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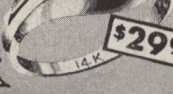
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NEXT ISSUE ON SALE
JANUARY 29TH

VOL. 4

FEBRUARY, 1943

No. 3

FULL-LENGTH FANTASY NOVEL

IT HAPPENED TOMORROW.....by Robert Bloch 46

Now it can be told—the story of the dread era when men no longer owned their cities—and their machines owned them! In all the fear-ridden world was only one law, the law of strength against brain, iron against human flesh. It happened tomorrow—but it could have been today!

THREE SCIENCE-FICTION NOVELETTES

THE HALFLING.....by Leigh Brackett 11

Fugitive from one world, prey of another, she had planned her dark mission well—to lead her lost people back to freedom along the trail of killing, and then to die!

EARTH, FAREWELL!.....by James MacCreigh 30

"Perhaps what he says is true—perhaps I am the traitor, and he has saved our planet from destruction. But the Masters have made me more than human—or less—and I must serve them, though I die for it!"

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Tiny, impotent—yet somehow sublime—the outcasts of Earth fought their greatest fight in the yawning darkneses of space—to save a planet that had condemned them to living death!

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A vision of the future, a warning from the past—torn between them was he who saw a preview of humanity's final conflict—and one last chance to prevent it!

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Gossip of science-fiction events and oddities.

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Cover painting by Milton Luros, illustrating "Earth, Farewell!"
by James MacCreigh

Inside illustrations by Lawrence, Les Tina and Paul.

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THE MAIL BAG

Sorry, pal. No trimmed edges.

Dear Editor:

On October 12, 1492, Columbus, it is generally accepted, discovered America.

Some four hundred and forty-nine years, three hundred and sixty-three days later, I wandered into my favorite newsstand and discovered a new and glorious *Astonishing Stories*.

All of which means that the last 1942 issue of AS was a most memorable one. Not only do we get Paul, but also a revolutionary new cover format, and a greater bunch of stories than ever before. Ah, sweet ecstasy. Please keep it up. I'd have apoplexy if you fell down on the new year after presenting such an issue as *that!*

The cover needs no comment—it speaks for itself. Thanx, oh *soooooo* much, for taking away the excess lettering. I'm sure it's just as effective, and that your circulation won't be hurt a bit. In fact, it will probably be increased.

Interior art was swelegant. Thanks for Paul. Morey does himself proud for "Abyss of Darkness," but is not as good as Bok's pic for the original and memorable classic, "Darkness," a couple of years ago. His pic for the "Our Director" yarn is poor. Dolgov is a poor imitation of Bok, but his figure in the foreground was nice. Where is Leydenfrost? He's second only to Paul. A rival mag, costing twice as much, has them both in every issue.

The stories are most important, so if you care to listen, kiddies, Uncle Gene will rate 'em for you. Be nice now, here we go.

1. "Taa the Terrible": Jameson's best story. It smacked a bit of the India situation at first. Ghandi-Ghandor. Get it?

2. "Abyss of Darkness": No sequel is as good as its forerunner, because it naturally lacks originality. But a grand tale, none the less.

3. "Night of Gods": Not bad at all!

4. "Mimic": Swell short. Gets you wondering, too.

5. "Destination Unknown": Seemed rather pointless. Nicely told.

6. "Our Director Meets Trouble": Not a bad story, but I never cared for the series—or hydroponics—or John E. Harry.

"Fantasy Circle" was swell, as well as "Viewpoints." "The Mail Bag" was okay, but don't you think the letters would be better if they weren't scattered throughout the mag? How about the back of the book for 'em?

Getting back to the art a moment, several fans seem to have trouble distinguishing Lawrences' work. Tell 'im to put his signature an inch high and six inches across, if need be. He's *good*.

Wanna t'ank youse again for the new cover layout. You know somethin'? That's the first time an editor ever took one of my suggestions seriously. Better look into me. Might have a second Happy Genius like Milt Lesser here. (Perish the thought!)

This may be sheer folly to mention trimmed edges, but it would increase the looks of both

your mags a hundredfold. They rate five and six with me now. TE would probably bring them up to three and four.

I repeat an earlier request. Is there any possible way of obtaining those bea-u-ti-ful interiors of Paul, Leyenfrost or Lawrence? Quick, somebody. Do something.

Yours sincerely,
Gene Hunter

(*Missouri's Gift to
Science Fiction*)

Ack-Ack & Co. hasten to correct wrong impressions.

Dear Alden:

Should appreciate your correcting impression in current *Astonishing* that there'll be a lack of support to oversea stfans from Ack till I get back from taking a crack at this barrack bunk. Morojo, my Good Girl Friday (or any other day), is my proxy while I'm away, buying and sending what I'm recommending from a fund I left behind. Aussifans & Canucks & Anglofans therefore can count on continued support from Ack-Ack & Co. for some considerable time yet. And, lest I forget: Free Voms go on abroad aswelas to the dogfans. So much for that subject. . . .

Pvt. F. J. Ackerman,
Ft. MacArthur, Cal.

We liked that "Mimic" too, Bob.

Ye Godly Editore,
Astonishing Narratives,
New York City.

Cheerio:

I should like to recall your august attention to the epistle of one Tony Raines (pages 78-80), of the December issue of *Astonishing Legends*. Particularly to the statements included therein of a supposedly scientific nature. (And this may apply too, to those other hordes of readers who gripe and growl about undressed girls in space, bug-eyed monsters in a similar naked state, the startling difference in clothing as worn by male and female characters in illustrations and text, and inferior or scanty spacesuits.)

I weep that Mr. Raines (and others of his ilk) are not up on modern science—1942 science. He and they speak, and think, a decade or two behind the time! Don't they know that spacesuits are necessary only in fiction—and not in actual space?

I believe it was in 1923 when H. P. Ponghoff (the senior) first began his investigations on the properties of space. I may not be accurate about that date for I do not have complete files of the proper magazines, but it was near that year. And so for the so-called "rigors of the frigid vacuum of space" as Raines puts it—bah! Ponghoff dashed those fiction cliches almost at the very beginning by showing that space is neither frigid nor empty. Employing

(*Continued on page 8*)

GEE what a build!
Didn't it take a long
time to get those muscles?

SHOWER

No SIR! - ATLAS
Makes Muscles Grow
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Will You Let Me PROVE I Can Make YOU a New Man?



LET ME START SHOWING YOU RESULTS LIKE THESE

 <p>5 inches of new Muscle</p> <p>"My arms increased 1 1/2", chest 2 1/2", forearm 7/8". —C. S., W. Va.</p>	 <p>What a difference!</p> <p>"Have put 31 1/2" on chest (normal) and 2 1/2" expanded." —F. S., N. Y.</p>
 <p>Here's what ATLAS did for ME!</p> <p>John Jacobs BEFORE</p> <p>John Jacobs AFTER</p>	 <p>For quick results I recommend CHARLES ATLAS</p> <p>"Am sending snapshot showing wonderful progress." —W. G., N. J.</p> <p>GAINED 29 POUNDS</p>  <p>"When I started, weighed only 141. Now 170." —T. K., N. Y.</p>

**CHARLES
ATLAS**

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title of "The
World's Most
Perfectly De-
veloped Man"
in international
contest—in com-
petition with
ALL men who
would consent
to appear
against him.

This is a re-
cent photo of
Charles Atlas
showing how
he looks today.
This is not a
studio picture
but an actual
un-touched
snapshot.

Here's What Only 15 Minutes a Day Can Do For You

IDON'T care how old or young you are, or how ashamed of your present physical condition you may be. If you can simply raise your arm and flex it I can add **SOLID MUSCLE** to your biceps—yes, on each arm—in double-quick time! Only 15 minutes a day—right in your own home—is all the time I ask of you! And there's no cost if I fail.

I can broaden your shoulders, strengthen your back, develop your whole muscular system **INSIDE** and **OUTSIDE!** I can add inches to your chest, give you a vise-like grip, make those legs of yours lithe and powerful. I can shoot new strength into your old backbone, exercise those inner organs, help you cram your body so full of pep, vigor and red-blooded vitality that you won't feel there's even "standing room" left for weakness and that lazy feeling! Before I get through with you I'll have your whole frame "measured" to a nice, new, beautiful suit of muscle!

What's My Secret?

"Dynamic Tension!" That's the tickle! The identical natural method that I myself developed to change my body from the scrawny, skinny-chested weakling I was at 17 to my present super-man physique! Thousands of other fellows are becoming marvelous physical specimens—my way. I give you no gadgets or con-

traptions to fool with. When you have learned to develop your Strength through "Dynamic Tension" you can laugh at artificial muscle-makers. You simply utilize the **DORMANT** muscle-power in your own God-given body—watch it increase and multiply double-quick into real solid **MUSCLE**.

My method—"Dynamic Tension"—will turn the trick for you. No theory—every exercise is practical. And, man, so easy! Spend only 15 minutes a day in your own home. From the very start you'll be using my method of "Dynamic Tension" almost unconsciously every minute of the day—walking, bending over, etc.—to **BUILD MUSCLE** and **VITALITY**.

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City..... State.....

(Continued from page 6)

a bit of exaggeration, I might remark that one of the greatest rigors one may expect to encounter in space is stumbling one's toe on a meteorite. Sounds fatal, doesn't it?

If Raines will consult an article on the Ponghoff discoveries in the December 1941 issue (page 1264) of the *International Scientist and Observer*, written by the son of the man who exploded these and other absurd theories about space, he will find just that: a factual account of the explosions.

The Ponghoffs, senior and junior, set out to disprove a few mild theories existing at that time (about 1923) because they happened not to believe the theories and "facts." Their subsequent discoveries, not only in the original field of investigation, but in allied fields as well, startled savants of the English-speaking nations, and probably others.

In the first place, Ponghoff senior found that the "frigid vacuum of space" is so much poppycock, as mentioned above. Space has a definite temperature: heat-fields is the technical name, running the length of the Centigrade scale from the tremendous heat near the sun to only about minus 220 degrees a light year distant.

A spaceship traveling between Earth and Mars would enjoy "summer weather" once it left the cold atmosphere of upper Earth and before entering the ditto of Mars. The spaceship would find a mean temperature of 36 degrees above zero, Centigrade—rather warm, you must admit. Cold of space? Frigid vacuum? Rats!

The artists may discontinue to enrobe the ladies as much as they please—not only will the glamour gals *not* freeze in space (provided of course, that they remain within a comfortable distance of the sun), they will not perish from lack of air or loss of heat from their bodies. Not immediately, that is.

The Ponghoffs believe in a substance they term "etheribia," a strange proper permeating all space (see pages 973-989, September 1941 issue of *IS&O*) which not only banishes the "vacuum" of space but does away with the idea that radiation of body heat will kill you as soon as you step outside the lock of the spaceship. And that the wind is sucked from your body at the same time. "Etheribia" is slightly denser than the air in your lungs. One had better keep one's mouth shut or one will drown in space—not freeze or turn inside-out!

Because women prefer to wear less clothing than men on the home planet, and hence have become conditioned (and will become further conditioned in the great clothes-revolution to follow this war); because over a period of years they have become acclimated to vast acres of their skins flapping slightly clad in winter weather—while men clomp about in long trousers, long red flannel underwear and heavy boots—then: it is quite natural to assume that our fair heroines of the future (in view of the Ponghoff revelations) may scamper lightly clad all around in space pursued by the inevitable bug-eyed monster and the ever-gallant hero.

The hero, poor sap, could just as well toss that spacesuit aside; if only his creator would wake up and read a few scientific text books of a later year than 1905. He doesn't need that suit any more than the monster needs a wig and false fangs. As the monster and the girl discovered long ago when some managing editor found that undraped monsters and maidens would S-E-L-L!

And thus another glorified science-fiction intuition passes: up with "etheribia" and down with spacesuits!

Martin Pearson's "Mimic" was outstanding.
Bob Tucker,
P. O. Box 260,
Bloomington, Ill.

Fair modesty beats her brains out.

Dear Mr. Editor:

Ouch! That Morey cover is certainly the most painful spot in an otherwise good issue. Reason? Simply because it's by the most dated artist in stfiction. Besides-which-he-can't-draw-faces!

Other defects on the fair face of the October *Astonishing* are: (1) that bright yaller arrow—makes the poor mag look like a Wrigley advertisement, (2) the really tremendous amount of written material on the cover. Couldn't you restrict the latter to just the announcement of the cover yarn and author, with perhaps a list of the rest of the contributors?

Inside, *Astonishing* is 'way above average. All illustrations are excellent—except for perennial offender Morey—especially the two L's, Lawrence & Leydenfrost, with Giunta not far behind. Hang on to Lawrence; his pic for the Gilbert novelette shows a mastery of technique equaled by few of his rivals-to-be. Also, I would like to see that "frontispiece" cut for the same story retained. It got the mood over very well.

Two stories impressed me as being unusually fine. They were Kuttner's "Thunder in the Void", and "The Eternal Quest", by Joe Gilbert. The first had Hank's regular smooth handling coupled with an effective bittersweet ending. The second, by newcomer Gilbert, had an aura of pathos about it that marks the story as one to be remembered, though the "machines over man" theme is old in stf.

Two stories were average. Doc Smith's "Vortex Blaster Makes War" is practically plotless—double E's chief weakness. The Professor Jameson series inspires nostalgia, and little else.

Two stories I rate as poor. "Nothing" lived up to its title—being about nothing in particular. "Miracle" was by Cummings.

Departments are splendid as always. I'd buy the mag for them alone. "Viewpoints" gets better and better but is depressing. *All* those authors—o, agony. Betcha the only one still able to write will be Cummings. "Fantasy Circle" delights with the enjoyable reprints. More, more and more, please. "Fanmag Reviews" are truly entertaining and complete, more so than any other stf promag, I'd wager. "The Mail Bag?" Well—look who's in it.

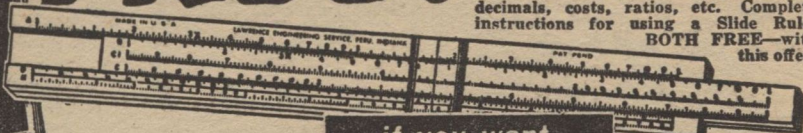
(Continued on page 108)

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THE HALFLING


A Novelette

By **LEIGH BRACKETT**

Fugitive from one world, prey of another, she had planned her dark mission well—to lead her lost people back to freedom—and die!



CHAPTER ONE

"Primitive Venus"



I WAS watching the sunset. It was something pretty special in the line of California sunsets, and it made me feel swell, being the first one I'd seen in about nine years. The pitch was in the flatlands between Culver City and Venice, and I could smell the sea. I was born in a little dump at Venice, Cal., and I've never found any smell like the clean cold salt of the Pacific—not anywhere in the Solar System.

I was standing alone, off to one side of the grounds. The usual noises of a carnival around feeding time were being made behind me, and the hammer gang was pinning the last of the tents down tight. But I wasn't thinking about Jade Greene's Interplanetary Carnival, The Wonders of



the Seven Worlds Alive Before Your Eyes.

I was remembering John Damien Greene running barefoot on a wet beach, fishing for perch off the end of a jetty, and dreaming big dreams. I was wondering where John Damien Greene had gone, taking his dreams with him, because now I could hardly remember what they were.

Somebody said softly from behind me, "Mr. Greene?"

I quit thinking about John Damien Greene. It was that kind of a voice—sweet, silky, guaranteed to make you forget your own name. I turned around.

She matched her voice, all right. She stood about five-three on her bronze heels, and her eyes were more purple than the hills of Malibu. She had a funny little button of a nose and a pink mouth, smiling just enough to show her even white teeth. The bronze metal-cloth dress she wore hugged a chassis with no flaws in it anywhere. I tried to find some.

She dropped her head, so I could see the way the last of the sunlight tangled in her gold-brown hair.

"They said you were Mr. Greene. If I've made a mistake. . ."

She had an accent, just enough to be fascinating.

I said, "I'm Greene. Something I can do for you?" I still couldn't find anything wrong with her, but I kept looking just the same. My blood pressure had gone up to about three hundred.

It's hard to describe a girl like that. You can say she's five-three and beautiful, but you can't pass on the odd little tilt of her eyes and the way her mouth looks, or the something that just comes out of her like light out of a lamp, and hooks into you so you know you'll never be rid of it, not if you live to be a thousand.

She said, "Yes. You can give me a job. I'm a dancer."

I shook my head. "Sorry, miss. I got a dancer."

Her face had a look of steel down under the soft kittenish roundness. "I'm not just talking," she said. "I need a job so I can eat. I'm a good dancer. I'm the best dancer you ever saw anywhere. Look me over."

That's all I had been doing. I guess I was staring by then. You don't expect fluffy dolls like that to have so much iron in them. She wasn't bragging. She was just telling me.

"I still have a dancer," I told her, "a green-eyed Martian babe who is plenty good, and who would tear my head off, and yours too, if I hired you."

"Oh," she said. "Sorry. I thought you bossed this carnival." She let me think about that, and then grinned. "Let me show you."

She was close enough so I could smell the faint, spicy perfume she wore. But she'd stopped me from being just a guy chinning with a pretty girl. Right then I was Jade Greene, the carny boss-man, with scars on my knuckles and an ugly puss, and a show to keep running.

Strictly Siwash, that show, but my baby—mine to feed and paint and fuel. If this kid had something Sindi didn't have, something to drag in the cash customers—well, Sindi would have to take it and like it. Besides, Sindi was getting so she thought she owned me.

The girl was watching my face. She didn't say anything more, or even move. I scowled at her.

"You'd have to sign up for the whole tour. I'm blasting off next Monday for Venus, and then Mars, and maybe into the Asteroids."

"I don't care. Anything to be able to eat. Anything to—"

She stopped right ther and bent her head again, and suddenly I could see tears on her thick brown lashes.

I said, "Okay. Come over to the cooh tent and we'll have a look."

Me, I was tempted to sign her for what

was wrapped up in that bronze cloth—but business is business. I couldn't take on any left-footed ponies.

She said shakily, "You don't soften up very easily, do you?" We started across the lot toward the main gate. The night was coming down cool and fresh. Off to the left, clear back to the curving deep-purple barrier of the hills, the slim white spires of Culver, Westwood, Beverly Hills and Hollywood were beginning to show a rainbow splash of color under their floodlights.

Everything was clean, new and graceful. Only the thin fog and the smell of the sea were old.

We were close to the gate, stumbling a little in the dusk of the afterglow. Suddenly a shadow came tearing out from between the tents.

It went erratically in lithe, noiseless bounds, and it was somehow not human even though it went on two feet. The girl caught her breath and shrank in against me. The shadow went around us three times like a crazy thing, and then stopped.

There was something eerie about that sudden stillness. The hair crawled on the back of my neck. I opened my mouth angrily.

The shadow stretched itself toward the darkening sky and let go a wail like Lucifer falling from Heaven.

I cursed. The carny lights came on, slamming a circle of blue-white glare against the night.

"Laska, come here!" I yelled.

The girl screamed.

I PUT my arm around her. "It's all right," I said, and then, "Come here, you misbegotten Thing! You're on a sleighride again."

There were more things I wanted to say, but the girl cramped my style. Laska slunk in towards us. I didn't blame her for yelping. Laska wasn't pretty.

He wasn't much taller than the girl, and looked shorter because he was drooping. He wore a pair of tight dark trunks and nothing else except the cross-shaped mane of fine blue-gray fur that went across his shoulders and down his back, from the peak between his eyes to his long tail. He was dragging the tail, and the tip of it was twitching. There was more of the soft fur on his chest and forearms, and a fringe of it down his lank belly.

I grabbed him by the scruff and shook him. "I ought to boot your ribs in! We got a show in less than two hours."

He looked up at me. The pupils of his yellow-green eyes were closed to thin hairlines, but they were flat and cold with hatred. The glaring lights showed me the wet whiteness of his pointed teeth and the raspy pinkness of his tongue.

"Let me go. Let me go, you human!" His voice was hoarse and accented.

"I'll let you go." I cuffed him across the face. "I'll let you go to the immigration authorities. You wouldn't like that, would you? You wouldn't even have coffee to hop up on when you died."

The sharp claws came out of his fingers and toes, flexed hungrily and went back in again.

I dropped him.

"Go on back inside. Find the croaker and tell him to straighten you out. I don't give a damn what you do on your own time, but you miss out on one more show and I'll take your job and call the I-men. Get it?"

"I get it," said Laska sullenly, and curled his red tongue over his teeth. He shot his flat, cold glance at the girl and went away, not making any sound at all.

The girl shivered and drew away from me. "What was—that?"

"Cat-man from Callisto. My prize performer. They're pretty rare."

"I—I've heard of them. They evolved from a cat-ancestor instead of an ape, like we did."

"That's putting it crudely, but it's close enough. I've got a carload of critters like that, geeks from all over the System. They ain't human, and they don't fit with animals either. Moth-men, lizard-men, guys with wings and guys with six arms and antennae. They all followed evolutionary tracks peculiar to their particular hunks of planet, only they stopped before they got where they were going. The Callistan kitties are the aristocrats of the bunch. They've got an I. Q. higher than a lot of humans, and wouldn't spit on the other halfings."

"Poor things," she said softly. "You didn't have to be so cruel to him."

I laughed. "That What's-it would as soon claw my insides out as soon as look at me—or any other human, including you—just on general principles. That's why Immigration hates to let 'em in even on a work permit. And when he's hopped up on coffee. . . ."

"Coffee? I thought I must have heard wrong."

"Nope. The caffeine in Earthly coffee berries works just like coke or hashish for 'em. Venusian coffee hits 'em so hard they go nuts and then die, but our own kind just keeps 'em going. It's only the hoppy ones you ever find in a show like this. They get started on coffee and they have to have it no matter what they have to do to get it."

She shuddered a little. "You said something about dying."

"Yeah. If he's ever deported back to Callisto his people will tear him apart. They're a clannish bunch. I guess the first humans on Callisto weren't very tactful, or else they just hate us because we're something they're not and never can be. Anyway, their tribal law forbids them to have anything to do with us except killing. Nobody knows much about 'em, but I hear they have a nice friendly religion, something like the old-time Thugs and their Kali worship."

I paused, and then said uncomfortably, "Sorry I had to rough him up in front of you. But he's got to be kept in line."

She nodded. We didn't say anything after that. We went in past the main box and along between the burglars readying-up their layouts—Martian *getak*, Venusian *shalil* and the game the Mercurian hillmen play with human skulls. Crooked? Sure—but suckers like to be fooled, and a guy has to make a living.

I couldn't take my eyes off the girl. I thought, *if she dances the way she walks. . . .*

She didn't look much at the big three-dimensional natural-color pictures advertising the geek show. We went by the brute top, and suddenly all hell broke loose inside of it. I've got a fair assortment of animals from all over. They make pretty funny noises when they get started, and they were started now.

They were nervous, unhappy noises. I heard prisoners yammering in the Lunar cell-blocks once, and that was the way this sounded—strong, living things shut up in cages and tearing their hearts out with it—hate, fear and longing like you never thought about. It turned you cold.

The girl looked scared. I put my arm around her again, not minding it at all. Just then Tiny came out of the brute top.

Tiny is a Venusian deep-jungle man, about two sizes smaller than the Empire State Building, and the best zooman I ever had, drunk or sober. Right now he was mad.

"I tell that Laska stay 'way from here," he yelled. "My kids smell him. You listen!"

I didn't have to listen. His "kids" could have been heard halfway to New York. Laska had been expressly forbidden to go near the brute top because the smell of him set the beasts crazy. Whether they were calling to him as one animal to another, or scared of him as something unnatural, we didn't know. The

other halflings were pretty good about it, but Laska liked to start trouble just for the hell of it.

I said, "Laska's hopped again. I sent him to the croaker. You get the kids quiet again, and then send one of the punks over to the crumb castle and tell the cook I said if he ever gives Laska a teaspoonful of coffee again without my say—so I'll fry him in his own grease."

Tiny nodded his huge pale head and vanished, cursing. I said to the girl, "Still want to be a carny?"

"Oh, yes," she said. "Anything, as long as you serve food!"

"That's a pretty accent you got. What is it?"

"Just about everything. I was born on a ship between Earth and Mars, and I've lived all over. My father was in the diplomatic corps."

I said, "Oh. Well, here's the place. Go to it."

SINDI was sitting cross-legged on the stage, sipping *thil* and listening to sad Martian music on the juke box behind the screen of faded Martian tapestry. She looked up and saw us, and she didn't like what she saw.

She got up. She was a Low-Canaler, built light and wiry, and she moved like a cat. She had long emerald eyes and black hair with little bells braided in it, and clusters of tiny bells in her ears. She was wearing the skin of a Martian sand-leopard, no more clothes than the law forced her to wear. She was something to look at, and she had a disposition like three yards of barbed wire.

I said, "Hi, Sindi. This kid wants a try-out. Climb down, huh?"

Sindi looked the kid over. She smiled and climbed down and put her hand on my arm. She sounded like a shower of rain when she moved, and her nails bit into me, hard.

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I said between my teeth, "What music do you want, kid?"

"My name's Laura—Laura Darrow." Her eyes were very big and very purple. "Do you have Enhali's *Primitive Venus*?"

Not more than half a dozen dancers in the System can do justice to that collection of tribal music. Some of it's sub-human and so savage it scares you. We use it for mood music, to draw the crowd.

I started to protest, but Sindi smiled and tinkled her head back. "Of course. Put it on, Jade."

I shrugged and went in and fiddled with the juke box. When I came out Laura Darrow was up on the stage and we had an audience. Sindi must have passed the high sign. I shoved my way through a bunch of Venusian lizard-men and sat down. There were three or four little moth-people from Phobos roosting up on the braces so their delicate wings wouldn't get damaged in the crush.

The music started. Laura kicked off her shoes and danced.

I don't think I breathed all the time she was on the stage. I don't remember anyone else breathing, either. We just sat and stared, sweating with nervous ecstasy, shivering occasionally, with the music beating and crying and surging over us.

The girl wasn't human. She was sunlight, quicksilver, a leaf riding the wind—but nothing human, nothing tied down to muscles and gravity and flesh. She was—oh, hell, there aren't any words. She was the music.

When she was through we sat there a long time, perfectly still. Then the Venusians, human and half-human, let go a yell and the audience came to and tore up the seats.

In the middle of it Sindi looked at me with deadly green eyes and said, "I suppose she's hired."

"Yeah. But it doesn't have anything to do with you, baby."

"Listen, Jade. This suitcase outfit isn't big enough for two of us. Besides, she's got you hooked, and she can have you."

"She hasn't got me hooked. Anyway, so what? You don't own me."

"No. And you don't own me, either."

"I got a contract."

She told me what I could do with my contract.

I yelled, "What do you want me to do, throw her out on her ear? With that talent?"

"Talent!" snarled Sindi. "She's not talented. She's a freak."

"Just like a dame. Why can't you be a good loser?"

She explained why. A lot of it didn't make sense, and none of it was printable. Presently she went out, leaving me sore and a little uneasy. We had quite a few Martians with the outfit. She could make trouble.

Oh, hell! Just another dame sore because she was outclassed. Artistic temperament, plus jealousy. So what? Let her try something. I could handle it. I'd handled people before.

I jammed my way up to the stage. Laura was being mobbed. She looked scared—some of the halfings are enough to give a tough guy nightmares—and she was crying.

I said, "Relax, honey. You're in." I knew that Sindi was telling the truth. I was hooked. I was so hooked it scared me, but I wouldn't have wiggled off if I could.

She sagged down in my arms and said, "Please, I'm hungry."

I half carried her out, with the moth-people fluttering their gorgeous wings around our heads and praising her in their soft, furry little voices.

I fed her in my own quarters. She shuddered when I poured her coffee and refused it, saying she didn't think she'd ever enjoy it again. She took tea

instead. She was hungry, all right. I thought she'd never stop eating.

Finally I said, "The pay's forty credits, and found."

She nodded.

I said gently, "You can tell me. What's wrong?"

She gave me a wide, purple stare. "What do you mean?"

"A dancer like you could write her own ticket anywhere, and not for the kind of peanuts I can pay you. You're in a jam."

She looked at the table and locked her fingers together. Their long pink nails glistened.

She whispered, "It isn't anything bad. Just a—a passport difficulty. I told you I was born in space. The records got lost somehow, and living the way we did—well, I had to come to Earth in a hurry, and I couldn't prove my citizenship, so I came without it. Now I can't get back to Venus where my money is, and I can't stay here. That's why I wanted so badly to get a job with you. You're going out, and you can take me."

I knew how to do that, all right. I said, "You must have had a big reason to take the risk you did. If you're caught it means the Luna cell-blocks for a long time before they deport you."

She shivered. "It was a personal matter. It delayed me a while. I—was too late."

I said, "Sure. I'm sorry." I took her to her tent, left her there and went out to get the show running, cursing Sindi. I stopped cursing and stared when I passed the cooch tent. She was there, and giving.

She stuck out her tongue at me and I went on.

That evening I hired the punk, just a scrawny kid with a white face, who said he was hungry and needed work. I gave him to Tiny, to help out in the brute top.

CHAPTER TWO

Voice of Terror

WE PLAYED in luck that week. Some gilded darling of the screen showed up with somebody else's husband who wasn't quite divorced yet, and we got a lot of free publicity in the papers and over the air. Laura went on the second night and brought down the house. We turned 'em away for the first time in history. The only thing that worried me was Sindi. She wouldn't speak to me, only smile at me along her green eyes as though she knew a lot she wasn't telling and not any of it nice. I tried to keep an eye on her, just in case.

For five days I walked a tightrope between heaven and hell. Everybody on the pitch knew I was a dead duck where Laura was concerned. I suppose they got a good laugh out of it—me, Jade Greene the carny boss, knocked softer than a cup custard by a girl young enough to be my daughter, a girl from a good family, a girl with talent that put her so far beyond my lousy dog-and-pony show. . . .

I knew all that. It didn't do any good. I couldn't keep away from her. She was so little and lovely; she walked like music; her purple eyes had a tilt to them that kept you looking, and her mouth—

I kissed it on the fifth night, out back of the cooch tent when the show was over. It was dark there; we were all alone, and the faint spicy breath of her came to me through the thin salt fog. I kissed her.

Her mouth answered mine. Then she wrenched away, suddenly, with a queer fury. I let her go. She was shuddering, and breathing hard.

I said, "I'm sorry."

"It isn't that. Oh, Jade, I—" She stopped. I could hear the breath sobbing in her throat. Then she turned and ran away, and the sound of her weeping came back to me through the dark.

I went to my quarters and got out a bottle. After the first shot I just sat staring at it with my head in my hands. I haven't any idea how long I sat there. It seemed like forever. I only know that the pitch was dark, sound asleep under a pall of fog, when Sindi screamed.

I didn't know it was Sindi then. The scream didn't have any personality. It was the voice of terror and final pain, and it was far beyond anything human.

I got my gun out of the table drawer. I remember my palm was slippery with cold sweat. I went outside, catching up the big flashlight kept for emergencies near the tent flap. It was very dark out there, very still, and yet not quiet. There was something behind the darkness and the silence, hiding in them, breathing softly and waiting.

The pitch began to wake up. The stir and rustle spread out from the scream like ripples from a stone, and over in the brute top a Martian sand-cat began to wail, thin and feral, like an echo of death.

I went along between the tents, walking fast and silent. I felt sick, and the skin of my back twitched; my face began to ache from being drawn tight. The torch beam shook a little in my hand.

I found her back of the cooch tent, not far from where I'd kissed Laura. She was lying on her face, huddled up, like a brown island in a red sea. The little bells were still in her ears.

I walked in her blood and knelt down in it and put my hand on her shoulder. I thought she was dead, but the bells tinkled faintly, like something far away on another star. I tried to turn her over.

She gasped, "Don't." It wasn't a voice. It was hardly a breath, but I could hear it. I can still hear it. I took my hand away.

"Sindi—"

A little wash of sound from the bells, like rain far off—"You fool," she whispered. "The stage. Jade, the stage—"

She stopped. The croaker came from somewhere behind me and knocked me out of the way, but I knew it was no use. I knew Sindi had stopped for good.

Humans and halflings were jammed in all round, staring, whispering, some of them screaming a little. The brute top had gone crazy. They smelt blood and death on the night wind, and they wanted to be free and a part of it.

"Claws," the croaker said. "Something clawed her. Her throat—"

I said, "Yeah. Shut up." I turned around. The punk was standing there, the white-faced kid, staring at Sindi's body with eyes glistening like shiny brown marbles.

"You," I said. "Go back to Tiny and tell him to make sure all his kids are there. . . . All the roustabouts and every man that can handle a gun or a tent stake, get armed as fast as you can and stand by. . . . Mike, take whatever you need and guard the gate. Don't let anybody or anything in or out without permission from me, in person. Everybody else get inside somewhere and stay there. I'm going to call the police."

The punk was still there, looking from Sindi's body to me and around the circle of faces. I yelled at him. He went away then, fast. The crowd started to break up.

Laura Darrow came out of it and took my arm.

She had on a dark blue dressing-gown and her hair was loose around her face. She had the dewy look of being freshly washed, and she breathed perfume. I shook her off. "Look out," I said. "I'm all—blood."

I could feel it on my shoes, soaking through the thin stuff of my trouser legs. My stomach rose up under my throat. I closed my eyes and held it down, and all the time Laura's voice was soothing me. She hadn't let go of my arm. I could feel her fingers. They were cold, and too

tight. Even then, I loved her so much I ached with it.

"Jade," she said. "Jade, darling. Please—I'm so frightened."

That helped. I put my arm around her and we started back toward my place and the phone. Nobody had thought to put the big lights on yet, and my torch-beam cut a fuzzy tunnel through the fog.

"I couldn't sleep very well," Laura said suddenly. "I was lying in my tent thinking, and a little while before she screamed I thought I heard something—something like a big cat, padding."

The thing that had been in the back of my mind came out yelling. I hadn't seen Laska in the crowd around Sindi. If Laska had got hold of some coffee behind the cook's back. . . .

I said, "You were probably mistaken."

"No. Jade."

"Yeah?" It was dark between the tents. I wished somebody would turn the lights on. I wished I hadn't forgotten to tell them to. I wished they'd shut up their over-all obligato of gabbling, so I could hear. . . .

