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FUTURE

MAN OF TOMORROW

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ISSUE

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COMET KINGS

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By EDMOND  
HAMILTON

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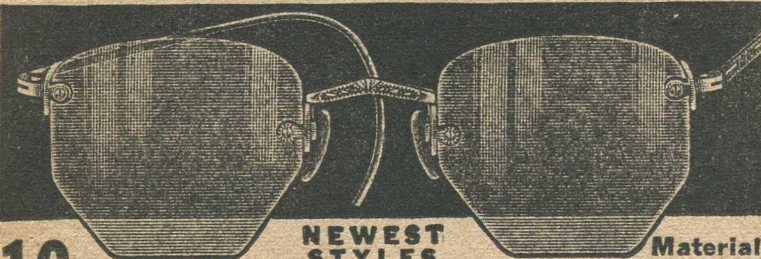
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# CAPTAIN FUTURE

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VOL. 4, NO. 2

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**A Complete Book-Length Scientifiction Novel**



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By

**EDMOND HAMILTON**

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**F**LASH! Captain Future goes to war! Yes, sir, with his typewriter under one arm and a machine-gun under the other, Author Edmond Hamilton is on the verge of being inducted into the service. Sure, writers and editors join up, as well as kiwis and other folks. The old Sarge will keep you posted on things, and Captain Future won't let you down.

Meanwhile, you'll find great news awaiting you in The Future of Captain Future in this issue. Sink your spatial teeth into that juicy morsel.

And, speaking about Captain Future and his future, the argument still goes merrily on as to who wants Curt Newton to do what, whether he should do more or do less. So, seal the ports, pee-lots and join assembly in the control-room, and we'll iron out some of the kinks in open discussion.

All you dizzy space birds tune in your televisior sets and let's have at it. The old Sarge will manhandle the mail bags and take off for a space jaunt with you junior astrogators to get you in line like a battery of smoothly purring rockets. Here's a plug for Captain Future—as is—the very first ethergram on the spindle.

## CAPTAIN FUTURE IS OKAY

By Joe Daniel

Dear Sarge: I have sat back and listened to all those guys yap and gripe for three or four issues, and I say that Ed Hamilton is okay. All of his stories have been okay—maybe a mistake once in a while, but what does that matter?

I am forming a CF club now, also. Captain Future plays his part perfectly, so why don't all those space-drunk jugheads crawl up a rocket tube and cease being? Romance! Bah! The more and more scientific the better. So tell Hamilton to go on with his ears sealed with waxite and create more adventures for Captain Future. If possible, put another diagram of the Comet in the next issue with all of its equipment, such as the time thruster, the vibration drive, and everything else.—1314 Reid St., Houston, Texas.

I take it, Kiwi Daniel, you don't care much for the woman interest in your Captain Future stories. Be careful, pee-lot—you are sticking your head into the lion's mouth when you completely disdain Joan. And monkeying with lions is a tricky business, even for a chap named Daniel.

## COVER THE COVER

By Leo Buresh

Dear Sarge: This is my first letter concerning CAPTAIN FUTURE. There are a couple of things you should fix up. First, your cover! The picture never matches the story.

Second, if nobody has ever seen the other side of the Moon, how do you know it looks the way you have it?

BUT I still think CAPTAIN FUTURE is the best science fiction book, and I think the members (including myself) would like for you to print at least eight editions a year instead of four.—6522 Steadmen, Dearborn, Mich.

Pee-lot Buresh, the old Sarge is surprised at you! Your second point is not well taken. Get back and crib your astrogation charts. You can't see the other side of the Moon from Earth, but Captain Future has his headquarters on the Moon, and it is from his travels that we learn much about the Universe that we can't see while standing on Earth.

As for your cover trouble, it isn't really as bad as you make it sound. Sometimes the cover scene is symbolic, but it always pertains to Captain Future. And in the very last issue, Author Hamilton wrote a complete sequence about an adventure on Jupiter which Artist Bergey illustrated beautifully.

Besides which, the old Space Dog has shown you kiwis a whole chart box of astral maps himself, as well as related many a rousing personal adventure of the star-ways in the control-room. So go back and box the star compass while—whoops, a woman driver!

## TODAY VERSUS YESTERDAY

By Mrs. G. W. Hunt

Dear Sarge: Move over and let me take the wheel while I run down that blasted Maxwell. What in heck would he do for reading matter if someone actually beat Cap. Future? So he wants him to lose, eh! What say we dump him out the chute and lose him? How many fictional characters can he name who have been defeated? When they are, they're dead—DEAD, get it? Holmes died, and Doyle had one tough job explaining it, too, when the public demanded his resurrection.

So CF isn't epical, eh? Well, he can keep his measly 20c—15c for the mag and 5c for stamp and paper to beef about it—or he can donate it to me. I can always use an extra shekel to buy CF or TWS if for no other reason than to read Satan—oops, I mean saturn's bombastic remarks.

CF must have something to keep me waiting in suspense for three months and watching almost daily in hopes it might come out ahead of schedule.

As for you, Sarge, you bawl 'em out for calling you down and you bawl 'em out for calling you up, so what in heck do you want? Make up your mind, if you got one, which I doubt. Even a parrot can cuss, you know.

As for Hamilton, the more super-duper he makes Captain Future and his pals, the better I'll like him. After all, call it escape literature if you will, I read fiction for entertainment, and get my facts from Science mags, encyclopedias and educational radio programs. For dessert give me CF, and the



richer it is the better. Who in the heck wants a cake without sugar and eggs? I'll bet if you took the sugar out of CF, antiquated Maxwell wouldn't read it.

Haven't read "Quest Beyond the Stars" yet, but know I am in for a delightful evening's reading.

One more thing; I haven't read all of those "classics" which readers are always throwing into the faces of the more recent fans but have read some of the reprints, and the ONLY one that meets some of the newer classics is "The Blind Spot," but "Slaves of Sleep" equals it in all ways, and that was only published a year or so ago. If I took the time, I could probably name others, but that isn't important. What is important is why don't they take off their blinders and see the best in TODAY (in spite of Hitler) and quit their petty day-dreaming about the "good old days"—phooey! I want my electric lights and radio and CF, not candles, soap-box speakers (brrrrr, it's cold) and Nick Carter, etc.

Better take her back, Sarge, before I burst a tube.—320 W. Curtice St., St. Paul, Minn.

Blast your—er—bless your heart, gal, that's firing a few rockets. It warms the cockles of the old Sarge's heart to get ethergrams from lady readers. You know what a weakness the old Space Dog has for female astrogators. For that very response is superb proof that science fiction isn't just a bit of fad literature for half-baked physics students in high school. It is vivid and vital literature of today which definitely has its place, its purpose, and its uses.

You tell 'em, honey, and the old Sarge will tackle a whole herd of Martian skitars bare-handed to back you up. Let's hear from other girl pee-lots!

## HALL OF FAME SERIAL

By Samuel Bryson

Dear Sarge: Here is to register my approval of "our mag" and to express the hope that it will enjoy many more years of publication. However, as criticism is usually of more value than praise, here's a blast from my combination pen-electron gun at the way you handled that fine old story, "The Man Who Awoke," by Laurence Manning.

As a science fiction reader of more than a decade, it seems, if my memory proves correct, that this was one of the first really good stories I read, and your inclusion of the story in the Hall of Fame awoke memories of the time I first discovered this type of literature. However, what does the old Sarge do but dismember it so that it looks like the remains of a Saturnian dwarf eaten by a cat-eagle?

How about the next two chapters in which Winters destroys the Brain and where mankind finally reaches its next stage in evolution? Fooey on you, Sarge.—Burbank, Calif.

Avast there, kiwi! Taking the old Sarge to task as well as jumping the gun at the same time, aren't you? The Hall of Fame serialization of "The Man Who Awoke" was not emasculated in any way. In fact, we even used the original illustrations.

A word on Hall of Fame stories and illustrations while we are on the subject. Wherever possible, we always retain the original illustrations. Only when they won't reproduce well or for some reason are not apropos do we order new illustrations for the stories. As for dismembering a classic, nothing is ever done save a straight editing job.

What you have reference to goes even  
(Continued on page 122)

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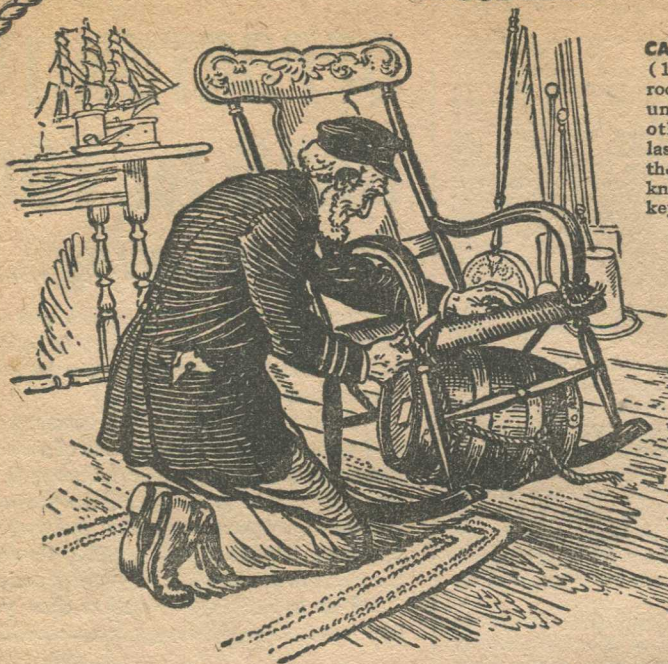
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Captain Future parried the blow by a swift jab of his own dielectric blade. (Chap. IX)

# The Comet Kings

By EDMOND HAMILTON

*Trapped in the Depths of Halley's Comet, the Futuremen Battle Fourth-Dimensional Monsters in a Titanic Struggle to Save the System's Solar Energy!*

## CHAPTER I

### *Vanishing Spaceships*

**M**ILLIONS of miles out beyond Jupiter, the battered old space-freighter *Arcturion* plodded through the void.

"I'd just as soon walk to Uranus!" disgustedly exclaimed Norton, the young second mate. "I wish I'd got a berth on a passenger liner. They don't

spend weeks crawling along between planets."

Brower, the veteran first mate, smiled tolerantly at the impatient young officer.

"You'll get used to it," he predicted. "Me, I kind of like it. It's restful, plugging along day after day through these big empty spaces."

"But nothing ever happens!" the younger man complained. "There's never even a close brush with a meteor

**A COMPLETE BOOK-LENGTH NOVEL**





Captain Future smashed desperately to close the fateful door as

swarm. I can't stand this deadly monotony."

Ironically, it was at that moment that the catastrophe broke upon them.

The plodding, droning *Arcturion* suddenly seemed to go crazy in space. Its steelite hull plates screamed beneath the grasp of unearthly forces. The ship hurtled suddenly sideward in space, as though it had been gripped by a giant, invisible hand.

The sharp shock of that invisible grasp was so powerful that it nullified the *Arcturion's* artificial gravitation. Young Norton felt himself hurled against the cabin wall, and his brain saw stars.

His last sensation was of mysterious and mighty forces sweeping the old freighter at undreamable speed through the void. Then he knew noth-

ing at all.

That was only the first disappearance.

"But there aren't any uncharted meteor swarms out in that sector of space, sir!"

The man who spoke was a Martian who wore the dark uniform of the Planet Patrol. He wore a captain's insignia, too, for Tzan Thar was head of this Jovopolis Maintenance Division.

His red, solemn face was wrinkled with dismay and there was anxiety in his large-pupilled black eyes, as he protested to the Venusian superior officer who looked at him out of the square television screen.

"Don't try to evade responsibility, Captain Thar!" snapped the higher officer. "You're in charge of the Main-





the Allus advanced viciously toward him and Joan. (Chap. XV)

tenance Division for that sector of space. You've been lax in your meteor-sweeping, and a score of ships have come to grief as a result.

"Twenty-three ships gone, since that old freighter *Arcturion* first disappeared! And every one of them vanished in that sector beyond Jupiter, and hasn't reported since."

"I can't understand it any more than you can sir," said the Martian captain. "We swept all lanes in that sector only a few weeks ago."

"Then you missed plenty of meteors!" rapped his superior. "You get out there with every sweep you've got—and be fast about it! I want that sector cleaned up at once. And see if you can't find the wreckage of those ships."

The connection was broken. Tzan

Thar turned and looked helplessly at his junior officers—lanky Earthmen, squat Jovians, bronzed Mercurians.

"You all heard him," the Martian captain said worriedly. "You know we swept that sector thoroughly, that every space-lane was clear. But something's drifted in that has been wrecking ships. We've got to get busy!"

Six broad-beamed, dumpy meteor-sweeps soon rose up through the thin sunlight of Jupiter, blasted their tortuous path out through the maze of moons, and then laid a course outward in space.

The six ships, built with steelite walls of massive strength, droned steadily out through the starry void. Their far-ranging spotter beams fanned space ahead. Wherever those beams encountered meteors or other



debris, they would be reflected back to indicate the location. Then the sweeps would advance and destroy the meteors by concentrated atom-blasts.

**B**UT their spotter apparatus found no trace of meteors as they droned out along the space-lane. Captain Tzan Thar became deeply puzzled.

