught the front face of our main building in a six-foot circle. It held a few seconds, vanished; then stabbed again, and still again. Three bolts. A total, I suppose, of nine or ten seconds.

I was standing with Grantline at a front window. We had rigged an oblong of insulated fabric like a curtain; we stood peering, holding the curtain cautiously aside. The ray struck some twenty feet away from us.

"Harmless!"

The men in the room shouted it with derision. But Grantline swung on them.

"Don't think that!"

An interior signal-panel was beside Grantline. He called the duty-men in the instrument room.

"It's over. What are your readings?"

THE bombarding electrons had passed through the outer shell of the building's double-wall, and been absorbed in the rarefied, magnetized air-current of the Erentz circulation. Like poison in a man's veins, reaching his heart, the free alien electrons had disturbed the motors. They accelerated, then retarded. Pulsed unevenly, and drew added power from the reserve tanks. But they had normalized at once when the shot was past. The duty-man's voice sounded from the grid in answer to Grantline's question:

"Five degrees colder in your building. Can't you feel it?"

The disturbed, weakened Erentz circulation had allowed the outer cold to radiate through a trifle. The walls had had a trifle extra explosive pressure from the room-air. A strain—but that was all.

"It's probably their most powerful single weapon, Gregg," Grantline said.

I nodded. "Yes. I think so."

I had smashed the real giant, with its ten-mile range. The ship was only two miles from us, but it seemed as though this projector were exerted to its distance limit. I had noticed on the deck only one of this type. The others, paralyzing-rays and heat rays, were less deadly.

Grantline commented: "We can withstand a lot of that bombardment. If we stay inside—"

That ray, striking a man outside, would penetrate his Erentz suit within a few seconds, we could not doubt. We had, however, no intention of going out unless for dire necessity.

"Even so," said Grantline, "A hand-shield would hold it off for a certain length of time."

C. S.

WE had an opportunity a moment later to test our insulated shields. The bolt came again. It darted along the front face of the building, caught our window and clung. The double window-shells were our weakest points. The sheet of flashing Erentz current was transparent; we could see through it as though it were glass. It moved faster, but was thinner at the windows than in the walls. We feared the bombarding electrons might cross it, penetrate the inner shell and, like a lightning bolt, enter the room.

We dropped the curtain corner. The radiance of the bolt was dimly visible. A few seconds, then it vanished again, and behind the shield we had not felt a tingle.

"Harmless!"

But our power had been drained nearly an aeron, to neutralize the shock to the Erentz current. Grantline said:

"If they kept that up, it would be a question of whose power supply would last longest. And it would not be ours. . . . You saw our lights fade down while the bolt was striking?"

But the brigands did not know we were short of power. And to fire the projector with a continuous bolt would, in thirty minutes, perhaps, have exhausted their own power-reserve.

This strange warfare! It was new to all of us, for there had been no wars on any of the three inhabited worlds for many years. Silent, electronic conflict! Not a question of men in battle. A man at a switch on the brigand ship was the sole actor so far in this assault. And the results were visible only in the movement of the needle-dials on our instrument panels. A struggle, so far, not of man's bravery, or skill, or strategy, but merely of electronic power supply.

YET warfare, however modern, can never transcend the human element. Before this assault was ended I was to have many demonstrations of that!

"I won't answer them," Grantline declared. "Our game is to sit defensive. Conserve everything. Let them make the leading moves."

We waited half an hour, but no other shot came. The valley floor was patched with Earthlight and shadow. We could see the vague outline of the brigand ship backed up at the foot of the opposite crater-wall. The form of its dome over the illumined deck was visible, and the line of its tiny hull ovals.

On the rocks near the ship, helmet-lights of prowling brigands occasionally showed.

Whatever activity was going on down there we could not see with the naked eye. Grantline did not use our telescope at first. To connect it, even for local range, drew on our precious ammunition of power. Some of the men urged that we search the sky with the telescope. Was our rescue ship from Earth coming? But Grantline refused. We were in no trouble yet. And every delay was to our advantage.

"Commander, where shall I put these helmets?"

A man came wheeling a pile of helmets on a little truck.

"At the manual porte—other building."

Our weapons and outside equipment were massed at the main exit-locks of the large building. But we might want to sally out through the smaller locks also. Grantline sent helmets there; suits were not needed, as most of us were garbed in them now, but without the helmets.

SNAP was still in the workshop. I went there during this first half-hour of the attack. Ten of our men were busy there with the little flying platforms and the fabric shields.

"How is it, Snap?"

"Almost all ready."

He had six of the platforms, including the one we had already used, and more than a dozen hand-shields. At a squeeze, all of us could ride on these six little vehicles. We might have to ride them! We planned that, in the event of disaster to the buildings, we could at least escape in this fashion. Food supplies and water were now being placed at the portes.

Depressing preparations! Our buildings uninhabitable, a rush out and away, abandoning the treasure. . . . Grantline had never mentioned such a contingency, but I noticed, nevertheless,that preparations were being made.

"Only that one shot, Gregg?"

Snap's voice was raised over the clang of the workmen bolting the little gravity-plates of the last platform.

"Four blasts. But just the one projector. Their strongest."

He grinned. He wore no Erentz suit as yet. He stood in torn grimy work-trousers and a bedraggled shirt, with the inevitable red eyeshade holding back his unruly hair. Around his waist was the weighted belt, and there were weights on his shoes for gravity stability.

"Didn't hurt us much."

"No."

"When I get the tube-panels in this thing I'll be finished. It'll take another half-hour. I'll join you. Where are you stationed?"

I SHRUGGED. "I was at a front window with Johnny. Nothing to do as yet."

Snap went back to his work. "Well, the longer they delay, the better for us. If only your signal got through, Gregg! We'll have a rescue ship here in a few hours more."

Ah, that "if!"

I turned away. "Can't help you, Snap?"

"No. Take those shields," he added to one of the men.

"Take them where?"

"To Grantline. The front admission porte, or the back. He'll tell you which."

The shields were wheeled away on a little cart. I followed it. Grantline sent it to the back exit.

"No other move from them yet, Johnny?"

"No. All quiet."

"Snap's almost finished."

The brigands presently made another play. A giant heat-ray beam came across the valley. It clung to our front wall for nearly a minute.

Grantline got the reports from the instrument room. He laughed.

"That helped rather than hurt us. Heated the outer wall. Frank took advantage of it and eased up the motors."

We wondered if Miko knew that. Doubtless he did, for another interval passed and the heat-ray was not used again.

THEN came a zed-ray. I stood at the window, watching it, faint sheen of beam in the dimness. It crept with sinister deliberation along our front building-wall, clung momentarily to our shielded windows and Pried with its revealing glow into Snap's workshop.

"Looking us over," Grantline commented. "I hope they like what they see."

I knew he did not feel the bravado that was in his tone. We had nothing but small hand weapons: heat-rays, electronic projectors, and bullet projectors. All for very short-range fighting. If Miko had not known that before, he could at least make a good guess at it after the careful zed-ray inspection. With his ship down there two miles away, we were powerless to reach him.

It seemed that Miko was now testing the use of all his mechanisms. A light-flare went up from the dome-peak of the ship. It rose in a slow arc over the valley, and burst. For a few seconds the two-mile circle of crags was brilliantly illumined. I stared, but I had to shield my eyes against the dazzling actinic glare, and I could see nothing. Was Miko making a zed-ray photograph of our interiors? We had no way of knowing.

He was testing his short-range projectors now. With my eyes again accustomed to the normal Earthlight in the valley, I could see the stabs of little electronic beams, the Martian paralyzing-rays and heat-beams. They darted out like flashing swords from the rocks near the ship.

Then the whole ship and the crater-wall behind it seemed to shift sidewise as a Benson curve-light spread its glow about the ship, with a projector curve-beam coming up and touching the window through which I was peering.

"Haljan, come look at these damn girls! Commander—shall I stop them? They'll kill themselves, or kill us—or smash something!"

WE followed the man into the building's broad central corridor. Anita and Venza were riding a midget flying platform! Anita, in her boyish black garb; Venza, with a flowing white Venus-robe. They lay on the tiny, six-foot oblong of metal, one manipulating its side shields, the other at the controls. As we arrived, the platform came sliding down the narrow confines of the corridor, lurching, barely missing a door-grid projection. Up to skim the low vaulted ceiling, then down to the floor.

It sailed past our heads, rising over us as we ducked. Anita waved her hand.

Grantline gasped, "By the infernal!"

I shouted, "Anita, stop!"

But they only waved at us, skimming down the length of the corridor, seeming to avoid a smash a dozen times by the smallest margin of chance, stopping miraculously at the further end, hanging poised in mid-air, wheeling, coming back, undulating up and down.

Grantline clung to me. "By the gods of the airways!"

In spite of my astonished horror I could not but share Grantline's obvious admiration. Three of four other men were watching. The girls were amazingly skillful, no doubt of that. There was not a man among us who

could have handled that gravity-platform indoors, not one who would have had the brash temerity to try it.

The platform landed with the grace of a humming bird at our feet, the girls dexterously balancing so that it came to rest swiftly, without the least bump.

I confronted them. "Anita, what are you doing?"

She stood up, flushed and smiling. "Practising."

Imperturbable girls! The product of their age. Oblivous to the brigand attack, they were in here practising!

"What for?" I demanded.

Venza's roguish eyes twinkled at me. Her hands went to her slim hips with a gesture of defiance.

She asked, "Are you speaking for yourself or the commander?"

I IGNORED her. "What for?" I reiterated.

"Because we're good at it," Anita retorted. "Better than any of you men. If you should need us. . . ."

"We don't. We won't," I said shortly.

"But if you should. . . ."

Venza put in, "If Snap and I hadn't come for you, you wouldn't be here, Gregg Haljan. I didn't notice you were so horrified to see me holding that shield up over you!"

It silenced me.

She added, "Commander, let us alone. We won't smash anything."

Grantline laughed, "I hope you won't!"

A warning call took us back to the front window. The brigand's search-beam was again being used. It swept slowly along the length of the cliff. Its circle went down the cliff steps to the valley floor, and came sweeping up again. Then it went up to the observatory platform at the summit above us, then back and crept over to the ore-sheds.

We had no men outside, if that was what the brigand wanted to determine. The search-beam presently vanished. It was replaced immediately by a zed-ray, which darted at once to our treasure sheds and clung.

That stung Grantline into his first action. We flung our own zed-ray down across the valley. It reached the brigand ship; this zed-ray and a search-light were our only two projectors of long range.

The brigand ray vanished when ours flashed on. I was with Grantline at an image grid in the instrument room. We saw the deck of the brigand ship and the blurred interior of the cabins.

"Try the search-beam, Franck. We don't need the other."

The zed-ray went off. We gazed down our searchlight which clung to the dome of the distant enemy vessel. We could see movement there.

"The telescope," Grantline ordered.

THE little dynamos hummed. The telescope-finder glowed and clarified. On the deck of the ship we saw the brigands working with the assembling of ore-carts. A deck landing-porte was open. The ore-carts were being carried out through a porte-lock and down a landing incline. And on the rocks outside, we saw several of the carts—and rail-sections and the sections of an ore-shute.

Miko was unloading his mining apparatus! He was making ready to come up for the treasure!

The discovery, startling as it was, nevertheless was far overshadowed by an imperative danger alarm from our main building. Brigands were outside on our ledge! Miko's search-beam, sweeping the ledge a moment before, had carefully avoided revealing them. It had been done just for that purpose, no doubt—making us sure that the ledge was unoccupied and thus to guard against our own light making a search.

But there was a brigand group here close outside our walls! By the merest chance the radiating glow from our search-ray had shown the helmeted figures scurrying for shelter.

Grantline leaped to his feet.

We rushed for the rear exit-porte which was nearest us. The giant bloated figures had been seen running along the outside of the connecting corridor, in this direction. But before we ever got there, a new alarm came. A brigand was crouching at a front corner of the main building! His hydrogen heat-torch had already opened a rift in the wall!

CHAPTER XXXV

Desperate Offensive

"IN with you!" ordered Grantline. "Get you helmets on! How many? Six? Enough—get back there, Williams—you were last. The lock won't hold any more."

I was one of the six who jammed into the manual exit lock. We went through it; in a moment we were outside. It was less than three minutes since the prowling brigands had been seen.

Grantline touched me just as we emerged. "Don't wait for orders! Get them!"

"That fellow with the torch, the most dangerous—"

"Yes! I'm with you."

We went out with a rush. We had already discarded our shoe and belt weights. I leaped, regardless of my companions.

The scurrying Martians had disappeared. Through my visor bull'seye I could see only the Earthlit rocky surface of the ledge. Beside me stretched the dark wall of our building.

I bounded toward the front. The brigand with the torch had been at this front corner. I could not see him from here: he had been crouching just around the angle.

I had a tiny bullet projector, the best weapon for short range outdoors. I was aware of Grantline close behind me.

It took only a few of my giant leaps. I landed at the corner, recovered my balance, and whirled around to the front.

The Martian was here, a giant misshapen lump as he crouched. His torch was a little stab of blue in the deep shadow enveloping him. Intent upon his work, he did not see me. Perhaps he thought his fellows had broken our exits by now.

I LANDED like a leopard upon his back and fired, my weapon muzzle ramming him. His torch fell hissing with a silent rain of blue fire upon the rocks.

As my grip upon him made audiphone contact, his agonized scream rattled the diaphragms of my ear-grids with horrible, defening intensity.

He lay writhing under me, then was still. His scream choked into silence. His suit deflated within my encircling grip. He was dead; my leaden, steel-tipped pellet had punctured the double surface of his Erentz-fabric, penetrated his chest.

Grantline's following leap landed him over me.

"Dead?"

"Yes."

I climbed from the inert body. The torch had hissed itself out. Grantline swung on our building corner, and I leaned down with him to examine it. The torch had fused and scarred the surface of the wall, burned almost through. A pressure-rift had opened. We could see it, a curving gash in the metal wall-plate like a crack in a glass window-pane.

I went cold. This was serious damage! The rarefied Erentz-air would seep out. It was leaking now: we could see the magnetic radiance of it all up the length of the ten-foot crack. The leak would change the pressure of the Erentz system, constantly lower it, demanding steady renewal. The Erentz motors would overheat; some might go bad from the strain.

Grantline stood gripping me.

"Damn bad!"

"Yes. Can't we repair it, Johnny?"

"No. Have to take that whole plate-section out, shut off the Erentz plant

and exhaust the interior air of all this bulkhead of the building. Day's job—maybe more."

AND the crack would get worse, I knew. It would gradually spread and widen. The Erentz circulation would fail. All our power would be drained struggling to maintain it. This brigand who had unwittingly committed suicide by his daring act had accomplished more than he perhaps had realized. I could envisage our weapons, useless from lack of power. The air in our buildings turning fetid and frigid; ourselves forced to the helmets. A rush out to abandon the camp and escape. The buildings exploding—scattering into a litter on the ledge like a child's broken toy. The treasure abandoned, with the brigands coming up and loading it on their ship.

Our defeat. In a few hours now—or minutes. This crack could slowly widen, or it could break suddenly at any time. Disaster, come now so abruptly upon us at the very start of the brigand attack. . . .

Grantline's voice in my audiphone broke my despairing rush of thoughts. "Bad. Come on, Gregg; nothing to do here."

We were aware that our other four men had run along the building's other side. They emerged now—with the running brigands in front of them, rushing out toward the staircase on the ledge. Three giant Martian figures in flight, with our four men chasing.

A bullet projector spat, with its queer stab of exploding powder fed by the buring oxygen fumes of its artificial air-chamber—one of our men firing. A brigand fell to the rocks by the brink of the ledge. The others reached the descending staircase, tumbled down it with reckless leaps.

Our men turned back. Before we could join them, the enemy ship down in the valley sent up a cautious search-beam which located its returning men. Then the beam swung up to the ledge, landed upon us.

We stood confused, blinded by the brilliant glare. Grantline stumbled against me.

"Run, Gregg! They'll be firing at us."

We dashed away. Our companions joined us, rushing back for the porte. I saw it open, reinforcements coming out to help us—half a dozen figures carrying a ten-foot insulated shield. They could barely get it out through the porte.

THE Martian search-ray abruptly vanished. Then almost instantly the electronic ray came with its deadly stab. Missed us at first, as we ran for the shield. It vanished, and stabbed again. It caught us, but now we were behind the shield, carrying it back to the porte, hiding behind it.

The ray stabbed once or twice more. Whether Miko's instruments showed him how serious that damage was to our front wall, we never knew. But I think that he realized. His search-beam clung to it, and his zed-ray pried into our interiors.

The brigand ship was active now. We were desperate; we used our telescope freely for observation. And used our zed-ray and search-light. Miko's ore-carts and mining apparatus were unloaded on the rocks. The rail-sections were being carried a mile out, nearly to the center of the valley. A subsidiary camp was being established there, only a mile from the base of our cliff, but still far beyond reach of our weapons. We could see the brigand lights down there.

Then the ore-shute sections were brought over. We could see Miko's men carrying some of the giant projectors, mounting them in the new position. Power tanks and cables. Light-flare catapaults—little mechanical cannons for throwing the bombs.

The enemy search-light constantly raked our vicinity. Occasionally the giant electronic projector flung up its bolt as though warning us not to dare leave our buildings.

HALF an hour went by. Our situation was even worse than Miko could know. The Erentz motors were running hot—our power draining, the crack widening. When it would break we could not tell; but the danger was like a sword over us.

An anxious thirty minutes for us, this second interlude. Grantline called a meeting of all our little force, with every man having his say. Inactivity was no longer a feasible policy. We recklessly used our power to search the sky. Our rescue ship might be up there; but we could not see it with our disabled instruments. No signals came. We could not—or, at least, did not—receive them.

"They wouldn't signal," Grantline protested. "They'd know the Martians would be more likely to get the signal than us. Of what use to warn Miko?"

But he did not dare wait for a rescue ship that might or might not be coming! Miko was playing the waiting game now—making ready for a quick loading of the ore when we were forced to abandon our buildings.

The brigand ship suddenly moved its position! It rose up in a low flat arc, came forward and settled in the center of the valley where the carts and rail-sections were piled, and the outside projectors newly mounted on the rocks. But the projectors only shot at us occasionally.

The brigands now began laying the rails from the ship toward the base of our cliff. The chute would bring the ore down from the ledge, and the carts would take it to the ship.

The laying of the rails was done under cover of occasional stabs from the electronic projector.

And then we discovered that Miko had made still another move. The brigand rays, fired from the depths of the valley, could strike our front building, but could not reach all our ledge. And from the ship's new and nearer position this disadvantage was intensified. Then abruptly we realized that under cover of darkness-bombs an electronic projector and search-ray had been carried to the top of the crater-rim, diagonally across and only half a mile from us. Their beams shot down, raking all our vicinity from this new angle.

I WAS on the little flying platform which sallied out as a test to attack these isolated projectors. Snap and I and one other volunteer went. He and I held the shield; Snap handled the controls.

Our exit-porte was on the lee side of the building from the hostile search-beam. We got out unobserved and sailed upward; but soon a light from the ship caught us. And the projector bolts came up. . . .

Our sortie only lasted a few minutes. To me, it was a confusion of crossing beams, with the stars overhead, the swaying little platform under me, and the shield tingling in my hands when the blasts struck us. Moments of blurred terror. . . .

The voice of the man beside me sounded in my ears: "Now, Haljan, give them one!"

We were up over the peak of the rim with the hostile projectors under us. I gauged our movement, and dropped an explosive powder bomb.

It missed. It flared with a puff on the rocks, twenty feet from where the two projectors were mounted. I saw that two helmeted figures were down there. They tried to swing their grids upward, but could not get them vertical to reach us. The ship was firing at us, but it was far away. And Grantline's search-beam was going full-power, clinging to the ship to dazzle them.

Snap circled us. As we came back I dropped another bomb. Its silent puff seemed littered with flying fragments of the two projectors and the bodies of the men.

We flew swiftly back and got in.

IT decided Grantline. For an hour past Snap and I had been urging our plan to use the gravity platforms. To

remain inactive was sure defeat now. Even if our buildings did not explode —if we thought to huddle in them, helmeted in the failing air—then Miko could readily ignore us and proceed with his loading of the treasure under our helpless gaze. He could do that now with safety—if we refused to sally out—for we could not fire our weapons through our windows.*

To remain defensive would end inevitably in our defeat. We all knew it now; it was obvious. The waiting game was Miko's—not ours! And he was playing it.

The success of our attack upon the distant isolated projectors heartened us. Yet it was a desperate offensive indeed upon which we now decided!

We prepared our little expedition at the larger of the exit portes. Miko's zed-ray was watching all our interior movements. We made a brave show of activity in our workship with abandoned ore-carts which were stored there. We got them out, started to recondition them.

It seemed to fool Miko. His zed-ray clung to the workshop, watching us. And at the distant porte we gathered the little platforms, the shields, helmets, bombs, and a few hand-projectors.

There were six platforms—three of us upon each. It left four people to remain indoors.

I NEED not describe the emotion with which Snap and I listened to Venza and Anita pleading to be allowed to accompany us. They urged it upon Grantline, and we took no part. It was too important a decision. The treasure —the life or death of all these men—hung now upon the fate of our venture. Snap and I could not intrude our personal feelings.

And the girls won. Both were undeniably more skilful at handling the midget platforms than any of us men. Two of the six platforms could be guided by them. That was a third of our little force! And of what use to go out and be defeated, leaving the girls here to meet death almost immediately afterward?

We gathered at the porte. A last minute change made Grantline order six of his men to remain guarding the buildings. The instruments—the Erentz system—all the appliances had to be attended.

It left four platforms, each with three men, with Grantline at the controls of one of them. And upon the other two of the six Venza rode with Snap, and I with Anita.

We crouched in the shadows outside the porte. So small an army, sallying out to bomb this enemy vessel or be killed in the attempt! Only sixteen of us. And thirty or so brigands.

I envisaged then this tiny Moon-crater, the scene of this battle we were waging. Struggling humans, desperately trying to kill. Alone here on this globe. Around us, the wide reaches of Lunar desolation. In all this world, every human being was gathered here, struggling to kill!

Anita drew me down to the platform. "Ready, Gregg."

The others were rising. We lifted, moved slowly out and away from the protective shadows of the building.

In a tiny queue the six little platforms sailed out over the valley toward the brigand ship.

CHAPTER XXXVI

The Battle in the Crater

GRANTLINE led us. We held about level. Five hundred feet beneath us the brigand ship lay, cradled on the rocks. When it was still a mile away from us I could see all its outline fairly clearly in the dimness. Its tiny hull-windows were now dark; but the blurred shape of the hull was visible,

* To fire a projector through the walls or windows would at once wreck the protective Erentz system. The enemy ship had pressure portes, constructed for the emission of the weapon-rays. Grantline's only weapons thus mounted were his search-beam and zed-ray.

and above it the rounded cap of dome, with a dim radiance beneath it.

We followed Grantline's platform. It was rising, drawing the others after it like a tail. I touched Anita where she lay beside me with her head half in the small hooded control-bank.

"Going too high."

She nodded, but followed the line nevertheless. It was Grantline's command.

I lay crouched, holding the inner tips of the flexible side-shields. The bottom of the platform was covered with the insulated fabric. There were two side-shields. They extended upward some two feet, flexible so that I could hold them out to see over them, or draw them up and in to cover us.

They afforded a measure of protection against the hostile rays, though just how much we were not sure. With the platform level, a bolt from beneath could not harm us unless it continued for a considerable time. But the platform, except upon direct flight, was seldom level, for it was a frail, unstable little vehicle! To handle it was more than a question of the controls. We balanced, and helped to guide it, with the movement of our bodies—shifting our weight sidewise, or back, or forward to make it dip as the controls altered the gravity-pull in its tiny plate-sections.

Like a bird, wheeling, soaring, swooping. To me, it was a precarious business.

BUT now we were in straight flight diagonally upward. The outline of the brigand ship came under us. I crouched tense, breathless; every moment it seemed that the brigands must discover us and loose their bolts.

They may have seen us for some moments before they fired. I peered over the side-shield down at our mark, then up ahead to get Grantline's firing signal. It seemed long delayed. We were almost over the ship. An added glow down there must have warned Grantline that a shot was coming. The tiny red light flared bright on his platform.

I hissed on our Benson curve-light radiance. We had been dark, but a soft glow now enveloped us. Its sheen went down to the ship to reveal us. But its curving path showed us falsely placed. I saw the little line of platforms ahead of us seem to move suddenly sidewise.

It was everyone for himself now; none of us could tell where the other platforms actually were placed or headed. Anita swooped us sharply down to avoid a possible collision.

"Gregg—?"

"Yes. I'm aiming."

I was making ready to drop the little explosive globe-bomb. Our searchlight ray at the camp, answering Grantline's signal, shot down and bathed the ship in a white glare, revealing it for our aim. Simultaneously the brigand bolts came up at us.

I held my bomb out over the shield, calculating the angle to throw it down. The brigand rays flashed around me. They were horribly close; Miko had understood our sudden visible shift and aimed, not where we appeared to be, but where we had been a moment before.

I DROPPED my bomb hastily at the glowing white ship. The touch of a hostile ray would have exploded it in my hand. I could see its blue-sizzling fuse as it fell. I saw the others also dropping from our nearby platforms. The explosions from them merged in a confusion of the white glare—and a cloud of black light-mist as the brigands out on the rocks used their occulting darkness bombs.

We swept past in a blur of leaping hostile beams. Silent battle of lights! Darkness bombs down at the ship struggling to bar our camp search-ray. The Benson radiance-rays from our passing platforms curving down to mingle with the confusion. The electronic rays sending up their bolts. . . .

Our platforms dropped some ten dynamitrine bombs in that first passage

over the ship. As we sped by, I dimmed the Benson's radiance. I peered. We had not hit the ship. Or if we had, the damage was inconclusive. But on the rocks I could see a pile of ore-carts scattered—broken wreckage, in which the litter of two or three projectors seemed strewn. And the gruesome deflated forms of several helmeted figures. Others seemed to be running, scattering—hiding in the rocks and pit-holes. Twenty brigands at least were outside the ship. Some were running over toward the base of our camp-ledge. The darkness bombs were spreading like a curtain over the valley floor; but it seemed that some of the figures were dragging their projectors away.

We sailed off toward the opposite crater-rim. I remember passing over the broken wreckage of Grantline's little space-ship, the *Comet*. Miko's bolts momentarily had vanished. We had hit some of his outside projectors; the others were abandoned, or being dragged to safer positions.

AFTER a mile we wheeled and went back. I suddenly realized that only four platforms were in the re-formed line ahead of us. One was missing! I saw it now, wavering down, close over the ship. A bolt leaped up diagonally from a distant angle on the rocks and caught the disabled platform. It fell, whirling, glowing red—disappeared into the blur of darkness like a bit of heated metal plunged into water.

One out of six of our platforms already lost! Three men of our little force gone!

But Grantline led us desperately back. Anita caught his signal to break our line. The five platforms scattered, dipping and wheeling like frightened birds—blurring shapes, shifting unnaturally in flight as the Benson curve-angles were altered.

Anita now took our platform in a long swoop downward. Her tense, murmured voice sounded in my ears:

"Hold off; I'll take us low."

A melee. Passing platform shapes. The darting bolts, crossing like ancient rapiers. Falling blue points of fuse-lights as we threw our bombs.

Down in a swoop. Then rising. Away, and then back. This silent warfare of lights! It seemed that around me must be bursting a pandemonium of sound. Yet I heard nothing. Silent, blurred melee, infinitely frightening. A bolt struck us, clung for an instant; but we weathered it. The light was blinding. Through my gloves I could feel the tingle of the over-charged shield as it caught and absorbed the hostile bombardment. Under me the platform seemed heated. My little Erentz motors ran with ragged pulse. I got too much oxygen; my head roared with it. Spots danced before my closed eyes. Then not enough oxygen. I was dully smothering. . . .

