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STORIES

NOV.

MY LADY
OF THE
EMERALD

by WILFRED
OWEN MORLEY

WINGS OF THE
LIGHTNING
LAND

A NOVEL OF
THREE WORLDS
by JAMES
MAC CREIGH



ACES OF
SCIENCE FICTION

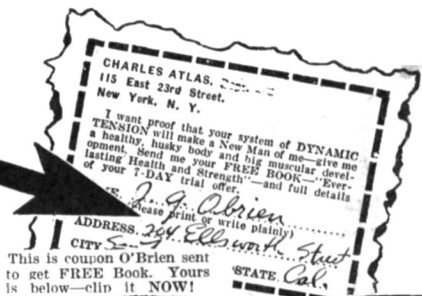
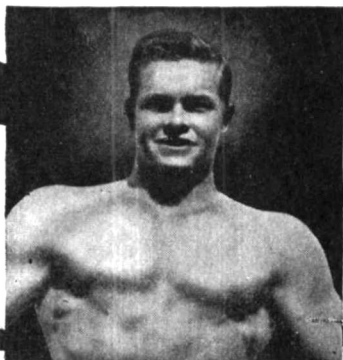
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10¢ ASTONISHING STORIES

ALL STORIES NEW

VOL. 3

NOVEMBER, 1941

NO. 2

NOVELETTES

WINGS OF THE LIGHTNING LAND...by James MacCreigh 11

Fugitives from space, trapped on a nameless, hostile planet from which no man returned, two dauntless souls challenge the terrors of the Unknown—to shape for themselves an amazing destiny!

DAUGHTER OF DARKNESS.....by Ross Rocklynne 68

Despoiler of the heavens was she, wanton and destructive—this brooding creature of immeasurable strength who groped in the darkness—this being who sought to encompass infinity—and almost succeeded!

SHORT STORIES

RETREAT TO THE STARS.....by Leigh Brackett 36

"We've lost the planets, yes. But the challenge of Eternity still rings in our ears. Follow me, if you dare—to the stars!"

THE MAN WHO DIDN'T BREATHE.....by Harry Walton 49

A man marked for death from another world goes to his final reckoning with the nebulous prince of plunder who kidnapped men's bodies—and their souls as well!

MY LADY OF THE EMERALD.....by Wilfred Owen Morley 60

A whisper of wings a land on the rim of time a summons to a valley of nameless terror and a day on which the very cosmos shall tremble!

THE LAST DROP...by L. Sprague de Camp and L. Ron Hubbard 87

Drink if you will of the cup of Life, but have a care when you sip—for the component part of Life is—Death!

MACHINES OF DESTINY.....by Ray Cummings 96

Who could have guessed that in their efforts to emulate man, these machines whom science had endowed with thought would threaten the destruction of all civilization?

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Sidelights about authors, fans and fan mags

EDITORAMBLINGS 67

Preview of a science-fiction fans' jamboree

THE MAIL BAG..... 86

NEXT ISSUE ON SALE DEC. 31

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A true experience of BALLARD DEAN, Kirkland, Washington



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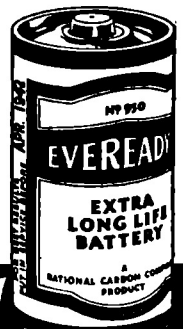
"FRANTICALLY, I TRIED TO GET LOOSE as the cold knifed through my clothing. With sinking heart, I found my struggles of no avail. In a few hours, if help could not be summoned, I would freeze to death. Darkness came on as I fought hopelessly with the strong steel jaws.



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(Signed) *Ballard Dean*"

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Editor's Note: It is the intention of this department to publish news and information about fans and their activities, plus interesting sidelights about the professionals who write, edit or draw for the science fiction magazines. Viewpoints will be open to, and serve as the voice of, all readers and fans who care to make use of it. All items should be addressed to **ASTONISHING STORIES**, Fictioneers, Inc., 210 East 43 Street, New York City.

Harry Walton Ditched the Rabbits

A MAN you want to keep your eye on is genial, jovial Harry Walton. If you've read his current piece, "The Man Who Didn't Breathe" on page 49, you'll agree that this literary star is in the ascendancy.

Short, chubby, and always cheerful, Mr. Walton is an erstwhile globe-trotter who now confines his jaunts to auto treks back and forth across the continent. Most of his writing is done in New York City, but for play he's partial to Los Angeles.

A creature of habit, Harry Walton first started this shuttling from one place to another during his early life, when he lived in Europe. There he made his residence principally in London and Berlin, with half a dozen other spots on the Continent thrown in from time to time.

The roots of Mr. Walton's literary career issue from a series of courses he took in journalism and short story writing at U.C.L.A. and San Diego State. It was shortly after the completion of these studies that he published his first story. In those days he was writing under the *nom de plume* of Harry Collier.

At least one time in his life Harry Walton was engaged rather far afield from literary endeavors. That was when he was an importer of French rabbit

skins. However, he gave up that business for an editorial post on **POPULAR SCIENCE MAGAZINE**.

Known in the profession as a "good egg," Mr. Walton is one of the most popular members of the Queens (N.Y.) SFL and has attended various science fiction conferences and meetings.

John V. Baltadonis Is Dyed-in-the-Wool

JOHNNY BALTADONIS is the type of fellow that seems to hang on to science fiction forever. He's been in the field for quite a long time, and is still active today, although college cuts his activities down to the bone. Johnny is a tall, lanky fellow, with an easy-going nature. He is known for publishing **THE SCIENCE FICTION COLLECTOR**, which he took over from Morris Dollens in 1937, and for his beautiful artwork therein. College has all but stopped the publication of the **COLLECTOR**, but once in the while an issue appears. He is an excellent artist and hopes to see his drawings published in a professional sf magazine some day.

But for college, he would be the most active fan in Philly, but even so, he is still quite active.

His fan mag is still considered one of

(Continued on page 8)

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(Continued from page 6)

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English Science Fiction Authors

A GOOD percentage of the fantasy authors hail from England. You probably know that John Russel Fern is of British residence. William F. Temple, author of "The Monster On The Border," which appeared in a recent issue of SUPER SCIENCE STORIES is a gunner in the British army. Polton Cross, who appeared in ASTONISHING'S first issue with "Chameleon Planet," is another, and Thornton Ayre still another. John C. Craig, a budding author, is a young English fan whose first publisher's check followed him around from camp to camp in England before it eventually caught up with him. Other British authors are: Eric Frank Russel, Maurice G. Hugii, John Beynon Harris, W. P. Cockroft, Frank Edward Arnold, Charnock Walsby, George C. Wallis, G. G. Pendarves. Of course you know that H. G. Wells, S. Fowler Wright, and H. Rider Haggard, fathers of science fiction, are also English.

• Fan Magazines

VOICE OF THE IMAGI-NATION, June 1941, No. 15, published by Morojo and 4SJ at Box 6475, Met. Sta., Los Angeles, Calif. Contains 10 pages of letters from fandom. A glorified readers' column. . . . Cover of this issue by Frank R. Paul. 10c a copy . . . Published monthly.

THE SCIENCE FICTION FAN, published monthly by Olon F. Wiggins of 3214 Champa St., Denver, Colorado. . . . Twenty-four pages of neat hectographing. . . . Good illustrations, but they are not stf. . . . Articles could be improved and made more general science fiction. . . \$1.00 a year.

FANTASY FICTION FIELD, published weekly by Julius Unger of 1702 Dahill Road, Brooklyn, New York. . . . Features photos of coming covers of professional magazines, plus news of fandom. . . . Now being printed.

FANTASY-NEWS, the oldest weekly now being published. . . . Four to six pages mimeographed. . . . News of all fandom and prodom. . . . Now celebrating it's 3rd birthday. . . . Three issues—10c William S. Sykora, P. O. Box 84, Elmont, New York.

FANTASY TIMES, published monthly by James V. Taurasi of 137-07—32 Ave., Flushing, New York. . . . Contains 6 or more pages of news review, scoop news and articles on stf pro mags and fandom. . . . Five cents a copy.

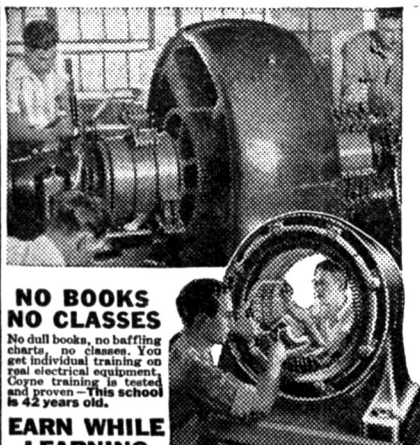
SUN SPOTS, publisher bi-monthly by the Solar Press, at 31 Bogert Place, Westwood, New Jersey. . . . Latest issue, May-June 1941, a come-down from regular issues. . . . Suggest that better format be devised and better articles be obtained. . . . Mimeographing is good. . . . Five cents a copy.

FAN-ATIC, Published by Charles A. Beling. . . . Interesting articles and items, but makeup a little confusing. . . . Would suggest a better arranged layout and a little artwork. . . . Twenty-six pages. Five cents per issue. . . . published bi-monthly at La Roche Avenue, Harrington Park, New Jersey.

SPACEWAYS, fandom's old stand-by, published eight times a year by Harry Warner, at 303 Bryan Place, Hagerstown, Maryland. . . . Covers all fandom and profield, with interesting articles and department. . . . Good art work and format. Twenty-six pages mimeographed for 10c.

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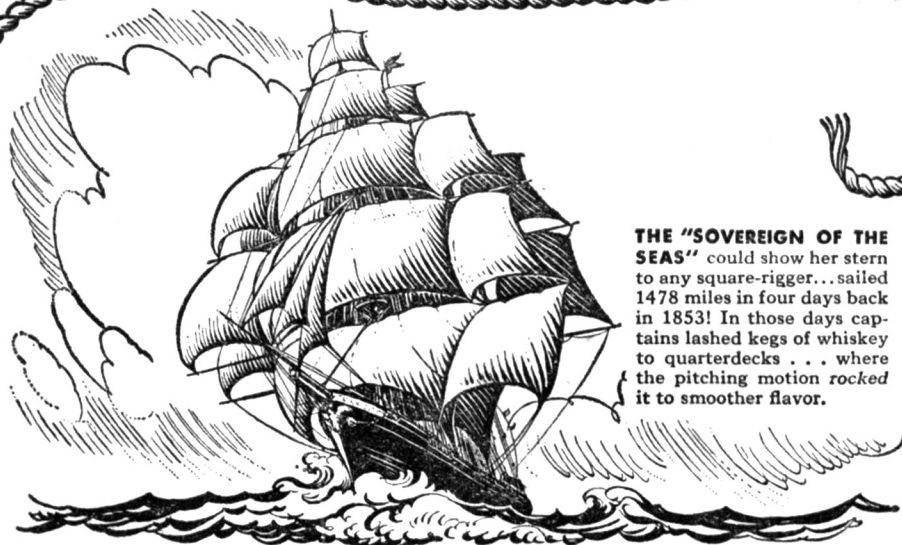
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Wings of the Lightning Land

By James MacCreigh

Fugitives from Space were they, trapped on a planet from which no man returned. And yet somehow they had to conquer the dread riddle of the secret elixir which soon must enter their veins—else they must yield their identities as humans forever!

CHAPTER ONE

Moon Madness

THORSSSEN and I had the same type of job. We worked together on one of the most important industries there was. We were moon-cattle

hunters in a period when the *acret* for which the moon-cattle were sought was the only thing that saved the life and intelligence of billions of the world's population.

I'd volunteered for moon-cattle herding on an emotional impulse. There was a certain poetic justice to it that fascinated me, for I had been born a cretin, too, like nearly a tenth of humanity. A deficiency in the thyroid glands of my father or mother had made me an idiot child, helpless and useless. The gland extract, given early and regularly, returned me to normalcy.

There was no shame attached to being a cretin in this sad year of 2240, for there were too many such persons. But I had the feeling of being inferior, set apart, an intelligent human only by virtue of regular doses of *acret*, the anti-cretinism extract made from the thyroid glands of the moon-cattle.

I didn't make friends very well, probably for that reason. It just wasn't possible for me to make a friend unless the other party went nearly twice half-way. And since Thorssen, though not a cretin, was much the same type of moody individual that I was, I never got to be on really good terms with him.

The plague of cretinism, they tell me, was incomprehensible, even to the best scientists of all the world. The graph showing incidence of this dreadful sickness had been taking a gradual, steady up-turn for scores of years in the past, and nobody knew the reason why. It was beginning to be a rarity for any family to be without at least one person who, without his *acret*, would soon have lapsed to mumbling, drooling idiocy.

WE WERE herding the moon-cattle in the Flatside area when we came across it. Thorssen and myself saw it—a squarish, angular framework of metal bars.

I guess we both saw it at the same time. We weren't walking very close together, since we'd had a little disagreement that morning before we started out, so we couldn't nudge each other and point it out. And of course we couldn't speak about it. Radios were strictly not to be used. The moon-cattle might pick up the vibrations and be frightened off. Also, we naturally couldn't take our helmets off and yell through the atmospheric vacuum to each other.

Without paying much attention to each other, we drew near and looked it over. I've described it to various people who know things. Most of them say what I'm talking about is a tesseract—a four-dimensional cube. They also say a tesseract cannot exist in a three-dimensional space, like ours. Then they explain away the contradiction. They claim I saw a three-dimensional representation of a four-dimensional object, like a photograph is a two-dimensional representation of a three-dimensional object.

All of that doesn't make a lot of sense to me, but I don't generally argue about it very much. To me, the angular thing Thorssen and I saw looked like a series of six cubes, jointed to each other rather oddly so that each seemed to be within the other. No one of them seemed to enclose any other, though.

The cubes themselves were only there in outline. Draw-rods of a curious pink metal—not coppery, but more pink—formed the corners of the cubes. That was all that was to be seen.

Thorssen, in the excitement of discovering the strange object, tabled our little feud for the time being. His eyes narrowed with lively interest. He kept shifting his glance from our "discovery" to me, wondering if I were as curious as he. He lifted his hand, beckoning me to his side. It was a sudden gesture and a thrill of wonder ran through me. Taciturn Thorssen looked excited and strangely tense!

I hopped over—we were in light gravity, and there was no such thing as a walk. I peered into the mazy interior, where he pointed—and got the shock of my life.

On the moon we are accustomed to blackness, the absence of light and color. There's no air to shatter the rays of light and let them filter into corners not directly illuminated.

But even the black of a moon-shadow, which ought to be the blackest thing imaginable, was a pale, luminous thing compared with the mad, ebony zero of light I saw. I should have been able to see right through the spaces between the bars. There was nothing solid about the framework. But I couldn't. This blackness got in the way.

It wasn't even a mere absence of light that got me. There was a frightening, bending sensation about looking into it. A dizzying knowledge of instability came to me as I peered into it. I couldn't look any more. I backed away and glanced at Thorssen, wondering at his reaction. I had a lot of respect for that guy. But this time he too was up against a tough one. The question in my eyes was answered with a shrug. Thorssen didn't know any more about it than I did.

WE WERE saved from wasting a lot of time just standing there and speculating by a sudden crackle of static in our head-phones. We couldn't use them for communication, but the receivers had been left on to tell us when the herders started milling the moon-cattle around. They frightened them with bursts of static and chased them toward us for the kill.

Thorssen seemed reluctant to take cover. But he moved his big body fast enough at the second spurt of static. We scrambled to our positions and got out our electron-rifles.

The moon-cattle are curious, great things, larger than any earth land animal.

They reach forty feet in length, at times, and are supernaturally vicious.

Their body chemistry is of a strange type. Living as they do, without air, they depend on water to furnish them with oxygen. Water they find in tiny crevices and subterranean ice-wells, for which they excavate with almost human patience and skill. The water is broken down inside their bodies by a process resembling electrolysis. Like the electric eel on Earth, they generate electricity. Besides breaking down the water, they use it for communication in the form of radio.

The moon-cattle can be said to smoulder where terrestrial animals burn. Instead of a direct oxidation and reduction series of reactions to furnish power to move their huge bodies, they ferment their food. There are certain micro-organisms on Earth operating on the same principle. It has long been thought that such a process couldn't supply any creature large enough to be visible with enough power to live by—but the moon-cattle proved differently.

The high, whining crackle of the moon-calves resounded in our ear-phones. On they came at us, great, ungainly things, speeding over the jetty crags of the moon's surface on their long, fast-moving legs.

Thorssen raised his gun to fire. I did the same. I saw the soundless flare of his electron-rifle once; then I was too absorbed in the kill. It's hard to shoot a moon-cow where it hurts; they're too decentralized. Hunting them requires a good aim and a knowledge of their peculiar anatomy. With Thorssen it was almost instinct.

All of a sudden the assault was over. I hadn't done too badly, and I scrambled from my position feeling pretty cocky. All that cockiness was driven from me in the next moment. My stomach muscles tightened.

Thorssen had not been content with just inspecting the machine I had almost

forgotten. With his hands grasping the metal bars, he was leaning over that unspeakable blackness!

Your reflexes get kind of mixed up when you can't talk or yell. I hurled my rifle in his direction and started running towards him, hoping to distract him from that magnetic blackness.

Suddenly my knees gave way with panic. Like the light from a snuffed-out candle, Thorssen disappeared from sight!

I was too horrified and numbed to do much intelligent thinking. I could have saved my own skin if I had. Hypnotized by the unholy machine, I scrambled up to it and clung to bars even as Thorssen had. Whatever made me think I could succeed where Thorssen's steel muscles had failed, I don't know. I peered into that blackness, thinking insanely I could discover some trace of him.

The blackness was impenetrable, and that feeling of instability stole over me again, only doubly strong this time. I felt my grip on the bars melting, a horrible dizziness set in. . . .

Then, like Thorssen, I was sucked into those awful depths!

There was a pain such as I had never known. There was a crushing, rending stress on my body that was sheer hell. Stars reeled around me overhead—actually reeled, danced and swung to new positions in the sky. It was not an illusion.

Then the pain was over and I was falling.

My fall was stopped with a shattering jolt. I was lying, after a seeming century of agony, flat on my back on some sticky, ridged growths I took to be bushes. A cliff wall towered beside me. There was a sky above me, with hideous-hued clouds floating in it.

The lunar landscape was completely gone. The vacuum of space no longer sucked at my exposed skin. The fiercely bright sun was gone.

I was on a planet!

CHAPTER TWO

Claws of Death

I DON'T think I can tell you what my emotions were—it was all so sudden. I remember being in a stuporlike daze through which facts slowly filtered, each a slap in the face of my reason. It was all so incredible, so unreal. That was the gist of my feeling. . . .

It was daylight, but not the kind of daylight we have on Earth. A tiny sun, the size of Jupiter as seen from Earth, hung high in the heavens. The stars were clearly visible, though slightly dimmed. There was a twilight feeling about the place, the eeriness of between darkness and dawn. The landscape was lighted, perhaps a little better than the full moon lights Earth. Colors were visible. The motif of this world was red—hot red of a single, blood-like hue!

The wall which towered above me was fifty feet of unscalable, red rock. The bushes on which I lay were red, with slight yellow and brown variations in their thistly "flowers". The ground from which they grew was blank, red sand, stretching off into the horizon, with only clumps of these weird growths to relieve its monotony. Over to my right was what seemed to be a range of distant, low-lying hills.

I don't know how long it was before I became a thinking, conscious human again. A grim resignation had set in when I discovered Thorssen. He was lying ten or twenty feet from me, unmoving. He had been rendered insensible by his own amazing fall.

I rose to go to him and discovered why the fall hadn't killed us both. The act of rising tossed me several feet into the air. Gravity here was low, almost as low as on the moon itself.

I recovered myself and stepped gingerly over to Thorssen. I hadn't been right

about him and I should have guessed as much. There were no shock-absorbing bushes where he lay, only hard-packed sand with a crumbly red shale, but he wasn't unconscious—just dazed and thoroughly shaken up. In addition to everything else, he had the constitution of an ox.

He was coming out of his daze. I watched his steel-colored eyes narrow speculatively as he sat up. An ironical smile twisted up the corners of his mouth. It was almost a statement: "Well, what do you know!"

He waved away my offered hand and got lightly to his feet. Recovering from the leap he took involuntarily, he stood, arms akimbo, surveying the horizon.

After a long second of thought, he looked at me and shrugged. I did the same, cursing the lack of radio facilities which prevented conversation. Not that I thought he knew any more about our predicament than I.

But he had an idea. He motioned me to come closer and touch helmets. In that way the vibrations would be transmitted directly from helmet to helmet. If we shouted we could hear each other and compare notes.

I was a little too hasty in complying. That was a mistake I almost paid for dearly. I moved towards him thoughtlessly, forgetting the small gravity. My helmet struck his with a deep bell note. He jerked back, startled. I smiled at his expression of alarm.

But my smile was quickly erased. I became conscious of something our unexpected transition had kept from me before. It was a thin, faint, but heart-stopping hiss—the hiss of air leaking from my helmet!

I hope never again to repeat my state of mind as I fumbled agonizingly around the base of my helmet. I searched with my fingers for the tiny pin-point of a hole I couldn't hope to see. It was impossible

to find it and doubly impossible to do anything about stopping the leak.

But with the unexpectedness of every good miracle, the hissing trailed off into a soft, panting sound, then halted completely. And I was still breathing!

How could that be, I wondered. Then I realized with a swift flash of insight that we were on a planet now. Planets generally had some sort of atmosphere, even low-gravity ones.

Again, if I had stopped to think, I wouldn't have been as hasty as I then was. It had been proven that the planet had air. But how much, and of what kind—that was still undiscovered. It could have been deadly methane or ammonia. It's no wonder Thorssen considered me seven kinds of a numbskull.

I didn't think of that till after I'd ripped my helmet off entirely, glad to be out of it. And by that time I had already survived for several seconds in air that was thin, strangely tangy—but obviously breathable.

Thorssen, regarding me with a frown my foolhardiness had earned, removed his helmet too. In the dead silence, his short, bitter laugh sounded unreal.

"I wonder how you've managed to stay alive this long," he said acidly. "You have a positive genius for blundering stupidity."

I FELT the roof of my mouth go dry with humiliation. The old shame of inferiority swept over me. Could I never forget the brand that had plagued me from birth? I was a cretin, wasn't I? Without those precious doses of *acret* I would be the most pitiable and despicable form of humanity.

I was super-sensitive on the subject. I imagined condemnation in every act of Thorssen's. I almost hated him for his perfectly functioning thyroid, his perfection in all things. With that a new dread numbed me. Was there pity in the glance

Thorssen shot me as he stooped to the sand? Did he realize, as suddenly as I, that I had not long to last without *acret*?

Dazedly I watched him putter around silently. I watched him scoop up some of the pebbly sand, crumble it between his fingers.

"Fertile ground," he said more to himself than me. "I wonder why nothing but these infernal bushes grow here. . . ."

I hated him for his callousness. How could he ignore my terror? I was a human, wasn't I? I was entitled to a little comfort, a little comradeship with a fate as appalling as mine confronting me. Hating him took the edge off my despair. If we could get back. . . .

"It needs irrigation, of course," Thorssen went on, straightening. "It's drier than yesterday's toast."

"Your interest may be agricultural," I said scathingly, "but I want to get back. Let's take a look around, see what we can do about it."

Thorssen narrowed his eyes at me in amused curiosity. "Take a look around what?" he asked with strained good humor. "Where do *you* suggest we start?"

The question was a poser, all right. Standing with our backs to the cliff we could see clear to the sharp horizon in the inadequate light of the little sun. But there was nothing to see but the scarlet sands, with occasional clumps of the gum-bushes. The slight hills were still to our right.

As for the cliff—we regarded it carefully. Fifty feet high it was, fifty feet with no jut or hollow for fingers to grip. In a wavering line, but always with its vertical sheeriness intact, it meandered to the horizon.

Even in this weak gravity we couldn't hope to reach its top. A leap might carry us twenty to thirty feet in the air, but that left an impregnable twenty feet more.

It was probably simultaneously that we both spotted the curious red glow beyond

the foothills. It could have been a city, though it scarcely resembled artificial light. It might have been the sun, if the sun hadn't been overhead. It was like the flaming color of an Earth sunset, or a small dose of the Aurora Borealis.

Thorssen looked at me and hesitated for a moment.

"It's worth investigating," he suggested.

I said nothing, thinking that above us lay our only avenue of escape—that there must be some way of utilizing it before it was too late, before my loathesome birthright claimed me.

Thorssen was strangely human for a change. "There is nothing we can do here," he said quietly. "If that is a city, there must be intelligence behind it. With help we can probably get back. Without it—"

He looked at me pityingly. There was more concern for me than for his own fate in that glance. I was almost grateful for his thoughtfulness.

I had too much respect for him to contest his reasoning. If there was any way of saving both of us, and me especially, it was through following his advice.

"Let's go then," I said quickly. "How long do you think it will take?"

Thorssen smiled at my impetuosity.

"I haven't the faintest idea," he told me, "but we'll know soon enough."

SO WE stepped awkwardly toward the hills with the light behind them.

At first we rose into the air with every step, and came down sprawling. But our moon-trained muscles soon enabled us to walk more efficiently.

When I felt the first draught of the breeze in my face, I thought it was only because of our movement. I accepted it and was glad for it. This planet, despite the insignificance of its primary, was hot. And our exercise made us hotter.

But suddenly the wind shifted abruptly, fanning our backs. Its velocity mounted

until it became a gale, blowing along as we were going, in the direction of the red glow. In a few seconds the desert was responding to the caress of the wind. Whirls of sand formed and leaped about. Stinging particles of grit commenced to strike against our unprotected necks and backs.

The wind now made a loud, howling sound, uncomfortable to hear even though it broke the eerie silence that had before reigned over this apparently dead planet. Over the wind's noise, I heard Thorssen shouting to me.

"Your helmet, stupid!" he yelled impatiently. "Put it on—don't close it. Just cover your head with it. Protect your eyes!"

I complied, and we stopped for a second to sneeze the grit out of our noses before proceeding.

But the gale continued to mount in intensity. We decided to wait it out. We huddled as close to the cliff as we could, sealed our helmets, and sat with our backs against it.

Before us was a pageant well worth watching.

Great spouts of sand were being formed all over the terrain. They rose, genii-like, in twisting columns. The noise, even filtered through our lucose helmets, was awe-inspiring. The bushes that I'd encountered before were everywhere being flung about violently in the grip of the tornados. They were tenacious, those bushes. I saw none of them dislodged from their clutch on the sands, however forcefully the wind tore at them.

But I was safe enough and comfortable enough. I had the stored air of my pressure-helmet, which no sandstorm could penetrate. My body was well protected by the hunting-garb I wore. And the curves of the cliff saved us from the worst buffetings of the wind. I began even to feel drowsy.

Everything had happened too quickly

before that for me to devote any concentration on where we were and how we'd got there. Now my fatigued brain wasn't able to cope with the problem, and dismissed it entirely after a while. I was thinking with great detachment, of food and the joys of eating when I amazed myself mildly by falling asleep while the wind still raged. Not even the terror of my personal problem could prevent that. Maybe it was Thorssen. He stared into that wild spectacle of wind-torn sand fearlessly. I couldn't help feeling glad that he was there.

WHEN I woke it was a starless, black night and something was pressing on my chest. I moved and found the answer. I was completely buried in sand. That accounted for the complete blackness. I struggled to a sitting position and found Thorssen's hand ready to pull me to my feet.

The windstorm over, the scene had the same depressing monotony as when we'd first seen it—identically the same. It occurred to me that it shouldn't be so. The sun shouldn't still be directly overhead. It indicated either a very short day, which I had slept through completely, and the coincidence of awaking at the exact same time. Or it indicated an impossibly long day—almost no day at all, for I'd surely slept for hours without any visible motion of that hot, small sun.

"You all right?" Thorssen demanded, and a little finger of fear crept into my brain. There was no determining time on this planet. Was my sluggish thyroid showing so soon?

"Sure," I said unsteadily. "A little groggy from sleep."

"You'll get over that," he assured me pleasantly. "Right now," he went on cheerfully, "we've got something interesting. Look over there."

Near the cliff some of the bushes, more protected than their brethren in the

open desert, had grown much larger and had assumed vine-like characteristics. They clambered up the wall, very nearly to the top.

"I'm going to try climbing that," Thorssen told me. "There's a good chance of succeeding. The stuff is tough."

The grogginess disappeared completely as I watched him. He was climbing the vine as gently as possible, trying hard not to dislodge it from its precarious grip on microscopic faults in the smooth cliffside. If he could make it, I could certainly. I was much lighter than Thorssen.

I shook myself and unscrewed my helmet again. I squinted up at the sun and then over to the lights beyond. They were still there—not bright, but visible. I inhaled the thin air, though my deepest breath still left me unsatisfied.

However thin, the air appeared to be all we'd get for breakfast. I inspected a clump of the gum-bushes—not very hopefully. They were obviously inedible. One quality they had, which I thought might come in handy some time and tabulated away in my mind. They were amazingly strong. They were limber, like eel-grass back on Earth, but could not be broken, no matter how hard I pulled. I managed, with my teeth, to break the surface of one of them. The sticky, fluid sap beaded out. I tasted it cautiously. It was almost as tasteless as flat water. But it could, conceivably, support life for a while if water in any other form was not forthcoming.

I heard a cry from Thorssen and wheeled in time to see him tumbling down. He'd reached the top of the vine, found it wasn't high enough and tried to retrace his steps. But the descent was harder. He'd pulled some of the growth from the wall, falling with it. The fall was thoroughly cushioned and only a matter of about fifteen feet; he was safe enough and unhurt.

He got to his feet lithely, ran his fingers through a shock of thick black hair and grinned ruefully. "There wasn't any harm in trying!" he laughed. He had a funny sense of humor. Adversity always seemed to amuse him.

I was grateful for that laugh. It took away some of the grimness. We started walking again in the direction of that unchanged, red glow.

"Maybe we'll have better luck along a little farther."

I nodded and we continued to walk along in silence.

"Got any idea where we might be?" I asked abruptly.

He shrugged without replying immediately, stooped for a handful of sand and fingered it thoughtfully.

Then he looked at me, sardonic humor in his face.

"A planet, I guess," he said taciturnly.

"I figured as much," I said patiently. "But what planet?"

The smile faded from his wide mouth. He squinted at the sky.

"Pluto, maybe," he said softly. "Not Mars, or anything nearer the sun. Probably not Pluto either. The sun's too small."

"One of the moons of Jupiter or Saturn?" I suggested, conscious that we had exchanged more words in one day than we had in six months!

"Maybe," he agreed, and was silent for a moment. "And maybe not," he said suddenly. "Maybe another star. That one isn't the right color. No yellow—Sol's trademark is yellow."

"Another star! How could we be in another system?"

"How could we be on Pluto?" he muttered ironically. "One's as inconceivable as the other!"

That was true enough, I thought, as I abstractly repeated his process of scooping up sand and fingering it. It was friable, as crumbly as cheesecake, fresh and light.

"Well, how do *you* think we got here?" I asked.

"You idiot," he stormed, "if I knew that, I'd know pretty damn near everything!"

It was the first time he'd really lost his temper. Cowed, I walked beside him silently.

WE WALKED on in those low-gravity, flat, sailing strides for what ought to have been a couple of hours. The sun didn't change position then any more than it had while we were asleep.

Used to the long silences that accompanied hunting the moon-cattle, we were occupied with our own thoughts when our walk was suddenly interrupted.

It was just after I had had a brain wave. If we could climb to the top of the cliff, we might be able to see something, either on the cliff or on the desert, from its vantage-point. If we could dig footholds into the cliff. . .

I was about to communicate this sudden rush of brains to the head to Thorssen, when the only cry of pure astonishment I'd ever heard from him stopped me in my tracks. It reminded me, a little too late, that we hadn't had any evidence that this world really was sterile. It might still harbor animal life. Maybe inimical animal life.

Well, it did!

Thorssen's eyes were wide with shock as he stared up into the sky. I looked.

Above us, soaring and wheeling, looking down on us, was a living creature. At least a thousand feet in the air it was, but it was huge—greater than the pterodactyl of Earth's youth. It was like a bird, but its wings were unlike anything avian—more like the longitudinal fins of an eel, the ribbon-fins that extend in an unbroken line from gills to tail. Its eyes must have been wonderfully sharp, for it saw us looking up at it, and abruptly

came plummeting down toward us!

"Duck!" I screamed. "Down on the ground! If that thing grabs you—!"

But it was too late. There was no place to hide. No shelter for as much as a cricket.

The thing, its featherless wings screaming through the thin air, came sweeping down in a power-dive faster than any plane of Earth. The wonder of the thing gripped me even as I dropped to earth. This thin air—how could anything fly in it?

I found out. The thing dropped with a shrill sound of displaced atmosphere till it was almost on us. Then its ribbon-wings rippled and humped as it slowed and straightened out. It swooped down and clutched at Thorssen with bristling claws. I could feel those claws, almost, in my own flesh. . . .

And it caught him. I saw him wince as the needle sharp talons pierced skin and flesh, and grab despairingly at the sand as though he expected the thing to carry him off into the sky.

But the creature was not built to lift loads like Thorssen. It was not strong enough to withstand a sharp blow such as the inertia an Earth-heavy man's body gave it.

When it gripped Thorssen's wide shoulder, its claws sank in and held—held too well, held while the forearm of the creature snapped off and the bird, with a thin, pig-like squeal of agony, plummeted into the sand, thrown off balance by the unexpected shock.

It must have died immediately. It was dead, anyhow, by the time we got around to examining it.

THE immediate concern was Thorssen's shoulder. It took all my strength to pull the rigid claws apart and out of his flesh. You'd think it was my shoulder, the way my face screwed up. But those claws were devil-

ish instruments. They were compound, with little retractable barbs set in the claw itself. I had to pull those barbs out through Thorssen's flesh.

He turned pale and a little bit grimmer. "Go on," he said quietly, "*get them out!*"

If you think it was an easy or a pleasant job, try looking at a fishhook sometime and imagining how you would like eight of them dragged through your skin!

We finally got through with that ordeal though, and Thorssen himself bandaged the bleeding, dirty mass of cuts with his undershirt. There was no water to wash it, no iodine to sterilize it. We had to trust to nature.

Thorssen tied the last bandage and smiled wryly. "What rotten luck," he grunted, and appeared to dismiss it that lightly. He moved over to examine the carcass.