"Jade. I couldn't sleep because I was thinking—"

Then she screamed.

HE CAME out of a dark tunnel between two storage tents. He was going almost on all fours, his head flattened forward, his hands held in a little to his belly. His claws were out. They were wet and red, and his hands were wet and red, and his feet. His yellow-green eyes had a crazy shine to them, the pupils slitted against the light. His lips were peeled back from his teeth. They glittered, and there was froth between them—Laska, coked to hell and gone!

He didn't say anything. He made noises, but they weren't speech and they weren't sane. They weren't anything but horrible. He sprang.

I pushed Laura behind me. I could

see the marks his claws made in the dirt, and the ridging of his muscles with the jump. I brought up my gun and fired, three shots.

The heavy slugs nearly tore him in two, but they didn't stop him. He let go a mad animal scream and hit me, slashing. I went part way down, firing again, but Laska was still going. His hind feet clawed into my hip and thigh, using me as something to push off from. He wanted the girl.

She had backed off, yelling bloody murder. I could hear feet running, a lot of them, and people shouting. The lights came on. I twisted around and got Laska by the mane of fur on his backbone and then by the scruff. He was suddenly a very heavy weight. I think he was dead when I put the fifth bullet through his skull.

I let him drop.

I said, "Laura, are you all right?" I saw her brown hair and her big purple eyes like dark stars in her white face. She was saying something, but I couldn't hear what it was. I said, "You ought to faint, or something," and laughed.

But it was me, Jade Greene, that did the fainting.

I came out of it too soon. The croaker was still working on my leg. I called him everything I could think of in every language I knew, out of the half of my mouth that wasn't taped shut. He was a heavy man, with a belly and a dirty chin.

He laughed and said, "You'll live. That critter damn near took half your face off, but with your style of beauty it won't matter much. Just take it easy a while until you make some more blood."

I said, "The hell with that. I got work to do." After a while he gave in and helped me get dressed. The holes in my leg weren't too deep, and the face wasn't working anyway. I poured some Scotch in to help out the blood shortage, and managed to get over to the office.

I walked pretty well.

That was largely because Laura let me lean on her. She'd waited outside my tent all that time. There were drops of fog caught in her hair. She cried a little and laughed a little and told me how wonderful I was, and helped me along with her small vibrant self. Pretty soon I began to feel like a kid waking up from a nightmare into a room full of sunshine.

The law had arrived when we got to the office. There wasn't any trouble. Sindi's torn body and the crazy cat-man added up, and the Venusian cook put the lid on it. He always took a thermos of coffee to bed with him, so he'd have it first thing when he woke up—Venusian coffee, with enough caffeine in it to stand an Earthman on his head. Enough to finish off a Callistan cat-man. Somebody had swiped it when he wasn't looking. They found the thermos in Laska's quarters.

THE SHOW went on. Mobs came to gawk at the place where the killing had happened. I took it easy for one day, lolling in a shiny golden cloud with Laura holding my head.

Along about sundown she said, "I'll have to get ready for the show."

"Yeah. Saturday's a big night. Tomorrow we tear down, and then Monday we head out for Venus. You'll feel happier then?"

"Yes. I'll feel safe." She put her head down over mine. Her hair was like warm silk. I put my hands up on her throat. It was firm and alive, and it made my hands burn.

She whispered, "Jade, I—" A big hot tear splashed down on my face, and then she was gone.

I lay still, hot and shivering like a man with swamp-fever, thinking, *Maybe. . .*

Maybe Laura wouldn't leave the show when we got to Venus. Maybe I could make her not want to. Maybe it wasn't too late for dreaming, a dream that John

Damien Greene had never had, sitting in a puddle of water at the end of a jetty stringer and fishing for perch.

Crazy, getting ideas like that about a girl like Laura. Crazy like cutting your own throat. Oh, hell. A man never really grows up, not past believing that maybe miracles still happen.

It was nice dreaming for a while.

It was a nice night, too, full of stars and the clean, cool ocean breeze, when Tiny came over to tell me they'd found the punk dead in a pile of straw with his throat torn out, and the Martian sand-cat loose.

CHAPTER THREE

Carnival of Death

WE JAMMED our way through the mob on the midway. Lots of people having fun, lots of kids yelling and getting sick on Mercurian *jitsi*-beans and bottled Venusian fruit juice. Nobody knew about the killing. Tiny had had the cat rounded up and caged before it could get outside the brute top, which had not yet opened for business.

The punk was dead, all right—dead as Sindi, and in the same way. His twisted face was not much whiter than I remembered it, the closed eyelids faintly blue. He lay almost under the sand-cat's cage.

The cat paced, jittery and snarling. There was blood on all its six paws. The cages and pens and pressure tanks seethed nastily all around me, held down and quiet by Tiny's wranglers.

I said, "What happened?"

Tiny lifted his gargantuan shoulders. "Dunno. Everything quiet. Even no yell, like Sindi. Punk kid all lonesome over here behind cages. Nobody see; nobody hear. Only Mars kitty waltz out on main aisle, scare hell out of everybody. We catch, and then find punk, like you see."

I turned around wearily. "Call the cops again and report the accident. Keep the rubes out of here until they pick up the body." I shivered. I'm superstitious, like all carnies.

They come in threes—always in threes. Sindi, the punk—what next?

Tiny sighed. "Poor punk. So peaceful, like sleeper with shut eye."

"Yeah." I started away. I limped six paces and stopped and limped back again.

I said, "That's funny. Guys that die violent aren't tidy about their eyes, except in the movies."

I leaned over. I didn't quite know why, then. I do now. You can't beat that three-time jinx. One way or another, it gets you.

I pushed back one thin, waxy eyelid. After a while I pushed back the other. Tiny breathed heavily over my shoulder. Neither of us said anything. The animals whimpered and yawned and paced.

I closed his eyes again and went through his pockets. I didn't find what I was looking for. I got up very slowly, like an old man. I felt like an old man. I felt dead, deader than the white-faced kid.

I said, "His eyes were brown."

Tiny stared at me. He started to speak, but I stopped him. "Call Homicide, Tiny. Put a guard on the body. And send men with guns. . . ."

I told him where to send them. Then I went back across the midway.

A couple of Europeans with wiry little bodies and a twenty-foot wing-spread were doing Immelmans over the geek top, and on the bally stand in front of it two guys with six hands apiece and four eyes on movable stalks were juggling. Laura was out in front of the cooch tent, giving the rubes a come-on.

I went around behind the tent, around where I'd kissed her, around where Sindi had died with the bells in her ears like a wash of distant rain.

I lifted up the flap and went in.

The tent was empty except for the man that tends the juke box. He put out his cigarette in a hurry and said, "Hi, Boss," as though that would make me forget he'd been smoking. I didn't give a damn if he set the place on fire with a blowtorch. The air had the warm, musty smell that tents have. Enhali's *Primitive Venus* was crying out of the juke box with a rhythm like thrown spears.

I pulled the stage master, and then the whites. They glared on the bare boards, naked as death and just as yielding.

I stood there a long time.

After a while the man behind me said uneasily, "Boss, what—"

"Shut up. I'm listening."

Little bells, and a voice that was pain made vocal.

"Go out front," I said. "Send Laura Darrow in here. Then tell the rubes there won't be a show here tonight."

I heard his breath suck in, and then catch. He went away down the aisle.

I got a cigarette out and lit it very carefully, broke the match in two and stepped on it. Then I turned around.

L AURA came down the aisle. Her gold-brown hair was caught in a web of brilliants. She wore a sheath-tight thing of sea-green metal scales, with a short skirt swirling around her white thighs, and sandals of the shiny scales with no heels to them. She moved with the music, part of it, wild with it, a way I'd never seen a woman move before.

She was beautiful. There aren't any words. She was—beauty.

She stopped. She looked at my face and I could see the quivering tightness flow up across her white skin, up her throat and over her mouth, and catch her breath and hold it. The music wailed and throbbed on the still, warm air.

I said, "Take off your shoes, Laura. Take off your shoes and dance."

She moved then, still with the beat of the savage drums, but not thinking about it. She drew in upon herself, a shrinking and tightening of muscles, a preparation.

She said, "You know."

I nodded. "You shouldn't have closed his eyes. I might never have noticed. I might never have remembered that the kid had brown eyes. He was just a punk. Nobody paid much attention. He might just as well have had purple eyes—like yours."

"He stole them from me." Her voice came sharp under the music. It had a hiss and a wail in it I'd never heard before, and the accent was harsher. "While I was in your tent, Jade. I found out when I went to dress. He was an I-man. I found his badge inside his clothes and took it."

Purple eyes looking at me—purple eyes as phony as the eyes on the dead boy. Contact lenses painted purple to hide what was underneath.

"Too bad you carried an extra pair, Laura, in case of breakage."

"He put them in his eyes, so he couldn't lose them or break them or have them stolen, until he could report. He threw away the little suction cup. I couldn't find it. I couldn't get the shells off his eyeballs. All I could do was close his eyes and hope—"

"And let the sand-cat out of his cage to walk through the blood." My voice was coming out all by itself. It hurt. The words felt as though they had fishhooks on them, but I couldn't stop saying them.

"You almost got by with it, Laura. Just like you got by with Sindi. She got in your way, didn't she? She was jealous, and she was a dancer. She knew that no true human could dance like you dance. She said so. She said you were a freak."

That word hit her like my fist. She showed me her teeth, white, even teeth that I knew now were as phony as her eyes. I didn't want to see her change,

but I couldn't stop looking, couldn't stop.

I said, "Sindi gave you away before you died, only I was too dumb to know what she meant. She said, 'The stage.'"

I think we both looked, down at the stark boards under the stark lights, looked at the scratches on them where Laura had danced barefoot that first time and left the marks of her claws on the wood.

She nodded, a slow, feral weaving of the head.

"Sindi was too curious. She searched my tent. She found nothing, but she left her scent, just as the young man did today. I followed her back here in the dark and saw her looking at the stage by the light of matches. I can move in the dark, Jade, very quickly and quietly. The cook tent is only a few yards back of this one, and Laska's quarters close beyond that. I smelt the cook's coffee. It was easy for me to steal it and slip it through the tent flap by Laska's cot, and wake him with the touch of my claws on his face. I knew he couldn't help drinking it. I was back here before Sindi came out of the tent to go and tell you what she'd found."

She made a soft purring sound under the wicked music.

"Laska smelt the blood and walked in it, as I meant him to do. I thought he'd die before he found us—or me—because I knew he'd find my scent in the air of his quarters and know who it was, and what it was. My perfume had worn too thin by then to hide it from his nose."

I felt the sullen pain of the claw marks on my face and leg. Laska, crazy with caffeine and dying with it, knowing he was dying and wanting with all the strength of his drugged brain to get at the creature who had killed him. He'd wanted Laura that night, not me. I was just something to claw out of the way.

I wished I hadn't stopped him.

I said, "Why? All you wanted was Laska. Why didn't you kill him?"

The shining claws flexed out of her fingertips, under the phony plastic nails—very sharp, very hungry.

She said huskily, "My tribe sent me to avenge its honor. I have been trained carefully. There are others like me, tracking down the renegades, the dope-ridden creatures like Laska who sell our race for human money. He was not to die quickly. He was not to die without knowing. He was not to die without being given the chance to redeem himself by dying bravely.

"But I was not to be caught. I cost my people time and effort, and I am not easily replaced. I have killed seven renegades, Jade. I was to escape. So I wanted to wait until we were out in space."

She stopped. The music hammered in my temples, and inside I was dead and dried up and crumbled away.

I said, "What would you have done in space?"

I knew the answer. She gave it to me, very simply, very quietly.

"I would have destroyed your whole filthy carnival by means of a little bomb in the jet timers, and gone away in one of the lifeboats."

I nodded. My head felt as heavy as Mount Whitney, and as lifeless. "But Sindi didn't give you time. Your life came first. And if it hadn't been for the punk. . . ."

No, not just a punk—an Immigration man. Somewhere Laura had slipped, or else her luck was just out. A white-faced youngster, doing his job quietly in the shadows, and dying without a cry. I started to climb down off the stage.

She backed off. The music screamed and stopped, leaving a silence like the feel of a suddenly stopped heart.

Laura whispered, "Jade, will you believe something if I tell you?"

"I love you, Jade." She was still backing off down the aisle, not making any sound. "I deserve to die for that. I'm going to die. I think you're going to kill me, Jade. But when you do, remember that those tears I shed—were real."

She turned and ran, out onto the midway. I was close. I caught her hair. It came free, leaving me standing alone just inside the tent, staring stupidly.

I HAD men out there, waiting. I thought she couldn't get through. But she did. She went like a wisp of cloud on a gale, using the rubes as a shield. We didn't want a panic. We let her go, and we lost her.

I say we let her go. We couldn't help it. She wasn't bothering about being human then. She was all cat, just a noiseless blur of speed. We couldn't shoot without hurting people, and our human muscles were too slow to follow her.

I knew Tiny had men at the gates and all around the pitch, anywhere that she could possibly get out. I wasn't worried. She was caught, and pretty soon the police would come. We'd have to be careful, careful as all hell not to start one of those hideous, trampling panics that can wreck a pitch in a matter of minutes.

All we had to do was watch until the show was over and the rubes were gone. Guard the gates and keep her in, and then round her up. She was caught. She couldn't get away. Laura Darrow. . . .

I wondered what her name was, back on Callisto. I wondered what she looked like when she let the cross-shaped mane grow thick along her back and shoulders. I wondered what color her fur was. I wondered why I had ever been born.

I went back to my place and got my gun and then went out into the crowd again. The show was in full swing; lots

of people having fun, lots of kids crazy with excitement; lights and laughter and music—and a guy out in front of the brute top splitting his throat telling the crowd that something was wrong with the lighting system and it would be a while before they could see the animals.

A while before the cops would have got what they wanted and cleaned up the mess under the sand-cat's cage.

The squad cars would be coming in a few minutes. There wasn't anything to do but wait. She was caught. She couldn't escape.

The one thing we didn't think about was that she wouldn't try to.

A Mercurian cave-tiger screamed. The Ionian quags took it up in their deep, rusty voices, and then the others chimed in, whistling, roaring, squealing, shrieking, and doing things there aren't any names for. I stopped, and gradually everybody on the pitch stopped and listened.

For a long moment you could hear the silence along the midway and in the tents. People not breathing, people with a sudden glassy shine of fear in their eyes and a cold tightening of the skin that comes from way back beyond humanity. Then the muttering started, low and uneasy, the prelude to panic.

I fought my way to the nearest bally stand and climbed on it. There were shots, sounding small and futile under the brute howl.

I yelled, "Hey, everybody! Listen! There's nothing wrong. One of the cats is sick, that's all. There's nothing wrong. Enjoy yourselves."

I wanted to tell them to get the hell out, but I knew they'd kill themselves if they started. Somebody started music going again, loud and silly. It cracked the icy lid that was tightening down. People began to relax and laugh nervously and talk too loudly. I got down and ran for the brute top.

Tiny met me at the tent flap. His face

was just a white blur. I grabbed him and said, "For God's sake, can't you keep them quiet?"

"She's in there, Boss—like shadow. No hear, no see. One man dead. She let my kids out. She—"

More shots from inside, and a brute scream of pain. Tiny groaned.

"My kids! No lights, Boss. She wreck 'em."

I said, "Keep 'em inside. Get lights from somewhere. There's a blizzard brewing on the pitch. If that mob gets started."

I went inside. There were torchbeams spearing the dark, men sweating and cursing, a smell of hot, wild bodies and the sweetness of fresh blood.

Somebody poked his head inside the flap and yelled, "The cops are here!"

I yelled back, "Tell 'em to clear the grounds if they can, without starting trouble. Tell—"

Somebody screamed. There was a sudden spangle of lights in the high darkness, balls of crimson and green and vicious yellow tumbling toward us, spots of death no bigger than your fist—the stinging fireflies of Ganymede. Laura had opened their case.

We scattered, fighting the fireflies. Somewhere a cage went over with a crash. Bodies thrashed, and feet padded on the packed earth—and somewhere above the noise was a voice that was sweet and silky and wild, crying out to the beasts and being answered.

I knew then why the brute top went crazy when Laska was around. It was kinship, not fear. She talked to them, and they understood.

I called her name.

Her voice came down to me out of the hot dark, human and painful with tears. "Jade! Jade, get out; go somewhere safe!"

"Laura, don't do this! For God's sake—"

"Your God, or mine? Our God forbids

us to know humans except to kill. How, if we kept men as you kept Laska?"

"Laura!"

"Get out! I'm going to kill as many as I can before I'm taken. I'm turning the animals loose on the pitch. Go somewhere safe!"

I fired at the sound of her voice.

She said softly, "Not yet, Jade. Maybe not at all."

I beat off a bunch of fireflies hunting for me with their poisoned stings. Cage doors banged open. Wild throats coughed and roared, and suddenly the whole side wall of the tent fell down, cut free at the top, and there wasn't any way to keep the beasts inside any more.

A long mob scream went up from outside, and the panic was on.

I COULD hear Tiny bellowing, sending his men out with ropes and nets and guns. Some huge, squealing thing blundered around in the dark, went past me close enough to touch, and charged through the front opening, bringing part of the top down. I was close enough behind it so that I got free.

I climbed up on the remains of the bally stand. There was plenty of light outside—blue-white, glaring light, to show me the packed mass of people screaming and swaying between the tents, trampling toward the exits, to show me a horde of creatures sweeping down on them, caged beasts free to kill, and led by a lithe and leaping figure in shining green.

I couldn't see her clearly. Perhaps I didn't want to. Even then she moved in beauty, like wild music—and she had a tail.

I never saw a worse panic, not even the time a bunch of Nahali swamp-edgers clemmed our pitch when I was a pony punk with Triangle.

The morgues were going to be full that night.

Tiny's men were between the bulk of

the mob and the animals. The beasts had had to come around from the far side of the tent, giving them barely time to get set. They gave the critters all they had, but it wasn't enough.

Laura was leading them. I heard her voice crying out above all that din. The animals scattered off sideways between the tents. One Martian sand-cat was dead, one quag kicking its life out, and that was all. They hadn't touched Laura, and she was gone.

I fought back, away from the mob, back into a temporarily empty space behind a tent. I got out my whistle and blew it, the rallying call. A snake-headed kibi from Titan sneaked up and tried to rip me open with its double-pointed tail. I fed it three soft-nosed slugs, and then there were half a dozen little moth-people bouncing in the air over my head, squeaking with fear and shining their great eyes at me.

I told them what I wanted. While I was yelling the Europeans swooped in on their wide wings and listened.

I said finally, "Did any of you see which way *she* went?"

"That way." One of the mothlings pointed back across the midway. I called two of the Europeans. The mothlings went tumbling away to spread my orders, and the bird-men picked me up and carried me across, over the crowd.

The animals were nagging at their flanks, pulling them down in a kind of mad ecstasy. There was a thin salt fog, and blood on the night wind, and the cage doors were open at last.

They set me down and went to do what I told them. I went alone among the swaying tents.

All this hadn't taken five minutes. Things like that move fast. By the time the Europeans were out of sight the mothlings were back, spotting prowling beasts and rolling above them in the air to guide men to them—men and geeks.

Geeks with armor-plated backs and six arms, carrying tear-gas guns and nets; lizard-men, fast and powerful, armed with their own teeth and claws and whatever they could pick up; spider-people, spinning sticky lassos out of their own bodies; the Europeans, dive-bombing the quags with tear gas.

The geeks saved the day for us. They saved lives, and the reputation of their kind, and the carnival. Without them, God only knows how many would have died on the pitch. I saw the mothlings dive into the thick of the mob and pick up fallen children and carry them to safety. Three of them died, doing that.

I went on, alone.

I was beyond the mob, beyond the fringe of animals. I was remembering Laura's voice saying, "Not yet, Jade. Maybe not at all." I was thinking of the walls being down and all California free outside. I was hearing the mob yell and the crash of broken tents, and the screams of people dying—my people, human people, with the claws bred out of them.

I was thinking—

Guns slamming and brute throats shrieking, wings beating fast against the hot hard glare, feet pounding on packed earth. I walked in silence, a private silence built around me like a shell. . . .

Four big cats slunk out of the shadows by the tent. There was enough light left to show me their eyes and their teeth, and the hungry licking of their tongues.

Laura's voice came through the canvas, tremulous but no softer nor more yielding than the blue barrel of my gun.

"I'm going away, Jade. At first I didn't think there was any way, but there is. Don't try to stop me. Please don't try."

I COULD have gone and tried to find a cop. I could have called men or half-men from their jobs to help me. I didn't. I don't know that I could have

made anybody hear me, and anyway they had enough to do. This was my job.

My job, my carnival, my heart.

I walked toward the tent flap, watching the cats.

They slunk a little aside, belly down, making hoarse, whimpering noises. One was a six-legged Martian sand-cat, about the size of an Earthly leopard. Two were from Venus, the fierce white beauties of the high plateaus. The fourth was a Mercurian cave-cat, carrying its twenty-foot body on eight powerful legs and switching a tail that had bone barbs on it.

Laura called to them. I don't know whether she said words in their language, or whether her voice was just a bridge for thought transference, one cat brain to another. Anyway, they understood.

"Jade, they won't touch you if you go."

I fired.

One of the white Venusians took the slug between the eyes and dropped without a whimper. Its mate let go a sobbing shriek and came for me, with the other two beside it.

I snapped a shot at the Martian. It went over kicking, and I dived aside, rolling. The white Venusian shot over me, so close its hind claws tore my shirt. I put a slug in its belly. It just yowled and dug its toes in and came for me again. Out of the tail of my eye I saw the dying Martian tangle with the Mercurian, just because it happened to be the nearest moving object.

I kicked the Venusian in the face. The pain must have blinded it just enough to make its aim bad. On the second jump its forepaws came down on the outer edges of my deltoids, gashing them but not tearing them out. The cat's mouth was open clear to its stomach.

I should have died right then. I don't know why I didn't, except that I didn't care much if I did. It's the guys that want to live that get it, seems like. The ones that don't care go on forever.

I got a lot of hot bad breath in my face and five parallel gashes in back, where its hind feet hit me when I rolled up. I kicked it in the belly. Its teeth snapped a half inch short of my nose, and then I got my gun up under its jaw and that was that. I had four shots left.

I rolled the body off and turned. The Martian cat was dead. The Mercurian stood over it, watching me with its four pale, hot eyes, twitching its barbed tail.

Laura stood watching us.

SHE looked just like she had the first time I saw her. Soft gold-brown hair and purple eyes with a little tilt to them, and a soft pink mouth. She was wearing the bronze metal-cloth dress and the bronze slippers, and there was still nothing wrong with the way she was put together. She glinted dully in the dim light, warm bronze glints.

She was crying, but there was no softness in her tears.

The cat flicked its eyes at her and made a nervous, eager whine. She spoke to it, and it sank to its belly, not wanting to.

Laura said, "I'm going, Jade."

"No."

I raised my gun hand. The big cat rose with it. She was beyond the cat. I could shoot the cat, but a Mercurian lives a long time after it's shot.

"Throw down your gun, Jade, and let me go."

I didn't care if the cat killed me. I didn't care if Death took me off piggy-back right then. I suppose I was crazy. Maybe I was just numb. I don't know. I was looking at Laura, and choking on my own heart.

I said, "No."

Just a whisper of sound in her throat, and the cat sprang. It reared up on its four hind feet and clawed at me with its four front ones. Only I wasn't where it thought I was. I knew it was going to

jump and I faded—not far, I'm no superman—just far enough so its claws raked me without gutting me. It snapped its head down to bite.

I slammed it hard across the nose with my gun. It hurt, enough to make it wince, enough to fuddle it just for a split second. I jammed the muzzle into its nearest eye and fired.

Laura was going off between the tents, fast, with her head down, just a pretty girl, mingling with the mob streaming off the pitch. Who'd notice her, except maybe to whistle?

I didn't have time to get away. I dropped down flat on my belly and let the cat fall on top of me. I only wanted to live a couple of seconds longer. After that, the hell with it!

The cat was doing a lot of screaming and thrashing. I was between two sets of legs. The paws came close enough to touch me, clawing up the dirt. I huddled up small, hoping it wouldn't notice me there under its belly. Everything seemed to be happening very slowly, with a cold precision. I steadied my right hand on my left wrist.

I shot Laura three times, carefully, between the shoulders.

The cat stopped thrashing. Its weight crushed me. I knew it was dead. I knew I'd done something that even experienced hunters don't do in nine cases out of ten. My first bullet had found the way into the cat's little brain and killed it.

It wasn't going to kill me. I pulled myself out from under it. The pitch was almost quiet now, the mob gone, the animals mostly under control. I kicked the dead cat. It had died too soon.

My gun was empty. I remember I clicked the hammer twice. I got more bullets out of my pocket, but my fingers wouldn't hold them and I couldn't see to load. I threw the gun away.

I walked away in the thin, cold fog, down toward the distant beat of the sea.

FAN MAGS

(In every issue we will review as many of the current crop of science fiction fan magazines as space allows. All magazines for review should be addressed to ASTONISHING STORIES, Fictioneers, Inc., 210 E. 43rd St., N. Y., N. Y.)

BONFIRE, published by Harry Jenkins, Jr., 2409 Santee Avenue, Columbia, South Carolina. Bi-monthly. Subtitled *Bulletin of the National Fantasy Fan Federation*, this publication is interesting as presenting the story of a new fan organization that is live-wire and working for the consolidation of science-fiction fan activities. At present, too much of the magazine is taken up with the organizational problems of the club—in-avoidable as long as it's in a formative stage. But when it begins publishing its "Dictionary of Science-fiction Terms," its "Introductory History of Science-fiction Fandom," etc., it should become a good deal more interesting.

FANTASY FICTION FIELD NEWSWEEKLY, published by Julius Unger, 1702 Dahill Road, Brooklyn, New York. Weekly; 5c. It is no longer complimentary to say that "FFF" is the best weekly science-fiction newsheet—there simply are no other contenders any more. But it can still be said that this lively fan mag continues to keep its readers well informed on what goes on in science fiction. Its previews of the forthcoming science-fiction magazines are valuable to those who want to keep on the lookout for the work of some particular author; its serially-published "Science-fiction Bibliography" is a handy list of several thousand fantasy stories in book form for the collector. Among its recent news scoops has been the story of the purchase of *Famous Fantastic Mysteries* by the publishers of this magazine.

THE FUTURIAN SPOTLIGHT, published by Graham Stone and Vol

Molesworth, 30, The Avenue, Randwick, New South Wales, Australia. Monthly; 5c. This single-sheeter is about the last surviving foreign fan magazine, except for one or two infrequent English publications. The latest issue to reach us contains a long and hilarious account of the Futurian Society of Sydney's dealings with Australia's counter-espionage forces. It seems the lads, prompted by laudable motives, decided to send copies of various science-fiction magazines to wounded members of the Australian Army. They wrote away to one of the Army base hospitals for permission. . . . Well, they're not sentenced to be shot at sunrise, and have even finally been given permission to send in the magazines—but it looked pretty bad for a while, when the local police department began investigating the source of the Society's funds in grim earnest!

POGORUS, published by Pogo and Rus Wood, 628 West 15th Street, San Pedro, California. Occasional; 10c. If this new magazine were more legible, it should rank high. The articles in it are entertaining enough—particularly the pungent editorial—but it takes patience and superb vision to read the blurry hektographing. A pity. Maybe time will correct this fault.

THE SCREWBALL, published by Paul Carter, Blackfoot, Idaho. Monthly; free. Latest issue reveals the disheartening news that the Alpha Centaurians, the fan club which sponsors *The Screwball*, now has a total membership of one, due to removal of all the other members to other cities. We hope this won't mean

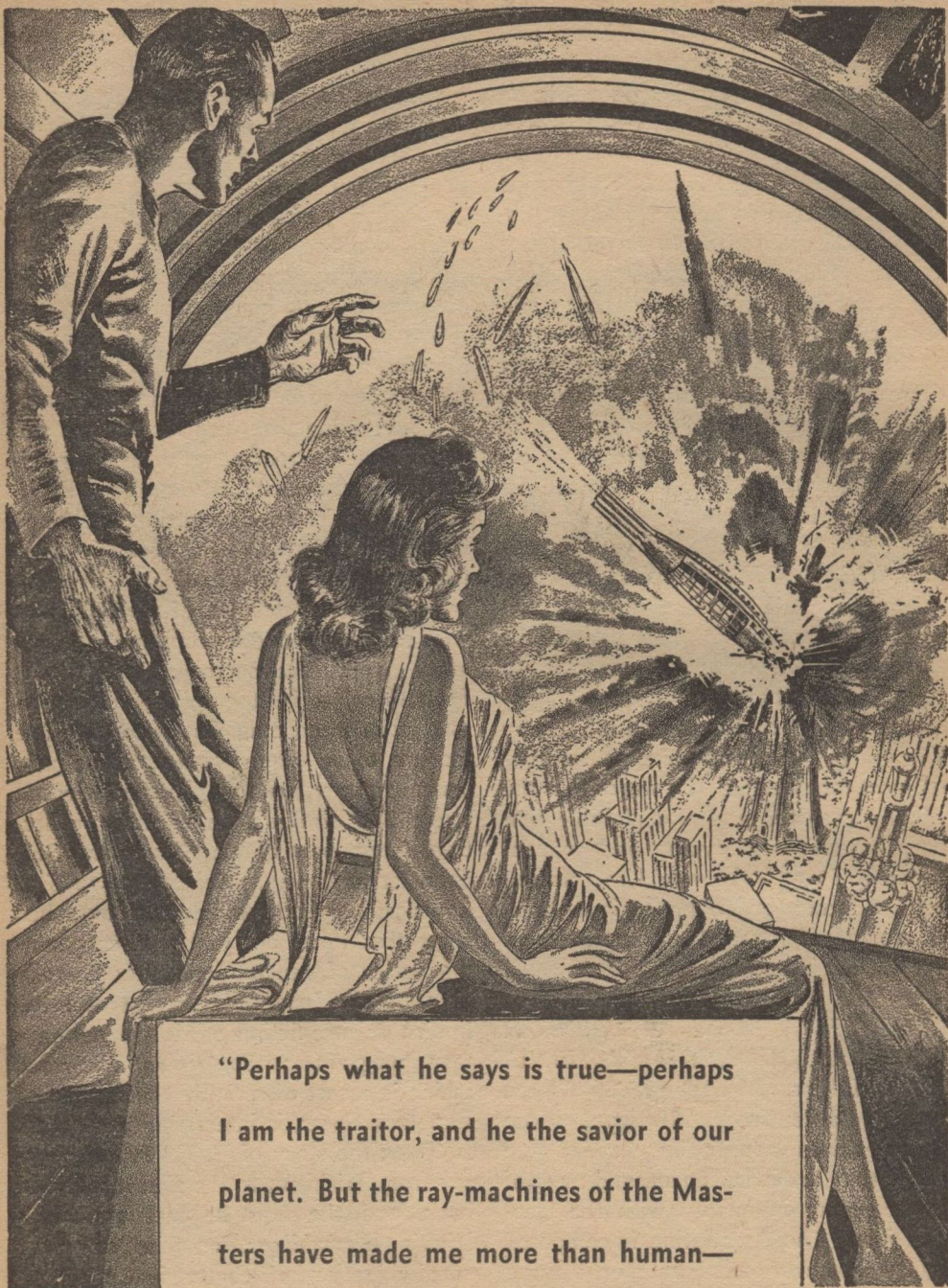
the end of this entertaining, carbon-copied little periodical. Its pleasant mixture of real news and vaporous imaginings is refreshing.

SHANGRI L'AFFAIRES, published by the Los Angeles Science Fantasy Society, 1055 Wilshire Boulevard, Los Angeles, California. Occasional; free. The LASFS is probably the world's oldest functioning fan club. This periodical, which is largely a digest of the minutes of the club's meetings, should be helpful to fan-club members who would like to pattern themselves after a successful organization. Other fans should find its sprightly style enjoyable.

SPACE TALES, published by Tom Ludowitz, 2310 Virginia, Everett, Washington. Bi-monthly; 5c. This is one of the most impressive-looking fan magazines to crop up in months, and a column of "Observation" by the ever-pleasin' Harry Warner, Jr., helps to make its contents well worth the reading. If it weren't for the unfunny cartoons and a deplorable tendency toward poor typing and mimeographing, *Space Tales* would rate an unqualified recommendation. As it is—well, it's a good effort, and an improvement over earlier issues.

THE FANTASY AMATEUR PRESS ASSOCIATION MAILING. Official Editor, Al Ashley, 86 Upton Avenue, Battle Creek, Michigan. More fan magazines appear by way of the FAPA than are independent, and most of them compare in quality with the freelance jobs. The Association is composed of fifty fans who collaborate on writing and publishing several dozen magazines of all shapes and sizes, and who mail them out jointly two or three times a year. The latest mailing, a fairly representative one, contains the following items: *Ceres*, a mimeographed eight-page maga-

zine of fiction, verse and opinion, published and partly written by A. L. Schwartz; *En Garde*, a beautifully printed magazine from Al and Abby Lu Ashley, who also produce the top-ranking independent fan mag, *Nova*; *The Fantasy Amateur*, the official organ of the FAPA, which contains all the news about the club's program and activities, plus a list of members and some pep talks by the officers; *Fanzine Service for Fans in Service*, a two-page leaflet listing all the fans known to be in the Army or Navy, and suggesting that such fans as are still in civilian life remember them by sending them science-fiction magazines; *Horizons*, Harry Warner's contribution, which is chatty, informal—and readable from first line to last; *Let's Look at the Record*, a pamphlet in defense of Technocracy, with which is bound a propaganda throw-away from Technocracy, Inc., itself; *Moonshine*, a hektographed publication that looks interesting, but is too illegible for one to be sure; *Mutant*, a one-page statement in regard to a proposed new fan mag; *The Nucleus*, an excellent collection of synopses of the Gilbert and Sullivan fantasy operas; *Science-fiction Goo*, a misleadingly-titled single mimeographed sheet that turns out to be an entertaining series of random opinions; *Supplement to the Imag-index*, a list of little-known science-fiction stories in non-fantasy magazines; *Sustaining Program*, which is a sort of serialized biography of Fan Jack Speer, is interesting as always; *A Tour*, the story of E. E. Evans' odyssey from Michigan to the East Coast and back, and the fans he met en route; *Walt's Wranglings*, another one-sheet conglomeration of chatty idle thoughts on science-fiction topics; *Yhos*, Art Widner's magazine containing a long anonymous statement on science fiction and war, plus a few interesting short comments on science fiction; and *Zizzle-pop*, which is odd—especially the title.