Then the bolt was gone. I found us soaring upward, horribly tilted. I shifted over.

"Anita! Anita, dear!"

"Yes, Gregg. All right."

THE melee went on. The brigand ship and all its vicinity was enveloped in darkness-mist now—a turgid sable curtain, made more dense by the dissipating heavy fumes of our exploding bombs which settled low over the ship and the rocks nearby. The searchlight from our camp strove futilely to penetrate the cloud.

Our platforms were separated. One went by high over us; I saw another dart close beneath my shield.

"God, Anita!"

"Too close! I did not mean that—I didn't see it."

Almost a collision.

"Oh, Gregg, haven't we broken the ship's dome yet?"

It seemed not. I had dropped nearly all my bombs. This could not go on much longer. Had it been only five minutes? Only that? Reason told me so, yet it seemed an eternity of horror.

Another swoop. My last bomb. Anita had brought us into position to fling it.

But I could not. A bolt stabbed up from the gloom and caught us. We huddled, pulling the shields up and over us.

Blurred darkness again. Too much to the side now. I had to wait while Anita swung us back. Then we seemed too high.

We swooped. But not too low! Down in the darkness mist we would immediately have lost direction, and crashed.

I waited with my last bomb. The other platforms were occasionally dropping them; I had been too hasty, too prodigal.

Had we broken the ship's dome with a direct hit? It seemed not.

THE brigands were occasionally sending up catapulted light-flares. They came from positions on the rocks outside the ship. They mounted in lazy curves and burst over us. The concealing darkness, broken only by the flares of our explosions, enveloped the enemy. Our camp search-light was still struggling with it. But overhead, where the few little platforms were circling and swooping, the flares gave an almost continuous glare. It was dazzling, blinding. Even through the smoked pane which I adjusted to my visor I could not stand it.

But there were thoughts of comparative dimness. In a patch where the Earthlight struck through the darkness of the rocks, I saw another of our fallen platforms! Snap and Venza! Dear God. . . .

It was not they, but three figures of our men. One was dead. Two had survived the fall. They stood up, staggering. And in that instant, before the turgid black curtain closed over them, I saw two brigands come rushing. Their hand projectors stabbed at close range. Our men crumpled and fell.

And now I saw why probably we had never yet hit the ship.

Its outline was revealed. "Now, Gregg—can you fling it from here?"

We were in position again. I flung my last missile, watched its light as it dropped. On the dome-roof two of Miko's men were crouching. My bomb was truly aimed—perhaps one of the few in all our bombardment which would have landed directly on the dome-roof. But the waiting marksmen fired at it with short-range heat projectors and exploded it harmlessly while it was still above them.

We swung up and away. I saw, high above us, Grantline's platform, recognizing its red signal light. There seemed a lull. The enemy fire had died down to only a very occasional bolt. In the confusion of my whirling impressions I wondered if Miko were in distress? Not that! We had not hit his ship; perhaps we had done little damage indeed! It was we who were in distress. Two of our platforms had fallen—two out of six. Or more, of which I did not know.

I SAW one rising off to the side of us. Grantline was over us. Well, we were at least three. And then I saw the fourth.

"Grantline is calling us up, Gregg."

"Yes."

Grantline's signal-light was summoning us from the attack. He was a thousand or two thousand feet above.

I was suddenly shocked with horror. The search-ray from our camp abruptly vanished! Anita wheeled us to face the distant ledge. The camp-lights showed, and over one of the buildings was a distress light!

Had the crack in our front wall broken, threatening explosion of all the buildings? The wild thoughts swept me. But it was not that. I could see light-stabs from the cliff outside the main building. Miko had dared to send some of his men to attack our almost abandoned camp!

Grantline realized it. His red helmet-light semaphored the command to follow him. His platform soared away, heading for the camp, with the other two behind him.

Anita lifted us to follow. But I checked her.

"No! Off to the right, across the valley."

"But Gregg!"

"Do as I say, Anita."

She swung us diagonally away from both the camp and the brigand ship. I prayed that we might not be noticed by the brigands.

"Anita, listen: I've an idea!"

The attack on the brigand ship was over. It lay enveloped in the darkness of the powder-gas cloud and its own darkness bombs. But it was uninjured.

Miko had answered us with our own tactics. He had practically unmanned the ship, no doubt, and had sent his men to our buildings. The fight had shifted. But I was now without ammunition, save for two or three small bullet projectors.

Of what use for our platform to rush back? Miko expected that. His attack on the camp was undoubtedly made just for that purpose.

"Anita, if we can get down on the rocks somewhere near the ship, and creep up on it unobserved in that blackness. . . ."

I MIGHT be able to open its manual hull-lock, rip it open and let the air out. If I could get into its pressure chamber and unseal the inner slide. . . .

"It would wreck the ship, Anita, exhaust all its air. Shall we try it?"

"Whatever you say, Gregg."

We seemed to be unobserved. We skimmed close to the valley floor, a mile from the ship. We headed slowly toward it, sailing low over the rocks.

Then we landed, left the platform.

"Let me go first, Anita."

I held a bullet projector. With slow, cautious leaps, we advanced. Anita was behind me. I had wanted to leave her with the platform, but she would not stay. And to be with me seemed at least equally safe.

The rocks were deserted. I thought there was very little chance that any of the enemy would lurk here. We clambered over the pitted, scarred surface. The higher crags, etched with Earthlight, stood like sentinels in the gloom.

The brigand ship with its surrounding darkness was not far from us. Then we entered the cloud.

No one was out here. We passed the wreckage of broken projectors, and gruesome, shattered human forms.

We prowled closer. The hull of the ship loomed ahead of us. All dark.

We came at last close against the sleek metal hull-side, slid along it toward where I was sure the manual-porte was located.

Abruptly I realized that Anita was not behind me! Then I saw her at a little distance, struggling in the grip of a giant helmeted figure! The brigand lifted her—turned, and, carrying her, ran the other way!

I did not dare fire. I bounded after them along the hull-side, around under the curve of the pointed bow, down along the other side.

I had mistaken the hull-porte location. It was here. The running, bounding figure reached it, slid the panel. I was only fifty feet away—not much more than a single leap. I saw Anita being shoved into the pressure lock. The Martian flung himself after her.

I fired at him, but missed. I came with a rush. And as I reached the porte it slid closed in my face, barring me!

CHAPTER XXXVII

In the Pressure Lock

WITH puny fists I pounded the panel. A small pane in it was transparent. Within the lock I could see the blurred figures of Anita and her captor—and, it seemed, another figure. The lock was some ten feet square, with a low ceiling. It glowed with a dim tube-light.

I pounded, thumped with futile, silent blows. The mechanism was here to open this manual; but it was now clasped from within and would not operate.

A few seconds only, while I stood there in a panic of confusion, raging to get in. This disaster had come so suddenly! I did not plan; I had no thought save to batter my way in and rescue Anita. I recall that I beat on the glassite pane with my bullet projector until the weapon was bent and useless; and I flung it with a wild, despairing rage at my feet.

They were letting the ship's air-pressure into this lock. Soon they would open the inner panel, step into the secondary chamber—and in a moment more would be within the ship's hull corridor. Anita, lost to me!

The outer panel suddenly opened! I had lunged against it with my shoulder; the giant figure inside slid it. I was taken by surprise! I half-fell inward.

Huge arms went around me. The goggled face of the helmet peered into mine.

"So it is you, Haljan! I thought I recognized that little device over your helmet-bracket. And there is my little Anita, come back to me again!"

Miko!

THIS was he. His great bloated arms encircling me, bending me backward, holding me almost helpless. I saw over his shoulder that Anita was clutched in the grip of another helmeted figure. No giant, but tall for an Earthman—almost as tall as myself. Then the tube-light in the room illumined the visor. I saw the face, recognized it. Moa!

I gasped, "So — I've — got you, Miko—"

"Got me!" You're a fool to the last, Gregg Haljan! A fool to the last! But you were always a fool."

I could scarcely move in his grip. My arms were pinned. As he slowly bent me backward, I wound my legs around one of his; it was as unyielding as a steel pillar. He had closed the outer panel; the air-pressure in the lock was rising. I could feel it against my suit.

My helmeted head was being forced backward; Miko's left arm held me. In his gloved right hand as it came slowly up over my throat I saw a knife-blade, its naked, sharpened metal glistening blue-white in the light from overhead.

I seized his wrist. But my puny strength could not hold him. The knife, against all my efforts, came slowly down.

A moment of this slow deadly combat—the end of everything for me.

I was aware of the helmeted figure of Moa casting off Anita—and then the two girls leaping together upon Miko. It threw him off his balance, and my hanging weight made him topple forward. He took a step to recover himself; his hand with the knife was flung up with an instinctive, involuntary balancing gesture. And as it came swiftly down again, I forced the knife-blade to graze his throat. Its point caught in the fabric of his suit.

His startled oath jangled in my ears. The girls were clawing at him; we were all four scrambling, swaying. With despairing strength I twisted at his waist. The knife went into his throat. I plunged it deeper.

HIS suit went flabby. He crumpled over me and fell, knocking me to the floor. His voice, with the horrible gurgling rasp of death in it, rattled my ear-grids.

"Not such a fool—are you, Haljan—"

Moa's helmeted head was close over us. I saw that she had seized the knife, jerked it from her brother's throat. She leaped backward, waving it.

I twisted from under Miko's inert, lifeless body. As I got to my feet, Anita flung herself to shield me. Moa was across the lock, backed up against its wall. The knife in her hand went up. She stood for the briefest instant regarding Anita and me holding each other. I thought that she was about to leap upon us; but before I could move, the knife came down and plunged into her breast. She fell forward, her gro-

tesque helmet striking the floor-grid almost at my feet.

"Gregg!"

"She's dead."

"No! She moved! Get her helmet off! There's enough air here."

My helmet pressure-indicator was faintly buzzing to show that a safe pressure was in the room. I shut off Moa's Erentz motors, unfastened her helmet, raised it off. We gently turned her body. She lay with closed eyes, her pallid face blue-cast from the light in the lock.

With our own helmets off, we knelt over her.

"Oh, Gregg, is she dead?"

"No. Not quite—but dying."

"Oh Gregg, I don't want her to die! She was trying to help you there at the last."

She opened her eyes; the film of death was glazing them. But she saw me, recognized me.

"Gregg—"

"Yes, Moa, I'm here."

HER livid lips were faintly drawn in a smile. I'm—so glad—you took the helmets off, Gregg. I'm—going—you know."

"No!"

"Going—back to Mars—to rest with the fire-makers—where I came from. I was thinking—maybe you would kiss me, Gregg—?"

Anita gently pushed me down. I pressed the white, faintly smiling lips with mine. She sighed, and it ended with a rattle in her throat.

"Thank you—Gregg—closer—I can't talk so loudly—"

One of her gloved hands struggled to touch me, but she had no strength and it fell back. Her words were the faintest of whispers:

"There was no use living—without your love. But I want you to see—now—that a Martian girl can—die with a smile—"

Her eyelids fluttered down; it seemed that she sighed and then was not breathing. But on her livid face the faint smile still lingered to show me how a Martian girl could die.

We had forgotten for the moment where we were. As I glanced up I saw that through the inner panel, past the secondary lock, the ship's hull-corridor was visible, and along its length a group of Martians were advancing! They saw us, and came running.

"Anita! Look! We've got to get out of here!"

The secondary lock was open to the corridor. We jammed on our helmets. The unhelmeted brigands by then were fumbling at the inner panel. I pulled at the lever of the outer panel. The brigands were hurrying, thinking they could be in time to stop me. One of the more cautious fumbled with a helmet.

"Anita, run! Try and keep your feet."

I slid the outer panel and pushed at Anita. Simultaneously the brigands opened the inner porte.

The air came with a tempestuous rush. A blast through the inner porte—through the little pressure-lock—a wild rush out to the airless Moon. All the air in the ship madly rushing to escape. . . .

Like feathers we were blown with it. I recall an impression of the hurtling brigand figures and swift-flying rocks under me. A silent crash as I struck.

Then soundless, empty blackness.

CHAPTER XXXVIII

Triumph!

"IS he conscious? We'd better take him back, get his helmet off."

"It's over. We can get back now. Venza, dear, we've won—it's over."

"He hears us!"

"Gregg!"

"He hears us—he's all right!"

I opened my eyes. I lay on the rocks. Over my helmet other helmets were peering, and faint, familiar voices mingled with the roaring in my ears.

"—back to the camp and get his helmet off."

"Are his motors smooth? Keep them right, Snap—he must have good air."

I seemed unhurt. But Anita. . . .

She was here. "Gregg, dear one!"

Anita safe! All four of us here on the Earthlit rocks, close outside the brigand ship.

"Anita!"

She held me, lifted me. I was uninjured. I could stand; I staggered up and stood swaying. The brigand ship, a hundred feet away, loomed dark and silent, a lifeless hulk, already empty of air, drained in that mad blast outward. Like the wreck of the *Planetara*—a dead, pulseless hulk already.

We four stood together, triumphant. The battle was over. The brigands were worsted, almost the last man of them dead or dying. No more than ten or fifteen had been available for that final assault upon the camp buildings. Miko's last strategy. I think perhaps he had intended, with his few remaining men, to take the ship and make away, deserting his fellows.

All on the ship, caught unhelmeted by the explosion, were dead long since.

I stood listening to Snap's triumphant account. It had not been difficult for the flying platforms to hunt down the attacking brigands on the open rocks. We had only lost one more platform.

Human hearts beat sometimes with very selfish emotions. It was a triumphant ending for us, and we hardly gave a thought that half of Grantline's little group had perished.

We huddled on Snap's platform. It rose, lurching drunkenly, barely carrying us.

And as we headed for the Grantline buildings, where still the rift in the wall had not quite broken, there came the final triumph. Miko had been aware of it, and knew he had lost. Grantline's search-light leaped upward, swept the sky, caught its sought-for object—a huge silver cylinder, bathed brightly in the white search-beam glare.

The police-ship from Earth!

CHAPTER XXXIX

My Exit

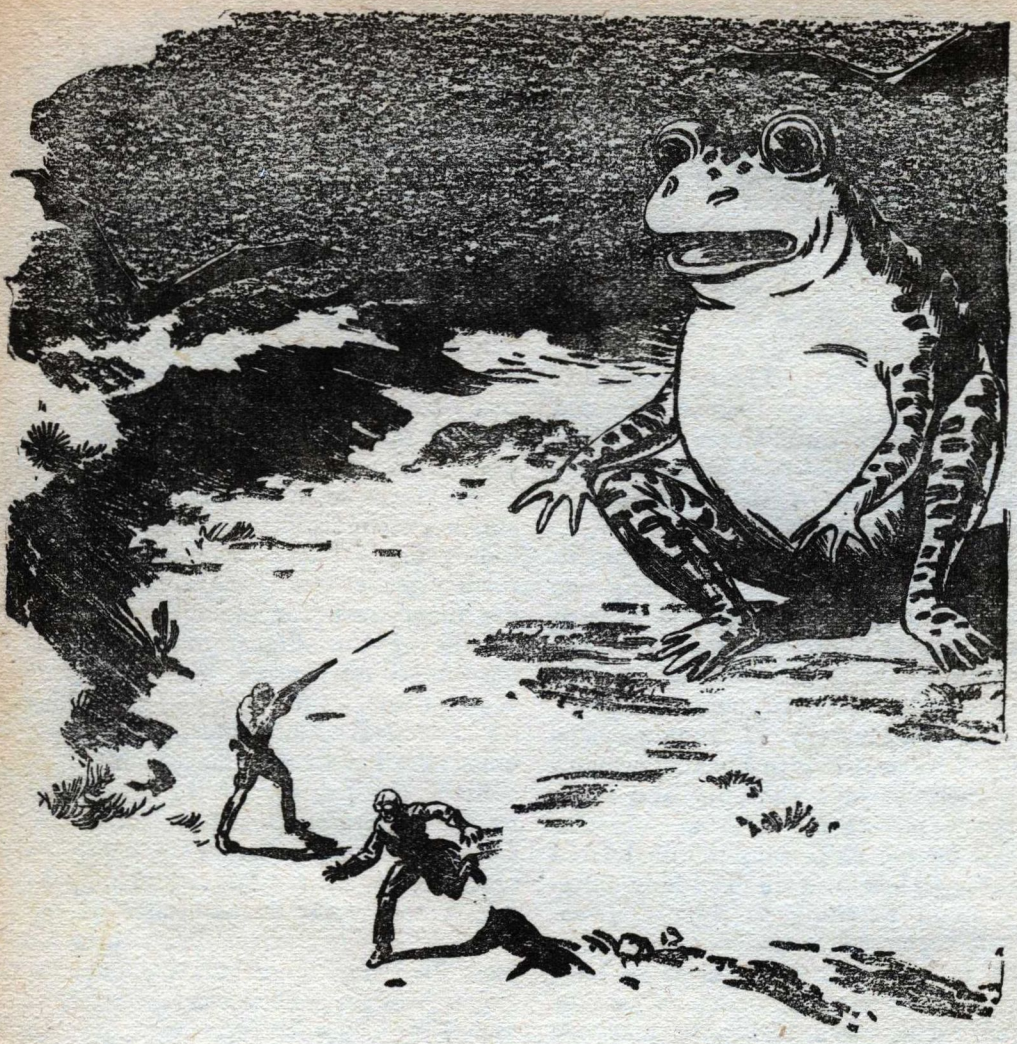
MY narrative lies now in this permanently recorded form before you, and I prepare my exit bow with the humble hope that I may have given you pleasure. If so, I do beg you to tell me of it. There are some who already have flashed their approval of my discs; I thank them most earnestly and gratefully.

My errors of recording unquestionably are many; and for them I ask your indulgence. There have been, I can readily see, errors of omission. I have not mentioned, for instance, the final rescue of the *Planetara's* marooned passengers on the asteroid. You will bear with me, since the disc-space has its technical limitations, that such omissions have been unavoidable.

Since the passage of the Earth-law by the Federated Board of Education, forcing narrative fiction to cling so closely to sworn facts of actual happening, I need offer no assurance of the truth of my narrative. My witnesses have filed their corroborating declarations. Indeed, the *Planetara's* wreck and the brigands' attack upon the Moon-treasure were given the widest news-casters' publicity, as you all know. Yet I, who was unwittingly involved in those stirring events, may have added a more personal note, making the scenes more vivid to your imagination. I have tried to do that. I do hope that in some measure you will think I have succeeded.

There are many foolish girls now who say that they would like to know Gregg Haljan. They doubtless would be very disappointed. I really crave no more publicity. And the girls of all the Universe have no charm for me. There is only one, for me—an Earth-girl.

I think that life has very beautifully endowed me with its blessings.



Giants of the Ray

By Tom Curry

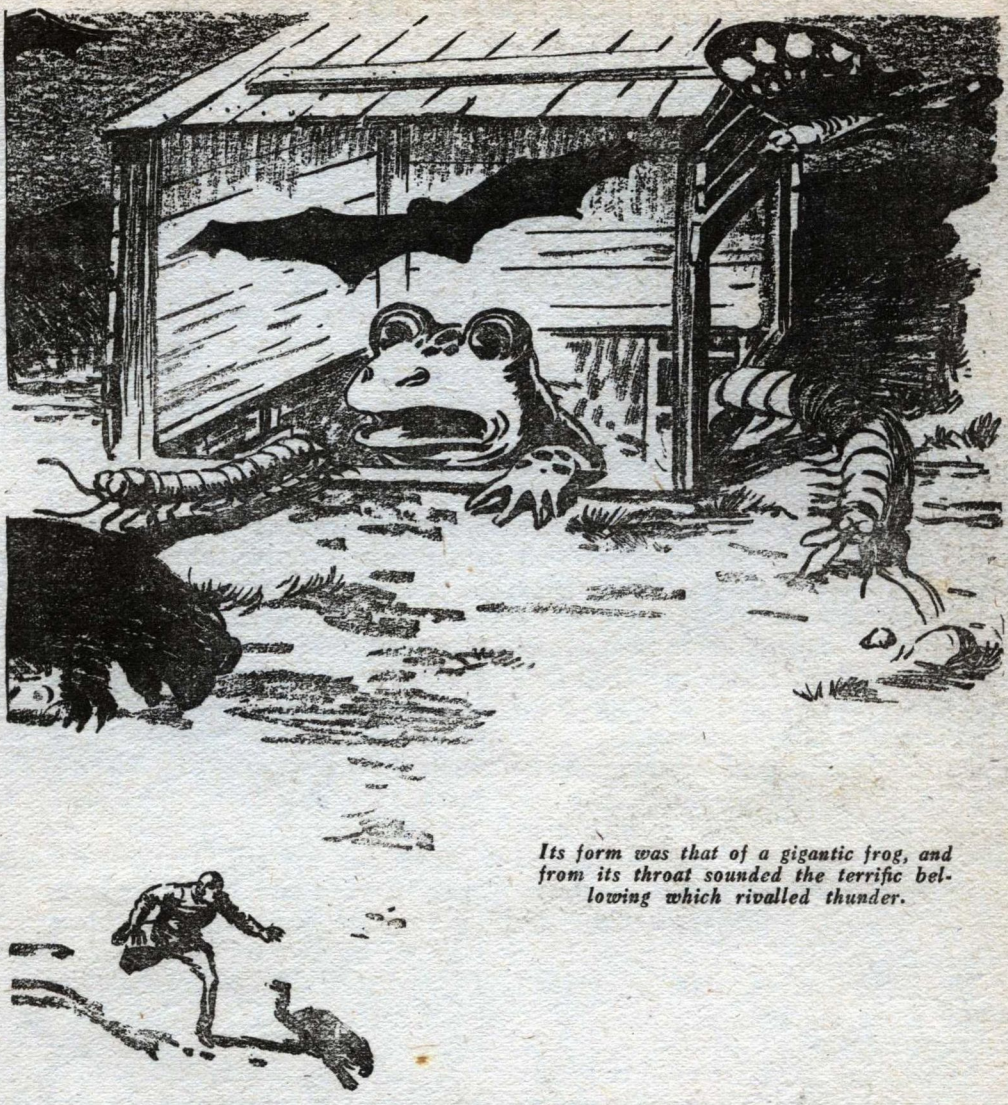
"I TELL you I'm not crazy," insisted the tall man. "Durkin, they got a big mine."

Bill Durkin laughed roughly, and sneered openly at his partner, Frank Maget. "G'wan, you're drunk."

"Well, I was last night," admitted Maget. "But I'd slept it off this morning. I was lying under that table in the Portuguee's, and when I opened my eyes, there were these three birds sitting near me. They hadn't spotted me. I heard 'em talking of wealth, how their mine was of unbelievable richness and greater than any other deposit in the world. Well, that means something, don't it?"

"That's all right," said Durkin. "But whoever saw a cricket fifteen inches long?"

Madly the three raced for their lives up the shaft of the radium mine, for behind them poured a stream of hideous monsters—giants of the ray!



Its form was that of a gigantic frog, and from its throat sounded the terrific bellowing which rivalled thunder.

"Listen. There were three of these guys. One was a hell of a looking fellow: his face was piebald, with purple spots. His skin was bleached and withered, and one eye looked like a pearl collar button! They called him Professor, too, Professor Gurlone. Well, he takes out this damn cricket thing and it was sort of reddish purple but alive, and as long as your forearm. This professor guy says his son had taken an ordinary cricket and made it grow into the one he had. But the mine was what interested me. I kept my mouth shut and my ears open, and it's in the Matto Grosso. May be emeralds, diamonds, or gold. Boy, I'm heading for it, right now. The old guy's going back to-morrow, get me?"

"It's a lot of bunk," growled Durkin, who was stout and red of countenance.

"Yeh? Well, Otto Ulrich don't put fifty thousand into bunk."

Durkin whistled. "You mean the German loosened up that much?" he asked, and his eyes showed interest.

"Sure. He paid this Gurlone fifty thousand dollars—credit, of course."

"Well—maybe there's something in the mine story. But boy, you were drunk when you saw that cricket. No cricket ever grew that big. You always see things when you get too much rum in you."

"The hell you say," cried Maget. "I saw it, I tell you!"

DURKIN feigned elaborate politeness. "Oh, all right, Frank. Have it your own way. You saw a cricket that big and this Gurlone feller took a couple of pink elephants out of his pocket to pay the check. Sure, I believe you."

But money never failed to attract the two tropical tramps. They were looking for trouble, not work, and the idea of a raid on a rich mine in the Matto Grosso was just what they would enjoy.

An hour later, they had cornered a small, inoffensive peon named Juan. Juan, Maget and Durkin had discovered, had come out of the wilderness with Professor Gurlone, the strange looking gentleman who spoke of a fabulously wealthy mine and commanded checks for fifty thousand dollars from a reputable banking firm. Such a man was worth watching.

The two rascals were expert at pumping the little half-breed. They knew peons, and the first thing that happened was that Durkin had slipped Juan several dollars and had pressed a large glass of whiskey on the little man.

The conversation was in broken English and Spanish.

"Quien sabe?"

Durkin and Maget had this phrase flung at them often during the course of the talk with Juan, and there were many elaborate shrugs.

There was a mine, way back in the Matto Grosso, said Juan. He thought it might contain silver: there had been the shaft of an old mine there. But now they were deep down in the ground, digging out reddish brown ore, and the cavern smoked and smelled so badly a man could work but an hour or two before being relieved. But the pay was very high. Also, Juan, in his rambling way, spoke of grotesque animals. What were these creatures like? asked Durkin. Then came a shrug, and Juan said they were like nothing else on earth.

DURKIN discounted the part of the story having to do with the strange animals. He thought it was peon superstition. But now he was sure there was a rich mine to be raided.

"It's a tough part of the Grosso," he said, turning to Maget.

"Sure. Hard to carry enough water and suppiles to make it. Say, Juan, who was that big Portuguee with Professor Gurlone? He's blind, ain't he? His eyes were white as milk, and his face tanned black as river mud. Surely is a great big guy, and tough looking, too."

Durkin drummed on the table, considering the matter, while Juan spoke of the big Portuguese. The swarthy man with the colorless blind eyes was Espinosa, former owner of the mine. He had sold part of his claim to the Gurlones, but had remained with them as an assistant. Though blind, he knew the depths of the mine and could feel his way about, and direct the peons in their labors.

"I've got it," said Durkin, turning back to Juan and Maget. "Juan, it's up to you. You've got to blaze the trail so we can follow you in. And you can steal food and cache it for use on the way, see? We'll come along a day or so after the Gurlones."

It took some persuading to make Juan consent to their plot, but the peon yielded at last to money and the promise of part of the spoils. "Maybe you can steal Gurlone's samples and they'll give us a line on what he's up to out there. Whether it's emeralds or diamonds or gold that they're taking out of the mine."

Juan was stupid and superstitious, like most of his fellows. He had obeyed orders, digging out the red ore, and that was all he knew. But prompted by the two tramps, he was ready for trouble, too.

Juan told them that Professor Gurlone carried a small lead case which he seemed to prize greatly.

"Get it, then," ordered Durkin.

The two tramps saw Gurlone's party start on the morrow. There were many cases of supplies loaded into launches, some marked Glass, Acids, and so on. Then there were boxes of food and various things needed in a jungle camp.

JUAN, their tool, was working with the other peons, and at ten o'clock in the morning the launches set out, pushing into the current of the Madeira.

Old Gurlone, of the livid face, was in charge of one boat, and the gigantic Portuguese, with his colorless eyes and burned complexion, sat beside him.

That night, the two tropical tramps stole a small boat with a one-cylinder motor, and started up the river.

It was a hard journey, but they were used to river and jungle work, and the object they had in view was enough to make them discount trouble. They speculated upon what manner of treasure it was they would find in the cavern of the Matto Grosso mine. It might be precious stones, it might be gold. Certainly it was something very valuable.