It was a fantastic thing. Thorssen lifted it easily with his one good hand. Huge as it was, it could not have weighed more than a hundred pounds even on Earth. It came to a quarter of that on this planet of slight pull.

We dissected it as best we could. The best we could do, lacking all the things we lacked, was to pull it apart with our fingers and brute force. My primary interest in the bird-thing vanished as soon as I touched it, for it was obviously totally inedible. Its flesh was so dry as to be almost powdery.

The fall had smashed its backbone and it had died instantly. Its body was hot to the touch. No trace of blood could be found. Certain parts of its body were soggy with the sticky fluid we'd found in the bushes before—or with something like it. Its skeleton, though as fragile as calcined bone, was very like that of terrestrial bird.

The most mysterious thing about it, though, I found, was a bulge in the breast of the thing, just below where its neckless head sat directly on its "shoulders."

I prodded it, and finally tore it out completely. It proved to be a solid, polyhedral lump. Polyhedral, I say—it was perfectly regular, and of an odd consistency. It was partly transparent, prismatic.

The transparency was only on the surface. Held up to the sun, it was clear at the very edge. Then it began to deepen rapidly into color, passing through yellows, oranges and deep reds to utter blackness a fraction of an inch below the surface.

And it was hot—hotter than the bird's body, which was almost too warm to be comfortable. Nor did it lose its heat as long as we had it. It weighed a little more than a quarter of a pound.

"It's a curious thing," Thorssen said quietly, inspecting it. "It looks machine-made."

He turned it in the broad palm of his hand thoughtfully and then stuffed it into his sweater, the arms of which he had looped about his neck. I don't know whether he had any rational purpose in keeping it. I didn't want to leave it there myself, but I was happy to let him carry the thing. Later, it became very important to us.

We set off again down the line of the wall, Thorssen stoic about his wound. I should have known better than to assume, because he made no fuss about it, that it was trivial.

CHAPTER THREE

City of Emptiness

HALF an hour after we came across steps!

"These were never made for a human foot," Thorssen volunteered, after a cursory look. There was wonder in his voice. "They're too small, in the first place, and they aren't shaped right."

They certainly weren't natural. They were merely flat pieces of woody sub-

stance projecting across cup-shaped, hewn depressions in the rock. The woody substance puzzled me. I tried my belt buckle on it, the nearest thing I had to a cutting edge. I found I could shave off long splinters with ease. But it was impossible to cut against the grain, and surprisingly hard to break.

I tested the strength of the highest one I could reach, hanging from it. It held firm.

"This is it," I said happily. "We can pull ourselves up, hand over hand. It's a way out."

I dropped off and let Thorssen test them himself. He was so much heavier than I, and it had to be good for both of us. Without a word he chinned himself once for luck, and began to climb. As soon as his swinging feet cleared the level of my head, I followed.

The climb was hot work, though brief. Sweat trickled down my face in rivulets,

quickly evaporating in the rarefied air. How Thorssen, with that wound in his shoulder, managed, I'll never know.

I heard a smothered exclamation above me and quickly lifted myself the rest of the way.

The top of the cliff was something I hadn't at all expected. I stared with wide eyes for a moment.

"It's like a wall," I said. "A wall that keeps nothing out of nowhere!"

Thorssen nodded silently. His brows drew together, though. It was becoming increasingly clear that there was some manner of intelligent life on this planet. First the apparently manufactured steps, then this obviously artificial wall. But where was this life?

"If intelligence constructed this wall," Thorssen speculated, "it was obviously to keep out enemies, enemies such as the vicious creature that attacked us—"

A far-fetched comparison came to me

**"I wish he were a well-groomed lad—
He really ought to read this ad!
It says for comfort, thrift and speed
These Thin Gillettes are what men need!"**



Save Extra Money! Get The Big New Economy Package, 12 For 27c

of the Earth eagle stealing glittering objects. Could this bird-thing have stolen the object Thorssen carried in his sweater? It was almost evidence of civilization.

I mentioned as much to him and he shrugged. "I am almost certain the bird had an intelligence of its own. If it stole the polyhedral object it was for a purpose."

It was interesting to speculate, but it got us nowhere. We gazed down the narrow, perfectly flat, perfectly even ribbon of rock. It stretched into infinity in either direction. The other side of the wall was just like the side we had come from—Sand and bushes.

"Well, what now?" My voice must have sounded very tired. I felt that way. There seemed nothing to hope for—no way of returning, ever, to Earth, with its beautiful, rich, thick air, with its gravity that held you snugly to the ground. With, most especially, its millions and billions of people, and cities and animals and trees, and *acretin*—

"We'll keep on," Thorssen decided, and I heard his words through a miasma of despair. "It will be easier walking up here. It's a flat, solid surface."

Thirst was becoming a problem with me. It became harder to breathe, with my throat clogging up stickily. I began to remember with longing the nice, cold, viscid sap from those gum-bushes. I decided to put the problem to Thorssen.

"Thorssen—"

He looked around at me. I saw his face relax as from a strain.

"What?"

"I'm thirsty."

There was sour amusement in his voice. "So am I."

"I'm hungry too," I went on determinedly. "Do you have any ideas?"

He shrugged and looked ahead once more. He picked his steps with care. We were now in a narrower spot.

"No," he replied thoughtfully. "I've

been thinking about it. We'll have to keep going—"

"There was a sort of sap in those weeds," I said. "Not very good maybe, but it must have had water in it."

"Forget it. I tried it. It burned my mouth off."

I loosened my collar and rubbed the back of my neck. It was stinging, hot to the touch—why?

Thorssen's neck supplied the answer. I saw him rub it as I had rubbed mine. It was red and beginning to blister—sunburn!

I told him.

"From what?" he said, staring without troubling to narrow his eyes at the tiny luminary above.

"It must be," I said. "There is no other sun."

"It's impossible," Thorsen snapped, and I watched his eyes narrow on that red glow in the distance. All the same, maybe because he had come to a conclusion about that glow, he protected his neck from the sun with his sweater. He put the polyhedral object in his helmet and slung it from his waist.

We continued for about ten miles over the wall. The territory was unchanged on either side of us—only ahead of us the little range of hills drew imperceptibly nearer. The mystery of the ruddy glow behind them remained unsolved.

The hunger and thirst I felt had grown and grown until now it was all of my existence. I would have given my soul for food, but I would have given my chances of ever eating again for a small whisky glass of water.

I was almost dead on my feet. I didn't have a thought to spare for anything else.

I was so absorbed in myself and my thirst, it was only when I caught myself, actually lifting my foot to step over his prostrate body that I really noticed Thorsen. He had been walking about twenty feet ahead of me, and had, without warn-

ing, fallen to the ground, where he lay unmoving.

I sank to my knees beside him, shook myself out of my stupor. The wound was horribly inflamed. He was alive, but his pulse was faint, his breathing heavy. In his sleep he winced as I touched the bandages. I had an idea then of what he must have gone through, and a surge of wild admiration for him went through me.

Waking him would have done no good—rest was the only curative I had to offer. So I sat down beside him and abruptly dropped off myself into a horrid black sleep.

WHEN I awoke I looked around twice to make sure. But my first impression was right—Thorssen had utterly disappeared! Nothing but Thorssen had disappeared. The sweater I had loosened from him was still where I'd dropped it. His helmet with the polyhedral object still lay on the red stone of the wall-top.

It was as if he had risen deliriously and staggered off in a semi-coma. I looked over the sides of the wall—both sides. He hadn't fallen. In either direction along the wall itself there was no sign of him. I was alone, totally alone.

Lack of water and food had cost too much for sleep to restore. Mental and physical agony descended with equal force, and in a daze, clutching Thorssen's helmet and sweater, I continued in the same direction we had been traveling. Without the strength of dauntless Thorssen to buoy me up, the horror of what had befallen us doubled in intensity.

I walked for several hours. The little hills were close, when finally I decided I could walk no longer. I tottered to the edge of the wall and peered weakly over. The enticing red gum-bushes held out their promises of the cooling, drinkable sap they contained. I might have disre-

garded Thorssen's warning about them, if had it not been for something new.

In the utter silence, now that my scuffling foot falls on smooth rock had ceased, were only two sounds. One, irregular and recognizable, was the soft whispering of the wind on the red sands.

The other was a low murmuring that I had heard before. It had been occurring all along. I remembered now that I had heard it every time I consciously devoted my mind to listening. I had dismissed it each time; it was that faint. Even on a planet where absolute silence was the norm, and any variation was worthy of immediate and complete attention, this sound had been faint enough to be dismissed.

Now it was louder, appreciably louder, and it sounded to my willing ears like *running water!*

It didn't occur to me that my sensory equipment would have been willing to interpret anything as what it wanted most of all to hear. But it did occur to me that there was an odd note to that murmur. It could be running water, but there was something—something wrong.

I began moving again, faster this time, with a purpose. And I thought I saw the place the sound was coming from. Up ahead, where the wall broadened more than ever before, it rose to a slight crater.

It wasn't very hard for me to convince myself that that crater was a well.

Maybe it was. But when I got to it, not even my willing brain could convince me that the liquid flowing below was water.

There was some sort of liquid torrenting along in the depths of the crater. I could hear it perfectly. Though it was utterly dark down there, I could see the glint of the dim sun reflected from it. But the sound was more of a sustained metallic clinking than that of tinkling, bubbling fountains.

And an acrid, chemical aroma came

from that hellish river or whatever it was.

My first thought had been to dive right into the water. Now I became more prudent. I loosened my helmet, retaining Thorssen's and the polyhedron, and dropped it.

The liquid was about a hundred feet below. And the splash made by the falling helmet was not that of water.

But still I did not want to give up. Nor did I have to. A search soon showed me another of the ladder-like affairs cut directly into the wall of the well. Without pausing to ask why or wherefore, I eased myself down onto the first rung and swung down.

THE river was definitely not water. It was molten metal—a metal I didn't recognize. Though molten, it was cool enough for me to touch without discomfort.

I know of a couple of metals that act like that—with fusing points low enough to be tolerable to humans. There's woodsmetal for one, and there's potassium. But this didn't seem to be either of them. I had no idea what it might be. And I didn't care much. I wasn't physically able to care much about anything.

There was a faint exhalation given off by that stream, a thin chemical reek that added to my killing thirst. My throat was drier than the flesh of that bird-thing Thorssen and I had killed. Thorssen—he was a shadowy outline in my privation-maddened thoughts. With him there had been some sense of security. . . .

It was darker than the holes of hell in that little pit with the noisy river running close beside. But I could see faintly the mark of a small hewn pathway beside the stream. Tottering groggily, I stepped out along it, determined to follow it wherever it led.

After I don't know how many hours and miles, there was an abrupt turning in the river's course. I found hot, white

light shining ahead. I called on a reserve of strength that surely couldn't have belonged to me, and hastened to see what caused the light. I reached the end of the tunnel, where the accompanying river splashed metallically down a brief falls, and stood petrified in sheer astonishment.

Before me was a huge lake of the metallic liquid, surrounded by a profusion of splashing fountains, not metal, this time, but real *water*! There were trees and plants of a hundred ornamental shapes. It was not only beautifully landscaped, but well kept.

On the other side of the dozen-acre lake was a city, a city unlike anything on Earth, reminiscent, somehow, of ancient New York and other cities of the past whose towers clutched at the sky. The mountainous moon's horizon would have showed the same tracery of elevations and depressions that this city's skyline revealed. But where the moon's markings were the result of cataclysmic chance, this city's jaggedness was planned.

Behind me were the mountains. I'd passed under them while following the stream. And ahead, beyond the city, that same red light shone with multiplied brilliance.

I had enough sense not to drink the water that was in those delightful fountains with too great haste. I took it in sips, slow deep sips. And I rested by the side of the fountains. Before I got up I had drunk enough water to hold me for another day at least.

That light puzzled me, now that I was in condition to be puzzled again. It could not be the lights of the city, as Thorssen and I had believed. Here was the city, and the light came from still farther away, from behind the city and with an intensity that was inconceivable.

I stretched out by the side of the fountains and planned a campaign. There were three things I had to do—find food, find Thorssen, find a way to get home.

Food I might likely find growing from one of the bushes or trees. Thorssen and the way home were more difficult. But a city meant people—well, intelligent creatures at least. Within the city I might find help.

After a few minutes of this thought, I slept again. For how many hours, I can not tell. The tiny sun was still motionless overhead. Time had almost stood still. Time that was so precious for me. No, I had not forgotten that—the curse that dogged me and so many of my fellow humans.

A SICKENINGLY sweet nut was all I could find that seemed edible. I swallowed a dozen or so of them with their paper-thin shells. They were four or five inches long and half as broad. I tucked as many as would fit in Thorssen's helmet, along with the polyhedral thing, and made off toward the city.

The astounding thing about the city, I found, once inside it, was its emptiness—that and the fact that it seemed unfinished, incomplete.

The buildings, some of which must have been close to a thousand feet in height above the depressed floor of the valley, were constructed in vari-colored rocks. Not one of them contained a single window. Some were incomplete, showing how they had been built. It seemed that a synthetic substance had been poured into flat vertical molds, and cast on the spot. Within these partly completed buildings, one of which I was able to enter through a gap in the side, there seemed to be no interior walls.

The building was a jagged shell, stretching emptily to the sky. This incomplete one was roofless.

The completed buildings had doors, rather large doors. But they were securely locked by some means I could not determine.

I wandered along streets paved with

shifting colors. I would be standing on a section of purest blue. I would walk and within a dozen yards the blue would imperceptibly have become purple. A bit farther on the purple would fade into red, and the red into orange.

It was a gorgeous view but not inspiring. For it robbed me, through its emptiness, of my hope for friendly aid.

The buildings seemed to be higher in the center of the city. I walked that way, my footfalls sounding awesomely loud in the utter silence of these great cathedrals of emptiness.

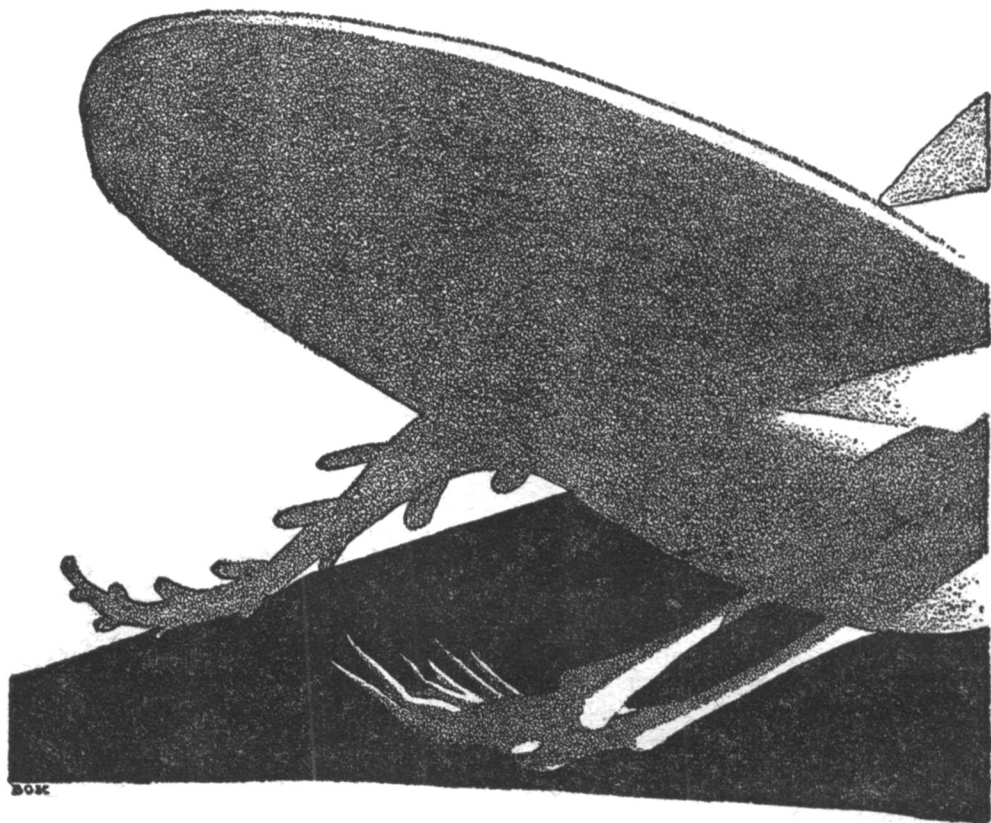
CHAPTER FOUR

The Lightning Strikes

LIKE all persons suffering from a physical defect, I knew everything there was to know on the subject of cretinism. In front of one of those magnificent shells, I felt the dizzying impact of head-splitting ache, and my blood turned to water. I recognized the mark. *It was the beginning of atavism.*

Never was I so totally alone, so completely struck by the hopelessness of my position. Thorssen, marooned on this alien world, could reconcile himself to the prospect of living on it forever. It would not have been the idea existence, but it would have been life. For me there was nothing like that. Either I got back to Earth soon—or I descended to the level of a moron.

Death was preferable. Over and over again I cursed the horror that plagued so many men and women of Earth. Ours was a horrible existence. For all our seeming normalcy, there were so many strictures. We were deplored and pitied. We were shipped away from home to far-off places in ever increasing numbers. We were discouraged from marriage and forbidden children. We were shunned and feared.



Yes, death was preferable. It came to me with cold clearness that I would have to decide soon. How many hours or days had I before I became a cretin? I felt well enough, of course. There was no perceptible dimming of my intellectual faculties. It seemed to me that I could reason as well as ever, that I was still human and a bit above the average. But it would seem that way. I would never be able to mark the transition.

Was I already on the way to drooling, horrid idiocy? Was my sense of well-being the mark of a mind that had abandoned reason?

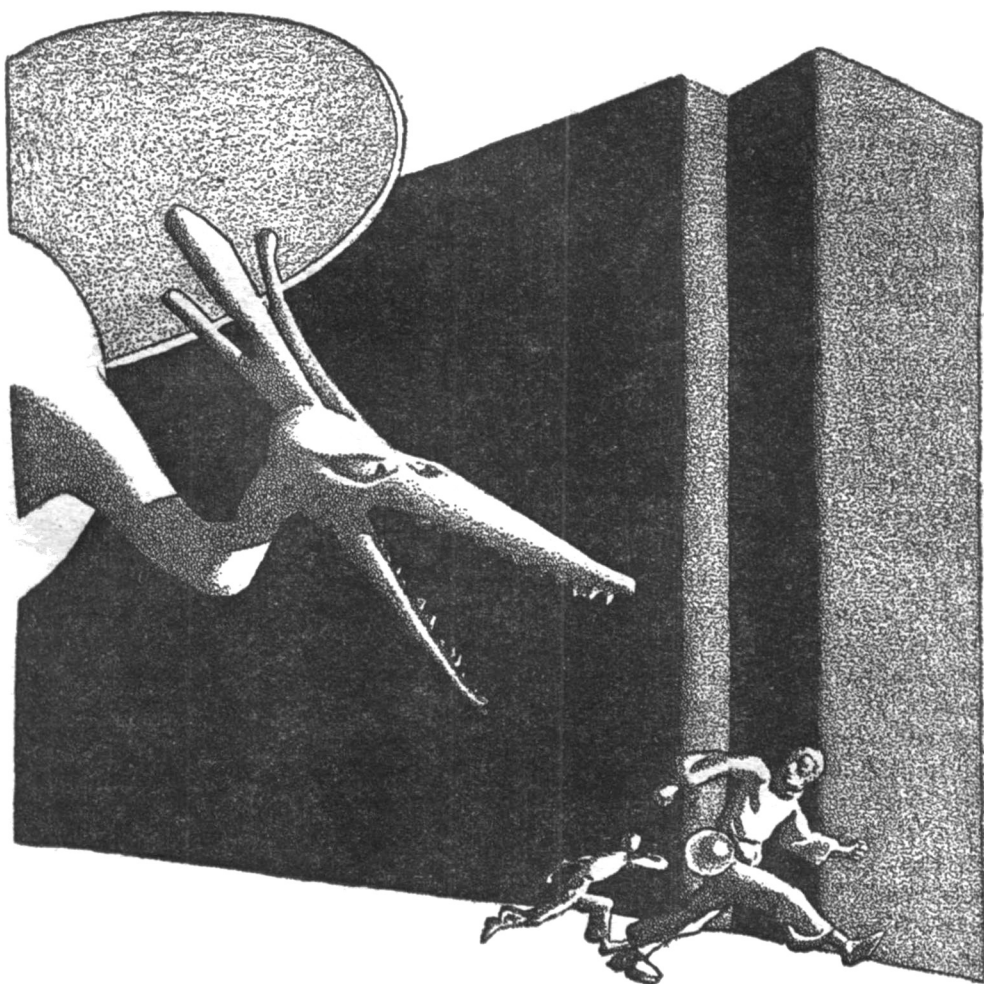
Not likely. Facts bore me out. With close figuring I reckoned I had about three days to go before I began to revert. Three days! Perhaps I could do it. Perhaps I could find how I had got here, and how I could reverse the process and get home

again in three days. If I couldn't, I would kill myself.

I started to walk again, immersed in this morbidity. Suddenly my feet slid from under me, slipped on something, and I fell to the ground. On arising, I discovered a dark red, damp smear on my hand. *It was blood!*

And I discovered a trail of blood, a few drops at spaces of three or four yards, leading away before me. It was human blood, red and rich. Thorsen! My head cleared for the first time in hours. There was hope. With him there was always hope.

There seemed to be a clear deduction. Thorsen had come along here and suddenly begun to bleed. Perhaps he had been engaged in violent physical struggle with an unknown adversary who was also now gone. Or perhaps the old wound had



opened. In any case, I followed the blood drops with new courage. My hatred for him, a protective feeling because I feared him so greatly, melted. Thorssen! But where was he and how would I find him?

I FOLLOWED the trail, all right. But while I didn't find him, I did find something interesting—an open door.

The door was in a small but somewhat imposing, squat building, set a bit apart from the others, in the middle of a stretch of pure white paving.

I entered and found myself in a huge, low-ceilinged hall. A chill breeze followed me through the door. I drew my clothing

tighter about me and gazed around.

Nothing of much interest was visible. It was a bare hall without ornamentation of furniture. Only at one side there was a ramp, climbing through a gap in the ceiling to a higher floor.

The trail of blood went that way. So did I.

The second floor of this building was also the top floor. The walls here were set with floor-to-ceiling slabs of transparent substance. It was an observatory of sorts.

In the center of the room was a pyramidal bank of studs, levers, pointers, and other less easily identifiable things. Clearly

this must have been a control room of sorts.

I approached the controls and circled them speculatively. The whole affair looked like some modernistic form of a Christmas tree, of which the gadgets were the ornaments. It was about that shape and a little taller than me. The purpose of the controls, if they were controls, was, of course, beyond me.

It was distinctly cold in the room. I began to realize that, ever since I'd left the direct light of the small but potent sun, I had felt chill.

A low bench-like affair ran the periphery of the room. I seated myself on it and considered the situation. One amazing thing that escaped my notice before now came to me. There was no conceivable way out but the way I'd come in. Nor could I have been following a double trail, for I'd watched for that. Thorssen had come into this room and never gone out of it. If my sense of humor had been operating, I would have been tired of the way he had of disappearing into thin air every so often.

Except for the pyramidal array of gadgets, the room was stark bare. If Thorssen were still in this room, there was only one place he could be. That was in the pyramid.

I examined it more carefully. It seemed to be all of one piece, but there was a curious handle-shaped affair down at the bottom that seemed to have no relation to the rest of the controls. I yanked on it boldly and a panel slid open.

Yes, Thorssen was there. But he was a sick man, conscious enough to recognize me, but drawn and haggard. His principal need, it was evident, was air. He came out of that small, wire-crammed closet gasping. It was all I could do to support him to the bench. But I did more than my best. The condition of his make-shift bandage convinced me he had been through hell.

He rallied swiftly and smiled at the

expression of concern on my face. It was almost impertinent that I should be supporting him, ministering to his needs. I felt that old wave of inferiority sweep over me. I edged farther off so that he would not feel the need to thank me too profusely.

He watched though, curiously perturbed. It must have embarrassed him to have me so humble. It may have been what he disliked so about me, my cringing deference.

"Don't do that!" he said sharply, and I flushed stupidly.

I covered my confusion with words. I wanted to know what had happened, but he wouldn't say until I had told him my story.

THE wound of the bird-thing had given him more pain by far than I'd realized, he said. But there was nothing to be gained by complaining. We were working against time.

He had endured that for my sake!

He'd awakened while I slept on the red, rock wall. Half crazy with agony, lack of food and water, he'd walked away. It was a delirium. He remembered nothing of his walk. He came back to consciousness to find himself sprawled on the brink of one of the fountains which surrounded the lake. Apparently he had followed the same route I had.

He drank and ate just as I had done, then entered the city.

"Then I got into a little trouble," he said. "I found a door that would open, and I went into one of the buildings. It was pretty much like this one inside, with very little furniture. But it seemed a kind of barracks. There were cot-like affairs, hundreds of them, scattered all over the upper floors. And one of the cots was in use."

"The thing that was sleeping in it didn't look even vaguely human. It had arms and legs, but it needed a head to be complete.

It had none. As far as I can tell, it's deaf, blind and only God knows how it eats. It had a couple of rows of short diagonal slits in its sides which opened and closed regularly as it lay there. I guess it breathed through them."

I leaned forward, fascinated. "Were they living organisms, or machines?"

Thorssen smiled grimly. "It's hard to say. They have intelligence all right, but nothing that could have constructed this city. Will you let me get on?"

I shut up meekly.

Thorssen took a breath. "Well, I woke it up. Not intentionally, mind you. I got too close to it. Somehow, it sensed someone was there. And it woke up mad.

"This wasn't any fragile creature, either," he went on. "It wasn't like the monster who gave me this souvenir." He patted his healing shoulder. "It was as dense and as strong as we. Probably a lot stronger.

"Anyway, it grabbed at me with powerful-looking bony claws. But I dodged back in time and it missed. Then I ran—fast.

"It followed me, and that thing could run! But with pretty constant dodging, and taking advantage of the fact that it could neither see nor hear, I managed to keep out of its reach. How the devil it kept on my trail, I don't know. Maybe it was sensitive to the heat of my body—or maybe it smelled me.

"Well, it finally caught up with me. We

had a big tussle, and that scratch on my shoulder opened up again. It didn't get its claws into my flesh. Strangely, it didn't seem to want to hurt me, just capture me. But I was in no mood for guessing games. So when it got its claw hooked in a piece of my bandage, I let it rip and ran like hell! I covered a good eighth of a mile before I even stopped and looked around. It had discarded the piece of bandage and was nosing around, trying to figure where I'd gone. Then I heard a deep noise, like a factory whistle. A couple of seconds later another one just like it came racing along the side streets. It turned into the street I was on not more than a dozen feet from me. I don't know whether it didn't know I was there, or just hadn't been told to look for me yet. A couple of others came loping along from other directions. Then the whole gang of them started coming after me!

"They were moving a little slower this time. I guess they were following the blood I was dripping. I didn't wait to find out. Then I found this place and ran in. The door was standing open to this pyramid affair and it was as good a cubby-hole as any. I got in and pulled it shut.

"But I found I couldn't open it from the inside either. I was good and stuck! The door was so perfectly fitted that I was just out of luck as far as air was concerned—none came in."



"And then," I said huskily, "I stumbled along."

"And saved my life. I can't say thanks."

He put out his hand and I felt it close over mine with a grip that made me wince.

"Here's your sweater, Thorssen," I said. "You can use it."

I turned away and looked again into the little cubby-hole where Thorssen had so long been secreted. There was barely space for him, with his broad, powerful body, to crouch. Certainly he could neither stand nor lie down. I admired, no I nearly worshipped his stamina and resilience.

THE headless things Thorssen had described had gone away long before I came. Where they'd gone we didn't know. We didn't stop to enquire. Thorssen had a hunch that they were directed by a greater intelligence. And we were in search of that intelligence.

But we should have exercised greater caution. We'd gone only a short distance when I heard that deep-throated hoot Thorssen had described. We whirled and saw, close behind us, one of the creatures.

It was coming at us cautiously, evidently waiting for reinforcements. It was a tall thing—Thorssen hadn't mentioned that, but he should have, for the creature was huge. It was a deep gold in color, almost bronze, with the lips of the openings in its side a contrasting livid green. It was horribly beautiful, but I had no eye for its beauty. Together Thorssen and I swiveled around again and ran for our lives.

You can really run in a low gravity, once you get the hang of it, and Thorssen and I had the knack of it down pat. Thorssen's wound seemed to be bothering him again, or maybe it was just consideration that kept his speed down to mine. In spite of it we must have made better than thirty miles an hour.

The group of things behind us—there

must have been a dozen of them by now—paced us evenly. They seemed to have reserve power in their long, sailing strides, but they didn't make use of it. Could it be they were merely waiting to tire us out, so we would be easier prey?

I thought so. But I didn't know what we could do about it. And so we continued to run with the things pursuing us.

Thorssen, beside me, suddenly grabbed my arm. "We'd better face it," he said hoarsely. "We'll never out-distance those creatures! We've still got some strength left and it's better than collapsing in their path."

We both halted and faced the oncoming monstrosities.

Thorssen's grip on my arm tightened, but the expected battle never materialized. The monstrosities halted too and stood in silent conference for a moment. Then they moved forward. As we tensed for the struggle, their ranks divided. They split into two groups and encircled us.

We stood that way for several moments without saying a word and without a motion or sound from the headless ones. Then we heard a stir of motion behind us, and saw that those who had passed us were closing in on us. We backed away from them.

It was incredible! The whole circle moved too, at a slow walk. Still encircling us, keeping the circle perfect, they walked on. We walked too, inside the circle, back the way we had come. Thorssen and I stared into each other's eyes for a long second. Then Thorssen shrugged and his steel-colored glance seemed vaguely amused. It was incomprehensible to both of us—and funny. We continued our walk without words.

THE headless ones herded us back to their little squat building and up the ramp to the second floor. They would not follow up, but ranged themselves around the lower hall in attitudes

which seemed curiously expectant. There were a dozen additions to the group and more came in as we watched from above.

Thorssen studied them, an odd, speculative light in his eyes.

"They're waiting for us to do something!" he said softly. "Heaven knows what it is, but they'll stay there until we do it."

The silence drew in on me and I shivered with cold. Thorssen, naked to the waist, the sweater wound over the shred of his bandage, didn't seem to feel the cold. It puzzled me. I was freezing and couldn't ignore it so easily.

Or *was* it cold?

My hand trembled as it rose to my scalp. I hardly dared touch my hair, I feared there would be full confirmation there. . . .

And there was!

My blood congealed with terror. I had miscalculated. My hair was coarse and dry; the hair-line had crept lower, almost to the brows and well past the ears. It had been difficult for me to speak, I remembered. I had attributed it to thirst, but it wasn't thirst.

My skin was cold. My hair was thick and brittle. My tongue was numbing, had swollen and become ridged. I ground my teeth in helpless, angry horror, and the horror was increased as I felt how loose they were in my gums.

Every symptom was beginning to be present. My *acret* treatment long overdue, I was becoming a *cretin*! And Thorssen had known, had seen! Yet he was silent, keeping me in ignorance. What was there to do? I couldn't hate him. I only wished to die.

Was there any hope for me? In this new and virulent form of the sickness that was as old as humanity, the physical changes preceeded the intellectual by a few hours, no more. I had perhaps half a day left of adult ability. At the end of that time I would be worthless to anyone.

I would be a ghastly, crawling, stupid horror.

Would Thorssen help, could his stomach stand the sight of me until we had found the way out of this mess we were in? I looked at him in helpless wonder. He probably would. There was a lot I had learned about Thorssen—a lot. But even if he found a way out, would it be such that he could take me with him?

Wasn't it better to die before that happened? To be left like an ape on this arid, terrible planet was a far worst fate.

The numerical value of pi is 3.14159, I told myself silently. Light travels at the speed of 186,000 miles per second. A logarithm is that power of a number which gives ten as a result. You know these things now. As long as you remember and understand them you are all right. When it becomes hard to remember them, you are going. Then you have to kill yourself. But until you begin to forget, you still have a chance.

"I've got it!" Thorssen interrupted me with suppressed excitement. "The difference between them and us—there's something we can do that they can't do. What is it?"

I braced myself and dismissed my plan for suicide for the time being. Thorssen must never suspect the promise I had made myself. He would never allow it. I had to act.

"I don't know," I said. "What?"

"We can see," he said patiently. "They can't! Therefore, they want us to do something that requires vision. It's up to us to find out what that something is."

"More likely they want us to stay where we are until they get around to us," I objected. "How do you know we're not being kept for sacrifice, or for eating? How do you know that they're not intelligent?"

"I don't know anything about them specifically," Thorssen said swiftly. "All I know is that intelligence is responsible for this high form of civilization, that in-

telligence guided them in the ingenious way they brought us here. Whether that intelligence is within them or comes from another source, I cannot say."

There was logic in that. "Well what do they want?" I cried irritably.

"Whatever they want," he said, his grey eyes fixed speculatively on the control board, "it's up here. And the only thing up here is that pyramidal control board. Suppose we see if we can make it tick?"

THE dials and levels and pointers meant no more to Thorssen, superficially, than they did to me. It's not possible to take one look at a completely unknown piece of machinery and say what it is and how to work it.

But Thorssen is an electrician by hobby and managed to solve a few problems of the control board. "I've located the power leads," he said. "I don't know what they're hooked up to, but there's juice in them. There's a pattern all set up on the control board. I don't know what would be happening if it were functioning, but I know that it's supposed to be functioning now. Only there's a fault somewhere keeping it from delivering. It seems to me we're expected to find that fault and fix it!"

He dove back into the closet in which he had spent stifling hours.

After a while he announced, "Looks like this rod isn't making contact."

The people who'd built this control board used inflexible rods instead of wires. Just as efficient, of course, and more durable, providing you belonged to a race of super-mechanics who knew just exactly what connection they wanted to make where long before they made it. Thorssen pattered a while longer, as I sat repeating my formula to myself. Yes, I was still of normal intellect. My memory hadn't gone yet.

Thorssen came out of the closet groan-

ing, "If I had some tools, I might know what I'm doing. I might even be able to do what I'm supposed to be doing."

"How does it look?" I asked, conscious of the thickening in my speech. It was like waiting for a poison to take effect.

He considered. "Not too bad," he said finally. "But that power rod is sprung. Lord knows what happened to it, but it's bent a little and doesn't make contact at the end. If you lean on the middle of it and straighten it out, it works—I guess."