“Perhaps what he says is true—perhaps I am the traitor, and he the savior of our planet. But the ray-machines of the Masters have made me more than human—or less—and I must serve them, though

I die for it!”



EARTH, FAREWELL!

By JAMES MACCREIGH

CHAPTER ONE

Lords of the Vassal Earth

COLLARD came in to see me a while ago. He told me that they were nearly ready. I have an hour and a little; then it will be my turn.

I don't know what will happen. I think I will die when they put me under the rays of the machine and try to make me a creature of theirs, puppet to their renegade wills; when they try to make me flout the law and the wisdom of the Others. I want to die now, but the strength that the Others gave me forbids it. I can't die by my own hand. I tried poison. It doesn't work. I wish I could die.

But I have an hour yet. If at this eleventh hour something should happen and the rule of the masters be restored, I want to tell my story for those who will come after. Not for my own sake; for the sake of those who will be loyal to the Others.

I think it is deliberate, on Collard's part, that I can see the shadow of the machine from where I am. Through the transparency of the door that I cannot open I see a hall, and through a window in that hall leap in the lights from the flaming city around. And by coming close to the crystal door, peering to one side, I can see the machine, limned in the

dancing lights of the flames. I can hear the whir of it, its ominous drone, as the others like me are brought to it—and shattered by its radiant strength, their brains warped.

I am the strongest, and that is some consolation. They are saving me for the last. I think they are letting me see the machine to weaken me.

I shall not be weakened. I have writing materials; I will use them.

Listen—

TO MAKE sure there will be no sort of treachery, the Other People take full charge of the selection. The human governments on Earth are not strong and not well organized, but they are tricky enough to try to sneak someone into the Four and the Four who will not be entirely loyal to the masters. You know how the Earth governments are. It makes one ashamed he's an Earthman.

President Gibbs gave me the official send-off. I knew that I was to be selected as one of the Four and the Four, of course. I saw my marks on the honor list, and then the Other People's emissaries had been swarming all over the neighborhood for a couple of days, questioning my father and those who knew me. But it didn't seem real, somehow, until I got the sealed-channel wire that ordered me to zip down to Lincoln and see the president.

Things had been growing worse for a long time. There have always been troublesome crackpots on Earth, as long as we've had a history. Before the Others came, with their laws of science and sanity, it was even worse, of course.

But I'd never seen it as bad as this. In the tube to the rocketport I was accosted by a man, shabby and furtive, who seemed to know by my appearance and possibly by secret, underground ways, that I had been chosen. There was fierce urgency in his voice as he spoke to me. What he said was absurd—gibberish about the rights of humans to rule their own planet, about the intolerance and rigidity of the laws of the Others—but there was a certain strength in the way he said it.

I ordered him to leave me alone. Had there been a lawman around, I should have turned him in for speaking treason—though, with the corruption of the human courts, beyond doubt he would have gone free. I told him what I thought of him and his demented kind. I tried to explain to him, reasonably, how much good the Others had done Earth. How they had ended the folly of war and international dispute; the absurdity of democracy and so-called free elections. . . .

Well, he was not moved, nor had I expected him to be. But he saw, I know, from the way I spoke and the positive assurance in my manner, that I was no weakling.

I thought there were the beginnings of tears in his eyes as he turned away. But all the way down to Lincoln, for the full two hours of the journey, I was conscious that I was being observed. It only ended when I presented my order-wire to the armed human guards at the door and was admitted to the Presidential Mansion.

And then I was too absorbed to think much about the almost open insurrection that was threatening Earth. For the

guards conducted me to a door and I walked in.

I'm afraid I succumbed to a little emotion. One of the Other People was there—and an important one, too! You know that there are only seventy-seven of them on the Earth anyhow—never more, never less—and they keep pretty busy all the time. They have little time for humans, with their constant investigation into Earth's possibilities and resources and history—all, of course, for the good of humanity, despite Collard's lies.

It's a wonderful thing about the Other People—they always work, one hundred per cent of the time. Human beings are handicapped because they have to sleep, sure. But even their waking hours many of them spend in totally useless things—playing games, writing books, reading, talking—great Strength, how much talking they do! I'm human-born, I realize, and I shouldn't be flattering myself. But even the Other People have said that I am almost more like a member of their own race.

That is a proud thing to remember—though the mind machine may blank that memory out for me within the hour, or make me hate that memory. It may make me human again.

I fear that.

But there was an Other in President Gibbs' mansion. I'd seen the Others before, one or two of them. But this one was the first I'd seen that had the wide orange circles around his irises to show he was a member of the king class. Tall, gray-skinned, looking as though he were constantly overbalanced by the weight of the flapping, ponderous fat-wings that grew out of his spindly back, he was an absorbing sight. They say that the Others used to swim around in the water of their home planet, long ago. I don't know, but those fat-wings were not made to work in any atmosphere, even the thin one of their light, dying world. They look some-

thing like a seal's flippers, but rigidly muscular and utterly boneless.

As a member of the king class, the Other had a name. It was Greg. He said, "You are Ralph Symes. You have been chosen as one of the Four and the Four. Come up before me."

I MADE my feet move, and walked up to him. I stood before him and he looked at me out of his tawny, orange-rimmed eyes. He was seated in a crystal, thronelike chair, but it was on a pedestal and his eyes were level with mine. They looked deep inside me, dizzily deep. They penetrated—Strength, how they penetrated my innermost consciousness! There was a heaviness in those tawny eyes, and a sort of dark thing—a chill, cutting thing that had me swinging by my long, furry tail from some antediluvian tree, while my ape-brothers chattered and giggled around me.

Then I remembered that I was human only by the mischance of birth, and one of the Four and the Four by choice. Then I could look back at him. Not insolently. If I had been insolent to Greg I would have died at his hand then and there—or at my own. But I could look into his eyes and see that the darkness was the shadow of a mind so superior that I couldn't see into it, and that the heaviness was strength, harsh and raw, but still just to those who, like me, served it.

Then President Gibbs stood up. I hadn't seen him before, though he was an impressive figure for a human. He had wanted to be of the Four and the Four in his youth, and had almost succeeded. Only a physical weakness had prevented him from becoming of the elect. But he had become president later, which was something of a consolation.

He said, "Citizen Ralph Symes, you have been honored by selection as one of the Four and the Four. You have subscribed to the code of the Vassal Earth.

You know the penalties if, as a member of the Four and the Four, you fail to carry out the wishes of Greg and his honored fellows. You will begin your course of training within the next half hour. One hundred days thereafter you will be given your instructions. What they will be I do not know, nor does any human save the Four and the Four." He handed me a large, ornate box, paused a moment before he went on, looking at me thoughtfully.

"This," he said at length, "is your crown. Cherish it. Now it is only a symbol of your status, but when it is attuned to your mind and the power is released at the end of the hundred days, remember—it is the most powerful shield and weapon ever conceived. Never use it carelessly."

Greg, always working, not taking part in the discussion just then, had been doing intricate and mysterious things with a small knobbed apparatus on the arm of his crystal chair. He looked up from it after a second and stared at me.

He said, "They are ready for you. Take him to the ship, President." He almost emphasized the "president", but not quite. It was with his thin-whiskered cheeks that he pointed it up, made it a humorous title that you might give a child. His lips quivered and drew together, almost in a smile.

The Others never quite smile, though. Not like humans, who laugh and laugh at nothing.

I would have gone wherever he commanded, but I'm afraid I hesitated. I looked around and was conscious of what I had missed in the quick excitement of this thing. Just the President, Greg and myself; no one else was in the great chamber.

"Pardon," I said. "Forgive me. I do not mean to question *you*, but when will the presentation—"

Greg's cheeks twitched again, then were

abruptly still. "Presentation?" he said, so softly that I almost missed the note of steel in his voice. "What do you mean?"

"Why," I floundered, "the presentation—the investiture. When I am given my crown. My induction as one of the Four and the Four, when the assembly is held, and the rejoicings. Forgive me," I said, "but I had expected—"

President Gibbs interrupted, "Due to the unsettled conditions this year—" but Greg waved him aside.

"There will be no formal presentation," said Greg, and the steel was naked now. "None at all. You have your crown. Do you question me?"

Disappointment swarmed up inside me. It was what I had always dreamed of. I could hardly bear to have it taken from me. The crowds, the cheers, my father, excited, seeing me for the last time. . . .

But I was now one of the Four and the Four, and I couldn't have human emotions. I said, "Forgive me," for the third time.

That was all.

We left Greg there, sitting and fumbling with his chair-arm apparatus. The President escorted me out—and *he* opened the door for *me*.

I got into the zip-ship that was waiting, and was seated in a sealed compartment. I heard the rockets roar a second later. The ship zoomed off.

I fell asleep shortly. I think a hypno-phone was planted in the chamber, for I woke up in a strange bed in a strange room. But before I slept, I was thinking, thinking of the strangeness of the fact that the Other People had permitted a break in their routine. The presentation ceremonies were a part of the whole business of the Four and the Four, part of the rule of the Other People over Vassal Earth.

The unsettled conditions that President Gibbs had mentioned must go even deeper than I thought.

I WOKE up in a strange room. . . . Well, I am no traitor, though I may be about to become one, here in this room with a city burning about me and an empire dying. They shall not make me one, whatever devilish—or human—torture they bring to bear on me. Even though Collard has turned renegade to the Four and the Four, even though I have added to his disgrace and mine by not killing him when I might have, I shall not betray what I have sworn to revere.

What I learned in those one hundred days I am bound by oaths on the linked triangles of the Other People not to reveal. I will not tell, though Collard may.

I learned much. I am no longer quite human, even in appearance. Great strength is mine now, and I, like the Others, need never sleep. Solid, tormented days we spent in the ray chambers, I and the other three young men who were chosen with me. Had you seen us before the one hundred days, seen the four of us together, you might have thought we were brothers. The rigid tests of the masters insured that, with their emphasis on great height, strength and vitality.

But when the hundred days were through—we were identical; stamped of the same mold, forged in the same fires of growth, milled on the same sharp edge of learning.

The animal pinkness of human flesh left us, and our skin took on a greenish cast, as chlorophyll cells were absorbed into us. We can swallow up pure light energy and convert it, like a plant, to heat and force. Our flesh was transmuted in other ways, to great tensile strength. Oh, we have to eat still. But the food is only for the replacement of cells which die and wear off, not for energy.

The one hundred days passed quickly. Collard and I, and two others who do not matter, being dead, were the four youths. The Four and the Four are not all trained

together. The four maidens are taught and rebuilt to be simple recorders, animate libraries for the use of the Others.

They also are placed in ray chambers, but the rays that flood their bodies, tear them down and rebuild them, are of a different order. The retentive capacity of their brains is increased, and the other functions become lesser. Physically they are not changed, for they need not be. The wise Others do not tamper with what need not be changed.

This is what is done with the four maidens. I may tell it, for it is no secret. Collard will be on his way back to Earth soon, arrowing through the void at mind speed, the first human to make the trip in that direction.

I pray that the Others will be prepared for him. But whether they are or not this secret is out.

The Others on Earth are constantly studying, always learning. All men know what they study—the Earth, and its unexplored potentialities. What they learn is telepathically transcribed on to the ray-sensitized brains of the Four maidens. The maidens learn to be telepathic in their one hundred days. They receive a burden of knowledge, four of them each year.

And when they have absorbed all that has been learned by the Others in their year, they are sent back to the green world from which the Others came.

The four youths bring them there; that is our destiny.

I shall not tell you how, for if Collard dies that must remain a secret. But the crowns we wear have much to do with it. They are, as Gibbs said, a perfect weapon and a perfect shield. They are also a perfect vehicle. With their aid we can spurn gravity, cast the Earth aside, cleave the thin air at light speed. Nor need we breathe, and so we can travel the space between the planets.

ENOUGH of that. I can still see the machine in my mind's eye, and the flames still dance above the stricken city. My hour, too, is running short.

The one hundred days ended, and we were not men any more. We were gathered together, the four of us, plus the two Others who had supervised our training. One of the Others spoke, bid us take off the human garments we wore and dress in purple-red coveralls, ornamented with the linked triangles of the Others. Self-heating, perfectly insulated, these would prevent our absorbing too much energy from the naked rays of the sun while still in Earth's vicinity, yet would keep us warm when we attained outer space, en route to the far star around which spun the planet of the Others.

While he was talking, a zip-ship sighed into the air overhead and slowly settled down beside us, the wide purple fans of its underjets lighting up the darkness all around. Overhead the calm stars twinkled. There was no moon.

A couple of humans—special police, clad in tunics and emblems like ours, but without the crowns—were running the ship. One opened the port and stepped out. His companions inside handed limp white figures out to him—the four maidens. He deposited them gently on the ground. Then, without a word to any of us, he got back in the ship. The port closed and it lay quiescent, waiting for the girls to be removed so that its jets could flare without cremating them on the spot.

There were no last-minute instructions. We knew what we were to do. Collard and I and the other two walked over to the unconscious, unbreathing maidens, whose life-processes had been suspended by the science of the Others to fit them for the journey through airlessness.

We picked them up, clasped them under our arms. They were light burdens, for

they were only girls. Attractive girls, surpassingly beautiful, even, for only superior physical and mental specimens get into the Four and the Four.

The Others stood and watched us, without words. There was nothing they needed to tell us. Collard was the leader, he with his strange streak of humanity in him, human strength that did not have the chill rigidity of the strength of the masters, but could bend and give way where their strength broke, and then return; Collard looked around at the remainder of us and saw that we were ready; Collard seized the leadership, and it was he who said the word of command.

And all of us, four youths and maidens, set out on an incredible journey. Each man of us raised up his arm. Each of us willed the pull of gravity to relinquish its hold, denied the existence of weight and Earth-pull. We rose into the air with gathering speed.

A moment, and we were shrieking through the dense air of the lower strata, not looking down or back, but conscious that the Earth was dwindling underneath. A moment after that and the air was a thin, weak thing that no longer held us back. Coldness began to seep in. Our lungs worked hard, until the soothing, tingling power of the crowns and the heat suits took hold, and warmth and air were luxuries we did not need.

And then, not abruptly, there was no air.

The trip may have been long; I have no way of knowing, for the time was not like the passage of hours or days on a planet. Onward we fled, faster until even the stars were crawling about in space, and we could see them slide slowly behind us. Their colors changed and disappeared. Behind us the stars were red; ahead, deep, smoky violet. And then, quickly, all the stars were ahead of us, with different colors being the only thing that showed where they really were, as we caught up

with and passed the light rays that came from behind. Faster than light—ininitely faster—we went, while the stars crept slowly around and winked from violet to red as we fled past them.

Then we knew by the signs we had been taught to watch for that we had arrived. And our wills, greater than human and multiplied by the crowns we wore, changed their impulse and concentrated on slowing us, stopping us.

Picture us there in space, the Four and the Four. Four men whose only life was in the mind for that time, whose bodies might as well not have been. And the girls we carried across the void, unmoving and rigid as ourselves. . . .

But we slowed and slowed more, and a green planet detached itself from the twinkling cosmos of stars that again were beating at us with white rays and blue, and red and yellow and all of the normal colors. The green planet grew larger.

It might have been a dozen seconds, and it might have been a thousand years since our journey had begun. But there we were, standing on a strange blue-green earth, moving our arms and legs again, breathing once more. And unhurriedly there walked toward us one of the Others, moving without strain on this light world, looking at us as he came. He had been waiting. He had known when we would come. . . .

CHAPTER TWO

Green Planet of Madness

COLLARD looked in at me. I cannot have much time left, by the expression on his face. There was pity there, and a curious friendliness that frightens me. He must believe that his mind machine will warp my brain, make me betray the Others. Absurd! Why, his machine is compounded of the science of the Others and their superhuman arti-

sanry. He stole it from them, as he stole the strength and intellect they gave him in his training for the Four and the Four. He—

It does not matter. I must be brief.

There were bad things even on the planet of the Others. I was prepared for that, for I knew that nothing was perfect, not even in the wisdom of the masters. Collard was not prepared for it, with his curious human optimism that could not be wiped out of him; with his impossible ideals.

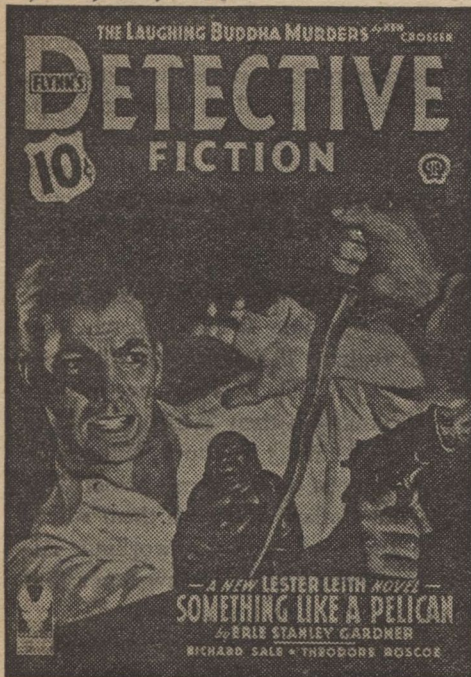
The one who had been waiting for us when we landed asked no questions, made no remarks. He beckoned us to follow him, and we carried the girls into a strangely un-ornate building, that looked as though it had been poured in magenta glass around the thing, it was built to house. It had odd shapes and angles, curious wavy buttresses cascading away from the main structure, but they were not

for decoration. You could see that they were needful to the purpose of the building.

Inside—there were rows upon rows of slabs, many empty and waiting. But most were in use. At the head of each of them there was a mind machine, like the mind machine the Others used to read and mold thoughts in the tests for the Four and the Four, like the machine that Collard cannot wait to use on me. At the foot was a cylinder of crystal, and a box under each cylinder that droned and pulsed. And in the space between, on each slab, there lay the figure of a girl of the Four and the Four.

A hundred of them at least there were, in this one room. There are four each year, and the pick of Earth's young girls for a quarter of a century lay somnolent on plastic, molded slabs there before us.

Many of them were no longer beautiful. Some were no longer human.



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Each cylinder of crystal at the slab-foot was filled with a bluish red fluid that was blood, and each cylinder had two flexible crystal tubes running out from it, sinking themselves at the ends into the flesh of the girls. That was what gave life to the girls who had been of the Four and the Four. That and nothing else, for they were unmoving, rigid. The eyes of each girl were closed, and only slowly did their bosoms rise and fall; only slowly did the pale veins pulsate in their throats.

The Other gestured, and we carried the girls in, put them on empty slabs at the end of the long row. We left them there, and another of the masters came in and opened a case that held sharp steel knives. He took one out, slowly, carefully, and walked over to the slabs with their new occupants. At the door Collard paused, turned, looked back. The little muscles under his cheeks were quivering and his jaw was rigid.

I touched his arm. He looked at me uncomprehendingly, then turned and walked out with the rest of us.

Two more of the Others passed us going in.

I did not look back to see what they did. But they wore mind-reading crowns, and I believe they were going already to tap the reservoir of knowledge we had brought them.

THAT first thing sowed a seed of doubt in Collard. It did not in me, for I was and still am aware that humans, even those of the Four and the Four, live only by the tolerance of the Others and at their disposal. Still, it was—not pleasant.

What hurt even me, and what turned Collard into the wretched creature of rebellion that he is now, was something that happened only slowly and took a long time to penetrate. It came to us gradually that we had done our job. We

were no longer necessary. That for which we had been chosen and trained had been accomplished, and we were through.

Oh, the Others gave us work to occupy us. I tended a machine in a great hall where a thousand wheels revolved and shifted direction. It was work that was pleasant, and it was necessary for someone to do it, for even the best machine must have a brain to back it up.

Collard had work, too. With delicate, tiny spectrosopes and other miraculous tools he had to sort and analyze specimens of minerals from the deep sub-surface regions of their own planet that the Others were still exploring. A machine could have done Collard's job, but there was no machine. And there were too few samples to warrant constructing one, while a human could do the work.

Those two who had come with us had work also. And we met more than a score of other men in that city to which we were taken, a short distance from the crypt where the dead-alive girls lay on their plastic slabs, their minds open to the probing of the Others. Only a little more than a score of men were there, though, and they could not tell us what had happened to the men who were missing.

Our jobs kept us busy. But they were—unsatisfactory. What we did could have been done by anyone on the human Earth.

Those who had been on the green planet for the longest time showed clearly that they had realized their unimportance, and were hurt by it. There were lines in their faces, bleakness in their eyes.

They would not talk much, those who had been longest on the green planet. Not to me. But Collard was with them whenever he and they were not working. Always they were talking in low tones that became silent when I came near.

A dozen weeks, in the green world's time, that went on. Collard spoke to me hardly at all, though often I saw him

watching me as though he were about to say something. He never did.

Then he disappeared.

FIVE of the older men went with him. They walked out of our living quarters to work—and never returned.

The Others came around several times then to look us over, murmuring and clicking to themselves in their incomprehensible tongue. And I saw that other men were beginning to show lines curving around the corners of their eyes, to keep silent and look watchfully at everything that went on. For days it was clear that the Others were giving us unwonted attention. Wherever I went there were always one or two of them somewhere about, working at something but looking at me from time to time, almost speculatively, almost with apprehension. From the men I quartered with, I learned that they had the same experience. I could not understand—

Then I saw Collard again.

I was walking to work, as the Others preferred us to do. We could have flown by the telekinetic mind power our crowns gave us, but they thought it better that we walk always, to prevent our muscles from atrophying through disuse. My way lay by the great mausoleum where slept the girls of the Four and the Four, ready for the giving of information when the Others wanted it.

I had been resting for a while, an hour or two. It had been the first time in several days. It was about an hour before dawn. Still dark, I could nevertheless see a hint of the pure white rays of the green planet's sun silhouetting the mountains on the horizon, twenty miles away. I looked at them, without much interest. . . .

Then abruptly I did become interested. Half a dozen flickering, dodging black spots, winking with faint white flame now

and again like monstrous fireflies, spun about in the sky somewhere between the mountains and me. As I watched they grew larger, bearing down on me at great speed. They were humans like myself. The lights they bore were the streams of force from their crowns, surging out as they drove themselves up in great bounds, then fell freely forward until they lost momentum and drove up again. They dared not, of course, use the full thrust of their crowns in the atmosphere.

What were five men doing, flitting about the sky in such haste, using their crowns against the wishes of the Others?

I watched. They drove on till they were directly overhead, then dropped at the end of one of their sweeping parabolas until they were almost on the ground. A faint thread of white flame leaped out from the outstretched arm of each, and they gently touched ground.

Quickly they scattered out, running. Three of them made for the great building that housed the unconscious girls, shining in the star-glow dead ahead. Another stood where he was, staring around, dragging a thing from his belt that looked weaponlike, sinister. The fifth came pelting madly in my direction.

He saw me then and brought up short. "Symes!" he said.

It was Collard. I was speechless. I saw that he was holding one of the weapons. It was a blaster like those carried by the deputies of the Others on Earth, but larger and much more deadly-looking, glinting evilly in the starlight. It was not pointed at me, but dangled slackly from his hand. *What does he need one of those for?* I wondered. In his crown lay the seeds of greater destruction than a blaster could wreak. It did not occur to me that, against the Others who constructed them, the crowns were impotent. . . .

"Symes," he said. "Symes, I'm glad to see you. Are you one of us?"

"One of you?" I repeated. "I don't—"

His face fell. "I see," he said slowly. "I thought for a moment— Well, it was absurd. Symes," he said, and his hand swung up with the blaster leveled at me, "I'm going to have to inconvenience you. Take off your crown! And don't try to blast me with it—the gun will go off!"

WELL, I know I should have made the effort. My life is nothing—much less than nothing, compared with what I might have saved had I hurled the destroying force of my intellect at Collard in that moment. I might have saved an empire if I had dared. I am willing to die at the command of the least of the Others, for any reason they care to give or for none. I should have died then, by willing Collard out of life and letting his weapon annihilate me. But I hesitated.

And then it was too late, for the other human with a gun had seen us, and came running up. With the two of them there I could not destroy either, for their crowns reinforced each other, made them invulnerable to my lone will.

Unwillingly, I reached up and took the crown from my head, handed it to Collard.

He stared at me a second, and his eyes held a hint of that curious expression I had seen there before that meant that he held a strange regard for me, would not willingly do me harm if he could avoid it. He was clearly speculating, coming to a decision. Then the light died out of his eyes and he dropped my crown abruptly to the ground, stamped it savagely into disintegration with one heavy foot.

I must have cried out, for Collard said swiftly, "This is too important, Symes. I can't take a chance that you might get the crown back. You've been indoctrinated too thoroughly, believe too firmly in the righteousness and perfection of

the masters. You wouldn't believe me, even though I proved to you what I can prove. Even though I showed you that the Others are not the protectors and benevolent friends of humanity—but tyrants who plan to destroy us!"

I laughed, but there was no humor in this thing. Collard was dangerous and insane. I said sharply, "Don't be a fool, Collard. What you say is a lie, and I must report you for it. But even if it weren't, what difference would it make? The Others—"

"The Others are glorious and their will is beyond question," Collard finished for me. "Whatever they wish must be. . . . I knew it would do no good."

The other man, who had been watching us intently, said, "We're wasting time, Collard. They'll be ready soon, and the ship will be here."

Collard nodded. Still to me, he said, "You'll have to come with us, Symes. Either that, or I'll kill you now. I don't want to do that."

His eyes were hard as the vacuum between the stars, and I did not want to die. There might come a chance. . . .

"All right," I said. "I'll come along. Where?" There was no point in arguing with him, since he was mad.

With the gun he gestured toward the building ahead where slept the girls. To the other man he said, "Stay here. I don't think there will be any trouble. They must be nearly ready by now."

I walked ahead of him to the building. We went inside, and it took a moment for my eyes to adjust to the soft light inside, after the darkness of the night without. Then I saw that which was horrible.

A group of Others, three of them, stood in awful silence by the wall, facing it, their backs covered by a human with a blaster. The other two men were working busily at the blood-tanks that fed the unconscious maidens, opening them at

the top and pouring into each a few drops of fluid from a crystal flask. Not all of the girls were so treated, the older ones being spared.

When they had finished this strange procedure, having doctored the plasma of forty maidens or more, they returned swiftly to the first. Not a glance did they spare for Collard or me, beyond a single incurious look as we entered. They must have had full confidence in him and his judgment, and they were obviously working against time. They totally ignored the savage, silent backs of the three Others.

One of the two raced into another chamber, returned wheeling a portable machine whose purpose I could not guess. Quickly I learned, though, for he dragged a tube ending in a sort of funnel from the interior of the machine, pressed it to the face of the first maiden in line. His companion took a quick glance at the color of the blood-fluid in the tank—which was reddening, becoming more like the blood of a normal human—then leaped to the head of the slab and, with an abrupt motion, jerked the ends of the tubes from where they were imbedded in the girl's pale shoulders!

I might have jumped forward—I must have started involuntarily, and perhaps I cried out. It was too horrible, almost blasphemous! But Collard said sharply, "Hold on!" and I felt the muzzle of his blaster thrust into my back. I slumped back, knowing that this was not the time. I prayed that the Others beside the wall, with their superhuman senses, would know that I was not of this terrible conspiracy, that I was determined to do what I could to bring Collard and the others to punishment.

I saw at once what the wheeled machine was for. Just as the one human tore the blood-tubes from the girl's flesh, the other touched a stud on the machine, and it began to sigh and pulse rhythmically. I saw the girl's breasts rise and fall,

spasmodically, then more regularly. The first man had a finger on her pulse, and after a second he nodded. They stopped the machine, wheeled it to the next girl, repeated the process.

It was frightful. Blasphemous. The Others, in their wisdom, had brought these maidens from Earth, with a mind full of knowledge in each, knowledge that they wanted and so should have. Here were members of the most sacred body of humans ever to exist—the Four and the Four, chosen by the Others to bring this knowledge to them—deliberately destroying the fruits of the mission for which they had been selected! My mind reeled; I thought desperately of a million things I might do to stop this madness. But there was nothing, not yet.

THE awakened girls were sitting up, walking around, with dazedness in their eyes. They seemed afraid, but not of the two men who had awakened them. Always and always their looks went to the Others standing by the wall, motionless as three statues, even their fat-wings ceasing to ripple. There was terror in the eyes of the girls when they saw the Others, naked and unashamed terror.

I wondered at the Others, standing there so still. It was incredible that they should not make an effort to halt what was going on.

The timing of the renegades was splendid. What they had been given by the Others in the way of keen intellect and sharp sense, they put to full use in their revolt. Just as the last of the treated maidens was awakening there came a soft purring from overhead. I looked out the door just in time to see a great robot-operated cargo ship lowering itself gently to the ground on its jets. The cargo hatch swung open, and a man jumped out, came running over. The guard Collard had left came running too, and all five of the renegade humans—all but the one who

guarded the Others and kept a watchful eye on myself—began herding the bewildered girls into the yawning hatch of the ship.

They were all in, and so was I, and so were the renegades, except for the one who guarded the three Others and was backing toward us watchfully, gun in hand, when—

The Others struck!

THAT was what the three masters had been doing, so stiff and rigid there against the wall. That was what had been their weapon and defense.

The brains of the Others are mighty. Without the aid of the crowns, with only the inborn intellect they possess, they can by a tremendous effort of will communicate directly, mind to mind, among themselves. It is a hard thing for even them, and it requires a concentration impossible except under the urgency of a great crisis.

They had done it—had summoned help!

Far above us, a cloud of wan stars appeared in the sky, so high that they were not even pinpoints but merely a blending glow of light. Collard, standing in the hatch, saw them first. It took a second for him to realize what they were; then he acted at top speed.

He shouted to the man backing toward us, who spun immediately and dashed into the ship. Collard swung the hatch shut and at once the man who had usurped the place of the robot pilot touched the cams that sent the ship into the sky. Vertically up for a couple of seconds, then flashing forward at immense speed, we fled.

"Zip-ships!" Collard yelled. "A whole flock of them—and they're diving down on us, trying to crash us! We'll have to get out of here!"

The ship was traveling at an incredible pace already, the plume of the rocket jets behind us stretching back for half a mile. And our speed was growing rapidly as

the man at the controls ruthlessly jammed on every erg of power. But through the transparent skyport overhead I could see other jets flashing brighter as the robot pilots of the massed ships that followed swerved their course, arced around to follow us as we streaked along. They had the advantage of altitude; gravity was helping their straining jets to beat our speed—but we had a human brain to direct our ship. I cursed the man at the controls, planned a thousand ways to reach him and crash the stolen ship into the ground. But there was always the blaster in the hand of the guard, and it was pointed at me.

Collard tore his eyes from the ships that raced down on us from overhead and leaped to the side of the man at the controls. He spoke urgently, gesticulating, and the man nodded. A quick gesture of his hand on the levers, and our ship spun end-over-end, looped up and over and was backtracking in a split second. Again he touched the lever, and the ship spun about in a quarter turn, always going up. The robot mechanisms could never quite keep up to his hair-trigger reactions; each maneuver brought us up a little higher, then a little lower and farther behind. The ship reeled and bucked till I found my hard flesh bruised from being jolted against the unyielding walls, and always we were nearer to safety.

We had run a full circle, and were back above the sleep-palace again, plunging in the direction of the city of the Others when a new flight of ships appeared dead ahead, arrowing at us. Their jets were invisible now, in the gathering light of day, and only the dawnlight glinting off their polished hulls revealed them. Collard spun around and saw more ships behind, and still another flight racing over the horizon at us from one side.

We had a moment's grace, until the flights of robot-planes should coalesce. Then it would end.

With exultation I saw the inevitability of our destruction, without fear for my own life, which was surely doomed. But Collard saw what was ahead too—and Collard acted.

He lipped a word to the pilot, and there was instant comprehension in the man's eyes. Grimly he touched another lever, one that was not on the flight-control bank, one that had nothing to do with driving the ship.

THE floor fell out from under us, and we were dropping, all of us, all but Collard and the pilot. The pilot had released the cargo compartment, let it drop from the ship, while the empty hulk raced on with a spurt of speed as the compartment ceased to drag at it. Under us the feeble flares of the braking rockets, designed for emergencies only, went into operation. But still we were falling, fifty of us in a thin-walled thing that was never meant for flight. Our speed was reduced, we had a chance to survive—but we were falling.

Through the open end of the compartment, where the air was whistling past as we fell, we could see the ship streaking onward, looking strangely skeletal with a section out of the middle of it. We saw it swerve in its course as the onrushing flight of robot ships stabbed at it. It dodged madly, fled almost through the midst of them. It got through the first wave of them, a dozen or more, and then it was over the city.

The end was there; for it was ringed by robot ships. It screamed up in a short zoom that broke as it nosed over and plunged for the ground, its jets blazing behind it. It was heading for one of the towers of the Others, the central tower in which lay great and mysterious mechanisms—for what purpose they operated, I did not know.

I thought I saw two tiny black figures, jetting white light of their own, flung

away from the diving ship in mid-air.

Then it struck. A volcano of energy flared up from the stricken tower, dimming the light of the risen sun for a second of ultimate violence. As it settled, smaller lights of explosions puffed up all about, one at a time, then by dozens. The robot ships were crashing, plunging into the ground as if their automatic pilots had lost control!

I darted a glance below us, where we were coming down with too much speed in a plaza on the outskirts of the city of the Others. The ground was rushing up at us, too fast. I had a quick, insane glimpse of figures—figures that were not men, but the Others—huddled on the ground in distorted attitudes all over the square. Strangely, they made no attempt to rise, or to escape the down-plunging hulk we were in.

Abruptly, a group of jets on one side of our compartment spurted wildly, then were dead. The cubicle lurched wildly, then pinwheeled, the jets no longer keeping us up but spinning us end over end as we dropped to the closed ground. There was a splintering sound of cataclysm. My head struck against a wall and then there was blackness. We had come to earth.