They carried little supplies, but they were heavily armed. For food, they might hunt and also depend on the caches left by their friend, Juan the peon.

Three hundred miles from Manaos, they came to the landing where old Gurlone had unloaded his boats. The two tramps drew their own craft up on shore a quarter of a mile away, keeping out of sight, and hid the boat in dense brush. Then they crept up the river bank, keeping out of sight of the boatmen, who were preparing for the return voyage, and cut into the jungle so as to strike the trail of the caravan ahead.

For several hours they followed the path easily. They found palm trees blazed with new marks, and these they were sure their friend Juan had left for them. But the trail was easy to keep without these. The supplies had been loaded on burros, which had been awaiting the boats.

That night, they camped beside a small stream. They were but twenty-four hours behind Professor Gurlone and his party, and the food Juan had cached for them was in good condition.

THEY were up at daybreak, and pressed on, armed to the teeth and ready for a fight.

"What's that?" said Durkin, stopping so suddenly that Maget ran into him.

They had been walking at a swift pace along the jungle path, the giant trees forming a canopy overhead. Monkeys screamed at them, birds flitted a hundred feet above them in the roof of the forest.

The sun beat on the jungle top, but few rays lightened the gloom beneath.

From up ahead sounded a frightful scream, followed by a long drawn out wailing. Maget glanced at Durkin, and the latter shrugged, and pressed on. But he gripped his rifle tightly, for the cries were eery.

From time to time the two stopped to catch better the direction of the wails. At last, they located the spot where the injured person lay.

It was under a great bombax tree, and on the shaded ground writhed a man. The two stopped, horrified at the squirming figure. The man was tearing at his face with his nails, and his countenance was bloody with long scratches.

He cursed and moaned in Spanish, and Durkin, approaching closer, recognized Juan the peon.

"Hey, Juan, what the hell's the matter? A snake bite you?"

The bronzed face of the sturdy little peon writhed in agony. He screamed in answer, he could not talk coherently. He mumbled, he groaned, but they could not catch his words.

At his side lay a small lead container, and closer, as though he had dropped it after extracting it from its case, lay a tube some six inches in length. It

was a queer tube, for it seemed to be filled with smoky, pallid worms of light that writhed even as Juan writhed.

"What's the trouble?" asked Durkin gruffly, for he was alarmed at the behavior of the peon. It seemed to both tramps that the man must have gone mad.

THEY kept back from him, with ready guns. Juan shrieked, and it sounded as though he said he was burning up, in a great fire.

Suddenly the peon staggered to his feet; as he pushed himself up, his hands gripped the tube, and he clawed at his face.

Perplexity and horror were writ on the faces of the two tramps. Maget was struck with pity for the unfortunate peon, who seemed to be suffering the tortures of the damned. He was not a bad man, was Maget, but rather a weakling who had a run of bad luck and was under the thumb of Durkin, a really hard character. Durkin, while astounded at the actions of Juan, showed no pity.

Maget stepper forward, to try and comfort Juan; the peon struck out at him, and whirled around. But a few yards away was the bank of the stream, and Juan crashed into a black palm set with spines, caromed off it, and fell face downward into the water. The glass tube was smashed and the pieces fell into the stream.

"God, he must be blind," groaned Maget. "Poor guy, I've got to save him."

"The hell with him," growled Durkin. He grasped his partner's arm and stared curiously down at the dying peon.

"Let go, I'll pull him out," said Maget, trying to wrench away from Durkin.

"He's done for. Why worry about a peon?" said Durkin. "Look at those fish!"

The muddy waters of the stream had parted, and dead fish were rising about the body of Juan. But not about the dying man so much as close to the spot where the broken tube had fallen. White bellies up, the fish died as though by magic.

"Let's—let's get the hell back to Manoas, Bill," said Maget in a sickly voice. "This—this is too much for me."

A NAMELESS fear, which had been with Maget ever since the beginning of the venture, was growing more insistent.

"What?" cried Durkin. "Turn back now? The hell you say! That damn peon got into a fight with somebody and maybe got bit by a snake later. We'll go on and get that treasure."

"But—but what made those fish come up that way?" said Maget, his brows creased in perplexity.

Durkin shrugged. "What's the difference? We're O. K., ain't we?"

In spite of the stout man's bravado, it was evident that he, too, was disturbed at the strange happenings. He kept voicing aloud the question in his mind; what was in the queer tube?

But he forced Maget to go in. Without Juan, the peon, to leave them caches of food on the trail, they would have a difficult time getting provender, but both were trained jungle travelers and could find fruit and shoot enough game to keep them going.

Day after day they marched on, not far from the rear of the party before them. They took care to keep off Gurlone's heels, for they did not wish their presence to be discovered.

When they had been on the journey, which led them east, for four days, the two rascals came to a waterless plateau, which stretched before them in dry perspective. Before they came to the end of this, they knew what real thirst was, and their tongues were black in their mouths before they caught the curling smoke of fires in the valley where they knew the mine must be.

"That's the mine," gasped Durkin, pointing to the smoke.

THE sun was setting in golden splendor at their backs; they crept forward, using great boulders and piles of reddish earth, strange to them, for cover. Finally they reached the trail which led to the hills overlooking the valley, and a panorama spread before them which amazed them because of its elaborateness.

It seemed more like a stage scene than a wilderness picture. Straight ahead of them, as they lay flat on their stomachs and peered at the big camp, yawned the black mouth of a large cavern. This, they were sure, was the mine itself. Close by this mouth stood a stone hut. It was clear that this building had something to do with the ore, perhaps a refining plant, Durkin suggested.

There were long barracks for the peons, inside a barbed wire enclosure, and they could see the little men lounging now about campfires, where frying food was being prepared. Also, there was a long, low building with many windows in it, and houses for supplies and for the use of the owners of the camp.

"Looks like they were ready in case of a fight," said Durkin at last. "That fence around the peons looks like they might be havin' trouble."

"Some camp," breathed Maget.

"We got to find somethin' to drink," said Durkin. "Come on."

They worked their way about the rim of the valley, and in doing so caught glimpses of Professor Gurlone, the elderly man they had spotted in Manaos, and also saw the big Portuguese with his sightless eyes.

At the other side of the valley, they came on a spring which flowed to the east and disappeared under ground farther down.

"Funny water, ain't it?" said Durkin, lying down on his stomach to suck up the milky water.

But they were not in any mood to be particular about the fluids they drank. The long dry march across the arid lands separating the camp from the rest of the world had taken all moisture from their throats.

MAGET, drinking beside his partner, saw that the water glinted and sparkled, though the sun was below the opposite rim of the valley. It seemed that greenish, silvery specks danced in the milky fluid.

"Boy, that's good," Durkin finally found time to say, "I feel like I could fight a wildcat."

The water did, indeed, impart a feeling of exhilaration to the two tramps. They crept up close to the roof of the parallel shaft which they had seen from the other side of the valley, and looked down into the camp again.

Professor Gurlone of the livid face and Espinosa the blind Portuguese, were talking to a big man whose golden beard shone in the last rays of the sun.

"That's the old bird's son," said Durkin, "that Juan told us about. Young Gurlone."

A rumbling, pleasant laugh floated on the breeze, issuing from the big youth's throat. The wind was their way, now, and the valley breathed forth an unpleasant odor of chemicals and tainted meat.

"Funny place," said Maget. "Say, I got a hell of a headache, Bill."

"So've I," grunted Durkin. "Maybe that water ain't as good as it seemed at first."

THEY lay in a small hollow, watching the activity of the camp. The peons were in their pen, and it was evident that they were being watched by the owners of the camp.

As purple twilight fell across the strange land, the two tramps began to notice the dull sounds which came to their ears from time to time.

"That's funny thunder," said Maget nervously. "If I didn't know it *was* thunder, I'd swear some big frogs were around here."

"Oh, hell. Maybe it's an earthquake," said Durkin irritatedly. "For God's sake, quit your bellyachin'. You've

done nothin' but whine ever since we left Juan."

"Well, who could blame me—" began Maget. He broke off suddenly, the pique in his voice turned to a quiver of fear, as he grasped Durkin's arm. "Oh, look," he gasped.

Durkin, seeing his partner's eyes staring at a point directly behind him, leaped up and scrambled away, thinking that a snake must be about to strike him.

He turned round when he felt he was far enough away, and saw that the ground was moving near the spot where he had been lying.

The earth was heaving, as though ploughed by a giant share; a blunt, purplish head, which seemed too fearful to be really alive, showed through the broken ground, and a worm began to draw its purple length from the depths. It was no snake, but a gigantic angleworm, and as it came forth, foot after foot, the two watched with glazed eyes.

Maget swallowed. "I've seen 'em two feet long," he said. "But never like that."

Durkin, however, when he realized that the loathsome creature could not see them and was creeping blindly towards them with its ugly, fat body creasing and elongating, picked up rocks and began to destroy the monstrous worm. He cursed as he worked.

Dull red blood spattered them, and a fetid odor from the gashes caused them to retch, but they finally cut the thing in two, and then they moved away from there.

THE dull rumblings beneath them frightened Maget, and Durkin, too, though the latter tried to brazen it out.

"Come on, it's gettin' dark. We can take a look in their mine now."

Maget, whimpering, followed. The booming sounds were increasing.

But Durkin slipped down the hillside, and Maget followed into the valley. They crept past the stone shack, which they noticed was padlocked heavily.

Durkin stopped suddenly, and cursed. "I've cut my foot," he said. "These damn shoes are gone, all right, from that march. But come on, never mind."

They crept to the mouth of the cavern and peered in. "Ugh," said Maget.

He drew back with a shudder. The floor of the mine was covered with a grey slush, in which were seething white masses of slugs weaving in the slime. A powerful, rotten odor breathed in their faces, as though they stood in the mouth of a great giant.

"Ah!" yelled Durkin, throwing his arms across his face.

The greenish, ghostly light which emanated from the slime was weaker than moonlight, just enough to see by; a vast shadow hovered above their heads, as though a gigantic bat flew there. The sweep and beat of great wings drove them back, and they fled in terror from such awful corruption.

But the flying monster, with a wing spread of eight feet, dashed past them, and silhouetted against the rising moon like a goblin. Then came another, and finally a flock of the big birds.

Durkin and Maget ran away, passing the stone house which stood near the cavern's mouth. The booming sounds from the bowels of the earth filled their ears now, and it was not thunder; no, it issued from the depths of the mine.

"We—we got to get somethin' to eat," said Durkin, as they paused near one of the shacks, in which shone a light.

SOUNDS of voices came from the interior. They crept closer, and listened outside the window. Inside, they could see Espinosa, Gurlone senior, and the big youth with the golden beard, Gurlone junior.

"Yes, father," the young man was saying. "I believe we had better leave, at once. It's getting dangerous. I've reached the five million mark now, with the new process, and it is ready to

work with or sell, just as we wish."

"Hear that?" whispered Durkin triumphantly. "Five million!"

"It's all ready, in the stone house," said young Gurlone.

"Why should we leave now?" said old Gurlone, his livid face working. "Now, when we are just at the point of success in our great experiments? So far, while we have struck many creatures of abnormal growth, still, we have overcome them."

"Well, father, there is something in the mine now which makes it too dangerous to work. That is, until they are put out of the way. You can hear them now."

The three inside the shack listened, and so did Durkin and Maget. The booming sounds swelled louder and the earth of the valley shook.

"I t'ink we better go," said Espinosa gruffly. "I agree with your son, Professor."

"No, no. We can conquer this, what ever it is."

"You see, father, while you were away, we broke through into a natural cavern, an underground river. It was then that the trouble started. You know the effect of the stuff on the insects and birds. It enlarged a cricket one hundred times. You saw that yourself. Six of the peons have disappeared —they didn't run away, either. They went down the shaft and never came back."

"Oh, they probably fell into the water and drowned," said old Gurlone impatiently. "Even if they did not, we can kill anything with these large bore rifles."

"We'd better pull out and let it alone for a while," said young Gurlone gravely. "The peons have been trying to bolt for several days. They'd be gone now if I hadn't penned them in and electrified the fence."

MAGET put his hand on his friend's shoulder. "I'm starving," he whispered.

Durkin nodded, and they turned away, toward what they had marked as a supply shack. They heard a low murmur from the peons' pen, as they began to break off the hasps of the lock which held the door of the storehouse.

They got inside with little trouble, and began to feel about in the dark for food. They located biscuits and canned goods which they split open, and these they wolfed hungrily, listening carefully for sounds from outside.

"Here they come," said Maget, gripping Durkin's arm.

They looked out the window of the supply shack, and saw old Gurlone issue from the building outside which the two tramps had been listening. In one hand, the old Professor, brave as a lion, carried an old fashioned double-barreled elephant gun, and the rays from a powerful electric torch shone across the barrel.

At least, they thought the bizarre figure was old Gurlone, from the size. For the man was clad in a black, shiny suit, and over his head was a flapping hood of the same material in which were large eyeholes of green glass. Behind this strange form came a larger one, armed also with a big bore rifle and with another powerful flashlight.

The blind Portuguese was armed, too, but he was not clad in the black suit. He took his stand beside the mouth of the cavern, and waited while the two Gurlones entered the mine.

"My foot hurts," said Durkin suddenly, breaking the silence.

"I'm going out and see what happens," said Maget.

DURKIN limped after Maget, who now took the lead. They crept close as possible to the mine opening, and saw the big Portuguese standing there in silence, listening carefully. Any sounds the two might have made were drowned in the great bellowing from within the cavern.

These noises, so like the croak of bullfrogs but magnified a thousand

times, were terrifying to the heart.

The sweep of wings sounded on the night air, and Espinosa drew back and squatted close to the ground, as immense green creatures, flying on dusty wings, issued from the mine.

"God, those are moths," breathed Maget.

Yes, unmistakably, they were moths, as large as condors. The green ones, but for their size, were lunar moths, familiar enough to the two tramps. More bats came, disturbed by the entrance of the two Gurlones.

Durkin broke, then. "I'm—I'm—I guess you're right, Maget," he whispered, in a terrified voice. "We should have never come. If my foot wasn't hurt, I'd start for the river now. Curse it, what a place!"

The booming, vast croaks filled the whole valley, reverberating through the hills. Wails sounded from the peon camp.

The big Portuguese was shouting to the Gurlones, "Come out, come out!"

Maget gripped his own rifle, and stood up, bravely. His fear, though it was great, seemed to have brought out the better side of the man, while Durkin, so brave at first, had cracked under the strain.

"Look out, they'll see you," whimpered Durkin.

Maget strode forward. A blast of fetid, stinking air struck his face, and he choked. The noises were now earsplitting, but above the bellows came the sounds of the big rifles, the echoes booming through the recesses of the cavern.

Then the two Gurlones, running madly, burst from the mine entrance.

"Run," they screamed. "Run for your life, Espinosa!"

"I'll help you," cried Maget, and Durkin could detain him no longer.

THE Gurlones hardly noticed the newcomer, as they ran madly towards the shelter of their houses. Espinosa joined them, going swiftly in spite of his blind eyes.

The croaking made Maget's brain scream with the immensity of the sound. Luminous, white disks, three feet in diameter, glared at him, and the creature, which progressed with jerky leaps toward him, almost filled the mouth of the mine.

It was hot in pursuit of the fleeing Gurlones. It squatted and then jumped, and presently it was out in the night air.

Its form was that of a gigantic frog, but it stood some twenty feet in height, and from its throat sounded the terrific bellowing which rivalled the thunder.

Maget bravely stepped forward, and began to fire into the huge, soft body. The great mouth opened, and as the dum-dum bullets tore gashes in the blackish green batrachian, the thunderous croaks took on a note of pain.

The odor of the creature was horrible. Maget could scarcely draw his breath as he fired the contents of the magazine into the big animal. Two more jumps brought the frog almost to Maget's feet, and the tropical tramp felt a whiskerlike tentacle touch his face, and bad smelling slime covered him.

The frog was blind, without doubt, from its underground life, but the tentacles seemed to be the way it finally located its prey, for it turned on Maget and made a final snap at him. The great jaws closed like the flap of hell, and Maget leaped back with a cry of triumphant terror.

THE bullets had finally stopped the big frog, but at its heels came a strange, jellylike creature, not quite as bulky as the frog, but pushing along on its legs and with a tail some eight feet thick and fifteen feet in length. This, too, evidently a polywog, was blind, with whitened discs for eyes, but it slid along at a rapid rate because of its size. Maget's gun was empty; he turned to flee, but the polywog stopped and sniffed at the thick blood of its fellow. Then, to Maget's relief, it be-

gan to hungrily devour its companion.

Utterly filthy, and ferocious, the polywog in silence snapped great chunks from the dead giant frog.

"Hello. Who are you?"

Maget turned, having forgotten the amenities of life in the excitement. Professor Gurlone and his son, still clad in their black suits, but with their helmets off, were standing beside him, clutching their guns and lights.

The big Portuguese, Espinosa, appeared, and Durkin was beside him.

"Why," said Maget, between gasps, "we just happened to be out exploring, and we saw your camp. We were on our way in when we heard the noises and came to investigate."

"I see," said old Gurlone. "What made you head in this direction, and where's your outfit?"

"Oh, we cached most it back there," said Maget. "My partner's hurt his foot, so he can't walk well. Isn't that so, Durkin?"

"Yeh," growled Durkin. "I got a sore foot, all right."

OLD GURLONE was suspicious of the vague story which Maget and Durkin concocted as the explanation of their presence in the valley. But evidently the Professor was too worried about the situation in which he and his friends were, to question the two tramps very closely. In fact, he seemed rather glad that he had two more pairs of hands to aid him, and he thanked Maget for his bravery.

They dispatched the great polywog as it tore its parent to bits, and then the five men, the two Gurlones, Espinosa, Maget, and the limping, cursing Durkin, retired to one of the shacks.

The living quarters of the Gurlones was quite elaborate. There were many books on rough shelves, and there was a small bench filled with glass phials and chemicals, though the main laboratory was in one of the long buildings.

Professor Gurlone poured drinks for the five, and welcomed Durkin and Maget as allies.

"We'll need every man we can get, if we are to cope with these great creatures," said old Gurlone. "The peons are too frightened to be of use. Luckily, it was a frog we came upon on the banks of the subterranean river. There is no telling how many more creatures of the same or greater size may be down there. We will have to destroy them, every one."

Maget and Durkin shuddered. "Say," blurted Durkin, his face working nervously, "how the hell did that frog get so big? I thought I was seein' things, Professor."

"No, no," said Professor Gurlone. "You see, the ore in the mine contains radium, that is, salts of radium. It is a pitchblende deposit, and it happens to be so rich in radium content that throughout the ages it has affected all the life in the cavern. The arid land surrounding the ore—this has been, generally, one of the characteristics of radium deposits—has kept most of the jungle creatures away, but underground beings such as reptiles, worms and frogs, have gradually become immune to the effects of the ore and have grown prodigiously and abnormally under the stimulation of the rays given off by the radium.

"Now, this is nothing strange in itself, but never before has such a rich deposit been discovered, so that the amounts of radium available have been too small to really check its effect on growth in animals. That is our chief scientific object in coming here: we realized, from Señor Espinosa's description of the played-out silver mine he had, and from his loss of sight, that he had stumbled upon a valuable deposit of radium. It usually occurs with silver, that is, the uranium mother ore does, through the disintegration of which radium is formed. The content of radium per ton in this ore proved unbelievably rich: we were delighted. I have always suspected that the animal cell might be stimulated into abnormal growth by exposure to radium salts, for such a thing already has been

hinted at in the scientific world. Not till our chance came here, however, has enough radium been available for the experiments."

MAGET and Durkin listened with open mouths. Radium meant but vague things to them. They had heard of radium paint which shone in the dark on the dials of watches and clocks, but of the properties of the metal and its salts they were utterly ignorant.

"That radium stuff is what makes the funny light in that mine, then?" asked Maget.

"Exactly. The radio-activity of the elements in the ore give off the light. There are three rays, the alpha, beta and gamma, and—"

The professor forgot himself in a lecture on the properties of radium.

Durkin, breaking in, asked, slyly, "Is this radium worth as much as silver?"

Young Kenneth Gurlone laughed, and even old Professor Gurlone smiled. "Radium is worth more than gold or diamonds or platinum. Its value is fabulous. We have five million dollars worth already, in the form of the chloride."

"Whew," whistled Durkin.

He glanced sidewise at Maget.

"Yes," said Professor Gurlone, "five million dollars worth of it! Those great monsters who have been developed throughout the ages by the action of the radium rays on their bodies, causing them to grow so prodigiously, are but incidents. We must destroy them, so that our work cannot be interfered with. We must use dynamite, blow them to bits. They are powerful enough to crush the stone bank by the mine mouth and ruin the labors of the past two years, gentlemen."

Armed, and once more fortified with whiskey, the five made their way outside. The moon was darkened by an immense shadow, as one of the giant bats winged its way over their heads. But there were no more monster frogs. The ugly, bulky shapes of the dead polywog and its parent lay before them.

"We are safe for the moment," said Professor Gurlone. "Go and quiet the peons, Espinosa: they will listen to you."

THE peons still wailed in terror; the blind Espinosa slipped silently away.

"Come," said Professor Gurlone, to his son and to Maget and Durkin. "I will show you the laboratory, so that you can understand better the effects of radium on growth."

The professor led them to the long, low, many-windowed building nearby, and flooded it with light. It contained cage after cage in which were monkeys, pumas, and various jungle folk. These creatures set up a chattering and howling at the light and intruders.

Maget glanced curiously about him. He saw shining vials and glassware of queer shapes on long black tables, and tubes of chemicals. There were immense screens of dull lead. "Those are for protection," said Professor Gurlone, "as are the lead-cloth suits we wear. Otherwise we would be burned by radium rays."

Maget looked about, to see if his partner was listening, but he had gone away.

However, Maget was intensely interested. He went from cage to cage, as Professor Gurlone, rather in the manner of a man giving a lecture to students, pointed out animal after animal that had been treated by the radium.

"This," said the professor, "is a monkey which usually attains a height of two feet. You can see for yourself that is is now larger than a gorilla."

THE horrible, malformed creature bared its teeth and shook its bars in rage, but it was weak, evidently, from the treatment accorded it. Its hair was burned off in spots, and its eyes were almost white.

There was a jaguar, and this beast

seemed to have burst its skin in its effort to grow as large as three of its kind.

"You see, we have not so much time as nature," said Professor Gurlone. "These beasts cannot be enlarged too rapidly, or they would die. They must be protected from the direct rays of the radium, which is refined. In the ore, the action is more gradual and gentle, since it is less concentrated. But the metal itself would burn the vital organs out of these creatures, cause them to be struck blind, shrivel them up inside and kill them in a few minutes in the quantity we have. We expose them bit by bit, allowing more and more time as they begin to grow immune to the rays. Here, you see, are smaller creatures which have grown some eight or ten times beyond normal size."

All the animals seemed the worse for wear. Maget, his brain reeling, yet was beginning to grasp what radium did to one. It was not gold that you could pick up and carry away.

"If a man touched that radium," he asked, "what would happen to him?"

"Just what I said would happen to the animals if we did not give it to them gradually," said Gurlone, with a wave of his hand. "It would kill him, strike him down as though by invisible poison gas. His heart and lungs would cease to function, pernicious anemia would set in, as the red corpuscles in his blood perished by millions. He would be struck blind, fall down and die in agony."

To Maget came the picture of the unfortunate Juan. As though answering his unasked question, Professor Gurlone went on. "We had a peon coming up with us," he said. "His name was Juan. He stole my sample case, which contained an ounce of radium chloride, and ran off with it. If he opens it, it will kill him in just that way."

MAGET shivered. "But—but didn't it hurt you to carry it?" he asked.

"No. For it was incased in a lead container some two inches in thickness, and the rays cannot penetrate such a depth of lead. They are trapped in the metal."

"Father, father, you're wasting time," broke in Kenneth Gurlone, shaking his yellow head. "We must act at once. The peons are almost mad with fear. Even Espinosa cannot quiet them. And every moment is precious, for the monsters may break forth."

But Maget was looking nervously about for Durkin. Where was he? Durkin had his mind on the treasure, and—

As they turned toward the door, the professor saying, "The rays from the ore, which is not so concentrated as the purified metal, do not kill—" Durkin suddenly appeared.

He carried his rifle at his hip, and he limped and cursed angrily. "Come across," shouted Durkin. "Give me the key to that stone house. Snap into it, and no argument."

"The key—to the stone bank?" repeated old Gurlone.

"Yes. I'll give you five counts to throw it over—then I'll shoot you and take it," snarled Durkin savagely. "I want that treasure, whatever it is, and I'll have it. One . . . two . . . three . . . ." The tramp sent a shot over their heads as a warning.

"Hey, Bill, easy, easy," pleaded Maget. "That stuff is radium. It'll ruin you, boy!"

"Shut up, you yeller-bellied bum," snarled Durkin. "Four. . . ."

A tinkle of metal came on the stone floor of the laboratory, as old Gurlone tossed his keys to Durkin.

"Don't go in that shack," cried young Gurlone. "It'll be your death, man—"

"Liars," yelled Durkin, and backed out the door.

"H'm," said old Gurlone, turning to Maget. "So you came to rob us, eh?"

BUT Maget thought of Juan, and then he knew he did not want Durkin, in spite of his failings, to per-

ish so. He ran for the door, and across the clearing.

"Durkin—Bill—wait, it's Frank—"

Great bellowings sounded from the bowels of the earth, but Maget ignored these in his effort to save his partner. Durkin had the padlock off the stone shack, and pulled back the door.

As the door disclosed the interior, Maget could see that a greenish haze filled the entire building. Wan liquid light streamed forth like heavy fluid.

Bravely, to save his pal from death, Maget ran forward. But Durkin had entered the stone shack.

Maget went to the very door of the building. Durkin was inside, and Maget could see his partner's thick form as a black object in the strange, thick air.

An eery scream came suddenly from Durkin's lips; Maget wrung his hands and called for help.

"Come out, Bill, come out," he cried.

Durkin evidently tried to obey, for he turned toward the door. But his knees seemed to give way beneath him, he threw his arm across his eyes as he sank to the ground, crying in agony, incoherent sounds issuing from his lips.

Shriek after shriek the unfortunate man uttered. As Maget made a dash forward to take a chance with death and rescue his friend, Professor Gurlone and his son Kenneth ran up and threw a black cloak over the tramp.

The three entered the shack of death. Maget, not entirely covered, felt his heart give a terrific jump, and he gasped for breath. Durkin was quivering on the floor which was lined with lead.

ROUND vials stood about the room like a battery of searchlights, and from these emanated the deadly green haze.

But almost before Maget touched his pal, Durkin was dead. Curled up as though sewed together by heavy cords, Durkin lay in a ball, a shaking mass of burned flesh.

The two Gurlones pushed out ahead of them, and raised their hands. They had on their black suits and their helmets.

"It is too late to do anything for him now," said Kenneth Gurlone sadly. "He was headstrong. You can see for yourself that the five million dollars takes care of itself. Certain death goes with it if you are unprotected. These lead-cloth suits will keep off the rays for a short time. We always wear them when we are working with the metal, even when we have a lead screen."

."Poor Bill," sobbed Maget. "It's terrible!"

Professor Gurlone shrugged. "It was his own fault. He was a thief and he would not let us stop him. I hope it's been a lesson to you, Maget."

"Yes. I want to help you," said Maget. "If you'll keep me with you, I'll work for you and be straight. Give me a chance."

"Good. Then shake hands on it," said Kenneth, and they clasped hands firmly.

Espinosa appeared from the darkness. "The peons are mad with terror," he said morosely. "They cannot be held much longer. They will revolt."

"Well, we must kill the creatures in the cavern: that will quiet them more than anything else," said Professor Gurlone.

"Better close the stone shack," said Kenneth.

But as he spoke, a vast shape, another giant frog, appeared in the entrance of the shaft.