"I can't figure it," he admitted anxiously. "There are no meteors in this sector. There isn't even any wreckage from all those vanished ships."

His immediate superior, a young Mercurian, looked uneasy.

"It's queer, all right—"

Cataclysm suddenly interrupted their discussion. A colossal, invisible hand seemed suddenly to seize their heavy ship. They were flung to the floor as that giant, unseen hand scooped up all six great meteor-sweeps.

Nor did the tragic disappearances cease.

"Fifty-two ships! Do you hear that—fifty-two ships! Freighters, liners, tankers, even meteor-sweeps. This can't go on!"

North Bonnel's face was agitated as he paced to and fro in his office, on a high level of Earth's Government Tower at New York. It was a comparatively small office, yet it was the very brain and nerve center of the far-flung Planet Patrol.

Halk Anders, commander of the Patrol, sat at his desk and said nothing. His bulldog face was stolidly grim as he hunched there, staring out through the window at the soaring towers and gleaming lights of this night-shrouded metropolis of the Solar System.

"Commander, something's got to be done," North Bonnel continued vehemently. "Those ships held thousands of people, millions of dollars' worth of cargoes. Shipping companies, planetary officials, anxious relatives are all besieging the Government. You've got to send cruisers out there to stop these disasters!"

Halk Anders did not turn from his grim contemplation of the lights of New York, as he answered.

"We sent two Patrol cruisers into

that sector to investigate weeks ago—after our meteor-sweeps vanished."

"You did?" Bonnel said hopefully. "What did they report?"

"They didn't report anything," the commander replied. "They never came back—just disappeared like the others."

The Government official was appalled.

"Patrol cruisers disappeared, too?" Anders nodded.

"Yes. We kept it quiet because we didn't want to add to the general alarm."

"But what are we going to do about it?" Bonnel asked dismayedly.

"I've already done something," the commander told him. "I sent out another cruiser to investigate. Two of my crack agents are aboard. You know them—old Marshal Ezra Gurney and Joan Randall."

"It may look queer, sending a girl," he added quickly. "But Joan's not only the smartest agent of our secret investigation division—she knows the spaceways better than most men. And as for Ezra Gurney—well, he knows the whole System like the back of his hand."

"Have they found out anything yet?" Bonnel demanded eagerly.

Halk Anders shrugged stolidly.

"I don't know. They were to report by televisor today. I've been expecting their call any minute."

But though the two men waited expectantly, it was not until four hours later that the televisor on the desk buzzed sharply. From it came the urgent voice of a headquarters switchboard man.

"Cruiser *Ferronia* calling, Commander. Agent Randall to speak to you."

"Switch her on at once!" snapped Halk Anders.

**I**N the square glass screen of the televisor appeared the vivid face of a dark, pretty girl. Joan Randall's eyes were shadowed with anxiety as she spoke to them across the millions of miles of space.

"*Ferronia* reporting, Commander," she said rapidly. "We've been cruising back and forth over the whole



sector in which those ships vanished. And we've found—nothing."

"Nothing?" echoed Anders incredulously. "You mean—"

"I mean just that. There's nothing here but empty space!" Joan Randall declared. "There's not a meteor in this whole region big enough to wreck a ship. Furthermore, there's no sign whatever of any wreckage of all those ships. It's just as though space itself swallowed them up!"

The white head of an old man appeared over the girl's shoulder. Marshal Ezra Gurney's wrinkled face and faded blue eyes were bleak as he

"Joan! Ezra! What's happened?"

There was no answer. Anders flung a switch and shot an order to the headquarters operator.

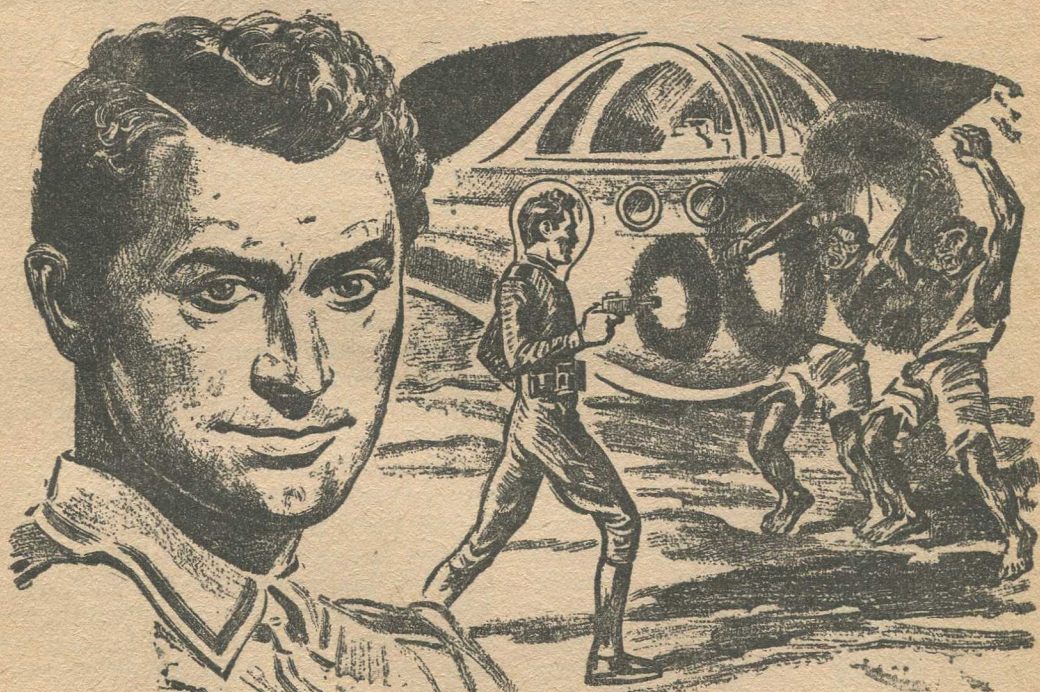
"Contact the *Ferronia* again at once!"

Ten minutes later, the switchboard division called back.

"No success at all, sir. The *Ferronia* simply doesn't answer."

Anders slowly turned and looked at the Government official, and his bulldog face was heavier than ever.

"It happened to Joan and Ezra, right in front of our eyes," he muttered. "Whatever struck at the other



CAPTAIN FUTURE

corroborated the girl's report.

"It sounds cursed queer, but it's so," he told the commander. "This is the dangdest, most puzzlin' mystery I ever—"

At that moment, something happened. It happened so swiftly that neither Commander Anders nor North Bonnel got more than a glimpse of it.

They saw something like a blaze of white across the televisior screen, instantly blotting out the suddenly alarmed faces of Joan and Ezra. And then the televisior had gone dark.

Anders jabbed its call-button.

ships struck at theirs, too."

Bonnel was appalled.

"But what was it? There was nothing but a blaze of force in the screen!"

Anders shook his leonine head helplessly.

"I can't figure it. I thought I'd seen everything in space but this is something new—and dangerous."

He rose to his feet.

"There is nothing to do but to send a full squadron of Patrol cruisers out there. And if they disappear, too—"

"There'll be a panic that will cripple space travel in the whole System,"



breathed Bonnel, his face pale. Then his eyes flashed.

"Commander, this mystery can't be met by force. It's a job for someone who can scientifically ferret out what is really happening. Someone who can use every resource of science to solve the riddle."

Halk Anders understood this at once.

"You're thinking of Captain Future?"

The official nodded emphatically.

"If anybody could crack this mystery, that scientific wizard and his Futuremen could."

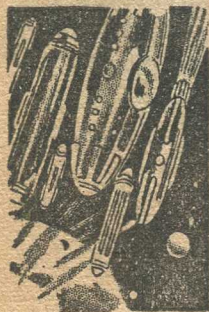
"Maybe so," muttered the commander. "Future has plenty of tricks the rest of us don't know. But if you call him in, will he come?"

"Will he come?" echoed North Bonnel. He strode toward the televisor. "Why, Ezra Gurney is one of his oldest friends, and as for Joan—you ought to know what Future thinks of her!"

"Will he come? He'll split space itself getting here when he learns that Joan and Ezra are in danger!"

## CHAPTER II

### *Riddle of the Void*



A SMALL, stream-lined ship climbed from the barren, airless surface of the Moon. With rockets blazing white fire, it shot toward Earth.

Had there been any observer, he would have known at once that it was

the ship of Captain Future and the Futuremen. For only those four famous adventurers lived upon the lifeless, forbidding satellite. Their underground laboratory-home beneath Tycho crater was the only habitation.

The little ship flew toward Earth at a speed no other craft could match, and which no ordinary pilot would have attempted. It screamed down through the darkness of the shadowed planet, toward the blazing pinnacles

of New York. Like a stooping falcon, it came down to rest on the truncated tip of the looming Government Tower.

Down in Planet Patrol headquarters, North Bonnel was still restlessly pacing his office as Halk Anders sat grimly silent.

"If Future can't solve this thing, nobody can!" Bonnel was saying jerkily. "And if ships keep on vanishing like that—"

A clear voice interrupted him:

"What's this about vanishing ships? And what's happened to Joan and Ezra?"

Bonnel and Halk Anders both spun around. A door had opened silently behind them. And in it were four figures.

"Captain Future!" exclaimed Bonnel. He breathed in gusty relief. "By heaven, I'm glad you and the Futuremen got here so quickly!"

Curt Newton ignored the warm greeting of these two old acquaintances as he strode into the office. His brows were knitted in a frown.

"You said in your call that Joan and Ezra were in trouble. What is it, Bonnel? And why didn't you call me before?"

Captain Future—as the whole System called Curtis Newton—towered a full head above Bonnel. His tall, rangey figure, clad now in a gray zipper-suit, hinted of strength and speed. And the heavy proton pistol belted to his waist recalled that he was not only the famous Wizard of Science, but also the most renowned fighting planeteer in the System.

Beneath Curt's torchlike mop of red hair, his space-tanned handsome face and clear gray eyes now mirrored an urgent anxiety. He had few friends, but those few were very close to him. Marshal Ezra Gurney was one of the oldest. And even closer to his heart was the gay, gallant girl agent whose safety now was threatened.

"Where are Joan and Ezra?" he repeated.

"We don't know," Bonnel answered helplessly.

"What do you mean—you don't know?" cried one of the Futuremen. "Devils of space, is this a joke?"



The three Futuremen who were Curt Newton's faithful, lifelong comrades made a striking contrast to their tall, red-haired young leader.

Otho, the one who had just spoken, was a lithe, white, rubbery-looking figure of a man, with a devil of fierce recklessness in his slant green eyes. He seemed almost an ordinary man, but was not. Otho had been created in a laboratory, long ago. He was a synthetic man, an android.

Grag, second of the Futuremen, was even more extraordinary. He was an intelligent robot—a giant metal figure towering seven feet high, with photoelectric eyes gleaming from the bulbous metal head that shielded his mechanical brain. Strongest of all beings was Grag!

The third and strangest was Simon Wright, the Brain. He was just that—a living human brain, dwelling in a transparent metal case whose constantly repurified serums kept him alive. His glass lens-eyes were watching, his microphone ears listening, as he hung poised upon the pale beams of force by which he could move through the air at will.

"You must have some idea where Joan and Ezra are!" Otho was exclaiming impatiently to Bonnel. "Or did you bring us all the way from the Moon just for a silly hoax?"

"Shut up, Otho," Curt Newton ordered. His gray eyes bored into Bonnel's face. "Tell us what happened."

**B**ONNEL told them, as briefly as he could. He told of the scores of ships that for weeks had mysteriously vanished in that sector beyond Jupiter, of the assigning of Joan Randall and old Marshal Gurney to investigate, and of the inexplicable interruption of their televisior call.

"The thing has me baffled, Captain Future," confessed Halk Anders when Bonnel had finished.

Curt's eyes were hard.

"We're going out there at once and find out what did happen to them," he said sharply. He turned toward the door.

Otho's slant green eyes flamed with excitement as he followed. And Grag, too, followed Captain Future silently.

But the Brain's metallic voice held them back.

"Wait a moment, Curtis. I know you're worried about Joan, but getting into too big a hurry won't help us. We need to know more about this."

Otho groaned exasperatedly. "Every time we're in a devil of a hurry, Simon has to delay to plan things out."

There was truth in the charge. The cold, almost emotionless mind of the Brain was always more careful in planning action than were the others. That was natural, for the Brain was the oldest of them all.

The Brain could look back across the years to the time before Curt Newton had been born. He had been an ordinary man, at that time. He had been Doctor Simon Wright, brilliant, aging scientist of a great Earth university, dying of an incurable ailment.

His body had died—but his brain had lived on. His living brain had been surgically removed and implanted in the artificial metal serum-case which he still inhabited. That had been done by Roger Newton, his gifted young colleague in biological research.

Soon after that, threats to their scientific secrets had caused the Brain, Roger Newton and Newton's bride to leave Earth in search of a safe refuge. They had found such a haven on the lifeless Moon, where they built an underground laboratory-home beneath the floor of Tycho crater.

In that strange home, Curt Newton had been born. And in it, the science of the two experimenters had created Otho, the android, and Grag, the robot.