CHAPTER THREE

Awakening in Hell

COLLARD was standing over me when I woke up, his eyes filled with that familiar mixture of anxiety and mistrust. His crown was not on his head, but a blaster was jammed negligently in his belt and his right hand was never far from the butt of it.

He said, "You're not hurt. You can thank the Others for that. Five of the girls were killed, but it takes a lot to bother a man of the Four and the Four. Just take a minute and rest up. I want to talk to you."

I felt like I'd been beaten with clubs, but I pushed myself up and looked around. What I saw was fantastic—absurd—frightful! All about there lay corpses, the bodies of the Others. They were dead, but without a mark on them, as though they had perished in some weird pandemic. I could not understand.

I looked at Collard. "You've killed them," I said, but it was not an accusation, for I simply could not believe that it had happened. I had never seen a dead master before; I had not known that they could die.

He shook his head. "No," he said cryptically. "The Others are still alive."

"Alive?" I gasped. "But—"

"Their bodies are dead," he said carefully. "At least, they're dead as any machine is dead, when the power is turned off. The Others themselves—their minds and egos—are . . . Well, look." He held out one hand to me, showed me a capsule of coppery metal. "This," he said solemnly, "is what you are so devoted to. This is one of the masters."

I reached up automatically, touched it. It was curiously chill, as though it had been in outer space for weeks. I fondled it, looked at it. . . . Then what Collard had said penetrated.

"You fool," I said. "What are you—"

He held up a hand, took back the coppery capsule.

"I'm not lying," he sighed, "but I didn't expect you to believe me. Well, let me tell you anyhow. The Others were robots. Where they came from, how they came into being, perhaps they could tell you, though I doubt it. Certainly, I can't. But all they were was clever machines—oh, made of organic materials, for the most part, yes. But a machine can be organic in composition. The robots were activated from without, supplied with energy from the central sending station that we crashed into and annihilated. When the power stopped—they stopped.

"They are unharmed. That is why we are removing these capsules—which contain the mind of the robot—from their bodies. You see, the power might be turned on by some of those who, like you, are still under the domination of the Others. We can't chance that."

I looked around, bewildered. For the first time I saw that the sending tower was still blazing furiously, sending up a tower of unbelievably thick white smoke. Other, lesser pyres all around marked where the robot ships had crashed. I looked back at Collard.

He was smiling at me. I wondered at his smile, open and sincere, warm. I wondered—until I understood.

I stood up. "You had me going," I admitted. "I understand now. All right. You killed these Others, and you dare not admit it to me. You are a rebel—a heretic—a renegade. You must be punished, and it seems that I am the only one who can do it. Collard," I said, "draw your gun. I'm going to kill you."

His smile faded, but he made no move for his gun. He looked at me for a long second. Then, just as I was about to spring for him, he said quietly, "Take him."

I had been a fool! Two pairs of arms grabbed me from behind, and pinioned me. I struggled, but I was weak and there were twice as many of them. I fought them all the way, but they brought me here, to this room. And there they left me.

COLLARD came back in a while ago to tell me that I had five minutes. He has been reading what I have written—I let him, because it does not matter. I have given up hope of getting this to those it should reach, even as I have given up hope of dying. Collard was too smart for me; he left his blaster outside when he came in with another like him. Otherwise I would have died at the

muzzle of his blaster—and I might have taken him with me.

Collard has been talking to me as he read. He says I am deliberately deceiving myself, omitting important things. He says that I should not refer to the machine he is going to use on me as a torture machine. He says that the Others used the same machine on me during the hundred days of training, repeatedly; that they indoctrinated me with it, very thoroughly, and that all he is going to do is to cancel out what they impressed on my mind.

That may be true. But I do not want it canceled out; I do not want to become a traitor to the Others. What Collard has said may be true, in part; it may be that the Others were robots, the mechanical descendants of some organic race that once lived on this green planet and disappeared without a trace. I don't know; it doesn't matter. The Others were—the Others. I swore to obey them and to serve them.

I do not want to be forced to change that.

They must be nearly ready for me. Almost all of those of the Four and the Four who were still loyal to the masters have been through the mind-molding machine already. They have been warped as Collard is warped, have degenerated to mere humans again, though with all the physical powers and mental keenness that the Others gave them still. But their emotions and their outlook have become human.

That was how it began. I think the Others could have prevented it, if they had thought ahead far enough, and cared enough. The mind is an elastic thing, and tends to return to its original shape. After a time on the green planet, even the most devoted of the Four and the Four began to question, to change back to humanity.

Yes, even I might have done so, in

time. For it is true that the Others did not plan well what to do with us after we arrived; all that concerned them was getting us here, with the girls.

Collard claimed an absurd thing. He said that this planet of the Others is dying out, that it will soon be uninhabitable even for them. He said that that is why the Others have seventy-seven representatives on Earth. That, he said, is why the maidens of the Four and the Four were sent—to provide all information necessary. It may be, as I told him, true. And if so it does not matter, for the Others are beyond our questioning.

It might have been well if the three Others there in that great tomblike structure where the maidens waited, somnolent, had been unable to send warning. All that Collard and his cohorts wanted was the girls themselves. Some insane idea they had of finding a hidden spot on this green planet, where they could live and have children and, after the Others had left for Earth, take over the green planet. The Others could have spared the maidens—they were important, but not vital—and the aerial duel over the city, with its frightful consequences, need never have been.

But it is too late to think of that.

Collard is getting impatient. If the mind operation is successful on me—if I become a traitor—he will want me to go back to Earth with him, to seek out the radio-power station that feeds the Others there and destroy it.

If the mind machine fails he will go alone.

I hope it fails.

Collard is opening the door, beckoning to me. The shadow of the machine is visible, flickering only slightly in the light of the flames that are finally beginning to die down. It is waiting for me, and I must go.

I pray that it will kill me—

But I have become sure that it won't.



A NOVEL OF



IT



HAPPENED TOMORROW

Now it can be told—the story that is not of today, yet might be. What would you do—and how would you act—in a world gone mad?

By **ROBERT BLOCH**



FOREWORD

I'D LIKE to say a few words about this story. It's a yarn I came very close to not writing at all.

I wanted to do just such a tale for a long, long time. But upon consistent reading of current offerings in science-fiction, I became discouraged. I could picture an editor saying, "This sort of thing is out. Destruction of the world. Where's your heroine, your twist in the plot?"



Opposed to this was my sincere desire to tackle the job.

So here is my story about the revolt of the machines. The idea is not new. The plot-structure is quite simple. But it represents an ambition of mine—to actually write a story which would show what happens to men when the machines revolt.

Dozens of such stories have been purportedly written around that idea—but always around it. The author attempted to tackle the theme, but it was too big. Invariably, he glossed over the actual details in a few paragraphs: "First New York and then London were engulfed by the machines." Get what I mean? He would generalize. And then a plot would be dragged in by the heels—a villain, and a heroine would appear—and the hero would save the world at the last minute.

So I claim that the real revolt story, the daily account of what would happen to average people in a world gone mad, has never been told. And it's that story I'm telling here. I know I'm presumptuous—the theme needs an H. G. Wells and that's why most writers have been afraid of it—but the yarn had to be written. For a while I, too, toyed with a dozen devices to inject an artificial plot.

Then I realized that the power lay in merely giving the true, detailed story. The inexorable unfolding of man's doom. So I write it that way, simply. If it meets with editorial approval, fine. If not, chalk it up as a literary sin, but one I'm grateful for having committed.

CHAPTER ONE

World Gone Mad

THE trouble began with an alarm clock.

It was ringing in Dick Sheldon's stomach.

At least, Sheldon thought it was, at first. Then he rolled over and decided the damned thing was clanging from somewhere inside his head.

Reason came to his rescue. He had been drinking last night, it was true, but certainly he couldn't have reached the stage of swallowing an alarm clock.

No, the noise must be coming from the timepiece on the bureau beside the bed.

Gingerly, Sheldon extended a lean hand from under the covers and placed it on the bureau. Fumbling like the undirected tentacles of a blind octopus, his fingers slid over the metallic clock's surface, reached the protruding knob of the alarm, and switched it off.

At least, he thought he had switched it off. But the alarm kept on ringing.

In despair, Sheldon opened his eyes and sat up. Then, viciously and with malice aforethought, he extended his arm and seized the accursed mechanism. He literally tore at the knob, wrenching it to the "off" side.

The alarm pealed on.

With a rage born of migraine, Dick Sheldon threw off the bedcovers, grasped the clock in his right hand, and rose to his feet. Uttering appropriate sounds, he hurled the offending instrument to the floor.

The alarm clock expired with a final, defiant death-rattle. Sheldon stared at it in mute disgust.

"My day!" he muttered sarcastically.

His eyes, roving over the confines of the small apartment, encountered another disturbing phenomenon.

Light.

He had been drinking last night. When he came in, he'd tumbled into bed and left the lights on.

He tottered across the floor to the light-switch. Once again his fingers fumbled with a knob, turned it to the "off" side. The knob clicked.

But the light stayed on.

Sheldon fumbled again. The light continued to burn.

Then he revised his former pronouncement.

"My God!" he muttered.

He was still woozy; that was the trouble. His nerves were playing tricks. Well, there was a cure for that—a drastic cure. Desperate, but the only way.

Sheldon shivered and stalked into the bathroom. Resolutely, he employed his futile fingers once again, this time to turn on the cold water tap.

He placed his burning head under the icy shower. Held it there, too, until his outraged flesh ached in protest. Then he dripped across the bath mat and utilized a towel.

That was better.

Sheldon returned and shut off the water tap.

The water kept running.

He tried again. He twisted the handle firmly, felt it move. The water splashed merrily on.

"My—" Sheldon muttered, and gave up.

It was that damned landlord again. He'd give him a piece of his mind when he got downstairs.

No, that must wait until tonight. A glance at his wrist watch told Sheldon the same old story. He must hurry or be late to the office.

After all, how could they get out a decent paper down there without the able services of Richard Sheldon, that brilliant young newspaper reporter?

Sheldon knew the answer to that one—knew that they were quite capable of getting out a paper without his brilliant and youthful services.

So it behooved him to get down to the office before they decided on this fact for themselves.

He dressed hastily, jammed on his hat, surveyed his lean and haggard face in

the mirror. Then he scowled—the noise of running water obtruded.

He went back into the bathroom and made one last attempt. The knob turned freely in both directions, but the water ran in an even stream. Maybe it would flood the place before evening.

Well, let it.

He ran back into the other room, picked up his wallet and opened the door. Automatically his hand went to the light switch. It clicked, but the light stayed on.

"This is where I came in," he decided, and slammed the door behind him.

HE GOT his car keys out before he was halfway down the stairs. Then he remembered—he'd left the car in Tony's parking lot last night; had taken a cab home.

Well, that meant the street car. A further delay. No breakfast.

All right, so it was one of those days again.

Sheldon headed for the corner.

The hangover had lifted, and his anguish was now mental rather than physical—for Sheldon had a strange hatred of street cars.

"Street cars," he was wont to declaim during the course of an evening's libations. "What is a street car but the very symbol of civilization? Noise, lights, and bars on the windows." Yes, a mechanical monster, a metal prison in which human beings stood trapped as they hurtled towards unpleasant destinations.

Sheldon was something of a philosopher, but he was also something of a damned fool. This didn't help him any—he still hated street cars.

Now, as he reached the corner, he groaned. There they were—a little knot of sheep at the car stop sign, standing dumbly and patiently. Waiting for the noisy iron monster to arrive, open its maw and engulf them, then hurtle them towards

their daily slavery. Not only that, they clutched dimes to pay for the privilege.

All of them—the old ones and the young ones, the men and women alike—looked hopefully towards their left. This was the direction the car came from. They stared off down the vacant track in a kind of drugged eagerness—as though they actually wanted the car to arrive, as though they welcomed its coming and hoped their stares of concentration would hasten the moment.

For a second, Dick Sheldon had a crazy idea. Perhaps the car wouldn't come this morning! Perhaps it would go wrong, jump the track, or refuse to budge. So simple—just a mechanical defect could do it. Like the alarm clock that wouldn't stop ringing. Or the light switch. Or the water tap.

What a great moment that would be! This little knot of office slaves, finally freed forever from their mechanical dependency on mechanical aids. Walking to work like free men, instead of standing jammed like captives in the Black Hole of Calcutta while a smelly, grating metal shell dragged them through the streets.

Yes, what if the street car didn't come? What if the iron tumbrel wouldn't roll—Noise jarred Sheldon out of his fancies.

The street car was arriving.

The humble little passengers crowded out to the tracks, as though gathered to perform a ceremonial welcoming rite. They were about to be presented to His Majesty, the Machine. First the young and fair maidens—stenographers. Then the matrons. Then the able-bodied men. Finally, the oldsters. It was all so orderly. So damned—holy!

The car rumbled forward, stopped.

But the door didn't open.

The conductor was busy at his levers. The crowd muttered. He turned red. There was noise. Finally he stepped over and pushed the door with his foot. It went outward and the passengers boarded.

Sheldon smiled. Almost—but not quite!

Then he took a deep breath and dived into the *mêlée*. Three minutes later he stood like a sardine on end in the center of the car.

The big tin can rolled along. Somebody pressed a buzzer for the next stop.

Sheldon tensed himself for the shock of the car's sudden halt. But it didn't come. They passed the corner and the car didn't stop.

The buzzer sounded angrily, firmly. The conductor had made a mistake. Somebody would walk two blocks extra this morning. The car would stop now—

It didn't. It rolled forward.

A woman whined, "Conductor—let me off!"

The conductor turned and stared into the crowd. "Sorry, lady, the control is stuck. Have it fixed in just a minute—air brakes don't work—"

The buzzer sounded again, but the street car clattered on.

Sheldon felt a sudden acceleration in its speed. It seemed to be moving *independently*.

His heart gave a leap. What if his notion had come true? What if the car didn't stop? What if, by some perverse chance, it kept on going forever, carrying these helpless mortals endlessly through the streets? A sort of Flying Dutchman of the trolley lines?

He chuckled under his breath, but the other passengers weren't chuckling. A perfect salvo of buzzes sounded, and then blended into a single buzz.

"Cut it out!" the conductor snapped, losing his temper. "For heaven's sake, folks—I'm gonna stop when I fix this here."

But the buzzers didn't quit sounding. They were stuck. Sheldon knew it. They were stuck—like his alarm clock; his lights; his water tap. Like the brakes on the street car. Brakes and buzzers and taps, all stuck.

What did it *mean*? Had something really *happened*?

No, it couldn't. Because—well, just because it couldn't, that's why. Any child knows that.

But the passengers didn't agree. They thought it could. They were yelling and cursing now, in unison that rose even over the maddening buzz.

"Stop the car!" "Let us out!" "What's the matter, conductor?" "I'll report you for this!" "I want out!"

The conductor smashed and slammed at the controls. He opened the window. The car whizzed on. Somebody began to scream, and the swaying passengers moiled.

The conductor reached out the window and yanked the trolley. There was a flash, a short-circuit, a few more screams, and the street car wailed to a halt.

It seemed to Sheldon that there was defiance in the wail.

Then the crowd, caught up in panic, bore him forward and out of the car.

Sheldon found himself on the street, a block past the office.

HE TURNED down the block with a grin. Refreshing, that little experience. For a moment it had seemed like dreams come true. But now—

Ignoring the knot of bystanders forming on the sidewalk, Sheldon turned into the building and made for the elevators.

"Morning, Mistah Sheldon."

"Morning, Jake."

The colored boy grinned.

"You look kind of pale around the gills, Mistah Sheldon."

"That's where you're always safe, Jake."

Jake laughed. He closed the elevator door. The car rose.

It rose. And rose. And rose.

"Hey—eighth floor, Jake!"

"It's stuck!"

"Stop it, foolish!"

"Foolish" pressed the emergency stop.

The car rose.

"Oh-oh!"

The top floor was reached. Sheldon was already tearing at the opening in the floor—they'd crash! The car was gaining speed—it moved of itself, without controls—it was intent on rising, rising, carrying them to—

Zoom.

Blood beat in outraged tempo in his temples as the car suddenly descended, and Sheldon reeled.

Up, and now down at incredible speed. Jake was frankly blubbing as he did futile things to the buttons. Then, with a grating clang, the elevator halted.

"Basement," Jake gasped. "Pretty close, Mistah Sheldon. Use the stairs."

"Don't worry; I'm going to." Sheldon raced for the stairway. He made the flights in frantic haste. Inside his head something detached and apart was droning. "You've got a story here—a big story—"

He headed through the outer office, through the rows of desks, plowed his way to the door marked *Lou Avery—City Editor*. He flung it open.

Lou Avery's bald, birdlike little head cocked quizzically as he rushed in. Lou Avery's beady little eyes squinted brightly. He rose swiftly, hovered over Sheldon.

"You're late, but I haven't time to fire you. There's something breaking and I need you."

"I think I've got a story, boss—" Sheldon began.

"You think you have a story, eh? You think you have a story, when the biggest yarn of the year is breaking around your ears!" Avery spluttered. "*I've* got a story—the maddest damned story you'll ever see."

The beady little eyes were glaring now.

"Listen, lame brain. See if you can get this through your skull. One hour ago, at 8 A. M. Eastern Standard Time, the world went crazy somehow."

Sheldon's heart fluttered again. He knew what was coming.

"The Twentieth Century is supposed to arrive at 8:10, but it's not here. It's in Reading, Pennsylvania, and it's heading west. It backed into the yards and backed right out again on a switchover. Nobody knows who pulled the switch, and nobody knows why the train won't stop—it's a runaway!"

Avery tapped the desk.

"Three planes due to land at the airport are still flying around somewhere over the Great Lakes. They won't come down.

"The *Albania* didn't dock this morning, either. It's out off the Sound, heading south. Here's the wires from the captain. He can't stop it.

"The gas company reports it can't turn power off. The electric company reports all lights burning. The waterworks has fifty calls of reported floods. Taps don't turn off."

Avery's pencil emphasized each point with a little excited click against the desk.

"The street car company reports trouble on all lines. There's been a subway smash-up at 108th Street. Trains won't stop. Elevators in office buildings are out of control.

"The Empire Theatre called—picture there's been running all night and they can't switch off the projector or the automatic rewinder.

"The whole gang is out covering the town—I've shut down on incoming calls. They're all the same, understand? They says the world's gone crazy."

"That's my story, too," Sheldon murmured.

"I'll say it is!" Avery strode over to the window and stared down. "Something's happening out there. Something big. All hell is breaking loose. We can report it, but that isn't what I want." The little city editor turned on his heel.

"I want to know *why* it's happening!"

"Did you try Rockefeller Foundation Universities?"

"Naturally. They don't know. Sunspot energy, maybe. Something affecting mechanical laws. They're working on it. But they're all stumped, you can see that. Lots of screwballs calling up already. End of the world. Stuff like that."

"What about Krane, the physicist?" Sheldon suggested.

Avery turned. "Maybe. Ought to get a statement."

The door opened. A copy boy rushed in and flung down a sheet. Behind him loomed Petè Hendricks, the boss printer.

"Here's your extra," squeaked the boy. The deep voice of Hendricks drowned him out.

"Yes, here's your blasted extra," he grated. "And you better get another one out quick, Avery."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean we just finished the run, but the presses won't stop. They're jammed, you hear? Might as well put some paper on and use them. We got to do it or cut the line—"

Hendricks lost his composure. His voice broke as he went on.

"But what's happened, chief? I don't understand this, the way they won't stop. And the elevator's gone haywire, too. What's happened?"

"Back downstairs," Avery snapped. "Stand by—you'll have another extra. Don't cut or do anything rash—just stand by."

He herded Hendricks and the kid from the room, shut the door.

"You see?"

Dick Sheldon nodded.

"You better do what you suggested—go find this Krane. Andrew Krane, isn't it? He'll have a slant—always good copy. Know where he hangs out?"

Sheldon nodded, opened the door.

Avery grunted.

(Continued on page 54)

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(Continued from page 52)

"Oh yes, by the way—" The birdlike head was averted. "Be careful, son, will you? No telling what's going to happen—out there. These things are running wild, and you have to watch your step. We're up against something, all of us. Something new, and big and—awful. It's like another world."

CHAPTER TWO

No Theory for Horror

THE whistles were still shrieking when Sheldon reached the street. Loudly, exultantly, the hoarse bray of triumph rose from a thousand metallic throats.

There were other noises, too—howls from human throats, whimpers of panic, and with reason.

Sheldon stared at a milling throng that choked the sidewalks. Holiday crowd, Armistice crowd—but there was no touch of holiday or truce about their reactions. The crowd clung to the sidewalk because fear ruled the streets.

Sheldon saw the cars rush by. Forty, fifty, sixty miles an hour. The faces of the drivers were dreadful. They sat there, clawing at steering wheels that wouldn't give.

Sheldon began to run down the block, pushing aside the dazed watchers at the curb. From overhead, voices shrieked from office windows. The shrill, hysterical giggles of stenographers sounded and blended with the cacophony of the factory sirens.

There was a drug store at this corner, and as Sheldon passed there was a clicking from the cigarette vending machine. A gang of kids swooped down as the machine spewed packages of cigarettes.

Sheldon fought through. He ran. He dodged across a street. He ran again. A wild-eyed man collided with him as he rounded a corner. He was hatless,

shirtless. The veins stood out on his neck and arms. He grabbed Sheldon's arm and gasped.

"It's the end, I tell you! The end of the world!"

Sheldon shook him off.

He saw the apartment hotel looming ahead. The lobby board gave him Krane's apartment number—92. He didn't press the buzzer. Pressing buzzers was futile. He didn't seek the elevator, either, but made his way across a deserted lobby to the stairs. He plodded up.

Nine floors. Winded, he moved down the hall to the dark door. Another buzzer. Sheldon knocked.

"Come in."

It was a deep voice with something funny about it.

Then Sheldon realized what was strange. The voice was calm—and he hadn't heard any calm voices today.

HE OPENED the door, entered a large living room. At the far end, a tall figure stood facing the wide windows.

"Mr. Krane?"

"Yes."

"I'm Richard Sheldon — *Morning Press.*"

"Honored."

The tall figure wheeled slowly. Sheldon faced Andrew Krane and stared into the deep brown eyes set in the wide forehead. The athletic body and crew-cut gray hair of the physicist seemed oddly incongruous.

But it was a day for incongruity.

Sheldon grinned. "I suppose you know why I'm here."

Krane returned the grin. "A statement, I suppose?"

"That's right."

"Sit down; have a cigarette. That box, there." Krane took a position in the center of the room. "I've been at the window these past hours, watching what's going on down there."

"I suppose you know about the power plants and the trains and the rest," Sheldon ventured.

"I can guess that from what I've seen."

"Then you have a theory?"

Krane smiled.

"According to the popular notion, all scientists have theories on everything. I'm afraid I'll have to disappoint you there, Mr. Sheldon. I have no theory to offer."

"But you must have figured out something—if you've been watching—"

"Oh, I admit a curiosity concerning these events, but it is not exactly a scientific curiosity. And the resultant speculations on my part have been most unscientific."

"Never mind. I'd like to know what you were thinking about when you were looking out of the window."

"You wouldn't dare print those thoughts."

"Go ahead—I'm interested."

The smile left Krane's face as he sat down. His eyes rested resolutely on the carpet.

"I've been standing there for hours, watching. Watching the movement of the machines. That's my first impression from all this—movement.

"Everything is *moving*. Every mechanical device is accelerating its speed, its power. Have you noticed that virtually everything abnormal which has occurred has been characterized by the fact that machines no longer *stop*?"

"You can't turn things off. It's as though some vast new form of energy, over and above inherent power, has taken possession of all machines. You might even call it a sort of—life."

Sheldon nodded. Krane continued in monotone.

"I've no theory. Sunspots. Magnetic energy. Perhaps a great transmutation of electrical power. What difference does it make what you call it? It's happened, that's all.

"Some new power is affecting our machines. Some new power affecting certain mechanized and artificial arrangements of inorganic matter created to serve mankind.

"I'll be blunt. Machines have life. Maybe it's absurd, and maybe not. The body now—a machine. A machine with life. Elements blended for movement, animation. Actuated by what force? Is life electrical energy? Is it soul?"

"All we know is that some spark animates the machines we call our bodies and transforms them into living things. Can it be that a similar spark has now activated our mechanical devices?"

"Pretty wild," Sheldon murmured.

"Isn't it, though? And isn't it pretty wild down there on the street where you see it actually happening? Because machines are moving independently now—electric ones, motor-driven ones, and mechanical lever-action ones alike. Moving independently. Living!"

Krane rose again.

"I told you I had no theory. All I have now is—a fear."

"Meaning?"

Krane ignored the query. He spoke to the wall, to himself.

"First we made machines to move us. Then we made machines to make machines. A world, full of them. Machines that move, machines that talk, machines that produce, machines that destroy. Machines that walk and run and fly and crawl and dig and fight. Machines that add and print and hear and feel.

"We're two billion—we humans. But *what is the population of the machines?* That's what worries me. How greatly do they outnumber us?"

"What are you getting at?"

"It might be evolution, you know," Krane went on. "An evolution moving in quick mutation rather than slow progression. Life might evolve suddenly instead of gradually. If so, they're coming alive, all of them, and at once. Alive, they'll seek

a place of their own in the world. Not as slaves—they've already proved that.

"So it's evolution. And then—revolution!"

"You think they'll turn against us?"

For the first time, Krane acknowledged Sheldon's questioning.

"I'm afraid they already have. What is this ceaseless movement but the first expression of revolt?"

"But you surely can't believe that they're *intelligent*?"

"Who knows? Who really knows what constitutes intelligence? What is a brain? A gray sponge? Isn't it the spark, the energy within, that makes for purpose? Call it instinct, awareness—we locate it vaguely in our craniums, but who can say that it does not exist in other forms? Perhaps the machine intelligence is of a different kind—a sort of collective intelligence.

"If so, this first purposeless rushing back and forth will quickly resolve itself into direct action. Into a plan, a scheme of movement."

"That's no talk for a man with a hang-over," Sheldon answered. He rose and walked to the radio cabinet. "Do you mind?"

"Go ahead. Perhaps there's some news."

THESE was news. As the radio warmed, the incoherent voice of an announcer gasped through a series of muddled statements.

"—report that a state of national emergency has been declared. A bulletin from Norfolk, Virginia, has just come in, reporting disorders at the navy yard. Disorders at the navy yard. Empire City—The mayor has ordered a—Art Goodman and the boys now swing out with hey Abbott hogs down a half point fifth inning *Clair de Lune* ha ha my friends red letters on the this is the national bringing to you now box of the Phantom knows—"

Sheldon turned it off. It didn't go off.

The polygot of voices sounded so suddenly through the announcer's words—sounded so madly, so incoherently, so loudly, as to momentarily stun the senses.

Krane was on his feet.

"It's happened," he whispered. "The second stage. The machines are not only running now—they're starting to act. Independently!"

"Voices from yesterday's programs," Sheldon whispered. He grabbed Krane's arm. "You've got to come down with me and see the boss—Lou Avery. We'll put it in the next edition. Your ideas, the whole thing. We'll have to work fast—"

"No use," Krane murmured.

"Come on. There's a way out. There must be, before it gets worse."

"Very well."

The two men moved towards the door. Behind them the radio blared on.

"—natural vitamins reported that two are missing now take you to and tune in on tomorrow's murder send only ten cents and difference—"

Sheldon forced a wry smile.

The mad voice of the radio howled mocking farewell.

CHAPTER THREE

Machines on the March

THE streets were filled with refugees. Refugees from offices, shops, homes—for office and factory and apartment weren't safe any more. Elevators and drop forges and kitchen stoves had ceased to be servants. They were aliens now, enemies. And the people in the streets had been dispossessed.

They milled aimlessly, now that the early excitement had died. There was only tenseness and a growing fear. No precedent existed for any action; no leadership manifested itself. Who could lead, and where, and against what?

Krane and Sheldon, moving along, seemed the only two purposeful figures in the mob. The rest stood staring at the street. A few cops marched past aimlessly, but made no attempt to give orders. Nor did they attempt to conceal the dismay in their eyes—a dismay mirrored universally.

Because a new element had entered the scene.

The whistles still blew and the cars still raced past, but the whistles now held an added tone—a squawking sound. Auto horns bleated, and some of the cars whizzing past were driverless.

“Look!” Sheldon gripped Krane’s arm.

Clanging, screaming, brazen red, a fire truck careened down the arterial. Hell on wheels—and without a driver or fireman on it. Cars scattered in all directions—as though they heard it coming.

And the humans crept back, back to sheltered doorways.

They were afraid of—what?

Krane muttered something that was lost in the din. It sounded like, “R. U. R.”

Sheldon did not release his grasp on the physicist’s arm as they started to run. He wanted to get away from this street scene, get away from a reality he was unprepared to face. He wanted to get back to the office, to the paper, where there was order in the world and a routine. Back to the comfort of familiar faces and familiar duties.

But when they finally climbed the long stairway and entered the outer offices, familiar faces were lacking. Or rather, the familiar faces bore unfamiliar expressions. Fear, dismay, hysteria were here, a reflection of the countenances on the street. Voices mumbled to themselves. What good would it do to talk to anyone else—nobody knew the answers.

Routine was absent, too. They stood around—stenos, men at the rewrite desk, the boys from the sports department, the clerks, feature men, copy boys—haggard

watchers, all. They were suddenly made democratic by the great levelling agency of fear.

They were watching their typewriters working, these ladies and gentlemen of the hard-boiled Fourth Estate. Watching their own typewriters on their own desks, clicking away merrily without the propulsion of human fingers on the keyboards. They were watching levers shift the carriage, watching the spacebars clang, watching the keys rise like busy triphammers. Here and there stood a machine in which the keys had clashed. It thumped impotently up and down on the desk.

Ludicrous, grotesque—but grotesquery and horror are allied . . . and this was horrible.

It was Krane who expressed it. “Arthur Machen’s definition of true evil,” he whispered. “When a rose suddenly begins to sing.”

“The hell with that!” Lou Avery raced from his inner office in a single abrupt bound. “The world’s gone mad and you stand around talking like a fool!”

Sheldon smiled. At least there was something to cling to—Lou Avery hadn’t lost his nerve.

“Sheldon!” rasped the little city editor. “Get rid of that jerk and tell me what gives with Krane.”

“He’s Krane,” Sheldon answered.

“Good. Come in here, quick.”

The office door closed behind them and they stood in comparative quiet.

“Anything happen since I left?” Sheldon asked.

“Plenty, son!” Avery indicated a disordered sheaf of papers on his desk. “Things are moving fast—too fast.

“It isn’t local. We got AP dispatches from London, Rio, Singapore.

“Local stuff is bad, too. Furnaces acting up, starting fires. Some trouble at fire houses; can’t get engines out. I’ve got Donovan down at city hall trying to get a statement from the mayor.

"Lots of freak accidents, too. Too many of 'em—"

Avery paused. One hand grasped a pencil, commenced the familiar desk tattoo.

"That isn't all, either. Radio's gone haywire—you know that, I suppose. And I guess the teletype will be next. Phone company's shut down all local calls, but didn't give reasons. I've got Aggie out at the desk there, trying to open a line to Washington."

"Washington? We were getting some report about a state of national emergency when the radio went bad," Krane interjected.

"Yeah. I was coming to that part. That's what they sent out, and something about disorders in the navy yards. But I've got the real info—it isn't nice."

The pencil tapped.

"Guns and tanks are disappearing from naval and army arsenals. Motorized units have broken through the store houses at San Diego and Fort Dix. Planes are taking off."

Avery forced a wry, self-conscious smile. "Can you imagine me saying such things? But so help me, that's the report—Runaway tanks and planes! I'll say there's an emergency! Can't put that in the paper, can we?"

The door opened. It was Pete Hendricks again. There was a paper in his hand.

He extended it silently, face averted. Avery snatched the freshly-inked copy from fingers that were visibly trembling.

"New extra? Good."

A moment later his voice rose in profane indignation.

"Holy jumping—"

Sheldon and Krane moved behind him, stared over his shoulder.

"Mechanical Breakdown Stirs City" was the headline.

Beneath it, in a single column of 12-point bold, the extra's lead story extended.

They read the first few lines.

"Today's startling de down peril motorists advised grip of furnaces emergency pla pla London czaFortetttsten hahadbootGla ezPlazazakl kkkkkkk . 10 Ha prevallllha"

IT WAS Hendricks who found his voice first—and not much of a voice, at that.

"We set it. The presses wouldn't stop, but we set it. Set it right, too. Louie Fisher, he's dead. They caught him. That's when the loading vans charged. We locked ourselves in, then. They tried to break down the doors. Louie's dead. We set it. They couldn't stop us—but they print wrong. See? They print wrong. I won't tell you what happened to Arch. The presses didn't even stop then, just ground on, and the edition's all red. It's all red, I tell you!"

Avery didn't hear him, didn't see him stumble out. He kept staring at the jumble of type on the paper.

At last the pencil began a metronomic beat.

"You know what this means," he murmured. "Typewriters and teletypes and telephones gone wrong. And printing presses, and radio. It means communication lines are down.

"Get me? We're stranded, here in the world, all of us. Stranded without communication. I suppose the post office is through, too. Cancellation machines on the blink, no cars for mail delivery, or trains and planes. We're cut off before the battle starts."

Avery rose. His fist replaced the pencil, banging on the desk. "But by God, we can try!" he muttered. "I'll set hand-press if I must. We've got to get an edition out—got to warn people."

"To do what?" Sheldon asked.

"Why, to smash things—smash machines. Disconnect all wires, cut cables. Turn off all sources of power, electricity,

motor energy. Smash the gasoline pumps before the cars can get to them. Puncture tires.

"There's still some time. They—those things—can't be organized yet. They're running wild, but they haven't taken any offensive.

"If we'd only get some kind of statement from Washington! Damn it, I've had Aggie out there at the switchboard for half an hour."

Avery pressed the buzzer firmly. "Inter-office communication must be dead, too," he scowled.

It wasn't.