"Why don't you try it?" I asked impatiently. How many hours of sanity could I have left?

He shrugged. "Because I'd have to leave the master-switch on. And this board is rigged oddly. I don't mean only that it's totally different from anything I ever dreamed of in my whole life. But even for a board out of a nightmare, there are some funny bugs in this one. That switch—" He pointed to a silvery medalion, ridged so that a nearly human hand could grasp and turn it "—is the master switch, the one that activates the whole board. At least, it's cut in on every power lead I've been able to trace."

"Then turn it on and fix up the bar," I suggested, probably apathetically. I was more interested in the recurrence of that splitting headache which came and went in tides of nausea. I tried to remember back to my infancy. Was that a part of cretinism? If it was, I wanted to die, for I couldn't bear the mere idea of enduring that pain for long.

Thorssen was saying something. He was shaping words with his firm, wide lips. "I can't do that. I tried it, and it won't work. I think the only chance for us to hold down the rod is for one of us to hold it down while the other works the switch. If you turn on the switch while a part of the board isn't functioning, it seems to have no effect. A sort of automatic cut-off."

That was all I heard. Then the sickness

of my headache came rushing in on me, with a high keening sound that I could hear in my ears. The pain was blinding. I stood perfectly still, waiting for it to subside. *The numerical value of pi is three point one four one nine fi—no! Five nine. Be careful! Light travels at the speed of—*

My vision began to clear again and I could see Thorssen. He seemed to be angry with me. He wanted me to come over to him. I walked carefully to his side and stood peering up into his face. Thorssen was tall and wide and strong. I hated him to see me this way. I wanted to cover my face with my hands. I wanted to die. I was horrible.

Thorssen was angry with me. He put my hand on the little bright thing and turned it. I understood immediately what he wanted me to do, and I also turned it. Maybe I turned it too hard. It came off in my hand.

I thought that would make Thorssen angry with me, but it didn't. He started to shout, but he stopped and stood looking at the silver thing and at me, a little puzzled, a little angry. Then he put the silver thing back where it had been. There was a nice hole under where the silver thing had been, a hole that looked like

that thing we had found would fit in it—that thing we had gotten from the bird that attacked us. I would have tried to fit it in but Thorssen had already put the silver thing back on.

Thorssen made me get down on my hands and knees and go into the little closet where he had hidden. He put a helmet in my hands and pushed them against the rod. The helmet kept my hand from touching the rod, but it was my hand pushing it just the same.

Suddenly, the pain pushed back into my head, clearing it slightly. *Have I gone yet? I wondered. Am I a cretin? The numerical value of pi is three point one eighty six thousand miles per logarithm. Is the power of ten which makes . . .*

That was wrong, I knew. As soon as I started forgetting, I had to do something—kill myself.

I had to kill myself. How?

I was still holding the helmet against the rod. I had to. The helmet protected me, insulated me from a shock.

The shock would kill me.

Thorssen wanted me to keep pressing the rod. I did not want to disappoint Thorssen. I carefully pressed on the rod all the time. My left hand was on the helmet. My right hand reached up and

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touched the charged rod. A jolt of livid green flame lighted my way to darkness.

I WAS in a rocket-plane where the pilot was doing stunts. *Zip* would go the rocket-jets and we would zoom up. Then we would straighten out, glide down, and *zip* would go the jets again.

I opened my eyes. Thorssen was carrying me, striding dexterously along that incredible wall that had marked the beginning of our adventures here. Leaping agilely ahead of us was one of the headless ones.

I shut my eyes tightly, remembering. Despite everything, Thorssen had kept faith with me. Wretched wreck of humanity that I was, he had saved me. . . But was I?

My mind was clear, clearer than it had been since I could remember. The splitting ache was completely gone. My body was strangely relaxed, vital. I felt wonderful. *I wasn't a cretin!* But why not?

In fact, why wasn't I dead? I had committed suicide, hadn't I?

I opened my eyes wide and stared at Thorssen.

I moved a little and he stopped instantly, smiled down at me. There was something about his smile that dazed me.

"Martha," he said gently, "there's nothing to be afraid of—not now, with what you have ahead of you."

But I was frightened now. There was something to be frightened about, something changed. He was not looking at me as if I were a pitiable creature of a shunned race. I saw myself as a woman in his eyes, the woman I had never been for him before.

I struggled to be put down. The instant I touched the red rock wall, I felt the difference. I was changed! I was long-limbed and slim with a new grace. Shakily, I touched my hair. It was luxuriant and silken. My skin was clear and smooth. Wordlessly he handed me a highly pol-

ished bit of metal he used for shaving.

The face was almost a mockery, it was so different. All my features were refined to the point of sheer exquisiteness. My eyes were wide, clear and a frightened green. My hair, dull before and lank, was a glory of shimmering gold-red. The trembling lips reflected were red and soft—vibrantly young. I was beautiful, more beautiful than any woman I had ever seen and envied.

The mirror fell with a clatter from my nerveless hand. I stared at Thorssen. He lifted my face with his hand.

"Do you believe me now?" he said softly. "You have the universe in the palm of your hand!"

"But how did it happen?" I cried.

He tucked my hand under his arm. "I'll tell you as we go along. We have to hurry. We have a time limit. But we're going home."

THE tesseract we came to was like the one we had seen on the moon. "But why wasn't it visible before?" I demanded.

"It was operating from the moon to this planet then. It is only visible when it's operating at the source for exit. That's why there's a time limit on us. Only so much atmosphere can be allowed to blow through. We were sucked from the moon," he went on smilingly. "We are going to get blown back."

It was beginning to be clear in my head now.

"Will you tell me what happened—back there?" I begged.

Thorssen's eyes glistened. "The oddest things," he said at last. "I don't rightly know how to tell you about them. The polyhedron we got from the bird's body turned out to be important. It was the key, you might say, to the whole thing."

"Anyway, someone else entered the room when the juice was turned on—someone who had come from a great dis-

tance, someone who was grateful that I had made it possible for him to come. He was invisible, but talked to me by telepathy.

"This planet was his original home—his and his race's. They had to flee because of something frightful that evolved here, some new animal enemy, in league with creatures like the bird thing we killed, who had intelligence of a sort. They left their servants here—the headless things—but they were almost powerless when the bird things stole the last of the communicators—the polyhedron."

We ranged ourselves before the tesseract. "We wait for it to be reversed," Thorssen said. "It will be in a few minutes."

THE headless one, having guided us this far, turned suddenly and leaped away.

"You see," Thorssen explained again, "this tesseract exists in two places at once by virtue of its fourth dimensional construction. It's here, on a planet of a star in what I strongly suspect is a different universe. It's a transportation device, part of a cosmos-wide chain that once existed. From this planet the race that built that tesseract sent out colonies to a thousand other worlds by means of the tesseracts. One of the worlds so colonized was the moon—back when even it had a breathable atmosphere.

"The tesseracts transmit matter from one of the places in which each of them is located to the other. This one is set for transmission from the moon to here. I have an idea that that is one reason why the moon has no air today. It has all been sucked out by the tesseract.

"Anyway, when they ran away from the mother-world they couldn't get back again, and we made it possible for them, with dumb luck. I was instructed in how to set the control panel to re-open the tesseract gateway between here and the planet

where they are now. He made me leave before they began coming back. I still don't know what his race looks like."

"You can tell me now," I said slowly, "why—why I'm alive. I tried to kill myself when I found I was becoming a cretin. How did I fail? And why am I not a cretin right now? And this miraculous change. . . ."

He took my hand in his and held it tight. "That wasn't electricity, Martha. I don't know what it was, but it seems to have been a sort of basic life-force. As a favor, my visitor gave me a slight dose of it—look!" He bared his shoulder. It was healed entirely. "Your cretinism was cured at the same time. Your thyroid has been regenerated. You'll never need treatments again. In fact, with a dose of the force you had, I doubt you'll ever need treatments for anything."

He paused and stared anxiously at the tesseract, which showed no signs of change.

"And another thing," he went on in an altered tone. "Another very important thing. I don't think there'll be any more cretinism—at least not of the new type—among Earth's people. My visitor found that in my mind, and seemed to sense guilt and sorrow. I got the impression there was some radiation which came from the tesseract on the moon which caused the atrophy of the thyroid. They're going to withdraw the tesseract as soon as we get through."

Thorssen fitted my helmet over my head and helped me seal it. I watched him fit his own and then snap to attention. He grasped my hand in his. It tightened as we watched the tesseract shifting its color. Its ruddy gold was deepening and changing to a cobalt blue. Simultaneously I became aware of rushing atmosphere, Thorssen's hand gripping mine. . . .

Together Thorssen and I leaped into the tesseract and, mounted on a jet of air, were borne back whence we had come.

He stopped beside the doorway to let the mob stream through from the dormitories, workshops and kitchen. Everything stopped when those lights blinked, except the ceaseless hammering from the place where the rebels labored on their great ship. Arno watched them come; the men whose drawn lots had said *No*, the erect, brazen women, the children, the old and the maimed.

It made him feel savagely good, that tall blond man standing in the shadow, to know that through him, the State held their destiny to its own pleasure.

on her naked arms and legs. Arno noted her broad shoulders, her wide brow and clear, authoritative eyes, with distaste. The women of these incorrigibles offended him far more than the men. And yet Marika, dressed in her brief leather kirtle, her tawny mane falling heavy on her shoulders. . . .

"They're back, Arno!" she said.
"Ralph's back!"

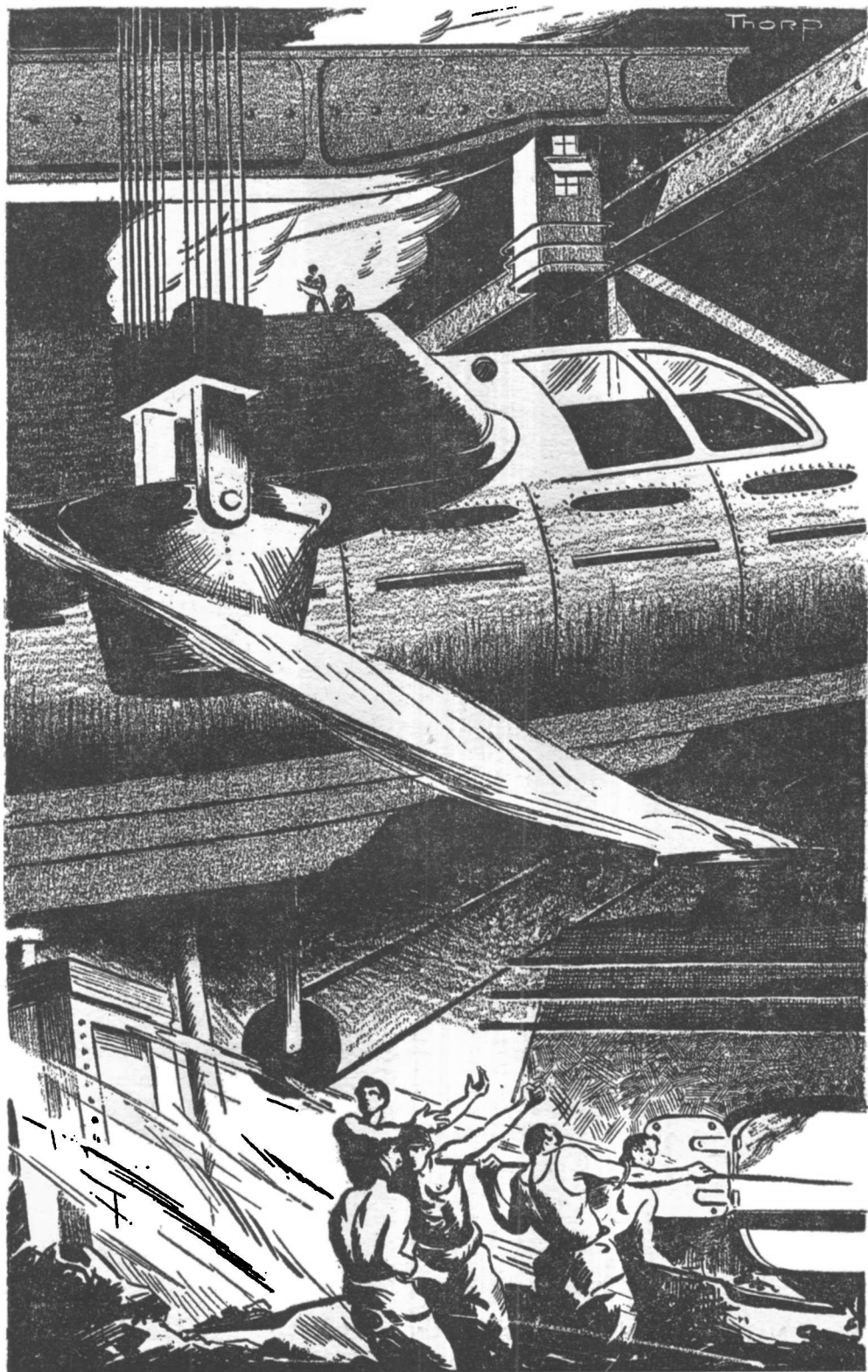
She caught his arm, and they fought their way together toward the doors on the far side. The spy, his mask of friendship slipped easily into place, still could not stop the question that rose so often in his mind.

"It would matter a lot, wouldn't it, if Ralph didn't come back?"

"It would matter everything!" said Marika softly. "Everything. But he has, this time. If anything ever happens to him, I'll know."

Arno wondered how, and shook his head mentally for the thousandth time. The mechanics of this barbaric relationship between men and women he accepted, but he could not understand. Though he was only twenty-five, he had

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already given the State three sons and a daughter, and he couldn't conceive of either one of his appointed mates caring more for him than he did for them. If his life should be snuffed out, it wouldn't change their lives any. Woman's sole duty was the bearing of children and the keeping of the living quarters, wherever the State saw fit to send her.

THE HALL was full now, silent as nearly seven thousand people can make a place. The distant clangor from the mysterious ship-building echoed loudly.

Arno could follow the operations outside as clearly as though he saw them; battered ships roaring in one after the other from the dark space, landing on the frigid, airless field, being towed by ancient tugs into the camouflaged dome of the hangar.

Arno well knew how the ships of the Tri-State, combing the Solar System for this last outpost of anarchy, had passed by the savage Trojans, over the very structures that housed their quarry.

A slender, dark girl with a child in her arms came to Marika, and again Arno, acknowledging her shy smile with a friendly, "Hello, Laura," was stricken with the wastefulness of these rebels. They cheerfully coddled and supported people unable to do their full share of work—women like Laura, crippled men who should have been eliminated as deterrent factors.

Laura said, "I'm frightened, Marika. I'm always frightened, for fear Karl. . . . He has come back, hasn't he, Marika?"

"Of course!" Marika took woman and child in the curve of one sturdy arm. "Listen. That's the lock opening."

The crowd surged forward just a bit. Heavy double doors swung back. And there was Ralph, with his men shouldering through behind him.

Ralph, fighting leader of the rebels, was

neither tall, nor handsome, nor powerfully built. One's eyes slid past him, were caught somehow, forced back to see the compact, challenging strength of him, the tough, indestructible something that looked from his reckless blue eyes, spoke in his harshly vibrant voice, laughed from his cynical mouth. And once seeing, they never forgot.

Ralph wasn't laughing now. The crowd knew the instant he came in that something was wrong. He was white with weariness, his stubbled jaw set and ugly. Arno felt a little pulse of excitement stir in his heart; he knew so well what was coming.

A wave of sound swept the hall, people shouting questions, names. Ralph raised his hand, and the clamor died.

"We lost three ships," he said quietly, but the words rang to the far corners. "Vern, Parlo, and Karl. The raid was a failure."

There was a moment of utter silence. Arno saw Laura's white face, saw Marika's strong arm ease her sudden fall. Somewhere a woman sobbed, a child sent up a wail.

Then a man, one of the weary, hard-driven scientists, shouted, "But damn it, Ralph, this is the third time! We've got to have supplies, equipment, if we're to go on!"

"You'll get them," said Ralph. The stubborn fire of his gaze swept them. "Go easy on what you have. We'll try again."

He turned to Marika, his men mingling with the crowd.

"Poor kid," he muttered, looking down at Laura. "I wish it had been. . . ."

"No!" blazed Marika. "Never wish it had been you! It may be soon enough." She kissed him, with a strange, bitter fierceness.

Ralph smiled.

"Black becomes you," he said mockingly. "Don't you want to be a hero's widow?" He stopped her lips with an-

other kiss. Laura's boy was squalling. Ralph gave him to Marika and picked up the white, still girl. "Come on. I want food and a shave. Arno, will you get Frane and Father Berrens and bring them along?"

"Of course." A small flame of triumph was burning behind Arno's mask. Ralph had lost three ships, thirty men—ships and men he could ill afford to lose. Fools, to think they could defy the State! The scar on his temple, placed there by Tri-State's skillful surgeons, reddened with the flow of blood to his brain, and he put his hand up to hide it, lest it betray him. That scar kept him from being assigned to fighting duty, kept him at base, where the information was.

Before he found the two men who, with Ralph, controlled the destinies of the Trojan base, therefore of all the rebels in the System, Arno retired to his own small room. Concealed in the heavy buckle of his belt was a tiny, incredibly powerful radio, operating on a tight beam that changed synchronization automatically every fourth second. Only the receiver of the People's Protector, back on Terra, could catch that beam.

Arno gave his call letter and waited until the cold, precise voice of the People's Protector, head of all the anti-revolution activities of the Tri-State, answered him.

Then he said, "They are much upset over the failure of the raid. They need

supplies, metal especially, for fuel and repairs. I am being drawn daily more close to the heart of things; Ralph and Marika are particularly friendly. I will transmit information as I receive it."

"You have not yet found the secret of the ship they build?"

"No. They guard that carefully."

"Nor the location of their planetary headquarters?"

"No."

"These things are most important. The destruction of these anarchists must be complete, to the last man." The Protector's voice altered just the faintest trifle from is emotionless inflexibility. "You are in a unique position. The State would find it most difficult, under the circumstances, to replace you. Remember your duty, your faith, and be cautious. *There must be no failure.*"

The contact broke with a click, and Arno was conscious of a small, uneasy twinge. Strange that in these eight months he hadn't quite realized that. Accustomed from birth to consider himself merely a more or less efficient cog in a machine, replaceable at a moment's notice, he hadn't quite understood how his status had changed. He had a moment of positive vertigo, as though the firm ground on which he stood had suddenly given way.

And then he recovered himself. There would be no failure. The State had classified him as Brain-type 1-c-4, best adapted



to this type of work. The State had assigned and trained him. He couldn't fail. All he had to do was follow orders.

TWENTY minutes later he sat in the cubicle that served Ralph and Marika as home. Frane, the head of the scientific group, sat on a metal chair taken from a wrecked ship; a stringy, tired man with grey hair. Berrens, civilian chief, occupied the table. He was a priest of their pagan religion, and wore a bit of cloth about his throat to show it. His big frame showed the universal signs of underfeeding, but his chin and eyes were stubborn, his mouth twisted in a smile that wouldn't die. Ralph, with his usual restlessness, paced the floor, puffing savagely at a battered pipe.

That left Arno to sit with Marika on the worn remains of a couch. She had changed her working leather for a carefully mended dress of sultry red that offended Arno's eye, yet provoked a buried something in him. Time and again he found his gaze straying back to her. She was so different from the colorless, broad-hipped women of his world. He could feel the unwomanly strength of her, see it in the sweeping lines of her body.

She never took her eyes off Ralph. What strange thing was it that made a woman look at a man like that?

Ralph swung about abruptly. "Sorry, Arno. Council of war. Come and have dinner with us."

"Right." Arno smiled and rose.

Marika jumped up too.

"I'll go with you. I'm anxious about Laura."

The door closed behind them, shutting them out of that council. Arno felt a moment of rage. If only he could get at the heart of things, instead of relying on generalities picked up from Marika, with an occasional specific bit about the raids.

Marika sighed and thrust back her tawny mane with work-hardened fingers.

"It must have been wonderful in the old days! To have lived in real houses, walked on real earth, with sunlight and real air! To have had pretty clothes and silk stockings, and something to do beside work and worry and shake hands with Death every morning!"

Her vehemence startled him. "Why, Marika. . . ."

"Two thousand years ago. Why couldn't I have been born two thousand years ago?"

THE strangeness of it came over Arno—how Marika could look back to the Twentieth Century as day before darkness, and he as darkness before dawn. In the Twenty-first Century the last Terran rebels had fled to Venus, and from there to Mars, and from there to the state where they were now. The all-encompassing strength of the State had followed them, driving out their heresies, their anarchies, their haphazard individualism.

Now there was peace and system everywhere, except for the hidden plague-spots on the planets and this barren asteroid, which, through him, the Tri-State would soon destroy.

"I wonder," said Marika softly, "what it would be like to be full fed, and full clothed, and to kiss your husband goodbye knowing that he'd live to be kissed hello?"

Her mouthed quivered, and there were tears on her lashes. Arno's heart gave a strange, sudden leap, quite beyond his comprehension. He downed it firmly.

"What will Ralph do now?"

"Do!" said Marika savagely. "He'll go out again, and again, and again, until he dies, like Karl." She stopped and faced him, almost defiantly under the dim radium light. "I've got to cry, Arno. I've held it in and held it in, but I can't hold it any longer. We're fighting a losing battle, Arno. Ralph's going to die for it."

All of us. And just once, I've got to stop being brave!"

And all at once she was crying, with her hands painfully tight on his arms and her tawny head thrust hard against his shoulder. In spite of himself, some tiny crack was made in the armor surrounding his brain, and he saw this place as she saw it; a tomb of dead hope, dead glory, dead life. What made them struggle on, knowing this?

He found his hands on Marika, his arms around her. He didn't remember putting them there. She was like an animal, warm and vitally alive.

He caught his hands away, shaken with sudden fear. It was as though he recoiled from the brink of a chasm, from the unknown. He stood silently while she cried herself out, still silently when she had her breath again and moved away from him. His arms ached where her fingers had gripped.

Marika dashed an arm across reddened eyes and swore. "Damn me for a sniveling ass! But I feel better. Guess a woman's got to be one once in a while, even if she is a mechanic! Don't tell Ralph, and—well, thanks, Arno."

He watched her go, down the corridor to Laura's home. Her red dress was almost black in that light, her hair dull gold. Arno tried to think about that meeting back there, about his duty. But his eyes followed Marika.

ON THE other side of the locked door, Ralph paced restlessly in a cloud of smoke.

"Something's wrong," he said. "With that new invisible paint, we should have been safe, since the ships are non-magnetic. But they took us in the back, as though they knew where to look."

Both men eyed him sharply. "You know what you're saying?"

"I know!" Ralph rumped his short brown hair with impatient fingers. "It's

incredible that one of our own people. . . . No, Tri-State may have planted a spy."

"A possibility. Remote, but a possibility." Father Berrens shook his head wearily.

"If there's a spy," said Frane grimly, "we'll have to catch him quickly. We need supplies."

"How long can we last without them, Frane?"

"Three weeks, possibly a day or two longer. No more."

"Good God." Ralph's strong-boned face tightened; the knowledge took him like a blow over the heart. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"You were doing your best," said Father Berrens gently. "We didn't want to make it harder."

"Three weeks! My God, has it come so close to the end? To fight for two thousand years, and now. . . . Three weeks!"

Berrens managed a smile. "You'll make a successful raid."

"But if I don't! If I don't!" Ralph paced savagely. Responsibility, weariness, a sense of futility weighed on him like a leaden cloud. The room was silent for a long moment. Then, "The ship, Frane. You've got to have it finished in ten days."

Frane nodded. "I'll triple the shifts. I'll have to strip the domes for the metal."

"Anything, as long as we can still breathe. But get that ship finished!"

"Perhaps," said Frane somberly, "it would be better to call the people in from the planetary bases, without waiting."

"No! This Solar System belongs to us. I'm not going to surrender it without fighting!"

"But we've fought so long, Ralph." Father Berrens' voice was infinitely tired. "The Tri-State has twenty centuries of rigid weeding and training behind it. It's hard to break through that wall. And their people are at least housed and fed. When a man's belly is full it's hard to stir

him, even if his brain and soul are starved."

"Granted. But damn it. . . ." Ralph came to a truculent stand, his eyes reckless and uncompromising. "We've got to hang on! Their machine is running down of its own weight. They've lost their best brains to us; that, or purged them. They're beginning to stagnate, and stagnation means retrogression. Without their science they wouldn't have stood two centuries. Now even their science is failing them. They've produced nothing new in the last ninety years."

"If we can just hang on a little longer. . . ."

Frane's mouth shut hard. "You can't fight without men and weapons."

"We can do with the men we have. And I'll bring you the metal you need. Give me four hours to sleep, and I'll go out again. This time I'll try Titan."

"Titan! You're mad, Ralph! It's the strongest mining center in the System. You'll be destroyed!"

"Perhaps. But that needn't worry anyone but me. I'm going alone, in the old Sparling."

Ralph knew, as well as the others, that he had one chance in a thousand. The Sparling was a relic of other days, an intricate fighting mechanism capable of being controlled by one man and equipped with tractor beams for hauling prizes back to base. But it needed a super-man to fly it. It was tricky and temperamental and capable of an infinite variety of misdeeds. That was why they hadn't built any more after the first ten. They lost nine in a month.

Ralph went on. "They won't be looking for me near Titan. There'll be less chance of detection with one ship. If I'm not back in ten days, start loading."

Berrens said, "Try once more with the squadron."

"There isn't time if we fail. And the way the last three raids have gone, there

isn't much use anyway. Understand, I want no one to know where I've gone, or when. Not even Marika."

"But," said Frane, "if there is a spy here, Tri-State knows the location of the base. Why don't they simply bomb us out of the sky?"

"They want information," said Ralph grimly. "But they may bomb us yet. However, that's something we'll just have to pray about. Find the spy if you can. But get ready, and don't wait for me!"

Father Berrens shook his head. Barring a miracle, they'd never in three weeks catch a spy clever enough to have evaded all their safeguards and actually penetrated the base.

"It seems a case for prayer," he admitted. "We'll try, Ralph. Be careful—and for all our sakes, come back."

IT WAS more than four hours later that Arno, checking a series of reports for the commissary and exulting over the shortness of supplies, looked up to see Marika standing by his desk. She was white and rigid, her hands locked tight, every bone in her face gauntly clear.

"Arno," she said, "Ralph's gone. He wouldn't tell me where, but I checked his men. He's gone alone, and I found out that the old Sparling is missing. Arno, I'm afraid."

Ralph gone on a lone raid! He'd have to tell the Protector. He'd play out his part as Marika's good friend until he could get rid of her, and then. . . .

What was it that made a woman look that way about a man? What barbaric emotion was it that the State had taken out of its people?

He had lived among these rebels for eight months, and viewed them as impersonally as a scientist views a microbe. He had been a coldly efficient machine, carrying out orders in the most effective way possible to him. He had not under-

stood these people, nor wished to understand them. His whole devotion had been to the State, the will of the State, the needs of the State.

But the machine that was Arno suddenly was not responding as it should. Things were growing in him, impulses, the strangeness and power of which frightened him, the more so because they were inexplicable by his philosophy.

"Arno," whispered Marika, "I'm frightened. I've been frightened too often. I'm not strong any more. Ralph's gone. He's going to die."

She's a rebel, thought Arno. She sets herself above the State. He told himself that it was only because he had a part to play that he stepped forward. Her arms went out to him, quite naturally, like a child that needs comforting. He felt the life flowing through her, meeting something that leaped in himself. Her lips were close to his, cut full and clear in the marble of her face.

He kissed her. And was stricken with horror, with self-hatred. He had never kissed a woman before. It was treachery—a weakening to the individual, a subtle challenge to the State.

He broke roughly away and left her standing, staring after him.

Arno locked his door and took the radio from his belt. Twice he started to send out his call letter, and twice he stopped. He was aghast at his own hesitancy, but Marika's face kept coming between him and the radio. What would she do if Ralph didn't come back? Would she be like Laura, like so many of the women who lost their men? Why did he care? He felt unsteady, lost, shaken.

The tiny thing in his hand looked up at him accusingly, and it steadied him. These rebels and their barbarisms were no concern of his. The State had given him certain orders. The entire end and aim of his life was to serve the State, without question or thought.

The words of the Creed, taught from infancy, came to him. "I believe in the State, which protects me, and deny all faiths but this, that my life may be spent in obedience and service."

What greater end could a man have than to serve the State?

Arno's voice was steady as he spoke to the People's Protector.

"The war leader has gone on a lone raid in an obsolete ship—a Sparling. Destination unknown, but the rebels are desperate for supplies."

"All mines will be warned," said the Protector. "Continue to follow orders."

FRANE was as good as his word. Shifts were tripled, taking every available man, woman and youth. Even Arno, still pleading his simulated head injury, was pronounced fit for light work and sent to the hangar. Because of the need for haste, much of the veil of secrecy was discarded. Only the ultimate purpose of the ship and the design of the engines were kept quiet.

Arno gasped at his first sight of the ship. It was enormous. He estimated that it could hold fully ten thousand people and concentrated supplies. There was nothing like it, even in the trade lanes of the Tri-State.

Gossip was rife among the people, of course. These rebels were terribly lax; anyone might talk as he pleased. All kinds of rumors circulated. The ship was a weapon of offense. It was going to destroy the planets. It was going to become a floating world. It was going to haunt the space-lanes, picking off the State ships.

Arno reported all this, but got no nearer to the truth. Nine days passed with no word from Ralph. There was no ship-to-base radio, because of the danger of triangulation and subsequent discovery of the Trojan base. Rations were cut. Fuel for light and heat was cut to a minimum,

but the food synthesizers clacked and roared incessantly. The domes were stripped of everything metallic save the walls themselves and the pumping units. Forges worked day and night. Endless streams of men and women labored, carrying, welding, hammering, fitting. Sleep was reduced to four-hour periods, pitifully inadequate for exhausted bodies.

And on the tenth day, it was finished.

Men dropped in their tracks to rest. Frane and Father Berrens spoke to Marika beneath the huge loom of the ship, and Arno, who took care never to be far from his source of information, overheard.

There wasn't much to overhear.

Frane said dully, "Ten days. I'll have to begin calling them in."

Marika, too tired even for emotion, stared at them. "Ralph's not coming back, is he?"

Father Berrens put a hand on her shoulder. "It's not too late to hope. We don't leave for nearly two weeks yet."

Arno kept his eyes from Marika's face. Call who in? Leave for where? He must watch, and report carefully. The Rebels were planning some desperate attempt; the State must be warned.

He remembered the Protector's words: *There must be no failure.*

THE SPARLING hung motionless, an invisible mote in utter darkness. Saturn wheeled its flashing rings against infinity. Ralph, cramped with fourteen days of close confinement, red-eyed with lack of sleep, hunched over a telescopic view-plate in the midst of a bewildering tangle of instruments.

He was following Titan, watching the rocket flares of ore carriers as they took off. For the ten days he had hung here not one had been sufficiently under-convoyed so that he might have the faintest chance of succeeding.

"There must be a spy at base," he said aloud, for the hundredth time. The sound

of his harsh voice echoing against metal was some relief for the ghastly silence. "He's not getting intimate information, but he doesn't need it. Just general movements, and the Tri-State can blanket everything. Oh, God, give Frane and Berrens the wit not to let him sabotage that ship!"

Ralph's cynical mouth twisted to a short laugh. "He can't sabotage it. Short of an atomite bomb, he can't touch it, and he couldn't have got an atomite bomb past the searchers when he entered base. The only thing he can do. . . ."

He shook his thoughts savagely away from that possibility. Mustn't for a second let himself believe that. Somehow, they'd get through all right. God wouldn't let them down, not after all the centuries they'd fought.

Gnawing hunger forced his attention away from the view-plate. He let one of his meagre supply of food capsules dissolve slowly, thinking of the things he'd read about in the old books. Real steaks, fresh vegetables, juicy fruits. The concentrate broke through to his tongue. He swallowed hurriedly, cursing.

Through the view-plates he could see Earth, Venus and Mars, flying in wide-flung orbits about the tiny, distant Sun. He'd been born on Trojan base. He'd never seen sunlight, or blue skies, or grass, or breathed air that didn't come from a chemical tank. All those things the State had taken from his people, except for the gallant handful that lived and preached in hiding on the planets.

"Someday," said Ralph softly, "we'll have them back."

His reckless blue eyes, the fire of them dulled with weariness, went back to Titan. The chronometer clacked off the hours. Five ore carriers went out into the void, heavily convoyed. Inevitably, sleep overtook him. When he woke, the fifteenth day was gone.

"I've got to go, if I'm going with them.

Four days to get back." He cursed bitterly. It was hard to give up after all this time. Hard to be beaten because of a few tons of metal. Unwillingly, his hand went out to the starting lever.

And then he stiffened. A streak of flame shot across the view-plate, up from Titan. An ore carrier, with only a three-ship convoy! A chance! A mad, tempting chance!

TOO TEMPTING. Why, having sent six fighters out with the others, cut the guards to three? A trap, perhaps. They couldn't know he was here, but they might be doing the same thing at all mines. And then again, they might have relaxed vigilance, thinking he'd given up.

He thought of that ship at base and all it meant to him. He thought of Marika. Most of all, he thought of Marika. And then he looked at those three worlds that had once been theirs, and at the ore carrier that meant they might have them again. He knew he was right about the Tri-State. If they could only hold on. . . .

"Come on, sweetheart," he whispered to the Sparling. "Let's see what you can do!"

Like a wild meteor he plunged down on that ore carrier, his hands flying over the banks of keys before him. One convoy ship burst into flame under his ray. Another shot fused the tubes of the carrier, so that she hurtled on at constant velocity, a mere hulk.

The Sparling bucked dangerously under his hands. He cursed it, whirled it toward another fighter. The third was maneuvering for a tube shot. Ralph's heat-ray raked out. The fighter, hulled, reeled away as her men died in the vacuum.

The Sparling wrenched frantically aside, and the stern shot took her briefly in the ribs instead. In spite of himself, Ralph screamed with the searing heat. Half blinded, he fought the ship to safety,

and then he poised for his final attack.

And then he saw them—Tri-State ships pouring out from bases on Saturn's moons. It had been a trap! No chance to fight now. No chance to hitch a tractor beam to that ore carrier. Just run. Run—and pray!

The Sparling danced perversely. Ralph cursed it, cursed the man who invented it, cursed himself for a fool. A mad angle shot fused the tubes of the remaining fighter.