Death had come to Roger Newton and his young wife, soon after that. The orphaned infant they had left had been adopted by the three strange beings, the Brain, the robot and the android. These three had faithfully reared the boy to brilliant manhood, giving him the unparalleled education that in time had made him an unsurpassed master of science.

Ever since Curt Newton had begun to use his great powers against the evil-doers of the System, his three former guardians had followed him as the Futuremen.



"Before we go out there," the Brain was saying deliberately in his metallic voice, "I want all available data about the spaceships that disappeared. I want to know the route each ship was on, its date of departure, its approximate cruising speed, and about when it vanished."

Captain Future's gray eyes showed quick understanding.

"I see what you mean, Simon. By calculating the courses and speeds of the ships, we may be able to fix the approximate point in space where they vanished."

Halk Anders gave rapid orders into an office interphone. The file of data requested by the Brain was soon brought to him.

"We'll call you the moment we learn anything out there," Curt called back earnestly from the door to the two officials. "Come on, Grag."

**T**HEY hurried up the little private stair to the landing deck atop Government Tower, Otho taking the steps three at a time, Grag's metal limbs clanking, the Brain gliding silently at Curt Newton's side.

Up there in the windy darkness atop the tower, the small ship of the Futuremen crowded the deck. The four boarded the *Comet* in a minute, the airlock door was slammed shut, the cyclotrons started, and Captain Future grasped the space-stick in the crowded little control room.

He sent the *Comet* climbing steeply up to the stars with a burst of white flame from its tail rocket tubes. It angled sharply above the glittering towers of New York to fling itself spaceward amid a roar of splitting atmosphere, as Curt's foot pressed the cyc-pedal.

Presently they were out in clear space, Earth receding rapidly behind them as Curt Newton built up the speed of the *Comet* to fantastic velocity. Like a man-made meteor gone mad, the ship of the Futuremen hurtled outward. The bright speck of Jupiter gleamed ahead, a little to the right.

Far out to the left, well beyond the orbit of the monarch world, glowed the brilliant splendor of Halley's

comet. The great comet was plunging Sunward again in its vast, seventy-five-year orbit. Its giant coma or head shone like a blazing world, the long tail streaming backward.

"The ships all disappeared in the quadrant ahead, between the orbits of Jupiter and Uranus," Curt told Otho thoughtfully. "Since all space-lanes have been re-routed to give Halley's comet a wide berth, it cuts down the area that we must search."

There came a sudden booming cry of alarm from Grag, back in the main cabin.

"Someone has planted an atomic bomb on this ship!"

Springing up in alarm, Curt Newton slammed the switch of the automatic pilot and bounded back with Otho into the cabin. This main cabin of the *Comet* was more laboratory than living quarters. It was crowded with telescopic, spectroscopic, electrical and other apparatus. There was a table at its center over which the Brain had been poised, studying a mass of calculations.

Grag was standing, pointing his metal arm in alarm at a small, square black case in a corner. It exactly resembled a "live" atomic bomb.

"Don't touch it, Chief—it may let go any minute!" the big robot cried. "Somebody must have put it in the ship while we were out."

Captain Future moved swiftly toward the bomb, snatched it up and tore open the airlock door to throw the thing out. But the "bomb" suddenly writhed and changed form in his hands.

It changed with swift protean flow of outline, into a small, living animal. It was a doughy-looking little white beast, with big, solemn eyes that looked up innocently at Curt.

"It's my pet, Oog!" cried Otho. He jumped forward in alarm. "Don't throw him out!"

Curt disgustedly tossed the little animal to its master.

"It isn't his fault," Otho said protectively. "You know Oog loves to imitate anything he sees. That's his nature."

Oog was cuddling contentedly in his master's arms. The little beast



was a meteor-mimic, a species of asteroidal creature which had developed the art of protective coloration to great lengths. This species had the power of shifting its bodily cells to shape itself after any model, and completely controlled its own pigmentation. It could imitate anything.

"I don't mind your keeping the little nuisance around in the Moon-laboratory, but I told you not to bring any pets in this ship!" Captain Future bawled out the android.

"Well, Grag brought along his pet, Eek, and so I thought I had a right to bring Oog," Otho answered defensively.

**C**URT uttered an exasperated snort. "So we've got Eek along, too? Where is he, Grag?"

Reluctantly the great robot opened a cabinet and released another small animal, but one of a different species. It was a little gray, bearlike creature with beady black eyes and powerful jaws, now contentedly gnawing upon a small scrap of copper.

Eek, as Grag called this pet of his, was a moon-pup. He was a member of the strange species of moon-dogs that inhabited the airless satellite of Earth. These creatures did not breathe air or eat ordinary food, but nourished their strange tissues by devouring metal or metallic ores. They were strongly telepathic, that being one of their chief senses.

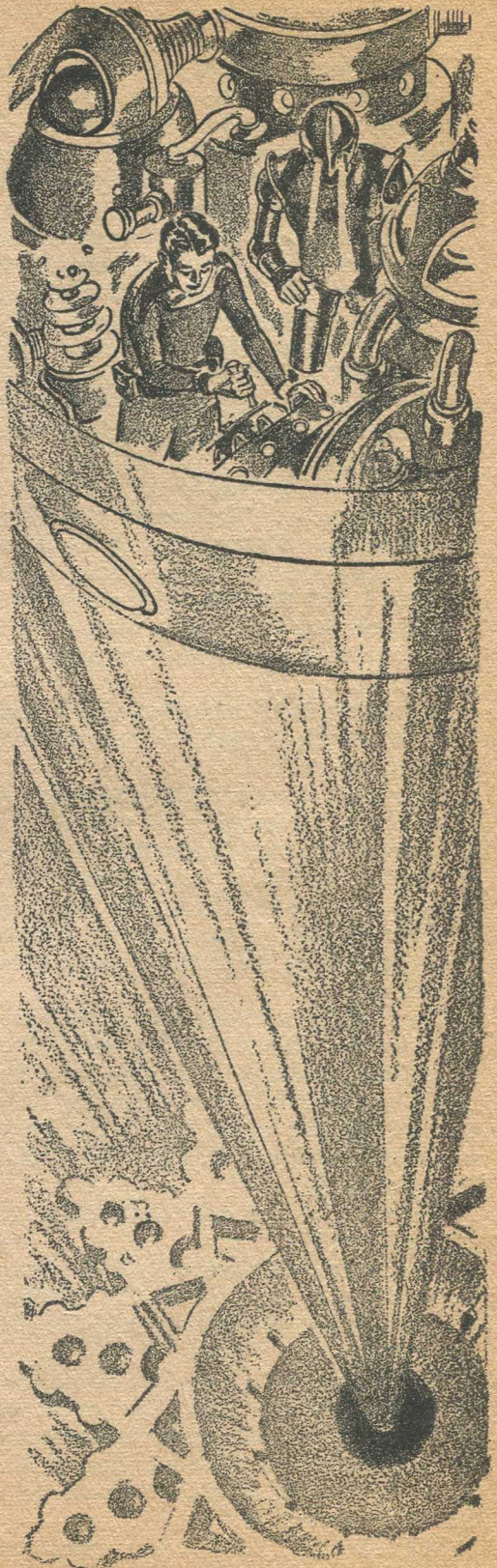
"Look at the beast—he's chewed up half the copper instruments in that cabinet," Curt said bitterly. "Why the devil did you bring him along?"

Grag shifted uncomfortably.

"Well, Chief, I had to do it. Eek can sense what people are thinking, you know, and he knew we were going and was upset about being left behind. He's a sensitive little fellow."

"Sensitive? That walking four-legged nuisance? All he knows is to eat up valuable metal and to sleep," Curt said witheringly.

Simon Wright had paid no attention to the altercation over the pets. The Brain was too accustomed to such arguments to notice them. "Curtis, I want you to look at these figures," he said.



The Futuremen were drawn inexorably into the center of Halley's comet. (Chap. III)



Curt went over to the side of the Brain, who was poised uncannily upon his pale tractor-beams above the mass of calculations. The brain had been marking small crosses upon a space-chart that showed the quadrant between the orbits of Jupiter and Uranus, ahead of them.

"Each cross represents where one of the spaceships vanished, as nearly as I can figure it," the Brain explained.

Captain Future felt dismayed as he looked. The pattern of crosses was not focused around any one point. It extended in a long, strung-out oval, reaching almost from Uranus' orbit to that of Jupiter.

"I can't understand this," Curt muttered puzzledly. "I thought the ships would all have disappeared in the same part of space, and that by going there we could find the key to the mystery. But since that isn't so, it means we'll have to search the whole vast quadrant for a clue."

"I fear so, lad," admitted the Brain. "And a search of such dimensions will take us weeks."

Curt went discouragedly back to the pilot chair. Gloomily he stared into the enormous, star-specked void ahead of the flying ship. It yawned empty to the eye, except for the bright spark of Jupiter to the right, and the flaring glory of Halley's comet far out on the left ahead.

Curt's eyes suddenly narrowed upon the comet. His unseeing stare had brought a subconscious idea into his mind. A possibility hitherto ignored abruptly burst upon him with stunning implications. He hastened back into the cabin.

"Simon, let me see that chart of yours again!"

The Brain watched wonderingly as Curt closely examined the plotted crosses, each of which marked the disappearance of a ship.

"Look, Simon! The first ships that vanished did so near the orbit of Uranus. The next ones disappeared further Sunward. The location of disappearances has steadily moved in a Sunward direction."

"That's true," the Brain admitted. "Does it mean anything?"

"I don't know," Curt muttered. "But

Halley's comet has also been steadily moving in a Sunward direction, during these vanishings."

His eyes flashed.

"Simon, I know it sounds insane, but I think that Halley's comet has something to do with this mystery!"

## CHAPTER III

### *On the Comet World*



RUSHING headlong through the great deeps of space, Halley's comet flamed in the blackness like a world afire. The gigantic spherical coma, over two hundred thousand miles in diameter, flared in a supernal

glory of dazzling electrical radiance.

Within that radiant shell of force, there pulsed the deeper glow of the mysterious nucleus. And back from the head streamed the millions of miles of the glowing growing tail.

Strangest of all the Solar System's children was this vast wanderer. Its long, elliptical orbit carried it out beyond the orbits of even the outer planets, out beyond the frontier of the System to the shores of infinity.

There, as though obeying the call of its parent orb, the great comet always turned and rushed Sunward through the planetary orbits, gathering speed until it was racing in through the circling worlds at frightful velocity.

Curt Newton and his Futuremen gazed with a tinge of awe at the gigantic, glowing body as their ship approached it. They were now but a million miles from the coma.

"It's like slapping a Venusian marsh tiger in the teeth to fool around with this thing," muttered Otho. "That coma is pure electric energy. If we get too close to it, we'll be blasted like a butterfly."

Otho spoke more truly than he knew.

A giant, invisible hand seemed suddenly to seize their ship in an iron grasp. The racing craft, brought sud-



denly to a halt in space, stopped so sharply that only the cushioning anti-acceleration force-stasis in the control room saved them all from being crushed on the walls.

As it was, Curt's brain blurred from the shock. He heard a loud yell of alarm from Grag. He shook his head violently to clear it.

Their ship, the *Comet*, was falling at nightmare speed toward the giant flaring comet that was its namesake!

"What happened?" Otho was yelling. "Chief, did the cycs fail?"

"No, they're still going. We must have run into a powerful ether current that's sucking us toward the comet," Curt said hastily.

As he spoke, he was jamming down the cyc-pedal and swerving the space-stick to bring the ship back on its course. The massive cyclotrons roared with full power, rocket tubes spouting tremendous blasts of flame backward.

But the ship continued to fall toward the flaring comet. All Curt's efforts could not bring it out of that racing descent. And now he noticed with increased alarm that the instruments before him had gone crazy. Meteorometers, gravitometers and all the other instruments had either blown out or were showing erratic, impossible readings.

"This isn't any ether current that's grabbed us!" Curt exclaimed. "This is a powerful magnetic beam of some kind, that's somehow projected from the comet and is sucking us in to it!"

A super-powerful magnetic force had seized the ship's steelite hull and was dragging it at rapidly mounting speed toward Halley's comet.

"Chief, something's the matter with me!" bellowed Grag in evident panic. "I'm stuck against the wall here—I can't move!"

Curt discovered the predicament of the robot. Grag was flattened against the wall of the control room nearest the comet. The great robot, with all his mighty strength, seemed unable to free himself. And Simon Wright, the Brain, was also pinned to the wall.

"It's got me too, lad," rasped the Brain, with unperturbed calm. "This is an effect of the magnetic force that's seized us."

CAPTAIN FUTURE understood. Both the great body of Grag and the case of the Brain were composed of metal alloys whose base was steelite. Thus they were pinned against the wall by the magnetic force.

The scene was one of desperate confusion. The speed with which the unseen magnetic beam was drawing them toward the ominous glowing coma was increasing by the second. Grag and Simon were helpless. Eek was cowering in a corner as he telepathically sensed his master's alarm. The little meteor-mimic, Oog, had promptly turned himself into an exact imitation of Eek, in his fright.

"Take it easy, men!" Curt ordered sternly. "We'll have to try the vibration drive. Go back and start the generators, Otho. Simon, you and Grag can't help—just wait."