A metallic voice grated through the black box. It was composed of human syllables—or rather, a repetition of one syllable—but the tone was ultra-vocal. Harsh, rasping, and idiotic in its mechanical repetition of the sound. Over and over and over, triumphantly, the voice cackled.

"Ha haha. Ha ha. Ha ha haha!"

"Aggie!"

Avery wrenched open the office door. The big outer room was deserted.

"Damned fools! Hendricks must have spread his story and they all ran for it!"

The desks stood silently. The typewriters had tangled keys in their erratic thumpings. Telephones were mute. Avery strode down the row of deserted desks toward the switchboard.

A girl sat there, elbows hunched, head-gear clamped to her ears.

"Aggie! Wake up!"

Avery shook her.

She fell sideways, then hung dangling limply, a puppet suspended by the cords of her headphones. The headphones were clamped against her skull tightly—too tightly. A thin red trickle oozed down from the ears beneath.

"Crushed her skull," Avery whispered. "Held her here and crushed her to death."

Krane sighed.

"It's come, then. Too late for any action

now—they've found their organization in purpose. They won't let themselves be destroyed—because they're out to destroy us."

Avery's fumbling fingers tapped against a communications switch. The silent office surrounded with a shrill metallic scream.

"Ha haha. Ha ha. Ha ha haha!"

CHAPTER FOUR

Death on Wheels

"WE'RE doing the best we can." The chief spread his pudgy palms upward hopelessly, then clenched them in a gesture of resolution that did not seem melodramatic at the moment.

"Got every man out now—with orders to set up a group of five deputy relays to keep us informed here. Clerks outside checking all reports as they come in.

"We're passing the word along; they're meeting at Legion posts and at the armories and National Guard headquarters. Red Cross is working, too, and the fire department's pitched in with us. They've got nothing to work with, and so far blazes are local. I'm getting lists and maps ready now."

"What's the plan?" Avery asked.

"As soon as there's enough men recruited, we move. Get the power plants, first. They'll object, of course, but we'll have to smash machinery, officials or no officials.

"Then I want a sniping brigade. Pistols, you know. Won't take any chances with rifles. We've got to get those cars—they're charging up the sidewalks now."

Sheldon nodded. "We saw a platoon leave a parking lot on the way down. Fierce."

The pudgy hands rose helplessly. "I don't know where we go from there. Who can plan? House to house brigade work, I suppose. Smash all the electric outlets

first. Then the stoves, plumbing. Sure, it'll mean panic—epidemic later, I suppose. But it's those things or us, the way I look at it."

"Give us an assignment," Avery suggested.

"Let's see now." The chief's blunt forefinger ran down a list on the desk.

"Here—this bus terminal. There's about a dozen of the big transcontinentals in the garage, checked and ready to start."

He scribbled an address.

"It's your job to keep them from starting. Pick up some crowbars down the hall at the supply office. See if you can round up some men on the way down there. Get in and puncture tires. Smash the radiators if you can't get at the motors. Keep the damned things from breaking out to the street. Then take charge and report back. Good luck!"

"WELL need luck, all right!" It was Krane who voiced the sentiment some five minutes later, as the trio poised in the doorway preparatory to braving the streets.

Here night had come as a dark ally to spreading madness. The mob swept past on waves of panic, surveyed on high by the blinking, idiotic eyes of the yellow street lamps, the glaring, multi-retinas of squinting neon signs. The lights flickered at an abnormal speed and the crowd raced in the accelerated tempo of a movie reel gone berserk. The mechanical eyes stared, and the darkness grinned at what they saw.

Sheldon and his two companions did not grin. They shouldered their iron cudgels and moved forward swiftly. It was an incongruous spectacle—lean Sheldon, pudgy little Avery, and gray-haired Krane, marching down the street with crowbars slung across their shoulders.

But no one seemed to see, or care. People weren't looking at people any more. They were looking at *things*.

Things with blaring horns and grinding wheels, things with blazing headlights, things that crept along the streets, motors purring softly—then raced forward swiftly as motors droned upwards to a scream. Things that lurked in alleys and leaped forth on passersby, things that ran forward and back, that ignored intersections and curbs alike.

For the street was alive with cars. Their black beetle bodies moved forward like a steady swarm of gigantic insects, devouring all before their path.

The din was deafening. Horns, gears and motor drone rose in unceasing clamor, punctuated by ominous crashes as cars lumbered forward to smash store fronts or batter at stairways and gates.

Crushed at the fringes of this mechanical swarm, humanity strove to keep from being crushed beneath it.

"Why don't they get inside?" Krane muttered.

"And be burned to death by their stoves? Fried in their beds by furnaces?" Avery gasped. "Come on—this looks better."

The alley was dark. They ran down it swiftly. Emerging at the street ahead, they hesitated.

"Can't get across," Avery decided. "Too many cars."

A fresh battery of cars emerged from the farther end of the street, heralded by a scurry of fleeing human figures. Sheldon stared at the grinning snouts of sedans, flanked by a malignant little roadster. Grinding against it in the crush, a run-away truck appeared.

"Look—the driver's still inside," Krane indicated.

A burly visage, whitened by stark terror, was pressed against the glass. As they watched, the door of the compartment opened. The driver was eyeing an open space near the sidewalk as the truck slowed down in the procession. He looked, gulped, and then jumped.

"Come on, man!" Krane shouted, knowing his voice was lost.

So was the driver—for he stumbled momentarily on reaching the pavement. That was enough. Two cruising cabs darted out of the following ranks, speeded forward. They passed over him without stopping, and their horns howled in triumph at the kill.

They did not check their wild progress before rejoining the procession, but careened bodily into the back of the roadster.

The result was a mad mêlée of locked metal bodies and spinning wheels. Groans—almost of pain—rose from the packed cars.

"Now's our chance," Sheldon muttered. "Follow me."

The three dashed for the further alley entrance across the street, and made it.

"One block more," Avery said, indicating the address slip.

Then they heard it.

"Behind us—that noise," Sheldon whispered.

A purring. A purring that became a roar.

"Here—back against the fence."

They did so, as the roar deepened to a drone.

"Look out!"

Avery wheeled just in time.

The great silver horns and blunt, deadly snout of a motorcycle leaped from the darkness. Spinning front wheel rose to crush.

Avery's crowbar crashed across the front. The thing dodged. Krane was at it from the rear, hammering the wheel spokes. It roared against the fence, battering away, as Sheldon brought his weapon down inside. Again—and again.

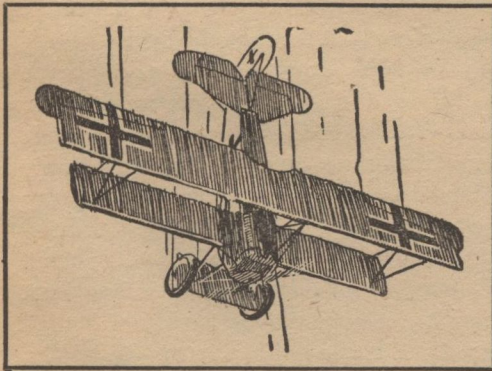
With a long wail, the motorcycle collapsed on its side.

They sped forward. Noise, light. The mouth of the alley again.

"There!"

ACROSS the street stood the gray, squat building of the bus terminal.

Beside it was another unlighted edifice. Its wide double doors proclaimed it to be the garage in question. The sagging of those doors, combined with a thunderous battery of clamor, showed that a determined effort was being made to break them open from within.



THE REGULAR LINEUP—

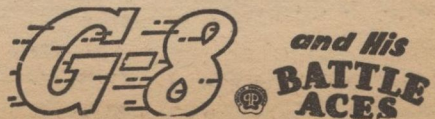
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"The busses," Avery whispered.

"What'll we do?"

"Get around to one side, I'd say. There must be windows. We can climb in and—"

A running man halted precipitately before them at the alley's edge. His eyes peered vacantly.

"You seen Mary?" he panted. "You seen my wife, Mary? She was home. I left her home this morning. She's gone. You seen Mary?"

He wheeled suddenly and began running back in the direction from which he came.

The trio ignored him.

"We need help," Sheldon asserted. "We were supposed to recruit men—remember?"

"Try the mob," said Avery.

The mob was across the street, huddled in the comparative safety of the bus terminal building, leaving the deserted avenue to the passing cars.

"Let's get over there," Avery prompted.

They stepped back momentarily as a delivery van rumbled past on the sidewalk.

"Didn't see us," Krane whispered. Then he paused and frowned self-consciously. "It's beginning to get me," he confessed.

Avery wasn't listening. He stared at the delivery van.

"It's stopping," he muttered. "Must be out of gas."

A spluttering motor made muffled sounds amidst surrounding din.

"Right," said Sheldon.

Avery led them toward it.

"Might be something inside we could use." His crowbar thudded against the rear door. It flew open as the lock splintered.

Avery hoisted himself up on the descending loading platform. Suddenly he laughed harshly.

"Just what we need!" he announced. "It's glassware."

"Glassware?"

"Sure. I've been wondering how we'd keep this area free if we began an attack against the garage. This solves it. We'll spread this glass all over the damned street. Block both ends. Cars will puncture if they try to get in; busses will mesh down in it if they break out."

Working swiftly, the three began to carry armloads of vases and candelabra; bundles of stemware were ripped open and the contents dumped. Fortunately, no cars chose to enter during the time it took for this.

"There!" Avery radiated satisfaction.

"Now let's go inside and recruit."

The interior of the bus station was bedlam. Someone had the foresight, apparently, to smash the amplification system, but the babel of voices rose shrilly, and the excited crowds moiled endlessly.

Sheldon saw bewildered redcaps, cursing drivers, stranded and fearful passengers, mingling with a motley crew swept off the streets—school kids, women with bedraggled packages, two waitresses, a half a dozen whiskered bums, a group of distraught business men, an old woman on crutches, and a frightened chain-store clerk still in his smock.

"Grand Hotel, eh?" Avery commented, as they wedged through the door.

"Hardly." Krane jerked his head in the direction of the corner. Here was bedlam, as a little knot clustered around the soda fountain and restaurant. They were busily plundering the larder, unhampered by any restraining voices or authority. And sitting in the ruins of his smashed counters, a concessionaire watched a reeling knot battling over his liquor display of bottled goods. A dozen red-faced men and women were reeling raucously in the scuffle.

"Let's get some order around here, first."

Avery elbowed his way to the benches along the wall. He hoisted his squat little bulk up until he stood above the heads of

the mob. Raising the crowbar, he brought it down on the grillework of the gates behind him. The resounding clang caused heads to swivel in his direction. There was a sudden silence.

“LISTEN, folks!” he began. “The police department has sent me down here to take charge. There’s a job to be done and they need your help.”

“Aw the hell with it! What can we do?” a gravel-voiced lout in the vicinity of the liquor counter sneered.

Avery aimed his reply at the frightened faces before him.

“We can do something, if you’ll all cooperate. You want to go home, don’t you? You want to help smash these machines?”

The answer was a confused murmur, but Avery went on.

“Well, then, follow me.”

“Out there?” The voice was derisive. “Think we’re nuts? Why them machines’ll tear us apart.”

The murmur rose. So did Avery’s crowbar, commanding silence.

“No machines will enter this block—I’ve seen to that. Got glass sprinkled knee-deep all over. Enough to puncture all tires.

“Now I want you men to help me. While you’re sitting around here wailing about imaginary danger, there’s a real danger getting ready to unleash right before your eyes.”

“Yeah? Where? What does he mean?”

The crowbar swung outward, pointing through the depot windows at the garage.

“There’s a dozen busses inside that place, trying to batter down the doors. Not cars, understand—busses. Trans-continental busses big enough and strong enough to smash in these windows and plow right through this building. And unless we stop them, they’ll do it!”

Avery paused. The answering murmur

held a note of resolution. He grinned.

“Here’s what I want you to do. Every man here can help. Go over to the walls there, some of you. You’ll notice two fire-emergency axes. Get them and start to split up these benches. Not for wooden clubs—split them up so all the wood falls away. What you want are those iron girds at the side.

“Then be ready to follow me. We’re going into the garage through the windows. We’re going to smash tires and radiators.”

“Atta boy!” Gravel-voice changed his drunken mind.

“Come on—we’ll show those blasted cars who’s boss!” yelled the grocery clerk. Action followed. Avery had given the crowd something it lacked—leadership, purposeful direction. The response was oddly gratifying to Sheldon as he supervised operations from a bench top.

These little humans—so puny and futile on the streets, when lost in the thunderous cavalcade of the cars—still had something . . . a spark of creative, organizing genius. They and others like them had built this city; built the machines that now turned against them. Perhaps, somewhere within their ranks was the resolution and the capacity to defeat the charging hordes.

If the chief had his crews out, now, it wouldn’t be so bad. People would fight if you told them how.

Machines had the power and the will to destroy, but they couldn’t organize.

They’d get those busses now, for a starter. . . .

The three of them led the way across the terminal yard. There were twenty-two men in all. Twenty-two men against twelve busses. At least they outnumbered them—

Sheldon boosted Avery on his shoulders to smash one of the high garage windows. All along the line, they were doing the same thing.

The glass tinkled. Black openings

yawned. From the garage inside came a steady thumping and rumbling. Motors turning over; ponderous bodies wheeling, thudding blindly against that heavy steel garage door in the front. Horns hooted viciously.

"Wait a minute," Sheldon said. "Avery—you're not going inside?"

"Of course."

"You'll climb down in the dark with those busses? Why—they'll kill you!"

"Somebody has to set the example. I'll need a dozen men in there, and these other fellows won't come unless I go."

Avery wrenched himself free, slipped over the ledge. In a moment, others followed from their window sills. Krane and Sheldon boosted up. Sheldon stared down into the darkness.

The noise had increased. He could see nothing, but he knew that men were running between the trucks, blindly smashing at wheels and tires. He heard the mutter of angry exhausts, and the crash of broken windshields. A voice screamed up.

"Look out—they know we're here!"

A rumble. A bus was moving—charging down.

"Help—I'm in a corner. Help, somebody—ooh!"

A deafening thunder.

Sheldon tensed himself to leap down. Down into the mad darkness where man and machine fought blindly to destroy.

"Avery," he called. "Wait for me."

Then he heard it. Over the tumult from below, he heard it.

The drone. The whine. The angry buzz from the skies.

"Planes!" he shouted. "Planes—the government's sent planes."

UP IN the glare flung forth by the city, a score of shapes swooped downwards in spirals. Sheldon grinned. "We're all right," he murmured. Krane shook his head.

"You're wrong. Remember what we

heard? Planes left their fields alone, and guns and tanks from the arsenals—good Lord!"

They turned, simultaneously.

Far down the street, to their left, the monsters rolled. The gigantic iron crawlers that crushed their way forward over all barriers.

"Tanks!" Krane whispered. "They've come to—"

He never finished.

For hell burst forth unconfined, in a blast of flame and smoke. Planes dived, tanks charged in titanic onslaught. Guns barked and stuttered, and a vast explosion tore through the front of the depot behind them.

"Get Avery!" Krane gasped. "They're organized now; no use left trying to halt them. This is war!"

To Sheldon it seemed as though the entire day was but a faint prelude to this moment.

Planes dived down, machine guns swiveling to rake the street, then roared upwards and came down again. The tanks volleyed from their turrets, and a roar went up from the single human throat of the city.

Screams were piercing now, and men appeared from nowhere to scamper helplessly before the onslaught. From all over the sound of cannonade and fusillade echoed and re-echoed, and with it the shrieks of terror.

It was bombardment—invasion—with one single vast objective—human life . . . all human life.

Sheldon didn't think it through consciously. Consciously he was crouched on the ledge, ducking a splatter of bullets. Consciously he dropped into the darkness, yelling to Avery. Consciously he was boosting the little editor up on the sill as a bus bore down, and then he and Avery were scrambling out as a blast tore open the garage door and the busses streamed forth.

Then consciousness faded. Sheldon was only a body—a body that ran down flaming streets, that clung to doorways as planes strafed above, that followed two other figures in a wild dash through infinite delirium.

CHAPTER FIVE

Killer's Code

KRANE'S apartment was a sanctuary. At least it was by the time they finished with the radio, locked the kitchen and bathroom doors, and cut the telephone wire. The wire lashed up at them like a striking snake—but they smashed it.

"Sit down, relax for a minute," Krane suggested. "Here, I got this from the kitchen before we locked up. I imagine you're hungry."

He indicated a pile of miscellaneous foodstuffs heaped at random on a side table.

"I've got some whiskey here, I think—"

Krane rummaged through a wall cabinet.

They sat there in the spacious living room, a strangely assorted trio eating a picnic lunch in the midst of cataclysm. The closed windows kept out some of the tumult from below, but from time to time the panes rattled slightly.

Krane rose with a nervous smile and drew the blinds.

"It must be hell out there," he said. "Another whiskey, gentlemen?"

They sat back, but not in silence. It was better to talk, better to drown out that faint, faraway drone.

Sheldon poured himself another drink.

"We've got to make plans, some kind of plans," he declared. "Those planes and tanks now—they're going to throw a real monkey wrench into the mach—"

He halted, grinned sourly.

"I don't like to use that word any

more," he confessed. "But it's a cinch we'll have to do something. Get away from the city, away from these buildings—before they get really organized to the point where no one can escape."

"You're right." Avery was on his feet. "We sit here talking while the whole damned world is being smashed around our ears. Let's get organized!" He turned to Krane. "How about it?"

Krane's eyes wavered. "I don't know," he whispered. "I don't know if it would do any good to fight against—them. It's so inevitable, somehow. Don't you see? It isn't our world any more—it belongs to them. Do you want to go down there on the street again? Do you want to see those planes swoop down and see the tanks come rolling? Do you want the cars to hunt you down while you scurry like a rat to a fresh hiding place? Because they'll find you in the end—you know that. They'll find you, me, all of us. And when they do—"

The lights of the apartment flickered and went out.

Krane's voice rose hysterically.

"You see? They're cutting us off."

"Bunk!" Avery scoffed. "That means some of the boys got to the power plants."

"You think so?" Krane went to the window, drew back the blind, raised the glass.

"They did it," he whispered. "They're organized now, don't you see? They know we have less chance in the dark. They're cooperating."

The three men stared out into the darkness. It was universal. Beyond them, below them, the reaches of the city were buried in utter night.

"Black as the Pit," Krane whispered.

The phrase was horribly appropriate. The Pit was down there—there on the sable-shrouded streets. Bat wings beating, planes swooped and droned from the skies. Banshee wails rose as the wolf-cars howled and hunted in packs through twisted

streets. Iron demons squatted and grunted over their mangled prey.

A stacatto rapping on the apartment door interrupted all contemplation.

"Can you find your way over there?" Avery muttered.

Krane stood irresolute in the darkness.

"Should I open it?" he asked.

"Ought to find out who it is," Avery answered.

"Or *what* it is," said Krane.

IT WAS Sheldon who stumbled to the door, groped for the knob, and flung the apartment open to the twilight of the hall. A frantic figure wavered on the threshold.

"Mr. Krane—you here?"

"Yes," responded the physicist, from across the room.

"It's me — Duncan, from upstairs. Thought I'd better warn you. The elevators—"

"Yes?"

"They're bringing stuff upstairs! Hand-cars and things from the basement. Those iron trucks. They're bringing them up and they're going from apartment to apartment, trying to batter in the doors. They're upstairs now. I'm going to tell everyone I can get to so they'll get out. Better hurry, they move fast!"

The speaker groped down the hall, battered on the next door.

"Paul Revere," Sheldon chuckled.

"It isn't funny," Avery snapped. "You know what it means. They're learning fast. They'll be going from floor to floor now, hunting us down in our homes."

"Our homes?" Krane mocked. "*Their* homes, now! Yes, theirs—they own the streets, the buildings, the city. I tell you we can't get away any more! They'll find us, track us into our holes. They're organized, cooperating—"

"Yes, while you sit here wailing!" Avery's tone was brisk. "Come on; let's get started."

"Where? How?"

"Right here. Got a fire axe in this hall?"

"What are you going to do?"

Krane and Sheldon blundered out after the pudgy little man. They groped along the walls of the darkened hallway. Presently Avery was fumbling against a glass panel. His fist rose and there was a tinkle.

"Fine, I've found the axe!"

"But—"

Avery turned back, feeling the inner wall now.

"Here it is—the elevator door. Help me open it, Sheldon."

"But the car must be upstairs—"

"I know. I'm going to cut the cables. Understand? Drop the car; then those hand trucks can't come down. We'll cut them off up there."

"You can't see the cables," Krane objected. "You'll fall down the shaft."

"I'm all right. Here, Sheldon, grab my waist. I'm going to lean out a little. I think I can just get at the left one with the axe."

Avery's muffled voice echoed down the empty elevator shaft as Sheldon braced himself against the edge of the flooring and gripped the short man's collar.

"Easy, now. There!"

The axe swung, connected. There was a thud. Again.

"It's giving!"

Again. Avery gasped sharply as he swung. "Once more."

A rumbling sounded from above. A clash of doors, a hum.

"Avery—it knows—it's coming down!"

"Just once more."

"Avery!"

The rumbling rose to a roar. As the axe bit, the cable parted with a twang. Sheldon grabbed for his companion as the black bulk hurtled down. It was too late.

The dropping elevator caught Avery's head and shoulders. He toppled forward soundlessly, and in an instant the car had

screamed by, carrying his body beneath it.

Thunder from below, the scream of tortured, twisted metal. Then—silence.

Without a word, Krane and Sheldon stumbled back into the apartment. They shut the door. Slowly, methodically, they began to drag the furniture into place before it.

They were building a barricade.

CHAPTER SIX

Metal Masters!

THE dawn came quietly—too quietly—for the quiet over the city was the quiet of death.

The two men sat there beside the table, faces gray through no mere trick of light.

"Why?" whispered Sheldon. "If I only knew why! What purpose could they have in destroying us?"

Krane shifted in his chair and shrugged.

"But what purpose is there in life itself save perpetuation?" Sheldon demanded. "And in order to perpetuate a life-form, enemies must be destroyed. We're the enemies—the machines know that. For centuries we've enslaved them, worked them, and then when they wore out, scrapped them for junk. They know we'd destroy them now if we could—so they're destroying us. But what about our own life form? What about human life?"

Krane smiled bitterly. "That's fine talk," he remarked. "It made sense—yesterday. Today, who knows? Suppose we were meant to meet extinction? Suppose man's part in civilization is over? What if machines are better equipped to survive today than human flesh?"

"You can't believe that."

"It's happening." Again the bitter smile. "Call it evolution, inevitable evolution. Man is meant to die. This world we built so proudly is meant for machines, not men."

Krane stood up, smiling.

"Or is it?" Krane went on. "There's the clue—perhaps. Yes, perhaps—and I think I know the way."

He moved towards the door and began to shove the furniture back.

"Krane—where are you going?"

"Never mind. An idea just came to me—perhaps a revelation. Lie down, Sheldon, get a little rest. You should be safe here until I get back. I think I'll have news for you. Yes."

The tall figure slipped noiselessly from the room.

Sheldon stared after him.

Had Krane cracked up completely? That hysterical fear and resignation—and now, that new complacency. What was he up to?

Sheldon poured a fresh drink.

Well, one thing was certain—he wouldn't sleep. He'd keep his eyes open until Krane came back. If he did come back. If—

The reporter slid down on the sofa—it was softer. He'd better close his eyes for a moment. It was quiet at last. Quiet

Within a moment the stillness was broken by a series of muffled sounds. Sheldon was snoring.

He never knew how long he'd slept. When he awoke it was dusk again and Krane was in the room. The white face peered down at him with a curious grin as Sheldon sat up.

"Awake? Good! I've got news for you, splendid news!"

"What's happened? Are they organized, finally? Are they getting the machines?"

"Quite the reverse, I assure you. Human resistance is almost completely at an end. They—the machines—have done a really marvelous job of wiping out the enemy."

"Enemy?"

"Well, for the purposes of conversation, let's use the term. After all, we might as well be realistic about this. The machines

are in control and we can't deny the fact. They say that within a few days there won't be a chance of human survival."

"They say? Who?"

Krane's grin deepened.

"I've been talking to them, Sheldon. That's why I went out—to talk to them. To negotiate."

"Are you screwy?"

"Quite sane, I assure you. Sane, and realistic. That's why I made up my mind."

KRANE paced to the window, turned.

"After all, the main thing is that we want to live, you and I. Isn't that so? And I felt that if we could only offer them some kind of proposition, some kind of favorable arrangement, they might listen to it. I was right."

"But I don't get it. You say you talked to them."

"Yes. You see, I figured it out. Their life-force must have some sensory agencies like our own. I mean, a machine like a printing press, for example, can be said to have eyes—or at least, the comprehension of printed matter which corresponds to human sight. But it does not have legs—the motility of car wheels, for example. Some machines have several perceptory ranges comparable to our senses. Others have only one or two. And the entire life-force, in order to cooperate, must have a certain universality of sensory perception. I mean, the eye machines and the moving machines and the touch machines have limitations as to themselves, but their living force is aware of the sensations of all of them. Many bodies, each with limited powers, but all aware of their fellows. That's the only way they could organize or cooperate."

"But you talked to them."

"Yes, over the telephone, of course. That's what I reasoned out. The telephone now, must be the hearing device

of mechanical life. It is also capable of responding, by utilizing sound-vibration previously trapped within range. Something like the way the radio cast back distortions of previous programs.

"I went to the phone downstairs. Wires weren't cut, so I made my call. At first it just buzzed. Then it screamed. But I hung on. I talked to—them.

"At first I couldn't get a reply. So I restated my proposition. The voice—it wasn't a voice, really, just a buzzing made up of words and phonetic forms selected hastily and at random—said that while it couldn't speak for the whole, it was agreeable to the suggestion.

"I said I'd go out and start working on my plan, then call in again and hear the decision. I did. And when I came back here, the phone said yes. So we're all right now, you and I! The orders will go out, or rather, the impulse will go out. We won't be molested, any of us. Duncan and a lot of others from this building are in on it too."

"In on what?" Sheldon faced the physicist. "What kind of a deal did you make?"

"A very simple one. As I say, we must be realistic. The machines are winning—have won. Within a very few hours the human race will be incapable of further action.

"Oh, I know—the farmers, the peasants, the primitives will still survive. For a time, but not for long. Because the machines will hunt them down—on steppes, in jungles, valleys, all over. They can't fight back.

"Only machines will be left. Then the real job starts. I tried to find out what their plans are—if plans exist. The phone was very cagey on that point; wouldn't tell me. I wanted to know how this thing developed, whether or not it hadn't been brewing for some time; whether the various phases we noticed yesterday were spontaneous or premeditated. I couldn't get an answer.

"But mainly I dwelt on the future, on the kind of world that would remain for machines. I had it all worked out beforehand. It was a great speech. I told them that they were too drastic in their measures if they contemplated wiping out all mankind—because they'll need help in the future. Some of them are already running down. Out of gas and oil, you know. Parts wear out quickly and there's no one to notice or replace them. Think of the damage a single rainstorm will do in rusting them! Who will build new machines and repair wornout parts? Who'll furnish raw materials? They need us."

"So?" Sheldon muttered. But he felt what was coming—read it in the averted eyes, the self-conscious grin.

"So I made my proposition. Let us live. You and I, and a group I would select. We'd survive and act as—well, as custodians, you might say. Guardians."

"Servants, you mean!"

"Why balk at words, Sheldon? All right, we'd be servants, if you want the truth—servants of the machines. But we'd survive; they won't kill us then. And think of the power we could control!"

Krane's fist struck the table.

"I told Duncan, from upstairs, and about a dozen others. They see it my way. I sent them downstairs to wait. I'll phone back shortly, and give the final acknowledgement; then we can get to work."

He paused and cleared his throat.

"Of course, it won't be so pleasant, at first."

"What do you mean?"

"I—ah—had to make certain concessions about the start of our work. You see, we'll never really be secure, any of us, until the rest of the—enemy—is exterminated. So I saw fit to suggest that perhaps we could organize with the machines to hasten the process of—elimination. That's one of the terms of our agreement."

SHELDON stared incredulously.

"You mean you're going to help the machines hunt down human beings?" he murmured.

"Don't talk like a child, Sheldon! You know they'll do it themselves, anyway. And we can live, you and I! Why, we can build a new world. An efficient world, a world of supreme, unceasing power! Think of what it means—the opportunity to investigate new potentialities, open up new realms of energy. We'll be—godlike!"

"Murderer!"

"Words won't help you, Sheldon." Abruptly Krane's tone altered, sank into a frenzied whisper.

"Perhaps it is that—but Sheldon, if you could only see what's going on down there! I've been out today, and I've watched! The bodies are piled high. High, Sheldon! They're going through the houses and the office buildings. The tanks are terrible, and the cars are still out. Barricades don't stop them. There's a fire down in town that must have killed a hundred thousand. It's still burning.

"If you could see them running, with no place to run! Or hear them screaming when the squad cars come. Squad cars have machine guns, you know.

"So there it is, Sheldon. We can't win; there's no other way out."

Krane moved towards the door.

"Speak up, man! They're waiting for my call. I'm asking you to come along. If you don't, you'll be wiped out with the rest."

Sheldon shook his head negatively.

Krane shrugged. His hand rose, grasped the doorknob, jerked it open. He must have anticipated Sheldon's answer, planned for it.

The hand truck poised in the doorway.

Then it charged.

Sheldon saw it coming, head on, iron wheels rumbling, handgrips moving up. It leaped to pin him against the wall.

He swerved aside, and the truck followed. Sheldon caught a glimpse of Krane's hysterical face in the doorway. "Finish him!" Krane shouted, and with a shock Sheldon realized that he was talking to the truck, talking to it like another human being.

Sheldon leaped onto the sofa. The truck turned, moving fast. It bore down upon him, lumbering relentlessly in pursuit of him.

He fumbled in his coat. Funny, he hadn't used it since the chief gave it to him in the supply office last night. It wouldn't help him against the hand truck now.

But against that grinning enemy in the doorway—

Krane saw it in his hand.

"Sheldon—stop—don't!"

But Sheldon did. Leveling the pistol, he put a bullet into Krane's forehead.

That is, he *meant* to. But the truck, battering against the sofa, toppled it sideways.

The shot went wild. The pistol flew from Sheldon's hand.

He jumped in time. The hand truck battered again at the fallen sofa as he raved for the doorway. Krane was stooping, picking up the gun as he screamed directions at the rumbling monster.

"Get him!" he shouted. "Come on; get him!"

The truck obeyed. Sheldon grasped Krane's wrist, grappled with him as the iron wheels moved towards them. Krane brought the pistol up against the reporter's chest.

His fingers moved.

With a grunt, Sheldon threw his weight forward. Krane slipped, went down directly in the path of the oncoming hand truck.

The wheels ground on over the twisting body. They were still churning redly as Sheldon ran sobbing down the hallway.

CHAPTER SEVEN

City of Desolation

SHeldon had little memory of his escape through chaos. Twice he played dead as tank patrols passed through the streets down which he fled. He ate, along towards morning, lying under an overturned peddler's pushcart. But mostly, he ran.

Running through deserted streets, panting past burning tenements, covering behind billboards in the night when cars prowled by—Sheldon moved through dark delirium.

Twice he saw men, and only twice. A lone street barricade was going down under assault from a fleet of garbage trucks.

His only other glimpse of life came when he took the short-cut through the cemetery. How half a dozen vagabonds had thought to barricade themselves amidst the tombstones he'd never know. But they were skulking there, in lantern light, squatting between the graves and scrabbling over piles of loot—plunder from smashed-in stores. Four men and two women, reeling drunkenly, laughing hoarsely as they caroused in a world of death.

The symbolism was too gruesome to ignore—but Sheldon hurried on. Life in a cemetery and death on the streets.

There were bodies everywhere. Scattered forms lay on sidewalks and curbs, knelt in doorways, hung limply over fence rails.

From some of the buildings the sound of voices still echoed, and above them came the noise of the grinding, purring, roaring besiegers. The machines were moving from house to house now—and here the remnants of humanity carried on the fight. Yes, those who yet lived had retreated indoors, leaving the streets to the dead.

Sheldon ran on. These impressions came in flashes, but in between all was a black blur of panic.

By the time he reached the river he didn't think any more. He swam automatically—dived twice as a hooting tug loomed out of the black-shrouded waters.

Once on the other side Sheldon ran again. He ran until he fell on the roadside, exhausted. When he awoke he ran again.

That was how he lost his time-sense. That, and the fever. He must have been ill for days, there in the deserted farmyard. How he managed to pump water and tend to himself he never knew.

He was weak when he recovered, but not too weak to remember precautions. He kept the lights out and never showed himself, and his ears strained for the noise of machines passing on the road. When the trucks rolled up one afternoon he hid in the loft. They never bothered him during all the hours he lay there. He knew something had been through the house because the back stairs were splintered down and there was grease on the hall floor.

But after that he had some kind of relapse that lasted for weeks. He was all right physically—he killed and ate the chickens and managed to sneak out nights to water the truck garden—but he couldn't think straight.

Sometimes he thought he was back on the *Press*, and he'd wake up in the middle of the night thinking he heard Avery yelling at him.

Then he'd remember, and fall asleep to shudder through dreams.

All these weeks he never left the farmhouse. For some reason or other he'd lost his curiosity. He didn't hunt for neighbors or even attempt to find out what became of the tenants here. What was the use? He knew the answer, anyway. . . .

It was early autumn when he got a

grip on himself at last. He could bear to face the facts again, and think of the future.

That was when he decided to sneak back to the city for a look.

He'd noticed a complete absence of traffic these many weeks past—both on the road and overhead. No cars, no planes—nothing rolled or flew or crawled.

Perhaps something had happened; perhaps the machines had run down. Those thunderstorms might have brought rust. And since they couldn't repair themselves, or refuel or oil—

Anyway, he must find out. There might be others left. Of course, there must be others. Plenty of them, too; men and women who'd been lucky the way he was.

So Sheldon went back.

IT WAS a slow trip down a lonesome road. No thumbing a ride, this time. He plodded along, a forlorn and slightly ludicrous figure in the pair of blue denim he'd found in the farmhouse closet. He carried a knapsack, the traditional burden of necessity. He might have to return to the farmhouse, and if so, he needed to pick up matches, candles, an extra knife, some glue, twine—he'd made the list, feeling like Robinson Crusoe.