"Get some dynamite and fuses," ordered Professor Gurlone quietly. "Come on Kenneth, and you, Maget, if you care to risk your life. You need not do so unless you wish to."

Bravely, the older man led the way towards the croaking monster. The ground shook at its approach. It was heading for the bodies of the dead frog and polywog, bent on a search for food. Evidently these vast creatures were forced to prey upon one another for sustenance.

THE rifles spoke, and Maget and the professor, in their black suits, protected by the lead-cloth and helmets from the rays, advanced. They poured bullet after bullet into the frog.

Kenneth came running to join them, and Espinosa stood by. Kenneth had dynamite bombs with fuses ready for lighting and throwing. He also brought more ammunition, and the three armed themselves to the teeth.

It was well after midnight when they started into the mine. They knew they must act quickly or retreat, for the bellowings sounded nearer and nearer the surface of the earth.

Each man carried big, powerful flashlights, and the three entered the mine shaft and walked across the seething slugs into the bowels of the earth.

"Stay close together," ordered old Gurlone.

The mine was easy to descend for the first hundred yards. It led in a gentle slope downward. The way, save for a few giant bats and moths, and the big maggots, was clear. The greenish haze, not so bright as that in the death shack, enveloped them, but they needed their flashes to see clearly.

"Slowly, take it easy," counseled old Gurlone.

The mine spread out now, and began a steeper descent. The air was poor, and it was hard to breathe through the mask. Maget, his heart thumping mightily, listened to the roaring within the depths of the mine.

Now the ground seemed to drop away before them. Maget could hear the running of water, the underground river, and every now and then there came an immense splash, as if some great whale had thrown itself about in the water.

A terrifically loud hissing filled their ears, and suddenly, before them, showed an utterly white snake with a head as big as a barrel. Its white eyes glared sightlessly, but its tongue stuck forth for several feet.

Kenneth Gurlone coolly tossed a lighted bomb at the creature: the explosion shattered their ear-drums, but it also smashed the serpent.

THE writhing, wriggling coils, bigger than the body of a horse, slashed about, dangerously near. They picked themselves up, and pushed on, keeping close to the right wall.

A great bat smashed against Maget, and knocked the light out of his hand, but the blow was a glancing one, and he was able to retrieve his light and hurry on.

They were far from the entrance, now. The hole which had been broken through by the peons showed before them, and they could see milky water dashing over black rocks.

Pallid eyes looked at them, and they knew they gazed upon another of the giant frogs. They tossed a bomb at the creature, and blew a jagged hole in his back. No sooner had he begun to die than there came a sudden rush of other monsters and a feast began.

"Throw, all together," yelled Kenneth Gurlone.

Into the vast mass of creatures, who crowded one another in the river for their share of the spoils, they threw bomb after bomb. The dynamite deafened them, and acrid fumes choked them, but they fired their rifles at the prodigious animals and there, in the big river cavern, was a seething mass of horrible life, dying in agony.

The bellowings and hissings sounded louder, so loud that the earth shook as if actuated by a mighty hearthquake.

Maget gripped Kenneth Gurlone's arm. "My bombs are gone," he shouted.

He had but a few rounds of ammunition left, and still more of the giant reptiles appeared. A centipede with its creeping, horrible legs topped the mass of squirming matter; they could see the terrific sting of the creature, so deadly when but a fraction of an inch long, and which was now at least a foot, armed with poison.

There came the rush of more bats and moths, a rush that threw the three men off their feet.

"We must have opened the hole more with our bombs," shrieked old Gurlone. "The dead bodies attract the other creatures, more and more of them are coming. It is impossible; we cannot deal with them all."

THE vast gobbling of the great animals in the river below them was so prodigious they could not grasp it. It seemed it must be optical illusion. In a few moments, the dead had been eaten, swallowed whole, and fights were progressing between the victors.

They tossed the rest of their bombs, fired the remaining ammunition, and as they prepared to retreat, several of the big creatures slopped over and started up the river bank into the mine shaft.

They ran for their lives, the three. Madly, with the earth shaking behind them as they were pursued by a hopping monster of a beetle with immense mandibles reaching out at them, they dashed for the open air.

Giant moths and bats struck at them, and Maget fell down several times before he reached the outside, and he was bruised and out of breath.

"Come on, there are too many to fight," gasped old Gurlone, throwing off the lead suit.

But there was no need to talk. The creatures, distured by the bombs, had collected in one spot and, shown the way out by one of their number, were coming.

Espinosa, with Kenneth Gurlone holding his hand, ran swiftly for the hills surrounding the valley. Maget helped old Professor Gurlone, who was so out of breath that he could scarcely move.

The great beetle which had been pursuing them was the first to break forth into the valley. Turning back for a look over his shoulder, Maget saw the thing pause, but the cavern belched forth a vast array of monsters, the beasts roaring, hissing, bellowing, in an increasing mass of sound.

They swarmed over the ground, and giant bats and moths winged their way about the heads of the monsters.

At the rim of the valley, the four men paused.

"God help the peons," said Kenneth Gurlone.

NOW the horde of monsters swelled more and more; the bats and moths winged in mad frenzy about the open door of the radium shack. There were great beetles, centipedes, ants, crickets, hopping, crawling things, and grotesquely immense in size. Fights progressed here and there, but the majority of them were carried along in the sweep of the multitude.

"See, the radium kills those who get too close," said Professor Gurlone, in a hushed voice.

The giant moths and bats were unable to withstand the lure of the green light. They flew with mad beatings of wings straight for the open door of the death house, and many of the great creatures, attracted by the light and urged on by an unexplainable force which sent them to death like gnats and moths in a flame, crowded near to the death-dealing radium.

Not until the whole shack was covered with quivering forms of the dead, did the other creatures veer off and with hops, creepings and myriad giant legs, begin to cover the whole valley.

The stone walls of the death shack had crumpled in with the weight; the other buildings, more lightly built, gave at once, with crackings and crashings.

The four men were powerless to assist the unfortunate peons, who were trapped in their barracks. The charged wires stopped many of the big beasts, but soon the electric light was short-circuited, and the valley, in the moonlight, was a seething mass of fighting, dying, feasting monsters.

OTHER sounds, besides those made by the big creatures, came to the ears of the stricken men on the hillside. The breaking of glass, the cries

of the jungle animals trapped in their cages, the shrieks of dying peons who were eaten at a gulp by the big frogs or stung to death, impaled on the mandibles of some great stinging centipede.

In the spot where the radium death shack had been, was a pulpy mass of livid, smoky light.

Now the bowl of the valley was filled as by some vast jelly. The creatures were slopping over the walls, and battling together.

The shambles was not yet over, but the four could remain no longer. They made their way down the hillside and struck out across the arid lands.

Maget, the tramp, became the leader. He was a trained jungle man, and it was he who finally brought them safely to the Madeira.

He was their strong man, the one who found the trail and located roots and fruit for the party to subsist on. They nearly perished in the trip for lack of water, but again, Maget was able to supply them with roots which kept them from dying in agony.

THEY lay upon the river bank now, exhausted but alive. Maget had assisted old Gurlone, acted as his staff, half carried him the last miles of the trip.

Their clothes were almost gone, they were burned to crisps by the tropic sun. Flies and other insects had taken their toll. But Maget had brought them through.

The tall, thin fellow's hair had turned utterly white. But so had his soul.

"You're a good man, Maget," said Professor Gurlone. "You have saved us, and you have been brave as a lion."

Maget shook his head. "Professor," he said, "I came into the jungle to rob you. Durkin and I bribed Juan to steal that radium, and I feel responsible for his death. We thought you had diamonds or gold in the Matto Grosso, and we were after it. That's why I am here."

"You have repaid your debt to us, more than fully," said Kenneth, holding out his hand.

"Yes," said Espinosa.

"Will you keep me with you, then?" asked Maget anxiously. "Are—will you go back there?"

PROFESSOR Gurlone stared at him, and then said, in a surprised tone, "Why, of course!"

"But the monsters?" asked Maget.

"Many of them will die in the outer air," said Gurlone. "The survivors of the battles will start eating the dead. They will finally clear away the débris of dead creatures about the radium shack. As each is exposed to the rays of the concentrated metal, it will die. The others will eat it, and be killed in turn. Thus, they will be destroyed. If there are any survivors after this evident turn of events, then we will cope with them when we return, reinforced. Dynamite, enough of it, will finish them off. And, Maget, in your next pursuit after knowledge of strange things, you may get a few earthly riches. The radium is still there, and you will share in it."

"Thank you," said Maget humbly. "I'm with you to the end."

"You must keep quiet about this," cautioned Kenneth Gurlone. "We do not want the world to know too much of our vast store of radium. It would attract adventurers and we would be annoyed by ignorant men. But we're thankful you lay drunk in that saloon when my father spoke of the millions, Maget."

In Manaos, Maget found himself a changed man. To his surprise, in spite of his white hair, brought on by the horror of what he had seen, he found that he had gained two inches in height, and that he was larger of girth. This, Professor Gurlone told him, was the effect of the radium rays.

Never again did Maget lie drunk on the floor of a saloon. The events through which he had gone had seared the tramp's soul, and he kept close to his new master, Professor Gurlone.

He laughed loudly and contemptuously.

The Moon Master

By Charles W. Diffin

"NOW that's a mighty queer noise," Jerry Foster told himself. He dropped the pack from his shoulders and leaned closer to the canyon rim.

Miles behind him was the last beaten trail; Jerry wanted peace and solitude and quiet. And now the quiet of the silent mountains was disturbed.

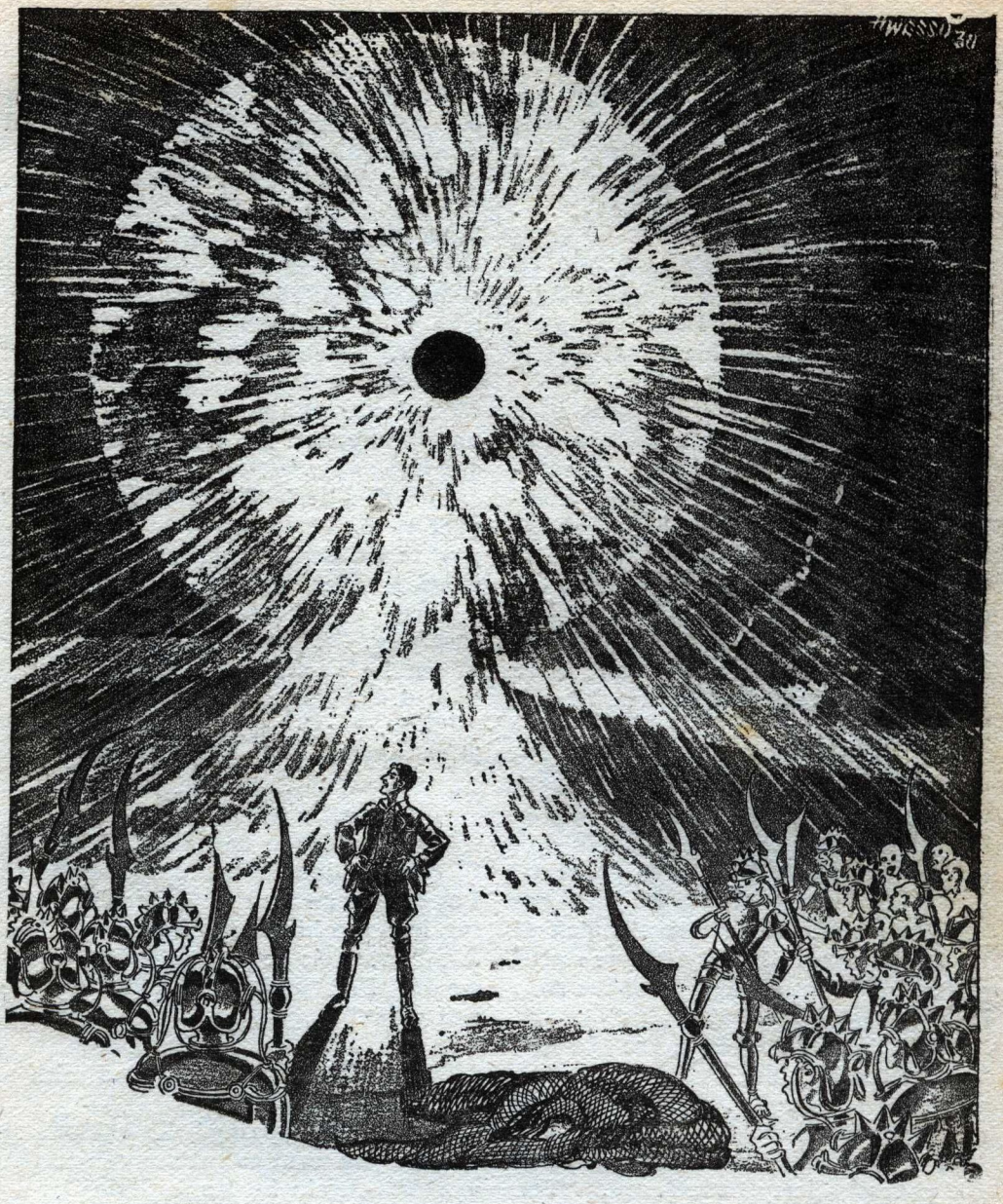
Through infinite deeps of space Jerry Foster hurtles to the Moon—only to be trapped by a barbaric race and offered as a living sacrifice to Oong, their loathsome, hypnotic god.

From far below came a steady, muffled roar. Faint it was, and distant, but peculiar in its unvarying, unceasing rush.

"Not water," Jerry concluded; "not enough down there. Sounds like—like a wind—like a wind that can't quit.

"Oh well—" He shrugged his shoulders and slipped into the straps of his pack. Then he went back again to the granite ledge. "I wonder if there's a way down," he said.

There was, but it took all of Jerry's strength to see him safely through. On a fan-shaped talus of spreading boulders he stopped. There was a limestone wall beyond. And at its base, from a crevice that was almost a cave, came a furious rush of air and steam.



It touched him lightly a hundred feet away, and he threw himself flat to escape the hot blast. Endlessly it came, with its soft, rushing roar, a ceaseless, scorching blast from the cold rocks.

"That's almighty funny," mused Foster, and sniffed the air. There was no odor.

"And is it hot!" he said. "Nothing like that in my geology book. And what is beyond? Looks like concrete work, as if someone had plastered up the cave." He picked his way quickly across the rock slope.

It was hard going. Below him the rocks and dirt went steep to the canyon floor. At its foot the blast swept diagonally over the slope. He must see what lay beyond. . . .

"Curious," he thought; "curious if that is nature's work—and a lot more so if it isn't."

A rock rolled beneath his feet. Another! He scrambled and fought desperately for foothold in the slipping

earth. Then, rolling and clawing, he rode helpless on the slide straight toward the mysterious blast. He felt it envelop him, hot and strangling. His lungs were dry and burning . . . the blazing sun faded from the rocks . . . the world was dark. . . .

DARKNESS was still about him when he awoke. But it was cool; the air was sweet on his lips. And it was not entirely dark.

He turned his head. He was in a room. On a rough-hewn table a candle was burning. Its light cast flickering shadows on walls of stone. Rumbling in his ears was the sound of the blast that had overwhelmed him. It echoed, seemingly, from far back in the stone cliff.

Jerry made a move to sit up. He found that his hands and feet were tied, his body bound to the rough board bed.

At the sound of his stirring, a figure came out from the farther shadow. It was that of a man. Jerry looked at him in silence. He was tall, his thin erectness making him seem abnormal in the low room. The lean face was unshaven, and from under a thatch of black hair a pair of deep-set eyes stared penetratingly at the figure on the rude bed.

"Well," asked Jerry, at length, "what's the big idea?"

There was no reply. Only the intent, staring eyes.

"You got me out of that man-trap of yours," Jerry continued. "You saved my life."

THE tall man finally spoke. "Yes, I saved your life. You missed the hottest part of the exhaust. I pumped you full of oxygen."

"Then why tie me up like this?" Jerry Foster was frankly puzzled.

"You are lucky to be alive. Spies are not always allowed—" He interrupted himself abruptly. "You are a reporter," he stated.

"Wrong," said Jerry Foster.

"Who sent you?"

"Nobody sent me. I heard the noise of your infernal blast-furnace and came down to have a look."

"Who sent you?" repeated the man. "Goodwin? The Stillwater crowd? Who was it?"

"I don't know what you are talking about," protested Jerry. "I don't know who your Goodwin or Stillwater people are. I don't know who you are—I don't give a damn. Take these ropes off and cut out the melodrama. I'll go on my way, and I don't care if I never see you again."

"That's a lie." The tall figure leaned over to shake a bony fist. "You'd report to Goodwin. He stole my last invention. He'll not get this."

Jerry considered the wild figure carefully. "He's a nut," he thought. When he spoke, his voice was controlled.

"Now, see here," he said: "I don't know anything about this. I'm Jerry Foster, live in San Francisco—"

"So does Goodwin."

"Confound you and your Goodwin! So do a million other people live there! I'm getting away from there; I'm heading into the hills for a short vacation. All I want is to get away from the world. I'm looking for a little peace and quiet."

THE thin man interrupted with a harsh laugh.

"Come here spying," he said, "and tell me you want to get away from the world." Again he laughed shrilly.

"And I am going to be your little fairy godmother. I wish you were Goodwin himself! I wish I had him here. But you'll get your wish—you'll get your wish. You'll leave the world, you shall, indeed."

He rocked back and forth with appreciation of his humor.

"Didn't know I was all ready to leave, did you? All packed and ready to go. Supplies all stowed away; enough energy stored to carry me millions of miles. Or maybe you did know—may-

be there are others coming. . . ." He hurried across the room to open a heavy door of split logs in the rock wall.

"I'll fool them all this time," he said; "and you'll never go back to tell them." The door closed behind him.

"Crazy as a bed-bug," Jerry told himself. He strained frantically at the ropes that bound him. "Looks bad for me: the old bird said I'd never go back. Well, what if I die now . . . or six months from now? Though I know that doctor was wrong."

He tried to accept his fate philosophically, but the will to live was strong. And one of his wrists felt looser in its bonds.

ACROSS the room his pack lay on the floor, and in it was a heavy forty-five. If he could get the pistol. . . . A knot pulled loose under his twisting fingers. One hand was free. He worked feverishly at the other wrist.

The ropes were suddenly loose. He pulled himself to his feet, took a moment to regain control of cramped muscles, then flung himself at the pack. When the heavy door opened he was behind it, his pistol in his hand.

There was no struggle; the lanky figure showed no maniacal fury. Instead, the man did a surprising thing. He sank weakly upon the rough bunk where Jerry had lain, his face buried in his thin hands.

"I should have let you die," he said slowly, hopelessly. "I should have let you die. But I couldn't do that. . . . And now you'll steal my invention for Goodwin."

Jerry was as exasperated as he was amazed.

"I told you," he almost shouted, "I never knew anyone named Goodwin! I don't care a hoot about your invention. And as for letting me die—why didn't you? That's a puzzle; you were about to kill me, anyway."

"No," said the other patiently. "I wasn't going to kill you."

"You said I'd never go back."

"I was going to take you with me."

"Take me where?"

"To the moon," said the drooping figure.

Jerry Foster stared, open-mouthed. The pistol sagged in his limp hand. "To the moon!" he gasped.

Then: "See here," he said firmly. "I've got you where I want you."—he held the pistol steady—"and now I'm going to learn what's back of this. I think you are crazy, absolutely crazy. But, tell me, who are you? What do you think you're doing? What was the meaning of that roaring blast?"

THE man looked up. "You don't know?" he asked eagerly. "You really don't?"

"No," said Jerry; "but I'm going to find out."

"Yes," the other agreed. "Yes, you can, now that you've got the upper hand. I guess I was half crazy when I thought I had been spied out. But I'll tell you."

He sat erect. "I am Thomas J. Winslow," he said, and made the statement as if it were an explanation in itself.

"Well," said Jerry, "that's no burst of illumination to my ignorance. Come again."

The man called Winslow was ready—anxious—to talk.

"I am an inventor. I have made millions of dollars"—Jerry looked at the disheveled apparel of the speaker and smiled—"for other people. The Stillwater syndicate stole my valveless motor. Then I developed my television set. Goodwin beat me out of that: he will have it on the market inside of a year. I swore they should never profit by this, my greatest invention."

Jerry was impressed in spite of himself by the man's earnest simplicity.

"What is it?" he asked.

"I've broken the atom," said Winslow. "First tore the atoms of hydrogen and oxygen apart—dissociated them in the molecule of water—and have resolved them into their energy

components. That's what you heard—the reaction. It is self-sustaining, exothermic. That hot blast carried off the heat of my retort."

WINSLOW rose from the bunk. Gone was his listless despondency.

"Put up that gun," he said; "you don't need it now. I think we understand each other better than we did." He crossed with quick strides to the door leading into the cliff.

"Come with me," he told Foster. "I am leaving to-day. You will not stop me. But before I go I will show you something no other man than myself has ever seen."

He led the way through the doorway. There was another room beyond, Jerry saw. It was a cave. Plainly Winslow had taken these caves in the rocks and had made of them a laboratory.

A lantern gave scant illumination; Jerry made out a small electric generator, and that was all. He felt a keen disappointment. Somehow this thin-faced man had communicated to him something of his own belief, his own earnestness.

"What kind of a laboratory do you call this?" he demanded. But the other was busy.

In the wall an opening had been closed with a small iron door, with cement around it. Winslow opened it and reached through. He was evidently adjusting something.

The little dynamo began to hum. There was a crackling hiss from beyond the iron doorway. The opening was flooded with a clear blue light.

Then the roar began. It was tremendous, deafening, in the echoing cave.

"You may look now," said Winslow, and stood aside.

JERRY peered through. There was another cave beyond. In it was a small metal cylinder, a retort of some kind. The blue light came from a crooked bulb beyond. The retort itself was white-hot, despite a stream of water flowing upon it. A cloud of steam drove continuously out and up through a crevice in the rocks.

The water flowed steadily from some subterranean stream in the limestone formation. It was diverted for its cooling purposes, but a portion also flowed continuously into the retort. Jerry's eyes found this, and he could see nothing else. For, before his eyes, the impossible was occurring.

The retort was small, a couple of feet in diameter. It had no discharge pipes, could hold but a few gallons. Yet into it, in a steady stream, flowed the icy water. Gallons, hundreds of gallons, flowing and flowing, endlessly, into a reservoir which could never hold it.

The inventor watched Foster with complacent satisfaction.

"Where does it go?" Jerry asked incredulously.

"Into nothingness," was the reply. "Or nearly that!"

"See?" He held up a flask of pale green liquid. "And this," he added, exhibiting another that was colorless.

"I have worked here for many months. I have converted thousands of thousands of gallons of water. It has flowed into that retort, never to return. I have gathered this, the product, a few drops at a time.

"The protons and the electrons," he explained, "are re-formed. They are static now, unmoving. Call this what you will—energy or matter—they are one and the same."

"Still," said Jerry, gropingly, "what has all that to do with the moon? You said you were going there."

"YES," agreed the inventor, "I am going, and this is the driving force to carry me there. I pass a certain electric current through these two liquids. I carry the wires to two heavy electrodes. Between them resolution of matter occurs. The current carries these two components to again combine them and form what we call mat-

ter, the gases hydrogen and oxygen.

"Do I need to tell you of the constant, ceaseless and tremendous explosion that follows?

"But enough of this! You said I was crazy. I gave you a few bad hours. I have shown you this much as a measure of recompense. You have seen what no other man has ever seen. It is enough."

He motioned Foster through the door. The roaring ceased. The inventor returned shortly, the two flasks of liquid in his hands. He transferred both to two metal containers that were ready for the precious load. He carried them with the utmost care as he went out of doors.

Once he returned, and Jerry knew by the crashes from the inner room that the laboratory work was indeed done. There would be nothing left to tell the secret to whomever might come.

He followed Winslow outside, trailing him toward a wooded knoll. There was a clearing among the trees. And in it, hidden from all sides, his eyes found another curious sight.

On the ground rested a dirigible in miniature. Still, it was small, he reasoned, only by comparison with its monster prototype; actually it was a sizable cylinder of aluminum that shone brightly in the sun. It was bluntly rounded at the ends. There were heavy windows, open exhaust ports, a door in the side, pierced through thick walls. Winslow vanished within, while Jerry watched in pitying wonder.

DESPITE its size, it was a toy, an absurd and pitiful toy. Real genius and lunacy had many an overlapping line, Jerry reflected as he approached to look inside. But he found Winslow in a room surrounded by a network of curving, latticed struts. The machine was no makeshift of a demented builder; it was a beautiful bit of construction that Jerry Foster examined.

"How did you ever get it here?" he marveled. "What you had in the cave you could pack in, but this—all these parts—castings—cases of supplies—"

The inventor did not even turn. He was busy with some final adjustments.

"Flew it in," he said shortly. "Built it in an old shop I owned out near Oakland."

"And it flew?" Jerry was still incredulous.

"Certainly it flew! On a drop or less of the liquids you saw." He pointed to a heavy casting at the center of the machine. There were braces tying it strongly to the entire structure, braces designed to receive and transmit a tremendous thrust.

"This is the generator. Blast expelled through the big exhaust at the stern. These smaller exhausts go above and below—right and left at the bow. Perfect control!"

"And you flew it here!" Jerry was still trying to grasp that incontrovertible fact. "And you were going to take me to the moon, you said."

He looked above him where a pale, silvery segment showed dimly in the sky. "But why the moon?" he questioned. "Even granting that this will fly through space. . . ."

"It will," the other interrupted. "I tried it. Went up to better than fifty miles."

Jerry Foster took a minute to grasp that statement, then continued: "Granting that, why go to the moon? There is nothing there, no air to speak of, no water! It's all known."

THE inventor turned to face the younger man in the doorway.

"There is *nothing* known," he stated. "The modern telescopes reach out a million light years into space. But the one place they have never seen—can never see—is less than two hundred and fifty thousand miles away. The moon, as of course you know, always keeps the same side toward us. The other side of the moon has never been seen.

"Listen," he said, and his deep-set

eyes were afire with an intense emotion. "The moon is no tiny satellite; it is a sister planet. It is whirled on the end of a rope (we call it gravitation), swung around and around the earth. How could there be water or anything fluid on this side? It is all thrown to the other side by the centrifugal force. Who knows what life is there? No one—no one! I am going to find out."

Jerry Foster was silent. He was thinking hard. He looked about him at the clean hills, the trees, the world he knew. And he was weighing the secure life he knew against a great adventure.

He took one long breath of the clear air as one who looks his last at a familiar scene. He exhaled slowly. But he stepped firmly into the machine.

"Winslow," he said, "have you any rope handy?"

The inventor was annoyed. "Why, yes, I guess so. Why? What do you want of it?"

"I want you to tie me up again," said Jerry Foster. "I want you to carry me off as you planned. I want to go with you."

The tall man stared at the quiet, determined face before him. Slowly his own strained features smoothed into kindly lines. He grasped tight at Jerry's hand.

"I was dreading that part of it," he confessed slowly; "going alone. It would have been lonely—out there. . . ."

THE shining cylinder of aluminum alloy was hurtling through space. No longer was it a ship of the air; it had thrown itself far beyond that thin gaseous envelope surrounding the earth; out into the black and empty depths that lay beyond. And in it were two men, each reacting in his own way to an adventure incredible. One was deep in the computation of astronomical data; the other athrill with a quivering, nerve-shaking joy that was almost breath-taking.

A metal grating that had formed the rear wall of their cabin was now the floor. Winslow had thrown the ship into a vertical climb that made of their machine a projectile shooting straight out from the earth. Gravitation held them now to the grating floor. And, stronger even than the earth-pull, was the constant acceleration of motion that made their weight doubled again and again.

The inventor moved ponderously, with leaden limbs, to take sights from the windows above, to consult his maps of the sky, check and re-check his figures. But Jerry had eyes only for the earth they had left.