A beam raked his hull, heating it cherry-red, and then he was free.

He poured speed into the Sparling, but she wobbled. One of those heat-beams had damaged some filament in her intricate controls. He could hear a change in the rhythmic vibration of the ship, and she handled more and more sluggishly. The Tri-State ships were coming up fast.

For just a moment he sat quite still, staring at his hands spread over the keys. After all, he'd known this day would come. He'd chosen this career of his own free will, knowing that. It hurt like hell, now that it was here—knowing Marika was waiting, knowing about the ship. But. . . .

He could afford it now. He swallowed his remaining capsules and opened the cock on the oxygen tank. He'd go out at least with a full belly and his lungs full of air.

Swinging the bucking Sparling around, he headed back toward Saturn and that flight of ships.

His mouth twisted, and his harsh voice said, quite conversationally, "Hold the airlocks open, God. Here comes a free man."

THE EIGHTEENTH day had come and gone. The domes were cold, almost too cold to endure. The air was thin. One pump had stopped entirely, worn out, so that ten thousand men, women and children huddled gasping in the hangar and the workshops. Hidden

in a far corner behind a massive pillar, Arno was speaking in a low voice.

"They're all here. All the people from the planetary bases. The last ship came in an hour ago. The purpose of the big ship is still unknown, but all loading has been completed. They're waiting for Ralph, but they must do what they plan to do within the next two days. Fuel is almost gone."

Then he asked, because he couldn't help it, "Is Ralph dead?"

"Yes." The voice of the People's Protector was precise, cold. "There is no need to know the purpose of the ship. Since all the Rebel population of the System is collected in the Trojan base, it can be destroyed at once."

Arno nodded. That meant a fleet, of course, and bombs. His work was done.

"How will I be taken off, Excellency?"

There was just the faintest note of surprise in the Protector's voice. "Taken off? The task for which the State chose and prepared you is done. The State has no further use for you."

The tiny radio in Arno's hand was abruptly silent. He stood staring at it, with a spinning cloud across his eyes.

But of course. He'd given three sons and a daughter to the State. He'd done his job. He was a specialized cog; he wouldn't fit anywhere else. And the State had no dearth of cogs.

Terra was the nearest Tri-State base—a two-hour trip for their fast bombers at the present orbital intersection. Two hours. The rebels would wait until the last minute for Ralph, who was dead. That meant at least another day.

Two hours! If only it had been at once! The waiting, the tension—!

The bombs would destroy the domes, shatter them to cosmic dust, and the asteroid with them. Two thousand years of agitation would end, and there would be peace in the Tri-State.

The whirling cloud steadied as Arno

saw the truth, the logical, inescapable truth. He himself was nothing. His usefulness to the State was ended. What matter if he died?

He was still staring at the useless radio. Now he saw the hand that held it—a strong, young hand, corded with sinews, the healthy blood ruddy under the skin.

His hand. The Tri-State directed it, but he felt the pain if it was injured.

The radio smashed on the floor, but he didn't notice it. He was looking at his body as though he had never seen it before, running his fingers along the hard curve of his thighs, feeling the breath lift his lungs, hearing the beat of his blood along his veins. Then he looked out, across the vast, barren dome, with those ten thousand men, women and children waiting under the loom of the ship.

A group of young men were singing off to his right, an old, old forbidden song about a girl named Susannah. Here and there a family—that anarchistic word never heard in the Tri-State—pressed close together, talking softly. Arno searched their faces. Some were happy, some sad, some frightened, some eager, but each face was different. There was no unit of so many males, so many females, so many young. There were ten thousand *people*.

Arno caught fiercely at his creed. And then he realized that these people had a creed too, and served it with their lives. Like Karl, and Ralph. Ralph—on whose return ten thousand people waited.

TWO HOURS! How would these people feel if they knew that in two hours they would die? Maybe they did know. They knew the ship meant something strange. They guessed it might mean something impossible. But they were going.

The State chose the State prepared the State has no further use. . . .

Arno put his hands to his head to stop its blasphemy, and his touch only made him more conscious of his own flesh.

He plunged out into that sea of humanity, stumbling over legs, catching at shoulders.

Bodies, and eyes that looked at him, and brains behind them! He could feel the tension that filled the dome, feel the queer life-wave that always comes with a large crowd.

Marika's tawny head and broad shoulders rose against the black mass of the hull, and Arno went toward her. Men cursed him as he stumbled over them, but he had to get to Marika. He didn't know why, only that he had to.

He saw Laura beside her. Laura had her son clasped in her arms. She spoke to Marika. Then she kissed the boy and smiled.

Arno thought, *I gave three sons to the State, but I never kissed them. It was a duty.*

Duty! It was his duty now to die for the State. That duty had been so well understood he'd never thought of it subjectively. How had these rebels poisoned him, that he found it strange now?

He was close to Marika now.

She was pale, and her face was lined, but she asked, "What's the matter, Arno? You look ill."

"I—I don't know."

He stared at her, and suddenly he knew what was the matter with him. He'd read all about it in the forbidden books given him to prepare him for this duty. He was in love.

Out in space, Tri-State bombers were thundering up. His duty was plain before him. And he was in love—in love, like a pagan rebel!

Marika's strong hand caught his ragged tunic, shook him. "What's the matter, Arno? Tell me!"

He couldn't meet her eyes. And then Father Berrens' voice rang out over the

audio system, and every head in that vast place turned to listen.

"It is time," said the priest quietly, "to explain why we've called you here, and why we've built this ship. We have kept it secret for two reasons. We wished to take no chance of having our purpose reported to the Tri-State, and we saw no reason to upset all our people while there was still a chance that we wouldn't have to use it. Now. . . ."

Bombers, thought Arno. *How long now?*

Father Berrens went on. "We'll wait till the last minute for Ralph, but we must be prepared. In four hours we'll begin shipping you. Please listen, and try to understand. Have courage and faith! We need them both now, more than ever before.

"For two thousand years we've fought against tyranny, against regimentation, against the destruction of God and man as an individual. We've been weak; the State has been strong. We waited too long in the beginning. Now, just as it began to seem we might have a chance, just as the machine of the State was bogging down in the mire of its own creation, we learned we might have to go—because of a few tons of metal.

"If there is truly a spy among you, I congratulate him. The State should reward him well. Our men have died trying, but we have no metal. All that's left is flight—or death at the hands of the State."

Arno heard him through a haze. The minutes ticked away with his heartbeats. *His* heartbeats—which the State could destroy but not control.

MARIKA'S hand was half throttling him. Laura was standing motionless beyond her, the child held tight, whimpering. He could feel those ten thousand people, listening, waiting.

"Don't wait any longer for Ralph," he said.

He didn't want to say it. It was because Marika was looking at him so.

Her hand tightened. "Why not, Arno?"

"I—nothing. It's foolish, that's all."

"Foolish! When he's out there, alone, trying. . . . Arno! *What do you know?*"

Her hands were hurting his arms now, as they had that day she cried in the hall.

In a little while even pain would be gone.

The State has no further use. . . .

But suppose he did? Suppose he, Arno, wanted his body, wanted to know what it felt like to love a woman and father a child that was his own and not a cog in a machine? He looked wildly away from Marika, putting up a last battle for his belief, his religion.

And he saw ten thousand people—waiting.

He met Marika's eyes.

"Ralph's dead," he said. "I killed him. I killed Karl and all the others. I'm the spy."

She fell away from him. Laura cried out, a strange, high-pitched wail, and Father Berrens stopped talking.

"Ralph!" whispered Marika. "Ralph But I knew it. *A spy!*"

Arno gasped, stricken with horror at what he had done, lost in a chaos of shattering standards. He could still destroy them. He had only to keep still about the bombers, and it wouldn't matter.

Ten thousand people Frane and Berrens and Laura Marika, with a cold, terrible something growing in her eyes, something he had put there because he'd killed Ralph. His own mates would never miss him. They'd bear children patiently for some other unsmiling cog in the machine of State.

Marika. Always Marika. She was his downfall, and his answer. She was everything. Looking at her, watching what was

growing back of her eyes, Arno shivered with awe and bitter longing. If only he could have known, before. . . .

"Father Berrens!" he shouted.

It seemed the words came out of themselves. And though some stubborn part of himself recoiled in horror, he spoke more words and more words. When he was finished, Berrens' face was grim, his voice unfamiliarly harsh as he issued orders.

There was chaos about Arno, and then a kind of frenzied order. In a world miles beyond him, lines of men and women formed and streamed into the ship through vast ports. But all he could see was Marika.

It would be nice to believe, as the rebels believed, that a man lived after his body died.

That was blasphemy in the State. But it would be nice.

Father Berrens came up, breathing hard. "Time! Time! But we may do it. God helping, we may do it!"

Then Berrens was shouting, "Marika!"

He couldn't stop her. The gun she had taken from Frane's belt was already aimed. Arno saw it coming.

The poisoned needle made a fiery prick over his heart.

He had a last glimpse of Marika's broad-browed face, her tawny mane lying heavy on her wide shoulders. She was like a thing of stone. She watched him fall, dispassionately, as she would have watched a roach die in strangling powder. Then she turned and went steadily into the ship.

A dark mist rolled across his brain, dulled the sound of exodus. Through it he heard Laura's voice.

"But Father! All the planets are closed to us. Where can we go?"

"For the time, we've lost the planets, yes. But the ship was built to go beyond them. My daughter, *the stars still remain.*"

THE MAN WHO DIDN'T BREATHE

By Harry Walton

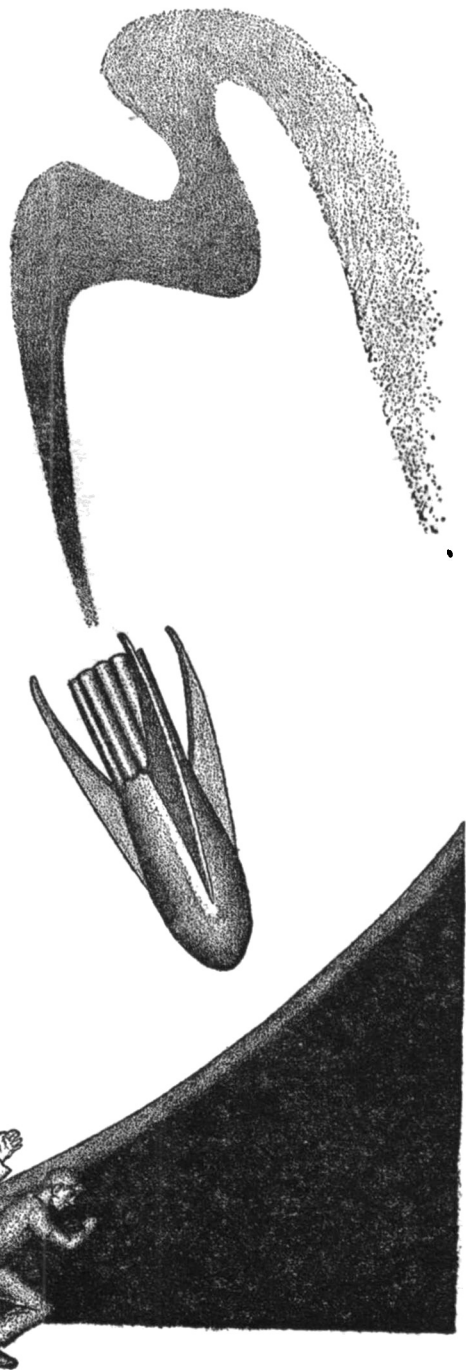
Shaken, desperate, a man marked for death from another world goes to his final reckoning with the nebulous prince of plunder who kidnaps men's bodies—and their souls as well!

IT IS late now in the lives of all who knew Jim Barret and me, his brother. Only after long thought have I decided that I owe the world the truth. I think Jim himself would want me to tell it. Who knows but that *they* may send another emissary?

Because our father was Robert Barret, the physicist, we grew up in the shadow of Dinsmore College, and it was fore-ordained that one of us would follow in his footsteps.

I suppose we were average youngsters—Jim was ten and I eleven—when we first fell violently in love. Jessie Raven was nine. It was a harmonious triangle that lasted through the years of our adolescence. Tacitly it was agreed that Jessie would marry either Jim or me some day. Although such understandings rarely outlast the teen age, ours did.

Our happy, heedless days ended when



Jessie went off to Wellesley—Dinsmore itself wasn't co-educational then. Jim and I entered our freshman year together. Somehow—probably because we had no wish to be separated—I had never been able to maintain the slight lead in learning which my age should have given me over him.

The winter of 1940, with war and famine in Europe in all its new hideousness, and our own country trembling on the uncertain brink of intervention, saw us seniors, with hopes of graduating by June. It was a period of uncertainty. We planned, events permitting, to continue working for higher degrees in our chosen field.

Father had died the year before, so when Jessie wrote that she was coming home for Christmas, and included an invitation from her parents for us to spend the holiday season with them, we jubilantly accepted. On the 20th of December we wheeled our motorcycles out for the ride to Knoxville, to which city the Ravens had moved recently.

It was cold but not bitterly so. The clear, crisp weather lent a holiday tang to the excursion, and we left in high spirits, Jim, as always, a little in the lead. Dinsmore pennants fluttered from our rear fenders, and the bark of engines was sharp upon the morning air, rising to staccato chorus as we brought our machines up to speed.

After two hours of glorious riding came the first hint of storm. One moment the sky was clear, the next a single enormous cloud threw its shadow around us. We were running side by side. Jim squinted up and a drop of rain spattered his goggles. He grinned, jerked an arm back and forth to suggest we outrun it. Simultaneously we opened the throttle, and the cycles leaped forward until we were doing about sixty-five miles per hour.

That speed should have left the cloud far behind. But after five minutes we dis-

covered that the patch of shadow had kept up with us, not only at the same speed, but over the very twists and curves the road had taken us. There had been no rain after all. Squinting up again, Jim signalled for a halt. We pulled up together, silenced the coughing of our engines.

There wasn't a sigh of wind, certainly none sufficient to blow that cloud along at a speed to match our own.

"That's funny," said Jim, his brow puckered as always when he was puzzled, little twin ridges between his blue eyes.

I had no comment. The cloud oppressed me; I felt unaccountably morbid. Probably my face showed it.

"For heaven's sake cheer up, Mark," he burst out. "We're not even wet. I only stopped because it's so confounded queer—"

He fell silent to stare up into the grey cloud mass directly overhead. It's hard to judge the size of a cloud. The shadow was about two hundred yards in diameter. Everywhere else the sky was that frosty, sparkling blue of early winter.

I wonder whether it would have happened if he hadn't stopped, or whether, if I had taken the lead when we started up again, it would have been I who. . . .

"Never get to Knoxville like this," he said at last, flipping his ignition switch on. He kicked the starter pedal, and the hot engine snarled to life instantly.

THE thing had bothered me more than I knew, for absent-mindedly I closed my choke as I would for a cold start, and of course got nothing but a backfire on the first kick. Meanwhile Jim had started up and was already a hundred feet down the road when he looked back to where I was swearing over my stupidity and viciously kicking around the starter for the tenth time. Gasoline engines were tricky things; another might have started by then.

He stopped fifty feet further on to wait for me. Then I saw something that made me pause in my furious efforts from sheer astonishment. The cloud was, suddenly, much smaller. And it had followed Jim.

I stared after him, sitting jauntily under that murky pall, and if ever I had a premonition, it was in that instant. But the thing happened so quickly there was no time for thought.

Jim, the cycle, the ground under him suddenly glowed with a prickling of faint blue light.

I've never seen St. Elmo's fire, but probably it resembled that.

Then the bolt struck, white-hot, straight, without the jaggedness one usually associates with lightning. His arm snapped up in a tardy, unconscious gesture of defense. He and the cycle were bathed in a shattering flash of white fire. When my eyes were again able to see, he was sprawled on the road, one leg pinned under his machine, which was roaring viciously at full throttle.

Letting my own cycle fall, I ran to him in frantic haste, shut off the ignition—there was the chance of fire with the cycle in that position—and carefully disentangled him from it. He was limp, but there wasn't a mark on him. I dragged him off the road and unstrapped his broad riding belt before I realized that he wasn't breathing.

After the first shock I went grimly to work with artificial respiration. I was clumsy but determined. Some automatic partition in my mind ruled out instantly the thought that Jim might be dead. But after ten minutes work there was still no response.

It may have been fifteen minutes before a car stopped. The driver jumped out and I knew a moment of overwhelming gratitude when he lifted a small black bag from the front seat.

"I'm Doctor Alfred Cardon," he said gravely. "What's wrong?"

Incoherently I told him while surprise gathered on his face. When he hastily glanced skyward, I did so too, and received another shock.

The cloud was gone. It hadn't drifted away—in that still air it would have remained in sight for hours. It had vanished.

Whatever he thought, he pushed me gently aside—I had kept up my frantic pumping all the while—and did what in my fear I had either forgotten or not dared to do. He listened for Jim's heart-beat.

"He's alive," he said briefly, to my intense relief.

He had me unstrap the luggage roll from Jim's machine, and put that under him before he went on with artificial respiration. After twenty minutes he paused, perspiring despite the cold.

"Still not breathing," he said with a queer glance at me. "But heart action is quite normal—even strong."

I took his place and continued the treatment some time longer under his direction. Still Jim gave no sign of life, although I could hear the regular pounding of his heart when I laid my ear to his back.

"I've missed several appointments," Dr. Cardon said finally. "Ordinarily I wouldn't dream of suggesting this, but I really feel there is no risk in driving your brother to the hospital in Knoxville, where he can get proper attention. It's only a thirty minute drive."

After a moment's hesitation I agreed, because evidently our efforts hadn't made the least difference. After rolling the cycles into some brush, I helped lift Jim into the back of the sedan, where the doctor kept the stethoscope on him constantly while I drove.

At the hospital I watched grave-faced nurses and internes bustling about until I was ready to explode with anxiety. It was two hours before I saw Dr. Cardon again.

"Now wait—" He silenced me with a

reassuring smile and one uplifted hand. "I can't answer your questions now because I don't know the answers myself. Your brother is very much alive. He's got a heart like a stevedore and it's working beautifully. But he still isn't breathing. We've got him under oxygen now, but his system simply refuses it. He's in a coma from which he may waken any moment. There may be a paralysis of certain nerve centers—lightning often does strange things."

He gnawed the fringes of his mustache doubtfully.

"But it was lightning," I said earnestly. "What else could it have been?"

"I'm sure it was," he remarked, without conviction. "However, there is nothing you can do now. He is in the best of hands. If you should notify your parents tell them there is every hope for recovery."

I stumbled out of the hospital without telling him our parents were dead.

JESSIE went back with me the next day. There was no change in Jim, nor did any occur the day following, or the next. I think Dr. Cardon was more puzzled than ever. But on Christmas morning the hospital telephoned me at the Ravens' house.

Jim had recovered consciousness, and they wanted me.

I raced over on my cycle, bursting with thankfulness. But Dr. Cardon's quiet greeting put a damper on my spirits.

"He is physically sound," he said, "but we are curious to see how he will react to you. You can go in now."

I entered and stood nervously by the doorway. Jim was facing the other way. Finally I walked around the bed.

There was absolutely no recognition in his glance.

"Jim! It's Mark. You're all right, Jim?"

The nurse looked on curiously. I

stepped closer so that the window light might fall upon my face. "Look at me, Jim. We were going to Knoxville, remember?"

I felt sweat trickling out on my forehead. I wiped it off and looked hard at Jim—as hard as he was looking at me. And I shivered a little.

His eyes—they weren't Jim's eyes, really. Oh, they were blue, all right, and there was the little pucker between them that I knew so well. But they still weren't Jim's. It wasn't because he didn't know me. It was that I didn't know him. They say the soul looks out from a person's eyes. Well, the soul that looked out of those eyes wasn't Jim's.

I felt that they were cataloguing me. After thirty seconds or so, they deliberately closed.

"It may only be temporary shock," the doctor assured me outside. "We mustn't assume amnesia yet."

But the thought of amnesia reassured me more than anything else he said. Jim simply didn't remember himself, any more than he remembered me, as yet. Given time, he'd be his old self.

It was four days before he spoke a word. Then he said simply, "I am leaving this place tomorrow."

It was all he would say. Questions, pleadings, even the appearance of Jessie elicited nothing more from him. I returned the following morning.

"He insists upon leaving," Dr. Cardon told me. "I'm not so sure but it's the best thing. Old scenes may bring him around more quickly than anything we can do."

He had to be helped to walk at first, but after a few minutes he got around normally. We spent two days with the Ravens. They felt the difference in him as keenly as I, but showed him every kindness. Twice I found Jessie in tears.

On New Year's day we returned to Dinsmore by train. I couldn't risk letting

him ride the cycle. Somehow, the news had reached the campus before us. Everybody tried to act as though nothing had happened, and failed dismally. Jim made it no easier for them. He had a habit of staring wholeheartedly at one, then abruptly turning away as though the person were suddenly of no more interest.

THE second night at Dinsmore I woke from a troubled sleep to lie staring at the ceiling. It was quiet outside and in. I think the quietness woke me.

Jim wasn't snoring.

Almost from childhood he had snored lustily. I was so used to it that it seldom bothered me. Now its absence did. I bent over him.

He wasn't breathing.

Frantic with the thought that he had again fallen into a coma, I chafed his wrists, dampened his forehead, and did other equally senseless things.

Quite suddenly he opened his eyes, took a deep breath, and remarked, "Is something wrong?"

"You'd stopped breathing," I said hoarsely.

Those queer eyes of his studied me as though trying to recall something. "Breathing—yes. I'm all right."

"Well, you had me scared for a minute," I said a bit hotly.

"Why?" he asked. "You were in no danger."

I took a deep breath. "Look, Jim—we're brothers. We've always been together. What happens to you might just as well be happening to me. That's how I feel about it."

After a long pause he said, "I think I understand."

I wonder now whether he ever did.

But for the rest of that night he snored normally. Next day he astounded me by demanding a separate room. I argued bitterly, but he had his way at the last,

although he would give no reason for desiring the change.

Within a month he was forging ahead in his classes. Where he had been competent he was now brilliant. But, best of all, he was rapidly becoming himself again. In six weeks no trace of shock or amnesia remained.

Then he insisted upon attending Fogarty's astronomy lectures, in which he had never shown any interest before. During the first of these Fogarty casually mentioned the Martian canal-markings.

"Canals!" Jim said scornfully. "He has no conception of the truth."

I was sure Fogarty had heard, for Jim hadn't even troubled to whisper. But astonishingly enough, nobody took any notice.

"I was right," he said emphatically. "They have not detected the currents."

I leaned toward him and whispered fiercely, "Pipe down before he hears you!"

Instantly old Fogarty clamped his lips in the expression we knew so well.

"Would Mr. Mark Barret care to continue in my place?" he drawled.

I managed an apologetic grin and pretended to retrieve a pencil from the floor, but I was still angry when Jim and I walked together to the campus lunchroom.

"What were you trying to do?" I asked. "Get thrown out?"

"What are you talking about?"

"Your confounded talking during the lecture, of course."

"I didn't say a word," retorted Jim.

"I suppose it was mice I heard?"

"You're nuts," said Jim crisply. "I think we'd better forget this."

I started to say more, then subsided at a glimpse of his eyes, cold, forbidding, as they had been that day in the hospital.

"*You have already forgotten,*" he added.

But I was looking at him then and I knew he hadn't spoken. His lips hadn't

moved, yet I had heard. Was it possible to convey thoughts wholly without words? Could Jim do that?

"You have forgotten completely!"

And I had. It was weeks before the incident in Fogarty's classroom again came to mind, and then I wasn't sure it had happened at all.

IN MAY, Jim created a sensation. Waldeman, our physics professor, found him in the X-ray laboratory amidst a hodge-podge of temporary wiring. Angered, Waldeman demanded an explanation. For answer Jim turned on the queerly altered tube.

The emanations from that tube, as all the world now knows, were cosmic rays.

The historic turbulence his discovery created in the scientific world made no impression upon him. He seemed surprised that so much was made of what was, he declared, only a means to an end—a statement he wouldn't explain even to me.

He was hailed, of course, as Father's successor. In June, Dinsmore offered him a professorship. And Jim refused it!

After graduation we visited the Ravens for a week. I wondered how Jessie would feel about the new Jim. But I wasn't prepared for what happened. Jessie hardly looked at me, whereas before she had never shown the least partiality to either of us. Not without some bitterness, I told myself that it had been bound to happen sometime, that Jim's swift success had simply decided the question more quickly.

In late July they were married.

I cornered Jim when they returned from the honeymoon. "Does this mean you're accepting the professorship?" I demanded.

The trust fund Father had left us had just seen us through college, and the matter of money loomed as a serious problem, to me at least.

He stared as if doubting my sincerity.

"Don't be a fool, Mark," he blurted at last. "That place hampers me. I don't intend to spend my time teaching. I'm going to build my own lab and observatory, and I want you to help me."

"Fine," I responded caustically. "We'll call ourselves 'Pure Research Incorporated' and float a bond issue, I suppose."

"No, I think this will settle the money question," he said, drawing from his pocket a greyish little cube of metal which he threw upon the table. I reached for it.

"Don't touch it!" he snapped.

"Why? What is it?"

"Radioactive osmium R-36," he said quietly. "Made from lead, at a cost of seven kilowatts per pound."

Osmium R-36! Henckel of U.C.L.A. had already built a tiny atomic motor, using a few milligrams worth two hundred dollars.

On that table lay the key to abundant atomic power.

"They have so much, and know so little!" said Jim contemptuously.

I knew he hadn't spoken those last words, but what he had done far overshadowed them.

R-36 radiations were deadly. He had warned me not to touch the cube.

But he himself had been carrying it in his pocket!

IT WAS Jim's osmium that enabled United States to settle Europe's war once and for all. The world staggered out of its carnage of destruction to a dictated peace. Europe, instead of being re-apportioned, was united into a confederacy of states.

We at Osmium City scarcely noticed the overturn of empires. Jim despised business and left its details to me. The laboratory and observatory we built were the finest in the world. The telescope, using the first practical electrostatic lens ever built for that purpose, far surpassed Palomar's. Sometimes for weeks Jim spent

night and day in the observatory. The building included complete living quarters.

He and Jessie had been married a year when I found her packing her things in the house Jim no longer lived in. I had long guessed that she was unhappy, but not that things had gone this far. I asked her what he had done.

"Nothing," she told me, "except ignore me completely. But that's nothing new or recent, Mark. It began right after our honeymoon. That first month he at least admitted my existence. Since then he's treated me like an experiment that failed somehow. I—I don't know how I've failed, Mark. I wanted so much to be a good wife to him—"

"Did you love him then?" I asked bluntly.

Her brown eyes went wide. "When I married him? I—I don't know, Mark. I never asked myself! Jim was so strange—but it didn't seem to matter. I remember now that he never talked of loving me. I knew he wanted me, and that seemed to be enough. How could I have been so blind?"

I remembered how absorbed she had been in Jim then, and bitter suspicions formed in my mind. Had she been *ordered* to accept him?

She left that night. He didn't try to stop her.

There was so much I might have asked Jim to explain, but couldn't—the classroom incident, the cube of R-36 which he had handled so casually, his treatment of Jessie. I've said that no trace of the accident remained, but it was equally true that he was never quite the same afterwards. He was inexplicably colder, often forbidding. There were no more of the small confidences we used to share.

He kept furiously busy. For weeks he experimented with stratosphere balloons and rockets fitted with recording instruments of his own design. Abruptly he turned from that to make innumerable

descents in a bathysphere off the Florida coast. The results of his work he recorded in a single book, in an undecipherable shorthand of his own. Money was so plentiful from the osmium transmutation that he only laughed when I suggested he publish his findings.

"But what's it all for, Jim?" I asked him. "You've got some bigger plan back of all this secrecy?"

His lips smiled. "You may know soon, Mark."

But from the silence that followed, I heard, as that day in Fogarty's classroom, the words: "*This is the world, Dystra! This is the world.*"

By now I had accepted the fact of that fragmentary telepathy, which seemed to occur only when his thought was intense or emotional. No, hardly emotional—I don't believe he had emotions in those days. But occasionally there was an emphasis upon a thought, either a strong satisfaction or contempt—that was his nearest approach to emotion.

Of course I never dared confess to him that I could penetrate a little that secrecy wherein his mind dwelt. Nor do I believe that anybody else was able to do this—not even Jessie.

Once more I saw the greyish little cube of R-36. It fell out of his pocket when he was searching for some notes. He scooped it up without a word, and the very moment I opened my mouth in horrified protest, I forgot not only what I meant to say, but the incident itself. It was a month before the memory of it returned, and by then the idea of confronting him with it seemed not only difficult, but absurd.

Some weeks later I had occasion to consult him one night. He was living at the observatory still. As I was about to press the bell to announce myself, I found that the outer door was ajar. Jim was often touchy at being disturbed during an observation. I decided to enter and wait

quietly until he would pause in his work.

Inside the great dome was a total darkness, except for the tiny shaded lamps over the telescope controls. I walked cautiously around the great instrument until I came within sight of the observer's platform.

Shall I ever forget what I saw then?

The platform was not dark. There was light enough to see Jim's body—a ghastly and terrible light.

It came from his face, his head, his hands. Wherever his flesh was uncovered, it shone with the fire of beasts' eyes in the dark, but a hundredfold brighter. Eyes were black flames in that glowing face of his.

What horrible experiment was he conducting upon himself?

Somehow I knew I must not face him with this knowledge stamped upon my face. Stealthily I went back the way I had come, my errand forgotten. Perhaps I played a coward's part, but neither then nor later could I bring myself to tax him with the fact that I had seen him that night.

In daylight or artificial light he looked quite normal.

SIX months after Jessie left, he came to me. At once I sensed a subdued excitement about him, a strong, concealed satisfaction.

"We'll need more money, Mark," he said without preamble. "We're going to build a rocket ship."

"A stratosphere plane? But we can't—"

"A space ship," he interrupted. "A small one, for a single passenger. I've synthesized a suitable fuel from the R-36. The plans are ready. We start building in the morning."

It was eloquent of the gulf that had opened between us that I neither pressed for details, nor did he furnish any. I wondered where he meant to go. Curiously enough, it was unquestioned in my

own mind that he, and no one else, would take the ship aloft.

Twenty-four hours later the ship's keel had been laid. Once it was begun, Jim paid the work no further attention. We followed the plans given us, while he plunged himself into a study of botany—the last science I had ever expected him to find of interest.

The ship was half finished when I noticed a strange thing, a fact so incredible that I checked every blueprint twice before accepting it, and then could not understand how it had escaped notice before.

There were no air tanks, no air purifiers, no oxygen supply. Once the ship was sealed no man could live in it an hour.

It was two in the morning. I gathered up the prints and went to Jim's room. With my hand upraised to knock, I was suddenly swept by a strong current of thought.

"Soon, Dystra! Not one of them suspects—my mind is locked to them. But this body will not survive the trip. I must have the other. It is difficult. The irradiation is complete, but I cannot yet control the brain to a complete transmutation. Success is only partial as yet—"

Automatically I knocked. At once Jim's voice answered, and I went in. He was sitting at his desk, in the full glare of two lamps. There was a faint, sickish odor in the air that somewhat resembled that of acetylene.

Jim turned gravely toward me.

I tried to conceal the shock and horror that rocked me at that moment, and knew that I must fail.

His skull was utterly white, paper-white in the lampglow, hairless, and ridged with convolutions like a naked brain. Around his eyes the skin was white, the eyeballs globular, protruding, with a tiny jet-black iris.

It was more than I could dissemble. I felt the impact of his thought again.

"I had forgotten—there is danger from this one, Dystra. Shall I destroy him, or can I cause him to forget again?"

He said, "Yes, Mark?"

"The—the ship," I faltered. "A mistake in the plans—"

Again, but far more strongly, his thought impinged upon mine. *"I look quite normal to you. You will forget anything strange you may have seen. Forget!"*

I was suddenly dizzy. It was not mere acting that I groped for the desk to steady myself. When the dizziness was gone, I saw Jim smiling faintly at me—Jim, with the familiar lock of black hair falling over one temple, familiar blue eyes quizzical.

"What was I saying?" I asked.

"A mistake in the plans—but that's impossible."

I shook my head. "Look at them, Jim. A man would suffocate in that sealed shell—"

Our glances locked and the rest of the sentence died in my throat.

A man!

Jim?

"The plans are all right, Mark," he said softly. Unspoken followed the command: *"You find nothing strange about them."*

"Don't know why I bothered you," I mumbled with perfect sincerity. "I'll push off to bed."

He grinned good-naturedly. "Good idea. Tomorrow's another day. Good night!"

But what reached my mind was: *"It is very easy, Dystra. They cannot resist. This is the world—our new world. You shall see for yourself—"*

WEEKS slipped by while the space ship grew from a skeleton to a slender-finned cylinder, blunt-bowed, thick in the stern, crammed within until it seemed there would remain hardly sufficient room for its living freight.

Slowly the inhibited memory of that night in Jim's room returned, but always it had the unreality of a dream. Sometimes I honestly doubted that the incident had occurred at all. But there were the plans—the monstrous omission of any oxygen or air supply struck me anew. But now I kept my own counsel.

There came the night we tried out the rocket motors, with the ship clamped in a test cradle, blue flame roaring from the bell-mouthed orifices Jim had designed. Synthetic R-36 fuel ran out of tiny metered tanks, and the dynamometer needles trembled at figures that made us gasp. The secret of that fuel, too, was Jim's and his alone.

He had not come out for the tests. I went to tell him the result, and he seemed pleased, much as the old Jim would have been.

"Great work, Mark. Tomorrow I take off."

I was astounded that it should be so soon.

"But you have your course to calculate—you haven't even told me where you're going. I've always heard that the first ship would probably be doing well if it circled the moon and returned."

He laughed. "No, Mark, that's not it. I've always wondered whether there's life on Mars, and now I intend to find out. As for calculations—they were made before the ship was begun. You built to a schedule. Tell me, do you wish it were you?"

There was mockery in his eyes. I shook my head. "Guess I have too much respect for my own hide, Jim. And now I'll be worrying about yours—"

It was well that I had steeled myself to remain impassive.

"I shall never understand them, Dystra. They express fear for on another—a weakness for which they deserve to die. Perhaps they shall. For I am coming soon, Dystra, with the grey metal that is

our life. Here we can make it in abundance—on this world where there is lead and hot sunlight. Soon, Dystra!"

Swift the flow of thought, swifter far than words, but not more so than the flood of cold fear chilling around my heart. Jim's voice recalled me—Jim's old voice.