Curt's presence of mind brought order out of the momentary chaos. Otho raced back into the cabin to start up the powerful generators, which were the source of power for the *Comet's* auxiliary vibration drive.

This drive, whose mechanism could fling the ship at incredible speeds through the reactive push of etheric vibrations, was intended only to be used in the vast spaces outside the System. But Curt knew it was their only hope of breaking free of the remorseless magnetic grip that was dragging them to doom.

Captain Future discovered that he himself was being dragged by a persistent force toward the wall against which Grag and Simon were pinned. He found that the effect was due to the proton pistol at his belt, whose steelite was tugged toward the wall by a powerful pull. Curt hastily took the weapon out of his belt—and at once it flew toward the wall.

"Hey, look out!" Grag exclaimed. "That thing hit me right in the stomach!"

"You can hammer out the dent in your stomach later," Curt retorted. "Otho, have you gone asleep back there?"

He was answered by the thrumming roar of the vibration-drive generators, which soon were shaking the ship with their powerful drone.



"All ready, Chief!" Otho reported, tumbling back into the control room. He, too, had been forced to jettison his weapons.

"This will yank us out of the magnetic grip, if anything will." Curt gritted. "Hold on, Otho!"

He flung in the switches of the vibration drive. The ship, still falling dizzily toward the comet, shuddered violently as the powerful propulsion vibrations were projected suddenly from its stern.

But it still continued to fall toward Halley's comet, still gripped by the relentless magnetic beam. Curt increased the power. The ship shuddered even more strongly, and an ominous creaking warned of tremendous stresses that were weakening its frame. Yet it still could not break free.

"We're caught for good!" Curt exclaimed dismayedly. "Even the vibration drive can't tear us loose. Fiends of Pluto, there must be a world of power in this beam that's seized us!"

"What are we going to do?" cried Otho. "We don't have much time left. Holy sun-imps, look at that coma!"

The spectacle outside the windows was now an appalling one, as the ship hurtled toward the comet at incredible speed. The immense spherical coma of Halley's comet filled almost all space ahead of them, a blinding sea of dazzling white light. It was not really light, at all, Curt well knew.

**T**HAT coma was a vast shell of ions, electrically charged atoms whose tremendous potential was such as to destroy by an unearthly lightning blast any matter that touched it.

And their ship would strike that coma in a dreadfully short time. Captain Future felt, as he had never felt before, a sense of being trapped by forces that even the resourcefulness and scientific powers of the Futuremen could not contend against.

Yet it was characteristic of Curt Newton that even in this moment of frightful danger, he was not thinking of himself. It was of Joan Randall and Ezra Gurney that he was thinking, and of the others who had been lost in vanished ships.

"They were all drawn into the comet by a magnetic beam, the same as we," he declared. "Simon, that beam was deliberately projected to seize us!"

"Aye, lad," came the answer of the helpless Brain. "There's intelligence and menace inside Halley's comet."

"We've got about five minutes before we hit the coma!" Otho yelled. "This is the end of our space-trail. Good-by, Grag, old pal—I'm sorry now I was always ribbing you about being a robot. You may be made of metal, but you're a better man than I ever was."

"No, Otho," Grag boomed earnestly. "You were a swell guy but I didn't appreciate you. I guess I was just jealous."

Curt Newton, looking fearlessly ahead into that appalling sea of light, toward which they were being dragged, suddenly shouted.

"Before you two grave-diggers make your last farewells, look at this!" he cried. "I think we're going to get through the coma!"

They stared unbelievably. Their ship was now rushing straight toward the vast, flaring wall of electric force, the head of the comet. There was a round aperture in the glowing shell of the coma. And the ship was being sucked straight toward that hole!

"I get it now!" Captain Future exclaimed. "The magnetic beam that holds us is projected out through the coma to make that aperture. We'll be dragged through that hole, perhaps without touching the coma!"

The moment was at hand as he spoke. The *Comet* seemed rushing headlong toward destruction in the flaring sea of electric force. One touch would destroy them as lightning might shatter a toy.

Straight as an arrow, the Futuremen hurtled toward that aperture in the coma. They entered it, and Curt and Otho cried out and shielded their eyes. The blaze of force all around the ship was blinding in intensity.

When he uncovered his eyes, Curt perceived with a thrill of hope that they were *through* the coma! Their ship was inside the spherical shell of the comet's head, was being dragged at unabated speed toward a little



planet that hung at the center of this vast enclosed space.

A world here at the heart of Halley's comet! A little world that was the solid nucleus of this vast, mysterious wanderer of the void!

"We're through — we're in the comet!" Otho yelled hopefully. Then, remembering something, he added hastily to Grag: "I hope you don't think I meant it when I said you were a better man than I. I was just handing you another rib, you poor metal imitation of a man!"

"The same goes for me!" Grag bel-lowed angrily at the android. "I was just hoping to make death easier for you, when I told you what a swell guy you were—you offspring of a smelly retortful of chemicals!"

**C**URT ignored the verbal combatants.

"Simon, the magnetic beam comes from that little world! That means Joan and Ezra must have been dragged here in the same way!" he said excitedly. "If they're on that world—"

"We'll never know if they are!" Otho groaned suddenly. "We're going to be smashed to flinders when we hit that planet at this speed!"

Curt, too, had realized their peril. It seemed they had miraculously escaped the coma, only to meet an equally frightful end. Their velocity was suicidal as they plunged toward the mysterious planet.

The planet that poised here at the heart of the great comet was a small green world, blanketed by thick forests. It was drenched in the brilliant, unearthly glare of the glowing coma

that completely surrounded it.

At one point upon this small green world, there was a star-shaped white city. And they were being dragged straight down toward that city, whose alabaster domes and towers and streets rushed up toward them with fearful speed.

Captain Future, nerving himself for the inevitable crash that meant annihilation, felt a sudden deceleration of their flashing fall. So sharp and swift was that slowdown that even through the cushioning stasis of force which protected them, they felt again a blurring of their senses.

"They don't want us to crash!" choked Curt. "Whoever's operating that magnetic beam wants us to land in one piece—"

"Chief, look at that!" Otho yelled, pointing unsteadily down.

In the fiercely flaring light of the coma, the strange white comet-city lay close beneath their falling ship. Curt glimpsed a round court of spaceport size near the center of the ivory metropolis.

It was toward that court that the ship was falling. The court was several thousand feet in diameter, ringed by white towers crowned with massive copper electrodes. At the center of the round court was a circular, silvery disk five hundred feet across. Around the disk rested scores of spaceships of familiar appearance.

"That disk is the magnet that's pulling us down!" Curt deduced. "I see people down there—"

"Here comes the crash!" Grag shouted.

[Turn page]



NO FINER DRINK ON ANY JOB





It was not really a crash, their impact against the silvery magnet-disk. It was a jarring contact that shook them violently. But so greatly had their speed been decelerated in the last moments that the ship was not shattered.

An instant after they came to rest, Curt and Otho were picking themselves up. Grag and the Brain were pinned helplessly now on the floor.

"Help me get loose, Chief!" the robot bellowed. "That cursed magnetic force is holding me—"

He was suddenly interrupted by a sound of hammering and prying outside the *Comet's* airlock door.

"They're forcing into the ship, whoever they are!" Otho cried. His slant green eyes flared. "We've got a fight on our hands. These cursed comet pirates can't kidnap us like this!"

Curt and Otho jumped to pick up their proton pistols. But the weapons were pinned against the floor by the powerful magnetism beneath.

The airlock of the ship burst open with a crash and a half dozen men charged into the cabin.

"Holy sun-imps!" screeched Otho. "They're devils of the comet!"

**E**VEN Captain Future was for a moment petrified by stupefaction. These comet men who had entered did indeed seem utterly unearthly.

They were tall, fair-haired fellows who wore sleeveless shirts and shorts of silvery cloth. They also wore long swords at their belts, and two of them carried gunlike weapons with electrodes instead of barrels.

But these men *glowed* with dazzling light! From every inch of their bodies, from their hair, their faces, their arms and legs streamed a halo of brilliance that was like the corona of the awful coma itself.

"They're men, even though they do shine with light!" Curt cried. "Clear them out of the ship! If we can wreck that magnet—"

He was plunging forward as he spoke, his fists flying toward the weird, shining invaders. Then as his fist hit one of the glowing comet men, Curt Newton felt a paralyzing electric

shock along his arm.

His body stiffened in agony. He realized it was not merely light that glowed from these shining men, but electric force. These were electrically charged human beings! The body of each was invested with an electric potential that should have been enough to kill them.

"Get back—don't touch them!" Curt yelled a warning to Otho.

As he shouted, one of the shining electric men extended a hand and touched Curt's head. The full electric shock stabbed to Captain Future's brain, and he was plunged into unconsciousness.

## CHAPTER IV

### *The Cometae*



**CURT NEWTON'S** returning consciousness made him aware, first of all, of a strange, tingling sensation through his whole body. He felt as though he were lying beneath a super-powerful gener-

ator that was flooding every fiber of his being with electric force.

"He is coming around now, Grag," a familiar, metallic voice was rasping. "So stop your worrying."

Curt forced his eyes open. Grag and Otho and the Brain were hovering anxiously over him. The pets, Oog and Eek, cowered close by.

He lay on the floor of a small, cell-like room of white synthestone. There was a single heavy metal door, and a high, tiny window through which flooded a brilliant white light.

"Simon, what happened in the ship after I passed out?" Curt cried.

"I know what happened to *me*!" Otho burst out furiously. "One of those cursed shining men grabbed me the same as you, and I felt a shock that knocked me silly. I woke up here just a few minutes ago."

"And we couldn't help you," Grag boomed angrily. "Simon and I were



pinned against the ship's floor by that devilish magnetism from beneath."

"That is the truth, lad," the Brain told Curt. "After stunning you and Otho, the shining men secured Grag and me with chains. Then they turned off the magnetism outside, and dragged all four of us, even the two pets, to this prison."

"Did you see anything of Joan Randall as we were brought here?" Captain Future demanded anxiously.

"No, lad," murmured the Brain. "She may be imprisoned like us somewhere in this cursed city."

Curt strode with nervous quickness to the window. He drew himself up to it and stared out at the amazing city.

Graceful alabaster buildings of white synthestone, crowned by bubblelike domes and slender towers, rose in his field of vision. He was looking across the great central plaza of the magnet-disk. He could make out his own ship and other captured ships parked out there. On the other side of the plaza bulked a large white palace with one huge, looming dome.

Curt saw that in the white streets and green gardens moved many of the natives of this comet world, afoot and in six-wheeled power vehicles. They were all fair-haired folk, beautiful women, stalwart men. And all of them glowed with that dazzling, uncanny radiance of electric force. They seemed like angels of light inhabiting some strange celestial metropolis.

Down upon the alabaster city poured a flood of white brilliance from the sky. For the sky of this comet world was the flaring aura of the comet's nucleus. Completely enclosing this hidden world, this nebulous coma arched across the heavens like a firmament of scintillating white fire.

"Who'd have dreamed that all this existed inside Halley's comet?" muttered Otho, peering out with awe from over Curt's shoulder.

Curt's gray eyes narrowed.

"These comet folk are enemies of our System. They must be, or they wouldn't have devised that great electro-magnet which sucks distant ships in here by means of its beam."

"But what are these people?" Grag demanded puzzledly. "They shine just as though they were highly charged with electricity."

"By all the imps of Uranus!" Otho swore. "If you'd have touched one of them, you'd know that they really are electrically charged!"

Curt Newton nodded quickly.

"There's no doubt about it. All these people possess physically an electric charge that should destroy them—but doesn't. Simon, what do you make of it?"

"It is strange," muttered the Brain. "Yet life is electrical in nature. Even back in the twentieth century, Crile showed that the living cells of a body are tiny batteries which produce the electrical current we call life."

"Theoretically, all life may be electrical. But nobody ever saw electric people like these before," objected Otho. "And why did they drag our ship in here? What are they going to do with us?"

"More important, what have they done with Joan and Ezra?" Curt interrupted. His eyes flashed. "If they've harmed her—"

"I hear a tapping in the wall," Grag suddenly announced.

**T**HEY listened. But they heard nothing for a moment. Then footsteps outside their cell door became audible.

"That must be what you heard," muttered Otho. "Our keepers coming."

A little panel in the bottom of the locked door was suddenly opened, and something was pushed through. Then the opening was closed.

Their captors had left them two things—a bowl of synthetic-looking mush obviously intended as their rations, and a book. The book was a queer one. Its leaves were of thin, silvery metal. Upon them were pictures of objects and actions, and under each picture an unfamiliar word.

"Why, it's an elementary textbook of their language," Curt said puzzledly. "Maybe they're not really hostile to us at all."



"Maybe that shock they gave me was all in fun," Otho retorted bitterly.

"I hear that tapping in the wall again," Grag interrupted.

"That tapping is inside your skull, bucket-head," Otho told the robot impatiently. "Your mechanical brain has stripped a gear, probably."

Grag, always sensitive to mention of his mechanical nature, flared up.

"Why, you miserable little mess of chemicals—"

"Shut up!" Captain Future ordered them sharply. "I hear that tapping, too. It's an interplanetary code. Listen!"

The sound came faint from one wall of their cell.

"SQ?" it spelled out in the System's universal code.