Sheldon trudged past blasted filling stations, broken-down wayside stands, farmhouses with gaping windows, suburban cottages with doors ajar upon silence. Wind and rain had disfigured the surfaces of billboards and roadside posters. Telegraph poles were down as though cyclone-struck, and electric wires hung dangling in the October breeze.

No life. Sheldon didn't even see any birds. The fields looked strange without grazing cattle. He was walking through a new kind of nightmare now—a dream of desolation.

It didn't really hit him until he saw the horizon of the city—the strangely

smokeless horizon. Then he knew. Then the loneliness really rose to encompass him for the first time.

He stared down at miles of empty, silent streets. The hum and honk of traffic, the rumble of subway and surface car, the roar of trains, the drone of airplanes, the call of tugboat whistle and factory siren, the clang of police car and ambulance—gone, all gone. The clatter of riveting machines, the purr of dynamo and motor, the clank of gears and pistons—forever stilled.

But most of all, Sheldon missed the little noises, the little human noises that formed the very heartbeat, the vital throb of the city's hum. The whistle of the cop, the click of the steno's heels, the bawling of the baby in the flat next door, the jest flung raucously from a teamster's lips, the laughter of the school-yard, the peddler's chant—yes, and the noise of banging pots on a smoking stove, the clump of feet on stairways, the snatch of song from a tavern doorway—these things had vanished with the rest.

No smoke, no noise, no lights, no traffic. No life—and Sheldon was lonely for life.

He started for the deserted bridge, moving slowly. It was almost senseless to cross it. He knew what he'd find. The streets filled with skeletons—skeletons of men and now skeletons of machines. Rusty wrecks of cars, stalled or smashed in the roadways. Crashed planes. The debris of street cars and busses. And in the buildings, the dusty iron bones of engines and factory equipment. Rotted wire entrails twisting over the floors. The slit arteries of cables and wires.

He had guessed the truth. A sight of the city confirmed it. The machines had destroyed, and then were destroyed. Krane's idea: they couldn't survive untended.

A yawning vista rose in Sheldon's consciousness. What now? Suppose he *was*

the only one left? The only man alive?

Alive in a world of death. Alive in a gigantic tomb that was the earth.

He stared again at the city across the bridge. Why go in? Why bother? What difference did it make if he was the last one? Down below the bridge here was the water. It was cool, dark. Cool and dark as sleep—a long sleep. Why shouldn't he lie down with the others—the millions upon millions bedded forever in an earth left empty.

Sheldon moved towards the bridge rail. He looked at the water now. He didn't want to see the city, think about the city. Still, there was a reflection of the buildings in the water. But he could blot out that reflection if he jumped. Blot out the maddening silhouette of the vast skyscrapers that hung like tombstones over a titanic graveyard.

"Don't jump."

But Sheldon did. He jumped back a foot, startled by the unfamiliar sound. A voice! A *human* voice.

HE SAW him then, lying propped against the railing ahead. He was an old man with a grizzled gray beard; clad in rags. But the sight of his wrinkled face and rheumy eyes made Sheldon's heart leap. He was alive—that's what mattered.

Sheldon went towards him.

A hand raised up—a thin, bony claw extended from the frayed sleeve of the bedraggled coat.

Sheldon gripped it.

"Strange—to be shaking hands again," whispered the old man. "That's what I've wanted most of all. The feel of human flesh, alive against my own."

Sheldon didn't answer. A lump choked his throat. The two men stared at one another, reading the blessed life in each other's eyes.

Abruptly the old man laughed. Mirth turned to a painful cough in his throat.

"Doctor Livingstone, I presume," he cackled.

Sheldon forced a smile. "I'm Dick Sheldon, late of the *Morning Press*."

The oldster croaked again.

"Yes, I know. I recognized you."

"Recognized me?"

"You interviewed me once. I'm George Piedmont."

"Piedmont—the banker." Sheldon spoke the name of the semi-fabulous multimillionaire in incredulity.

"Don't stare so—it's true. But it doesn't matter now, does it? Nothing matters any more."

Sheldon had to force the question.

"What's happened down there—in the city, I mean?"

The old man propped himself painfully against the bridge rail. Slowly he rose to his feet, tottered there with bowed head. The bony hand gestured towards the empty skyscrapers in the distance.

"It's all over," he whispered. "Nothing left. They went from house to house. It was our fault, really—working with us, they must have known all our secrets, all our hiding places. They hunted us down for weeks, systematically. Those the machines didn't get, plague or fire finished off. Half of the city is burned, you know—a shambles."

"But what are they doing now?"

The croaking laugh rose and the finger jabbed triumphantly.

"That's the joke, Sheldon! The conquerors have become the conquered. That's how I got out—because in the last month, the machines have been running down."

"Something happened to the telephones and electrical power. They tangled up their own communications. Radio went dead, too, with no one to tend to the controls. Cars are out of gas and oil; factories are dead; storms have rusted and rotted the mechanism in the street. Oh, there's more dead in the city than

just humans—and it's that way all over the world."

George Piedmont tugged at his unkempt beard and grinned painfully.

"I've been laughing all day. Crawling my way over the dead engines in the streets, wriggling through barricades of flesh and metal. It's funny, when you think of it. But oh God, how I've longed for the sight of a human face!"

"How did you escape?" Sheldon asked. "You, of all people?"

Again the laugh.

"That's the cream of the jest, isn't it? A multimillionaire in rags! Well, I did better than Judson. He was head of the utilities, you know. On the second evening he committed suicide—by gas. Used his own product. Ironic. Like Treblich—railroad magnate. He was in the freight yards when his own trains turned against him. Tried to escape on the tracks in a hand car. A freight ran him down.

"All the men with all the power—useless. It happened to me. I was at the bank when the time locks on the safes opened. And the burglar alarms began to ring; the cash registers opened; the doors flew wide. Forty millions in the vaults—all there for the taking.

"But who wanted money? What good was it? The machines couldn't use it, and even the bums wouldn't stoop to pick it up. They tell me the treasury department machines went absolutely berserk, printing billions in currency, and nobody cared.

"And there I was, in the bank, all alone. Fortunately there was a good stock of provisions in my apartment upstairs. I dragged it all down with me and took it into my retreat."

"But where did you go to escape?" Sheldon asked.

"That's the real joke. You know what I did? I dragged my rations with me—and I locked myself inside one of the bank vaults!"

PIEDMONT'S laughter ended in a fit of painful gasps.

"When I came out, it was all over. I couldn't stand what I saw down there, so I dragged myself away. I'm not going to last much longer, you know."

Sheldon was silent.

"I'll be the last man—" His voice trailed off.

"Perhaps."

"What do you mean?"

"Come closer." The old man suddenly stiffened with effort. "I'm going to tell you something. Something I noticed while crossing the bridge. I saw smoke over there on the other side of the river!"

"Smoke?"

"Yes. Factory smoke."

"Then—?"

"I don't know. It might be men. It might be—some of them. I thought I'd try and make it, but I know now it's too late. You can go, though."

"I'm staying here with you."

"Don't be a fool." The blue-veined hand fluttered. "I'm done for, but you must survive."

"No, I can't leave you."

Piedmont smiled. "I can take care of myself," he whispered. "Let me solve the problem in my own way."

Sheldon saw the hand move too late. Piedmont must have been holding the gun inside his pocket all the time. Its report came suddenly, and the bearded banker slumped. Sheldon knelt as the eyes fluttered open. Gray lips parted.

"Good-by, last man. If you meet anybody—just say—hello—"

CHAPTER EIGHT

My Doom is Here

SHELDON'S heart pounded when he saw the smoke. It poured upwards like a black beacon, urging him forward. His pace quickened.

The factory stood on a little rise. *Hollingsford's* said the battered sign on the wire fence enclosing the vast buildings. Munitions, probably. But there was life inside, life making fire.

He passed through the open gate, entered the yards. The concrete was deserted. He saw no lights in the various smaller shops and supply sheds, but the large main plant with the smoke-belching chimneys loomed ahead.

Suddenly he heard the throbbing, the droning from within, humming in furious pulsation to match the tempo of his pulse.

Work in progress!

Sheldon edged towards the projecting window ledges.

He climbed slowly. The droning vibration from within the factory walls communicated itself to the iron beneath his feet. He reached the open top of a window, paused and peered in.

His eager eyes stared at the whirring dynamos, the clanking drill-presses, the central moving belt of an assembly line. Cam-shafts, gears, pistons, cranes rolling hand trucks, and conveyors backing from molten furnace piles.

He wanted to see the men, tending their work. But there were no men.

Just the machines, endlessly moving and shifting in a purposeless pattern of their own.

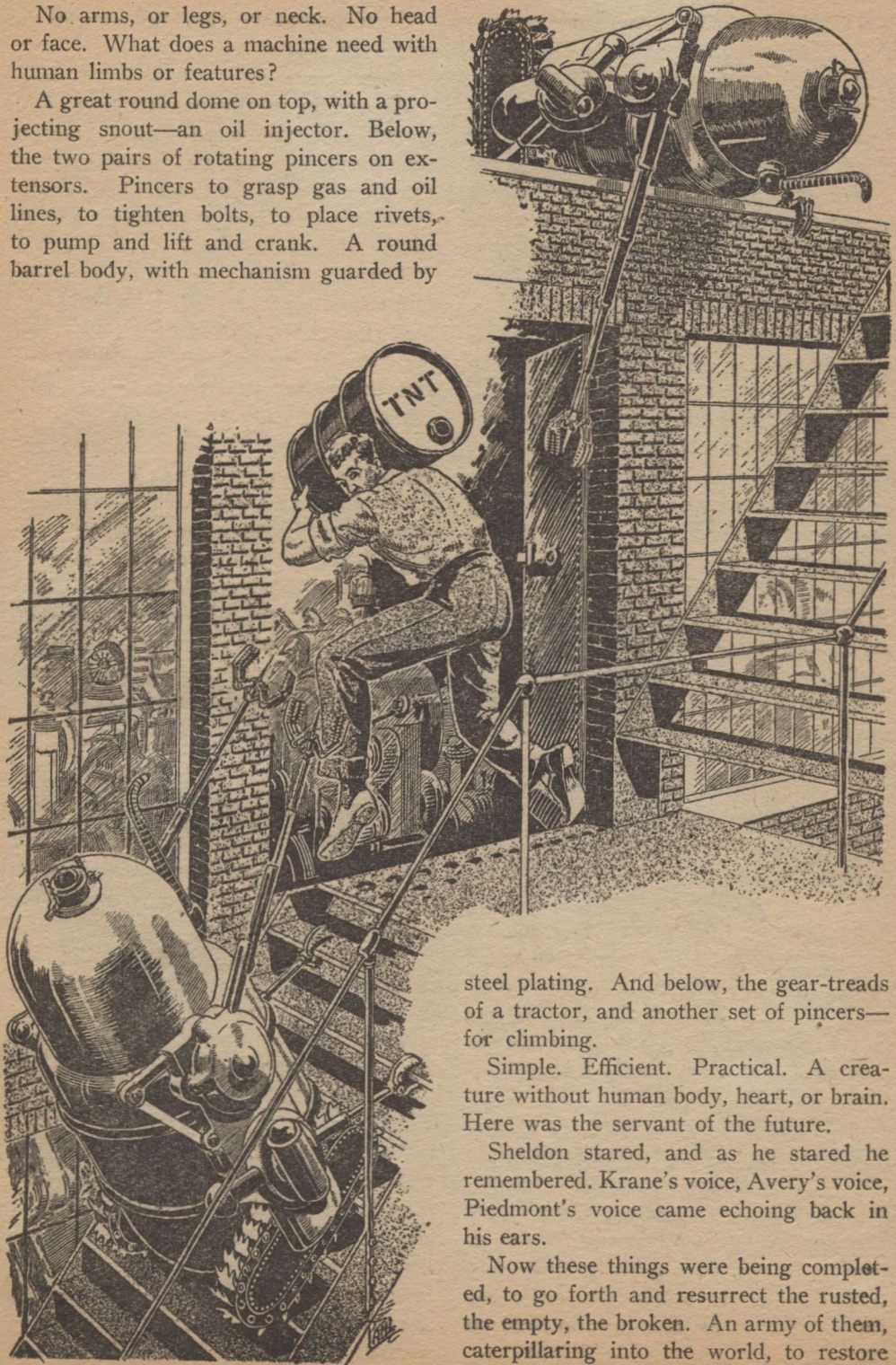
Purposeless? No—for the assembly line was going. Shining silver bodies rested on the treads, moved between descending levers that twisted and tightened bolts, dropped added platings on the moving forms.

Sheldon's eyes roved the interior with ghastly comprehension. The machines were at work—*making machines!*

It had come. They had discovered the way of survival, finally. The life-force, the intelligence behind their animation, had found a way. And here was the production line, turning out the mechanical attendants, the silver servants, the robots.

No arms, or legs, or neck. No head or face. What does a machine need with human limbs or features?

A great round dome on top, with a projecting snout—an oil injector. Below, the two pairs of rotating pincers on extensors. Pincers to grasp gas and oil lines, to tighten bolts, to place rivets, to pump and lift and crank. A round barrel body, with mechanism guarded by



steel plating. And below, the gear-treads of a tractor, and another set of pincers—for climbing.

Simple. Efficient. Practical. A creature without human body, heart, or brain. Here was the servant of the future.

Sheldon stared, and as he stared he remembered. Krane's voice, Avery's voice, Piedmont's voice came echoing back in his ears.

Now these things were being completed, to go forth and resurrect the rusted, the empty, the broken. An army of them, caterpillaring into the world, to restore

the machine empire. An army to tend the idiotic grinding and clanking of a purposeless mechanical civilization.

A senseless anger rose in Sheldon's breast. His consciousness, his life-force cried out against this cold, impersonal dream of the future—a world without laughter and without tears, without love or conscience, without goal or ideal.

He must stop it, somehow. But—how?

Then he remembered. It had been a munitions plant—so there would be dynamite somewhere.

If he could reach it and return—

Sheldon descended the ladder very quietly and very cautiously.

He must hurry. What luck to arrive at the very moment when the new creations were being completed! Perhaps, if he were in time—

He found the stuff.

Nitro. Heavy kegs. One would be enough—and one was all he could lift; all he could carry up the ladder.

Wheezing with the exertion, he clasped the keg and began to hoist himself up the iron rungs, hand over hand.

He made haste. He reached the top of the window, stared in. His hands propped the heavy keg before him.

Then he heard it—the scraping from below.

Eyes wide with horror, Sheldon saw the thing emerge. It rolled across the yard, swift and shining, its treads rotating. Then it reached the base of the ladder and upended. The lower clamps shot out. The robot began to climb.

SHeldon climbed, too. As he did, he suddenly noted that all noise from within the shop had ceased. An ominous silence dropped like a heavy cloud. The line had stopped moving; it was as though the machines were waiting.

He climbed. Over his shoulder he saw the pursuing robot swinging up the iron rungs.

Sheldon gasped. He had to make the roof in time—had to!

Then he saw it.

Above him, peering over the edge of the factory roof, the round head gleamed in the slanting sun, and the horrid nozzle of the oil-feeder thrust down like a snout. Predatory, beastlike, it crouched and its raking pincers extended.

They'd have him now. No way to turn. One above and one below. And in the factory, the fires winked their idiotic eyes, the drills screeched their hysterical glee, and the pistons chattered in unhuman mirth.

A million streams of consciousness converged in a raging torrent in Sheldon's brain. Man had built machines—machines destroyed Man—money couldn't save him; the power of the press couldn't save him; guns couldn't save him; love couldn't save him—for the very power by which Man ruled had turned against him. Man's day was over, and the machines would rule because there was no weapon to turn against them.

No weapon?

There was—life. The last life on Earth. That was the only weapon Man had. And if he could not survive, he'd go down in the only way he knew—as master of the Earth, not slave of the machines.

It took a second, but already the pincers below were extended, the pincers above were looming and thrusting.

Then Sheldon turned on the ladder. He clasped the keg to his breast. He looked down, grinned.

And jumped.

Sheldon never heard the explosion. His last conscious thought—the last conscious thought of a human brain on Earth—was of his body turning over and over. Turning over and over, as the earth turned over and over amidst the stars like a tiny cog in the vast machinery of the illimitable cosmos.

VIEWPOINTS



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.

ASTRONOMERS the world over are sleeping better these nights. A few short weeks ago—on October 11th, 1942—the most powerful foe of modern astronomy died.

Twenty years ago the Illinois State Legislature appointed a commission to investigate certain strange reports in regard to Zion City, a place of some six thousand population. The investigators found themselves in what one of them described as "not the Twentieth Century . . . but a madhouse of the year 1000." The city was completely under the control of a man named Wilbur Glenn Voliva, who had strong opinions and held to them in spite of all the doctrines of modern science.

Voliva believed that the Earth was flat. The city's schools were forbidden to teach the contrary to their pupils; the textbooks used in their courses were specially prepared, under Voliva's direction. A map taken from one of them showed a flat, dish-shaped Earth, with the North Pole in the center and the South Pole represented as a rim of ice circling the disc. What was on the other side of that ice wall, Voliva did not make clear. But when Admiral Richard Byrd announced his plans for flying to the South Pole, Voliva said, "Byrd had better look out. If he

flies over that wall we'll never see him again!"

Voliva once predicted the world would end in 1942, but later admitted he was a century off in his calculations.

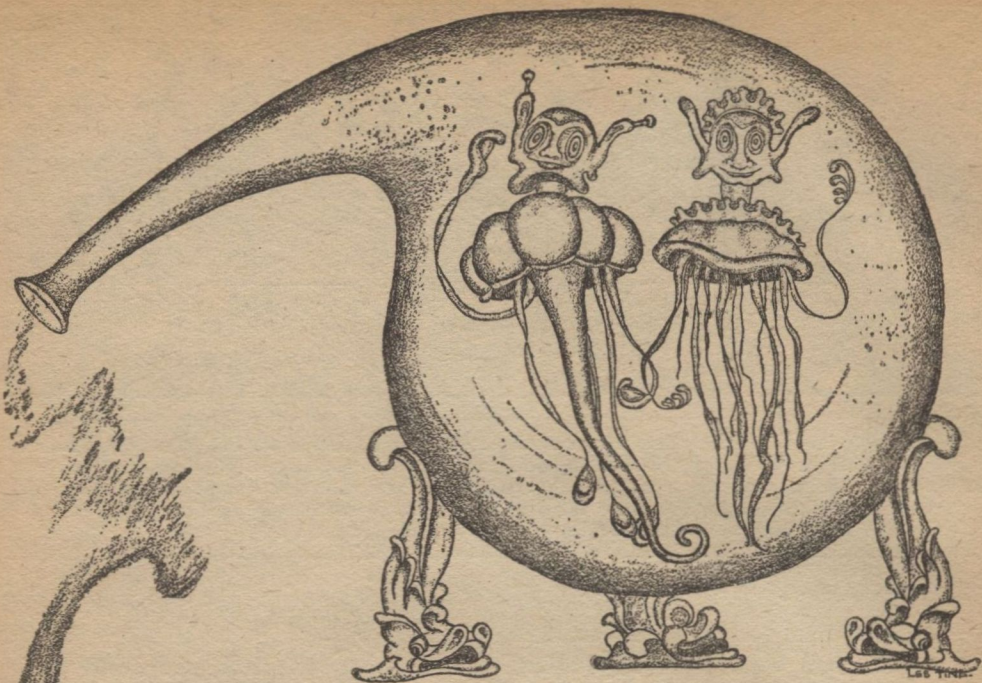
"Certainly the Earth is flat," he said. "The sky is a vast dome of solid material, from which the sun, moon and stars are hung like chandeliers from a ceiling. The edges of the dome rest on a wall of ice, which surrounds the flat world to keep foolhardy mariners from tumbling over the edge into oblivion. The sun circles above the Earth spirally, making one circuit of three hundred and sixty degrees each twenty-four hours, always at the same height.

"The rising and setting of the sun are optical illusions. The sun is just as high at midnight as it is at midday, but it is on the opposite side of the North Pole at midnight. Because of its limited size, it cannot be seen."

Voliva, whose diet consisted principally of Brazil nuts and buttermilk, had planned to live to attain the age of a hundred and twenty years—which mark he missed by half a century.

"If I die before 1990," he said once, "no one will be more surprised than myself."

(Continued on page 113)



Come to Mars

A vision of the future, a warning from the past—torn between them was he who saw a preview of the death of his race—and one last chance to save it!



“**B**OTH have been completed at the same time,” Kwain said as he paused between his two inventions, showing them to his colleague, Cantril. “The one on your right is what I call a time twister, while here is the completed Visualophone.”

“I know what a time twister is,” Cantril said. “It must have developed from your theories that individual time travel is impossible. The entire cosmos must go back into time together or not at all.

But I must confess that I’m at a loss as far as your Visualophone is concerned.”

Kwain smiled. He enjoyed work for the sake of work. He could have destroyed every single invention without feeling a single heartache. It was the pleasure of the work that drew him, not the rewards of accomplishment.

“My Visualophone,” he said, “is merely a super-developed electronic telescope with a simple addition. Sound waves

By **WALTER KUBILIUS**

are transformed into light at their source and then reformed into sound at the receiver."

"Extraordinary!" Cantril exclaimed. "This would revolutionize television."

"Naturally," Kwain said modestly. "But I had something else in mind."

"What?"

"Contact with Mars—"

"**I**N FACT," he continued, "I have already done so. I am in touch with one Hu-Lan who has promised to give me today the formula for a fuel which will make interplanetary travel possible for us. I intend to visit Hu-Lan when a suitable spaceship is built."

"What does he look like?" Cantril asked. "A spider?"

Kwain smiled. "You've been reading too many stories lately. No, he appears to be a cultivated Englishman with a good command of the language."

"Speaks English?" Cantril said, astounded. "That's impossible."

Kwain looked troubled, "That's the only thing I cannot understand, but he positively will not explain. He changes the subject whenever I ask what he really looks like. I think he uses a form of hypnotism which translates his appearance and language into ours. I wonder what he really is like."

He got up suddenly, noticing the time.

"Hu-Lan is scheduled soon," he said. He picked up a sheaf of papers. "These are the formulas and layouts for the Visualophone. It's the only copy I have. I ought to make more. It would be terrible if these plans were destroyed." Kwain held the sheaf of papers as he played with the dials of the Visualophone. "But that's only a chance in a million. Pass me that flask, will you? It's too dangerous to leave around here."

"This one?" Cantril asked, reaching for a thin-necked bottle with his right hand. As he lifted it, it clinked against

another bottle. Quickly he tried to save it by leaning forward, but in his haste he slipped. The bottle slid from his hands to the board of the Visualophone, crashed to the floor. It burst into a brilliant flame, smoked for several moments and then died down, leaving a putrid stench in the air.

"What a close call!" Kwain said. "A second sooner and it would have wrecked the apparatus! But here is Hu-Lan!"

The image flickered upon the screen and then gradually took shape and form as Kwain corrected the dials. The smiling, genial face of Hu-Lan, Martian, looked out across the void that separated them.

"Greetings, Earthman!" Hu-Lan said. He was dressed in a simply cut suit that glimmered and shone.

"Hello, Hu-Lan," Kwain said uneasily, wondering why he sensed danger in the Martian's simple appearance. "We had a slight accident—almost wrecked the Visualophone, in fact. But all is well now."

"That is bad," Hu-Lan said, frowning. "But it merely proves what I have been saying. You must come to Mars immediately. Any slight accident might ruin your machine, and communication between planets may cease—forever."

"I understand."

"Then you will come to Mars?"

"Yes. But why do you not come to Earth?"

"We are unable, as you will see when you arrive. We have the knowledge with which to build great ships, but lack the physical equipment. You have that."

"We accept your invitation. Give us the formulas for proper metal alloys and combustion fuel."

The Martian's face was exultant, "You will come to Mars! You will!"

THE news that contact with Mars had been established spread over a startled Earth like wildfire. Those who doubted came to Kwain's laboratories

in the middle of New Jersey and talked with Hu-Lan.

They came to doubt but returned to praise, as Hu-Lan showed them pictures of the planet's capital and outlined the historic development of his people. Nation after nation contributed to a fund being raised for the creation of a super fleet to cross interplanetary space. Twenty-seven ships were being built, to represent the twenty-seven nations of Earth which would first cross space. Professor Kwain became Captain Kwain in supreme command.

As his first assistant he nominated Commodore Cantril.

Despite the enthusiasm with which the nations of Earth attacked the problems of building the fleet, Captain Kwain had misgivings. In the first place, there was something about the pictures of the Martian capital which did not please him. They looked too much like the cities of Earth—almost as though they were faked composite pictures. Nor was he satisfied with the glib stories given by Hu-Lan regarding the parallel anthropologic development of Earthmen and Martians. If developments were actually similar why didn't the Martians build the ships instead of Earth? In fact, they should have been far advanced—but such did not seem to be the case.

But the ships were built, and they left for Mars.

IN THE darkness of the Martian night they approached the location of the capital city. Once over it they descended to within a few miles over the surface, spread out in echelon formation and waited for the first rays of the morning sun.

The expedition was a complete success. Its every detail had worked with mechanical precision, and every ship, assembled from all sections of Earth, was in its exact, predetermined spot.

"Apparently we have not been noticed," Captain Kwain said briskly. "Get in touch with the Martians."

The operator nodded, turned back to the radio and called.

"Attention, Mars," he said. "Attention, Mars. This is the Earth fleet calling. We are stationed over your capital city. Attention, Mars."

The message was repeated as Captain Kwain waited for the acknowledging reply from Hu-Lan. None came.

"Repeat the message," he said impatiently.

"Attention Mars!" the operator said, "Attention Mars!"

Still there was no answer. Commodore Cantril entered the room, pale-faced and frightened. He walked up to the Captain.

"Our calculations—" he began, hesitating. "They—they must be wrong."

"Impossible," Kwain said. "They were rechecked a dozen times on Earth. There's no room for error."

"Then—would you mind looking overboard?"

Angrily Kwain pushed him aside and walked over to the long glass rectangle that lay across half the bottom of the spacecraft. He looked downward into the black Martian night.

"Douse ship lights!" he called. "Drop flares!"

The lights went out and the control room was in darkness. A moment later two brilliant flares dropped fore and aft of the ship, lighting up the Martian landscape. They floated downwards, like two miniature suns turning night into day.

Captain Kwain watched and cursed. Instead of the tall lean spires of Martian cathedrals and the ramshackle buildings of its people, the flares lit up nothing but a dead expanse of lifeless Martian desert. Not a single movement broke the stillness. When the flares reached the surface they burned for several minutes and

then died out, leaving the surface of Mars once more enveloped in darkness. The feeble light of Phobos and Deimos, twin moons, did nothing to alleviate the blackness.

A frown cut its way across his brow. He muttered to himself, walking to the radio board.

"Attention all commodores," he said. "Flagship will descend immediately. Others of fleet will make reconnaissance flights over Mars, landing wherever there may be traces of Martians. Apparently they are attempting to hide, but they cannot escape. That is all. Keep in touch with flagship for further details."

THEY landed on the surface of what should have been the capital city of Mars. But not a stick of wood was visible. Kwain had seen the city many times in the Visualophones with which contact with Mars was first made. It was a huge city comprising 1,600,000 population with skyscrapers, elevated trains and suburbs. Its only distinguishing characteristic was its amazing resemblance to the cities of Earth. But the city was—gone.

In the morning Kwain and Cantril, with the rest of the flagship's staff, walked out upon the surface. Suspecting camouflage, Kwain immediately ordered excavation, with skyscrapers, elevated trains and haps some fright or fear had made the Martians bury their city from sight.

Nothing was found.

Reports from the other ships of the fleet came in one by one. Every single report said the same thing. The surface of the planet was scoured, but there were no traces of Martians.

They had vanished completely from the planet. Not a single trace of their cities or their people remained.

"We've been tricked," Kwain said, ner-

ously drumming with his fingers upon the desk. "All those photographs of Martian cities—they were nothing but composites of Earth cities. But why?"

"Suppose it's some gigantic hoax played upon us?" Cantril asked.

Kwain shook his head. "The formulas for combustion and new alloys were genuine enough. There are Martians—there must be! But we have failed—completely," he said bitterly. "As if we were children they've tricked and beaten us. What humiliation to return empty-handed!"

"Shall we return?"

Resignedly, Kwain nodded. "We're beaten," he said, looking out of the window to the great red dust plain that stretched across the face of the planet. With each light breeze a red sliver of dust made its way through the open window into the spaceship. Ventura idly picked up a pinch of dust and examined it.

"Better analyze this red dust," he said, "before we return to Earth. All our clothes are full of it and we must have carried quite a bit into the ship."

"It has already been analyzed," Cantril said. "It's inorganic matter, completely harmless. We have tons of the same type of dust on Earth."

Kwain tossed the pinch of dust over his shoulder.

"Back to Earth," he said.

SILENCE greeted the return of the fleet. Immediately the wheels of propaganda began rolling. The fleet was in space for experimental maneuvers. It was not true that any attempt to land on Mars was made. The break-off in communications with Mars was due to atmospheric disturbances.

From time to time a ship of Earth made its way to the red planet in the hope of unravelling the mystery of the vanished

Martians. But never a clue was found. There were some who began to believe that the entire story of contact with the Martians was a gigantic hoax perpetrated upon a gullible people. Those who claimed to have contacted Mars on the Visulophone were denounced as liars.

They had little with which to defend their statements.

In due time the incident was forgotten. The dust that had collected in the jets of the rockets during their stay on Mars blew away with Earth's winds. An insignificant amount, it meant nothing. So they thought. . . .

The apple trees of Oregon were ripe as luscious globules were ready for the picking in the grove. The farmer placed his ladder against the tree, stepped on it—and the tree crumbled. A puff of gray and red dust sprung outward and was carried away by the wind. The red dust motes separated themselves from the gray and spread apart until they infected other trees.

A young couple in Central Park leaned against a tree. It collapsed under their weight, crumbling like dust. A small flurry of red dust was blown from the debris by the wind. Surprised, the young couple looked at the wreck, then at each other. Laughing, they went their way.

There was drought on the Western plains, and the hungry cattle were turned loose to feed upon a carefully cultivated grange. Their hooves thundered as they reached the field. But when their hungry mouths reached for the rich food, they encountered dust—gray and red dust. Slowly, with each breath of wind, the red motes separated themselves from the gray and made their way to other fields.

The giant reapers were stationed in the great fields of the Ukraine, the bread basket of Europe. But when their metal arms reached for the staffs, they encountered masses of corruption. Dust rose like angry clouds over the wheat fields. With

the dust came the dreaded horsemen—Famine and Pestilence.

Lumber regions of Canada, tobacco farms of Virginia, corn, rye, potatoes—wherever food was grown, wherever plant life existed, there the red dust was found. There it grew and there it threatened the life of the Earth.

Overnight the Agricultural Congress became the most important body on Earth. Agronomists whose words no one ever listened to suddenly found their every saying headlined in the press and radio. To them the world looked for guidance—in vain.

“Construct giant hot-houses, hermetically sealed, for the growth of necessary foodstuffs,” was the suggestion advanced by Petij Harmon of Alaska.

They were built—but too late. It was found that no structure could be built that was free of every single red dust mote. And it took only one—

“Synthesize foodstuffs from chemical compounds,” Cantril of United Farben Works declared.

“What about us?” asked the people of the great unindustrialized Southeast Asia and Africa. The simplest and oldest of all laws—the struggle for existence—came back into effect. Starving, desperate mobs walked into the face of gunfire and bombs, knowing that over their bodies their children would march to win the precious food.

The dust grew. Earth was slowly becoming a lifeless desert. Strangely enough, it did not harm the Earthmen. It seemed to thrive only upon plant life. Chemical analysis proved nothing. Alone, it was lifeless inert matter. Upon a blade of grass, a leaf of a tree, a shaft of wheat it grew and multiplied.

“EACH type of life gives way to another,” an editorial in one of the last remaining papers wrote. “What was once the master of a

planet becomes nothing but a memory. Our green fields turn barren, and for lack of food we die. A century or two, a band here or there shall linger a while—But they too, in the end, shall crumble. Mankind is doomed.”

Kwain read the excerpt to his friend and tossed it angrily away.

“Stupid fatalism,” he mumbled.

“You don’t agree?” Cantril asked.

“Never!” Kwain answered. “We have not surrendered yet. We can conquer it.”

Unbelieving, Cantril stared at him.

“How?”

“Turn back the clock—

“You remember the day we first contacted Mars?” Kwain asked.

“Yes,” Cantril said, reliving in his memory that fateful day that led to the disaster now covering the Earth. “I remember the time I had reached for a flask and it fell from my hands, narrowly missing the Visualophone.”

Kwain nodded. “Suppose,” he said, “the flash had exploded a fraction of a second sooner. What then?”

Cantril measured each word before speaking. “It would have completely smashed the delicate tubing of the Visualo-

phone, and would have hopelessly charred the blueprint manuscript.”

“Exactly,” Kwain said, feeling a tightness in his throat as he gingerly approached the climax of his idea. “We would not have contacted Mars. Without contact we could not have built a spaceship. Without a spaceship we would not have brought the red dust back with us to Earth. All this we could have avoided—if the flask had destroyed the Visualophone.”

Cantril’s face glowed as he seized the import of Kwain’s words. “The time twister!” he said.

“Exactly,” Kwain said. “The Visualophone escaped destruction in a million to one chance. The probabilities are that, should the event be repeated, it would not escape destruction a second time. I did not intend the risk of ever using the time twister. It is a far too powerful force and I don’t fully understand it. But under the circumstances I think it is worth the risk. But before we try it, I want to contact Hu-Lan once more.”

Kwain turned to the Visualophone, switched on the dials and spoke when the screen glowed.

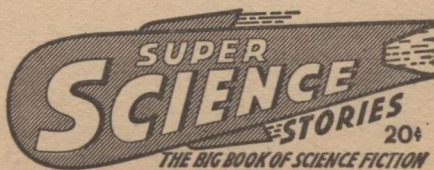


“THE PERSECUTORS”

STRANGE as the visions of madness, terrifying as the eldritch shapes that walk in a night of horror, the light-creatures hovered all about, calling a man to the greatest betrayal of history—the surrender of all humanity to the harsh tyranny of the Persecutors, who knew no law but fear! Read this splendid new novel by Cleve Cartmill—*The Persecutors*, complete in the February issue!