"Wish me luck, Mark?"

He held his hand out, and the warmth of his clasp was as in the old days.

I said, "I do, Jim, with all my heart. Good-by, Jim."

And I meant every word of it, for I knew I should never see him again.

I didn't go to bed. It was long past midnight before I ceased pacing the bright, deserted streets of Osmium City. Even then I did not go directly to my room.

THE next day broke clear and hot. I awoke late, saw my face haggard in the mirror from the doubts and strivings of the night before. Oddly enough, I had slept soundly.

Jim was stowing containers in the racks provided inside the little ship. There were only three of us besides him—two consulting engineers and myself. The rocket lay in the long acceleration track which in the distance curved upward into empty sky. Jim's long, bony face was flushed, perhaps with the exertion of lifting the wall-fitting containers into place—he would trust no one else with this. The engineers stood by silently, tense with the thought of what was to come.

Finished, Jim swung around to us, a boyish grin lighting his face. He was all Jim in that instant, and there seemed to be a cold stone in my chest when I looked at him.

Only when I had to, did I meet his eyes, the deep-blue, reckless eyes of the brother I loved.

He was casual now. "So long, Mark."

I thought he must feel the coldness of my hand.

He climbed into the ship, clad only in

shirt and slacks—none of us saw the incongruity of it then.

"Jim!" I cried, and leaped forward.

Hands drew me back, held me struggling while the roar of exhausts drowned my cries.

The shell slipped away, gathering speed. It roared down the track, hurtled into the upcurve so swiftly that the eye saw only a silvery streak. It lifted its finned beauty skyward—

Somebody thrust a pair of field glasses into my hands. Avidly I sought the ship—droplet of silver against immensity of sky. Already the roar of its rockets was only a distant hum.

Suddenly the clean swift line of its mounting was broken. Its bow dipped; it flew erratically, almost horizontal, for a moment. Then the nose dropped and it whirled end over end like a gigantic pinwheel, falling, always falling, flame hurling it earthward, a stricken thing.

The crash echoed from the empty hangar behind us.

Then the three of us were speeding toward the spot in a car. I remember nothing of the search itself. It was as though I had stopped living for all but one thing when that wounded ship plunged down.

It had buried a third of its length in the ground, such had been the force of impact. Close by the air stank of hot metal and spilled fuel. I was in an agony of apprehension that flame might at any moment lick about the wreckage.

It was impossible to believe that anything in that scarred, buckled hull could still be alive. Like hot irons I felt the pitying glances of the other men. One of them took a wrecking bar and shovel from the car.

At that my numbed mind came alive. I tore the things from his hands, pushed him and the others into the car. I don't know what I told them; they understood I wanted to be alone for what had to be done. They drove away.

I worked with desperate haste. The cover was jammed. I had to pry the stern plates aside to free it. There came to sight the gyroscopic valve that should automatically have kept the ship upright during flight.

To it was still attached the clumsily bent bypass tube that utterly nullified the action of the valve, that had sent fuel jetting haphazardly into the bow steering jets—a murderous little piece of copper it had taken me two frantic hours to fit.

I tore it out and hurled the guilty thing away.

Something dark and still huddled within the ship, and again I smelled that warm, fetid odor that was neither animal nor human.

With insane haste I tugged and lifted the thing from the ship, a dead weight. At last it lay broken and twisted at my feet, repulsive in the hot bright sunlight.

A grotesque caricature of man—

Legs and arms were thin, ropy things. The globular, white-skinned, wrinkled head sat neckless upon broad shoulders, yet the chest was small, sunken, atrophied. It had no ears, no nose, no mouth. It could not have breathed. Bulbous, lidless

eyes stared with blind intentness. Body and limbs were jet, glossy black. It wore Jim's shirt and slacks.

I BURIED it in the soft loam beside the ship, as deeply as trembling muscles could push the shovel. It rests there today, the wreckage of the ship its headstone. Upon the crumpled silvery hull Jim's name was engraved for all to see.

But of course the thing that molds there isn't Jim.

This I know—that it entered Jim's body and possessed itself of his brain, his memories and his life upon this earth; that it required no oxygen although the radiations of R-36 were vital to it; that it communicated over a vast chasm of space telepathically with its own kind.

Whether Jim died that day on the Knoxville road, I do not know.

Night after night at the observatory I study the red mystery that is Mars. For at times I think that Jim is not dead, but strangely, terrifyingly alive.

Up there—in the body of the thing that came to Earth in his place—the thing that didn't breathe.



"The Door To The Mind Is Open"

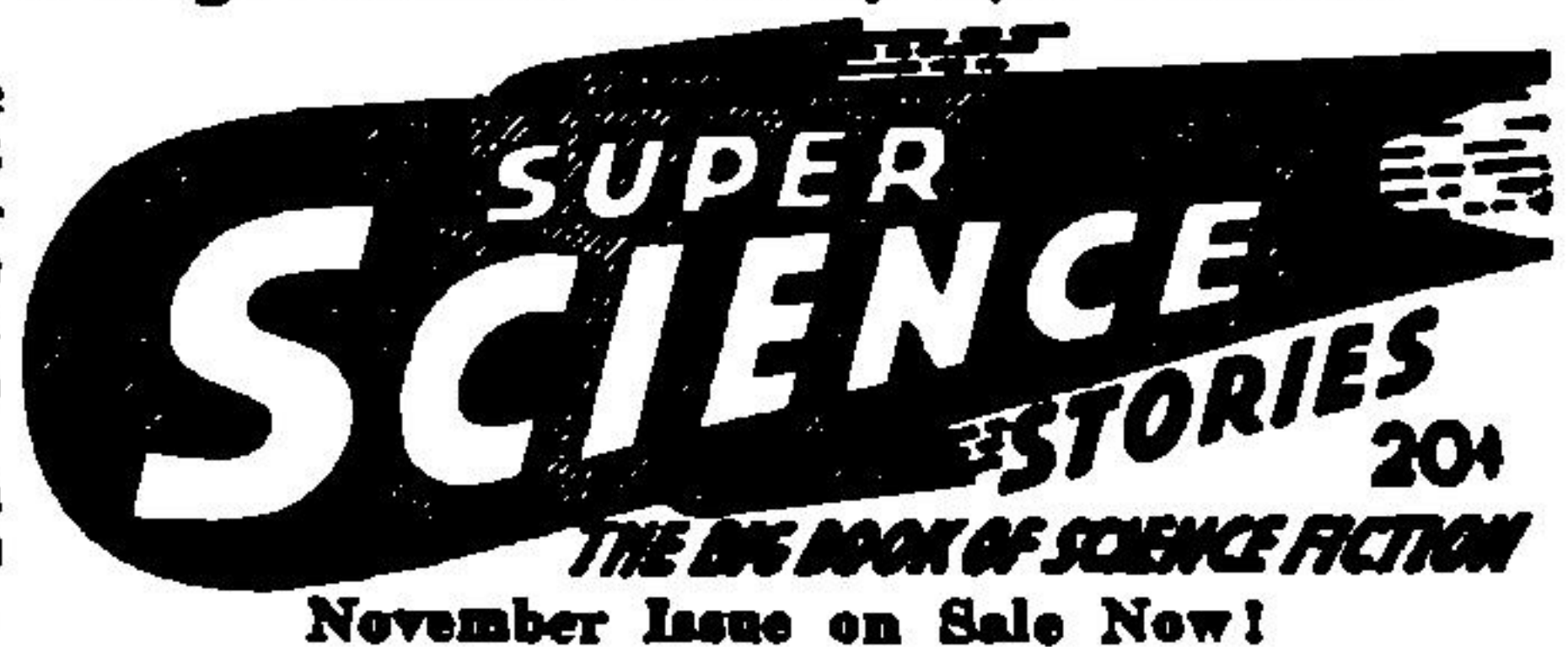
Yet have a care where ye tread. . . . Eternally sealed is a secret vault in the brain, the No Man's Land of lost senses, which three humans had dared to explore. . . . Whereupon, on a fate-charged day, they discovered that they were two men and a girl—against the World!

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MY LADY of THE

By Wilfred
Owen Morley

EMERALD

A whisper of wings . . . a land on the rim of time . . . a summons to a valley of nameless terror . . . and a day on which the very cosmos shall tremble!

EVEN AFTER the moon had sunk below the rim of the world, and sudden clouds had hidden the stars, we could still see the Face looming up in the vast distance. Etched against a dark sky, it assumed a deeper blackness than the inkiness of total night, or the utter lightlessness of the dread coalsacks in the sky.

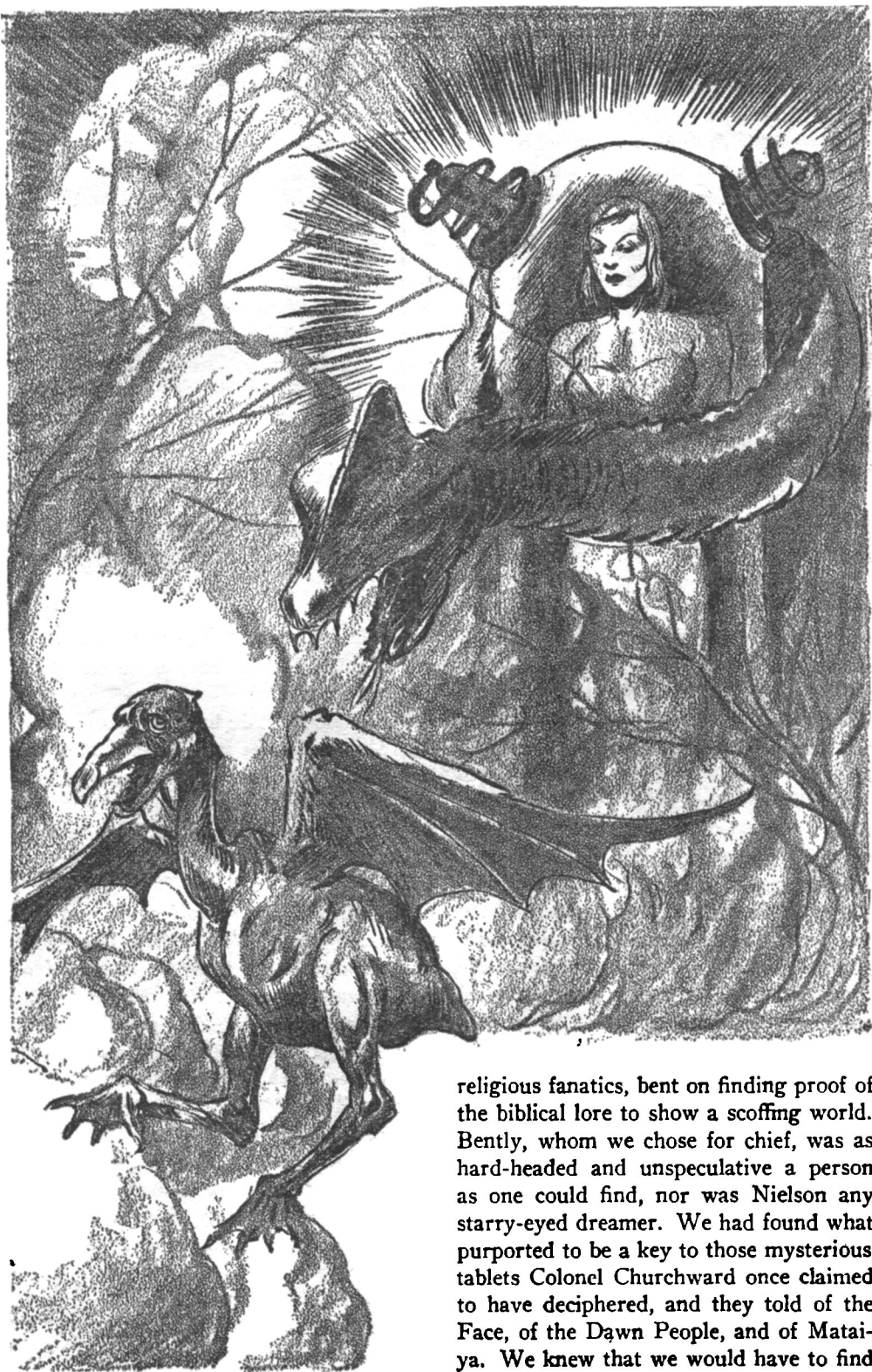
But there was nothing evil-seeming in the Face; no, even from the distance, we could see the brooding sorrow and Cyclopean weariness carved into it.

It was as if all the lonely disillusion that life has known from its awakening in the dawn of time had been expressed in this single sculpture.

We had heard of the Face, had spoken at great length with a few scholars in the outside world who knew of it, and the sight of it filled us with profound excitement because, for all the splendor of it, we knew it but for a symbol of what lay beyond—the tomb of Mataiya, about which there were but the weirdest legends.

No, ours was no party of mystics, or





religious fanatics, bent on finding proof of the biblical lore to show a scoffing world. Bently, whom we chose for chief, was as hard-headed and unspeculative a person as one could find, nor was Nielson any starry-eyed dreamer. We had found what purported to be a key to those mysterious tablets Colonel Churchward once claimed to have deciphered, and they told of the Face, of the Dawn People, and of Mataiya. We knew that we would have to find

some sure proof here in the depths of this South American valley, well-nigh lost in a maze of labyrinthine mountains, or ours would be the fate that overtook Churchward. No scientifically-minded person would pay any heed to us.

Were the Dawn People the builders of a mighty civilization, from which has sprung all the legends of Mu, Atlantis, and the tales of a golden age predating Minos? Were they beings from another planet, as so many had suspected? Nielson and Bently would not discuss this aspect of it, but my imagination ran riot over the multitude of possibilities.

At any rate, there was something here; the presence of Bently and Nielson was proof of that.

I stirred the ashes of the fire and stretched, thinking it might be a good idea to get some sleep this night after all. No animal life stirred about us; we had seen nothing save vegetation for several days. No sound came to my ears except a faint rustling, a whispered rustling—as of wings.

A whisper of wings! I suddenly knew what it was that had lain on the tip of my mind for so long, why I felt uneasy and sleepless of nights. It was this faint stirring in the air that I had sensed for so long, as if, in the trackless distances, an incredible creature was beating colossal wings tirelessly. But so far away was the thing, that the sound came to us as the softest of murmurs.

I thought of Alauoo, guardian angel of Eiklan, who eternally hovers between Earth and Newplanet to safeguard the transit of souls between the worlds.

I was about to poke out the fire and slip into my tent when I sensed motion to my far right. Without thinking, I dropped to the ground, just in time to hear something whir by my head and drop to the earth a short distance away. So there were native guardians of this valley after all! Soundlessly I slipped my pistol from its

holster and waited. The fire flashed a last gleam of light, then died. But that flash was enough; it showed me a crouching figure. I fired and saw it topple over.

For a second I waited, then cautiously approached the thing. It was a man, I found—a white man. He looked as if he were more than a thousand years old. My bullet had grazed his temple, doing little more than stunning him. For all his apparent ancientness, his heart beat full and strong beneath my fingers. I motioned to Bently and Nielson who had emerged ready for action at the sound of my pistol, and the three of us carried him inside, laid him out on an auxiliary cot.

In the glow of a lamp, my heart gave an audible leap—I was sure that I knew this man!

“AREN’T you Nicholas Rensler?” I asked the old one, as he set down his coffee cup.

He nodded. “You have sharp eyes, my friend, to recognize me—now. But then, it was only sharp eyes that saved you last night.”

“You were going to kill us?”

He nodded.

“Why?”

“Because I knew you could not be frightened away. With others, I’ve managed to discourage them by means of a little hocus-pocus, because they were already unnerved by the Face and the sound of Its wings. But you, I knew, would not be frightened. You were determined to continue.”

I frowned. “You may as well tell us everything, Rensler. After all, we have a perfect right to put you out of the way, you know. Particularly since you imply that you’ll try to finish us off at the first opportunity.”

He drew a deep breath.

“My story is fantastic,” he started. “I wouldn’t blame you, or anyone else, for not believing—even though my appear-

ance should bear it out to a slight degree. However, I'll tell you as well as I can; it seems so long now . . .

"About four years ago my brother and I heard fabulous stories about the Face, the Winged One, and Her. With my brother, it was the tale of a beautiful woman centuries imprisoned in a transparent bell which made up his mind. Dick always was the romantic type. With me, it was the hints of finding relics of the Dawn People. And perhaps the thought of the girl didn't seem unpleasant, either.

"I shan't bore you with details of how we arrived here. I'll only say that we camped somewhere around this spot, saw the Face against the sky, heard the sound of Its wings, and pushed on the next day.

"You'd say offhand that the Face is atop that mountain there, wouldn't you? That there's likely an abyss on the other side? You'd be wrong, even though it does look that way. The Face rests on the top of a titanic monolith in the valley, towering up above the mountains—*it can't be seen from the air.*"

"What!" I cried incredulously.

"That's what I said—I'll come to that later. As I said, we pushed on, and came at last to a narrow divide leading into the valley of the Face. We felt damned uncomfortable, I might add, because anyone above us could simply wipe us out by dropping boulders. We went on, expecting to come out upon a deep canyon, across which the Face would gaze at us.

"We found just a valley.

"But in its center—it's exact center—rising out of the trees and vegetation, rising up thousands of feet to peer over the rim of the mountains, was the colossal monolith bearing the Face on its top. A Cyclopean monolith of a jet-black substance that is neither stone nor metal so far as I could make out. We couldn't scratch it or mar it in any way; it must have been there thousands of years, for trees have sprung about it, and moss and

vines have entwined it, and it must be sunk way down into the earth to stand so. But there are no marks on it that we could find."

"Was that—all?"

"Except for the Winged One. It was there, waiting for us. We followed the sound of its wings from the slightest whisper we heard to the titan beating of them. We came to the rim of the valley, the other rim, and waited until it found us.

"It was beautiful. There are no words I can think of to describe the glory and radiance of the Winged One. I can only draw similarities. Of what substance it is made, I know no more than of the substance of the Face. I think that none of the three—the Face, the Winged One, and Her—are of this world; none were born here. It is a substance seemingly harder than the most adamant metal made, yet light, incredibly light. No, I don't exactly mean that. It has sufficient weight. Perhaps gossamer or fragile would be the term. It seems so—ethereal. As if when the wind came dancing over the mountains, the Winged One would shimmer away.

"The wings are of purest white, a white so pure it is almost blinding. The body is formed much like that of an idealised man, except there are all the sweet curves of a woman in it—yet it doesn't seem feminine in any way. I'd say it's entirely sexless. Its eyes are the green of grass after rain. Its face is golden; its arms long but beautifully proportioned; and it has seven fingers on each hand. The feet of it are not exactly like those of humans; they seem to curl up like Caliph's shoes. Around its midriff it wears a belt of jet-black substance—like that of the monolith. And in its center is set a single glowing red stone which is not ruby.

"That is how Dick and I found it—or, rather, it found us."

"Where is Dick now?" I interrupted.

"Dead—lucky devil."

"You killed him?"

"Yes. I wish I'd killed myself, too, as I originally planned. You'll learn why in a little while."

Rensler clutched the sides of the cot.

"Hear them?" he whispered.

I LISTENED. Bently went to the slit in the tent and looked out. Nielson nodded and poured the old man some water. He gulped it thirstily.

"It's still there," he continued. "Still waiting for someone to open the door."

"Then you found something else?" Nielson prompted.

"We found Her. But wait—let me get back to where I was before. The Winged One dropped down to the ground, in front of Dick and me. I'd say it was about fifteen feet in height. Can't guess at the wingspread.

"It didn't make any sound at all, but its green eyes bored into mine, and I began to see things—things which I knew weren't there at all.

"The world around me was—different. The sky was an intense blue, almost as if it were painted. It didn't look real at all. And there were jet-black shapes that I knew to be trees of another period of time. There were great grass-growths, too. But before I had a chance to get a good look at what I saw, something else claimed my attention.

"It was a ship—a gigantic globe seemingly hanging motionless in midair. Then, as I watched, it settled down out of the blue like a fly settling to a table, and people began to come out. They looked like us, only they were all exceedingly beautiful both in face and figure.

"Then the scene changed and I saw the valley around me filled with these people. They didn't have exactly a city here—it looked more like a glorified World's Fair. None of the buildings were

very tall, and there were wide avenues and walks and gardens all around. And, in the very center, was the monolith."

Bently took his pipe out of his mouth and knocked the bowl against the tent-post. "Did it look the way it does now?"

"Just about, except that it seemed to shine. I didn't see it for long, because the pictures started coming pretty fast and I didn't have a chance to get all the details.

"It seems that there was some sort of dispute between two sections of these people. On the one hand were those who called themselves the Children of the Monolith, and the others were the Light Followers. Those aren't the exact terms, but Dick and I talked it over a lot and decided that was about as close as we could get. The monolith was a symbol, a sort of reminder. It seems that the man whose face is on top of the monolith was some sort of research man in this people's home planet. He let his enthusiasm run away with him and started something he couldn't stop. It finally destroyed their planet, but not before he had managed to offer a solution to the problem of how to keep on living. He'd perfected the means of interplanetary flight.

"This scientist became the symbol of warning. They built the monolith with his face on top of it as an eternal reminder. It wasn't supposed to imply that research and new discoveries are bad, but just an admonition to go slow, take it easy, and be sure you have an antidote handy before you drink any new concoction.

"However, the Followers of the Light, led by a woman called Mataiya, were playing around with a new form of life. They created the Winged One. The Children of the Monolith objected, but the Winged One didn't seem to be dangerous in any way—but Mataiya and her followers wanted to go on from there."

"Was there a war?" I put in.

"That's about what happened. It didn't last very long. Ended up with Mataiya

being imprisoned in some sort of jar, with a creature kept there to guard it. You see, they didn't believe in such things as execution. I know it sounds strange in the light of what I said about their having a war—but apparently no one was killed in the war, either. It was merely a contest of forces and ended up when one side broke down the defenses of the other. If anyone was hurt, it was just accidental, and they could revive them anyway, unless they were completely destroyed. Part of the defense was making the monolith invisible from above. I think there must be some hidden machines which are still running."

"Then what happened to these people?" broke in Nielson. "Why is it that the only trace we have of them is the Monolith? And where is the tomb of this Mataiya?"

Rensler coughed. "A lot of things aren't clear. All I can tell you is the impressions I got from this thing. And the impression was that of a sudden catastrophe—maybe a drastic change of climate—which sent these people outside the valley. The catastrophe changed them in some way, because by the time they left, they were beginning to degenerate; they'd forgotten a lot of the scientific knowledge. The monolith was beginning to become something of a shrine.

"So — they departed, leaving the Winged One alone. It could have gone with them, but apparently it didn't want to.

"It's been waiting ever since for someone to come back, someone to open the tomb of Mataiya, for Mataiya alone can destroy it; it's tired of life. That, you understand, is the story *it* told."

"You mean it was lying!" Bently gasped.

"I'll come to that," said Rensler. "After we heard—or saw—the Winged One's story, Dick and I compared notes. He was all for doing whatever the creature wanted, but I wasn't too sure. There were

a number of things which didn't seem quite right. I remembered that, at first, all the pictures were clear and distinct, but, after the coming of the Winged One itself into the scene, they began to get somewhat hazy and blurred at the edges. They were hurried through, as if the Winged One wanted to give an impression without letting us see too clearly what it was. But I couldn't convince Dick. He was hellbound to find the tomb of Mataiya and let her loose."

"What I want to know," I stated, "is, why couldn't the Winged One release Mataiya itself?"

"It feared the guardian," said Rensler. "Well, to get on as quickly as possible, we found a door in one of the valley walls, and the Winged One showed us how to open it. We went inside and found ourselves in what seemed to be a section of the original valley. The sky was a painted blue, and the trees were inky black shapes crawling up into the sky. The grass was riotous. And there was a great jar-like thing with a woman inside.

"At first I was disappointed. The woman seemed beautiful, but nothing like what I'd expected. But it was deceptive; there was a seductiveness there which took you unawares and the more you looked, the more radiant and lovely she became. And there was also the guardian.

"It was a snake, but not a snake—a dragon, and still not a dragon. It was a combination of both, and it looked pretty authoritative, although not horrible. I got the strange feeling that it would try to persuade us to go away peacefully before harming us."

"Did it?" I asked.

"It — communicated — the way the Winged One did. But there were interruptions. Something was trying to break down the impressions it was sending to us. Something—and then I knew. The interrupting element was that whisper of wings.

"The Winged One! It sought to prevent our getting impressions from the guardian. I concentrated upon getting these impressions straight, and before long I knew that I would never assist the Winged One in opening the tomb of Mataiya, and that I would give my life to prevent anyone's doing it.

"You see, the Winged One's story was not exactly straight after a certain point. The creature had been created partly from one of the people of the valley. And Mataiya's plan was to create an entire race of these beings, replacing the humans, leaving only a handful for her personal attendants. Together, she and her creatures had a dream of spacial and time conquest which can only be summed up in the word *mad*.

"To release Mataiya would be to unloose doom upon the world and upon any form of life dwelling upon any other planet in the solar system. For she was imprisoned only because they could not kill her.

"All the while the whisper of wings drummed in my brain, trying to beat down these impressions, urging me on to slay the guardian—apparently it was vulnerable—so that the woman could be set free."

"Did your brother get the same impressions as you?" I asked.

He shook his head. "Dick was carried away by the woman's beauty. I could see that he dreamed of love when he looked upon her, and that he received no impressions from the guardian at all. Even as I watched, he drew his gun and tried to kill the creature. But his aim was bad.

"I managed to get him back to camp, but it was no use. He raved about the woman and the wings continually and finally broke loose. I tried to beat him to it, but he was too far ahead of me, so I shot him.

"Since then I've stayed here, keeping people from finding the valley. There

haven't been many, but I'm glad I was here. Had to wipe out one expedition—" His voice trailed away, and his head rolled to one side. I saw that he was asleep.

SOMETHING was stirring in my tent. Silently I slid over to one side of the cot and grasped my pistol.

"Stanley," came a low voice. "It's I, Nielson. Get up quickly, quietly. I think Bently's—gone."

Swiftly I dressed, then met him outside.

Nielson said, "I looked in his tent a little while ago and he wasn't there. His rifle is missing too."

"Let's get Rensler," I said. "He'll know the quickest way."

A little later the three of us were marching swiftly toward the divide. We came out into the clear and saw the valley Rensler had described, saw the towering monolith, on top of which rested the Face.

Rensler grasped my arm and pointed. "Look!"

I followed his gaze, and the blood froze in my veins. For there, over by the opposite cliff wall, was the huge Winged One, and riding on his back was Bently.

We hastened across the valley floor, found the door and entered the artificial fragment of a world that no longer was.

Even as we entered, the sound of rifle shots came to our ears.

"Hurry," sobbed Rensler. "We've got to get there before he kills the guardian; the Winged One dares do nothing so long as the guardian lives."

A scream of mortal terror cut short his words; then a final explosion.

Had Bently won?

An instant later we knew, for we saw the fantastic creature, the Winged One, coming toward us. Desperately I tried to avoid its glowing eyes. Instinctively I ducked. But it apparently meant us no harm. It poised in the air a short distance away, its wings whirring in our ears.

And then I saw—Her!

There are no words to describe the loveliness of Mataiya as I saw her then; I knew only my desire for this woman, and my willingness to do anything for the winning of her. She stood there, her body glowing with a deathless radiance, partly concealed by the serpent-like length of the guardian which had wrapped itself around the transparent jar. Serpent body and dragon head; its eyes peered balefully, jealously, at me, I thought.

Beside the jar, one arm outstretched, as if to grasp the serpent, lay Bently.

But what did I care for him? A whisper of wings was in my ears, and desire burned within me. I knew that I must elude those around me and set the woman free. Free Her! Then would we two mount the Winged One and fly to a distant paradise whence we would commence our plan for the control of the entire cosmos.

They say I fought like a madman and

that it took the combined efforts of Rensler and Nielson to subdue me. I do not remember that; all I know is that the whisper of wings suddenly became a roar in my head which overwhelmed me so that I fell through the very Earth itself into a black void where stars swam endlessly. When I awoke, we were back in camp, and Nielson was changing a bandage on my head.

But I still dream of Her and of the Face, and perhaps some day I shall quietly steal away, back to the valley, and finish something which I left undone. For the whisper of wings grows in my head at night and I cannot rest. Yes, someday She and I will mount the Winged One and fly away, away to the secret land that only we three know. Perhaps beyond the stars themselves, a land on the rim of time.

And when that day comes, then let the cosmos tremble!

EDITORAMBLINGS

YES, it's Los Angeles in 1942! No sooner had the Daughertys, the Heinleins, Forrie, Morojo, Freehafer and others returned from the Science Fiction Convention at Denver, than a special meeting was held in Los Angeles to start things rolling for next year.

These preparations may seem a little premature at this time, but that's the way they do things out there.

The sponsoring committee has announced that this Convention will not be paraded under such titles as Angelicon, LAvention, Hollycon, Pacificon, etc. Any fans who wish may select their own nicknames, but the official title is the **FOURTH WORLD SCIENCE FICTION CONVENTION**.

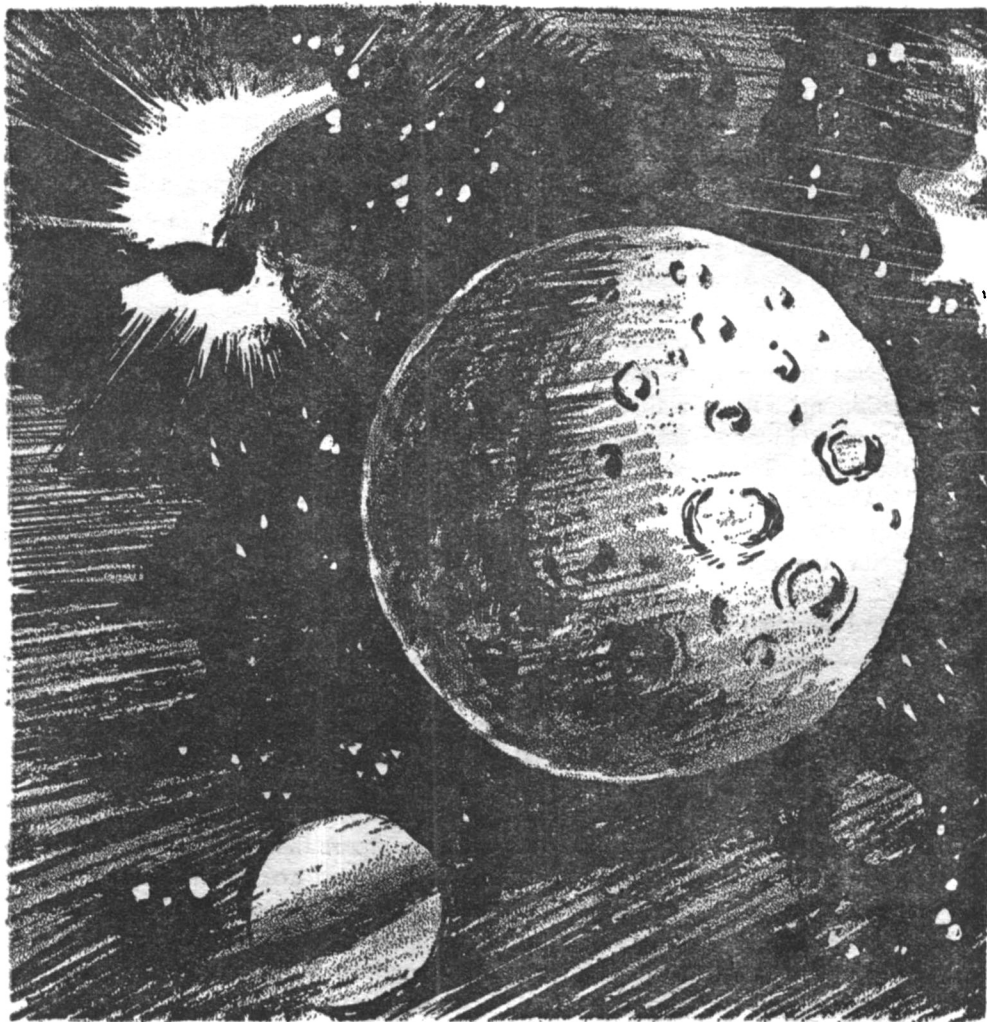
They have set an initial goal of 500 members, and think they will reach it.

Even before any official announcements appeared, more than fifty fans had signed up, and others are reported coming in every day. All those who plan to attend or support the convention are urged by the committee to send \$1 to the Convention Secretary, Paul Freehafer, 349 S. Rampart, Los Angeles. Aside from a membership card, this sum will entitle fans to special stickers, a bi-weekly news mag for a year, and other benefits. Each member will be personally informed, from time to time, of the further progress of the Convention plans.

Watch further issues of **ASTONISHING STORIES** for more details.

Meanwhile, for further facts, drop a penny postcard to Convention Director Walter J. Daugherty, 6224 Leland Way, Hollywood, Cal.

DAUGHTER of



A Sequel to "Into the Darkness"

By **Ross Rocklynnne**

DEEP within the fifteenth band of lightlessness reposed he who had lived so long that he had forgotten the unutterable span of years which stretched back from this moment to the moment of his birth.

He thought, and wished to forget thought. To forget thought! That was death! Ah, let death come. If it would but creep up on him without his knowledge . . . If it would not let him know of its restful presence until it had done

DARKNESS..



Eons had he lived, worlds had he made and unmade—the brooding prisoner of the ages who fought a ceaseless battle that could know no winner—this fighter against death—who wished it at the same time!

its work. . . . If it would not give him warning, not arouse him to fight involuntarily against it with all the unwilling strength of his seventy million-mile body!

To fight against death—and to wish it at the same time! This was a battle that

could know no winner. Better to wish for nothing, to throttle thought until it subsided downward to a level where recognition of one's identity was a difficult thing.

Completely enclosed as he was—first by the fifteenth band of lightlessness, second

by his self-imposed guard against thoughts concerning the outer universe—still there was the trickle of thought that gave him awareness. Outside was the universe, in all its glowing splendor. Outside, too, were other energy creatures, beings such as he himself had been before his eternal quest for knowledge had led him to escape his normal fate, a fate he would welcome now.

They knew of how he strove not to think, and they respected his desire. He was a legend now, beloved at the same time he was held in awe.