FLAT on the grating he lay, his eyes over a thick glass in a protuberance of the shell that allowed him to stare and stare at what lay directly below. He watched the familiar things of earth vanish in fleecy clouds; through them there formed the great ball, where oceans and continents drew slowly into focus.

And now he was filled with a sense of great solitude. The world, in its old, familiar companionship, was gone —probably forever. The earth—*his* earth—*his* world—that place of vast distances on land and on sea, of lofty mountain ranges and heaving oceans, of cities, countries, continents — was become but a toy. A plaything from the nursery of some baby god, hanging so quiet in space he could almost reach and take it in his hands.

Beyond it the sun was blazing, a hard outlined disc in the black sky. Its rays made shining brilliance of a polar icecap.

Jerry Foster closed his eyes and drew back from the glass. Again he was aware of the generator, whose endless roar reverberated in their compartment. A smaller but similar apparatus was operating on one of the liquids from the inventor's laboratory to generate oxygen and release it inside the room. An escape valve had been set to maintain one atmosphere of pressure about them. Water dripped from a con-

denser where both gases were formed to burn into water vapor and cool to liquid form.

ONE of the windows below admitted a shaft of direct sunlight; it illumined their room with a faint glow. It would never cease, Jerry knew. They were in a place of eternal sunshine, yet a realm of an endless night. Above him, as Jerry raised his head, the windows framed nothing but utter blackness, save where some brilliant point marked the presence of a star. He missed the soft diffusion of light that makes daylight on earth. Here was only the one straight beam that entered one window to make a circle of light on the opposite wall.

Jerry looked from a window of heavy glass at the side. This had been the bottom of their ship when they left. And he found in the heavens the object of their quest. Clear-cut and golden was half the circle; the rest glowed faintly in the airless void. He tried to realize the bewildering fact—the moon, this great globe that he saw, was rushing, as were they, to their trysting-place in space.

Jerry stared until his eyes were aching. His mind refused to take hold upon the truth he knew was true. He was suddenly tired, heavy with weariness that was an aftermath of his emotional turmoil. He let his heavy body relax where some blankets had piled themselves upon the grated floor. The roar of the generator faded into far silence as he slipped into that strange spaceless realm that men call sleep.

THE human mind is marvelous in its power of adjustment, its adaptability to the new and the strange. The unbelievable is so soon the commonplace. Jerry Foster was to sleep more than once in this tiny new world of Winslow's creating, this diminutive meteor, inside which they lived and moved and thought and talked. The fact of their new existence soon ceased as a topic of wonder.

They alternated in their rest. And they counted the passage of time by the hours their watches marked, then divided these hours into days out there where there were no days. Seven of them had passed when the hour came that Winslow chose for checking their speed.

They were driving directly toward the moon, which was assuming proportions like those of earth. The pilot admitted a portion of the blast to a bow port, and the globe ahead of them gradually swung off. The pilot was reversing their position in space to bring the powerful blast of their stern exhaust toward the moon, so as to resist somewhat its increasing pull.

Now their stern windows showed the approaching globe. It was slowly expanding. They were falling toward it. The inventor moved a rheostat, and from behind them the stern blast rose to a tremendous roar. The deceleration held them with unbearable weight to the rear of the cabin.

No thought now for the shining earth, yellow and brilliant in the velvet sky above. Jerry Foster watched through the slow hours as the globe beneath them enlarged and expanded in ever-increasing slowness. Slowly their falling motion slackened as they cushioned against the terrific thrust of the exhaust below.

THE globe ceased to grow and held constant. Winslow cut the exhaust to a gentler blast. They were definitely within the moon's gravitational field; their last hold upon the earth was severed. The great globe was revolving beneath them.

"How about it?" Foster asked breathlessly. "It doesn't revolve like that—not the moon!"

"We have approached from the earth side," said the other, "but we have overshot it. Say that the moon is revolving, or say that we are swinging about it in an orbit of our own—it is all the same thing.

"And soon," he added slowly, "we

shall see. . . ." He faltered and his lips trembled and refused to frame the words of a dream that was coming true. "We shall see . . . the lost side of the moon. What will it be . . . what—will —it—be. . . .?"

To Foster the whole experience had now the unreality of a dream. He could not bring himself into mental focus. His thoughts were blurred, his emotions dead.

They were approaching the moon, he told himself. It was the moon that was there below them, slowly enlarging now, as their own earth had hung below them, but dwindling, when they left.

"The moon!" he told himself over and over. "The moon—it is real!" But the numbness in his brain would not be shaken off.

His voice, when he spoke, was casual. He might have been speaking of any commonplace—a ball-game, or a good show.

"The sun is coming from my right," he said. "We are going around toward the dark side of the moon. Shall you land there?"

Winslow shook his head. "Wait," he said, "and watch."

Jerry returned to his circle of glass.

THERE was a shading of light on the surface below him. From the right the sun's brilliance threw black shadows and bright beams transversely over a wilderness of volcanic waste. And beyond, where the rays could not reach, was a greater desolation of darkness, its blackness relieved only by a dim light. He realized with a start of amazement that the dim light he saw was that of their own earth far above; it was lighting their approach to this sister orb.

Their side-motion was swift as they drew nearer. Another hour and more, and they were drawing toward an expanse of utter darkness. The earth-light was fading where they passed. They were approaching, in very fact, the other side of the moon.

What was below? What mysteries awaited them? He shivered, despite the warmth of the generator, cheery-red, that heated the snug cabin; shivered with unformed thoughts of unknown terrors. But he forced his voice to calm steadiness when he repeated his question to Winslow.

"Must we land there?" he asked. "In the dark?"

The inventor was piloting his ship with ceaseless concentration. Their falling speed was checked; they were close enough so that the whistling of air was heard merging with the thunder of their exhaust. He moved the rheostat under his hand, and the thunder slackened.

"No," he said. "You are forgetting your astronomy. This 'other side' is subject to the same conditions as the near side. The sun shines on them alike, but alternately. We are rounding the limb away from the sun. We find, as you see, a darkness that is absolute except for the light of the stars. Here the earth never shines, and the sun only during the lunar day. But the sun is creeping down this other side. Their day, equal to fifteen of our days, is beginning. We shall come into the light again. I am checking our motion across the surface. We shall land, when it seems best, later on. There will be light."

THE thin strong hands of the pilot played over the current and valve controls. Their ship slowly swung and dipped to a horizontal position. A blast from below held them off from the moon. A bow port was roaring as their speed slowly decreased.

Minutes merged endlessly into long hours as Jerry's eager eyes strained to detect some definite form on the surface beneath. Dimly a glow appeared far ahead; slowly the darkness faded. They were moving ahead, but their wild speed was checked. And slowly the new earth below took on outline and form as the sun's glow crept over it.

What would the light disclose? His mind held irrationally to thoughts his reason would have condemned. He found himself watching for people, for houses, lights gleaming from windows. This, in a region of cold that approached the absolute zero. The reality came as a shock.

The first rays that crept into vision were silvery fingers of light. They reflected up to the heights in glittering brilliance. They gathered and merged as the ship drove on toward the sunrise, and they showed to the watching eyes a wondrous, a marvelous world. A world that was snowbound, weighted and blanketed with a mantle of white.

TO JERRY the truth came as a crushing, a horrible blow. He turned slowly to look at his companion; to look and be startled anew by the happiness depicted on the lean face.

"I knew it," the pilot was saying. "I always *knew* it. But now—now. . . ." He was speechless with joy.'

"It's terrible!" said Foster. He almost resented the other's elation. "It's a hell! Just a frozen hell of desolation."

"Man—man!" was the response, "can't you see? Look! The whiteness we see is snow, a snow of carbon dioxide. The cold is beyond guessing. But the clear places—the vast fields—it's ice, man, it's ice!"

"Horrible!" Jerry shuddered.

"Beautiful," said the other. "Marvellous! Think, think what that means. It means water in the hot lunar day. It means vapor and clouds in the sky. It means that where that is there is air—life, perhaps. God alone knows all that it means. And we, too, shall know. . . ."

The ship settled slowly to the surface of the new world. Black blobs of shadow become distinct craters; volcanoes rose slowly to meet them, to drift aside and rise above as they sank to the floor of a valley. They came to rest upon a rocky floor.

On all sides their windows showed a waste of torn and twisted rock. Volcanic mountains towered to the heights, their sides streaked with masses of lava, frozen to stillness these countless years from its molten state. The rising sun, its movement imperceptible, cast long slanting rays between the peaks. It lighted a ghostly world, white with thick hoar-frost of solid carbon dioxide. A silent world, locked in the stillness of cold near the absolute zero. Not a breath of air stirred; no flurry of snow gave semblance of life to the scene. Their generator was stillen, and the silence, after the endless roaring of endless days, was overpowering.

BUT Winslow pointed exultantly from one window, where an icy expanse could be seen. "That will be water," he said; "water, when the sun has risen."

He turned on the generator for warmth. The cold was striking through the thick insulated walls. They sat silent, peering out upon that boundless desolation, upon a world's breathless nakedness, exposed for the first time in all eternity to human eyes.

Jerry's mind was searching for some means of expression, but the words would not come. There were neither words nor coherent thoughts to give vent to the emotions that surged within him.

Their watches showed the passage of nearly two earth days before they dared venture forth. They watched the white mantle of frost vanish into gas. From the darkness that they called "west," winds rushed shriekingly into the sunrise.

"Convection currents," Winslow explained; "off under the sun. In the direct rays the heat grows intense; the air rises. This is rushing in to fill the void. It will serve our ends, too. It will churn the air into a mixture we can breathe, dispel the thick layer of CO_2 that must have formed close to the ground."

More hours, and the icy sheet was melting. A film of water rippled in the gusts of wind. Winslow opened the release valve that would permit the escape of air from their chamber, equalizing the pressures within and without. The air hissed through the valve, and he closed it so the escape was gradual.

"We must exercise," he told Jerry. "We will decompress slowly, like divers coming up from deep-sea work. But watch yourself," he warned. "Remember you are six times as strong as you were on the earth. Don't jump through the roof."

THE valve had ceased to hiss when Winslow opened it wide. The air in their cabin was thin; their lungs labored heavily at first. Jerry felt as he had felt more than once at some great elevation on earth. But they lived, and they could breathe, and they were about to do what never man had done—to set foot on this place men called the unknown side of the moon.

Earth habits were strong; Jerry brought his pistol and a hunting knife out of his pack and hung them at his belt, as the inventor opened the door and sniffed cautiously of the air.

Jerry Foster's blood was racing; the air was cold on his face as he rushed out. But it brought to his nostrils odors strange and yet strangely familiar. He was oddly light-headed, irresponsible as a child as he shouted and danced and threw himself high in the air, to laugh childishly at the pure pleasure of his light landing.

The sun made long shadows of two ludicrous figures that went leaping and racing across the rocks. Their strength was prodigous, and they were filled with an upwelling joy of living and the combined urge of an eternity of spring-times. The very air tingled with life; there was overpowering intoxication in this potent, exhilarating breath from a world new-born.

The ground that they crossed so recklessly was a vast honeycomb of caves. Between the rocks the soil was soft with the waters from melting ice, and the men laughed as they floundered at times in the oozing mud. Beyond was a lake, and it was blue with a depth of color that was almost black, a reflection of the deep, velvet blackness of the sky overhead. And beyond that was the sloping side of an extinct volcano.

"Up—up!" Jerry shouted. "From up there we will see the whole world—the whole moon!" He laughed as he repeated the exultant phrase: "The moon—the whole moon!"

DESPITE their strength which carried them in wild bounds across impassable chasms, their laboring lungs checked them in the ascent. The joyous inebriation was wearing off. Winslow met his companion's eyes sheepishly as they stopped where a sheer cliff of basalt above caught and held the warmth of the sun's rays. Behind them it rose a straight hundred feet, and before stretched a vast panorama. The sun was mounting now in the sky. It brought into strong relief the welter of volcanic waste that extended in bold detail through the clear air far out to the horizon, where, misty and dim, the first vaporous clouds were forming from the steaming earth.

And as they watched, the depressing bareness and emptiness of that gray-black expanse was changing. Far to the east a pink flush was spreading on the hills. It wavered and flowed, and it changed, as they watched, to deep areas of orange and red. The delicate pink swept in waves over valleys and hills, a vast kaleidoscopic coloration that rioted over a strange world.

In silence it spilled into the valley below. The slope they had traversed was radiant with color.

At their feet the ground was in motion; it heaved and rolled in countless places. Rounded shapes in myriads were emerging. Plants—mushroom growths—poured up from the earth to drink in the sunshine of their brief summer. They burst the earth to show

unfolding leaves or blunted, rounding heads, that grew before the men's incredulous eyes.

Winslow was the first to recover from the stupefying beauty of the spectacle.

"The machine!" he gasped. "Back to the ship! We'll be swamped, overwhelmed. . . ." He rushed madly back down the slope.

JERRY was beside him, a revulsion of feeling driving him to frantic efforts. The piercing beauty that had enthralled him was become a thing of terror. The soft, pulpy, growing things that crushed beneath his feet were a menace in their lust for life.

They were a mile and more from the machine. Could they ever find it, Jerry wondered. The whole landscape was changed; bare rocks were half-hidden now under clinging, creeping vines. Only the sun remained as a guide. They must go toward the sun and a little north.

He followed Winslow, who was circling a huge area of weird growths that already were waist high. They leaped across a gaping chasm and fought their way over a low hill, rank with vegetation, only to be confronted by a maze of great stalks—stalks that sprouted as they watched, dismayed, and threw out grotesque and awkward branches.

They made one futile effort to force their way, but the trunks, though pliant, were unyielding. To attempt to find their way through the labyrinth was folly.

"We've got to keep on trying," said Jerry Foster. "We've got to get back, or. . . ."

Winslow, as the look in his eyes showed, needed no ending to that sentence. There was the summer of a lunar day ahead; the inventor did not need to be told of the scorching, broiling heat that would wither the land when the sun struck from straight overhead. And in their ship was food and water and a means of transport to the cooler heights above.

IT was Jerry who took charge of the situation. Here was a prodigous laboratory in which Winslow's science was useless, but in fighting with nature—even nature in as weird and terrifying a mood as this—Jerry felt himself not entirely incompetent.

He looked about him. It had been but an hour since they watched the first onslaught of this life that engulfed them. And now they were cut off. Through an opening, where bare rocks made a rift in the vegetation, he saw again the high ground where they had stood. There was more rock there on the volcanic slope: the growing things were in clumps—islands, rather than continents of rank growth.

"We must go back," he told Winslow, "and climb while we can. Get to the high ground, take bearings on the place where we left the ship. We'll look over the ground and figure some way to get there."

Winslow nodded. He was plainly bewildered, lost in the new jungle. He followed Jerry, who bounded across a crevice in the earth. The ground was rotten with the honeycomb of caves and cracks.

Jerry forced his way through and over a rock heap, where the thick trunks of nightmare trees were spaced farther apart. There was an opening ahead; he started forward, then stopped abruptly and motioned the other to silence.

FROM beyond there came sounds. There was rending of soft, pliant tissue. The sound came through the thin air from a grove up ahead, where big plants were waving, though the wind had long since ceased. To their ears came a snoring, blubbering snuffle. A stone was dislodged, to come bounding toward them from the hillside; the soft plants were flattened before it. The men cowered in the shelter of a giant fungus.

Beyond the rocks, above the mottled reds and yellows of the grotesque trees, a head appeared. It waved at the

end of a long, leathery neck. All mouth, it seemed to the watchers, as they saw a pair of short forelegs pull the succulent tops of the giant growth into a capacious maw. Below, there was visible a part of a gigantic, grayish body. It was crashing down toward them, eating greedily as it came.

"Back," said Jerry softly. "Go back to that cave. We will hide there in some crack in the ground."

They picked their way noiselessly over the rocks. The cave they had crossed offered a refuge from the beast. It went slantingly down into the ground, a great tunnel, deep in the rock. They dropped into the opening and started forward, only to recoil at the fetid stench that assailed their nostrils.

"A bear pit," gasped Jerry. "Great Heavens! What a smell!"

They stopped, dismayed. Far below them in the bowels of some subterranean passage was the crashing of loose stone; a scrambling and scratching of great claws came echoing to them. They leaped madly for the outer air.

"Over here," Jerry directed, and led the way, crouching, to the concealment of great stalks and vine-covered rocks. He pointed toward the open ground where they had been a few moments before. The tree-eater was out in full view. Its flabby, barrel-like body was squatted like that of some unearthly, giant toad, on massive hind legs. It sat erect, its forelegs hung in air, as a hoarse, snarling cry came from the cave. The great head, perched on the long leathery neck, waved from side to side.

THE noise from the cave ceased. The rift in the earth was in plain sight from where they cowered, and the eyes of the men were upon it. One instant it was empty; the next, in uncanny silence, it was filled with huge hideousness—an enormous, crouching beast.

It was black, a dull leathery black. Its thick, hairless hide hung in creases and folds on a gaunt frame. Shorter than the tree-eater, it was still a thing of mammoth ugliness. Its hind legs were powerful and armed with claws that curved deep into the earth; its front legs displayed the same fearful weapons. A thick, heavy tail slashed forward and back over the ground. And from this to the grinning, heavy-toothed jaws and beady eyes where the long neck ended in a warty head, it was an incarnation of pitiless ferocity.

Was the scent of the hidden, shuddering men in its red nostrils? It forgot them at the sight of the beast in the clearing. The snarling cry echoed hideously in the thin air as the frightful body came erect with neck extended, jaws open and dripping. It hurled itself through the air in one terrific leap.

Had there been any lingering hope in the minds of the men that they had no carnivora to deal with, the ensuing struggle ended it. The attacker tore great masses of living flesh from the struggling, screaming body. The first cumbersome brute was helpless before its destroyer.

JERRY was trembling and sick at the sight, but he grasped his companion's arm and drew him after as he slipped quietly away.

"To the high ground," he whispered. "It's our only hope. Perhaps we can fight them off there—find some steep rock we can climb." They worked their way desperately through the rubbery, obstructing growth.

At the foot of the hill there was better going; the bare rock gave winding and twisting passage to the heights. They could have leaped over the stunted growths here, could have raced frantically for the high ground, but they dared not. To leap up into view of those fierce, searching eyes! It was unthinkable. They crouched low as they darted from their concealment to new shelter, and crawled behind rocks when open ground must be crossed.

They had dared regain hope when again the paralyzing scream ripped through the silence. It was answered by another and another from distant points. The valley of the caves was spewing out its loathsome dwellers from their winter's sleep.

The men raced openly now for the heights. As he leaped, Jerry turned to see over one shoulder a pursuer appear. It was one of the flesh-eaters, head to the ground on their trail. At sight of them its cry rang out again. It bounded forward in pursuit. And again there were answering screams from the jungle growth.

The men threw themselves frantically up the mountainside. Once Winslow landed in a sprawling heap and groaned as he drew himself to his feet. The beast was below them. Jerry seized a great boulder, whose earth-weight would have made it immovable. He raised it above his head and sent it crashing down the slope.

ANOTHER and another he threw. One struck the great beast in mid-air; it was pure luck that drove the stone crashing against the creature's head. It fell back with a blood-chilling snarl that was half shriek. Another monster appeared, to throw itself upon the first and tear at the crushed, waving head.

Jerry took his companion by the arm. His voice came strangled from his straining lungs. "Are you hurt?" he gasped. "Can you run?"

Winslow nodded breathlessly. Again they gathered themselves for their wild, leaping retreat toward the top. An uproar of furious fighting behind them marked where a score of the monsters had gathered for the feast.

Jerry watched vainly for some refuge, some pinnacle of rock or precipice they could climb, and from which they could beat down their attackers. There was nothing but the welter of volcanic waste: rock heaps and boulders and smooth streams of solid lava. Perhaps in the crater, he thought, over the ragged crest of the cone, might be some place of safety.

The pack was in full cry again as they climbed gaspingly to the top. Beyond lay the funnel-shaped crater. Its vast inner slopes were less steep than the hill they had climbed. They were covered with a jungle, like those they had seen—a maze of red toadstools and distorted trees.

Jerry turned savagely to face the oncoming brutes. This, he knew, was the end. For this they had hurled themselves through space—to make a morning morsel for these incredible beasts.

ABOUT the men was a confusion of granite rocks, thrown from the crater to provide weapons, crude and futile, for two puny earth-dwellers. The men raised great rocks in the air and threw them with all their strength. Jerry struggled with a mammoth boulder, Winslow leaping to his aid. They toppled it over to start an avalanche of devastation that swept into the oncoming monsters.

And again there was respite for their aching arms, while the hunger-crazed brutes tore at the bruised bodies of their fellows.

Jerry Foster looked longingly again toward the crater. Should they chance the shelter of the jungle growth? Hopeless, he knew when these monsters could crash their way through while the men were impeded at every step. The mottled, orange-green stalks, as he watched them, seemed to move. He dashed the sweat from his face—his hair hung matted on his forehead—and passed a grimy hand across his eyes. Plainly, one of those stalks crossed a rocky-floored clearing.

Was he dreaming? Was this all a dream—a mad nightmare from which he could force himself to wake? Another moved. He saw definitely a mushroom growth pass swiftly to lose itself in a neighboring clump. Dreaming? No! The screams from behind him and Winslow's hoarse yell proved

the stark reality of his surroundings.

The vile creatures were close: Jerry could see their fierce heads dripping with blood. He reached for his pistol, knew instantly it was useless against these mammoth brutes, and joined Winslow, who was straining desperately at another great rock. It toppled and fell. Jerry hurled himself at a heap of smaller boulders and sent them crashing as fast as he could seize them and throw.

ONE quick look behind him showed still the impossible vision he had seen. And now there were figures—a mob of them—figures that threw off their wrappings of vegetation as they ran, cast to the ground the toadstool disguises that they held. They were caricatures of men that were swarming up the hill. . . .

He swung again in one last hopeless stand against the first horrible enemy. The two men poured a torrent of stones down the slope; they were useless, except for they delaying the advance. The beasts leaped and dodged. They were close when the rock-rain increased to a deluge.

Jerry was fighting in a red haze through which he saw dimly. He was aware of the hailstorm of boulders that were thick in the air. He saw vaguely the white faces and copper-clad bodies of strange men leaping about him, and he heard the wild bedlam of their shrieks as they joined in the mad battle against the common enemy.

The beasts were swept off in a landslide of loose rock—all but one. Above them, on a high point of stone, it was crouching to spring. A wild human figure, its flesh white as chalk, leaped forward with a tangle of fibers. The tangle was thrown as the brute was in air. A net spread and wrapped around the monster. It fell, clawing and tearing, to roll helplessly down the slope.

The battle was won. Jerry swayed drunkenly on his feet. About him the mountains seemed whirling, where unreal figures of men with dead white skin and shining copper armor danced dizzily.

He met for an instant the look from Winslow's dazed eyes. Out of the past a picture flashed clearly: Winslow—this same Winslow—arguing that the moon might hold mysteries still. He laughed thickly.

"And I said it was all known," he muttered through slack lips. "Nothing on the moon that wasn't known. . . ."

He was still laughing in a wild inebriation as a net settled close to entangle his swaying figure and bear him helpless to the ground. He saw Winslow similarly bound, saw him lifted to the shoulders of shouting, yelling men, whose stupid, pasty faces were wide-eyed with excitement.

He, too, was raised into the air. . . . They were being carried toward the crater's mouth. . . .

A FIGHT for life in thin air does not make for clear thinking. Jerry Foster knew only that a nightmare world was whirling about him; that beneath him powerful shoulders supported, while the one who carried him leap at racing speed down the slope.

They went more slowly down pathways cleared through the rank vegetation. Soft, pulpy vines from the grotesque trees brushed his face. He tried vaguely to shield himself, but his hands were bound fast. He was helpless in the entangling folds of the net.

The touch of cold stone brought him to his senses. He was lying on smooth rock. They were in a clearing. He turned his head to find Winslow, but could not find him.

Across the open ground were naked men, their bodies, like these others, dead white in the sun's glare. They were dragging giant stalks to earth by means of ropes. Trunks and branches, bright in their colors of yellow and orange and flaming red, were hacked to short lengths and piled on all sides. The workers, as Jerry watched, dropped

their implements to race toward him. There was a press of flat, white faces above. His captors, in their copper armor, beat the newcomers back. The babel of chattering voices was deafening.

AGAIN he was lifted into the air—plainly these were no weaklings he had to deal with—and again the warrior band surrounded him as the march was resumed. The milling, shrieking crowd of workers followed in an ear-splitting mob.

The forest ended, and the men went slowly now down smooth, rocky slopes to stop upon a wide, level expanse. Before he was placed on the ground Jerry had a glimpse of a funnel-shaped pit—the mouth of the extinct volcano. And toward it, bound and helpless, was being carried a struggling form which he thought he recognized.

"Winslow!" he shouted. But the bodies in their gleaming copper armor closed about him in a solid throng and cut off his view.

In the sky the sun had moved slowly upward since first they landed. It slanted brightly now into the eyes of the prostrate man, and made a spectacle of his twisting contortions as he tried to get his hands on his knife in its sheath at his belt. This and his pistol were under his coat. But he could not reach them. He lay panting with his exertions.

One of the warriors seemed to have authority, for his arms alone of all the group were sheathed with copper circlets, and the others obeyed his orders. Jerry addressed himself to this one. He knew the words were unintelligible, but he pleaded desperately for a chance.

"Take this off," he said. "We are friendly—friends—friends!" He struggled to keep himself from shouting, to keep his voice under control. "The other man," he said, "bring him back." And again he repeated: "We are friends."

He scanned his captors' faces.

THE pasty face above him was impassive; the eyes stared uncomprehendingly into his. Then the figure barked an order. One of the warriors swung Jerry lightly to his shoulder, and started toward the pit.

At its edge was a basket, a huge affair of knotted fiber ropes. Dimly, Jerry saw other baskets standing about: they were filled with the fragments of fungus. Still bound, he was placed in the empty container. Hands grasped the meshes, and he was swung out over the edge. A rope was above him; he was lower steadily into the dark shaft.

Jerry breathed a sigh of relief. This was not death—not yet. And Winslow? Safe, perhaps, for he had traveled this same road.

There was figures outlined above against the circle of light, figures that clambered like apes down swaying ropes. The light glinted and sparkled from their shining armor. His escort was still with him.

The circle of light changed to a glowing ring, where only the rim was lighted. Above was the deep black of the lunar sky. Then the circle faded to a mere point as he went down into the pit.

The rope basket came to rest upon a rock floor, and Jerry was lifted out. He saw plainly the figures about him, and he wondered vaguely at the light that came from the walls of the cavern. There were long lines of soft light, leading off into the dark, lines that marked plainly a labyrinth of passageways, leading in all directions.

BEYOND a narrow entrance was one brighter than the rest, a broad avenue that led downward still further into the depths. Here he was carried. He tried vainly to keep some mental map of their course. He would return some day—he *must* return—he and Winslow. They would escape. . . . But the passage turned and twisted; there were many branching corridors, each with its lines of light. Jerry

gave up the attempt. It was a maze of serpentine streets beyond his power to remember and recall.

Before him the passage was still wider. It was opening into a great room. . . . Jerry found himself upon the floor. He strained cruelly at the cords about his head as he twisted and turned to get a view of his surroundings.

The room was a cave, its vast vaulted ceiling sprung high above a level floor, where the figures of men—odd, plaster-white figures like animated statues—were small in the distance. His eyes were drawn quickly to the brilliant glow of the farther wall. There was the bright black of basaltic formation, and in it—though he knew the impossibility—was shining the sun.

Jerry blinked his eyes to look again and again; the golden circle was dazzling. It was set at a point well above the smooth floor, and up to it there led a sloping pathway of gold. It was as if they had indeed captured their god, these worshipers of the sun, had captured and held it for the adoration of the grovelling people.