"SQ—who's there?" Curt translated. His eyes lit. "There are other prisoners in here with us. Maybe it's Joan!"

Hastily he rapped in answer, stating his identity and finishing with the same inquiring signal.

The answer came quickly.

"Are you new prisoners really the famous Futuremen? I am Tiko Thrin, a scientist of the Syrtis Laboratories of Mars. I'm sorry that you are also captives of the Cometae.

"The Cometae? Is that what you call these comet folk?" asked Curt.

"It is what they call themselves," tapped Tiko Thrin. "I have learned their language and many facts about them, for I have been here ever since the space-liner on which I was traveling was dragged into the comet."

"Have you any knowledge of other prisoners here?" Curt rapped anxiously. "Especially Marshal Ezra Gurney and a girl, Joan Randall."

"Both of them are here in this city of Mloon," came the quick reply. "I heard them brought in, many days ago. Ezra Gurney is still a prisoner in this place. I have talked with him many times in code. Prisoners in the other cells relay our signals from cell to cell."

"Ask him if he and Joan are all right," Curt directed quickly.

He waited with fast-beating heart for the answer, feeling a new hope.

But when Tiko Thrin's report came, it brought dismaying information.

"Ezra is overjoyed that you Futuremen are here. He says he is all right but is worried about the girl. She is not here in prison, he says, but is somewhere in the city."

"Ask him what happened to her," Captain Future bade the Martian anxiously.

Again minutes dragged by before the delayed answer came.

"He says that he and Joan were taken before the rulers of the Cometae, King Thoryx and Queen Lulain. They were asked to join the Cometae. Ezra refused and was brought back here. But the girl was not brought back."

CURT'S anxiety increased. Tiko Thrin tapped on.

All prisoners brought here are first given a chance to learn the language and then are asked to join the Cometae. Those who refuse are brought back here, as I was. We are kept locked up until the solitary confinement makes us change our minds. Many prisoners have weakened and surrendered. Perhaps the girl was among them."

"If they're hostile to the System, Joan wouldn't join them under any circumstances!" Curt tapped back. "She may be trying to deceive them. Tell me, what are these Cometae planning that they need recruits?"

"I do not know," came Tiko Thrin's answer. "It is obvious that the Cometae are preparing some important venture, but I have no idea what it is. They are only obeying the orders of the Allus in what they do."

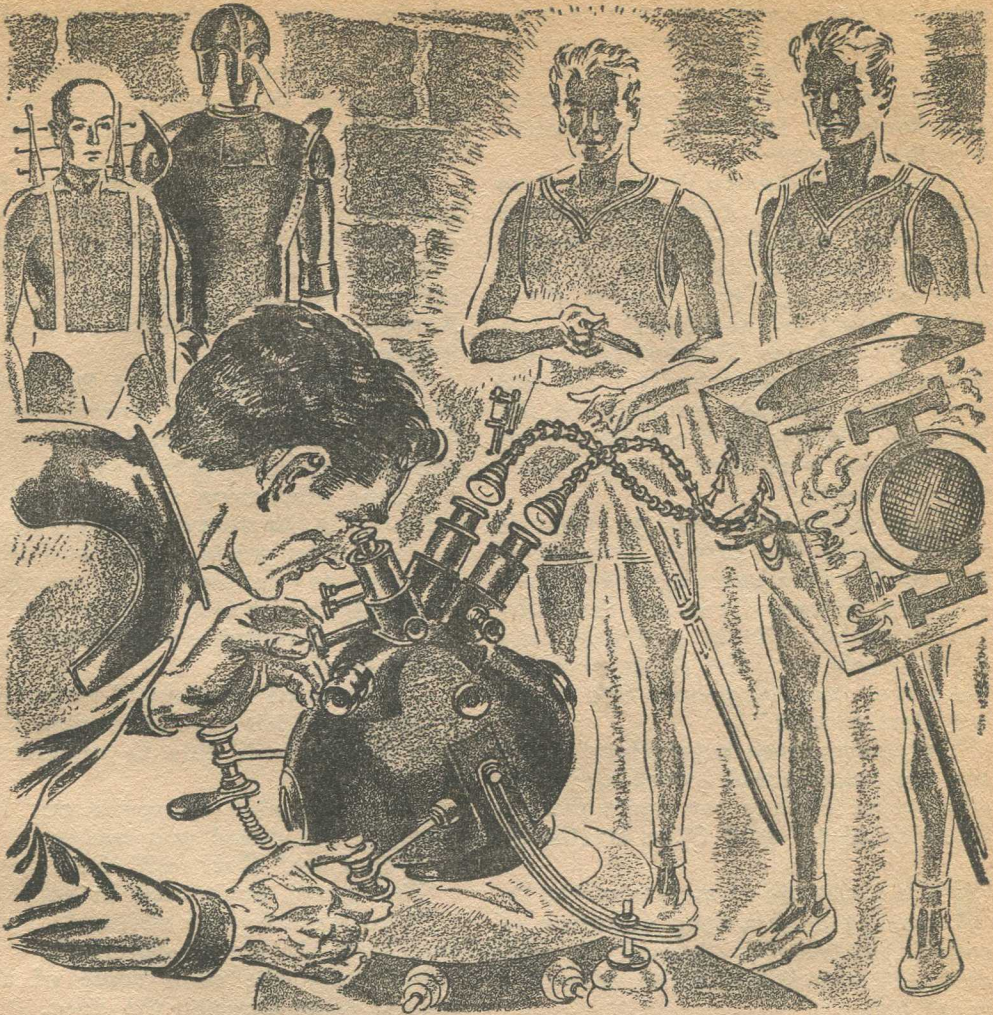
"The Allus? Who are they?"

"That, too, I don't know," the Martian replied. "I only know that the Allus are the real masters of this strange comet-world, and that these Cometae regard them with a respect and awe verging on dread."

"Are the Allus men? What do they look like?" Curt demanded.

"None of us prisoners has ever seen any Allus," Tiko Thrin tapped back. "The Allus never come to this city of the Cometae, but inhabit some mysterious place in the north. The





Captain Future and the Brain bent over the electron microscope. (Chap. VII)

Cometae speak always of the Allus as 'the dark masters' or as 'they from beyond the veil.'

"Devil take all these mysteries!" Otho exclaimed violently. "What I want to know is—how are we going to get out of here?"

When Curt tapped that question, Tiko Thrin's reply was flatly discouraging.

"I fear that even you Futuremen cannot escape this place. You will be confined until you learn the language of the Cometae. Then you will be taken to the rulers."

The Martian added a warning.

"Do not attempt any rash attack upon the Cometae. They have very powerful weapons, as well as the protective charge of electricity which

keeps their bodies immortal."

"Immortal?" Curt repeated. "You mean that these electric folk are deathless?"

"Yes. The Cometae cannot die unless they should leave this comet. Then they would perish for lack of the electric radiation that is their food."

"These Cometae live on electricity?" Curt tapped incredulously.

"They do," replied the Martian. "As you no doubt know, life itself is essentially electrical. We get our vital electricity from the chemical batteries of our body cells. When the cells wear out and can no longer produce the vital electric current, we age and die.

"But the cells of the Cometae have



somehow been so altered that they do not produce this all-important energy but simply receive it from the coma's electric radiation—the same radiation you doubtless feel tingling through your bodies now.

"Thus the Cometae do not need to eat or drink, for their cells absorb their vital energy from the coma's electric radiance. Because of that, they cannot age and cannot die—unless killed by accident."

"This is very interesting," the Brain declared absorbedly. He had Curt tap a further question to the Martian. "Were the Cometae always like this, or were they once ordinary human people?"

"I am sure, according to what is passed along the prison 'grapevine,' that until a few years ago they were ordinary humans," replied the Martian scientist. "It is said that only a few years ago, the Allus changed them from normal people into undying electric men."

"Whoever these mysterious Allus are, they must wield incredible scientific power if they can accomplish a feat like that!" said Otho startledly.

**T**HE exchange of messages was interrupted by a deep vibration of sound that traveled through the window. It sounded like the note of a great bell.

"It means that 'night' has come," tapped Tiko Thrin in answer to Curt's question. "There is no real night upon this world, of course, but the Cometae have a period of sleep which they all observe."

The activity in the city outside lessened. Soon but few of the shining electric folk were to be seen in the streets.

Next "morning" the small panel in the door of the Futuremen's cell was again opened and another ration of synthetic food thrust in to them. One of the Cometae guards spoke to them through the door, asking what seemed to be a question in his unfamiliar language. Receiving no answer, the guard went on.

For three "days" the guard followed the same procedure. Curt spent nearly all of the time in in-

tensive study of the Cometae language. He assumed from Tiko Thrin's information that when they could speak the language, they would be taken before the rulers of these strange comet folk.

Curt Newton now realized that this was their sole chance of getting out of their prison. The door was never unlocked. The Futuremen had been stripped of every tool and weapon. Simple as their prison was, it seemed inescapable.

Otho and Grag and the Brain also picked up a working knowledge of Cometae language from the textbook, though Simon Wright spent much of his time discussing with his fellow-scientist in the next cell the mysteries of this comet world. Grag and Otho, chafing at confinement, quarreled endlessly, while Oog slept peacefully and Eek gnawed contentedly on a metal bowl.

On the third "morning," when their guard asked his usual question, Captain Future was able to understand it.

"Are you able to speak our language?" the guard was saying.

"Yes, I am," Curt replied haltingly.

The guard exclaimed in surprise.

"You learned very swiftly! I will call Zarn, the prison captain."

Presently the deep voice of that official came through the door.

"So you can speak our tongue already?"

"Yes, and we demand that your people give us an explanation for this enforced captivity," Captain Future retorted.

"You will receive your answer from King Thoryx," replied Zarn. "But I cannot take you to him, for I have not the authority. I will notify Khinkir, captain of the king's guard."

Later that day the door of the Futuremen's cell was unexpectedly opened. Two officers of the Cometae and a half-dozen soldiers stood outside.

All of the shining electric men of this guard wore swords at their belts. And three of them carried alertly the gunlike weapons that had copper electrodes instead of barrels. Zarn, the prison captain, was a massive,



stocky, rough-looking individual. Khinkir, captain of the king's guard, looked younger and his silver-cloth garments were more ornate.

"Let me advise you," Khinkir immediately warned Captain Future, "that these weapons project a concentrated electric blast that can destroy you in a split second, should you attempt any rash act. Now come with me."

The other three Futuremen moved forward with Curt Newton, but Khinkir hastily warned them back.

"Not you! Only this man is to come."

"Why can't my comrades come with me?" Curt demanded.

"They are not human," replied Khinkir, glancing somewhat nervously at the strange trio of robot and android and Brain. "We do not know what powers they may possess, and the king ordered them to be kept here."

**O**THO showed the rage he felt at this contretemps. Otho had secretly been nursing a hare-brained plan of attacking the Cometæ ruler and holding him as a hostage, though the android had been careful not to tell Curt. Now the plan was ruined, and Otho boiled with anger.

"You do well to dread our powers!" he told the captain of the guards menacingly. "If you keep us imprisoned here, you will feel the weight of those powers! Why, my metal comrade here could tear down this place if he so desired!"

Grag, somewhat amazed at this assertion, nevertheless backed it up with an imposing show of ferocity. He beat clangingly on his metal breast.

"That's right," he growled in his deep, booming voice. "I could tear this place up like it was made of paper."

"And the Brain yonder," Otho went on with his threats, "has scientific powers beyond your dreams—powers greater even than those of the Allus."

"Shut up, you idiot!" hissed Curt to Otho. "Let me handle this."

Zarn, the prison captain, had shrunk back a little from the Futuremen and so had the Cometæ soldiers. But Khinkir now answered angrily.

"No individual has powers comparable to those of the mighty ones from beyond the veil! You utter a blasphemy against the Allus!"

He turned to the prison captain.

"Set guards outside this door from now on, Zarn. These creatures are dangerous!"

Curt Newton inwardly cursed the android's foolish threats as he was conducted down the corridor. The passage ended in a guard room full of Cometæ soldiery. Curt was led out of it into the open air. He blinked, half-blinded by the Coma's brilliant sky. Its electric force tingled through him strongly. Khinkir and the guards kept their weapons trained upon him alertly as they conducted him around the plaza to the looming white palace.

The high-arched white halls of the palace were magnificent, their alabaster walls decorated by frescoes of silver. They passed into a large, circular throne room whose ceiling was the curving white dome far overhead. Facing Captain Future was a sunburst throne, a wide benchlike chair of solid silver backed by a golden disk.

Upon it sat a man and a woman of the Cometæ, two richly dressed, radiant figures who were listening now to an older man.

"So that's King Thoryx and Queen Lulain," Curt thought, as he was led toward the rulers. He glanced swiftly around. "I don't see any of the mysterious Allus."

Around the big throne room were knots of the Cometæ nobility, handsome men and beautiful women, whose glowing electrical radiance of body deepened their strangely angelic look. But their faces were not those of angels! Curt read in many of those faces a shadowy oppression, a dim, haunting dread.

Then Captain Future stiffened as he noticed one of the Cometæ women. In her scanty silver-cloth garment, she was a figure of shining, unearthly beauty, her slim white body brilliant with glowing electric energy. But she was not fair-haired, as all the other Cometæ. Her hair was dark.