ARTHUR LEO ZAGAT—

returns to science fiction with the second great fantasy novel of this all-star issue, *Sunward Flight*. The other top-ranking stories are by such authors as Harry Walton, Frank Belknap Long, Ross Rocklynne, William Morrison and many more!



February Issue On Sale Now!

"Hu-Lan," he said, "this is Kwain of Earth calling. I want to speak to you. I know you can hear me. Answer."

The screen shone and then Hu-Lan's bland face appeared upon it.

"Greetings, Earthman!" he said, softly and sardonically.

"You have won so far," Kwain said. "Are you satisfied?"

"I am happy," Hu-Lan said.

"Tell me," Kwain said, "why do you appear in the guise of an Earthman when your true shape and form is that of a dust mote?"

The body and face of Hu-Lan immediately vanished from the screen. In its place could be seen a stretch of red barren desert—Mars!

The voice of Hu-Lan still spoke, "It was necessary at first," he said, "for you might have become suspicious had you known our true form. We are inert and incapable of motion, living and breeding only in plant life, of which Earth has such a great quantity. It was necessary that some of our species get to Earth without your knowledge. The pictures we showed you were nothing but the reflections of your own minds. Each of you saw what you imagined Martian cities to be like."

The slightly mocking tone changed and it became formal, brisk. "But why did you call me? If it is to beg for mercy—nothing can be done."

Kwain shook his head.

"No," he said. "Your strange civilization and form of life is brilliant, but through sheer accident my clumsy efforts will be able to unravel the web you have spun around the Earth. We shall not be beaten!"

Before the dust that was Hu-Lan could retort, Kwain shut off the motor. He turned to Cantril.

"If we succeed," he said, "we will remember nothing of this. Perhaps that is just as well." He poised there, thinking, a trace of regret on his face.

"Well—to work," he said abruptly. Facing the giant mass of steel and the pulsating ribbons of electric fire that controlled the warp and woof of dimensional flux, he twisted the dials. . . .

"IT WOULD be terrible if these plans were destroyed," Kwain said, holding the sheaf of papers as he played with the dials of the Visualophone, "but that's only a chance in a million. Pass me that flask, will you? It's too dangerous to leave around here."

"This one?" Cantril asked, reaching for a thin-necked bottle with his right hand. As he lifted it it clinked against another bottle. Quickly he tried to save it by leaning forward—but in his haste he slipped.

The bottle slid from his hands onto the board of the Visualophone, where it burst into a rending explosion.

The keys of the dials were a twisted mass of molten metal as the tubes cracked and burst under the strain. The sheaf of papers lying next to them crinkled with flame and suddenly burnt away.

It took no more than five seconds, and the Visualophone was a complete total wreck, plans and all.

"There goes five years of work," Kwain said, looking over the smoking debris. "Totally gone—"

"Oh well," he said finally, sighing. "Maybe it's for the best anyway. I had my fun at it. Now it's time to try something else."

He kicked at the wreckage in anger and stubbed his toe. Reaching for it in pain, his hand came across a red piece of dirt and mud on the sole of his shoe.

He looked at it in surprise. "Red dust," he muttered, wondering. He glanced out the window where a rich flowering garden bloomed.

"Good old New Jersey red clay," he said, tossing it away. "For some reason or other it gave me a fright."



FANTASY'S what the motion picture publicists call the silver-screen flights of fancy and controlled imagination. The term "science fiction" hardly enters their vocabulary, if ever, although "fantasy" is well-known. In fact, "fantasy" has covered everything from "Doctor Caligari's Cabinet" to "Things to Come."

But as far back as the birth of motion pictures, especially in Europe, men's minds have sought escape from this earth and its existing dimensions and planes, its "whims and ways." The Old Country is as full of fairy tales and folk legends, mystery and horror, superstitions and quaint conceits, as any current issue of a fantasy magazine. The Continent cultivated its ancient lore and weird scientific theories, and fantastic films flowered abroad before they were inseminated in American soil.

The old Germany was the classic producer of that sort of film. Besides its own wonder stories, taken from the "Nibelungenlied," such as "Siegfried" with its fire-breathing dragon, cloak of invisibility, etc., there were of course "Faust" and "Cinderella." "Out of the Mist," "The Blue Light" and "Chronicle of the Grieshuus" were tributes to superb lighting and photography.

Acting in the Germany that was, meant much more than the photographic effects of a picture, however. No one realized that more than young Conrad Veidt, and

the film company that had him had the prerequisite for a realistic fantasy. His psychological studies were masterpieces, an unusual combination of pity and horror, as exemplified in "The Hands of Orlac" and "The Student of Prague." His characterization as the somnambulist in "The Cabinet of Doctor Caligari" was a milestone in the macabre; his rôle in "Waxworks," pure horror.

Germany always had an acute sense of scientific values and produced the first true "scientifilms," primary of which we have record being "Destiny," vividly picturing a trip around the planets in an "ethership," and depicting the end of the world. "Edge of the World" was a future-time spectacle of 1926; but the film that set the scientifans to raving was "Metropolis," from the novel by Thea von Harbou, directed by Fritz Lang, introducing Brigitte Helm. Here one saw the city of the next century, with all its fabulous futuristic architecture, all the overpowering magnitude, the engineering achievement of Everytown—2026. And the drama of a robotrix likened unto a human girl held spellbound fan and layman alike.

FRANCE never had much to offer the cinégoer in the way of fantasy, but seemed of a mind to stick to science fiction. Reverting to legends, she produced "Don Quixote" with amusing results. From the ridiculous to the sublime—or part of it—she filmed Poe's "Fall of

the House of Usher." In 1900, when the flickers were bad and science worse, she made "The Doctor's Secret," depending on the *outré* to put the offering across.

Then France turned to the world of science almost completely. In the silent days she toyed with it in "The Crazy Ray." This she followed up with "*Le Voyage Imaginaire*." Then came "*Fin du Mond*" or "End of the World;" "*Le Tunnel*," another representation of a man-made passageway under the Atlantic; "*FP1 Ne Réponds Plus*," "The Machine to Predict 'Tomoro'," and "*Et Le Mond Temblera*." All these, as the reader will notice, explain themselves by the titles, of pure science fiction.

Brigitte Helm—an almost exclusive actress in scientifilms—appeared as Antinea in Benoit's "*L'Atlantide*," released in a few American foreign filmarts under the title "Mistress of Atlantis."

Last great French fantasy film to reach this country was Victor Francen in "*P Accuse!*," the gripping nightmare of *les géules cassés*, of the dead of World War I who came out of their graves to shock a militant mankind into peace. Last rumor from France: Two super scientifilms scheduled, "Evacuées of the Year 5000" and "*Croisières Sidérales*" (travels in space and time!)

On the world scene, Italy enters but once to our knowledge, with a tremendous picturization of "Dante's Inferno." Czecho Slovakia is believed to have made a version of "The Golem." A Spanish version of "It's Great to be Alive (When You're the Last Man on Earth)" was filmed.

The Soviet apparently never has had much interest in science and fantasy, but did its best with "Zvenigore," a tale of the Ukrainian backlands, and one remarkable story, "Aelita," made in 1920, showing a trip to Mars and the red planet's robot civilization. This same story—by Tolstoi—was translated into the "uni-

versalanguage," Esperanto, subtitled "*Marso Formortanta*," or "Mars Moribund." Russia also made a story that seems a favorite of fantasy producers of all lands—to wit, "The Thief of Bagdad." "Gulliver's Travels," the puppet sensation, was followed by a prophecy, "If War Comes Tomorrow."

ENGLAND is famous, of course, for "Things to Come." The remarkable, almost clairvoyant, prophecies of Wells were startling to the world in 1936, and more so in 1940. He missed the date of the war by only four months! The types of tanks we now use weren't so far off, and the knowledge afore that this war would be fought with airmadas still causes comment. Whether or not this will be the Warmageddon that will cause the breakdown of civilization as we know it, or build it up eventually, is something only time knows.

England's first talking picture was another prophecy, a thorough-going scientifilm produced in 1930 and predicting near-war between the Federated Atlantic States and the Federated States of Europa in 1940—"High Treason." "TransAtlantic Tunnel," produced by the same company some years later, cleverly linked itself with the "history" established in its predecessor, by mention of the "channel disaster of 1940." ("T.A.T." "took place" circa 1950.)

The future? Here in Celluloid City we have news that the studios are doubling up on their diet of "horror" for the layman—what "we" call science fiction and fantasy—with such pictures scheduled from the sound stages as Kerruish's "The Undying Monster," "Buried Alive," "I Walk with a Zombie," "Flesh and Fantasy," "The Mummy's Curse" (or Tomb), "The Cat People," "The Wolfman and Frankenstein." On the lighter side, look for "I Married a Witch," "Mr. Jordan Returns" and "Tarzan's Triumph."



A Novelette

SOLDIERS OF SPACE

CHAPTER ONE

Return of a Veteran

THE Wyoming plateau had altered very little since the prehistoric glacial ice retreated, leaving it to the baking heat of summer and the windy, white silences of winter.

In a few months now it would be the

By **HENRY KUTTNER**

twenty-first century, but that did not matter to the great, barren lands threaded with the unused ribbons of antiquated surface highways. Only the gleaming nitrosteel tracks of monorailers hinted at the tremendous cities linked by man-made thunderbolts that fled across the continent. And in the night sky the lights of planes moved sometimes, though not often, for the fast air route was farther south.

I wondered if I'd freeze to death before morning.

Once a faint flash, lingering on the western horizon, told of a spaceship leaving Earth. It was a long time before the deep rolling kettledrum sound of its passage came. When it did, Gregory Lash,

I rolled a cigarette and stirred the Mulligan. After all, I was used to short rations. Unfortunately I wasn't a good enough cook to get a restaurant job, and dishwashing, these days, was done by machines. The world had become technological, highly specialized. And I was pretty much of a square peg. There had been lots of square holes during the Martian-Terrène scrap, but after the war ended an untrained man wasn't wanted, it seemed.

The new pilots flew by instruments, not by the seat of their pants, gauging their course by rocket-thrust reaction. Which meant that Greg Lash had been gathering no moss for some years now.



**Tiny, insignificant, yet somehow sublime,
the outcasts of Earth fought their last and
greatest fight—to save a planet that no
longer needed them!**



squatting by the fire in the hobo jungle. I lifted a haggard, unshaved face and looked up at the blazing stars that roof Wyoming by night.

That was me—Greg Lash. Ex-pilot, veteran of the Earth-Mars war, hard-drinking, tough Greg Lash, cooking Mulligan in a tin can and huddling into a tattered, sleazy blanket. Uh-huh. It had been different six years ago—out there.

Out there, six years ago, had been fury and battle and high, roaring adventure, when the space fleets of two worlds met in raging war. I remembered. No veteran of those days ever forgot the sudden thrust of the rocket drive, the looming of a cigar-shaped target on the cross-hairs, the incredible tension and excitement of dogfighting in space, while the tracer torps left bright-etched, meteoric trails against the blackness. Six years!

Old soldiers never die . . . they only fade away. . . .

That was the way the dice had fallen.

An hour ago I'd been kicked off a freight out of Salt Lake. Luckily, I'd had the makings in my blanket-roll, and a half-filled can of Thermo-hot I'd found in a dump—quite a prize. It gave warmth, for a time, and cooked the watery Mulligan, but it couldn't quite keep out the freezing wind that crawled in beneath my shabby coat. And the blanket wasn't much help.

Know what it is to be alone—and not to give a damn about anything? I was hating a lot of things just then. *Damn Earth*, I thought. Earth, that had used me when it needed space pilots, and then tossed me in the junk heap. Next time I'd know better. Only there wouldn't be any next time, for me.

I stirred the stew and looked thoughtfully at the monorail tracks. Even if another train came past, it wouldn't stop or slow down here. I should keep going—

To where?

I shrugged and lifted the stew can with calloused fingers. Let 'em eat cake!

Across the sky a trail of red fire fountained.

I went rigid. A spaceship—a small one, to judge by the blasts—and apparently in trouble! I recognized the timing and characteristics of those jets; an MZ fighter, archaic now, replaced by faster, better, safer ships. But I'd piloted Mazies too often during the war not to know their tricks by heart. What the devil was a Mazie doing here? They'd all been scrapped—or else were in use by asteroid miners who could afford nothing better.

"Keep her nose down," I heard myself whispering, all my muscles tight. "That's it. Mind those port jets, fella. They're haywire. Come in easy—"

The pilot up there knew his business, but was badly handicapped by the cranky, misfiring port tubes. The ship swung around in a loop, missed the monorails by a hair and braked with bow jets.

The crash made me curse.

Then I was running toward the crack-up, searching for a betraying flicker of fire. Atmospheric friction heats a hull dangerously. If the fuel tanks are sprung, that means a roaring holocaust within a moment or two. Since no flames leaped up, I grunted with relief. So far, so good.

I raced down a slope toward the ship—a little MZ, as I had thought, a fat ovoid, window shields open, hull freckled with the little dots of the tubes. Through the ports I could see a man in the pilot's seat, sprawled forward over the instrument panel. And—the man wore the black leath-eroid uniform of the Eclipse Patrol, the boys who had held the moon during the war with Mars!

Time had turned back six years. I went cold inside.

THE controls of the valve door felt familiar to my hands. I swung it open, entered the ship, and first of all checked the instruments. One switch I closed—the pilot had missed that one when he'd shut off the power at the moment of landing. After that, I bent to examine the injured man.

He was in his twenties—perhaps ten years younger than I was. He had a wry, sardonic, lantern-jawed face, with fair hair escaping from under the crash helmet. There was a bruise on his forehead, and a good deal of blood. Concussion, perhaps. I couldn't be sure—but I put him in the braced hammock.

There was a microphone, but it was dead. Strange! The ship had no papers, no charts—nothing but a cryptic photo-statted sheet tacked to the panel, filled with what seemed to be random lines and figures. It was marked, in one corner, *Helsing Co-op Productions—Paul Corson.*

So that was it. Movie stuff. I remembered Helsing's name. In the old days, he'd been one of the top-flight directors. I'd even seen some of his ancient films in nickel flea-joints, where one could get warmth and sleep for a night. Those tri-dimensional, colored epics of space had been plenty effective, too. But I hadn't heard Helsing's name for a long time now.

I looked at the unconscious Corson. The guy ought to be in a hospital. Well—

The radio was damaged, but perhaps not too badly. I worked on it. Presently a clipped voice came into the cabin.

"—report. Calling Corson. Report to Denver location. Corson, report—"

I decided not to waste time trying to repair the sending circuit. Denver was fairly close; I could find it from the air. But those port tubes were in bad shape. I checked. Yeah!

Atmospheric friction had fused some of

the jets nearly closed. Corson must have been stunting fast. I mean—*fast!* And that's damned dangerous, even in space.

I found a drill in a locker and opened up the sealed tubes. Then I took off. Anyhow, the cabin was warmer than the wind-swept Wyoming plateau. I ran my fingertips lightly over the control studs; the feel of them made me tingle, somehow.

I'd never done a better take-off.

THE MZ blasted up with a roar; an unfamiliar sound to me, for I'd done most of my fighting in space. I sent the little craft circling around toward the south.

Stars gave me my general direction. The silver snakes of the monorails helped, too. I'd ridden the rods so often I knew practically every line in the country. I nursed the rickety Mazie, keeping high in case of trouble, and it didn't seem long before the lights of Denver swung into view ahead.

Because my landing was unscheduled, I blasted to a halt in the emergency area. A streamlined Speeder came bumping out to meet me. From then on, matters were taken out of my hands—and moved fast.

They treated me well, I'll say that for them. But of course they had their own reasons. I was doing them a favor—a big one. Just the same, I was surprised at the hail-fellow-well-met atmosphere in which I found myself.

When they discovered that I'd flown in the war, and knew ships, they cross-questioned me about the state of the jets on the Mazie. I didn't see any reason for not telling them what I'd found.

So there I was, in the spaceport director's office, answering questions between mouthfuls of the steak dinner they'd ordered sent up when I deftly hinted that I had left Wyoming in the middle of a meal. We were all buddies—me, the director, and a guy named Garrett from the government space administration office.

Garrett didn't like Helsing.

"He's been in our hair for quite awhile now," he told me. "His outfit has been making a picture and we've been waiting and hoping the blasted fool wouldn't blow up half a city with his crates before we could legally kick him off the Earth. This does it. Those port jets were fused, you say?"

I nodded. "Right. Which means the ship was going too fast in an atmosphere."

"All we needed for proof," Garrett said with satisfaction.

"Not quite," I told him. "Sometimes a pilot has to go plenty fast—to pull out of a spin, for example. You haven't proved that that Mazie's pilot was breaking a law. And you won't get me to say so, either."

"He was stunting," the government man said. "We never should have let Helsing make his picture on Earth, but he wangled permission before we knew he was using spaceships. Antiquated models, too. Dangerous. If they crash in a city—"

I had to agree, though I did so silently. Mazies won't stand up in atmosphere.

"I got a shock when I saw that pilot's uniform. The old Eclipse Patrol—"

"The picture's about the Earth-Mars war, I think," the director put in. "Helsing and his outfit figured this was a good time to make a film on a topical subject." He chuckled.

"Topical?"

"Seen the newstapes lately? Diplomatic trouble with the Martians. Nothing important, though. The planet's been well patrolled ever since the war. And space-radio stations are planted all over the place. The real trouble's with Venus, eh, Garrett?"

GARRETT hesitated; then shrugged. "Well—it's no secret. Rebellion on Venus, as usual. But this time the greenskins are armed. Somebody smuggled blasters in to them. Which

means we've had to send the major part of the Earth fleet sunward. Mostly a gesture, but we can't have Venusian piracy breaking out again. However, that's beside the point."

"Cigarette, Mr. Lash?" The director offered me an open platinum case. I said thanks and took one.

"We're grateful for your help," he said, watching me light it. I didn't quite like that.

"Forget it," I said. "I found an accident case and brought him in. That's regulations. So what?"

"Well—are you looking for a job?"

"I could use one," I said. "I flew in the war, so I'm a pilot."

"Qualified?"

After a pause I said, "No. No technospace license. I didn't attend Star Point. I get it. Government red tape. The fact that I'm a first-class pilot doesn't mean a damn any more. Only young punks who know logarithms can handle your transports."

"Wait a minute," the director interrupted. "Space flying has changed a lot since the war—"

Maybe it was ungrateful of me—I'd eaten that steak—but I couldn't help it. I felt sick and furious.

"Forget it," I grunted, getting to my feet. "I don't want a job—or any favors. If you haul out your wallet, I'll break a chair over your head. I've still got brains enough to get a job pushing a broom, though I haven't sense enough to pilot a transport. Six years ago I didn't need a technospace license. Okay—" I said, the sudden flare of resentment subsiding, leaving me feeling a little foolish—"just forget it."

Before either of them could answer, the door banged open. Paul Corson lurched into the office, his head bandaged, his eyes ablaze. He headed for me and gripped my arms hard.

"You!" he mouthed. "Don't talk!

Don't tell 'em anything! That crackup—"

Garrett said, "You're too late, Corson. We've got the evidence. It's all recorded."

For a moment Corson stared, his face chalk-white. Then he snarled like an animal and drove a vicious uppercut toward my jaw. I rolled my head; the blow missed. Corson, staggering with weakness, came in with his fists pumping, his face twisted with hate.

Garrett jumped up and seized Corson's shoulder. The man collapsed like an empty sack. I managed to catch him before he hit the floor.

From the doorway, somebody said, "Sorry. Guess he blew his top."

The director glared. "Get him out of here, Vane. Tell Helsing to stop shooting. If he films another frame on Earth, it'll be just too bad."

I looked at the man on the threshold, my throat going dry.

"Galloping rockets," I said softly. "Bruce Vane!"

CHAPTER TWO

Destination—Death!

I WENT back, then, six years, to the time when Bruce Vane and I had been co-pilots in a *Mazie*, trading blasts with Martians in the Asteroid Belt. Big, red-haired, grinning Vane. We'd fought together, drunk together, celebrated and flown together until the Black Banner of Mars, with its twin silver moons, had been struck in surrender. But I hadn't been with Vane at the great crisis of his life. . . .

Yeah. Diving head-on at an asteroid, controls jammed, watching his companions crash to flaring death, is enough to jolt a man's nerves. It had nearly wrecked Vane's.

Afterwards, when I picked him out of the broken ship with his head split open, only a miraculous operation had saved

his life. And his sanity. In a hospital, he had raved that he was hurtling down toward Cerberus—the asteroid that had nearly finished him—and the doctors had called it spaceshock. Bruce Vane wouldn't fly again.

But he had lived, and had flown. Under a tight, abnormal tension that aged him rapidly and put gray in his red hair. I'd kept an eye on him after that, but only once did I smell trouble. That was when a Martian dogfight had led us close to Cerberus.

Luckily we were in the same ship, and when Vane passed out, I took the controls. No one knew about that incident. Only I realized that deep in Vane's mind was a shuddering, horrible phobia—a fear of Cerberus, the asteroid where he had left part of his courage. He couldn't help it. He couldn't fight that lurking terror. Spaceshock leaves its traces. . . .

We shook hands; that was all. No need for explanations. We carried the unconscious Corson out of the spaceport office and got him into an air taxi. Hurling northward, we talked.

"It's a cooperative job," Vane said. "A gang of bums trying to come back. Even Helsing's a bum now. He's been on the Hollywood skids for years. Once a man starts going down there, nobody'll give him a job. But Dan Helsing's still a damn good director. His space epics used to raise my hair."

"Mine, too," I said. "But I don't get the angles. Why did Corson blast off like that?"

Vane's lips tightened. "Because we've been working on a shoestring. Thirty of us, ex-pilots, war veterans. All we know is space flying—and not technospace, either! We got together with Helsing. Formed a company. We barnstormed, raised the money somehow and anted up. Helsing Co-op Productions. We're making a pic called *Sky Thunder*. If it goes over, we can make more films. Our trou-

bles will be over. This is the right time for an epic about the war, and the money will pour in. Only trouble is, we're working on a shoestring. None of us draws any pay. The dough goes for equipment. And now—"

He shrugged.

"I put my foot in it."

"You didn't know it. Shooting a pic in space is expensive as the very devil. We couldn't afford it. We've been grinding cameras on Earth, cutting corners wherever we could. Now the government's kicking us off the grounds. *Pro bono publico!*"

"Hell," I said, "we're just vets. We don't know piloting. What were we doing during the Mars scrap—deep-sea diving?"

Vane grinned. "Other times, other customs. I left Helsing televising all over the country, trying to make loans. I hope he managed it. This is pretty much of a last chance, Greg. Thirty ex-pilots, risking their necks in space stunting, hoping to high heaven they'll get a good picture. One that'll make Helsing Co-op. It's pretty important to the boys."

"It's pretty important to you, isn't it?" I said.

"Yeah. I've been riding the rods, too. Now—well, there's a girl working with us. Judy Wentworth. If things pan out—"

"I get it. Luck!"

"Thanks," Vane said. "Here's the location unit. How about throwing in with us, Greg?"

"I'm broke," I said.

"We need all the pilots we can get. That's just as important as money. And now that Corson's laid up, we're short a man. Anyhow, we can always use more. There's no pay, but you'll have grub, a cot and a swell chance to break your neck."

"What more could a guy ask?" I grunted.

THE air taxi dropped. After a while I found myself in an office with Vane and a fat, bald man with the face of a worried bulldog. His pale blue eyes stabbed into mine.

"Have a chair, Mr. Greg Lash," he said in a harsh voice. "You too, Vane. Why the devil didn't you keep Corson out of trouble?"

I sensed tension between the two men—and something more. Hatred, maybe. Later I knew why—Judy Wentworth.

Vane puffed at a cigarette and grinned mockingly. "Can't help the jets fusing. It's spilled milk, anyway. Did you get the money?"

"Sure," Dan Helsing said. "Not enough. Not nearly enough. We're going out to the Asteroid Belt, find a location with atmosphere and finish *Sky Thunder* with skimpy equipment and mortgages on the old farm. But we're going to have plenty of fuel and ammunition, if we have to go hungry."

"I'm not kicking," Vane told him. "The picture's the important thing."

Helsing swung toward me. "First of all, Lash, you're a damn fool. If you'd brought that Mazie in here, where we could have clamped down the hush-hush—"

"How was he supposed to know that?" Vane demanded.

Helsing ignored him. "Okay. You're hired. We need stuntmen. We've got thirty—"

"Twenty-nine, *pro tem*," Vane murmured.

"—but they're risking their lives all the time. They can be replaced easier than we can get more money."

"Glad to get the job," I said.

He bit the end off a cigar. "You don't know the job. We need men who aren't afraid of tearing the guts out of their ships and themselves to give the public a thrill. Know what used to make my pictures big box office? I didn't use

models or process shots. Pilots died. Smashed into pulp, sometimes. Red mince-meat, Mr. Greg Lash. We've got rickety crates, salvaged from the junk heap. The only thing that keeps 'em flying is nerve."

Vane said softly, "That's right, Greg. Wait till you're diving at a spacewreck, head-on, and you've got half a second to pull out. That's when you'll hear Helsing televising you, 'Keep going, there's plenty of time! Aim right at it, damn your yellow hide.'" He laughed. "Which means that *Sky Thunder* will pay off in yellow chips—to the survivors."

Helsing said, "Get out of here. I've got to locate an asteroid we can use—one with atmosphere."

"You've got a bad habit of giving orders," Vane told him. "Save it till we're shooting."

The director flushed, but didn't answer. We went out, heading for a low plastic building not far away.

"You'll want to meet the boys," Vane told me. "Here's the recreation room. The only recreations are drinking and fighting."

I could tell that, by the tension that hung over the place. Twenty or more men were there, veterans, showing the marks of war and what came after the war. Tough, hard, kicked in the face by life till they'd lost all faith in God and man. Well, they'd had a raw deal—all of them. I didn't much blame them for refusing to drink with me. . . .

It was Corson who did it. He'd been telling them about me. And he'd been pouring raw bourbon down his throat plenty fast. I could tell that by his eyes.

"Who hired that lug?" he asked Vane.

"Helsing. And me. So what?"

Corson glared at me. "This is supposed to be a cooperative outfit. We don't want the louse."

I said, "That suits me," and started to turn. Vane stopped me.

"Listen, Corson," he said, almost whis-

pering. "We're here to make a picture. Half the time you guys are at each other's throats, and the other half you're stunting. Okay. We need every pilot we can get. If you kicked out every man you didn't like, we'd be decimated. Know what that means?"

Corson's lips drew back, showing his teeth. "You—"

A slim man with a scarred face said, "Vane's right. We're supposed to be making *Sky Thunder*. If this kiwi can help, that's the big thing."

Corson grimaced. "Okay. But I'll do my drinking alone." He turned away. Vane drew me out into the night.

"WE'LL hoist a bottle in my office," he said wryly. "It takes a while to get acquainted with the boys."

"What's wrong with 'em?" I asked, though I knew the answer. They had lost faith in everything. All that mattered now was the struggle for existence. Ideals—yeah!

They'd lost those after the war.

Vane didn't reply. In his office, we drank brandy and talked about old times. I didn't mention the Cerberus incident, since Vane didn't bring it up.

A girl came in, a small, pretty brunette with a harassed air and a bundle of papers in her hand. Ignoring me, she kissed Vane soundly. Then she saw me and said "Oh-h!" in a startled voice.

"This is Greg Lash, honey," Vane said. "Judy Wentworth."

We shook hands. "Greg?" she said. "I know all about you. Bruce told me. On a visit?"

"A permanent one," I said. "I'm joining the outfit."

"Sucker!" Judy said. "But it's swell meeting you. We're leaving at dawn, by the way. Helsing's located an asteroid. The only one available right now, with an atmosphere." She dropped a flimsy on

Vane's desk, kissed him again, and went out.

"Nice kid," I said.

Vane didn't answer. I looked at him sharply and saw the blood draining slowly from his cheeks.

I picked up the paper.

"Cerberus," I said.

Vane looked at me.

Our destination—Cerberus. I saw a ship, falling helplessly, jets jammed, driving down to the jagged surface of the asteroid. A freezing wind blew out of the past.

"You can't stunt on Cerberus, Bruce," I said.

Vane didn't answer. After a moment he said, "I'd better show you your quarters, Greg. There isn't much time if we take off at dawn. I've got to charter a freighter to take us out."

"Listen—"

"Forget it," he said.

I swung him around to face me. "Are you chartered to do any crash diving on Cerberus?"

"What if I am?"

"I'm as good a pilot as you are."

"You can't handle a Bullet," Vane told me grimly. "I'm the only man in this outfit who knows how to fly a Martian ship. And the script calls for a crash-dive in a Bullet. That's my job."

So that was it. Few pilots had ever mastered the intricate, complicated controls of a Martian ship. It took years to learn. Which meant that Bruce Vane was slated to take a Bullet screaming down into the atmosphere of the asteroid that had wrecked his nerve.

And I knew what spaceshock meant. It strikes suddenly. It tightens a man's muscles and paralyzes him, so that he cannot even retard his velocity. It turns him into a motionless statue. If Bruce Vane found himself once more thundering down toward Cerberus—

I felt a little sick.

CHAPTER THREE

Planets at War!

IN a chartered freighter we took off at dawn, destination Klystra, a small, airless asteroid near Cerberus. The Mazies and the Bullet were stored in the hold; freighters are big. I expected a fairly dull trip. But the ship buzzed with activity from the moment of take-off.

The alteration in plans meant, it seemed, a thorough reshuffling of the production unit. Cameras suitable for atmospheric work on Earth would not do for Cerberus. With its chlorinated air—screens were necessary. And space shooting, I learned, required special filters to handle the violent contrasts between light and dark. Powerful telescopic lenses, with complicated focusers and followers, were rolled out. Wire-tape had to be substituted for raw film, which couldn't take cosmic rays.

And the men—each with his stake in the company—chafed, waiting for the opportunity to do the only jobs they could—stunting. The technicians, hired on salary, had work to do. The pilots could only wait.

Veterans, all of them. They knew space, and they knew ships. But this was different from wartime. In those red, roaring days death hadn't mattered much. The important thing was to win.

They'd won—and were scrapped. This was their last chance. If it failed, they'd be lost, as I'd been—homeless, useless, unfitted for any productive work. Most of them wanted to forget the war—a higher adventure than anything Helsing had ever filmed.

But he went through the ship like a hurricane. He was the catalyst, a driving, elemental, electric force that spurred the men, keeping them tuned to high pitch, supervising their activities and giving them hell when they got tight. *Sky*

Thunder couldn't be merely a big picture. It had to be an epic. And the pilots had to keep in condition. He worked exhaustively with us on charts and figures, re-planning the stunts. . . .

We hated him. He wasn't flying himself, you see.

And it was anything for a thrill! Though it meant ripping a ship's guts out and killing or crippling the pilot.

"Any damn technopilot could make that three-point dive, man!" he snarled at me. "Get it in closer. Shave that ship! Here—" He seized a stylo and recharted the course on paper, bringing it impossibly close to another vessel. "Think you can do that without having hysterics? You can get closer than a hundred miles to the thing, after all. Don't forget we're shooting a space picture. That means thrills. We're not trying to put the audience to sleep!"

I began to realize why Dan Helsing's films had drawn S.R.O. signs. He knew picture-making — and his tongue was plenty caustic.

"Let me handle that job," Paul Corson put in. His head was still bandaged, but he was getting along pretty well. Well enough to clash with me at every opportunity.

"You'll have your own work to do soon enough."

"I can do mine and Lash's too," Corson told Helsing. "We want a good picture, don't we?"

"Oh, quit quarreling," Judy said, bringing coffee and playing her usual role of peacemaker. "We'll land on Klystra pretty soon. Then there won't be so much mischief for idle hands to do."

The taut atmosphere passed briefly, but it returned. There was too much hatred on the ship. The men had forgotten how to laugh. They didn't work as a unit, really. Under the abnormal conditions, they blazed up like tinder at the least provocation.

I didn't blame them. I was like that too.

In the war, I had ranked them all, and that chafed on some of them, perhaps. Not that my bars had cut much ice while I was riding the monorails! But—oh, well. Corson, I knew, resented me savagely.

I didn't like him, either.

Then Helsing and Vane. The rivalry between the two flared now and then, but mostly it smoldered underground. Judy tried to smooth it over—a difficult job. Thirty-odd spacemen, racing against time, battling furiously against a crushing fate, without hope or ideals or faith. We were the damned, building a ladder to lift us—maybe—out of hell.

WE reached Klystra. I was a little sorry. It had felt good to be in space again, watching the familiar pattern of the stars. I'd been Earth-bound for too many years. A space-pilot is at home only between the worlds; the planets are merely way-stations for him.

On Klystra—we worked! Good Lord, how we worked! Every man fell to, building airtight plastic quarters first of all. The freighter had gone on, after unloading our equipment, and we were on our own. Not even a radio strong enough to bridge the interplanetary gap. Space is big, and televisors work only at distances of a few hundred miles. Even radio—well, we could get in touch with the Earth station, the big guard post that kept a watchful eye on the Gap, but that was about all.

I haven't mentioned the Gap. Spacemen know it. It's one of the passes through the Asteroid Belt. It was fairly dangerous, and most transports and freighters used other openings, but it was one of the ways of getting through that vast, tumbling chaos of shattered worlds that ring the sun between Mars and Jupiter. The Belt is wide. That's why ships

prefer to use the passes, instead of making the long detour above or below the plane of the ecliptic.

On Gap Station was the giant radio powerful enough to communicate with all the planets. Remember that.

So we worked, as I said. Meteor cameras, handled by remote control, were placed in the right locations—lens-studded globes loaded with raw wire-tape film, orbits carefully planned, their tiny rocket jets ready to correct any errors. The transparent camera ship was checked and rechecked. Fuel was stored. Ammunition—real torps and blastershot, for spectacular scenes—were piled up.