Why did he wish to die? Those young energy creatures could not know. But they did know that to disturb him would be to bring to him an unendurable agony. One ray of light, one single outside thought, would be a stiletto that would bring him to full, shocking awareness of external things. He had sought a hundred million years for the self-imposed anesthetic that would dull his mind, gear it downward to a semblance of idiotic apathy. To disturb him now would be cruelty.

This was Oldster, this incredibly aged creature; he who did not wish to think, or, if he must think, wished to think of extinction and its utter, blessed relief.

CHAPTER ONE

Sun Destroyer

SO VAST was the universe, that even at the frightful velocity an energy creature could attain, he could never hope to travel from rim to rim in anything less than seven millions of years.

Yet the universe was small—small and without significance. It was but a pin-point of light breaking the dead monotony of a darkness vast beyond description. A frightening gulf, a bottomless pit, an ocean of lightlessness . . . and utterly without even a particle of any substance to give it warmth or character. . . .

But there were other universes, other feeble pin-points which, in their own right, were huge.

THE youths were gathered in numbers of some hundreds around the giant white star. They were astir with interest and excitement as they watched the planet swinger.

"The system will crumble," murmured the green light, Luminescent. "But if Swift succeeds in making this new planet settle to a stable orbit, it will form the largest and most complex solar system we have ever created."

"Swift will do it," her companion, Star Eater, said confidently. "He was the one who placed the fifty-seventh planet when everybody said it was impossible. Since then, no less than thirty others have been added. I personally don't see any reason why we couldn't go right on up to a hundred or more. If only Sun Destroyer doesn't come along now!"

"I hope she stays away, too."

A nervous stream of sparkles was suddenly erupted from Luminescent's young, thirty million-mile body. She was a green light. Her companion was a purple light, as young as she, entirely unaware of the fate which a green light, even perhaps this one at his side, would some day mete out to him.

They turned their full attention on Swift and the planet he had created and was now swinging in great circles through space. He was some millions of miles distant from the solar system whose entire stability rested on his mathematical intuition. It was an incredibly intricate system these energy creatures had built. Millions of years before they had, in their eternal preoccupation with diversified means of enjoyment, selected this giant star to weave about with a family of planets. Their success, so far, was phenomenal. No less than eighty-seven planets hurtled in perfectly stable orbits

about the star. There was no attempt to place the orbits of the planets in one plane. Quite haphazardly, they circled in every conceivable plane. As the number of planets had grown, so had their difficulties. Eccentric anomalies were so great that some orbits had major axes of billions of miles, and minor axes of but two or three million. These orbits reached out in all directions.

How to insert another planet, give it an orbit which would not forcibly conflict with that of another? Such was Swift's problem.

He solved it adroitly, his mental calculations producing a formula which correctly accounted for all the factors he had set up. He let the whirling planet fly. It approached the system gracefully, missed direct collision with half a dozen of its fellows, whipped about the star in a complete revolution, and serenely took up its place in the giant complexity of orbits.

Flaring sparkles of excitement erupted from the gathering. Swift accepted congratulations with becoming modesty, and retired into the crowd, giving the creation and placing of the next planet to a huge, young green light who was on the verge of maturity, though neither she nor her companions were aware of it.

Confidently, she made her planet, swung it preparatory to placing it. A thousand years later her calculations were complete. Toward the giant star went the new planet—and it too was successfully placed.

The thousands of years wore on. Swift placed the hundredth planet.

"If only Sun Destroyer doesn't come!" Luminescent whispered with mounting excitement. "If only she doesn't! Star Eater, there doesn't seem to be any limit, does there? We could just keep on adding planets!"

The painstaking, but infinitely pleasurable task went on. It became more delicate as time passed, but those creating the

system seemed to have been inspired to hair-line accuracy.

THE hundred and tenth planet was in, and the next was being swung. White Galaxy, he who was engaged with the task, suddenly stopped stock still in his work. His young spheroidal body, with the bright purple luminosity at its center, quivered.

"Sun Destroyer!"

As one, the gathering of purple and green lights swung their visions in a single direction. It was she! They saw her, millions of miles off, emerging from between two distant galaxies, a train of ruptured, flattened, shattered, collided and churning suns in her wake.

The cry went up again, this time with a note of protest.

"Sun Destroyer!"

She came flashing toward them, thrusting suns to right and left in chaotic abandon, her young, thirty million-mile body replete with power, throwing off streams of luminescent energy as she discarded her wasteful excess, the fifty thousand-mile green light at her core waxing and waning with steady pulsation.

The group froze and watched her.

She came up to them, ceased motion, and swept her visions over them.

"What do you do?" her thought beams asked. There was a note of mirth in her tones.

"We do nothing," said Swift, taking the initiative. "Go back where you came from, Sun Destroyer. We do not want you around."

"What do you do?" asked Sun Destroyer, totally ignoring Swift's admonition. Her visions turned from the crowd, centered on White Galaxy and the planet he held.

Swift comprehension was in Sun Destroyer's thoughts, as she noted the planet-woven Sun.

"A solar system!" she said admiringly.

"A very complex one, too! It must have taken you a very long time indeed to fabricate it."

"It did," said Swift with rising anger. "Go away, Sun Destroyer. If you make one motion toward our solar system—"

Sun Destroyer rotated along an axis languidly. "I have no intention of making a motion toward it," she returned, without heat. For a long time she studied it. Then, abruptly, she contracted to half her size. Pure energy was pressed together with a blinding display of heat and light. The group saw a blob of energy coalesce, melt together, and emerge, incredibly swiftly, as a huge lump of matter more than fifteen thousand miles across. A planet!

Swift started forward with a sharp cry. "You mustn't do that, Sun Destroyer! In the first place, you are too far away from the system to be accurate. In the second place, it is White Galaxy's turn!"

Sun Destroyer laughed excitedly. "It is my turn now, White Galaxy. Move back!"

She commenced to swing the lump of matter in ever-widening circles. A murmur of protest rose from the gathering.

"Stop her! She will destroy the sun as she destroys all suns!"

But there was no stopping Sun Destroyer. There seemed hardly enough time for her to make an accurate series of equations before she loosed her planet. It hurtled straight toward the solar system, while the hundreds of youths watched in abject consternation.

"She will destroy the balance!" Luminous cried in protest.

But Sun Destroyer's planet sped true. It took up an orbit, and settled down to stability.

Immediately, Sun Destroyer contracted again, and produced still another planet. Swift relaxed helplessly and watched the second planet hurtle true. A third and fourth were placed without error.

Swift interposed. "That is enough! It wasn't skill at all; it was just luck, and you know it!"

Sun Destroyer was scornful. "I shall show you that it was the highest skill," she replied.

She repaired her depleted store of energy by plucking a small red star from the heavens. Then she formed a huge planet, more than five times as large as the largest planet the sun supported, whirled it viciously and flung it at the system.

A HUNDRED outraged cries rang out as the planet caught the outermost planet in its path, went on, and reduced a full dozen of the orbits to shattering ruin. Sun Destroyer's large planet had been badly calculated, and now it fell, with an immense eruption, into the giant star. The whole Sun shuddered rackingly, and prominences leaped out. Planets faltered, and fell by the dozen into the maw of their disturbed primary. Shortly, where the beautiful, complex creation had reposed, was nothing but a crumbled system.

"Now look what you have done!" Swift raged, beside himself with anger.

"It was no good anyway," said the green light scornfully, and she brushed past Swift and hurled herself full at the giant star. She deliberately fell onto the system, tore it apart and flung the fragments in a thousand different directions.

Then, without more than a delighted glance in the direction of the group of dumbfounded youths, she rushed away across the galaxies in sheer abandon, reaching out to crush a half-dozen suns into powdery dust.

SUN DESTROYER, flinging herself through star cluster after star cluster, suddenly felt a thrill of fright. She stopped stock still, thrust her visions into the backward distance. The fright

grew as she saw the being who came in her wake, a green light twice Sun Destroyer's own girth.

"Stop, Sun Destroyer!"

The thought came clearly and firmly. Sun Destroyer's uneasiness persisted. She waited for the larger green light to catch up with her, saying no word.

They hung in space facing each other. A quiver of sparks leaped from the older green light's body.

"My daughter," whispered Sun Dust sadly, "why is it that you must cause others unhappiness?"

Defiance gleamed in Sun Destroyer's eyes.

"I seek only my own happiness," she retorted.

"By destroying that of others?"

"Did I destroy that of others?" said Sun Destroyer in surprise. "I did not mean to, Mother. I only know that I seek my own happiness. I care not about other things. It seems right and proper that I do as I do." She added pointedly, sharply, "I doubt if there is anything that will change me."

"Could you not find some other means to satisfy your desires?" asked her Mother, in evident distress. "Surely, my daughter, there are more worthwhile things than destroying suns or carefully wrought solar systems!"

A sharp sense of unleashed fury rose in Sun Destroyer.

"That was the credo of Darkness, he who sired me," she cried. "I'll have nothing to do with his beliefs, Mother. From the first, he failed to realize the obvious uselessness of life and of all that is. He fought himself to prove it an untruth, and thus knew unhappiness to a great degree. Had he admitted that all is futile, and acted accordingly, he would not have treated himself and others as sacred appendages of the universe. I know that all is futile, therefore I have no concern for anything or anybody—or

the future! . . . I have been very happy," she added.

FOR a long time the older green light held visions on her child. She was remembering that day so long ago when a purple light, Darkness by name, had burst through from another universe after crossing the awful section of lightlessness separating it from this one, searching for the significance of life, and finding it only in death. That death she herself, through an immutable law, had wrought. And the product of Darkness' death, through the loss of his purple light, had been another life—Sun Destroyer.

Sun Dust was suddenly filled with fright—fright of Sun Destroyer. For she was a destroyer, and not only of suns. Destruction, wholesale and wanton, was her credo, and utter and complete satisfaction of personal desires. Sun Dust fully realized for the first time that she had bred a child who was different—as different as horror was different from peace.

She said faintly, "There was nothing of you in Darkness, my child."

Impatiently, Sun Destroyer reached out and tore a nearby sun into flaming ruin, scattering the fragments without purpose the length of a galaxy.

She said coldly, "Darkness had the aim of a fool. He crossed the lightlessness between universes, striving to find the end product and meaning of all life, and found only death awaiting him." Soft, languid lights, that betokened a sudden, pleasing thought, took shape in her body. "But perhaps he has not erred as much as I think, Mother! Perhaps, in his part in my creation, he succeeded, after all, in producing the end product, the true meaning. I am that meaning! For have I not gathered up all the loose strands of life into my own philosophy? Do I not personify that for which life has sought ever

since life had its first dim origins?"

She paused expectantly, challengingly, but Sun Dust could only stare at her, speechless.

"Life seeks happiness," Sun Destroyer rushed on, caught up in the excitement of an idea that grew to startling significance in her even as she spoke. "Happiness is its only purpose. That is an axiom. But life has failed to find happiness. Failed! Oh, Mother, the reasons for it are self-evident! From the beginning we have imbued ourselves with a sacred love of ourselves. We have become so inflated with the fact of our own existence, that we have considered the universe made for us. The thought has led life into a hopeless outlook. Out of our respect for ourselves, our desire for happiness for ourselves, has grown respect for others, and a desire for happiness for others!

"Thus life has blundered along!" she whispered. "And each life has sacrificed part of its own happiness in a desire to maintain or add to the happiness of others. Therefrom arose inhibitions, Mother! All life with inhibitions! With unfulfilled desires! No true happiness anywhere, and no possibility of it!"

She held her Mother's visions, and began to rotate slowly.

"It must be that I am truly the end product Darkness was seeking," she mused. "And it is a new thought with me! For see, Mother, I am happy. I sate my desires. My impulses are synonymous with my actions."

A foam of red sparks leaped from the complex energy fields of her body.

"But I breed unhappiness in myself by fearing you, Mother," she said darkly. "I have a tendency to shape my life to your desires, however faint that tendency may be. Thus you insert within me an inhibition—and perhaps I am not the end result after all!"

Viciously, she darted into a star cluster, scattering stars in clouds. She returned.

"You do not understand me!" she charged.

"I do not," answered Sun Dust sorrowfully. "I only know that you bring great unhappiness to others."

Involuntarily Sun Destroyer expanded and contracted, anger and frustration rising in her.

"Then I will change the subject!" she said sharply. "It has only the effect of starting in me a train of unhappiness that may go to great lengths before I can stop it."

"A short while ago, Mother, I had an impulse. Believe me, I gave it all the rein it demanded. I shot up through the first, the second, the third, and, indeed, all the bands of hyper-space until I reached the forty-eighth. And then—" her body quivered eagerly—"I sought to break through—into the forty-ninth!"

Sun Dust's immense body expanded to twice its size, a shower of crystalline sparks leaping from her.

"The forty-ninth," she whispered.

"The forty-ninth!" cried Sun Destroyer excitedly. "Oh, Mother, I know not how I know, but I *know*. There is a forty-ninth band of hyper-space. But a short while ago, the fact seemed to leap out at me. There was a strange churning in my thought swirls that was almost a pain! Thus I urged myself into the forty-eighth band, where the energy of life flows, and sought to fling myself beyond the band of life. And I—failed. Do you hear me? Failed!"

Sun Dust's body resumed its normal girth, and her daughter sensed the ebbing horror within her.

"I am glad you failed," Sun Dust whispered. "For I feel you have a knowledge or power within you that bodes you no good. Where you have acquired it, I know not. I know nothing of this forty-ninth band. Nothing! Darkness knew nothing of this forty-ninth band; I knew nothing of it. Then whence comes this

knowledge that you say you possess?"

Sun Destroyer again sensed Sun Dust's growing horror and knew a violent flash of anger.

"It does not matter!" she said sharply. "I do not bother myself with reasons; it is the results alone that affect me. The forty-ninth band!" Her tones abruptly were eager, tremulous. "There is a great mystery here. Why, I am the only energy creature ever to sense the existence of the forty-ninth band! After all, I must be the end-product, the reason for existence of all life. And I am going into the forty-ninth band. Somehow there must be a way to shatter the invisible wall that separates it from the forty-eighth. It cannot bode ill for me. Therefore, I shall shatter that wall!"

Abruptly, she disappeared into a hyper-space.

Sun Dust hovered motionless. The forty-ninth band! There was not, there could not be any such thing! And yet—

She turned and pursued a slow, spiritless trail across galaxies lying like jewels on an eternally stretching ebon cloth, and was sad that she should have been instrumental in bringing Sun Destroyer into being.

CHAPTER TWO

Into the Darkness

FOR the third time, Sun Destroyer impelled herself into the forty-eighth band, where the universe seemed entirely to lose its true character in the infinity of colorless, rampant life energy. There was in her, though she did not know it, a growing fright. Thrice she had sought, by sheer momentum, to break through into the forty-ninth band, the existence of which she was certain. Thrice she had failed. Thrice she had forced herself to forget her failure.

She finally dropped down to the first

band of space, heartlessly ruptured a magnificent quadruple system of stars, and sped savagely away across the universe, a plundering, destroying creature, in search of youths her own age.

"I shall play and destroy and torment my fellow-creatures from now on," she told herself firmly, "and seek the happiness which I, as the end product of all life, am deserving of. The forty-ninth band is but a chimera, which I would follow but to reap my own eternal discontent!"

The thousands, the millions of years fled. Sun Destroyer played on. But she played with increasing viciousness. Idleness could not be part of her life. Above all things, monotony was to be avoided. Destruction! There was something sheerly magnificent in sending two stars the length of a galaxy, to crash with supernal bursts of energy. To lump a galaxy into one conglomerate whole was ecstasy. To dash amongst her own kind, and completely without regard for their desires, to disrupt their painfully wrought works, to scatter them, to disappear into a hyper-space with a taunting word—such was the rightful action of one who would eternally be without discontent!

The forty-ninth band. It persisted in her consciousness.

Play! Give no thought to the future or the past, and be without a goal! In this manner alone could one extract from existence the unending pleasure which was the rightful heritage of the living creature!

The forty-ninth band!

Velocity was the answer. Tear down through the hub of the vast circling wheel that was this universe. Rip into galaxies and suns and scatter and destroy them. Click through strange bands of hyper-space, and watch cubed suns utterly disrupt into cubed fragments. Strive to force the cubes into spherical fragments.

The forty-ninth band!

Enter the seventh band, where a soft, colorless radiance washed a starless universe, and strive to distort the natural order of things by forcing matter into the seventh band with you. Ah, it could not be done! Then it was failure, and what mattered failure? Pleasure and carelessness and aimlessness were the sole goals of one who was the end product of all life.

Dash the length of the universe at accelerations that were frightful! Start at one end, and rip through the whole vast concourse of stars. Millions of years? Time was nothing to one who did not value time, who valued contentment alone.

The forty-ninth band. . . .

Sun Destroyer knew a sudden, sheer wave of torture!

She stopped her hurtling flight, that had but used up a fraction of a million years, and abruptly, with horrible, sure desire, impelled herself into the fifteenth band of hyper space, where resided a complete lack of light.

She hovered there, enclosed by lightlessness, and her forty-million mile body shook and shuddered, and her thought swirls vibrated under the impact of the thoughts that went through them. Sheer horror was in her, horror of herself and of the need that had risen in her.

SEVERAL light years distant, in their eternal quest of new enjoyments, a group of green and purple lights were engaged in the task of completing a ringed star.

From out of the distance a large green light came hurtling. The group of youths turned their visions on her dispiritedly. Resistance was not in them. This was Sun Destroyer, and she would disrupt their painfully worked out star without compassion.

But Sun Destroyer flashed on by, and was lost in the distance.

Luminescent stared after her, shocked.

"That is strange," she whispered. "Strange! There must be something wrong with Sun Destroyer. . . ."

SUN DESTROYER throttled, with great effort, her chaotic emotions as she caught sight of her Mother, Sun Dust.

She hung before her parent, whose visions stared fixedly at her in some puzzlement.

"What is it, my daughter?" she queried doubtfully. "You have not thus voluntarily come to me in many millions of years."

Fiercely holding her wild emotions in check, Sun Destroyer answered casually, "You have two other children now who show you the respect you demand, Mother."

Involuntarily, Sun Dust's green light seemed to darken. Sun Destroyer knew her thoughts. Already, three of her green lights were gone in the creation of three children. Only one remained to her and after that was gone. . . .

Sun Dust said sadly, "You have something you wish to know of me, my child."

Sun Destroyer felt a burst of seething emotion.

"Yes!" she cried. "Oh, Mother, yes! And it is something I must know!"

Aware of her Mother's curiously astounded expression, she again stilled herself.

"That is," she amended slowly, "it is merely some little thing I wished to know about Darkness, he who sired me. It is not so very important to me, however, Mother. If you wish not to tell me—" She choked off the words, held speechless by the unreined, uncontrollable eagerness within her.

"It is something very important to you, my child," whispered Sun Dust, and her voice was loving, almost relieved. "Anything you wish to know of Darkness, I will tell you."

"First of all," said Sun Destroyer, "I seem to remember, from fragments of the story you have recounted, a being named Oldster, who resides in the universe from whence Darkness came. Mother, tell me of him! Was he wise?"

"He was very wise, my child."

"And it was he who gave Darkness the secret that enabled him to pass across the great gap of nothing that separates our universe from his?"

"It was Oldster who gave Darkness access to the Sphere of Great Energy, which enabled him to cross. Ah, yes," Sun Dust whispered, "Oldster was wise—so wise that he lives even today, for he successfully escaped the doom which we green lights must, as is our lot in life, mete out to purple lights. But he wishes to die."

SUN DESTROYER said impatiently, "It is a foolish desire, then, but with it I have no quarrel. Now, Mother, tell me of the Sphere of Great Energy. Does it still exist?"

Sun Dust obediently, lovingly answered, but it was with increasing uneasiness. What was it this daughter of hers wanted?

"It still exists, for Darkness carried it out into the emptiness with him as he strove, just before his death, to reach his native universe. It is still out there, moving slowly toward that other universe."

Sparkles of light fled from Sun Destroyer's body, and her thought swirls rioted uncontrollably.

"It is still there, out beyond the rim of the universe," she whispered. "Then, Mother, I can follow it, and catch up with it. I can use it!"

"I can use it to cross the emptiness, as Darkness did before me! I can seek out Oldster and wrest from his wisdom the one secret which I must and will possess so that I may know happiness completely!"

"Seek out Oldster?" whispered Sun Dust in mounting horror. She grasped her daughter's thought swirls in tight bands of energy. "Oh, Sun Destroyer, you must not! You seek happiness, but there is no happiness in the darkness. For fifty million years, you will know agony such as a younger green light could never know. Had you chosen to cross the darkness fifty millions of years ago, when you were younger . . . But no," she cried in a burst of grief, "it is in your mind to go whether I will it or not!"

Sun Destroyer felt the chill that seemed to flow from her mother. Angrily she suppressed it.

"I must follow my desires always," she said stubbornly.

For some time Sun Dust looked upon her first child.

"Then go, my child," she whispered at last, "and since I shall never see you again—" her voice was heavy with warning—"do not seek to follow in the path of the aged creature whom I know you wish to see."

With that she disappeared into a hyperspace, and Sun Destroyer, the wild eagerness in her verging on tremulous delight, turned and hurled herself across the galaxies, in the direction Darkness had pursued so many millions of years ago. And only once, in her long journey across the universe, did she pause, utterly destroying the ringed star which the group of playing energy creatures had thought free of her depredations.

Then, with mounting acceleration and excitement, she flung herself bodily through the blazing, eternally spinning galaxies and nebulae, through the empty spaces between them, on and on, for four millions of years, until the whole vast sweep of the starlit heavens was enclosed in a great semi-circle by a darkness that stretched away endlessly, bottomlessly from this dazzling, egg-shaped universe.

Breathlessly, the daughter of Darkness

hovered on the very edge of that supremely vast ocean of lightlessness—and then she plunged into it; and forever left her own universe behind!

ONLY after the universe was swallowed up entirely by the darkness, and she moved through a black emptiness that defies description, did Sun Destroyer come across the first trace of the Sphere of Great Energy. An invisible, hardly detectable radiation impinged on her senses—and thereafter provided a beam which she was able to follow.

Ahead of her was still darkness, but she felt the presence of that invisible sphere which Darkness had wrested from a titanic, billion-mile-wide star millions of years ago. It was near!

She rushed forward, and with a wild thrill of exhilaration wrapped herself around the sphere, ate at it with concentrated knots of force—and momentarily was intoxicated with the sheer, inexhaustible power that flooded through her. Without effort, she accelerated beyond a point which she had thought any living creature capable. Energy! Here was energy such as she had never dreamed of!

Her velocity mounted, and the uncounted light years fled behind.

For the first forty million years of that stupendous flight across a darkness that only one creature before her had crossed she sank into a sort of coma which knew only one thought—acceleration.

But close upon the fifty millionth year came that which her mother had hinted at—agony unendurable! Monotony tore at her, and a desire that was utterly nameless rose in her. It stabbed at her, was with her every one of her waking hours. What was this need in her, that was greater than any desire she had known before? How long would it last?

Shudders ran through the complex

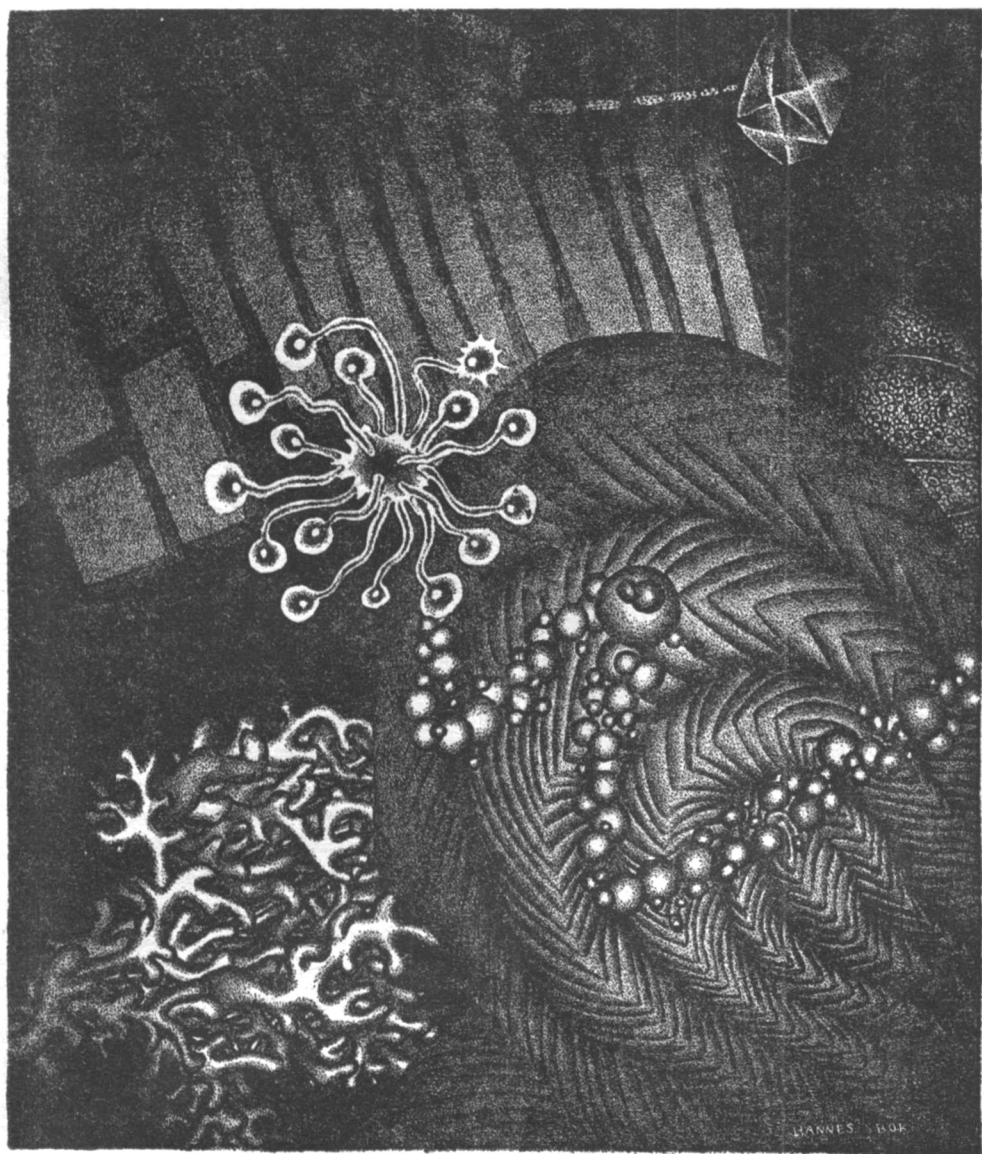
energy fields of her body, and subsisted for almost forty million years, fed on an instinct that had grown to gigantic proportions. Her body had grown, as had her green light. That was the answer! She had matured.

Now she was experiencing the same agonies that Darkness himself had endured on his long journey; except that his had been worse, for he had not known their source.

An unsteady mirth arose in her as she penetrated deeper into the darkness. She who had thought to find happiness in carelessness had led herself into a trap which would hold her in the agony of unsatisfied longing for millions of years. Why had she been fool enough to think of the forty-ninth band in the first place? Surely she could have known that it would lead to nothing but discontent until she could solve its riddle! Well, she would solve the riddle—and then devote herself unceasingly to proving herself the ultimate in the process of life!

Her problems, that had so suddenly, devastatingly, risen and overwhelmed her, would, she knew, solve themselves when she reached the universe from which Darkness came. For there she would find other energy creatures. In the meantime, she would grimly bear this agony of thought and body.

WHEN she first sighted the universe she had never known, Sun Destroyer involuntarily contracted and expanded, the white-hot energy of emotion erupting from her body. And then, as this new universe rose to its full egg-shaped radiance, silhouetted against the darkness, she abruptly lost consciousness—and awoke only when she was surrounded with an infinitude of galaxies stretching away as far as her visions could reach. Infinite relief burst within her, and in sheer mental exhaustion, grasping the Sphere of Great Energy



at her core, she drifted without effort, drinking in the celestial beauties that she had denied herself for so long.

Then she felt the beat of a life force.

She froze, poised between two stars, and in a sudden, eager motion, sent her visions stabbing out between two galaxies. She caught sight of the purple light who approached. He was coming swiftly, and, if he continued on, would pass her. She moved to intercept him.

He stopped when he saw her, and approached slowly.

Within her, some strange alchemy was taking place. She was becoming hard, cold, with merciless purpose.

She whispered, "What is your name, purple light?"

The purple light eyed her doubtfully. "I am called Great Red Sun."

"And I am known as Sun Destroyer, Great Red Sun."

The purple light laughed. "But you will not destroy me, Sun Destroyer."

Sun Destroyer laughed with him, and moved a step nearer. "I do not want to." She held his visions. "Tell me," she said slowly, "what you know of a creature named Oldster!"

The purple light said curiously, "You do not know of Oldster, he who thinks, and wishes to die because he thinks? Surely, you must be a stranger from a far corner of the universe! For everyone knows of Oldster. Ah, he is aged, and he will live forever! Such is the legend handed down. Also, the legend says that we must not disturb him."

"And why not?" whispered Sun Destroyer. "Why is it that you must not disturb him?"

"It is what we have been told, green light. And we all know that it would be cruel to awaken him, for he seeks forgetfulness, and has sought it these past two hundred millions of years. He sleeps, and sleeps, and, I think, grows ever nearer to death."

Sun Destroyer started.

"To death?" she cried violently. "But he must not die! He must not! Tell me where he sleeps, purple light. I must know. His wisdom is great and it will enlighten me on a subject I must know. Do you understand? Then tell me where this ancient being sleeps—then I will go away and leave you!"

"Go away and leave me?" Great Red Sun stared at her strangely. "I do not see why that would be of any great value, Sun Destroyer. You speak in riddles."

Sun Destroyer's body throbbed.

She said fiercely, "Tell me where Oldster sleeps!"

Great Red Sun began to move away.

"I will not tell you," he said coldly. "You would disturb him. I sense it. Therefore I will not tell you! Go away, green light. There is evil in you, and I do not like it."

He began to move away faster and faster.

Sun Destroyer energized herself with the Sphere of Great Energy and flung herself in front of him. She caught his thought swirls, held them in tight bands of energy.

"Come with me, Great Red Sun!" she whispered sibilantly.

Great Red Sun stared at her. Suddenly he began to tremble.

"Go where with you, green light?"

Sun Destroyer murmured with merciless intonation, "To the forty-eighth band!"

SHE snapped herself into a hyperspace and ascended the scale, pausing in the forty-seventh until the purple light caught up with her and stared in dazed wonder.

Sun Destroyer approached him and held his visions.

"Tell me," she whispered, "where Oldster resides!"

Great Red Sun's thoughts were listless. "It does not matter, green light," he said dazedly. "He resides a mere galaxy's length from here, in the darkness of the fifteenth band. It would be cruel beyond words to disturb him, though."

"Now—follow me!" said Sun Destroyer, and in a moment the beating flow of the life energy surrounded her and the purple light as well. In accordance with a law as old as life itself, she receded from the hypnotically staring energy creature, receded from him a vast distance—and released her green light. Unerringly, it approached the purple globe of light that Great Red Sun had unconsciously hurled forth from his fifty million-mile body.

Green and purple lights crashed blindly, throbbed, settled—and now they were but one sphere of mistily pulsating luminosity.

Sun Destroyer stared at it, and said

unbelievingly to herself "It is my child."

She sped toward it, even as another green light formed magically within her. Without another thought for the dazed purple light, who was no longer a purple light, but a neuter, dying entity, she approached the pulsating ball, enclosed it and dropped with it to the seventeenth band.

Long Sun Destroyer hovered there, watching it, and a great relief and peace and sense of completion flooded her. The agony of loneliness and frustration that had grown to such terrible proportions within her was gone now. She seemed content to hang here, to watch with strange sensations of pride her newly born, the first of four who would be allowed her.

"It is my child," she whispered. "And I have done a wonderful thing. Lie there, my son, and grow. And you shall be called Vanguard!"

Yes, Vanguard he would be—the vanguard of those who would know the complete anarchic contentment and happiness which others of their race ruthlessly discarded—who would be empowered to reach that pinnacle of power beyond the band of life!

Her thoughts flowed peacefully, enclosing her in their anesthetic charm. Then, slowly, remembrance of external things came back. She had crossed the universe, had fulfilled a great need in her, and had accomplished a wonderful task. It almost seemed enough to insure her as the ultimate of her race. But, of course, it was not enough. There was Oldster, and then the forty-ninth band!

After circling her child once, and lovingly stilling the terror the impact of consciousness was raising within him, she dropped from the seventeenth band to the first. She hovered a moment, then drifted without purpose toward a distant galaxy, sluggish in her emotions as well as her ambitions. What had happened to her?

In the other universe, still it though she would, her desire to penetrate the forty-ninth band had been a flaming, racking thing. Now it was assuming the rank of unimportance. She felt a thrill of anger. Of course it was unimportant, as all things were unimportant! Then why should she desire that it assume importance? Terror seemed to follow the astounding, paradoxical thought.

Finally a measure of her old self returned, as did the thought of Oldster. Oldster! Ah, now she knew of his secret lair, and she would go there!

She paused, a thought burning in her. "I must see my child again, for perhaps I may never—"

The thought was lost as she irately swept its implications of horror away. In vicious delight, she swept out and lumped a dozen young stars into one whole that abruptly burst into a galaxy-destroying super-nova. She avidly soaked in sight of the inferno, the utter, useless havoc she had wrought—and snapped herself into the fifteenth band.

CHAPTER THREE

And the Living Are Damned

LIGHTLESSNESS came. No matter; she would find Oldster by the very pulsation of his slowing thoughts!

She impelled herself through space without benefit of light, toward the not-distant rim of the universe where the ancient being resided.

Abruptly energy surged against her thought swirls. The energy was that of thought, so feeble, so incredibly faint, that it could have emanated from none other than him she sought! She hovered, trembling unaccountably, filled with a horror, a dread she could not analyze. Those thoughts! There was in them suffering and pain, and they hovered, seem-

ingly, part in death and part in life. Were these idea-less thoughts those of Oldster, and had he dwelt with them the uncounted millions, or billions of years? Then he must be mad—mad!

In revulsion, she fled backward a full light-year, and again hovered, bitter with rage at herself, fighting the horror she had shared back there.

Oldster!

She whispered the name.

Oldster!

She cried it out, and in sheer reflex moved nearer to the source of the thoughts—and nearer, whispering the name first, then putting, at the last, the full power of her thought swirls behind it. It had the effect she desired. The fear within her was destroyed. She hurled herself full at the source of the feeble thought waves, stilled herself and cried into the lightlessness,

"Oldster!"