Curt Newton felt a staggering shock. He could not believe the terrible thing his eyes told him.



"It's impossible!" he muttered hoarsely.

Then as he came closer to the girl, he saw that it was true. This girl of the Cometae, this weirdly shining electric figure, was none other than Joan Randall!

## CHAPTER V

### *Shadow of the Allus*



IN the prison cell, after Captain Future had been taken away and the door had been re-locked, the Brain faced Otho condemningly.

Simon Wright never gave way to anger. The cold, intellectual mind

of the Brain abhorred useless emotion. But for that very reason, his rebuke was the more stinging.

"You have committed a rash piece of folly," he told Otho severely. "Your empty boasts have convinced the Cometae captains that we are dangerous. Now we shall be guarded even more closely."

"I lost my temper," Otho admitted sulkily. "Anyway, what difference does it make? We couldn't get out, anyway."

Presently they heard footsteps re-approaching their cell. But to the amazement of all three Futuremen, the door of the cell was unlocked. Zarn, the prison captain, stepped inside.

Zarn held one of the electrode-barreled weapons ready for use. But the Cometae captain stood eying his charges for a moment in silence. His stocky, shining figure had an attitude of indecision, and there was an expression of mingled doubt and hope upon his massive face. Finally he spoke to the Brain.

"Is it true, what your comrade said, that you are master of a science greater than that of the Allus?"

Simon answered cautiously.

"My comrades and I possess certain scientific powers, yes. I do not know whether they are greater than those of

the Allus, for I do not know anything about the Allus or their methods."

Zarn came a little closer and thrust out his hand. That hand, glowing, as all his body with electric energy, was trembling a little.

"You see that I am now an electric creature, as are all my people," Zarn said hoarsely. "It was the science of the Allus that made me like this. Could you undo what they have done?"

"You mean, could I change you back into a normal, non-electric man?" the Brain asked surprisedly.

Zarn nodded anxiously, his eyes clinging to the weird face of the Brain.

"Could you?" he repeated.

Simon sensed that much might depend upon his answer. He could not yet fathom all that was in the Cometae captain's mind, but it was evident that his reply was of supreme importance to Zarn.

The Brain thought rapidly before he spoke.

"It should be possible," he said carefully, "to bring you back to normal by reversing whatever deep alteration has been made in your bodily cells. Our red-haired leader and I would need to study your body first, before we could say definitely."

A wild, haggard hope showed in Zarn's eyes. The electric man trembled with visible emotion. His free fist clenched.

"If you could do that!" he whispered hoarsely. "If you could free my people and me from this horrible death-in-life and make us real men and women again!"

"You mean that you Cometae don't like being electric men?" Otho demanded incredulously.

"Like it?" repeated Zarn. He laughed bitterly. "Stranger, would you willingly suffer such a joyless mockery of existence? Once we were real men and women. Once we grew up through happy childhood to maturity, loved and had children of our own, grew peacefully old and passed to the quiet rest of death.

"But now!" His voice was thick with passion. "For us there is no escape, unless we so sicken of this life that we put violent end to ourselves!"



The somber picture Zarn painted communicated itself to his listeners.

"I remember now that I noticed no children at all in this city," the Brain recalled. "I should have known that this electrification of your bodies would make your whole race sterile."

**O**THO asked Zarn a blunt question. "If your people don't like this electric existence, why did you let yourselves be changed so?"

"My people had no voice in the matter!" Zarn answered violently. "It was done to us without our consent. The only ones who wanted this change were the tyrants who rule us—Thoryx and Lulain, and that devil's wizard, old Querdel. It was they who plotted this thing with the Allus."

"Who are the Allus, really?" the Brain asked him.

Dread crept like a chilling shadow into Zarn's eyes.

"None of us Cometae except our rulers know much of the Allus. But we do know that they are in no way human, having unguessably alien forms and powers. And we know that they do not belong to this cosmos at all, but came from outside it."

"From outside our cosmos?" gasped Otho.

"I tell only what I have heard," Zarn answered. "I have never seen the Allus myself—though it was in their black citadel in the north, that I and all the rest of my people were changed into this terrible electric state."

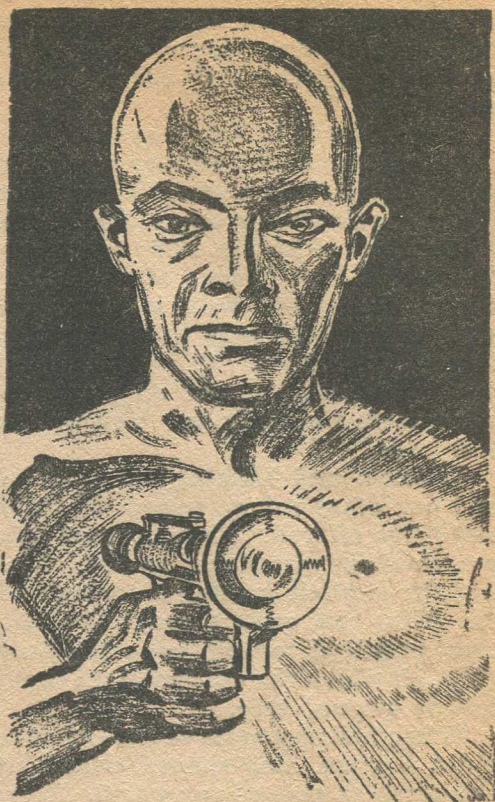
"You're talking in riddles!" Otho exclaimed. "If you were in the Allus' citadel, if it was they who changed you, you must have seen them!"

"No, none of our people saw them or knew how it was that they changed us," Zarn repeated. "I know it sounds incredible, but it is so."

"Let him tell it in his own way, Otho," ordered the Brain.

Zarn continued earnestly.

"We Cometae have lived long upon this comet world, which our pioneering ancestors reached long ago by coming in their ships through a chance rift in the coma. We were then a quite ordinary human race, and lived here as such for many ages.



OTHO

"Our government slipped into the hands of a small class of nobles which centered around the hereditary king. Yet in spite of the exploitation by this ruling class, our life was bearable.

"Then, as though in a bad dream, the shadow of the Allus fell upon us. It came about through Querdel, an elderly noble who is one of King Thoryx's councillors. Querdel is somewhat of a scientist, though our science may be crude and primitive compared to yours.

"Somehow, in his devilish researches, old Querdel first got into communication with beings inhabiting a weird, alien universe that lies in the extra-dimensional gulf outside our ordinary cosmos.

"These beings called themselves the Allus. They had, it seems, been trying for a long time to communicate with someone in our universe. For the Allus desired to enter our cosmos. They wanted to open a door into our world from the black extra-cosmic abysses in which they dwelt. And the door could not be opened from their



side alone, but must be unlocked from both sides. Hence their need for someone to cooperate with them on this side."

Anger blazed in Zarn's eyes.

"They found the one they needed in old Querdel," he said. "They made alluring promises to that old devil and to Thoryx and Lulain. They told them, 'We Allus have powers of which you do not dream, and will richly reward you—if you will help us open a way into your cosmos. We will reward you by making you and all your people ageless and undying. You will be like gods.'"

"Thoryx and Lulain, and Querdel and our other rulers, seized the bribe the Allus offered. They coveted that promised immortality. And so, obeying the explicit mental commands of the Allus that came through the veil, they prepared to help open the door through which the dark masters could invade our universe.

"They had us people of the Cometae build a great, ring-shaped citadel at the northern pole of our world. They had us build also certain strange mechanisms and apparatus, the purpose of which was totally unknown to any one of us. Only the Allus, who transmitted their instructions by mental messages through the veil, understood the nature of the instruments we constructed."

**Z**ARN'S eyes blazed in reminiscence.

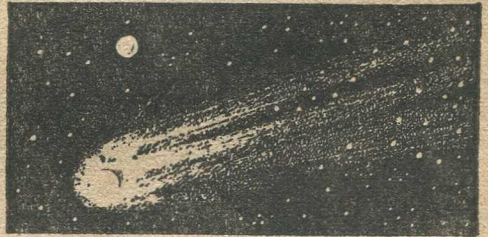
"Then, alone in that northern citadel, Thoryx and old Querdel operated the strange machines at the bidding of the dark masters. They unlocked the door into the extra-dimensional abysses that lie outside our cosmos. And through that door, the Allus somehow came into our universe, and made that citadel their home. And they kept their promise of making Thoryx and old Querdel immortal.

"For when Thoryx and the old wizard returned to us from the citadel, they had been made into shining electric men, such as you now see. They told us then that the Allus had done that to them, that the Allus would give us all this wonderful gift of electric immortality. Every one of our peo-

ple of the Cometae was to achieve deathlessness.

"Some of my people, especially the nobles of the ruling class, were won over by this prospect. But the great majority of us were not. Even though it meant deferring death and age indefinitely, we shrank from becoming inhuman electric men such as Thoryx and Querdel. We did not wish to lose our humanity. And we were afraid of these dark, mysterious Allus from the unguessable outside, and suspicious of their purposes.

"But we ordinary folks had no choice! Thoryx and the nobles were resolved upon making us deathless. For the Allus had promised our rulers that then they would reap great pow-



ers and eventually sway over many peoples. They of the nobles went first, one group after another, to the citadel of the Allus in the north—to return to us as electric men and women.

"Then we of the soldiery and the people were ordered to go, group by group. We went north to that mysterious citadel which we ourselves had built for the dark masters. But before ever we entered it, a pall came upon our minds. The Allus employed that mental darkness so that none of us might learn their secrets. When the cloud lifted from our minds, we were again outside the citadel—and had been made into electric men and women, such as you now see!"

Otho uttered a low exclamation.

"They had you all in some kind of anesthesia as they altered you!" he declared.

"It is more probable," the Brain said thoughtfully, "that the Allus used an artificially induced amnesia on their subjects. These so-called dark masters must be great wielders of mental force, indeed."

Zarn shook his massive head.

"I do not know how it was done. Perhaps Thoryx and Querdel know.



They are the only Cometae who are permitted to go freely to and from the citadel of the Allus."

Zarn concluded his story somberly.

"But we know now that the Allus are alien and evil, that they are planning something dark and wicked," he summarized. "It was they who directed Thoryx and Querdel and our other rulers to construct the great electromagnet that sucks spaceships into the comet. That electromagnet is operated by some of Querdel's men, through a special detector apparatus that can spot any ship within millions of miles."

"Why do the Allus want ships and men from the outside brought in here as captives?" the Brain asked keenly.

The Cometae prison captain shook his head.

"I don't know. None of us knows just what their unfathomable purposes are. But we are certain some involved and sinister scheme is afoot."

**T**HE Futuremen glanced at each other. It was the Brain who spoke the thought that was in all their minds.

"This is no mere menace within this comet, but a dark, threatening force from outside our cosmos that we've run into," muttered Simon Wright. "I'd give a lot to know what these Allus are like—and what they plan."

The Brain thought hard.

"I feel certain, Zarn, that Curtis Newton and I can devise a way of re-transforming you people when we have thoroughly studied the problem," he told the Cometae captain. "But until then, I cannot promise. We must have a chance to investigate your bodies with certain instruments."

"I will bring secretly everything you need, next sleep-period," Zarn promised excitedly. "And I will contact my friends, also."

The Brain quickly named a list of things he would require from the Futuremen's confiscated spaceship.

Suddenly the prison captain started as they heard a sound of approaching footsteps in the corridor.

"Someone is coming!" Zarn exclaimed fearfully. "If I am caught in here with you, our whole plan is ruined!"

## CHAPTER VI

### *The Throne Room*



**PETRIFIED** by a freezing horror, Curt Newton stood amid his guards in the throne room of the Cometae, staring with wild eyes at Joan Randall. He was stunned to his very soul, unable for the moment to believe

what he saw. He had found the girl he loved, the girl whose danger had brought him on this perilous quest into the comet world. He had found her—and she was one of the Cometae!

Joan had never looked so beautiful. Her soft, dark hair and lovely face, her lithe, utterly feminine figure so completely revealed by the scanty silver-cloth garment were brilliantly enhanced by the glow of inherent electric force, scintillating from every inch of her body and investing her with its shining halo.

But to Captain Future, that dazzling aura of living light was a horror beyond description. He forgot his guards and stepped blindly and numbly forward, all the agony of his love and despair showing in his bloodless face.

"Joan!" he exclaimed hoarsely. "My God, what have these devils done to you!"

"Curt, stay back!" the girl cried in sharp alarm.

It was too late. In the tumult of emotions that shook him, Curt Newton had reached hungry arms toward her. His hand barely grazed her shining shoulder—and he recoiled, his whole arm paralyzed by electric shock.

"Don't try to touch me, Curt! You can't!" Joan Randall was telling him, her eyes full of apprehension.

The voice of Khinkir, captain of the Cometae guards, snarled from behind.

"King Thoryx awaits you, prisoner. Move on!"

Captain Future barely heard him.

"Joan, I'll kill these fiends for doing a thing like this to you!" he raged.



"I'll tear this devil's city of theirs to fragments!"

"But Curt, I *wanted* to be changed like this!" Joan exclaimed. "I wanted to become one of the Cometæ."