Jerry saw them upon the floor. The copper of the armored men gleamed bright in the glow from beyond, as they abased themselves and crept slowly toward the light. At each side of the dazzling orb was a platform. There were figures upon it, seated figures, Jerry saw, even at a distance, that were robed in vestments of the sun. Their forms gleamed gold in the light.

THE leader that Jerry had noted among his captors crept on in advance of his men. From among the bright figures on the platform above one rose to extend a glowing arm. He spoke, and the tones rolled majestically back from the high vault above. The crawling man below him stopped rigidly where he was. Another word from above, and he rose slowly to his feet. He stood full in the glow of the captive sun, to be outlined in black against the brilliance beyond.

Haltingly he spoke. Then, seeming to gain confidence, he launched into a torrent of words. He gestured and waved, and, to Foster, the sign language was plain. He saw reenacted the surprise of the warriors upon beholding these intruders; saw how they had spied out upon them, using trunks and branches of the fungus as a screen; saw in pantomime their own battle with the beasts, then the rush of the armed men to the rescue. Again the net was thrown, and the gesturing figure turned to point dramatically where Jerry lay bound, then pounded his armored chest with unconcealed pride.

He ceased to speak, and there was utter silence in the room as the figure above crossed to stand before the golden sun. He too abased himself before the sign of their god, then rose, to stand motionless, listening. . . .

For a breathless interval he waited before the oracle, then prostrated himself again and returned to his place.

HE repeated, it seemed, a command, congratulation, to judge by the ecstasy of the figure below. The warrior turned once to throw himself before the image of the sun; he repeated this again and yet again before he crept back to his fellows. The group arose and rushed swiftly toward the bound man.

They brought him quickly into the presence. With scant ceremony Jerry was unrolled from the net; he lay free and gasping upon the floor. The men scurried like mad from out the pathway of light that shone down from the false sun. Jerry rose to his feet; the brilliance before him almost blinded, but he saw now whence it came.

There was a hollow in the wall, a great parabola, deep and wide, and it was lined throughout with beaten gold. In a straight path the light was reflected from every point—every point but one, for at the far end, where the curved sides joined, was a circle of darkness. It stared like an eye, evil, portentous. Jerry nerved himself for

an ordeal, unknown but imminent. The black eye glared at him unwinkingly.

Before him was the pathway of light; it shone brilliantly down the sloping ramp where a floor of bright gold led up to the sun god itself.

The figure on the dais raised its hand. Jerry heard the words come from its lips and roll sonorously back from above. The figure waited for an answer.

Jerry's hands slipped beneath his coat to rest reassuringly upon his weapons. He withdrew his hands empty and raised one toward the figure above.

"I do not understand your words," he said. "Your language is strange. No doubt mine is as strange to you. I come as a visitor—I am friendly." He held out both his hands, palms upward.

"We have come, my friend and myself, on a friendly errand." He paused to look vainly about for Winslow. "And you have received us as if we were wild animals."

JERRY FOSTER, of San Francisco, U. S. A., was suddenly resentful of their treatment. His words were meaningless, but his tones were not. "You have tied us," he said, "bound us—dragged us before you. Is that the way you receive your guests from another world?"

The golden-clad figure stood in majestic silence while Jerry was speaking. It waited a moment after his outburst, then crossed again to bow low in the floodlight of gold. As before, it seemed listening to words from the black heart of the strange sun, words quite inaudible—soundless. He returned quickly and waved Jerry's attention to the place of light.

The sense of a presence there in the central blackness was strong upon the waiting man. In that other life that now seemed so remote—his life on earth—Jerry had once felt the threat of a concealed intruder in the dark. He recalled it vividly now. The sensation was the same.

But it was magnified. There was no denying the reality of a malign something at the heart of that golden glow. The black center of it vibrated with cold and venomous hate. It struck upon the waiting man like a physical force. His head was swimming, his thoughts refused to form. He was as if suspended in a great void, where all that was lay deep in the center of that radiant orb. And it drew him irresistibly on.

LIKE a dazed bird, held and stricken in the hypnotic gaze of a snake, Jerry took one stiff, unconscious forward step. Another, and another. He strove dumbly, helplessly, for realization—there was nothing in the universe but the certain thing ahead.

His foot was upon the golden incline leading to his doom, when that buried something which marks a man—the spark of divinity which sets him apart as one alone—reasserted itself.

"I am," he heard his own voice shouting in strangled tones, "I am Jerry Foster! I am I. . . . I am myself!"

He awoke from his stupor with a shock that set every nerve-fiber quivering. For long minutes he stood silent. Then, realizing his victory and proving it to his own soul, he looked straight into the black center of the threatening sun god, and he laughed, loudly and contemptuously. Then, turning, and with steady stride, he walked calmly from the light.

The great hall was silent with a silence that was breathless. Then pandemonium broke lose. The priests and the god had been defied, and screaming and shouts rang throughout the vast chamber to re-echo batteringly from ceiling and walls. There was tumult and confusion where the populace thronged. Even the figures above on the dais were milling about in disorder; the rippling gold of their robes made a spectacle that forced Jerry's involuntary admiration.

Then one from among them sprang

forward. His voice roared above the shattering din. The room was still. Another order, and the guard of armed fighting men formed in a circle about the defier of their god.

Jerry waited. Trouble was about due, he told himself. One hand was on his pistol, tense and ready. As the ranks stood silent and made no move to attack, Jerry Foster did a curious thing.

IT was not done intentionally, but Jerry Foster had nerves, and they had been under a strain. His hand went unconsciously to his pocket and extracted a cigarette. There were matches there, too, and he struck one and lighted the white cylinder. The match made a tiny flame where he flipped it.

The whole room whispered and hissed with one loud gasp of amazement, but the moan that followed, that echoed and resounded from the roof, was of nothing but horror. Even the warriors drew back in trembling dismay. And before them the stranger they had brought to the very portal of their sanctum of holies blew clouds of white smoke that eddied and whirled as they rose round his head.

The effect was not lost upon Jerry. And his mind was working. Was fire unknown to these strange beings? Here in the deep caverns, far from the surface, was fire a thing of terror to them? He looked back toward the wall.

"If they rush me," he thought, "there's a good place to be. That will feel mighty comfortable at my back."

He walked slowly, the smoke rising thick about his head. The copper-clad figures before him withdrew, the ranks parting to let him through. Unharmed he reached the safety of the wall. The enemy now formed a semi-circle before him.

The inertia of the stricken beings on the platform was broken by his move. Again their head priest gave an order; from another side a second detachment of armed men came on. They were carrying something. Jerry leaned forward in quivering preparedness as he saw, in the floodlight of radiance, the body of Winslow lying on the floor.

WAS he injured? Dead? The devastating loneliness that swept him at the sight of the still body was unnerving. He breathed a long sigh of relief as the lanky figure rose slowly to its feet. Winslow was alive! They would show these beastly, unearthly humans something yet.

There was no preparation—no preliminaries. Whether Winslow could have reacted as Jerry had would never be known. He seemed stunned and helpless, and it was with no resisting hesitation that he began the climb to the unknown.

Jerry's crouching tenseness snapped. No thought of the gun as he sprang toward the enemy between him and his friend. "No, Winslow—no!" he shouted as he leaped at the figures in front of him.

Their strength had seemed startling to Jerry when they had carried him like a child. He had forgotten his lightness here on this unheavy world. And he had forgotten his own great strength.

No panting, exhausted, beaten fighter of beasts was this that hurled himself against the ranks before him. One coppery sword flashed upward above his head. Its bearer was seized in two hands that picked him bodily from the floor and crashed him, a living projectile, among the others. Jerry waited for no more. There was an opening ahead, and beyond was Winslow, walking stiffly, certainly, up that damnable slope. He threw himself in giant leaps across the floor.

His companion was half-way up the glittering ramp when Jerry seized him. Holding him in his arms, he leaped outward, to land rolling on the floor. He was on his feet in an instant. He dragged Winslow to a standing posture.

"Wake up, man," he was shouting. "Winslow—wake up!"

THE onrushing horde was upon them while the tall man was still brushing his hand over weary eyes, and Jerry, for the moment, had the fighting to himself.

No time for anything but parry and strike. He caught one white face on the jaw; the man went bodily through the air. Jerry landed again and again. His weapons were his fists, and they did fearful execution. And he knew, at length, that he was not alone.

The long arms of the inventor tore a sword from an upraised hand. Its owner was thrown, as Jerry had thrown one previously, to catapult among its fellows.

They were clear for an instant. "Back to the wall!" shouted Jerry. He had time and room to reach for his pistol, and drew it quickly from its holster. They backed hastily to the protection of the stone wall. There were scores upon scores of copper-clad figures that followed them, held out of reach. With a flashing of gold, the head priest himself sprang to urge on his men.

"Ready!" said Jerry. "I wish you had a gun! Here! Take this!" He handed his companion a long-bladed knife, then turned to aim his pistol with steady hand at the oncoming figure in golden robes.

The priest stopped for a brief scrutiny of this new menace, then screamed out an order and hurled himself into the sheltering press of men.

Jerry fired into the whirl of bodies. The roar of the forty-five tore like a battery of siege guns throughout the great room. But the creatures before them were fighting now in an insane frenzy. Their bodies pressed the two men to the wall. Jerry fired again, and the fall of a limp, gold-robed body gave him a thrill of delight.

THE inventor was holding a white body as a shield, while he thrust past it incessantly with a red blade. There were huddled figures before them that lay quiet or crept painfully away. The body of the head priest was being carried off.

The dark mouth of a passage had impressed itself upon Jerry; he remembered it now. It offered a means of escape.

"Off to your right," he said. "Work off to your right. There's a hole in the wall—"

They fought off the struggling eruption of bodies that drove at them. Jerry was saving his ammunition, but once more he fired as a sword was falling over Winslow's head. He drove strongly with his left and beat at the white skulls with the butt of the gun gripped in his other hand.

The passage was suddenly behind them. One last stand against the screaming, frothing faces, and they backed, panting, into the sheltering dark. Jerry stopped and took Winslow by the arm.

"Are you hurt?" he demanded. The inventor was too breathless for reply.

"Nothing much," he panted, after a moment. "One got me along the cheek—you shot him just in time. How about you?"

"O.K.," was the assurance. "But, man, I've been hammered!

"What a peach of a fight," he added. "But now what?"

Winslow laughed mirthlessly in the dark. "This looks like a one-way street," he said. "We can't go back.

"Say," he demanded, with sudden, dim recollection. "I remember something of a dream—a ghastly sort of thing. I was . . . I was . . . where was I when you collared me? Where was I headed?"

"For something too damnable for us to imagine," Jerry stated emphatically.

They were walking as rapidly as they dared through the dark passage. There were high-pitched voices from the rear. From somewhere ahead came the sound of running water.

"Too damnable to imagine!" he repeated. "But we'll hunt the vile thing out, if we get a chance, and we'll slaughter—"

The words ended in a startled exclamation as the ground fell beneath their feet. They pitched headlong into nothingness—

THERE was water in Jerry's face as he fell. A torrent engulfed him as he struck into it, pouring in from a lower passageway to plunge straight down the shaft. The roaring crash of water tore madly at his body; his arm was shot through with stabbing pain as Winslow's falling body was torn from his grasp.

He was conscious only of his bursting lungs when he came to the surface from the depths into which he plunged. With one arm he swam weakly, the other trailing at his side, while he gulped greedily at the air.

A voice came hoarsely from a distance. "Foster," it called. "Jerry—where are you, Jerry?"

Ah, the good air in his lungs—he could swim more strongly now. He managed to gasp an answer: "Here, Winslow, over here!" There was a splashing in response to his voice. He heard it over the noise of the water; he had been swept away from the cataract.

A hand was upon him in the dark. "Hurt?" asked the welcome voice. "Can you swim, Jerry?"

"A little. One arm's working."

THE hands fumbled over him quick, and his good arm was drawn over the other's back. "Hang on," Winslow told him. "I can swim. I'm half fish."

Jerry clung to the folds of the coat. He was light in the water, he felt—riding high—and the man beside him was swimming with strong strokes. He released his hold on the other as he felt strength ebbing back into his body.

"I can paddle," he said; "but stick around. Where are we going?"

"In a circle, probably," was the reply, "though I'm trying to hold a straight course. How big is this lake, I wonder?"

They swam slowly, saving their strength, but it was a time that seemed like endless hours before the answer to Winslow's question was found. Jerry was fighting weakly, exhausted, and the hand supporting him was failing when they felt sharp rocks against their dragging feet. The hand that had held him still clung tightly to his shoulder as they struggled upward and fell together where great rocks gave safety in the darkness. In his arm the sharp pain had dwindled to numbness; Jerry Foster asked only for sleep.

There was light about him when he awoke. In his stupor he had found again the surroundings he knew so well—the clash and clatter of a distant city—the roaring traffic—signals, and glowing lights. He came slowly back to unwelcome reality. The light was there, but it shone in luminous lines along the wall to illumine the hateful familiarity of the honeycombed rock that composed the moon.

IT showed, too, a familiar figure, breathing heavily where it lay on the far side of the small room. Winslow's face was pale in the dull light, and his eyes were closed. He was on a thick pallet of soft fibers, and across his body a cloth was spread, shot through with gold in strange designs.

Jerry Foster threw aside a robe of the same material that covered him. He stifled an involuntary word as a twinge of pain shot through his arm, then crossed noiselessly to shake softly at the shoulder of the sleeping man. Winslow, too, came slowly from his sleep of complete exhaustion, but his eyes were clear when they opened.

"Where are—" he began a question, but Jerry's hand was pressed quickly against his lips.

They stared slowly about. The room that held them was in the natural rock, but whether hewn out by hands or a natural formation they could not tell. The rock was rotten with perforations, through which air flowed in a cool stream.

Jerry came softly to his feet to feel cautiously of the glowing, luminous mounds along the wall. They were spread upon a ledge. The light was cold to his touch, the material like fine soil in his hands.

"Fluorescent," whispered Winslow. "Calcium sulphide, possibly; I saw them spreading it above ground in the sun. It absorbs light and gives it off slowly." Jerry nodded; the source of the endless glowing lines had been puzzling to him.

THEIR whispers ceased at a sound beyond a doorway. In the opening a figure appeared, tall and erect, the figure of a girl. Her face was white like the others of these whose lives were lived below the surface, but there was a kindly softness in the eyes, a refinement and intelligence of no low order, that contrasted with the cold eyes of the warriors and the priests. Not beautiful, perhaps, by earth standards, yet it required no straining of chivalry on Jerry's part to find her human and lovely.

In silence the men stood staring. Then Foster, with unconscious gentleness, made a revealing gesture. This woman—this girl—had saved them. He knew it without words, and he was wordless to reply. He dropped swiftly to his knees and pressed a bit of the golden robe against his lips.

A flush of scarlet swept across the white face and receded. The hand dropped from its startled poise and rested, gently, questioningly, on the brown head bent before her.

She murmured unintelligible words in a guarded voice as Jerry arose. "Marahna," she said, and touched her breast lightly. "Marahna." Her head was erect, the whole attitude imperious, commanding. She questioned them with swift, liquid words. The men shook their heads in utter incomprehension.

Again she spoke, and again they shook their heads. Jerry felt foolish and dumb. He took his turn at questioning, and this time, with a trace of a smile, it was the girl's turn to shake her head. She had mastered one sign at least.

Pointing toward the great hall they knew was somewhere above, she reenacted the scene there: she evidently knew what had transpired. And now Jerry nodded in confirmation. That she approved of the part they had played was evident.

NOW she questioned whence they had come. She pointed down, and her fluttering hands and graceful posture spoke eloquently. She showed them more than a trace of fear, too, as she marked them coming from the depths. Jerry shook his head in vehement denial.

He pointed above, spread his hands wide, tried as best he could to indicate vast distance beyond. She stared, wide-eyed, then in her turn knelt as if before a god.

"She thinks we have come down from the sun," Winslow surmised. "Well, let it go at that." But Jerry Foster was embarrassed in the strange role of a god; he raised the humbled, kneeling young woman to her feet.

He pointed to her gold-clad figure and repeated the name she had given. "Marahna," he said. "Marahna!" Then, placing his hand on his companion, he repeated: "Winslow—Winslow!" And, pointing to himself, he completed the introduction with: "Foster, Jerry—Jerry Foster!"

The pale lips formed themselves slowly to the strange and unaccustomed sounds.

"Cherrie," she repeated, and smiled in comprehension. "Cherrie."

This was the first of many lessons, and it was amazing to both men how rapidly they learned to get their thoughts across. In turn, they learned to read the messages that the slim hands and graceful, undulating body conveyed. Even words were linked one by one with their indicated objects and meanings.

ONE syllable the girl used only in a hushed and awe-stricken tone. It was "Oong" that she whispered, while her eyes filled with terror and dread. And they knew this for the name of the horror that waited in the black center of that unholy place where the pathway of light ascended. It was later that they learned to read hatred as well as sheer terror in the emotions that the word *Oong* aroused.

The first lesson ended in a soft exclamation from the girl. She withdrew, to return in a moment with a beaker of hammered gold, filled with cold water. In her hands, too, were strange fruits and branches of fungus. She ate bits of them to show they were food. And Jerry, as he watched her, was aware that he was famished. But the two men ate sparingly at first of the strange food.

It was tasteless, they found, except for an elusive flavor, but the reception of the food in their gnawing stomachs was satisfactory. Their strength was returning, and with it came hope of release. The moon-people, evidently, were not altogether villainous.

"Thank you," said Jerry in a normal tone, "that was—" White fingers trembled against his lips to enforce silence.

THE girl listened intently, then stole softly out into the corridor from which she had come. She motioned the men to follow, and pointed there in the dim light to a far room.

There were others, they saw; a group of young women lying at ease on their pallets, or moving slowly about. The need for quiet was apparent, more so when the figure of a man appeared as they watched. Quickly the girl, Marahna, stepped before them and motioned them back to their room.

She followed and glanced quickly about. In the farther wall was an opening, close to the floor, and low, but they managed to work their way through at her silent command. A passage, much like the others, lay beyond. It widened and grew higher, until they could stand erect. Back in the circle of light they saw, for a moment, the man, bowing low in respect before Marahna. He carried a basket of light that shone brightly in the room.

"Replenishing the supply of sulphide," whispered Winslow.

A current of air came cool and refreshing from a branching tunnel in the rock. There was no lack of ventilation, as they well knew, throughout all the tortuous passages, but this came with a scent of outdoors that set both men a-tingle with hope. Jerry forgot even the dull ache in his arm as he breathed deep of this messenger from the outside.

But exploration must wait. They needed to rest, to learn and to plan. They returned when Marahna called softly from the room.

TIME had lost all its meaning. They could only guess at the hours that had passed since the hour they left their ship, could only make unanswered surmises as to where was the sun or how much was left of the long lunar day. They must escape—they would escape—but their one stroke for freedom must not be made when darkness and paralyzing cold should force them back into the hands of the enemy tribes.

Marahna was with them much of the time, and always they struggled and strove with desperate concentration to grasp at the meanings of the thoughts she tried to convey. And they learned much.

Of the passage they believed they had found out to the surface, she knew little. But she showed them, with doubt in her face, that there was almost hopeless struggle along that path to the freedom above. Sadly she touched Jerry's injured arm, and she shook her head in dejection.

The arm had had a bad wrench, Jerry found. No fracture, but the muscles and ligaments had been painfully torn. But Jerry set his teeth firm at the thought of a possible escape.

ONCE, peering along the dark passage that led to the room where the others had been seen, the men noticed the deep bows that unfailingly marked the entrance of Marahna. They questioned her and learned that here was royalty among the people of the moon. This, as they considered the proud poise of her head and her whole attitude of unassuming superority, was not entirely surprising. But they marveled the more at the truth that she finally made plain to them.

Marahna, she told them, as plainly as if she were speaking in their own tongue, Marahna was chosen for death. And her white face was pitiful and her eyes full of horror as she enacted for them the slow march she must take up the long golden slope and into the horror that waited.

"A sacrifice to that god!" Jerry spoke with dismay. "No, no!" But the face of the Princess Marahna of the moon people was unutterably sad with unspoken thoughts as she touched her breast with one slender finger, then indicated the outer room and showed there were two there beside herself who were to go.

"Help us to get out," Jerry begged, and with fierce eagerness he showed them going through the passage to the outside. "We will come back, and we will find some way to end all this damnable thing."

She gave them to understand the time that was left. The sun, she showed, was long past the meridian and was on its return. The day was now reaching a close. And then, as the sun set, the great sacrifice would be made—had always been made—to insure the return of their god.

THEIR watches were useless, for the water had entered their cases. The two men waited what they judged was the length of a day, while Jerry tried to believe that his arm was improving. Then, putting a small supply of food in their pockets, they were ready for the attempt.

Jerry saw that his gun and knife were ready at his belt, and patted a pocket where his matches were safe in their watertight container. The prospect of escape almost unnerved him. To breathe the clear air; to stand in the radiant light of the sun—he could understand now how these people made a god of the sun. He turned to Marahna.

"Good-by," he said, "but not for long. We'll be back. And we'll save you, Marahna, we'll save you. Winslow will figure some way to do it. . . . We'll be back. . . ."

The girl was silent. She touched Jerry's arm, and shook her head slowly, doubtfully.

He reached for the hand. It trembled, he felt, in his. The impulse to take the slim form within his arms, to hold her close, was strong upon him. Would he ever see her again . . . would he?

"Won't you say good-by, Marahna?" he asked.

But she smiled, instead—a friendly smile, and encouraging. Then dropped in silence to her knees to press with both her trembling hands his hand upon her forehead. And, still in silence, she rose to vanish from the room.

The men entered the narrow opening to start forward into the dark. But Jerry Foster was puzzled, puzzled and more than a trifle hurt. Marahna could at least have said good-by. She knew the word, for he had taught it to her. And she had let him—them—go. . . .

"Oh, well," he thought, "how can I know how a princess feels—a princess of the moon? And why should I care—why should she? But. . . ." He refused to complete the thought. He hurried instead, as best he could, to follow Winslow, fumbling ahead of him in the dark.

JERRY had used plenty of muttered invective with the massage he had given his arm, but he cursed his handicap wholeheartedly at the end of some several hours.

They were standing, he and Winslow, in a dark tunnel. They had climbed and clawed their way through the absolute dark, over broken, fragments, through narrow apertures, down and up, and up again through a tortuous, winding course. And now they had reached the end. They had found the source of the fresh air, had come within reaching distance, it seemed, of sunlight and all that their freedom might mean. And they had come, too, to a precipitous rock wall.

They stared long and hopelessly at the shaft that reached, vertical and sheer, high, high over their heads. And a curse like that of Tantalus was theirs. For, far at the top, slanting in through some off-shooting passage, there was sunlight. It was unmistakable in its clear glare, beautiful, glorious — and unattainable.

There were roughnesses in the wall, footholds, handholds here and there. "It might be . . . it might be. . . ." Jerry tried to believe, but the ache in his arm made the thought hopeless and incomplete. He turned to his companion.

"I believe you can do it," he said steadily.

WINSLOW'S dark eyes were gleaming in the dimness that surrounded. "Possibly," he replied, and eyed the ascent with an appraising stare. "Even probably. But you know damn well, Foster, that I'm not going to try."

"Don't be an ass." Jerry's tone was harsh, but the tall man must have known what emotions lay underneath.

"We'll play it out together," he said.

Jerry was silent as he reached in the darkness for Winslow's hand.

"Of course I knew you were that sort," he said. He waited a moment, then added: "But you're going, old man, you're going. Don't you see it's our only hope?"

Winslow shook his head emphatically. Jerry could see him in the dim reflection from that radiance above. "Nothing doing," the calm voice assured him. "Don't bother to think up more reasons why I should desert."

"Listen!" Jerry gripped roughly at the other's shoulder. "Listen to reason.

"If you go and I go back there, what will happen? With Marahna gone we are helpless, and we will be helpless to save her. The long night is ahead. How can we live? Where can we live? We will be wiped out as sure as we're alive this minute.

"If you go—and if you make it to the ship—there's a chance. Alone, I may manage to stick it out." He knew he was lying, knew that the other knew it, too, but he went on determinedly. "You can wait for me up above. My arm will be well—" Winslow stopped him with a gesture.

"There's a chance," the older man was muttering, "there's a chance. . . ." He swung quickly toward Foster, to grab hard at the good right hand.

"I'm going," he stated. "I'm on my way. I won't say good-by; what's the use—I'll be back soon!"

He released his hold on Jerry to leap high in the air for a ledge of projecting rock. He caught it and hung. His foot found a toehold and he drew himself up to where another rough outcrop gave grip for his hands.

Jerry Foster stood frozen to throbbing stillness. Words were strangling in his throat, an impulse, almost irresistible, to call. If there were only a rope. . . .

He was still silent when the tiny figure of his companion and friend was lost in the heights, where it vanished into that tunnel from which came the light. He turned blindly, to stumble back into the dark.

MARAHNA was waiting when he regained the safety of her room. "Safety!" The thought was bitter when linked with the certain fate that lay ahead.

Silently she stroked the bent head of the man who dropped dejectedly upon

the hard stone floor. Her fingers were gentle, comforting, despite the utter hopelessness and discouragement that lay heavily upon him.

They sat thus, nor counted the flying minutes, while the fog of despair in the mind of the beaten man was clearing. He raised his head finally to meet the look in the dark eyes. And he managed a smile, as one can who has thought his way through to the bitter end and has faced it. He patted the hand that had stroked his bowed head.

"It's all right," he said gently. "What is to be, will be—and we can't change it. And it's all right somehow."

His sleeping, during their long stay, had been a cause for amusement to Marahna, whose habits were tuned to the long days and nights on the moon. And he was sleepy now, sleepy and tired. She spread the robe over him as he rested on the soft fiber bed.

He awoke from a deep sleep with a light heart. For Jerry Foster, as he faced his own certain death, had seen certain things. It was the end—that was one fact he couldn't evade. But he grinned cheerfully, all by himself in that strange cheerless room, as he thought of what else he had visioned.

"And it will be just one hell of a fight," he said softly aloud. "There will be some of those priests that will know they have been in a war."

HE examined again the knife and the automatic, and counted the cartridges left in the magazine. There were more he had found in a pocket of his coat, enough to replace those he had fired. He slipped the pistol into its holster at the sound of soft footsteps approaching.

It was Marahna who entered, a strange and barbaric Marahna. She was clad in a garment of spun gold that enveloped her tall figure. It trailed in rippling beauty on the floor—draped in resplendence her slim body, to end in soft folds about a head-dress that left Jerry breathless.

Her face was entirely concealed. The gold helmet covered her head. It was tall, made entirely of hammered gold in which spirals of jewels reflected their colors of glittering light. She was quite unrecognizable in the weird magnificence.

Only her voice identified the figure. She murmured chokingly some soft words, then raised her head with its barbaric helmet proudly high as she concluded. There were words become familiar now to Jerry. Together with the spectacle she presented, her meaning was more than plain.

"The time has come," she was telling him. "The sun . . . the hour of sacrifice."

Jerry leaped to his feet. His plans for battle were being revised. An idea—a plan, half-formed—was beating in his brain.

A sound was beating upon him, too. There were drums that throbbed in steady unison, that echoed hollowly along resounding walls, that approached in loudly increasing cadence.

THE plan was complete. "No!" said Jerry Foster, with a wild laugh. He reached to remove the golden helmet.

He placed it upon his own head, under the startled gaze of the wondering girl. He reached out for the robe.

"You shall not go," he told her. "I will go in your place. And when I reach that room. . . ." His eyes were savage behind the slits in the golden head-dress.

"No—no!" the girl protested. Her face showed plainly the complete hopelessness of what Jerry proposed. To pit himself against that antagonist—she knew how futile was the brave gesture.

Jerry was undaunted. "I've got to die anyway," he tried to explain, "and if I can get in one good crack at whatever is there—well, I may be of help."