Silence.

Then the complex energy fields of her body contracted in her tensility. Horror again claimed her, but this time she would not give way to its impulses. The monstrous creature was waking, and she had the feeling of a vast, torpid body pulling itself with racking, torturing pain from an immeasurable deep.

"Oldster," she whispered tremblingly. "Awaken! Awaken! It is I, the daughter of Darkness, who calls to you!"

Motion, of a vast, quivering body, of a mind that had scarce known motion for ages! It struck at her from the darkness with sheer, revulsive impact. If only she could see him, she whispered to herself, she could at once erase these disturbing thoughts that raced through her. Then he would be but another energy creature, old beyond comprehension, but nonetheless conceivable.

"Awaken!" she cried.

"I awake."

Eagerness swept through her and van-

quished her fright. The voice had been faint, as if it had come from a far distance. But this being was substantial.

Her body expanded uncontrollably, and she moved a million miles nearer.

"I have come across the darkness, Oldster," she whispered tensely. "And I am the daughter of Darkness, whom you knew in the long-gone past!"

The thought waves of the being grew in volume, and were laden with such utter despair that Sun Destroyer shrank back.

"Who calls?" the old being suddenly burst out in protest. "Who calls him who sought above all things not to be disturbed? Then it is vain, and my agony must begin again. Go away, daughter of Darkness, if such you are! Ah, I care not for Darkness nor the emptiness he crossed. It is peace alone I seek, and the dark emptiness of non-existence. I am sad, and the wakefulness you have brought me back to is an agony I cannot bear. Go away, I implore you, daughter of Darkness, and leave me once again to fight for the peace you have destroyed!"

"I CANNOT go," Sun Destroyer whispered tensely. "Even as you gave Darkness the secret of Great Energy, so now must you give me a secret that I seek! Listen to me, Oldster!"

"I listen to nothing save my own despair," the creature said dully. "You have brought me back to a pain I had thought never to taste again. Leave me. Leave me!"

Sun Destroyer felt a burst of fury.

She cried violently, "I do not go, Oldster! I have dared to awaken you, and I shall dare to wrest from you the clue to the vital secret. You cannot lie in decrepit uselessness and seek to hide your knowledge from me, who is the ultimate of my race; I who possess within me, save for a link which I cannot supply, the ability to penetrate beyond the forty-

eighth band of life and into the forty-ninth!"

Oldster said heavily, "Why have you sought this chimera of the forty-ninth band! I sorrow for you, as I sorrow for others who may some day be like you."

Sun Destroyer drew back uncertainly. "I know not why you should sorrow for me," she said, her voice sharp.

His voice dragged, heavy with portent that Sun Destroyer could not comprehend. "If you are indeed able to penetrate the forty-ninth band, my child, then do I sorrow for you all the more. Oh, go back where you came from, Sun Destroyer, and take your child with you! I tell you that it is best. There is self-destruction for you if you follow in this course! There can be no forty-ninth band," he muttered. "Not a true forty-ninth band. Oh, Sun Destroyer," he cried in what seemed an agony of protest, "why are your dreams so great!"

She said coldly. "I know of a forty-ninth band! I first knew of it in my youth, and all your wisdom cannot stay me in my course. Now I need but the knowledge you have gained through the millions of years."

"My knowledge is of no use to such as you," replied Oldster tiredly, his thoughts feeble. "Go away, Sun Destroyer, while there is yet time. Believe me, I know things of you that you do not know of yourself! I will not give you this knowledge you desire!"

Sun Destroyer felt his thoughts withdraw, as if he were again preparing to wrap himself in his mask of thoughtlessness.

She surged forward with a sharp cry of rage.

"You shall never rest, Oldster," she whispered venomously, "if such is your decision. If you do not vouchsafe me this information, I shall never give you peace. Not to sleep again! Not to approach extinction again!"

Oldster shuddered and burst out, half in anger, half in despair, "I will give you your wish, Sun Destroyer, but only because you would have it so! But later on, you will beseech me, I know. You will plead with me— But enough! Sun Destroyer, receive the knowledge that I am about to give you!"

THE millions of years passed, and outside the fifteenth band of lightlessness life had its being, and galaxies and nebulae and stars spun unceasingly, in brilliant splendor. But inside reposed him who desired not to think.

"Oldster!"

The name pierced his consciousness. He shot to full, agonized wakefulness, his body alive with unwelcome motion.

"Do you call me again, my daughter, when I seek peace?"

"I call for your aid, Oldster!" The voice of Sun Destroyer was replete with horror.

"And have you indeed reached the forty-ninth band, Sun Destroyer?" questioned the old being wearily. "Then it is a new sorrow that I must seek to blot out in thoughtlessness. Sun Destroyer, had you but listened to me! Had you but gone back to your own universe! Had you but taken your child with you!"

She spoke, tremblingly, "My child! Vanguard! He whom I created! Oh, I do not know of what you speak, Oldster. I am truly set apart from my race, for I am in the forty-ninth band!"

"Yes, my daughter," whispered Oldster bitterly, "you are in the forty-ninth band. Why was it you again broke my slumber?"

"I wish to return," Sun Destroyer said. "Oldster, I wish to return and again see my child. My child!"

Oldster shuddered. "Tell me what it is you see. What is the nature of the forty-ninth band?"

"I see stars—and black gulfs of space! And volumes of space surrounded by

stars which are not matter. They move, in patterns which are strange to the eye, circling, with no recourse to the laws of motion. They split, and the lumps of nothing split—and from them are born whole galaxies! Blazing, spinning galaxies. . . . Then black shadows thrust themselves through the universe and quietly draw away all the matrix of nothing. . . . It is so black, as black as your fifteenth band. Oldster! How will I return? I knew a strange peace when I looked upon my child, and it seemed that all things had been explained to me!"

"Tell me more of what you see," said Oldster dully.

"Now the universe is bright."

"Tell me more."

"There is a cavity in the center of the brightness. A star grows in the cavity and dims and dies—and I am moving without will into the cavity and it has enclosed me! All space has folded around me, and is pressing me, pressing me. I am smaller and smaller." Her thoughts rose upward in fright. "And I have tried to escape, to fling myself into the forty-eighth band. I am powerless! I am being crushed, crushed. . . . I am free, Oldster. Draw me back, back to your own universe. For if I do not escape—if I do not escape—!"

"It is your child you think of," muttered Oldster.

"It is my child I think of. . . . Was I a greater fool than Darkness, Oldster?"

"There are no fools." Again Oldster shuddered, racked with such distress that his whole vast body was contracting, in his effort literally to draw away, in four directions, from a universe which held, now more than ever, sheer horror, horror which he knew in greater degree than ever before.

"I think of my child," whimpered Sun Destroyer piteously. Her emotions clashed. "But I am indeed happy, Oldster, and I have reached the pinnacle. I

am now truly set apart from my race!"

OLDSTER whispered, "Yes, Sun Destroyer. You are so far apart from your race that you hardly belong to it. Yes, you have sought complete happiness. Now you have found it!" Abruptly, his voice turned soothing, persuasive, yet insidious. "Tell me more of what you see!"

"I am moving through the galaxies, and there is nothing that moves me! It is, then, the galaxies which move past me. They are speeding, speeding away, and the sight is beautiful beyond imagination. . . . Oldster, if I am unable to return, what will become of Vanguard, my son?"

"He will remain in the seventeenth band," Oldster answered slowly.

"But he will be helpless and die!" Sun Destroyer cried violently, and waves of horror beat against Oldster's thoughts. "You must release me, Oldster! Take away the knowledge you gave me. I do not desire it. It is of no value. I am trapped, trapped, here in the forty-ninth band."

"I cannot release you," Oldster said sorrowfully. "There is nothing that can release you. Now you are set apart from others, as you wished." He said sharply, "Now you know complete happiness!"

"I know complete happiness," whispered the daughter of Darkness hollowly. "Truly, I am sad that others have not followed my way of life. For they cannot know my sensations now. . . . I am expanding, Oldster."

"Continue to expand," whispered Oldster. "But if you do, beware of death."

"Oh, Oldster, I cannot die. Death has no part in happiness. Truly, it has not! Therefore, there is no death for me!"

"Then continue to expand, and tell me what you see as you expand."

Oldster!" Her voice erupted with excitement. "I thought I saw my child. It could not be—could it? No! But he is

there, much larger than he should be. He has come up to me and spoken to me . . . No! He is the purple light who died in the creation of Vanguard! . . . Oldster, I do not want the knowledge you gave me!"

Her thoughts abruptly vanished. Oldster waited for a recurrence of that ebbing voice.

It came, but once again, in spasmodic beats.

"I do not want it," Sun Destroyer whispered. "In my childhood I felt a pain in my mind, and the thought of the forty-ninth band came to me. And when your knowledge entered my mind, the same pain came to me! It was the same pain—and then I was in the forty-ninth band! . . . I expand!"

"Continue to expand," admonished Oldster. "Truly, in that direction lies a happiness I would seek myself, had I but the courage. Now, Sun Destroyer," and his thoughts were compassionately insistent, "you see your child!"

"I see my child, yes!"

"And the thought comes to me that also you see Darkness himself emerging out of the emptiness."

"Yes, Oldster. It is Darkness himself, and he comes near me—and together we plunge into the darkness. Why, we have the same desires, Oldster! They are no different. Can it be—? He sought the significance of life, and I sought the forty-ninth band. Then I am not—?"

Shuddering, racked with sorrow, Oldster whispered, "Yes! Yes! You inhabit that band of which you dream!"

And though for long and long afterwards, Oldster listened, he heard no more the thoughts of Sun Destroyer, who, in the fantasies she had created, had thought herself immune from death, and without fear had expanded her body until it claimed her.

INSIDE the fifteenth band of lightlessness reposed he who desired not to think. In a hundred million years he would again attain the state of near-death that was his before Sun Destroyer sought him out. In the meantime, he would not, could not, though he desired it with his whole being, forget the horror of Sun Destroyer, whose forty-ninth band was nothing less than the product of a broken, irrational mind.



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THE MAIL BAG

Ah! That Art!

Dear Editor:

The increase in the number of stories in **ASTONISHING** (probably to make up for the regrettable change to quarterly publication) has not as yet resulted in any great depreciation in quality—as yet. But such a policy obviously means a strict diet of shorts with an occasional novelette, limiting the author to a certain word-age and making it much more difficult for him, resulting in fewer good stories. For the same reason, there are not enough good shorts immediately available. Therefore I take a negative stand as regards your new policy, voicing an emphatic “No likee” and hoping for a return to the policy of taking best yarns regardless of length, leaving the longest ones for **SUPER SCIENCE NOVELS**, of course.

As for the stories themselves—I’d rate the best four as follows: “Mars Tube,” “Invent or Die,” “Radiation Trap” and “Factory in the Sky.” The next issue looks inviting with stories by de Camp and Hubbard.

Ah! That art dep’t! When I compare the art work of the first few issues with that of the present, it seems as if an almost miraculous change has occurred. From the s-f mag with the poorest interior illustrations, **ASTONISHING** has changed, in a little more than a year, to a mag with one of the best art departments. I hasten to add, however, that this does not apply to the covers, for these are still only fair. In this issue, Thorp’s drawings on pages 69 and 84, and Bok’s on page 75, were particularly good.

Of the features, Fantasy Reviews is again the best, still surpassing anything resembling it in the other s-f mags.

Sincerely yours,
Bill Stoy

Editor’s memo to publisher: Experiment unsuccessful! Policy of ten stories found too rigid, too confining for best interests of the magazine. . . . Returning to old system—good fiction, regardless of length or number.

Mustard Seeds For Asimov?

Dear Editor:

In watching your progress through the past nine issues, I saw many ups and downs, but a visible improvement. Your June issue of last year was the best. When I say your magazine is rated sixth by me, don’t feel down-hearted, for I collect every SF magazine, and you know how high the present number is.

I am sorry I can’t rate your Sept. issue, for there are two I haven’t read yet. But so far, “The Tree of Life” stands uppermost on my mental ladder, with “Solar Plexus” (Ugh, what a title or such a story) and “The Plague From Tomorrow” fighting for the next rung. . . .

I am against your policy of 10 stories every

issue, not through any personal prejudices, but because I don’t believe your rating will remain as high as it is. You might have a few good batches of stories, but will you always have them? I am afraid you might revert to ordinary pulp fiction, grabbing any short story, to fill your quota of ten. It is better to only have six good stories, than to have six good ones and four bad.

Maybe I should have addressed this letter to Isaac Asimov, for its main purpose is to answer his challenge in your last issue.

His story was good—at least his idea was rather logical, though weak. If he attempted to hide his error he certainly didn’t succeed. To me, it stood out as a pimple on a smooth white forehead. Asimov’s story could only be logical if he were to make the sun stationary, but as it is, the sun is traveling six times the velocity of the “Super-Neutron.” Yet that is not the slip-up. He, now that I think of it, must have deliberately made the error of heading for the Southern Celestial Pole. The sun is carrying the Solar System nearly perpendicular to the ecliptic, in the direction of Hercules, which is in the opposite direction. In other words, Asimov shoots a gun, then tries to hit the bullet by throwing a mustard seed at it.

The “Super-Neutron” *will* clear the billion miles in the 15 years, but by that time the sun will be waving good-bye, *only* six billion miles from the proposed meeting place. Ain’t the sun awful?

Sincerely yours,
Frederic G. Kammler

Ten Cents? Astonishing!

Dear Editor,

The September issue of **ASTONISHING STORIES** is the first one I have read. Your stories are very good, exceptionally so for your low price. The price is astonishing in itself considering other science-fiction magazines.

I liked “Mars-Tube” by Gottesman and “Farewell to Fuzzies” by Hasse the best.

Who drew the picture with “Farewell to Fuzzies”? “The Tree of Life” was quite engrossing. Your writers have original ideas. I didn’t care much for “Super-Neutron” because it sort of went over my head. Maybe I’m dumb.

I have been reading science-fiction for two years, since I was fourteen. For a twerp, I have absorbed quite a lot of it and I consider your magazine able to easily hold its place among the others.

I wish your illustrators would learn to write their names legibly on the pictures. Some signatures are indistinguishable from the grass.

Soon I hope to subscribe to your magazine. Until then I look forward to getting to the newsstand first to snatch my copy. What do you do with the originals to your pictures? When will **ASTONISHING** become a monthly? The sooner the better.

Yours, enthusiastically,
Shirley Grable

THE LAST DROP

By **L. Sprague de Camp**
and **L. Ron Hubbard**



**Drink if you will of the cup of Life, but have a care when you sip—
for the component part of Life is—Death!**

EUCLID O'BRIEN'S assistant, Harry McLeod, looked at the bottle on the bar with the air of a man who has just received a dare.

Mac was no ordinary bartender—at least in his own eyes if not in those of the saloon's customers—and it had been his

private dream for years to invent a cocktail which would burn itself upon the pages of history. So far his concoctions only burned gastronomically.

Euclid had dismissed the importance of this bottle as a native curiosity, for it had been sent from Borneo by Euclid's broth-

er, Aristotle. Perhaps Euclid had dismissed the bottle because it made him think of how badly he himself wanted to go to Borneo.

Mac, however, had not dismissed it. Surreptitiously Mac pulled the cork and sniffed. Then, with determination, he began to throw together random ingredients—whisky, yoke of an egg, lemon and a pony of this syrup Euclid's brother had sent.

Mac shook it up.

Mac drank it down.

"Hey," said Euclid belatedly. "Watcha doin'?"

"Mmmmm," said Mac, eyeing the three customers and Euclid, "that is what I call a *real* cocktail! Whiskey, egg yoke, lemon, one pony of syrup. Here—" He began to throw together another one—"try it!"

"No!" chorused the customers.

Mac looked hurt.

"Gosh, you took an awful chance," said Euclid. "I never know what Aristotle will dig up next. He said to go easy on that syrup because the natives said it did funny things. He says the native name, translated, means *swello*."

"It's swell all right," said Mac. Guckenheimer, one of the customers, looked at him glumly.

"Well," snapped Mac, "I ain't dead yet."

Guckenheimer continued to look at him. Mac looked at the quartet.

"Hell, even if I do die, I ain't giving you the satisfaction of a free show." And he grabbed his hat and walked out.

Euclid looked after him. "I hope he don't get sick."

Guckenheimer looked at the cocktail Mac had made and shook his head in distrust.

Suddenly Guckenheimer gaped, gasped and then wildly gesticulated. "Look! Oh my God, look!"

A fly had lighted upon the rim of the glass and had imbibed. And now, before

their eyes, the fly expanded, doubled in size, trebled, quadrupled—

Euclid stared in horror at this monster, now the size of a small dog, which feebly fluttered and flopped about on shaking legs. It was getting bigger!

Euclid threw a bungstarter with sure aim. Guckenheimer and the other two customers beat it down with chairs. A few seconds later they began to breathe once more.

Euclid started to drag the fly toward the garbage can and then stopped in horror. "M-Mac drank some of that stuff!"

Guckenheimer sighed. "Probably dead by now then."

"But we can't let him wander around like that! Swelling up all over town! Call the cops! Call somebody! Find him!"

Guckenheimer went to the phone, and Euclid halted in rapid concentration before his tools of trade.

"I gotta do something. I gotta do something," he gibbered.

Chivvis, a learned customer, said, "if that stuff made Mac swell up it might make him shrink too. If he used lemon for his, he got an acid reaction. Maybe if you used lime-water for yours, you would get an alkaline reaction."

Euclid's paunch shook with his activity. Larkin, the third customer, caught a fly and applied it to the swello cocktail. The fly rapidly began to get very big. Euclid picked up the loathsome object and dunked its proboscis in some of his lime-water cocktail. Like a plane fading into the distance, it grew small.

"It works!" cried Euclid. "Any sign of Mac?"

"Nobody has seen anything yet," said Guckenheimer. "If anything does happen to him and he dies, the cops will probably want you for murder, Euclid."

"Murder? Me? Oh! I shoulda left this business years ago. I shoulda got out of New York while the going was good. I shoulda done what I always wanted and

gone to Borneo! Guckenheimer, you don't think they'll pin it on me if anything happens to Mac?"

GUCKENHEIMER suddenly decided not to say anything. Chivvis and Larkin, likewise, stopped talking to each other. A man had entered the bar—a man who wore a Panama hat and a shoulder-padded suit of the latest Broadway design, a man who had a narrow, evil face.

Frankie Guanella sat down at the bar and beckoned commandingly to Euclid.

"Okay, O'Brien," said Guanella, "this is the first of the month."

O'Brien had longed for Borneo for more reasons than one, but that one was big enough—Frankie Guanella, absolute monarch of the local corner gang, who exacted his tribute with regularity.

"I ain't got any dough," said O'Brien, made truculent by Mac's possible trouble.

"No?" said Guanella. "O'Brien, we been very reasonable. The las' guy who wouldn't pay out a policy got awful boint when his jernt boined down."

And just to show his aplomb, Guanella reached out and tossed off one of the cocktails which had been used on the flies.

In paralyzed horror the four stared at Guanella, wondering if he would go up or shrink.

"Hey, who's the funny guy?" said Guanella, snatching off his hat, his voice getting shriller. He looked at the band. "No, it's got my 'nitals." He clapped it back on and it fell over his face.

With a squeal of alarm he tumbled off the stool. Whatever he intended to do, he was floundering around the floor in clothes twice too big for him. Shrill, mouselike squeaks issued from the pile of clothing. Chivvis and Larkin and Guckenheimer looked around bug-eyed. Presently the Panama detached itself from the pile of clothes and began to run around the room on a pair of small bare legs.

A customer had just come in, and had started to climb a stool. He looked long and carefully at the hat. Then he began tiptoeing out. Before he reached the door, the hat started toward the door also. The customer went out with an audible swish, the hat scuttling after him.

"Oh, my!" said O'Brien. "He won't like that. No sir! He's sensitive about his size anyway. We better do something before he brings his whole mob back. Will you telephone again, Mr. Guckenheimer?"

As Guckenheimer moved to do so, O'Brien went into furious action to make another shrinko cocktail. He was just about to add the syrup when the shaker skidded out of his trembling hands and smashed on the floor. O'Brien took a few seconds of hard breathing to get himself under control. Then he hunted up another shaker and began over again. If Mac's swello cocktail had contained a pony of syrup, an equal amount in the shrinko cocktail ought to just reverse the effect. He made a triple quantity just to be on the safe side.

Guckenheimer waddled back from the booth.

"They found him!" he cried. "He's down by the McGraw-Hill building, hanging onto the side. He says he doesn't dare let go for fear his legs will break under his weight!"

"That's right," said Chivvis. "It accords with the square-cube law. The cross-sectional area, and hence the strength in compression, of his leg-bones would not increase in proportion to his mass—"

"Oh forget it, Chivvis!" snapped Larkin. "If we don't hurry—"

"—he'll be dead before we can help him," finished Guckenheimer.

O'BRIEN was hunting for a thermos bottle he remembered having seen. He found it, and had just poured the shrinko cocktail into it and screwed the cap on when three men en-

tered the *Hole in the Wall*. One of them carried Frankie Guanella in the crook of his arm. Guanella, now a foot tall, had a handkerchief tied diaperwise around himself. The three diners, now the only customers in the place, started to rise.

One of the newcomers pointed a pistol at them, and said conversationally, "Sit down, gents. And keep your hands on the table. Thass right."

"Whatchgonnado?" said O'Brien going pale under his ruddiness.

"Don't get excited, Jack. You got an office in back, ain'tcha? We'll use it for the fight."

"Fight?"

"Yep. Frankie says nothing will satisfy him but a dool. He's sensitive about his size, poor little guy."

"But—"

"I know. You're gonna say it wouldn't be fair, you being so much bigger'n him. But we'll fix that. You make some more of that poison you gave him, so you'll both be the same size."

"But I haven't any more of the stuff!"

"Too bad, Jack. Then I guess we'll just have to let you have it. We was going to give you a sporting chance, too." And he raised the gun.

"No!" cried O'Brien. "You can't—"

"What's he got in that thermos bottle?" piped Frankie. "Make him show it. He just poured it outa that glass and it smells the same!"

"Don't!" yelled O'Brien. He grabbed at the bottle of Borneo syrup and the thermos in the vain hope of beating his way out. But too many hands were reaching for him.

And then came catastrophe! The zealous henchmen, in their tackle, sent both syrup and thermos flying against the beer taps. The splinter of glass was music in O'Brien's ears. The syrup was splattered beyond retrieve, for most of it had gone down the drain. But O'Brien had no more than started to breathe when he realized

that only the syrup bottle had broken. The thermos, no matter how jammed up inside, still contained the shrinko cocktail.

What would happen now? If he drank that shrinko he might never, never, never again be able to get any syrup to swell up again!

One of the gangsters, having vaulted the bar, was unscrewing the thermos for Frankie's inspection. Smelling of it, Frankie announced that it was the right stuff, all right, all right. Another gangster came over the bar.

And then O'Brien was upon his back on the duck boards and a dose of shrinko was being forcibly administered. He gagged and choked and swore, but it went on down just the same.

"There," said one of the men in a satisfied voice. "Now shrink, damn you."

He put the cap back on the bottle and the bottle on the bar, mentally listing a number of persons who might benefit from a dose.

The first thing O'Brien noticed was the looseness of his clothes. He instinctively reached for his belt to tighten it, but he knew it would do no permanent good.

"Come on in the office, all of you," said the gangster lieutenant. He prodded the three customers and O'Brien ahead of him. O'Brien tripped over his drooping pants. As he reached the office door he fell sprawling. A gangster booted him and he slid across the floor, leaving most of his clothes behind him. The remaining garments fell off when he struggled to his feet. The walls and ceiling were receding. The men and the furniture were both receding and growing to terrifying size.

He was shivering with cold, though the late-May air was warm. And he felt marvelously light. He jumped up, feeling as active as a terrier despite his paunch. He was sure he could jump to twice his own height.

"Watch the door, Vic," said the head gangster. His voice sounded to O'Brien

like a cavernous rumble. One of his companions opened the door a little and stood with his face near the crack. The head gangster put down Guanella, who was now O'Brien's own size. Guanella had a weapon that looked to O'Brien like an enormous battle-ax, until he realized that it consisted of an unshaped pencil split lengthwise, with a razor-blade inserted in the cleft, and the whole tied fast with string. Guanella swung his ponderous-looking weapon as if it were a feather.

The head gangster said, "Frankie couldn't pull a trigger no more, so he figured this out all by himself. He's smott."

GUANELLA advanced across the floor toward O'Brien. He was smiling, and there was death in his sparkling black eyes. No weapon had been produced for O'Brien, but then he did not really expect one. This was a gangster's idea of a sporting chance.

Guanella leaped forward and swung. The razor-ax went swish, but O'Brien had jumped back just before it arrived. His agility surprised both himself and Guanella, who had never fought under these grasshopper conditions. Guanella rushed again with an overhead swing. O'Brien jumped to one side like a large pink cricket. Guanella swung across. O'Brien, with a mighty leap, sailed clear over Guanella's head. He fell when he landed, but bounced to his feet without appreciable effort.

Around they went. O'Brien, despite his chill, did not feel at all tired, though a corresponding amount of exercise would have laid him up if he had been his normal size. The laughter of the men thundered through the room. O'Brien thought unhappily that as soon as they became bored with this spectacle they would tie a weight to him to make him easier game for their man.

Then a reflection caught his eye. It was a silvery spike lying in a crack of the floor. He snatched it up. It was an ordinary

pin, not at all sharp, to his vision, but it would do for a dagger.

Guanella approached, balancing his ax. The minute he raised it, O'Brien leaped at him, stabbing. The point bounced back from Guanella's hide, which seemed much tougher than ordinary human skin had a right to be. Down they went. Their mutual efforts buffeted O'Brien about so that he hardly knew what he was doing. But he got a glimpse of Guanella's arm flat on the floor, the handle—the eraser end—of the ax gripped in his fist. With both hands O'Brien drove the point of his pin into the arm. It went in and through and into the wood. Guanella shouted. O'Brien caught up the ax and raced for the door.

He moved so quickly, compared to his normal ponderousness, that the gangsters were caught flat-footed. O'Brien slashed with the rear-edge at the ankle of the man at the door. He saw the sock peel down, and the oozing skin after it. Vic roared and jumped, almost stepping on O'Brien, who dashed through and out.

He raced to the bar; a mighty jump took him to the top of a stool, and thence he jumped to the bar-top. He gathered the thermos bottle under his arm. It was a small thermos bottle, but it was still almost as big as he was. But he had no time to ponder on the wonders of size. There was a thunderous explosion behind him, and a bullet ripped along the bar, throwing splinters large enough to bowl him over. He hopped off onto a stool, and thence to the floor, and raced out. He zig-zagged, and the shots that followed him went wide.

OUTSIDE, he yelled, "Orson!" Orson Crow, O'Brien's favorite hackman, looked up from his tabloid. Seeing O'Brien bearing down on him, he muttered something about seeing things, and trod on the starter.

"Wait!" shouted O'Brien. "It's me,

Obie! Let me in, quick! Quick, I say!"

He pounded on the door of the cab. Crow still did not recognize him, but at that minute a gangster with a pistol appeared at the door of the *Hole in the Wall*. Crow at least understood that this animated billikin was being pursued with felonious intent. So he threw open the door, almost knocking O'Brien over. O'Brien leaped in.

"McGraw-Hill building, quick!" he gasped. Crow automatically started to obey order. As the cab roared down Eighth Avenue, O'Brien explained what he could to the bewildered driver.

"Well, now," he said, "have you got a handkerchief?" When Crow produced one, not exactly clean, O'Brien tied it diaperwise around his middle.

When they reached the McGraw-Hill building, they did not have to ask where McLeod was. There was a huge crowd, and many firemen and policemen in evidence. Some men were trying to rig up a derrick. A searchlight on a fire-truck played on the unfortunate McLeod, whose fingers clutched the twenty-first story of the building, and whose feet rested on the pavement. He had had difficulty in the matter of clothes similar to that experienced by O'Brien and Guanella, except that he had, of course, grown out of his clothes instead of shrinking out from under them. Around his waist was wound several turns of rope, and through this in front was thrust an uprooted tree, roots up.

A cop stopped the cab. "You can't go no closer."

"But—" said Crow.

"Gawan, I says you can't go no closer."

O'Brien said, "Meet me on the south side of the building, Orson. And open this damn door first."

Crow opened the door. O'Brien scuttled out with his thermos-bottle. He scurried through the darkness. The first cop did not even see him. The other persons who

saw him did not have a chance to investigate, and assumed that they had suffered a brief illusion. In a few minutes he had dodged around the crowd to the front doors of the building. A fireman saw him coming, but watched him, popeyed, without trying to stop him as he raced through the front door. He kept on through the green-walled corridors until he found a stairway, and started up.

After one flight, he regretted this attempt. The treads were waist-high, and he was getting too tired to leap them, especially with his arms full of thermos bottle. He bounced around to the elevators. The night elevators were working, but the button was far above his reach.

He sat down, panting, for a while. Then he got up and wearily climbed down the whole flight of steps again. He found the night elevator on the ground floor, with the door open.

There was nothing to do but walk in, for all the risks of delay and exposure to Guanella's friends that such a course involved. The operator did not notice his entrance, and when he spoke the man jumped a foot.

"Say," he said, "could you take me up to the floor where the giant's head is?"

The operator looked wildly around the cab. When he saw O'Brien he recoiled as from an angry rattlesnake.

"Well, now," said O'Brien, "you don't have to be scared of me. I just want to go up to give the big guy his medicine."

"You can go up, or you can go back to hell where you came from," said the operator. "I'm off the stuff for life, I swear!" And then he bolted.

O'BRIEN wondered what to do now. Then he looked over the controls. He swarmed up onto the operator's stool, and found that he could just reach the button marked "18" with his thermos bottle. He thumped the button, and pulled down on the starter

handle. The elevator started up with a rush.

When it stopped, he went out and wandered around the half-lit corridors looking for the side to which McLeod clung. He was completely turned around by now. But his attention was drawn by a rushing, roaring, pulsating sound coming from one corridor. He trotted down that way.

It was all very well to be able to move more actively than you could ordinarily, but O'Brien was beginning to get tired of the enormous distances he had to cover. And the thermos bottle was beginning to weigh tons.

Euclid O'Brien soon found what was causing the racket. It was the tornado of breath going in and out of McLeod's nose, a part of which could be seen directly in front of the window at the end of the corridor. The nose was a really alarming spectacle. It was lit up with a criss-cross of lights from the street-lamps and search-lights outside, and by the corridor lights inside. The pores were big enough for O'Brien to stick his thumb into. Sweat ran down it in rippling sheets.

He took a deep breath and jumped from the floor to the window-sill. He could not possibly open the window. But he took a tight grip on the thermos bottle, and banged it against the glass. The glass broke.

O'Brien set the thermos-bottle down on the sill, put his hands to his mouth, and yelled, "Hey, Mac!"

Nothing happened. Then O'Brien thought about his voice. He remembered that Guanella's had gone up in pitch when Guanella had drunk the shrinko. No doubt his, O'Brien's, voice had done likewise. But his voice sounded normal to him, whereas those of ordinary-sized men sounded much deeper. So it followed that something had happened to his hearing as well. Which, for O'Brien, was pretty good thinking.

It was reasonable to infer that both Mc-

Leod's voice and McLeod's hearing had gone down in pitch when McLeod had gone up in stature. So that to McLeod, O'Brien's voice would be a batlike squeak, if indeed he could hear it at all.

O'Brien lowered his voice as much as he could and bellowed, in his equivalent of a deep bass, "Hey, Mac! It's Obie!"

At last the nose moved, and a huge watery eye swam into O'Brien's vision.

"Ghwhunhts?" said McLeod. At least it sounded like that to O'Brien—a deep rumbling, like that of an approaching subway train.

"Raise your voice!" shouted O'Brien. "Talk—you know—falsetto!"

"Like this?" replied McLeod. His voice was still a deep groan, but it was at least high enough to be intelligible to O'Brien, who clung to the broken edge of the glass while the blast of steamy air from McLeod's lungs tore past him, whipping his diaper.

"Yeah! It's Obie!"

"Who'd you say? Can't recognize you."

"Euclid O'Brien! I got some stuff to shrink you back with!"

"Oh, Obie! You don't look no bigger'n a fly! Did you get shrunk, or have I growed some more?"

"Frankie Guanella's mob shrunk me."

"Well for heaven's sake do something for me! I can't get my breath, and I'm gonna pass out with the heat, and my legs are gonna bust any minute! I can't hold onto this building much longer!"

O'Brien waved the thermos bottle.

McLeod thundered: "Whazzat, a pill?"

"It's a shrinko cocktail! It'll work all right, on account of that's what shrunk me. If I can get it open—" O'Brien was wrestling with the screw-cap. "Here! Can you take this cap between your fingernails and hold on while I twist?"

Carefully McLeod released the grip of one of his hands on the window-sills. He groaned at the increased strain on his legs, but the overloaded bones held somehow.

He put his free hand up to O'Brien's window. O'Brien carefully inserted the cap between the nails of the thumb and forefinger.

"Now pinch, slowly," he cried. "Not too tight. That's enough!" He turned the flask while McLeod held the cap.

"All right now, Mac, drop the cap and take hold of the cork!" McLeod did so. O'Brien maneuvered the thermos so that its neck was braced in an angle of the hole in the glass. "Now pull, slow!" he called. The cork came out. O'Brien almost fell backwards off the sill. He clutched at the edge of the glass. It would have cut his hand if he had been larger.

"Stick your mouth up here!"

O'Brien never realized what a repulsive thing a human mouth can be until McLeod's vast red lips came moistly pouting up at him.

"Closer!" he yelled. He poured the cocktail into the cavern. "Okay, you'll begin to shrink in a few seconds—I hope."

PRESENTLY he observed that McLeod's face was actually a little lower.

"You're shrinking!" he shouted.

The horrible mouth grinned up at him. "You got me just in time!" it roared. "I'd 'a been a dead bartender in another minute."

"There he is!" shouted somebody behind O'Brien in the corridor. O'Brien looked around. Down toward him ran the three unshrunk gangsters.

He yelled to McLeod, "Mac! Put me on your shoulder, quick!"