He had thought he could receive no greater shock, but her words left him mentally gasping, eying her in incredulous disbelief.

"Curt, the Cometæ are not fiends," Joan was continuing earnestly. "They are a fine and friendly folk, who are allied to a wonderful race of superhuman beings called the Allus. The Allus gave these people immortality, and they freely offered me the same priceless boon.

"Think of it, Curt—I'm practically immortal! I'll never grow old and ugly, I can live on and on and on! Is it any wonder that I accepted this wonderful thing they offered? And if you are allowed to join them, Curt, we two could live here forever!"

Khinkir's snarl came sharply then to Curt's shocked ears.

"Unless you move on, prisoner, you will be blasted where you stand," said Khinkir sharply.

"Please go, Curt. The king is waiting," Joan said in distress. "And try to conquer this hostility of yours toward the Cometæ. I want you to see their greatness, and to join them as I have done."

She drew back into the group of Cometæ nobles in the background, and Curt lost sight of her. Khinkir and his subordinate guards had raised their electrode-weapons toward him, with grim purpose.

Curt Newton stumbled along with them, on across the great open throne room.

The scene before him, the brilliant throne room and the shining figures of the Cometæ nobles, was a somber blur to his eyes. It was difficult for him to breathe, as though iron bands had been clamped around his chest.

Dimly he heard a voice through the confused throbbing of his thoughts. Then came the hissing, furious whisper of Khinkir who was standing beside him.

"The king is speaking to you, prisoner!"

CURT'S vision cleared. He was standing with his guards in front of the sunburst throne. He looked up at the man and woman who sat on the benchlike silver chair.

Thoryx, hereditary king of the Cometæ, was handsome as all his fair-haired race, his youthful figure invested by that alien halo of electric force that gave them all such an incongruously angelic appearance. But Curt read weakness in the smooth and effeminate features of the king, and in his suspiciously narrowed eyes.

There was no weakness in the girl beside him, the queen Lulain. Her blond beauty, flaming with the electric glow, was brazenly revealed by her brief, richly jewelled silver garments. She sat with languorous, feline grace, looking down with insolently appraising eyes at Captain Future's tall, red-haired figure.

"You do not answer me, stranger!" Thoryx was saying. The king glanced petulantly at Khinkir. "I thought you said he had learned to speak our language."

Curt answered for himself, in the Cometæ tongue.

"I have learned it," he said, a harsh edge in his voice.

"Do not take that tone with me, stranger!" flared the Cometæ king. "You are a prisoner here. If I but say the word, you will be dead before your heart beats twice."

The Cometæ noble who hovered at Thoryx' side hastily bent toward the angry king. Curt now noticed this councillor for the first time. The shining halo of his electric vitality could not disguise the man's advanced age. His elderly figure was slightly stooped, his hair thin and gray, his face a wrinkled mask of cunning with crafty, watchful eyes.

"The stranger does not know our ways, sire," he was telling the king soothingly. "It would not be wise to order his destruction before we have learned more about him and his strange companions."

"Very well, Querdel," Thoryx told the old noble fretfully. "But let him not look at me again so threateningly. I am master on this world—under the Great Ones, of course."



He added the last words hastily, with a nervous, involuntary glance around the throne room. Curt surmised the reference was to the Allus.

Lulain looked half scornfully at her consort.

"Are we to spend all day in examination of this prisoner?" she inquired.

Thoryx addressed himself to Captain Future.

"Why did you and your companions approach the orbit of this comet?"

Captain Future had got a grip upon his raging emotions by now. Shaken as he was by the terrible surprise of his encounter with Joan, he still retained enough presence of mind to realize the wisdom of temporizing. So he answered the question.

"We did not approach the comet of our own free will. You dragged our ship in here with your magnet-beam, as you have kidnaped many other ships of our worlds."

"Yes," old Querdel agreed craftily. "But those other ships were all seeking to avoid the comet, while you were boldly approaching it. *Why* were you approaching it?"

Captain Future saw no reason for concealing the truth.

"We were searching for those other ships," he retorted. "Now we find that it is you Cometae who have dragged them in here. What could be your reason? The people of the planetary worlds have never harmed your race."

"*You* are not questioning us, prisoner!" flared Thoryx angrily. "It is an order of the Great Ones that we seize as many ships as possible. Who are you to dispute the command of the dark masters?"

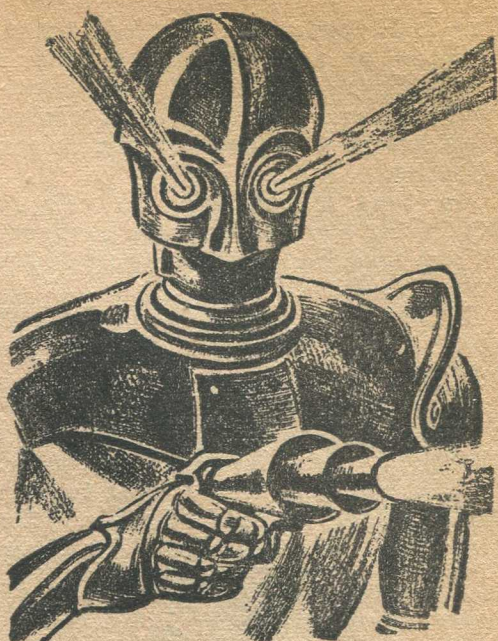
So, Curt thought swiftly, it was the mysterious Allus themselves who were behind the capture of the ships.

**Q**UERDEL was asking him another question.

"Who are the three strange beings who are your comrades? They are not human."

"No, they are not human," Curt answered carefully. "But they are more than human in many respects."

"I thought as much," muttered the old councillor. His cunning eyes narrowed. "I think that you are danger-



GRAG

ous, stranger."

Curt perceived that the outlandish appearance of the Futuermen was what had made the Cometae take a deeper interest in him than in ordinary prisoners. He sensed doubt and apprehension in the attitude of Thoryx.

"We had better destroy all four of them, Querdel," declared the king uneasily.

The crafty old councillor, who was obviously the brain behind the Cometae throne, demurred.

"We should report to the Great Ones first, Your Highness. They told us to enlist into the Cometae all captives willing to join us. But these captives are different."

Thoryx nodded nervously.

"Communicate with the Great Ones in the usual way, Querdel. Khinkir, return this insolent prisoner to his cell."

Captain Future turned without reluctance to leave the throne room, even though he felt he had learned nothing concrete about the Allus and their purposes. He was hoping desperately to get another word with Joan on the way out.

But his hopes were dashed. For Joan Randall was no longer to be seen in the brilliant throng of Cometae.



She had apparently withdrawn. Crushed by a heavy burden of fear and anxiety for her sake, Curt unseeing accompanied his alert guards back across the plaza to the prison building.

As they approached the cell in which the Futuremen were confined, Prison Captain Zarn hastily made his exit. He showed confusion.

"What were you doing in the cell with the prisoners?" Khinkir demanded.

"The three strange ones were fighting among themselves. I went in to stop them," Zarn explained nervously.

"It might have been a trick to gain their escape," snapped Khinkir. "Do not enter their cell again, for these



four prisoners are dangerous. And where are the guards I ordered you to post at this door?"

"I was just going to get them," Zarn answered quickly.

When Curt entered the cell, the Futuremen came toward him at once. Otho asked the question they all had foremost in their minds.

"Did you find out anything about Joan?"

Curt Newton nodded heavily.

"I saw her. She is one of the Cometæ now."

They stared incredulously. Then Otho began to rave.

"The devils! They forced her to become an electric monstrosity like themselves!"

"She said she became one of them by her own free will," Curt told them miserably.

But the Brain asked a shrewd question.

"When you and she talked there—did you converse in English?"

"Of course," Curt nodded.

"Then," pointed out the Brain,

"why did she have to pretend to you at all? Your Cometæ guards couldn't understand your conversation."

Fingers of doubt clutched sickeningly at Curt's brain, poisoning his thoughts. With a violent effort he broke their grasp.

"This isn't a time to be doubting Joan, but to be helping her!" he exclaimed. "We've got to find a way to bring her out of that horrible electric existence!"

"Yes, lad, everything depends on our finding such a way," the Brain told him soothingly.

Simon went on to relate what Zarn had said.

"The Cometæ people will revolt against their rulers," he concluded, "if they can only be sure that we can re-transform them afterward to normal men and women."

**C**APTAIN FUTURE paced agitatedly to and fro.

"But how can we find the answer to that scientific secret in sufficient time?" he asked desperately.

"We shall not be wholly without instruments, if Zarn does not fail us," the Brain interposed. "He promised to try to bring certain apparatus from our ship, if it was possible 'tonight'."

"Then we may have a chance, though it's still a gamble," Curt muttered. "When will he be here?"

"Soon after the sleep-period begins, if he is successful," answered Simon. "I described for him the electrochemical apparatus I thought we'd need."

Grag snorted gloomily.

"Maybe these guards that Khinkir made him post outside our cell now will spoil the whole thing."

"Always cheerful and optimistic, that's Grag," Otho chimed in sarcastically. "Why don't you get a job haunting some dead planet?"

As they waited for "night," Curt's turmoil of spirit did not lessen. His feverish impatience was finally broken by the sound of steps down the corridor. The Futuremen listened tensely as the steps approached. Then they heard a low challenge from the guards posted outside their door, and the voice of Zarn replying.



## CHAPTER VII

*Desperate Research*

THE door opened and Zarn came in. The prison captain clutched a bundle of scientific apparatus in his arms, and his shining face showed an extreme nervous excitement. With him was another man of the

Cometae—a big, hulking, craggy-featured soldier who stared at the Futuremen.

"This is Aggar, a captain and one of my friends," Zarn introduced him quickly. "He is one of us Cometae who have long desired to revolt against our heartless rulers."

Zarn put down the bundle of apparatus.

"I think I got everything you described from your ship," he told the Brain. "It was not easy to do so unobserved. But I got in here safely with it, for I had taken care to post guards 'tonight' who are of our secret party."

"You have already spoken to your friends among the Cometae about a possible revolt?" Captain Future asked Zarn quickly.

The prison captain bobbed his head.

"We potential rebels have an undercover organization. I made contact with its heads, of whom Aggar is one. They long to rise against the tyrants, against Thoryx and that old devil Querdel. But they will not do so unless certain that success will make it possible for us to be normal men once more."

The hard-fisted Aggar spoke bluntly to Curt.

"Can you do that, stranger? Can you use those instruments to match the science of the Allus and undo what the Allus did to us?"

"I can't tell without some study," Captain Future answered honestly. "And my comrades and I would like the help of the man in the next cell—the Martian scientist Tiko Thrin.

Can you get him in here, Zarn, and also the man named Ezra Gurney?"

"Yes, I can do that," said Zarn, and hurriedly left the cell.

He was back in a few moments and with him came two men. One was an elderly little Martian, a small, withered creature with an incongruously big and bald red head, and weak eyes which peered through thick spectacles.

But it was the other man toward whom the Futuremen jumped with an exclamation of delight. This one was elderly, too, a wrinkled-faced Earthman with iron-gray hair and faded blue eyes, whose bleak depths now were sparkling with pleasure.

"Ezra Gurney!" Captain Future wrung the old Planet Patrol veteran's hand. "You old buzzard of space. If there's trouble anywhere in the System, you'll find it."

"Yes, an' I found plenty of it in this cursed comet, Cap'n Future," said Ezra earnestly in his drawling voice. "Did you find Joan?"

Curt's face darkened.

"Yes. She's become one of the Cometae."

Ezra uttered an incredulous oath.

"It's impossible! She'd never accept that Thoryx' offer to join them!"

"She did it only for some purpose we don't know," Curt declared stoutly. "I'm convinced of that."

Yet, even as he spoke, he had to force down that haunting doubt that had poisoned his thoughts ever since Joan had spoken to him so strangely.

Meantime Grag and Otho were slapping the old veteran on the back in high glee at the reunion. Even Oog and Eek, recognizing an old friend, had come trotting up eagerly from their corner.

Zarn intruded then. The face of the Cometae captain was anxious.

"We may be interrupted at any moment!" he warned. "Khinkir and other officers loyal to Thoryx often come snooping about this prison."

Curt rapidly explained to Tiko Thrin what they had in mind.

"You have been here, observing the Cometae, for some time," he told the old Martian scientist. "What do you think of the possibility of re-trans-



forming them?"

Tika Thrin wagged his head doubtfully.

"We can only try. It will not be easy. The science of the Allus may be far beyond our own."

**CAPTAIN FUTURE** addressed Zorn and Aggar, who were waiting tensely, while the Brain and Otho set up the compact electron microscope, ray probers and other delicate electric apparatus.

"We'll need a sample of your tissues," Curt said slowly to the two Cometae men. "It's the only way we can make a thorough study of the altered cells of your bodies."

The big Aggar calmly drew his dagger and poised it over the skin of his glowing forearm.

"Just tell me how much," he grunted.

Captain Future directed him. The big Cometae captain coolly cut a thin strip of skin from his forearm and placed it in the chamber of the electron microscope.

Curt and the Brain bent over the instrument. The apparatus was a compact adaptation of the old-fashioned electronic microscope, magnifying almost indefinitely by using magnetic action to focus rays of free electrons, instead of a lens to focus rays of light.