His hand was taking off the cloak. Marahna's eyes were steady upon him. She ceased to resist. She whipped one of the covers from the couch about her

and helped him with the golden robe.

The throbbing of drums was hammering at Jerry's temples. They were close at hand! Marahna, without a word, rushed frantically back toward the room where the others waited.

And again Jerry Foster felt that odd tightening of disappointment about his heart. But what was the difference, he told himself, in a hundred years—or a hundred minutes. He set his lips tight and walked slowly out and down the passage.

The room he entered was deathly quiet. There were figures standing about, figures robed in their gold-threaded drapes, that stared strangely, wonderingly, at him, and drew themselves into a huddled group against the wall. And two there were, who stood apart: the other victims—their sacrificial garments wrapped them round where they waited for the third who was to accompany them. Jerry joined them as a guard came in from the outer hall.

THE drums were rolling softly in their rhythmic beat. The priests who entered showed annoyance at the delay; they gave a curt order, and motioned the three to follow.

Outside, the corridor was broad, and the double rows of lights on either side glowed brightly to illumine a pageant grotesque and terrible in its barbaric splendor. The drums throbbed louder. Jerry saw them in their fire of burnished metal, beaten by the hands of naked men. Beyond, a group of warriors waited. Stalwart and strongly muscled, they stood erect in copper armor beside a platform of metal bars, whose floor was of latticed gold. The victims were placed upon it to stand erect. Jerry balanced himself upon the golden floor as the warriors raised it slowly to their shoulders.

Priests, in robes of heavy golden rope, were ranged about; they formed a guard and escort ten deep about the living sacrifice. At that the drums increased their volume, and to this was added a nerve-racking, discordant and rasping jangle, when sheets of copper, paper-thin, were struck with a heavy hand. The pulsing, throbbing pandemonium was terrific as the march began.

Slowly they made their way through a winding gallery. Slowly they came to where a portal, high-arched, gave entrance upon the great hall. Solemnly, proudly, the priests lead the way as they circled the vast room. Their wrappings of gold were a scintillant quiver of light; above each hard face a circle of gold—symbol of the sun—was borne imperiously high.

THE priestly guard surrounded the platform where the three standing figures were huddled. And behind, and on either side, the men with the drums and the discordant, ringing sheets gave full force to their blows. The high vault above thundered and roared to the thunder and roar of the drums. And, high over all, a wailing began.

The thin shrillness beat with the tempo of the drums in a pitch that steadily descended. The glittering procession had come to rest at its appointed place in the pathway of light as the wailing came down to a moan. *"Oong! Oong!"* the voices groaned, while the walls re-echoed the despairing tones. Only from the band of warriors did the ear of Jerry Foster detect anything but misery and despair. The priests were silent, but the warriors, in their shining armor, stood erect and roared out the syllables in exultant joy.

The priests were now upon the dais —the rocky platform, divided by the great, glowing parabola of light. They stood erect as a new high priest, replacing the one Jerry had killed, crossed to bow and grovel in the radiance from their god.

The room was silent with the silence of a great tomb as the march of death began. Softly, from the silence, the drums resumed the merest whisper of their former thunderous booming. Be-

side him, Jerry heard the soft sobs of a girl. One of the figures swayed and threatened to fall as the platform was lowered to rest upon the floor. The other pressed close to support the drooping figure.

NOW the entire directed ray of light from the round, glowing hole struck full upon them. It blinded and dazzled, yet, plain and distinct, Jerry saw at its heart the circle of blackness, the eye of the mysterious, hypnotic parabola—the entrance to what lay beyond.

The beat of the drums was hypnotic. As if in a trance he saw, at the side of the way they must go, the form of the head priest beckon them on. The two victims at his side took one step on the path to their death. And the same stiff rigidity held Jerry as he, too, moved onward and up the golden ramp.

The drums were bearing them on. Louder they throbbed in a steady crescendo, to carry the three rigid figures a step at a time up the pathway of light.

The priest, Jerry felt more than saw, was beside them. Close ahead was the blackness that held the set stare of his eyes. One of the golden figures was before him. He saw the priest reach out to take the helmet from her head.

The movement aroused him from his numb horror. An impulse to escape surged through him; every nerve was tense and ready for a spring. He looked quickly about. The warriors were behind, the priests ready on their platform to direct them. And in the doorway, from where he first had seen this chamber, on the only way he knew that led to freedom, another figure, tall in its priestly robes, blocked the passage.

HOPELESS, he knew. And then there swept through him a wave of hate. Gone was his horror, and gone the dull deadness of brain and body. There, facing him, was the mouth of the pit, where waited a something—horrible, rapacious—demanding the lives of these people . . . of Marahna . . . of others—more and yet more.

No thought now of life or escape. For the moment, Jerry Foster's whole being held nothing but hot hate, and the wish for revenge.

Before him the priest was stripping the robe from the girl at his feet. She stood like a statue, a carving of purest alabaster, slim and erect in her white, slender nakedness. And the face that he saw through incredulous eyes was that of Marahna.

Marahna! The realization and quick understanding held him spellbound. She had come, had taken the robes from another poor victim . . . to be with him in this, the last hour. . . .

Marahna—a princess among these strange folk—was giving her life when another could have been in her place. And she smiled tremulously, bravely, as her eyes locked with his, as, speechless and spellbound, he stared through the eyelets of gold.

The priest was reaching for his head-dress. Jerry tensed. The moment had come.

HE was ready. As the weight left his shoulders, he dropped, with one swift movement, his golden disguise. The robe fell in folds at his feet. He stared in silence, through narrowing eyes, at the face of the head priest above him. Then, leaping straight up, he fastened one hand, sinewy, sun-browned and strong, on the white neck below the white face. They crashed back, to land on the ramp and roll, struggling, toward the edge.

Jerry's hold never slackened. He felt his fingers sink deep in the flesh. He came to his knees, then up, to hold the writhing figure at arm's length. Then, heaving with all his strength, he whipped the man into the air, to drag him in one leaping bound for the sheltering darkness beyond.

A figure was entering with him—a slim, naked figure, with glowing and worshipping eyes.

Behind them the silence was shat-

tered. Jerry saw, as he stepped from the light, the riot of figures that surged in hysterical frenzy through the great hall. The priests were leaping among them . . . the tall priest who had guarded the door was fighting his way through the mob.

Jerry loosed his quivering hand from the throat it held. He cast the figure from him. And he blinked his eyes to make them serve him in the blackness all about.

Beside him, a form, invisible in the dark, was stroking at his face, and a voice was whispering tremulously: "Cherrie . . . Cherrie!"

THE tumult in the great hall reached them but faintly. Jerry Foster strove desperately to focus his eyes in that darkness of utter night. A dim glow from the portal crept softly in to bring faint illumination to the farther wall. Slowly his eyes found that which they feared yet sought.

Off in the dark, directly opposite the entrance, was a white and ghostly thing. Formless and vague, it wavered and blurred to his straining eyes. He fumbled clumsily for a match, one of his treasured store. He must see—he must know what was waiting—

The match flared to a point of brilliance in the murky gloom. It showed, on the floor where they stood, a litter of dried vegetation—food, doubtless placed there as an offering. It was dry now, and dusty, and through it there shone the bleak whiteness of bones. Beyond was the floor, and beyond that. . . . The whiteness that had been but a blur grew sharply distinct.

Jerry could not have told what he expected the light to disclose. Certainly it was not the heaping of coils, milk-white and ghastly, that took shape before his staring eyes. Above them a head hung in air. It was motionless—lifeless, almost—like the coiled body that held it. But the eyes, black and staring, in the bloated, bulging head, made its poised stillness the more deadly.

Even in the dark Jerry had sensed the hypnotic spell of unseen eyes. Visible, they held him in a rigid, unreasoning terror. Unreal, unthinkable, this serpentlike horror, tremendous and ghastly in its loathsome whiteness. A dweller in the dark, used by the priests as a symbol and a threat for the ignorant folk who trusted and believed them. And it held him, stilled and stricken, in its evil spell.

THE flame was scorching Jerry's hand that nervelessly opened to release the match. The man was like a statue, frozen to mental deadness. About his feet a light was playing, unseen. A bit of the dry stuff sprang brightly to yellow flame. Neither seeing nor feeling, the figure of Jerry Foster stood, held in the deadly magic of the malignant eyes.

Dimly he sensed that the prostrate body on the floor was that of Marahna. Vaguely he knew when the form of the priest took a halting step forward. The fire his match had kindled was rising about his feet. The flames seared and stabbed with a pain that reached his dulled brain. Quivering and shaken, the body of Jerry Foster reacted again to a conscious thought. He leaped quickly as the deadly witchery left him, and he tore at the smoldering cloth about his legs.

And now he knew the thing before him for what it was. Shocking in its gigantic size, more so in the concentrated venom of its gaze, it was the flabby, scaly and crusted whiteness of the thing that filled his being with a deadly nausea. He stared with a sickened fascination at the flabby, drooping pouches beside the mouth, the distorted, bulging head and the short legs, armed with long, curving talons—legs that sprang from out the neck to clutch and tear at what the jaws might hold.

Deadly and hateful—loathsome beyond all imagining—still Jerry Foster found it was something a man could meet. Its devilish power to paralyze and still the soul of him was gone.

He snatched quickly for the gun at his belt and knelt to aim—then checked his finger on the trigger. The figure of the priest had come between him and the monster.

THE golden robe was dragging. It fell to the floor, to gleam dully in the flickering light of the fire. Against the heaping coils of white the priest was outlined, drawn, as Jerry sensed, against the protest of every fiber of his being. Yet, one stiff step at a time, he went faltering on. The hair above his white face was torn in disarray. And the face itself, so exultantly fierce in its hour of triumph, now a mask of quivering, hopeless terror.

The head of the monster came slowly to life. It raised and raised into the air. The mouth gaped open with a hoarse, sucking sound, then struck, like a whip of light, at the doomed priest.

His screams, as the thing descended upon him, rang through the roar of the forty-five. Jerry fired again where the black eyes showed above the writhing body of their prey. The head jerked backward, to tower in the darkness overhead. The mouth disgorged its contents to the floor.

Only for a shuddering instant did the monster pause. Then it launched its great bulk in a counter-attack, while the automatic poured out the rest of its futile lead.

The gun was knocked from his grasp as the great head smashed past, swerved from its aim by the blinding bullets. Jerry knew only that his knife was in his hand as the great scabrous coils closed about inevitably him.

Vaguely he heard the shouting from behind as the writhing folds engulfed him. He stabbed blindly at the scaly mass; again and again his knife ripped slashingly at the abhorrence that drew him close. Then his arm, too, was caught in the crushing loathesome embrace. . . .

HE felt no pain—the pressure alone was insufferable. His head was drawn back. Above him the horrible eyes glared into his—there was blood dripping from the jaws. . . .

He saw it in the brilliance of a light that flashed in blue heat overhead. There came in his ears a vast roaring of sound, a great heat-blast that scorched and burned at his face. The crushing pressure was relaxed. He went reeling to the floor, as the great coils whirled high into the air.

He was stunned by the fall, his body inert and relaxed. But he knew through it all that from somewhere above there was shrieking of gas—blue, roaring fires—a flame that tore blastingly into a writhing contortion beyond.

The tall figure of a priest was bending over him, but it was the voice of Winslow that was in his ears—a blessed, human voice—when he awoke.

"Thank God, I made it," the voice was saying, over and over. "Thank God, I found the ship and got back here in time!"

There was light within the cavern. The burning fungus was extinguished by the smothering coils that had crashed upon it, but beyond was a waving plume of yellow where a blue flame shot against a wall of rock.

And Jerry, through the stress and riot of emotion that overwhelmed him, laughed chokingly, wildly, at the words of his companion.

"It is sodium," Winslow was saying in explanation, as he saw Jerry's eyes resting on the light. "A hydrogen flame, but there's sodium in the rocks that turns the flame yellow. I rigged up a flame-thrower of hydrogen."

"You would," Jerry gasped through hysterical laughter. "You would do just that, and make your way back to this hell just to save me—you damn fool inventor!"

HE clung to Winslow, who was raising him to his feet. Marahna was beside him, robed in the golden

garment of the priest. She placed her hands beside his face to turn him toward the further wall. The light was fickle, but it showed him, as it rose and fell, the blackened, swollen body of the monster, still writhing in its death struggle. And beside it, blasted and charred, the head of the obscene sun god, severed by the cutting, obliterating blast, lay flabby and black in a silent heap.

"Rather effective," said Winslow, complacently, "though I didn't have much to work with. Two small vials of my liquid and a hand generator to furnish the current. A tubular strut from the frame of the ship made the blow-pipe."

"And these?" Jerry questioned, and pointed to the priest's vestments that Winslow still wore.

"Oh, it was all quiet up above," said the inventor, "and I came down the rope. But there was one of them waiting at the bottom. He didn't need these any more when I left, so I took them to help get about—"

He stopped, to cross quickly and pick up the flame-thrower as the flame died away. It roared as he worked at the mechanism, then dwindled again. Its light, for an instant, was reflected in a liquid on the floor.

"Broken!" said Winslow in an anguished voice. "The vials are gone—smashed! And I counted on this to hold off the mob, to get us safely out. . . ."

He regarded the instrument with silent dismay. The blue flame, as he held it, flickered and died.

"Not so good!" said Jerry slowly. He stopped to retrieve the knife. This, he reflected, was their sole weapon of defense. In the dim light his eyes met with Winslow's in mutual comprehension of their plight.

THERE were caverns beyond, dark and forbidding. Did they lead to the outer world? Or, instead, was it not probable that they went to some deep, subterranean dens, from which this monster had learned to come at the priests' summons? Jerry put from his mind all thought of escape in that direction.

"And Marahna, too," he told Winslow. "What will become of her?"

The girl got the essence of the question. Fumbling for phrases that they knew, she made them believe that she was safe. Her people, she told them, would protect her.

"Yes," Jerry agreed, "I guess that's right. She's a princess, you know," he reminded Winslow, "and the great mass of the people look up to her. Only the priests and warrior gangs will be opposed. But how can we get through them?"

The question was unanswered.

"We've got to knock them cold some way," said the inventor. "Got to give them a fright that will last till they let us get through. Once at the big shaft where we came down, we can make our getaway. But how to do it. . . ." His voice died away in dismal thought.

Jerry's eyes were casting about. The priest's robe? No, not good enough. It had brought Winslow through, but it couldn't take them back. Marahna? No help there; she had enough to do to protect herself from the fury of the priests.

HIS eyes rested again on the steaming, blackened mass that still showed the horrible features that had marked the head of the monster. The sun god! There was an idea there.

"Come!" he said to Winslow, and walked swiftly across to the severed head.

He had to steel his nerves before he could lay hands upon the vile thing. The paws were still attached behind the head. He took a grip on one and pulled. The great mass moved.

"I don't get the idea," said Winslow.

"Nor I," Jerry admitted, "but there's an idea here." His thoughts were racing in the moment's silence.

"I've got it," he shouted. "I've got it ! If only I can make Marahna under-

stand!" He led the girl nearer to the door, where his signs could be seen more plainly.

"You," he told her, "go out there." He pointed to the place where the priests had stood. "Tell your people" —he took the attitude of the orator declaiming to his audience—"we have come here from the sun." Again his signs were plain. Marahna nodded. This plainly was literal truth to her.

"Tell them," he continued earnestly, "we have saved them from this thing. Tell them it was no sun god, but a monster that the priests had kept. Monster!" he exclaimed, and pointed to the head and to the body that still writhed and jerked spasmodically. "No god—no!" And again the girl showed her understanding. Her eyes were glowing.

"Then," said Jerry, indicating Winslow and himself, "we will take the head that they have worshipped, and we'll drag it out and throw it to the priests." His gestures were graphic. The girl nodded her head in an ecstasy of comprehension.

"And then," Jerry added softly for Winslow's hearing, "we'll beat it. And, with luck, we'll make it safe."

"There's a chance," said Winslow softly, "there's a chance—and that's all we ask."

IT'S up to you, Marahna," Jerry told her. His words were meaningless, but the tone sufficed. She drew herself proudly erect, wrapped herself closely in the robe of braided gold, and stepped firmly and fearlessly through the portal and down toward the platform of the priests.

The two men watched from the shadows. Beyond the outline of the platform they saw the warrior clans, a phalanx of protecting bodies. And beyond, drawn back in huddled consternation, were masses of white-faced people—Marahna's people—who listened, now, in wondering silence to their princess.

Marahna made her way slowly to the platform's edge. Of all the countless ones to have gone that road, she was the first ever to return. She stood silent, while her eyes found their way scornfully over the enemy below. Then, looking beyond them, she began to speak.

Her soft voice echoed liquidly throughout the room. She gestured, and Jerry knew that she was giving them the message.

From the priests there came once a hoarse, inarticulate growl of hate and unbelief. She silenced them with her hand. She pointed to the heavens, and she told them of the sun and of the two who were true children of the sun, who had come to save them from their false god.

HER voice rose as she told her people in impassioned tones that which she had seen. And she was shouting above the tumult of the priests and pointing directly at them as she made the roof echo with the message: *"Oong devah! Oong devah!"*

"The god is dead," translated Jerry. *"Devah* means death; she said that of herself before we left. Come on!" he shouted, and laid hold of one great claw. "It's our turn now."

Winslow was tugging at the other foot. Between them they dragged into the light the obscene burden. Down the long ramp they took it and off upon the platform of the priests, where Marahna waited.

The priests, as Jerry's quick glance showed, were milling wildly about. It seemed that a charge was soon to follow, but the commotion ceased as the two men came upon the platform, hauling between them the great scorched head of "Oong." The vast hall was without movement or sound as they made their way out to the front. Jerry stood erect and faced the crowd.

He pointed, as had Marahna, toward the sun somewhere above those thick masses of rock; he traced it in its course across the sky; he pointed to Winslow and himself. And in loudest

tones he roared throughout the room his message. "Oong," he shouted, *"Oong devah!"*

"I'll count three," he whispered in the utter silence. "Then let 'er go!"

Again he took a firm hold on the flabby paw.

"One," he whispered, and swung his body with the word. "Two . . . and *three!"*

THE men heaved mightily upon the gruesome horror. The head swung ghastly in scorched whiteness into the air. The dead jaws fell open as it crashed downward among the huddled, stricken priests.

"This way!" commanded Winslow. He had been carefully appraising the openings in the crowd. "And don't hurry! Remember, you're a god to them—or something a darn sight worse."

Heads proudly erect, the two strode firmly down the pathway of golden light. The room was silent as the few they met fell back in cringing fear. Slowly, interminably, the long triumphal march was made across the rocky cavern of the moon.

Not till they reached the portal did the silence break. The shrieks of the priests and the clashing of copper were behind them, as they vanished with steady steps from out the room.

"Now run!" ordered Winslow. "Run as if the devils from hell were after you—and I think they are!" The two tore madly down the corridor whose double rows of brightness made possible their utmost speed.

There was the narrowing of the passage—Jerry remembered it—where they came out at the foot of the great shaft, the dead throat of the volcano. Behind them the shrieks and clamor echoed close. A rope was dangling from far up at the top.

Jerry leaped for it before he recalled the condition of his arm. In the excitement of the encounter he had forgotten that the arm was still in no shape for a long hand-over-hand climb.

"I can't make it," he said, and looked about quickly. There were baskets of fungus growth, already dried from the heat of the mid-day sun that had shone where it grew. He dragged one to the narrow part of the tunnel. Winslow tugged at another and threw it up as a barricade. A chalk-white figure in copper sheathing was clambering upon it as he worked at another of the nets.

JERRY let go the fiber basket he was dragging and drew his knife as he sprang to meet the assault. A sharp cutting edge was unknown to these workers in copper. Jerry slipped under the raised bludgeoning copper weapon to plunge the knife into a white throat. Then, without a look at the body he helped Winslow, struggling with another load.

They completed the barricade. A heap of fungus made a raised place where Jerry leaped. Commanding the top of the pile that blocked the choked throat of the passage, he was ready for the next figure that leaped wildly up.

It would take them a while, Jerry saw, to learn of this scintillant death that struck at them from close quarters. His knife flashed again and again as he took the men one at a time and let their limp bodies roll back to the passage beyond.

THE assault was checked when Jerry shouted to his companion. "Tie the rope around me," he ordered, "up under my arms . . . then you go on up. When you get there pull up—and for the Lord's sake pull fast!"

"Go on," he shouted. "I can hold them for a while—" He turned swiftly to take a leaping body upon the red point of his knife.

He felt the rope about him as he fought, knew by its twitching when Winslow started the long climb, and prayed dumbly for strength to hold his weak fortress till the other could hoist himself up to the top.

He was fighting blindly as they came on in endless succession, the figures of

frenzied priests leaping grotesquely beyond. Only the strategic position he had taken allowed him to turn the wild assault again and again. They could only reach him by ones and twos, but the end must come soon. There were priests tearing at the foot of the barricade. . . . The cold winds that came down from above revived him, but it helped the figures ripping at the fiber cords. The dry fungus fragments whirled gaily away and down the passage in the wind.

The wind! The draft was blowing from him, directly upon his attackers. Jerry struggled and clinched with another that bounded beside him, and knew as he fought that a weapon was at hand. His knife found the lower edge of copper, and the figure screamed as he rolled it down the slope. He slipped the knife into his left hand as he fumbled with his right.

HIS precious matches! He struck one on the rock; it broke in his trembling fingers. Another — there were so few left. He drew it with infinite care on the surface of rock. The figures below tore in frenzy at the weakening barricade, while yet others stood waiting at this sign of some new form of magic.

They shouted again, as they had when, those long days ago, he had lighted a cigarette before their horrified gaze. Jerry shielded the tiny blaze in his hand to bring it beneath a papery leaf beside him.

The flame flashed and dwindled. He dared not drop back to set fire to the base of the heap. But even in the exhaustion and strain of the moment Jerry Foster still knew the value of the showman's tricks in reaching the fears of these white-faced fighters.

With grandiloquent gesture he raised another of the tindery fragments and ignited it from the first. Another, and he had the beginning of a fire. He lit another piece, and, when he had it blazing, dropped it behind him and kept on with the show.

A large piece became a flaming torch, and he waved it before him and laughed to see the warriors cringe. A cloud of smoke was billowing about him—he leaped to safety through a rising wall of flame.

The rear slope of the barricade became a furnace; the wind behind him swept the smoke clouds down the passage. He heard, and sank back weakly on the ground as it came to him, the screaming riot where a mob of terrified warriors fought and struck to turn the horde that clamored behind them and pushed them on. The blast roared over the heaped fuel and poured downward from the crest. The noise of the retreat went silent in the distance.

SPENT and exhausted, Jerry Foster lay panting upon the stone floor. The breath of cold and life came down the long shaft from the crater. Had Winslow gained the top? Was he equal to the climb? Jerry hardly felt the jerking of the rope about his shoulders, but he knew as, in frantic haste, it drew him scraping up the long side of the shaft.

The biting cold above revived him, and again a scene of desolation was spread before his eyes. Winslow fumbled with the knots and released him from the rope.

"Come on!" he shouted, and extended a helping hand as they leaped and raced across the rocky floor.

Jerry again was vividly, strongly alive as the cold winds swept him. He leaped hugely through the whirling wisps of dried out vegetation—the sun had stripped the surface of every living thing. Again the rocky slopes rose naked in the rosy light of evening. The sun was hidden below a distant range of jagged hills. The long night was begun.

"You're going the wrong way," Jerry shouted. "We left it over there." He stopped to point where the sun had set. "See, that's where we fought the beasts—"

"Come on!" repeated Winslow.

"Hurry! We mustn't lose out now. I flew the ship over this way while I was up here before."

A ridge of rock cut off the view where Winslow pointed. "Bully for you!" Jerry shouted and turned to follow. They stopped as the slope ahead, from its multitude of honeycomb caverns, erupted men.

THE priests were ahead, and behind them swarmed their men. Vindictive and revengeful, the wily enemy was fighting to the end. The two stopped in consternation.

"What's the use!" demanded Jerry. His voice was tired, utterly hopeless. "And the ship's right over there. . . ."

"A million miles away," said Winslow slowly, "as far as we're concerned." The army was sweeping down the long slope: they had found their quarry. There were other figures, too, pouring from the throat of the volcano —white, naked figures that swarmed in growing numbers and rushed across upon them from the rear.

"Trapped," said Jerry Foster savagely, "and we almost made it." He rose wearily to his feet. "We'll take it standing."

The armored warriors were approaching; in leaping triumph they raced to be the first ones at the death. The shouts of the priests were ringing encouragement in their ears.

BUT the leaders from the rear were nearer. One deep breath Jerry drew as he turned to meet them. Then stared, astonished, as the figures swept past. They streamed by in confusion. They were armed with rocks, with clubs or copper metal—some even carried bars of gold above their heads. They came in a great swarm that swept past and beyond them. And they met, like an engulfing wave, the bounding figures of the men in copper. Smothered and lost were the warriors in the horde that poured increasingly on.

The wave, before Jerry's eyes, swept on over the crest, while he still stood in amazed unbelief at the battle that raged.

It was Marahna who brought understanding. He turned to see her kneel in sobbing, thankful abasement at his feet.

Marahna! Her people! She had saved them! There was time needed for the full force of the truth to banish the hopeless despair from his heart. Then he stooped to raise the crouching figure with arms that were suddenly strong.

THE pale rose light of the departed sun above shone softly within a rocky valley of the moon. It tipped the tall crags with lavender hues, and it touched with soft gleaming reflections a blunted cylinder of aluminum alloy.

The valley was silent, save for the hushed whispers of wondering thousands who peopled the enclosing hills, and the rushing roar from the cylinder itself where the inventor was testing his machine.

There were figures in priestly robes —scores of them—and they were surrounded by a white throng that, silent and watchful, held them captive.

Beyond, in the open, where bare rock made a black rolling floor, there were two who stood alone. The golden figure of a girl, and beside her, Jerry Foster, in wordless indecision.

Behind him was the ship. Its muffled thunder came softly to his unheeding ears. He looked at the girl steadily, thoughtfully.

Gone was all trace of her imperious dignity. The Princess Marahna was now all woman. And Jerry, looking into her dark eyes, read plainly the yearning and adoration in their depths. The Princess Marahna had forgotten her deference to the god in her love for the man. The tale was told in her flushed face, openly, unashamed.

And his gray eyes were thoughtful and tender as he gazed into hers. He was thinking, was Jerry Foster, of many things. And he was weighing them carefully. His hand clasped and

unclasped at something safely hidden in his pocket. He had taken it from his pack; he had wanted something for Marahna, something she would treasure.

AND now she was offering him herself. He could take her with him, take her to that far-off world that she never dreamed existed. He could show her the things of that world, its wonders and beauties. He could train her in its ways. He would watch over her, love her. . . . And she would be miserable and heartsick for the sight of this awful desolation. He knew it —he told himself it was the truth—and he hated himself for the telling.

The voice of Winslow aroused him. The inventor had come from his ship. "We had better be starting," he said.

The slim figure of the girl in her robe of pure gold trembled visibly. She knew, it was plain, the import of the words. She spoke rapidly, beseechingly, in her own tongue. The words were liquid music in the air. Then, realizing their impotence, she resorted to her poor vocabulary of their own strange sounds.

"No!" she said, and shook her head vehemently. "No—no!"

She motioned to wait, and she called loud and clear across the silence to her own people. There was a stir about the priests. One in the robes and headdress of the high priest was brought forward, led by two others of her men. They stopped a few steps from her and bowed low.

Again she called, and the leaders among the vast throng came, too, and made their obeisance before her.

SHE turned then to Jerry. And now it was Marahna, Princess of the Moon, who stood quiet and poised before him. The light, he saw, made soft wavelets of radiance in her hair, and her eyes were still glowing and tender. She stepped forward toward the priest.