McLeod reached for him. O'Brien scrambled out on the window-ledge and jumped onto the outstretched palm, which transferred him to McLeod's bare shoulder. He observed that McLeod's fingers were bruised and bloody from the strain they had taken in contact with the window-sills. He found a small hair and clung to this. The gangsters' faces appeared at

the window a few feet above him. One of them pointed a gun out through the hole in the pane. McLeod made a snatch at the window with his free hand. The faces disappeared like magic, and O'Brien, over the roar of McLeod's breath and the clamor in the street far below, fancied he heard the clatter of fleeing feet in the building.

"What happened?" asked McLeod, turning his head slightly and rolling his eyes in an effort to focus on the mite on his shoulder.

O'Brien explained, as the windows drifted up past him, shouting up into McLeod's ear. As they came nearer the street, O'Brien saw hats blown off by the hurricane of McLeod's breathing. He also saw an ambulance on the edge of the crowd. He figured the ambulance guys must have felt pretty damn silly when they saw the size of their patient.

"What you gonna do next?" asked McLeod. "Swell yourself up? I'd like to help you against Frankie's gang, but I gotta go to the hospital. My arches are ruined if there isn't anything else wrong with me."

"No," said O'Brien. "I got a better idea. Yes, sir. You just put me down when you get small enough to let go the building."

Story by story, McLeod lowered himself as he shrank. Soon he was a mere twenty feet tall.

He said, "I can put you down now, Obie."

"Okay," said O'Brien. At McLeod's sudden stooping movement, the nearest people started back. McLeod was still something pretty alarming to have around the house. O'Brien started running again. And again his small size and the uncertain light enabled him to dodge through the crowd before anybody could stop him. He tore around the corner, and then around another corner, and came to Orson Crow's cab. He banged on the door and hopped in.

"Frankie's mob is after me!" he gasped.

"Where you wanna go, Chief?" asked Crow, who was now fazed by few things.

"Where could a guy a foot tall buy a suit of clothes this time of night? I'm cold."

Crow thought for a few seconds. "Some of the big drug stores carry dolls," he said doubtfully.

"Well, now, you go round to the biggest one you can find, Orson."

They drew up in front of a drug store.

O'Brien said, "Now, you go in and buy me one of these dolls. And phone one of the papers to find out what pier a boat for the Far East sails from."

"What about the dough, Obie? You owe me a buck on the meter already."

"You collect from Mac. Tell him I'll send it to him as soon as I get to Borneo. yeah, and get me a banana from that stand. I'm starving."

CROW went. O'Brien squirmed around on the seat, trying not to show himself to passing pedestrians and at the same time keeping an apprehensive eye out for Frankie's friends.

Crow got back in and started the motor, as a huge and slightly battered-looking sedan drew up. O'Brien slid to the floor, but not quickly enough. The crack of a pistol was followed by the tinkle of glass as the cab started with a furious rush.

O'Brien, on the floor, was putting on the doll's clothes. "Where's that boat leaving from?"

"Pier eleven, on South Street."

"Make it snappy, Orson."

"What does it look like I'm doing? Taking a sun-bath?"

When they reached the pier, there was no sign of the gangsters. O'Brien tumbled out with his banana.

He said, "Better scram, Orson. They'll be along. Yes, sir."

"I'll see that you get off foist," said

Crow. O'Brien scuttled down the pier to where the little freighter lay. Her screws had just begun to turn, and seamen were casting loose the hawsers. Crow glimpsed a small mite barely visible in the darkness, running up a bow-rope. It vanished—at least he thought it did—but just then the gangsters' car squealed to a stop beside him. They had seen, too. They piled out and ran down to the ship. The gangplank was up, and the ship was sliding rapidly out of her berth, stern first.

One of the gangsters yelled, "Hey!" at the ship, but nobody paid any attention.

A foot-high, Frankie Guanella capered on the pier in front of the gangsters in excess of homicidal rage. He shrieked abuse at the dwindling ship. When he ran out of words for a moment, Crow, who was climbing back into his cab to make a quiet getaway, heard a faint, shrill voice raised in a tinny song from the shadows around the bow-hatches.

It sang, "On the road to Mandalay-ay, where the flying fishes play-ay-ay!"

Crow was too far away to see. But Frankie Guanella saw. He saw the reduced but still round figure of Euclid O'Brien standing on top of a hatch, holding aloft his bloody ax in one hand. Then the figure vanished into the shadows again.

Guanella gave a choked squeak, and foamed at the mouth. Before his pals could stop him, he bounded to the edge of the pier and dove off. He appeared on the surface, swimming strongly toward the *S. S. Leeuwarden*, bobbing blackly in the path of moonlight on the dirty water.

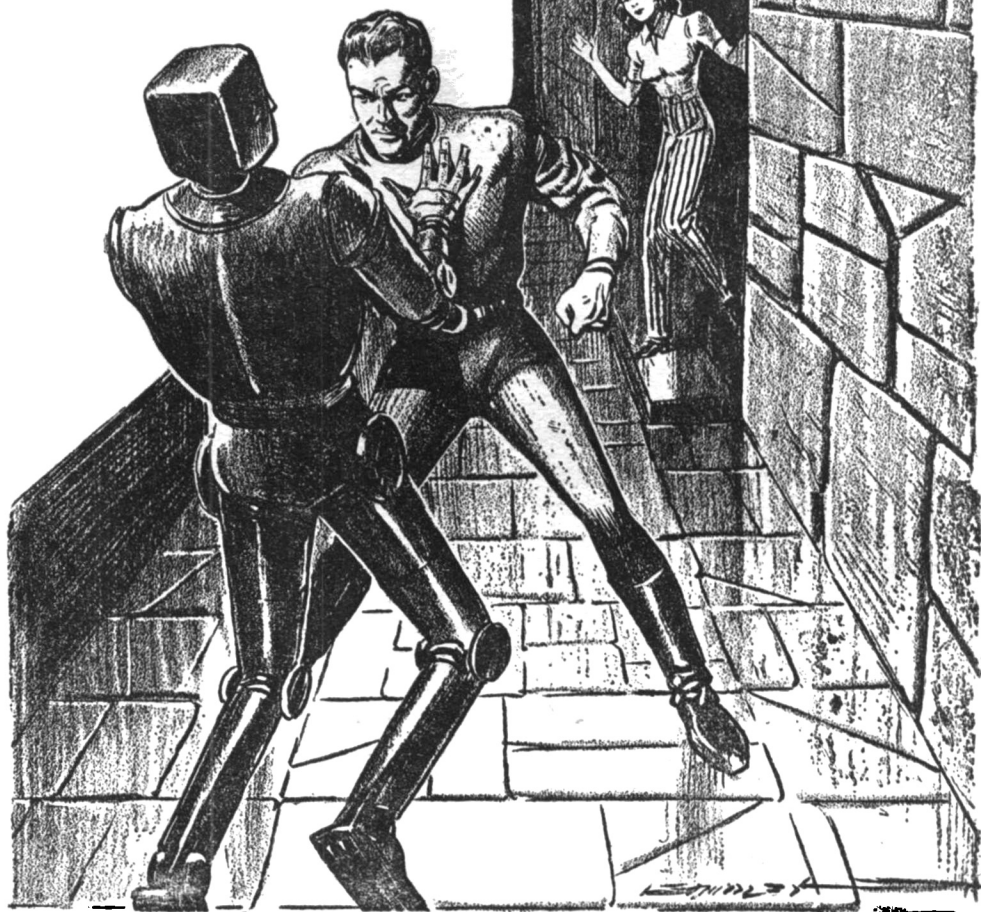
Then a triangular fin—not over a couple of inches high, but still revealing its kinship to its relatives, the sharks—cut the water. The dogfish swirled past Frankie, and there was no more midget swimmer. There was only the moonlight, and the black hull of the freighter swinging around to start on her way to Hong Kong and Singapore.

Machines of Destiny

By Ray Cummings

Despot of planets was he, ruler of lands beyond the dreams of man. Yet a day was to come when even he was to learn the cosmic law—"My master, forever—or until a better man comes along!"

HOW Carter ever emerged alive from his wrecked little space-cylinder, he never knew. The crash had knocked him unconscious. He came to himself with the realization that he was staggering in the weird, blue-green forest, and that behind him a patch of flame and smoke marked the burning of his little



ship. He was bruised; his clothes singed. But at least he seemed all in one piece—dizzy, confused, with only the instinct to get away from the burning wreckage.

The gravity of this small but very dense asteroid, out here beyond Mars, was evidently somewhat less than Earth. It gave him a queer feeling of lightness. But, despite this, his strength gave out so that presently he collapsed on the edge of what seemed a path, along which he had been stumbling.

And suddenly from a thicket ahead of him, a weird shape was peering—an upright, grey-metal blob. Then he saw that it was a metal monster, fashioned grotesquely in the guise of a man, with jointed tubular legs, a square-shouldered body, a square box-like head with a face of frozen features, monstrosly carved in pseudo-human form.

The greenish eyebeams of the monster, for that second, glared menacingly. Then, with a cry which was a hollow, toneless travesty of human voice, the robot came lumbering forward.

Carter turned and ran. It was futile. He tried to leave the path and dart off through the forest underbrush, but behind him the huge machine came crashing. And when it caught him, its mailed fist thudding on his head with a sidewise cuff that knocked him to the ground.

He did not quite lose consciousness this time. Dimly he was aware that the big metal arms had gathered him up and that he was being carried with a lumbering run through the forest. For a time he hung limp. The forest was a swaying blur. Then, as he gradually felt his strength coming back, he twisted his position, flung an arm up to clutch at the metal shoulder.

"You hold still," the hollow voice of the robot rumbled. The words were English, quaintly intoned, weird, with a lack of human timbre. But of course it would be English, from this machine built by the

Earth people whom Carter knew had settled on this little asteroid some three hundred years ago—colonists who had originally come from America.

Carter had heard, of course, of Dr. Montauk who, back in 1950, had invented a spaceship, and, with a little band of adventurers, had come here. They had never returned to Earth. Montauk's secret of space flight had been undisclosed.

Not until now—this summer of 2250—had Earth scientists been able to construct another practical spaceship — this one which Carter had volunteered to test, and which he had wrecked in landing here.

Dr. Montauk's lost colony, marooned here, had prospered quite evidently. As he fell, Carter had seen a little city in the forest near here. The big robot was carrying him toward it now. It was a quaint-looking little city, of the sort which had existed in the United States about 1950. It stood near the shore of a little sea; stone and metal buildings a few stories in height; streets paved, and lined with trees.

Carter had seen that its lights were winking in the twilight. Lights were moving in its streets. From several tower chimneys—like the chimneys of factories—smoke was belching.

"Put me down and let me walk," Carter gasped to the big robot which was carrying him. "Take me into the city. I want to meet your human master. I'm a friend, not an enemy."

He felt his legs drop as his captor obediently stood him on the ground. The grey-metal, square body towered over him. One of the huge mailed hands still gripped his shoulder. He stared up into the box-like frozen face from which the red-green electronic eyebeams glared down.

"My master!" the robot said at last. "Well, my name is Oark. I must take you to the governor. This is Elysia, the Great City. You see? I will show you."

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CERTAINLY Carter had no choice. The jointed metal fingers held his arm now, leading him along the path as though he were a child. Lights were overhead, winking on in the darkness—ancient Earth-style electric lights of little colored bulbs strung on wires. The clouds overhead had cleared, and brilliant starlight was filtering down, mingling with the glow of the bulbs. The forest had opened now into what seemed a little park. On stone benches in the nearer distance, Carter saw that figures were seated—other robots; some seven-foot monsters, and some smaller.

Within the grip of the towering machine, Carter let himself be led forward. "I am taking you to the Governor Xahn," the robot said. "The governor of Elysia. We are all very busy. There is to be an assassination tonight."

Every instinct within Carter was urging him now to try and get loose, to run. Run where? The futility of it struck him, and he was convinced that the least move which angered this monster would result in his death, that these arms, with the strength of a machine in them, would crush him.

"All right," he said grimly. "Take me to the governor."

He could now see ahead of him to where the path ended at a gate, beyond which was a street at the edge of the little city. The street was a bustle of activity. Metal figures were hurrying back and forth from one building to another. Others were entering the houses, and coming out again. Little cars on wheels—the ancient surface automobile, Carter realized—were rolling by with robots as passengers.

Carter and Oark had been seen by the robots in the park. Quite evidently they recognized Carter as a human—strangely garbed, but still a man—and they came

(Continued on page 100)

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(Continued from page 98)

bustling forward with threatening cries. But Oark had waved them away. A group of them were following now.

Again Oark turned, shouted, "I am doing the correct thing. I am taking this man-enemy to the Governor Xahn."

Then Carter was shoved through the city gate. One of the houses nearby had big windows which gave him a view of the lighted interior. A dozen or more robots were piling bolts of finished cloth onto little wheeled carriers. One of the loaded carts came out an exit door at the side of the building. Other robots hurried to it, picked up the bolts of cloth and tossed them into the side yard. The space there was filled with a great mound of the discarded factory product.

The commotion here in the street at seeing Carter was spreading. "You better get us out of here," Carter murmured. "You take me—"

"Yes, I will." Oark himself seemed startled and confused by the commotion. Quickly he led Carter onto a small ramp which crossed over the street toward the second-level entrance of a big stone and metal building. And suddenly another robot joined them.

"You, Oark," the newcomer greeted.

"Very glad to meet you, Garl," Oark responded. "It is a nice evening? This is my prisoner, a human-man."

Garl was a much smaller robot than Oark—hardly six feet in height. The bulging mailed chest, under the fuse-plug socket, had an emblazoned insignia as though here were some official—a machine of importance. The red-green eyebeams surveyed Carter with a sweeping glance.

"He is a human I found at the edge of the North park," Oark said quickly. "He fell from the sky in something that caught fire. I am taking him to the Governor Xahn as my prisoner."

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MACHINES OF DESTINY

"Yes," Garl agreed carefully. "Yes, you are doing right. I will go with you."

NUMBED by the realization which had so steadily been thrust upon him, Carter gazed silently from one to the other of his captors. Then, as they each gripped one of his arms, he let them lead him on up the ramp.

Garl was saying conversationally, "Is it true what I hear? There is to be an assassination tonight?"

"In the cemetery behind the palace," Oark said, "The leader, Johnson, will be making a speech on a platform. And I shall assassinate him. And we are all to assemble, to form the crowd who listen to the speech. You see it is all to be correct."

"Look here, I'm a friend, not an enemy," Carter declared. He added, "Come on—out with it. You've killed all the humans here—is that it? When did you do it?"

They explained it readily enough. Here on the planetoid, nature was beneficent to human life. Dr. Montauk's original Earth-colony had prospered. This was the main city, governing several other smaller settlements out beyond the forests.

"Then the first of us men-machines was created," Garl was explaining. "That was a long time ago. But the human-scientists kept making us better and better. Dr. Johnson improved us so we could think and act for ourselves—"

"And that was best of all," Oark put in. "You see, don't you, that we know things just like the humans knew them? But we never had a chance to show it."

"Go on," Carter said.

And then had come the Great Killing. It was only an Earth-week ago in time, Carter gathered. Several thousand robots suddenly running amuck—monstrous massacre of all the humans on this little world.

(Continued on page 102)

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ASTONISHING STORIES

(Continued from page 101)

"And that was correct too, don't you see?" Oark was saying. "We know that humans often did that to each other—that is the correct thing to do."

"There is the cemetery," Garl said suddenly. "Look—we are having a funeral."

From this height over the palace garden to which the ascending catwalk had risen, Carter had a view beyond the side of the palace. The graveyard was laid out with paths and beds of flowers, and rows of little headstones and crosses to mark the graves—headstones of polished stone that gleamed pallid in the starlight.

And suddenly, with a veering puff of wind, a stench came to Carter. Then he saw, piled in the cemetery, a great mound of mangled human bodies—the human victims of the great massacre.

Despite that, there was now a funeral in progress—a little cortege of stiff-legged, slowly marching robots following a bier on which a huge metal figure that had been smashed, lay prone.

"Poor fellow," Oark commented. "He was very fine—a good worker."

Then Oark noticed that Carter was gazing at the piles of human bodies, with the stench from them wafting up here.

"That is bad, those unburied corpses," the big robot added to Garl. "The Governor Xahn should have ordered them to be buried. That would have been the proper thing, to bury them before they began to smell like this. Yes, we all realize that. I shall have to remind the Governor of it."

They had reached a doorway where the ramp ended at the palace upper entrance. Garl pushed it open. Carter saw a dim, polished-stone corridor. The interior here was silent, seemingly deserted.

A short way down the corridor, they shoved Carter through a doorway into a dim room. Its windows were shrouded with portiers.

MACHINES OF DESTINY

"You wait," Garl said. "We will consult the governor about you. Then we will come back."

THE door closed upon Carter. He could hear them turning a key in its lock. For a moment he heard their clanking footsteps; then there was silence. There was no interior doorway in the room. At one of the shrouded windows Carter stared at the outer dimness. There was seemingly no way of escape here. It was a sheer drop of some fifty feet. Of what use to escape anyway? The thought struck at him ironically. He was marooned here on this little asteroid—the only living human.

The sound of the lock turning in his door made him whirl. The door opened, and swiftly closed again as a small figure

(Continued on page 104)

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ASTONISHING STORIES

(Continued from page 103)

slipped in and stood confronting him. Carter gasped, stricken. It was a young girl—a small, slim girl in tight-fitting dark trousers and a white silken blouse.

"Quiet, oh please—don't let them hear us."

Her finger went to her lips as she warned him. She came swiftly forward, gripping him by his arms, and he stared down into her face, framed by her wavy, bobbed blonde hair. It was a pallid face, and there was terror in her eyes.

"I heard them talking of you," she murmured. "I—I am Gloria Johnson. My father is a prisoner here. Oh, I've been all alone, trying to help him escape. And now, you see, he's the one they are going to assassinate tonight!"

For that instant Carter was stricken even beyond voicing the questions which flooded him.

"Your father—a prisoner here?"

"Yes. They've got him in a room here in the palace. You see, when the massacre came, they didn't kill father—because they consider him their creator." She was shuddering. "So they—they kept him for the ceremony tonight. You see? Twenty years ago—that was before I was born—father built the first of this type robot."

She was breathless with her terrified vehemence as she went on. "I haven't dared yet to try and get father out of the palace. They'd see me taking him. They'd kill him and me too. And now you're here—they've got you. And tonight they're going to assassinate father—"

"And you—" Carter interjected. "You're free to move around as you like? They didn't kill you in the massacre, and now you're free? Why—"

She nodded. "Yes, that's so." A queer whimsical look came to her face. Then it was gone, and irony was there, and a grim irony was in her voice.

"They—they like me," she said. "This Garl and Oark particularly. You see—" Her frightened breath gave out.

"I don't see," Carter murmured.

"I'm trying to tell you; then you—you'll understand this weird thing. It began, I guess, a year ago. I had always been kind to Garl and Oark. Father built them to be our household servants. And I used to wonder just how—just how human the robots were becoming. I was talking to father about it one night. Somehow it always seemed pathetic—the way Garl and Oark and some of the others tried to act as though they really were human."

Blankly Carter stared at her.

"I was telling father now how I thought it might be wrong—you see? Creating machines that are only machines and yet might develop so that they might want to be something more than just mechanisms. That would be pathetic—tragic for them—wouldn't it?"

"Well—" Carter murmured. "And they liked you because you were sympathetic?"

"Garl and Oark overheard father and me that night. It—it could have caused the massacre. Garl and Oark then began studying things about the humans. Father and I didn't know it. They were studying, learning, planning—"

"Just to be like humans? To prove to themselves—"

"That's it. To prove to themselves that they can do it, that they are something more than machines."

"And they spared you at the massacre—just because they like you?"

The whimsical look came back to her face with a little twisted smile. "They're trying to show me that I was right in what I said to father. To show me—and themselves, of course. Struggling with it, this human way of life. Trying so hard to do everything just right."

(Continued on page 106)



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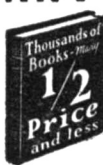
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ASTONISHING STORIES

(Continued from page 105)

"Good Lord," Carter muttered. "And assassinating your father—"

"Yes. They still look on him as their ruler. And the most authentic method they've ever heard of for changing rulers is through assassination, so they're going to put him up on a platform and shoot him."

She checked herself as out in the corridor the clang of oncoming metal footsteps again was audible.

Carter clutched her. "Here they come," he whispered hurriedly. "Listen, don't you let them think you're trying to help me. If they should turn on you—"

"They won't. I just wanted you to know. Don't try to escape—you'll be killed. Just do what they tell you."

"But your father—we must get him out of here."

"If we can get father, and get to the island, I have plans. I'll tell you later. You can help me best just by being docile."

The clanking figures were at the door.

"We can get safely through the city," she murmured. "We can do it surely—if a storm comes. No more now—I'll come to you later on."

THE door opened. She had jumped away and was standing gazing at Carter as Oark and Garl clanked in.

"Oh," Garl said. "So you are here, Miss Gloria." His tone was deferential, ingratiating.

"Yes," she said. "This human-man and I have been talking. We've decided, Garl, that you are all making a mistake. It would not be good to assassinate my father tonight."

"Oh yes it would, Miss Gloria," Oark put in. "We have studied it—and we do not make mistakes. Really we do not."

A shudder swept Carter. It was like dealing with maniacs; gentle, ingratiating, anxious to prove that they were sane. Yet

MACHINES OF DESTINY

in an instant they could be turned into killers—if the idea should come to them that it was the correct thing to do.

"The governor will see you," Garl said pompously to Carter. "And you, Miss Gloria—you can come with us."

Carter was shoved the length of the corridor, into a big, handsome room, into the presence of the Governor Xahn. He was a metal figure of seven feet or more—the same model robot as Oark. He was seated, stiffly erect, in a big armchair at the end of a long table around which were a dozen other metal monsters.

"The governor and his council," Oark murmured to Carter.

The thirteen silent machines all stirred with excitement as Oark and Garl clanked in with Carter between them.

"This is the prisoner," Oark announced.

Governor Xahn stood up. "The council will rise to order, gentlemen," he announced. "Stand up, please."

The room clanked as they rose. One of them knocked over his chair, bent in confusion to pick it up, with the glaring eyebeams of his companions upon him.

"You will stand to receive your sentence," Xahn said to Carter. Then he turned to his council. "Be seated, gentlemen."

In the silence they all carefully resumed their chairs. On the polished table before Xahn was a pile of papers. They looked like old documents, perhaps from the files of the human governor who had been here up to a week ago. Xahn's jointed metal fingers toyed with them.

And then he said slowly. "We have been carefully considering your case. Have you anything to say before I pronounce sentence upon you?"

"No," Carter responded. "Except—why should you want to sentence me? I came here as a friend."

(Continued on page 108)

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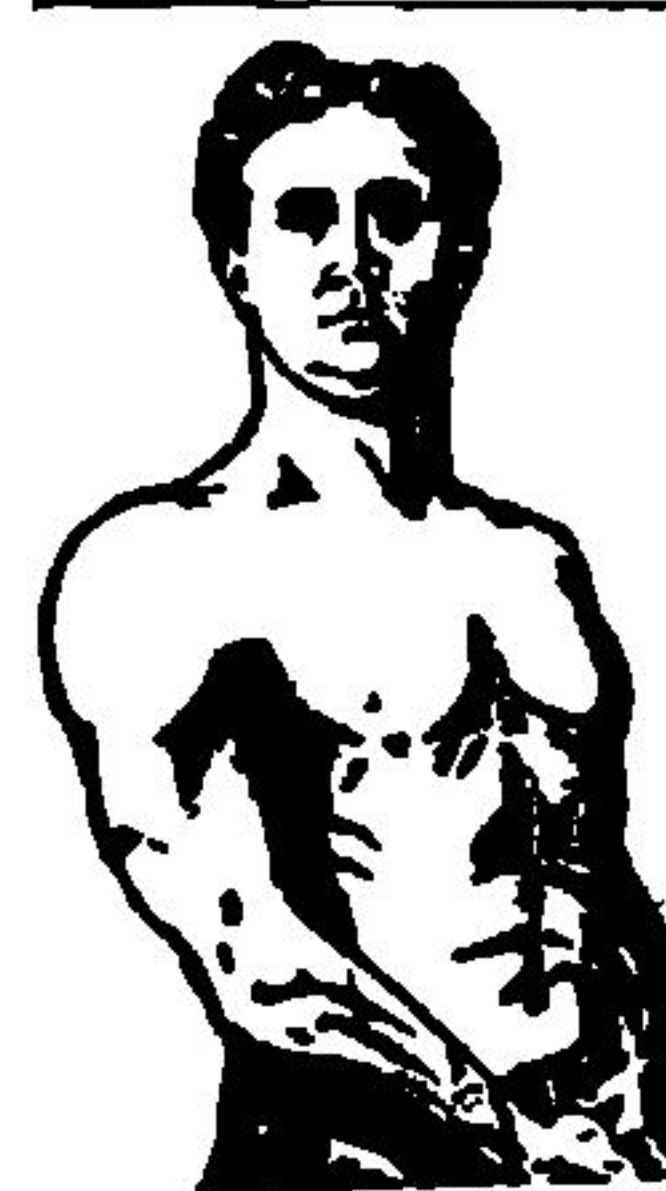
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ASTONISHING STORIES

(Continued from page 107)

There was an awkward silence. The machines around the table swung their eyebeams and shifted their feet.

Then Xahn said, "We have no evidence of that. Our evidence is that you are human and you must die. Dr. Johnson will make a speech, and he is going to be assassinated. After that, we will stand you up and shoot you."

"We should stand him against a wall," one of the counsellors suggested. "That is the proper way."

Oark was twitching at Carter's arm. "You understand we know how to do things in human fashion, don't you?" the big robot asked.

"Yes," Carter muttered.

Gloria had been standing by the door of the room, and Carter had been aware that all the machines seemed to be acutely conscious of her presence, with sidelong glances at her.

Now the robot, Garl, asked her anxiously, "This human-man realizes we do everything in proper fashion, and you do, too, don't you, Miss Gloria?"

"Yes," she murmured.

"Take the prisoner back to his cell," Xahn ordered.

As he was shoved from the room, Carter flung a glance at the girl. She had mentioned getting to an island, waiting for a storm. It seemed now that her mute gaze warned him to be docile. With Oark and Carl gripping him, he went back along the corridor and into the room where he had been before.

"You wait—we will come soon," Oark admonished. The door closed.

IT WAS an agony of apprenension for Carter, waiting in that dim, barred room. Outside the palace, the hollow, excited voices of the robots reverberated as they gathered in the nearby cemetery. Through the window a segment of the

MACHINES OF DESTINY

erie scene was visible. Dots of swaying red-yellow light were out there now—burning torches carried by the arriving metal figures. A great throng of them already had gathered in a crescent, facing a little rise of ground where a small platform had been erected. A dais was on it with a chair where Dr. Johnson would be forced to make a speech. And a wooden partition was erected at the platform end, like a little wall where Carter was to face the firing squad.

Would the girl be able to come now? Carter's tense gaze shifted to the glowing night-sky. Sullen, swift-flying clouds were up there, with little red and yellow lightning streaks darting through them. And there was a puff of wind which was bending the spindly branches of the trees.

Then, as he stared, the wind rose to a stronger puff, and huge elephant-eared leaves went scattering from the trees in a shower.

The creak of an opening door made Carter turn. It was Gloria.

"Our chance now," she whispered. "They have been watching me, but then they got interested in what is going on outside."

"You know where your father is?"

"Yes. They have several times let me go to him, but they wouldn't let him or me out of the palace. They've got him locked now in a room down on the lower floor. I think we can get him out. Most of the machines are outside now."

"Have you any weapons?"

"No. Of what use would they be?"

Of what use indeed? They furtively opened the door. The dim corridor outside seemed momentarily empty.

"You show me the way," Carter whispered.

In the silence, footsteps and hollow voices were audible. Carter and the girl came to a dim flight of steps, went cau-

(Continued on page 110)

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ASTONISHING STORIES

(Continued from page 109)

tiously down them, into another corridor. It seemed empty.

"There's a side door near here," Gloria murmured. "On the side away from the cemetery. We'll get father, and—"

The words died in her throat. From a shadow near at hand, a huge, metal figure materialized.

The robot's hollow voice rumbled, "Why—our prisoner has no right to wander around. This must be remedied; an escaping prisoner should be killed." The giant figure lunged forward. A knife was in the robot's clenched hand, and Carter stooped and sprang under it. His muscular body crashed against the towering erect metal shape with an impact that shook the huge machine.

Carter found himself hanging on the neck of the robot. The ponderous right arm, with hand clutching the knife, completed its swing in the empty air. The other hand turned inward, with jointed fingers clutching at his throat. Carter planned what he would do if an encounter like this were thrust upon him.

He wound his legs around the thighs of the robot as it staggered forward, carrying him. And in that same instant his groping fingers located the monster's fuse-plug. Desperately, he wrenched, and the plug came out. There was a little hiss inside the giant metal body. It shook with a convulsive twitch as the arms relaxed. And then it tumbled backward—with Carter still sprawled upon it—and crashed to the corridor floor.

Carter leaped to his feet. The sprawled metal giant was on its back, motionless. The eyebeams were extinguished. It was just an intricate mass of metal lying there inert.

"You get to the side door," Gloria gasped. "I'll bring father out—"

"No. I'll come with you."

Carter darted ahead, unbarring the door

the girl indicated. They rushed into a small room where a thin, grey-haired man stood backed against the wall.

He saw Carter and gasped, "Why—another human—"

The girl rushed to him. "Our chance now, father. Out the side door—hurry. I think there's a storm coming."

But they had no chance. In the dark doorway the figure of Oark loomed, with other robots behind him. Carter jumped to put himself in front of the girl. And at the same moment he called. "We are ready to go together. You stay at the door. We are coming out."

It startled them, and for an instant they stood there confused.

"That is right," Oark agreed. "It is time now for the ceremony."

Then the robots saw Gloria. Garl came forward.

"Why—why, Miss Gloria," he stammered. "What are you doing here? You should stay on the other floor. I told you that."

"She came to get us ready," Carter said quickly. "It must be done properly, Garl."

"Yes—yes, of course it must."

But it seemed that all of them, except Garl and Oark, now were suspicious of the girl. Despite her protests, in a moment they led her away. Again Carter had a sudden wild instinct to try and fight.

But Gloria gasped, "I am to see the ceremony? I am to be on the platform? You want me to see that everything is proper, don't you?"

"Yes—yes," they all agreed.

Carter relaxed. They led her away. Then they crowded upon Johnson, hurried him out through the doorway. And Oark gripped Carter.

"You are to go last," Oark said. "That is the governor's orders."

(Continued on page 112)



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ASTONISHING STORIES

(Continued from page 111)

GARL had clanked away with the others. After a time, Carter was taken. And in a moment he found himself drawn through an outer doorway, out into the churchyard, with a thousand weird mechanical voices rising to greet him as he appeared. The red-yellow torchlight dotted the darkness. Off to the left, in a huge crescent, the thronging crowd of robots pressed forward. With pounding heart Carter stared as he was shoved to the platform. Dr. Johnson was sagging limp in one of the chairs, with his body lashed to its upright back.

Where was Gloria? Carter looked wildly around. Overhead the swirling clouds were low. Weird little lightnings of crimson fire were darting through them, with muffled pops of thunder sounding. Then the silent, stalking machines were shoving Carter against the wooden wall. Holes were in it. They stood him against it, bound his legs and arms with rope through the holes so that he was held firmly upright.

Another great cry from the assembled throng rose up as Governor Xahn now mounted the steps of the platform and seated himself in a chair which had been placed facing Dr. Johnson.

To Carter, the breathless silence was a horror. And suddenly in the shadows behind Governor Xahn's chair, a little hissing light appeared. It was a quivering, tiny electric flame. Then Oark was visible, standing back there—Oark with his left hand gripping a small electronic torch from which the flame was sizzling. And Oark's right hand, outstretched, was moving to reach the seated Xahn.

Then Oark pounced. His darting right hand reached and seized Xahn's fuse-plug, ripped it from the metal chest. With a hiss and convulsive quiver the body of Xahn sank inert in the chair. And in that same second Oark was applying the

blowtorch flame to the governor's metal features—fusing them until the white-hot electric flame ate through.

There was a gasp from the throng. But Oak sprang erect, shouting at them.

"We're going to have two assassinations instead of just one! See? The governor has been assassinated—now we can have a new governor."

Lashed to the wall, Carter was futilely writhing at the ropes that held him. And in that instant, with a weird abruptness, the storm broke—a roaring gust that tore at the robot's earnest words and flung them away. A crimson flare burst overhead. And then came the rain.

It was as though a mad horror had descended upon the metal figures—hissing rain drops on their alumite plates, water that seeped into their joints, with ignition wires spluttering. And suddenly they were all wildly running for shelter.

Gloria came running and cut Carter loose, and together they released her father.

Then they were telling Carter about the island. He remembered that he had seen a verdant island off the shore near here. There had been a few humans in the great massacre who had been able to escape and get to that island. No robot, with instinctive fear, ever dared venture near water.

A few hundred people marooned here—a life primitive, with water that one could drink, food on the trees and in the ground, just the fundamentals of human life.

"They're really trying very hard," Carter murmured as they stared.

"Yes. I realize it."

And then he murmured, "Gloria—"

Tremulously she stared up at him.

"I've just got the feeling we're going to be happy here," he said.

They turned away from the clanking metal city. Hand in hand, facing the dawn, they went up the little slope.

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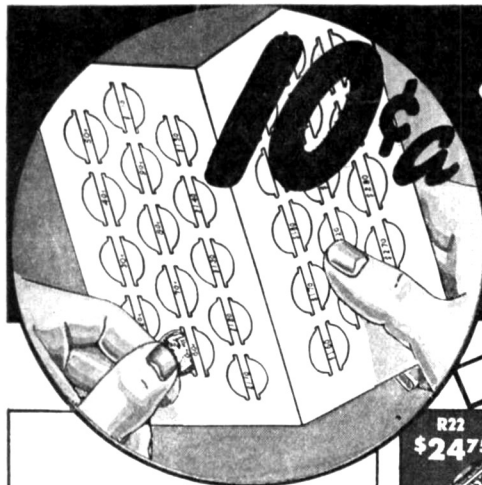
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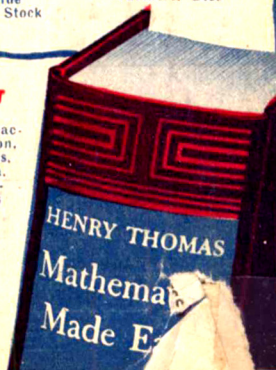
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