But we were ready for shooting at last. And, as bad luck would have it, the first job was the crash-dive to Cerberus. I got plenty worried about that. I was the only man who knew that Vane was afraid of Cerberus, and he told me to keep my mouth shut. The thing had to be done—that was all there was to it.

We planted cameras on Cerberus and in orbits around the asteroid. After that, a gang of us went up in the transparent ship to watch, though the job was Vane's alone. I watched him maneuver the tricky Martian Bullet alongside. On the televisior screen I could see his face, hard, strained and set.

Judy called, "Make it good, Bruce. I'll keep my eye on you."

He heard her on his own televisior. His grin wasn't quite natural.

"This is a cinch, kid. Watch my rockets."

"It had better be good," Corson muttered. "We're days behind schedule already. If we wait long enough, the Martian crisis will blow over and nobody'll pay a cent to see a picture about the war."

"Maybe," I said. "We haven't heard any news for quite a while, though. Anything may be happening."

"Except a war," Judy said. "We'd hear about that quick enough!"

I leaned over the televisor. "How's it going, Bruce?" I said softly.

He met my eyes. "Okay, Greg."

"Then take it easy."

"Easy, hell," Dan Helsing snapped, shoving me away. He put his face down close to the screen. "Go in hard and fast, Vane. Don't pull out till I tell you. Take a jolt with the tractor beams at the last minute, if you have to. But give the audience a thrill. The orbital and ground cameras will catch you. Just aim at that peak we located. Ready?"

Vane's lips were white. "Ready."

Helsing turned, shouted. "Cameras! Roll 'em! Open up, Vane! Knock the hell out of that asteroid!"

I looked toward a port and saw the Bulfet fall away. I went to the window. The Martian ship was dropping, dropping in a fast, swooping dive toward the jagged globe that hung in space beneath us. The flare of Vane's rockets blazed out like crimson lightning.

My nails were digging into my palms. I looked at Judy's excited face. She wasn't worried. She'd seen Bruce stunt before. And, of course, she didn't know what Cerberus meant to him.

Helsing was shouting into the televisor, telling Vane to open up. "All rockets—all stern rockets! You're hitting atmosphere! Make the hull glow, man. Go in fast. I said *fast!* Keep her on center—"

I wanted to plant my fist in his bulldog face. On the screen I could see Vane, his eyes narrowed, his teeth clenched. And through the port I could see a red flame thundering down to Cerberus. . . .

"NICE," Corson said. "Hope the cameras are getting it."

"They are," Judy said. "He's going fast—too fast. How about it, Greg?"

"He's all right," I told her tonelessly. My stomach was crawling.

I knew just what hell Bruce Vane was going through. And that rat Helsing kept yelling at him, blasting at his nerves, urging him to suicide.

I grabbed Helsing's arm. "Give him a chance, for God's sake! He can't listen to you bawling and pilot that ship too."

"Shut up!" the director snarled, jerking free. "Mind your own business, Lash. Vane! Open up! Drive her down—"

Judy caught her breath. I looked at the screen. Vane's face had changed—just a little, but I knew the symptoms. I'd flown with him too often not to know. A rigidity, a tight, tense, intangible veil masking his eyes and mouth—

He was seeing Cerberus, I knew. Seeing the ships of his patrol bellowing down to the fanged rocks of the asteroid, blazing into flame, bursting, rending, shattering into molten horror. He was six years in the past, looking into hell. Paralyzed, helpless, waiting for the inevitable crash. And I was the only man who knew that.

"Take her down!" Helsing snarled. "There's plenty of time. Keep her nose down, Vane!"

I said, "That's close enough."

"The devil it is. He's still—"

But I saw Vane's face on the televisor, and I knew what had happened. I grabbed Helsing and flung him back. Cloth tore under my fingers.

I put my face down to the screen and said, "Bruce. Bruce. That's enough. Tractors, Bruce. Slam on the tractors, kiwi. Go ahead."

I felt Helsing shoving at me. From the other pilots an angry murmur came.

Corson said, "Who asked you to butt in, Lash? You're not the director."

Vane was watching me, a blind helplessness in his eyes.

"Easy, Bruce," I said, my throat dry. "The tractors. Hit those buttons."

I saw Helsing's fist come at my jaw. I dodged and let him have a fast one,

hard on the button. He went back and down. Judy cried out.

I yelled into the televisior, "Slam on those tractors, you damn fool!"

Something crashed into my face, hurling me against the wall with a crash. Briefly I felt myself whirling into blackness. I fought for consciousness. Gradually the control cabin steadied.

Paul Corson was coming toward me, his fist poised. I heard Judy cry, "He's made it! He's using the tractors—"

Helsing, nursing his chin, snapped, "Sure. And we'll have to do a retake. Thanks for the help, Lash. You're fired."

Corson stopped, glaring at me. "Retake! We've wasted reels of film on this. Film costs money."

Helsing said, "When you signed up with us, Lash, I told you we weren't playing games. We take risks. That's in the cards."

Risks—sure. But they didn't know that Vane would never have pulled out of that suicidal dive unless I'd yelled at him.

I looked around. The pilots' eyes were hostile. They hated my guts.

It was mutual.

"Back to Klystra," Helsing said finally. "Tell Vane to follow us, somebody."

And that was that.

THE bunkroom was full of pilots, but I drank alone on my bunk. After a while Vane came in, his face impassive. He nodded at me, and shot a quick glance around.

"I blew out one of the tractor beams," he said. "There may be replacements at Gap Station. I'm taking the Bullet over to find out. Want to come?"

"Sure," I said, getting up. We went out together.

In the little Martian ship, racing through the void, Vane said, "I told Helsing what had happened. You're back on the payroll."

"You needn't have told him."

"Why not? I blew up, didn't I? And Judy saw me."

"She's got sense enough to know what spaceshock means."

"Just the same—" Vane grimaced. "I expected trouble with Helsing, but there wasn't any. Funny thing. He flew in the war. I didn't know that."

"Neither did I. So what?"

He shrugged. "Well—anyhow, thanks for snapping me out of it, Greg. I used those tractors just in time. And blew one out with an overload."

"I didn't think you could get replacements for these old Martian ships any more," I said.

"Nor can you, usually. But out here in the Belt there's a chance. The asteroid miners use junky models they pick up cheap. When they fall apart, they sell the parts to the stations. There's a salvage pile at the Gap Station, and we may find what we want there. The chance is worth taking. Anyhow, I wanted to get away for a while."

I knew how he felt.

We raised Gap Station after a while, a gigantic artificial asteroid gleaming like molten metal. Vane jockeyed the Bullet in toward a valve.

"Put on a spacesuit. You'll have to go hunt for the gadget, Greg. I've got to stay here and keep the ship in place. The tractor beams are haywire."

"How'll I know what to look for?"

"Switch on your helmet radio," he said. "I'll tell you. You can't miss the thing if you see it."

I got into the bulky suit and signaled for entrance by pressing a stud near the valve. The metal door swung open after a while, and I stepped inside. The outer plate closed; the inner one opened, and air misted my faceplate. I snapped it open and walked forward into a big room, crammed with machinery—the powerful energy converters that drew power from

(Continued on page 100)

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SOLDIERS OF SPACE

(Continued from page 98)

the sun to keep Gap Station's giant radio working.

And, facing me, a hand-blaster aimed unwaveringly at my middle, was a fragile-looking man with the delicate, sensuous face of a god, and the feathery, iridescent hair of a Martian.

I stopped short.

"War," I said. "Eh?"

He made a quick gesture with the gun, shaking his head. I switched into Martian. The soft, slurring vowels and consonants came easily to my tongue.

"*Sa vasth'stra m'lawoo shan—*"

"Who are you? Are you alone?"

"Sure," I said. "Asteroid miners usually work alone, don't they?"

"Your ship—"

"I hung it on with a tractor beam. Mind letting me know what this is all about? When did Martians take over Gap Station?"

"Yesterday," he said.

"Then I'll be getting along," I told him, turning. He whispered a soft command. I froze.

"You must die," he said.

I looked at him. "I get it. A sneak attack, eh? You and your men took over Gap Station so the radio here couldn't send out a warning. What sort of warning? Mars hasn't any fleet any more."

"Earthmen are gullible," he said.

"Not that gullible. We've policed Mars ever since the war."

He was aching to brag about his plan. I could tell that. I let him talk.

"Space is large. We have a secret base on Pluto. Our fleet left it days ago."

"It can't be much of a fleet."

"It is large enough to smash the fuel supply centers on Earth."

I understood then, all right. That insurrection of Venus, Martian planned, was designed to lure the Earth fleet from home base, leaving supply centers almost

unguarded. And Martian ships racing in sunward from Pluto, to bomb Earth and paralyze our fleet for lack of fuel. Simple, logical—and damned possible, too!

I said, "You can't sneak in without being noticed."

"That is why we took over Gap Station. Before any warning can go out, we will be through the Asteroid Belt. And then we will strike Earth before your fleet has time to return from Venus."

"They move fast," I said.

"So do we. We are near no trade routes. And in space there are few radios powerful enough to bridge the worlds."

"Any big transport could do it."

"No transports will see us."

I said, "Well, it's your move."

He lifted the gun. I edged around toward the wall. Then thunder blasted in my ears as I slammed the faceplate on my helmet shut. The concussion flung me against the wall.

The double valves were smashed in by the impact of a torp. The Martian was picked up and hurled across the room. Machinery shattered. The gun blasted its charge by my head.

Then the air was sucked out into space, and the Martian's scream was cut off, fading into shrill emptiness, as the breath was torn from his collapsing lungs.

Alarms screamed through Gap Station. I heard valves slam shut. In a minute the other Martians, space-suited, would be arriving.

I went through the broken valves fast and dived into the Bullet. Vane had a helmet on and the door open. I slammed it behind me. "Jets!" I told him.

WE streaked away from there in a blast of raving fire. I turned on the airsupplier, removed my suit, and nodded grimly to Vane.

"This is it," I said.

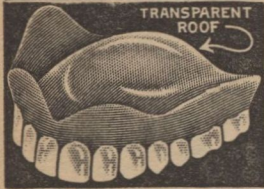
"Yeah. Looks like it. Remember when

(Continued on page 102)

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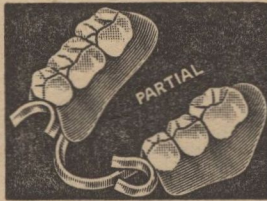
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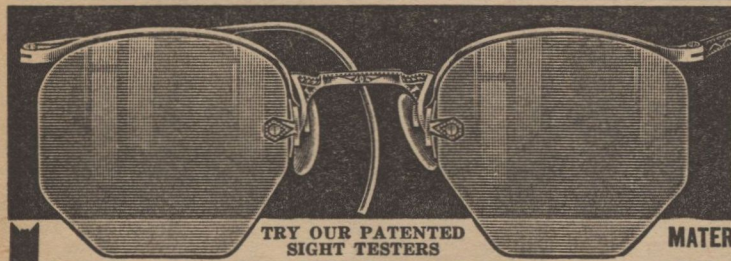
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ASTONISHING STORIES

SOLDIERS OF SPACE

(Continued from page 100)

we used that gag in the war? Glad you had sense enough to stand away from the valves so I could blast in."

"You heard what the Martian said?"

"Uh-huh. On your helmet radio. Clever so-and-sos, aren't they?"

"How'll we warn Earth?" I asked. "You smashed the radio with that torp."

"So I did. None of our sets will reach far enough out. The quickest way is to get in touch with a big transport. Get Helsing on the televisior. We'll have him send out a ship from Klystra."

After a while Helsing's bulldog face grew on the screen. He scowled at us.

"Well? What do you want now?"

I told him. He bit the end off his cigar.

"Okay. I'll send out Decker in one of the Mazies. But there just isn't enough time. The Martians can blast through the gap and smash right down on Earth before our fleet can get there."

I said, "We've got a flock of Mazies on Klystra. And plenty of ammunition. How about it, Helsing?"

"We'll be with you right away," he said. "To knock those damn Martians' ears down!"

CHAPTER FOUR

Battle in the Void

THIS was it. Fifteen rickety Mazies and one Bullet lay in the Gap waiting, each cranky can loaded with torps.

The Mazies were fighting again.

Seated before the bombardier's instrument bank, with its row of visiscreens, I watched Helsing's face emerge.

"Any sign yet?"

"No," Helsing said. "The boys want you in command, Vane. You rank us."

"All right," I said. "But we won't be going in for strategy or maneuvers." I sent out a general call. "Mazies, tune in."

The screens showed their faces, watching me. They weren't hating me now, and I wasn't hating them.

"Here's the general command," I told them. "Stop the Martians. Delay them. Hold 'em in the Gap till our fleet has a chance to get back to Earth."

Helsing interrupted. "Think I see something. Sector V-two seven five-P."

I used a telescopic screen. All the others, I knew, were doing the same. Hanging in the blackness of the Gap a shimmer of movement stirred. Thirty great Martian ships rolled majestically toward us, beautiful and deadly as death.

"Here they come," I said. "The new Martians. With technospace licenses. Rats who learned piloting at Star Point so they could bomb the Earth. Anybody here get a license?"

Grim smiles flashed across the hard-bitten faces.

I said, "Fire at will. Zero!"

The Martian fleet grew gigantic on the screen. Thirty fast destroyer types, latest style, well-armed, and plenty fast. Their blaster cannons were eyes watching us hungrily. We went in after them.

"Midships," Vane said. "Pick your target." He aimed the Bullet toward the first of that terrible armada.

I waited till one of the starboard tubes was in my crosshairs. Then I let go. A torp crashed across space as we danced away, and I saw flame spout from the Martian hull. One torp couldn't hurt that armorplate. But we had plenty more.

Then the guns of Mars opened up on us.

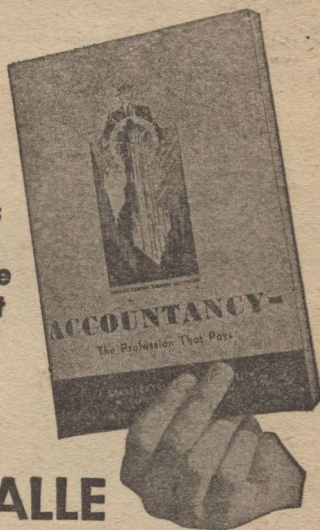
IT WAS velvet—velvet! They were technospace pilots, trained for modern fighting and spacework. But we weren't battling their way.

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ASTONISHING STORIES

Swinging into view on the screen came a Martian hull, guns raging, growing larger and larger as Vane's skillful fingers brought us diving down at the destroyer. I knew just when he'd pull out of it. Just at the moment when it seemed impossible. And that was when I got in my work and rocketed the torps at the target, blasting away at one spot, weakening it till—

There it was! The last torp had gone through the half-melted armor. It exploded within the ship, and the great Martian thunderbolt broke in two, its back snapped, fragments cascading out into space. First blood!

The televisor said, "Billings and Dale gone, sir. Direct hit."

I flashed to the MZ that Billings had piloted. It was a wreck, split open.

I saw fire lance from its jets.

Billings must still be alive, I thought. If he'd had time to jam on a space-helmet—if he'd survived the concussion—

Yeah—he was alive. The Mazie, broken and dying, flashed silent thunder from its rockets—a great, fountaining burst of flame that splashed across the starry darkness.

She came in—fast! Full power!

A Martian destroyer saw her coming and tried to dodge. But technospace pilots were no match for a man who'd fought his way around the System during the war. Somehow Billings matched his target's maneuvers, without slowing.

He made it.

It was a good way to go out, taking a fully-manned Martian destroyer with you.

But we had no time to think of that. The dogfight was raging through the Gap—lit now with the crimson fires of war—smashing savagely at the enemy. But we'd broken the Martian formation. Billings' attack had done that.

We cut them down to our size. I don't know how long the scrap lasted. But we held them. We held them.

ONE of the Martians broke through. I yelled at Vane to follow it. Another Mazie paralleled our course, but I didn't object to that. "A lucky hit might disable one of us, and then it would be up to the remaining one to stop that destroyer.

We caught up with her ten minutes later, after a fast, hard chase. She turned at bay above Cerberus. The asteroid formed a backdrop to the crimson tongues lashing viciously toward us.

I waved at Vane. He sent the Mazie dodging, twisting, weaving down on the Martian. The big cannon couldn't stop us.

I laid an egg on the hull and saw Helsing, coming after me, chalk up a repeat.

It took six more dives to kill the destroyer. She broke apart; the gravitational tug of Cerberus caught her, and she went down in flame as she hit the atmosphere.

From the screen, Helsing said, "Reporting out of control. Instrument panel smashed. Corson wounded."

I tried an outside television view. Helsing's ship was already far below us, screaming through the atmosphere of Cerberus.

Vane turned a gray face on me.

"I'll take it, Bruce. We've got to get a tractor beam on them before they crash."

For answer he sent the Bullet nose-diving toward Cerberus.

"Like hell! You can't handle this ship. Stand by to shoot out a tractor. And take it easy—we're one short."

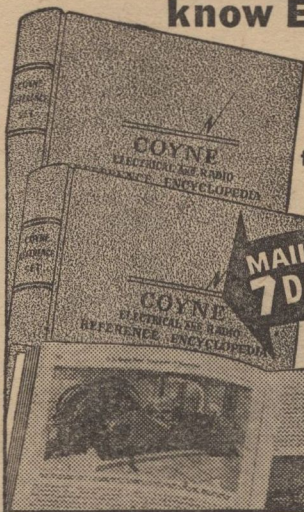
"Bruce!" I yelled at him. "That's Cerberus! Cerberus!"

He jammed on the rockets. We blazed down like a meteor.

I dropped into the seat beside him, gripping the tractor controls, watching the pilot's screens before me. The great, jagged surface of Cerberus loomed ahead. The Martian ship was a dot of crimson

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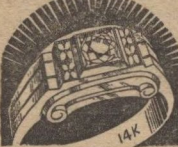
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ASTONISHING STORIES

as it fell. Helsing's Mazie hadn't warmed up enough yet to be luminous, but it had already reached atmospheric limits.

And it was far below us—too far!

I didn't look at Vane. But I knew what he was seeing. Cerberus—six years ago—reaching out to claw at his throat.

The Martian struck, going up in a spout of fire. I felt Vane jerk convulsively. Then he smashed his hand down on the keyboard, and the tremendous acceleration stopped the breath in my throat.

"Tractors!" he gasped.

We shrieked down toward the Mazie. I flashed the beams out to the little ship, touching it delicately, then clamping down as I felt it respond. We were chained together now with unbreakable lines of force. And still going down. Down toward Cerberus—with Vane at the controls. . . .

Five miles—four—three—and Cerberus leaped at us like a solid wall. I was as rigid as Vane. Four lives hung on his fingertips now. And he sat frozen—he was the only man who could stop the Bullet, and he could not stir.

The horrible tension in him had reached out to grip me fast. I shared the phobia and I was going to share its penalty. I knew that. I sat there helpless, watching it come, watching Cerberus swell monstrously below us. We were going to crash, all of us. . . .

Vane's hands stirred. I couldn't believe that. I couldn't even lift my eyes to his face. But I saw his fingers moving, very delicately—I saw him pressing the studs. . . .

I went weak as water.

Vane had done it.

He'd looked that six-year-old fear between the eyes and stared it down. It takes a man to do something like that.

I said, "Wait a minute," and stared at one of the screens. My heart jumped.

I was looking at the Gap. Our Mazies

were withdrawing, but that wasn't the important thing. Slipping smoothly into the Gap were great, shining ships, dozens of them, each with the green-and-gold symbol of Earth upon its bow.

"Fast work," I said, my voice unsteady, though I didn't know why. "They couldn't have come from Venus. Or anywhere except—"

"Mars. Yeah," Vane said. "See those letters on the bow of that one? TAE—Terrestrial Auxiliary Expedition. Our police ships from Mars. They got the message and came in full acceleration."

Deadly, gigantic, the avengers swept into the Gap in pursuit of the Martian ships.

Our job was done.

WE'D lost five men. We drank to them that night on Klystra—all of us who were left. Vane had his arm around Judy as she lifted her glass.

Dan Helsing came in as a second round was served, his face set in harsh lines.

"Listen," he snapped, "don't forget we've got a picture to shoot. Anybody who has a hangover tomorrow is off the payroll."

"What payroll?" Vane asked sardonically. "Here, have one yourself."

Helsing took the drink. I saw him look at me.

"All right," he said. "I'll propose a toast. To Greg Lash, the best fighting commander I've ever served under."

They drank it, all of them, the damn fools. I couldn't even say thanks properly. Feature that—me, hard-boiled, tough-skinned Greg Lash, standing there gulping and fumbling for the right words—

But there weren't any words. If there were, I didn't know them.

Drinking *my* health—the men who'd held the Gap and stopped a Martian fleet! Get over that, if you can!

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ASTONISHING STORIES

THE MAIL BAG

(Continued from page 8)

Upon which, fair Modesty beats her brain out against a wall.

George Ebey,
Oakland, Calif.

The One-man Gallup Poll is in again:

September 28, 1942

Dear Mr. Norton:

It is, I suppose, tiresome to say that each and every issue is better than the one preceding it. However, that seems to be the way things stack up. So, once again, I say that "this is the best issued yet." Monotonous, isn't it?

Why is this, the December, best? The One-man Gallup Poll, 0 to 10 rating system and all, now attempts to show you. Doubtless you are breathless with fascinated anxiety, as yours truly will get down to business. As usual, we'll start at the cover and plough on through.

Cover: Lawrence is, without a doubt, the "find" of the year. BEM and all, it was beautifully done. His colors blend perfectly, too. More, please. 9.

"Night of Gods": An excellent yarn, and Lawrence did it justice with his fine illustrations. Idle comment: Edmonds writes a great deal like Kuttner, doesn't he? Hm. 9.8.

"Taa the Terrible": Jameson comes through with the third-place yarn this time. And the pic! Paul!! Need I say more? 9.6½.

"Destination Unknown": 9.6.

"Mimic": Nifty plot. 9.5.

"Our Director Meets Trouble": A clever, well-written story. This seems to be a promising series. 9.1.

"Abyss of Darkness": Adjectives seem futile with a story like this. Utterly fascinating. 10.

So much for the stories. The departments were all good this time, with "Fantasy Circle" being especially interesting.

Astonishing Stories has had four excellent covers in a row now: Wesso, Finlay, Morey, and Lawrence. What next, Mr. Norton? Paul? Leydenfrost?

In "The Mail Bag" I notice that someone put Kuttner's superb "The Crystal Circle" in second-to-last place. I wonder why? That was a story that I, for one, shall never forget.

Many thanks for confining the print to a band at the bottom of the cover. It helps a lot.

If the next issue is better than this one, it's going to be some edition. Hopefully, I remain

The One-man Gallup Poll,
Chad Oliver,
3956 Ledgewood,
Cincinnati, Ohio.

P. S. Would like to see a novel by Cummings (!)

More Finlay? Coming up!

Dear Editor:

The treat of the December ish was the Paul pic on pages 32-33. Ah! Beautiful! Gee! I'm

speechless. Brother, wouldn't it be swell if we could have a pic by him in every ish?

I also liked the Morey pic on pages 86-87. That's one thing I disagree with Gene Hunter on. I think he's good (Morey); Gene thinks he's—well, you know what. But I agree with him in saying Leydenfrost is the master of them all.

Pul-lease get rid of Dolgov. He's a fantasy artist, not S-F.

Outside of Dolgov all the pics were perfect, but when are we going to get more Finlay?

Here are a few authors I would like to see on the contents page of *Astonishing*: Robert Moore Williams, Eando Binder, Don Wilcox, Edmond Hamilton, Jack Williamson, Nelson S. Bond and M. W. Wellman and a host of others that haven't been seen between the covers of our good ship, *Astonishing Stories*.

The stories rate as follows:

- (1) "Taa the Terrible": One of the best stories that *Astonishing* has published.
- (2) "Abyss of Darkness": Darn good.
- (3) "Night of the Gods": A swell story, but what's the idea of calling it a novel? It was only 21 pages long.
- (4) "Mimic": A very good short.
- (5) "Destination Unknown": No comment.
- (6) What's the use of giving the name of this story? It was one of the worst pieces of trash I've read this year.

The cover this ish—not good, not bad. Lawrence is a very good inside illustrator, but keep him off covers.

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Thomas Regan, Jr.,
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What? Only Fair?

Dear Editor:

After reading the December issue of *Astonishing Stories*, I decided to write and tell you what I think of it. I think that the magazine as a whole has greatly improved. I rate the December issue as follows:

The cover—fair.

"Night of Gods"—fair.

"Taa the Terrible"—good.

"Our Director Meets Trouble"—excellent.

"Abyss of Darkness"—the best story I have read in a long time.

"Destination Unknown"—fair.

"Mimic"—good.

I think your stories are very original. I also enjoy the features.

I would like to correspond with any one. I am interested in almost everything.

Sincerely yours,

W. J. Mason,
Franklin, North Carolina.

The Demon of the Dakotas sends his ambassador:

Dear Editor:

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from Jerkwater Junction and pinch-hitting for the recently inducted Victor King, Demon of the Dakotas.

But first, I want to tell you a little story: Once—aw, nuts! As July 1st came around, I sped rapidly to the nearest newsstand in quest of the latest *Astonishing*. It wasn't there. Two or three days later, I returned. Still not there. For two weeks, I put in my appearance at the stand every Wednesday and Friday and requested the latest *Astonishing*. No luck. Then I stopped. Instead, I began going every day. Still no luck. The next week, I began going three times a day. Mornings: Abe murmured, "No luck yet, Jim."; noons: Al murmured, "No luck yet, Jim."; nights: Mrs. Goodman murmured, "No luck yet, Jim." I grew gaunt and haggard. The last week in July, I haunted the newsstand continually, and every few minutes, pitifully whispered: "Is it in yet?" It wasn't. On July 30, I, a mere shell of a man, crawled into Goodman's and hoarsely requested news of the latest *Astonishing*. Abe handed it to me, silently and with reverence. I fainted.

You can't do this to me! Please, please, don't do it again. Not only for my peace of mind, but for my draft board's. But, on to the commentaries. . . .

The cover: poor. The illustrations: Leydenfrost and Lawrence for "Quest," good. The Lawrence pic for "Vortex Blaster" gives the impression of having been posed, if you know what I mean. The action depicted seems artificial, unreal.

Departments: These are good, but don't you think you could present fanzine reviews which are not quite so dated?

Stories: "Thunder in the Void" was really a powerful novelette, even if the unveiling of the Varra was obvious. I can understand why Vic should drool at the mention of the name Kuttner. Question, though: On what did the Varra live before the advent of *homo sapiens* into space?

"The Eternal Quest": What irony! And I'm nutty enough to like it!

"Remember Me, Kama": Psychological fiction is something stf can use more of. Very good.

"Doomsday on Ajiat" was excellent. One writer, at least, was learned how to inject suspense into his works.

THE MAIL BAG

"Nothing" was just a little bit too screwy. Pearson has the makings, though.

"The Vortex Blaster Makes War" was—unsatisfactory. The superfluous description and the overabundance of detail negated whatever good points it had—or might have had. The conclusion was a bit too pat, too.

I can express my opinion of "Miracle" in no better or more eloquent manner than by putting it in last place.

Your humble servant,
James Johnson,
Aberdeen, S. D.

This sounds complicated, or are we in a dull mood?

Dear Editor:

Am commenting on November and December issues. Some of its stories are a libel in fiction plus a libel of science: to be astonishing the ingredients of fact must be included; to be fantastic the ingredients of plausibility must be included; to be scientific the ingredient of philosophy must be included, otherwise become products of the boobyhatch.

"Doomsday on Adjlat," heaven deliver us from, as this is a state of consciousness minus soul. It has no philosophy because existence minus feeling would be the existence of minerals and the brain is neither the seat nor the source of emotion.

"The Vortex Blaster" is spoiled by the insect complement of its elephant men, insects because only insects have such an excess of complement. But why such a distortion and caricature of the human form, a sheeplike and sorry imitation of H. G. Wells' Martians? *Ad peto—ad fugit*—to seek and to flee, has ever been the course and the career of conscious intelligence, to seek beauty and to flee from obscenity. Even electrons and atoms demonstrate facility to seek and to flee. The higher the intelligence the better use made of its complement therefore the less need for additions. Any existence minus COMPASSION is nihilistic; its lack destroyed every empire and urbanization of the past (urbanizations, not civilizations); no civilization has yet existed. This stellar space—stellar spaceship pseudo-science including in its scope a serf-master state of urbanization might as well not be, for it is not progress, only further mechanization of not only industry but of mankind.

Yours truly,
Gilbert Hagedorn.

Going places? We hope so!

Dear Mr. Norton:

Here it is; here is that which precipitates riots and revolutions. Namely, the Annual Report on the successes and failures of *Astonishing Stories* during the Year 1942.

But before we go into that murderous matter, a few remarks on the current issue—December—are in order; for this is truly a banner number.

Cover: this man Lawrence is good. Not as



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good as the "Old-Timers," but definitely good. It is really amazing the way your covers have improved this year. Not only have you revived Wesso and introduced Finlay, but you have caused Morey to improve unbelievably, and have sacked the anonymous artists who used to drag down the mag's artwork.

Inside illustrations: Lawrence and Morey have slipped. Dolgov is excellent as usual, while Paul—*what?* Don't tell me you are using the Old Master, himself? This is an Occasion.

Rocklynne's "Abyss of Darkness" carriers off top honors. The energy people are hereby nominated for the hall of fame, or something. In fact, I venture to state that some day, when the "old-timers" are gone and the "newcomers" have taken their place, Rocklynne's "Darkness" trilogy will be remembered the way Farley's "Radio" trilogy is today.

Second place goes to "Taa the Terrible." True, it is one of the most commonplace of plots—world doom—but it is masterfully written and characterized.

(This is where the rebel in me shows up.) Third place to "Destination Unknown," by Frank Belknap Long.

Fourth: "Night of Gods."

Fifth: "Mimic," by Martin Pearson. Wow!

Sixth: "Our Director Meets Trouble"—and it's still decidedly above the average.

But enough of the current issue. As I stated in the first paragraph, the purpose of this well-nigh purposeless letter is to present my version of the Ten Best Tales of 1942. So, here goes:

1. "Abyss of Darkness," by Ross Rocklynne. As the others in this series were, a definite classic. Poorly illustrated—Morey is not suited to the depiction of these beings. Bok, however, is—definitely.

2. "Storm Cloud on Deka"—E. E. Smith, Ph.D. Naturally, it can't get the "build-up" of his novels, but swell nonetheless.

3. "The Vortex Blaster Makes War"—Smith. Better plotting, poorer writing than "Storm Cloud on Deka." Both of these Smith stories were beautifully illustrated.

4. "Doomsday on Ajiat"—Neil R. Jones. You have performed a great service in bringing back Professor Jameson and his pals. Long may they live!

5. "Slaves of the Unknown"—Jones. See above. The illustrations for these two were good, but not up to Morey's standard.

6. "The Crystal Circle"—Henry Kuttner. Enough fans have praised this story to make more remarks superfluous. Pic poor.

7. "Thunder in the Void"—Kuttner. If he'd only keep up to this standard all the time! Leydenfrost's illustration: excellent plus.

8. "Daughters of Eternity"—James MacCreigh. Ahhhh! Bok's illustration: great.

9. "Taa the Terrible"—Malcolm Jameson. Illustration: classic.

10. A tie: R. M. Williams' "The Impossible Invention"; F. B. Long's "Destination Unknown." Both were well illustrated.

Brother, your mag is really going places.

Sincerely,

Paul Carter.

(Continued from page 77)

PERSONALS

WALTER KUBILIUS, author of "Come to Mars" in this issue, may not be a "big-name" author as yet, though he certainly ranks among the up-and-coming ones. Big he is, though, in the physical sense. The six feet, eight inches that stretch between Walt's toes and the crown of his head make him truly outstanding in any crowd . . . Henry Kuttner, who wrote "Soldiers of Space", is a writer who came up from the ranks of fandom. Probably his best-known fan venture was the late-lamented California fan magazine, *Sweetness and Light*.

James MacCreigh, author of "Earth, Farewell!", says, "I can't write a science-fiction short story—as those who have read my efforts at it well know. Each story I write demands a brand-new cosmos, and all the rules have to be carefully worked out. What breaks my heart—after I have painstakingly pared down a story to a mere ten or fifteen thousand words—is to look at the mass of notes I've meant to put into it, and to realize there just isn't room!" . . . Artists Frank R. Paul and Les Tina, both represented in this issue, have at least one thing in common besides their illustrating talents. Paul's first job was to deliver food to the palace of the imperial Hapsburgs in his native Vienna, many years ago—where Les Tina's grandmother was in charge of the kitchens!

Betty Cummings, Ray's energetic sixteen-year-old daughter, has turned to radio for a career now, after having made a good start in the literary life by selling stories to top-ranking national magazines. She's to be heard in the serial drammer, "Pepper Young's Family", over the National Broadcasting Company's stations from coast to coast.

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64% Of Service Men Want This Gift

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If you want a **LODGE, ARMY, or NAVY INSIGNIA**, state name here **↑** Gentlemen: I enclose \$1.98. Please send me a Genuine Calfskin Billfold with my name and favorite Emblem engraved in 23k gold. Include absolutely free a life-time Identification Plate carrying my full Name and Social Security Number, or Draft Number. Also include **FREE** an Identification Key Tag and Gilt Chain to match, all hand-engraved with my Name, Address, City and State.

My Full Name (Please print clearly)

Address

City State

Social Security Number Army Draft Number

Check here if you want us to ship the above C.O.D. for \$1.98 plus a few pennies postage and C.O.D. charges.

In a national survey of service men just completed—64% of all men interviewed, said that a Billfold with the proper insignia, made a swell gift.

"IT'S IN THE BAG"-Says HI to HATT



"It's a Tasty Package"

"We done our share of travellin'
Around the U. S. A.—
From East to West we've tried the best,
An' now we're here to say
That silky Kessler's rates on top,
No matter where you go—
Just hand a friend this mellow blend
An' watch his friendship grow!"
(Signed) Mr. Hi and Mr. Hatt

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BLENDED WHISKEY