The helmet of the sun god was upon his head. It marked him, Jerry knew, as the master of their world. True, they had bowed in submission to that other master, whose vile head lay horrible and harmless on the floor of the great hall—they had believed in the commands the priests had pretended to receive from him—but this emblem on the helmet marked the leader of the race, the master of this world, for these simple folk.

Marahna reached her slim hands and lifted the thing of gold. She turned and held it above the startled eyes of Jerry Foster, and she placed it upon his head with all the dignity that became a queen. A word from her, and the men before him dropped in humbleness to the ground. The Princess Marahna was among them in honoring salutation to their king.

Jerry was beyond speech. Not so Winslow. "It looks to me," he said dryly, "as if you were being offered the kingdom of the earth—I mean the moon. Think it over, Jerry—think it over."

AND Jerry Foster thought it over, deeply and soberly. He could rule this people, he and Marahna, rule in peace and quiet and comfort. He could bring them knowledge and wisdom of infinite help; he could make their new civilization a measure of advancement for a whole race. He could teach them, train them, instruct them. And he and Marahna—there would be children who would be princes born—could be happy—for a time. And then . . . and then he would be old. Old and lonely for his kind, hungering and longing for his own people. As Marahna would be on earth, so would he be here. . . .

His decision was formed. And with it he knew he must not hurt the heart of Marahna. She loved him, Jerry Foster, the man. He must leave her as Jerry Foster, the god, child of the sun. He stood suddenly to his full height, and who shall say that for a moment the man did not approach the stature of divinity—for he was wholly kind.

He placed a hand upon the head of the kneeling girl before him. He held her in her submissive pose, then, turning to the waiting men, he spoke in measured tones.

"I thank you," he said, and the words came from a full heart, "but my place is not here. I leave with you one more worthy."

Before their wondering gaze he removed the glowing circlet from his head; he leaned to place it on the head of Marahna, humbled before him. With strong hands he raised her to her feet. His look, so tender yet reserved, was full of meaning. She followed his every sign.

HE waved once toward the sun, hidden behind the distant hills; he pointed again to Winslow and himself and to their shining ship; and again he marked the going of the sun. His meaning was plain—these children of the sun must return to their far-off home.

He turned now to Marahna. In his hand was the object he had taken from his pack. It was a treasured thing, this locket of platinum on its thin and lacy chain; it had been his mother's, and he thought of her now as he opened the clasp to show his own face framed within the oval. His mother—she had worn this. And she would have approved, he knew, of its disposal.

Gravely he faced Marahna. He showed her the picture within the case, then held it aloft where all might see. He closed it and taught her the pressure that released the spring. Then, with gentle dignity that made of the gesture a rite, he placed the chain about the neck of Princess Marahna—Queen, now, of the People of the Moon. And he knew that he gave into her keeping their only relic of a being from the sun. It marked her beyond all future question with a symbol of mastery. And it made of him a god.

And even a queen may not aspire to such an one.

It was well that Winslow's hand was there to guide him as he walked with unseeing eyes toward the ship.

TIME may lose at times all meaning and measure—moments become timeless. It seemed ages to Jerry Foster when Winslow spoke in casual tones. "I'm going straight up," he said, above the generator's roar. "Then we'll swing around above the other side. We'll follow the sun—make the full circle of the moon before we start."

But Jerry neither thought nor heard. His eyes were close to a window of thick glass. Below him was a shrinking, dwindling landscape, wind-swept and desolate.

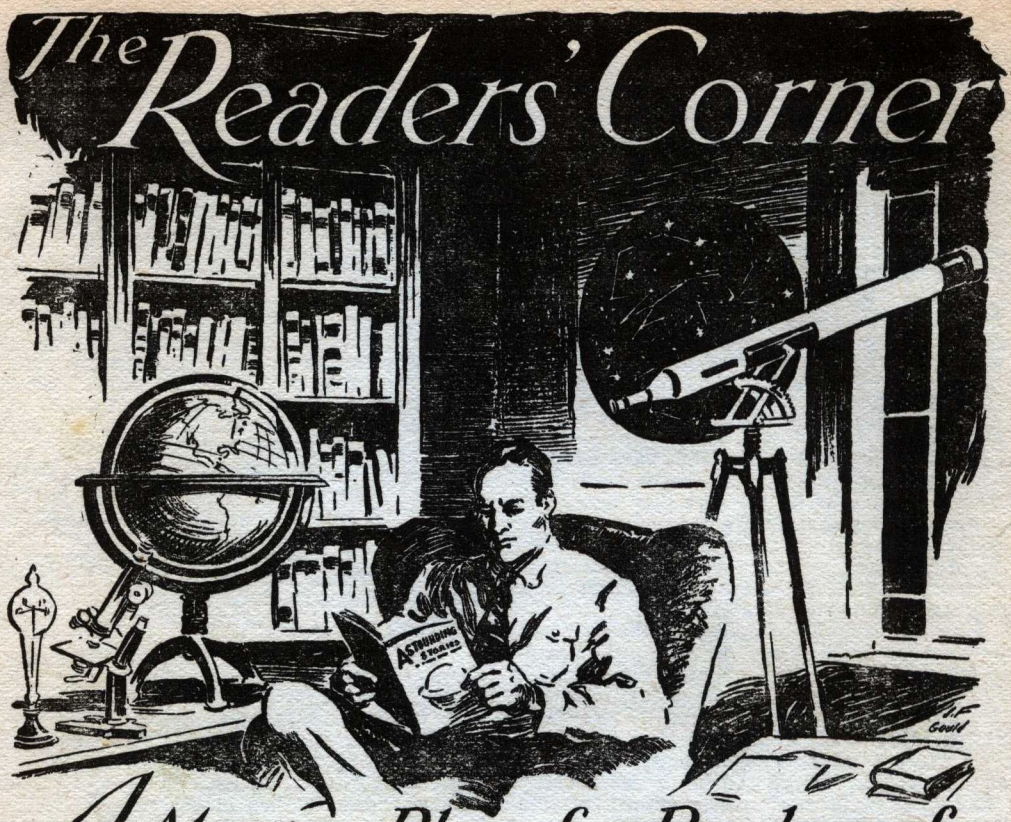
There was a multitude of faces, turned worshipping toward the sky. On one, who stood apart in tiny loneliness, his vision centered. He watched and strained his aching eyes until the figure was no more. Only the pale rose of a dying sun, and a torn, volcanic waste that tugged strangely at his heart.

"Yes," he answered mechanically, "yes, we'll go round with the sun . . . a couple of sun gods."

He laughed strangely as he regarded his companion.

If Winslow wondered at the weariness in the voice he made no sign. He was busy with a rheostat that made thunderous roaring of the blast behind their ship; that swung them in a sweeping arc through velvet skies, away from the far side of the moon, to follow the path of the setting sun—homeward bound.

The Readers' Corner



A Meeting Place for Readers of Astounding Stories

"Second Better Than First"

Dear Editor:

The second number of Astounding Stories is better than the first. "Spawn of the Stars," by Charles Willard Diffin, was the best story, closely followed by "Creatures of the Light," by Sophie Wenzel Ellis and "The Beetle Horde," by Victor Rousseau. I like stories of vibration as in "Mad Music," and of acceleration, as in "The Thief of Time." I am glad to see Harl Vincent in the pages of Astounding Stories. I have read many good stories by him. Interplanetary stories are my favorites, and the more you have of them the better.

I wish that you would put Astounding Stories out twice a month or put out a quarterly containing twice as much reading material as the monthly. In this you could put one book-length novel and a few shorter stories.

Are you going to start a department containing the readers' letters soon?—Jack R. Darrow, 4225 N. Spaulding Avenue, Chicago, Ill.

Size and Paper

Dear Editor:

I certainly am glad to see your magazine appear on the newsstands. I also view with appreciation the fact that you have such brilliant authors as Harl Vincent and Captain S. P. Meek, U. S. A., on your list of contributors. Your stories are of the very highest value in the line of Science Fiction. However, I did not like "The Corpse on the Grating." It did not have an inkling of scientific background. I really am surprised it was published in a Science Fiction magazine. Aside from the fact that the idea of the story was merely a fantastical surmise I was very favorably impressed with the author's style and his use of the English language.

Why don't you try for some more of the works of the other well-known authors in this line of fiction?

My main object in writing this letter was that I think you rub the name of Science Fiction in the dust by printing it on such paper and in such a small magazine. If you intend to compete with your several contemporaries, you will almost have to alter your size and quality of your paper.

You might include a full page illustration for each story also, but, you will admit, that to combat these other influential Science Fiction magazines, you will have to put your magazine on a par materially with the others in your line.

I admire the type of stories which you publish and want to see your magazine get ahead.—Warren Williams, 545 Dorchester, Chicago, Illinois.

They Will!

Dear Editor:

I am a monthly reader of your Astounding Stories and I am greatly interested in them.

The best story I have so far read is "Creatures of the Light." It is a story of Superscience indeed. If the author of this story would write more like it, I am sure they would be greatly appreciated.

Here is hoping that more of their kind appear in the very near future. Your for more good stories.—Quenton Stockman, 245 Dixon Street, Portland, Oregon.

"Surpasses the First"

Dear Editor:

I have just finished the February issue of your magazine. It surpasses the first issue by far. I am glad to see that you have eight stories in this issue. That is just enough. I like one serial (not too long), one or two novelettes, and five or six short stories in each issue. Tell Captain S. P. Meek to write more adventures of Dr. Bird.

I have arranged the stories of the first two issues according to my own liking. Excellent: "The Beetle Horde" and "Phantoms of Reality." Good: "The Cave of Horror," "Tanks" and "Invisible Death." Fair: "The Stolen Mind" and "Compensation."

In the second issue: Excellent: "Creatures of the Light," "Old Crompton's Secret," "The Beetle Horde" and "Spawn of the Stars." Good: "The Thief of Time" and "Mad Music." Fair: "The Corpse on the Grating" and "Into Space."

I hope there will be more stories under "Excellent" next month.—Ward Elmore, 2012 Avenue J., Ft. Madison, Ia.

"Only One Trouble—"

Dear Editor:

I have just finished reading your new magazine and think it's great. The only trouble with it is that it doesn't have enough stories.

I liked "Phantoms of Reality," by Ray Cummings, best, and "The Cave of Horror," by Capt. S. P. Meek, next best. "The Beetle Horde," and "Tanks" were also good.

Ray Cummings and S. P. Meek are among my favorite Science Fiction authors.

I like best interplanetary stories and stories of the aircraft of the future. I would like to see a good interplanetary story by R. H. Romans in this magazine pretty soon.

Other good authors whose stories I would like to read are: Dr. David H. Keller, Dr. Miles J. Brewer, Lilith Lorraine, Ed Earl Repp and Walter Kateley.

In your editorial you mention the fact that some day in the future a person can disintergate his body in New York and reintergate it in China. I would like to see a good story about that by either Ray Cummings or S. P. Meek.

Something else: why not make your magazine a little bigger and include a scientific article or two once in a while?—J. W. Latimer, 1000 East 6th Street, National City, Calif.

"No Horror Stories"

Dear Editor:

I am taking this opportunity to let you know what I think of Astounding Stories. The worst fault is the tendency to print terror stories. Please don't do this. If I never see another story like "The Corpse on the Grating" in your magazine it will be too soon.

Don't print so many detective stories. Capt. Meek's splendid stories are plenty. Please start a discussion column and put Wesso's drawings inside the magazine, too.

Are you planning on any reprints? I would like to see some reprints of Ray Cummings', A. Merritt's, H. G. Wells', Garret Smith's and George A. England's stories soon.

"Phantoms of Reality," "The Beetle Horde," "The Cave of Horror," "Into Space," "Creatures of the Light," and "Old Crompton's Secret" were splendid.

I hope for fewer detective stories and no horror stories.—Joe Stone, 123 20th Street, Toledo, Ohio.

We Liked It, Too!

Dear Editor:

Just a line to tell you that I bought my first copy of Astounding Stories and they certainly are good, especially "Creatures of the Light," by Sophie Wenzel Ellis. It's the best short story I've read in ages. I hope to read more by her in the future. Yours for success.—F. J. Michasiow, Battery "D," Ft. Hancock, N. J.

"Strikes a Mystic Chord"

Dear Editor:

I think that your Astounding Story Magazine is a fine magazine. It seems to strike a mystic cord within me and makes me respond to it.

One thing lacking—I believe, that is—a department for letters from your readers.

"Spawn of the Stars" is certainly a fine scientific story.

I wish that the author of "Into Space" would write a sequel to his story.—Ronald Bainbridge, Rockford, Illinois.

We're Avoiding Reprints

Dear Editor:

I am writing again about Astounding Stories. It seems more people are interested in science to-day than ever before, and an easy and interesting way to gain this knowledge is through reading an entertaining science story.

Regarding stories in your February issue, will list them according to my likes and dislikes. "Into Space" and "Mad Music" contained science maybe not impossible in the future. "Spawn of the Stars," "The Beetle Horde," "Creatures of the Light," "The Thief of Time" and "Old Crompton's Secret" were very interesting science, and good reading, but "The Corpse on the Grating" did not appeal to me.

I like interplanetary stories and stories of what might be on other planets.

I notice some familiar names among your authors. Why not print some (not too many) stories from H. G. Wells, E. R. Burroughs and Jules Verne? Some of their stories which were considered just wild dreams of the author at the time of writing have actually become a reality, as, for instance, the submarine. If you keep on as you started or improve I can see only success.—C. E. Anderson, 3504 Colfax Avenue South, Minneapolis, Minn.

A Few Favorites

Dear Editor:

I am an electrical engineer. I read the last two issues of your magazine. I liked it very much. It is thrilling and very well edited. I will buy it regularly.

I liked "Invisible Death" best. "The Beetle Horde" was good, "Phantoms of Reality," good, "Into Space" and "Mad Music," very good. "Creatures of the Light," "Old Crompton's Secret" and "Spawn of the Stars," good.—Adolph Wasservogel, Gedden Terrace, Waterbury, Conn.

"Going Some!"

Dear Editor:

I purchased one of your magazines when I first saw them. I always had a liking for Super-science stories, but your magazine was the best I ever got hold of. Thought I could never wait until the next issue to finish "The Beetle Horde." I believe "The Cave of Horror" was the best story in that issue. It really seemed as if it could be true.

Due respect must be paid the author of "The Corpse on the Grating," for it was enticing and fantastic. "Phantoms of Reality" was good.

All the stories in the second magazine seemed as good as the best of the first number, and that's going some.

May you succeed in getting the same good and better stories as you have in the first two issues of a magazine that I am sure will grow to fame.—Harold Rakestraw, Box 25, Winthop, Wash.

We Intend To

Dear Editor:

Having read the first two issues of your new magazine, I find it has a larger variety of stories than any of the other Science Fiction magazines now found on the newsstands. Why not keep it that way? It will be unique.

Mr. Wessolowski, your artist, is great. He is one who can draw when it comes to a good scientific background.

I consider "Tanks" your best story as yet, with "Spawn of the Stars" close second. "Invisible Death," "Creatures of the Light" and "Mad Music" were also good. Try to give us some stories by Edgar Rice Burroughs and A. Merritt. Did not think much of "The Beetle Horde"—too many like it.—Ted Shatkowski, 812 Hoffman St., Hammond, Ind.

Some Good Suggestions

Dear Editor:

I received the pleasure of purchasing a copy of Astounding Stories the other day, the first copy I have seen. I have not yet read it, but I am unable to wait that long to inform you of my great joy in greeting a new magazine of this type.

I am a reader of other magazines similar to A. S. Stories of Harl Vincent, Capt. S. P. Meek, Murray Leinster, and others appear in these magazines, also, so I am familiar with your authors.

But you have asked me what sort of stories I'd like to see in A. S., so here goes. First of all, I would earnestly beg you not to print such stories as those that deal with ghosts, etc., because in my opinion there are far too many good stories available to cast them aside for trash.

The type of story I prefer is the kind that is fanciful, odd and interesting. Some tales deal with a new invention of some sort, but contain no action or plot. However, I fail to see any like that in the present A. S., unless it's "Mad Music."

A few utterly impossible stories are so interestingly told that it is worth while to publish them. Some examples are stories by A. Merritt (whose stories are the most fascinating I have ever read), H. P. Lovecraft (master of the bizarre and the grotesque) and G. A. England.

My letter seems to be mostly composed of suggestions, but that is only because I am interested in anything pertaining to stories of imagination, or Science Fiction, as it is called. However, Astounding Stories seems to be very satisfying to me. I am glad that you have Wessolowski on your artist's staff. I hope that you will have a story contest some time in the future, as they are very interesting, and often uncover hitherto unknown talent in the contestants.

I sincerely wish you the utmost of success in Astounding Stories and hope that it will live a long, enduring life.

I hope, as time goes on, you will favor us with more illustrations, for this type of story needs a large amount of drawings so that the readers won't overwork their imaginations.

Astounding Stories seems to be very shy, for I heard of it from a friend and got the February, 1930 issue only after an exhaustive search. The place where I got it appears to be about the only one in town selling it. I hope more stores will handle your great magazine. (I didn't intend the words "great magazine" to be sarcastic. I really think it's great!)

I hope you will have a department in which the readers may discuss the merits or faults of stories published. Or at least print excerpts now and then.

Enclosed find twenty cents in stamps for which please send me the first issue.—A. W. Bernal, 1374 E. 32 Street, Oakland, Calif.

"Stories I Like Best—"

Dear Editor:

The stories I like best in your Astounding Stories of Super-science were "The Beetle Horde," by Victor Rousseau, "The Cave of Horror," by Capt. S. P. Meek, "Compensation," by C. V. Tench, "Invisible Death," by Anthony Pelcher. I have just bought your second copy of Astounding Stories. I like the book very much, and expect to buy it every month.—Isaac Dworkowitz, 1262 Valentine Avenue, Bronx, N. Y.

"Just What Is Needed"

Dear Editor:

I have read the first two copies of your new magazine and I would like to make a few comments and criticisms. This magazine is very popular in my community and is just what is needed to instill scientific interest in the mind of the general public. Science Fiction will arouse more interest and will be read by more people than any amount of dry science and cold facts. Since you would like to have a reader's opinion, I will say that "The Beetle Horde" is the best story that I have read in a long time and was based on the most excellent science; "The Thief of Time" was good; try to get some more stories by Capt. S. P. Meek; one in every copy would not be too many. I could not get all "het up" over "Spawn of the Stars." It was a little vague; I do not think the author had a very distinct idea about the nature of the invaders.

The stories do not have to stick to cold science, but should not violate an established fact without a reasonable explanation, as this might cause a mistaken idea in the minds of the readers. A few good authors are: Dr. Keller, A. Hyatt Verrill, Walter Kately and R. H. Romans.—Wayne Bray, Campbell, Missouri.

"Literature That Typifies New Age"

Dear Editor:

As a member of an organization whose existence was founded through the medium of Science Fiction, I have watched your magazine closely, and here are the results:

It is all Science Fiction, virile, interesting and new.

A popular edition of these stories with the name of a great publishing house behind it.

The authors you have acquired are supreme in this field. Ray Cummings and Captain Meek need no introduction. And Harl Vincent is a notable addition whose stories of "Indefinite Extension" and interplanetary travel are well known to Science Fiction fans.

Science Fiction, first introduced by Verne, Poe, Wells, Haggard and other old masters in this line, is a type of literature that typifies the new age to come—the age of science. And, in conclusion, may I say that the Science Correspondence Club extends to your new and most acceptable publication heartiest wishes for continued and increasing success. I subscribe myself to the advancement of science and Science Fiction.—Walter P. Dennis, F.P.S., 4653 Addison Street, Chicago, Ill.

"Keep Up the Good Work"

Dear Editor:

I have just completed the perusal of the first issue of Astounding Stories and am immesely pleased. I am a high school senior, and though have only a rudimentary knowledge of science, the subject impresses me and I am eager to gain new facts and food for thought.

I compliment you on securing the services of such writers of scientifiction as Ray Cummings, Harl Vincent, and R. F. Starzl. They are good! Ray Cummings' impressive style, his vivid imagination, and his knowledge of his subject seem to me invincible. His stories are always welcome.

Now, concerning the services of other writers of Science Fiction, I think the majority of the readers would be well pleased with the following list: Edgar Rice Burroughs, A. Hyatt Verrill, H. G. Wells, David H. Keller, Otis Adelbert Kline and Stanton Coblentz. The above mentioned, I am sure, would greatly please your readers. I believe it would greatly improve the circulation of your magazine to try to secure the services of such writers (especially E. R. Burroughs).

I am greatly interested in the future of your magazine and wish it every bit of luck in the world. You have made an astounding start. Keep up the good work.—A. G. Jaweett, Jr., 132 Murdock Avenue, Asheville, N. C.

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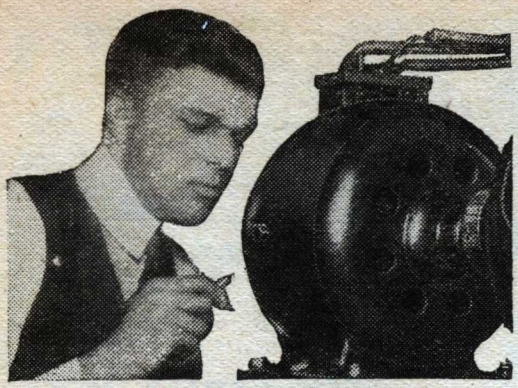
—The Editor.



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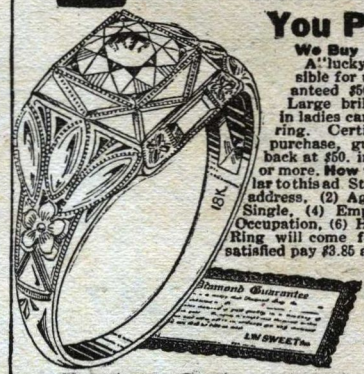

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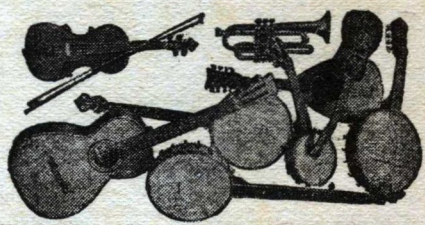

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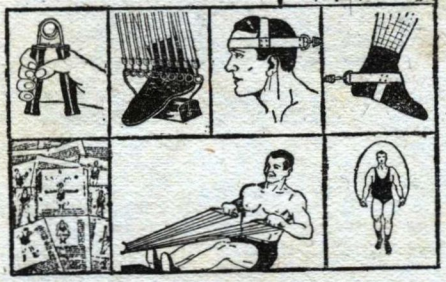

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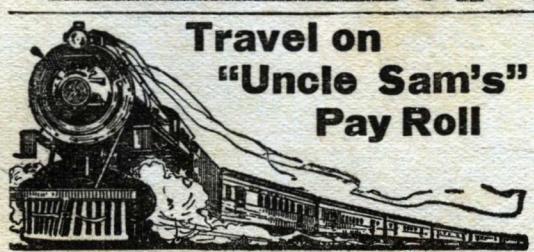

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Which Man Will It Be!

It's up to you. Set your own future. You want to be the Human Dynamo? Fine! Well, let's get busy. That's where I come in. That's my job. Here's what I'll do for you:

In just 30 days I'll increase your arm one full inch with real live, animated muscle. Yes, and I'll add two inches to your chest in the same time. Pretty good, eh? That's nothing. Now come the works. I'll build up your shoulders. I'll deepen your chest. I'll strengthen your whole body. I'll give you arms and legs like pillars. I'll literally pack muscle up your stomach and down your back. Meanwhile I'll work on those inner muscles surrounding your vital organs. You'll feel the thrill of life shooting up your old backbone and throughout your entire system. You'll feel so full of life you will shout to the world, "I'm a man and I can prove it."

Sounds good, what? But listen! That isn't all. I'm not just promising these things. *I guarantee them!* It's a sure bet. Oh, boy! Let's ride.

Send for my new 64-page book **"Muscular Development"** **IT IS FREE**

EARLE LIEDERMAN
Dept. 1706, 305 Broadway, New York City

Dear Sir: Please send me, absolutely FREE and without any obligation on my part whatever, a copy of your latest book, "Muscular Development."

Name .....Age....

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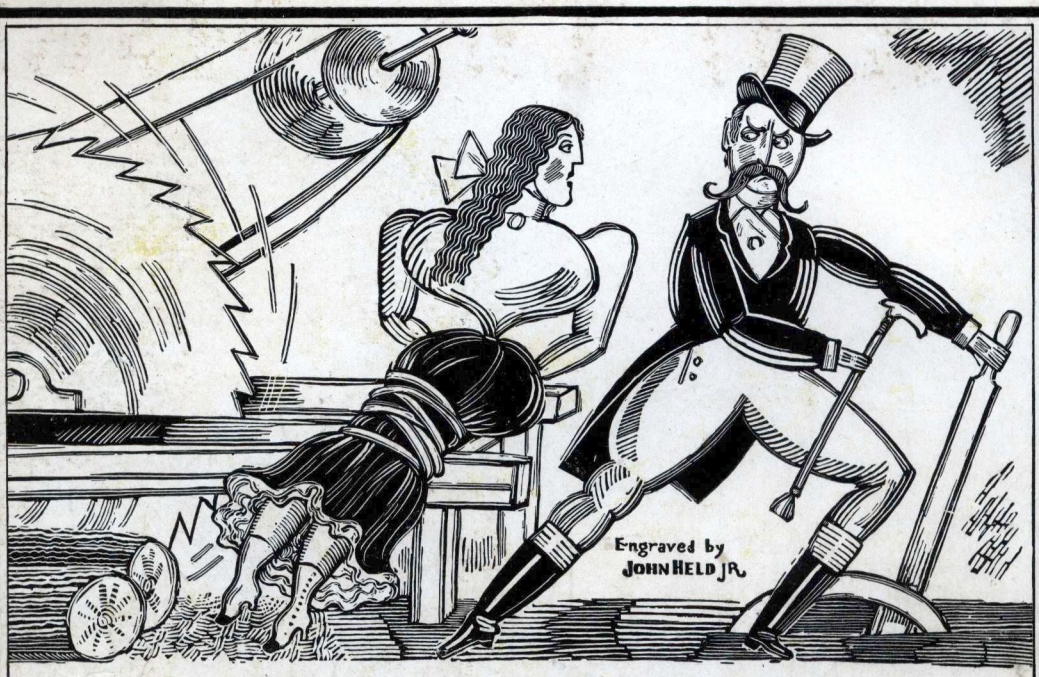
(Please write or print plainly)

What do you think of that? I don't ask one cent. And it's the peppiest piece of reading you ever laid your eyes on. I swear you'll never blink an eyelash till you've turned the last cover. And there's 48 full-page photos of myself and some of my prize-winning pupils. This is the finest art gallery of strong men ever assembled. And every last one of them is shouting my praises. Look them over. If you don't get a kick out of this book, you had better roll over—you're dead. Come on, then. Take out the old pen or pencil and sign your name and address to the coupon. If you haven't a stamp, a postal will do. But snap into it. Do it *now*. Tomorrow you may forget. Remember, it's something for nothing and no strings attached, no obligation. GRAB IT!

EARLE LIEDERMAN
DEPT. 1706, 305 BROADWAY, NEW YORK CITY



"SO, MY PROUD BEAUTY, YOU WOULD REPULSE ME, EH?" barked DALTON

"I would indeed," said the fairest flower of the countryside. "And how!"

"What is there about me, gal, to bring this disfavor down upon my head?" he demanded.

"Your voice, sir," she answered him haughtily. "The man who wins my heart must smoke OLD GOLDS in kindness to his throat—and to his listeners."

OLD GOLD

FASTEST GROWING CIGARETTE IN HISTORY... NOT A COUGH IN A CARLOAD

Camels are odds-on favorites in every field. . . . There isn't a cigarette . . . anywhere . . . that can touch them for fragrance, for mildness, for downright smoking *pleasure!*

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CIGARETTES