The strip of tissue still glowed with scintillating light under the microscope, although its luminescence seemed to be fading. Curt focused down until he was examining a single cell of that changing tissue. He and the Brain, and then Otho and Tiko Thrin, studied the enormously magnified cell.

As he straightened, Tiko Thrin shook his head.

"I'm afraid it's beyond me," he confessed. "The whole molecular pattern of the cell has been altered beyond recognition. I can't see how the Allus did it or how it can be undone."

"Curse it, the Allus must be gods or devils to accomplish a thing like this!" Otho swore.

The Brain was looking at Captain Future.

"Not only molecular change, but

also atomic, lad," said Simon.

Curt nodded his red head, frowning deeply.

"Yes. Some force has been utilized to break down each cell's molecules, not only into atoms but into sub-atomic particles—and then recast them in a wholly new pattern."

Captain Future was feeling a sensation he had never experienced before. This unthinkable tampering with the finest units of life was evidence of a science vast and alien beyond conception.

"Can you undo what was done to us, Captain Future?" Captain Zarn asked anxiously.

Curt knew that the hopes of a race hung upon his reply. That the fate of Joan Randall hung upon it, too. Yet he couldn't answer in an unqualified affirmative, much as he would have liked to do so.

"I feel certain," he said slowly, "that this process can be undone, that the molecular and atomic pattern of your cells can be recast to normal by the right force. But it will not be an easy thing to do!"

"You see," he explained, "the living cell is normally a tiny electric 'battery,' that by chemical action produces the electric energy which we call life. But the Allus have worked deep and subtle changes in your cells. They have recast their molecules and atoms so that now each cell forms a tiny 'transformer,' which simply receives its energy from the coma radiation which permeates everything here."

Zarn and Aggar seemed impressed by Curt's knowledge.

"Then you'll promise to change us all back to normal if our revolt succeeds?" they cried.

Captain Future took the plunge.

"I promise to restore you to normality—or to die trying!"

**AGGAR'S** massive face glowed with hope and resolution.

"Then we of the Cometae will rise!"

Curt seized the opportunity.

"How many of your people will revolt against Thoryx?" he asked quickly. "How soon can you organize and strike?"



"Nine-tenths of the Cometae hate our rulers," Aggar replied. "But not all of them will risk rebellion, at first. Our secret organization is what we must chiefly rely on. We number fully five thousand men."

"How many fighting men can Thoryx count on?" Otho demanded.

"About as many," Aggar admitted. "The regiments of the palace guard are loyal to him, because they are a favored class. The nobles, of course, will support Thoryx. So will some of the people, because of their superstitious regard for the Allus."

"What about weapons?" Curt asked him. "Can you secure enough of those electrode-weapons?"

Aggar laughed.

"They would be of no avail against Cometae. They simply project a powerful electric blast, and that wouldn't hurt one of us in the least. The things are used only to keep you captives under control."

"Then what the devil do you use for weapons against each other?" Otho exclaimed.

"Swords and daggers are all that can be used effectively on a Cometae," Zarn answered. "Only the soldiers are allowed to possess them."

"All us captives here can fight with you, if you can get swords of dielectric material for us," Curt told Zarn quickly. "You know we can't touch you Cometae, even with an ordinary

metal sword, without receiving a paralyzing electric shock."

"I can touch them!" said Grag loudly. To prove it, he laid his heavy metal hand upon Zarn's shoulder. "It's only inside me that I have steelite parts. The whole outside of my body is of dielectric metal, a non-conductor!"

"Good ol' Grag!" chuckled Ezra Gurney. "You won't need any sword."

"Yeah, for once your dumb metal carcass will come in handy," said Otho gibingly.

"How soon can you strike?" Curt was asking Aggar intently. "What is your plan?"

"The only possible plan," replied Aggar, "is to attack the palace, overcome Thoryx' guards in the first rush, and round up the tyrant and his spit-fire queen and the nobles in short order."

"Especially," put in Zarn anxiously, "it is necessary to grab that old wizard Querdel at once. It's said that he has a way of communicating with the Allus."

Captain Future saw again that chill shadow of dread creep into the eyes of the two Cometae captains at mention of the Allus. But Aggar forced the fear away.

"The Allus have never come out of their citadel in the north, and they won't now," the husky fighter said

[Turn page]

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emphatically. He turned to Captain Future. "We can be ready to strike by tomorrow 'night.' It's the 'night' of the Lightning Feast, and Thoryx and all the nobility will be gathered in the palace, ours for the taking."

The plan was quickly arranged. Aggar and Zarn were to mobilize the Cometae rebels around the plaza when the next 'night' came. Zarn would re-



lease the Futuremen and the other captives. At a given signal, they would join forces and attack the palace.

"One more thing!" said Curt urgently. "The Earthgirl who is now one of the Cometae—she must not be harmed under any circumstances."

"Agreed. Now let's get out of here," Zarn warned. "Everything would be ruined if we were discovered plotting together."

Tiko Thrin, the Martian, and Ezra Gurney were taken back to their own cells and the door of the Futuremen's cell was relocked.

**I**THO paced to and fro excitedly. "Action at last! Anything's better than rotting away in this cell."

The Brain looked at Curt.

"The plan is a precarious one, lad. Suppose the Allus should intervene with their mastery of mental force."

"That's exactly what I don't understand," Grag interposed puzzledly. "All this talk about mental force. What in the world is it?"

Captain Future explained.

"Thought is basically electrical, like life itself, Grag. When a man thinks or wills something, the synaptic pattern of his brain cells conducts to his nerves a definite electrical current, which energizes his physical body to obey that thought or will."

"Theoretically," Curt added, "it

should be possible for a man to 'broadcast' his electric thought or will-impulses, as electromagnetic vibrations that would impinge upon and seize control of another man's brain and body.

"That's what is meant by mental force. No man has ever possessed more than a fraction of this power. But it seems the Allus have mastered it."

The hours of the following day-period passed with dragging slowness. Tension built up with each passing hour. Captain Future labored under a growing nervous strain as "night" approached. He had never felt so tense at any time in the past, on the threshold of struggle.

"Night" came at last. There was no lessening of the coma's brilliant light from the window, but in the alabaster city outside the passing throngs of Cometae dwindled away. The sleep-period had come.

Curt, watching tautly from the window, saw more and more of the six-wheeled Cometae vehicles arriving at the great palace across the plaza. The nobility of the Cometae were streaming into the big building.

"They're coming for the Lightning Feast that Aggar mentioned," Curt muttered. "I wonder what kind of function it is, anyway."

"Sounds crazy, like everything else in this cursed comet," Grag snorted.

"Zarn should be here with the others by now, to release us," Captain Future said, biting his lip. "If he's too late—"

"I hear him coming now!" Otho exclaimed joyfully.

The tramp of feet was clearly audible.

In a moment their prison door was flung open.

To their surprise and consternation, it was Captain of the Guards Khinkir and a half-dozen of the palace sentries who stood there.

They carried electrode weapons and trained them uncompromisingly upon the Futuremen.

"You four strangers are to come with us," Khinkir snapped. "Sentence has been passed upon you. You are too dangerous, and are to die tonight."



## CHAPTER VIII

*The Lightning Feast*

TO Captain Future, the announcement was a thunderbolt that wrecked all their plans. He could not keep the sharp momentary dismay out of his face. And Khinkir saw it, and smiled thinly in triumph.

"You learn now what it means to defy the king and blaspheme the Great Ones, stranger," he rasped. "For the Great Ones, through the wise Querdel, have decreed that you four might be a danger, and that it is safer to destroy you at once."

His smile widened.

"But you will not die ingloriously, strangers. You are to die at the Lightning Feast. Your destruction will afford an enjoyable spectacle for our king and court."

Curt Newton desperately decided that since all was lost, he would perish fighting here and now. And Khinkir read that, too, in his face. The Cometæ captain recoiled and shouted a sharp order to his men, who brought their electrode weapons to bear on Captain Future's heart.

"Curt!" cried a clear silvery voice in anxious alarm.

Joan Randall had appeared in the corridor outside! A dazzling electric-glowing figure of beauty, her radiant face was taut with apprehension.

Khinkir had turned startledly at her cry. The guards, too, had glanced sideward. That moment was enough for Grag. The great robot's mighty metal arms reached out and seized the Cometæ captain!

"Kill them!" shrieked Khinkir. But his scream was choked off as Grag's arms crushed him.

With yells of alarm, the Cometæ soldiers triggered their strange weapons to loose crackling blasts of electric force at the Futuremen. But Joan had bravely flung herself against the guards, distracting them and spoiling

their aim. The blasts missed Curt Newton and Otho and Simon.

One of the electric blasts struck Joan's shining body. Mad with apprehension for her, Captain Future plunged in at the soldiers with whom she was struggling.

He touched one of those Cometæ guards—and was flung back half senseless by the paralyzing electric shock of contact. He fought to get to his feet, and was dimly aware of a tumult of shouting and running about him.

Curt's eyes began to clear, as the first effects of the shock passed. Staggering drunkenly, he found himself witnessing an amazing scene of conflict.

Zarn and Aggar had arrived! With them were a score of other Cometæ. All carried swords, and were hacking down the Cometæ guards who had come with Khinkir. Even as Curt stumbled forward, the last guard fell a mangled, radiant corpse.

Khinkir himself lay on the corridor floor, a crushed and broken thing. And big Grag was straightening grimly.

"I told you that I could touch them!" the robot boomed.

The Futuremen were all unhurt. But Curt stumbled toward Joan Randall.

"Joan, are you all right? That electric blast that hit you—"

"It couldn't hurt me," she breathed. "No electric force can harm a Cometæ, Curt."

Zarn was close beside Captain Future, speaking wildly.

"We've little time! The alarm will be given when Khinkir doesn't return to the palace!"

"Release Tiko Thrin and Ezra Gurney and all the other captives," Curt ordered. "You brought swords for us?"

"Yes, here they are," said Aggar, pointing to a bundle of long, gray, saberlike weapons. "We had them hastily forged of dielectric metal. You can use them, even against the Cometæ."

**J**OAN spoke now in a sobbing rush. "Curt, I was afraid I'd be too late! I came here as soon as I heard that your executions had been ordered,



though I didn't know what I could do—"

"Joan, tell me quickly," he interrupted. "You didn't join the Cometae because you really wanted to, did you?"

"Oh, no, Curt! It broke my heart to have to keep up that pretense when I met you yesterday in the throne room."

"But why did you keep it up with me?" he asked bewilderedly. "We were talking in our own English, which the Cometae couldn't understand."

"There were captives who had become Cometae, like myself, in the throne room," she said earnestly. "If they'd heard and betrayed me—"

"Of course. What a fool I was not to think of that!" Captain Future exclaimed. "But even so, I knew it wasn't the real you talking."

"Curt, I only pretended to join the Cometae," Joan cried. "I pretended to be allured by the prospect of immortality—but only because I thought it the only way in which I could learn the secret of this comet's mystery."

She came closer, her eyes wide and haunted as she looked up at him.

"Curt, there's a threat in this mysterious setup. A strange, unguessable threat to our Solar System from those Allus who came from outside our cosmos. It's not a *physical* menace, I feel certain of that.

"I'm convinced the Allus have in mind nothing so crude as a physical attack upon our System. But they are planning something! They direct everything the Cometae do, as incomprehensible details of some dark, baffling plan."

Her shining face was earnest.

"I wanted to find out, to carry a warning out to the System, if warning was needed. So I pretended that I wanted to become a Cometae and live a deathless electric life. But I've found out so little!

"I was in an induced mental amnesia when I was taken to the citadel of the Allus and made a Cometae, so I remember nothing about them. And I've never seen any Allus since. I'm certain that only Querdel, Thoryx and a few others have really seen the Allus.

And they themselves are in deadly fear of the dark masters!"

"But Joan, even if you'd found out anything, you couldn't have escaped from here to give warning!" Curt exclaimed. "You couldn't have lived outside the comet, now that your body feeds on the coma's electric radiance."

"I knew that, Curt. But I thought that if I could get away in a ship, my ship would be found and my written warning read—even if I died," she answered simply.

Curt Newton felt a lump in his throat as he contemplated the girl's matter-of-fact heroism. He took a step closer toward her.

"Joan—"

"Stay back, Curt!" Her warning was a sob. "You can't touch me now, or ever again. I'm a Cometae!"

Captain Future felt a tumult of emotions such as he had never experienced before.

"Joan, I'm going to get you out of this terrible electric existence, no matter what else I do!" he vowed fiercely. "You and all these Cometae, after our revolt succeeds!"

By now the other prisoners in the rows of cells had been released. Tiko Thrin, the little Martian scientist, and Ezra Gurney were hastening toward Captain Future. After them came the other captives of the vanished spaceships—Plutonians, Earthmen, Venusians—a bewildered, heterogeneous crew.

**Z**ARN spoke a warning to Curt Newton.

"We mustn't delay here any longer. The Lightning Feast will have begun by now. Our people are waiting!"

"Tiko Thrin, you keep Eek and Oog safe for us here!" cried Grag.

"Joan, you stay here with Tiko also," Curt told the girl authoritatively. "No, I won't have you with us! We'll be back, never fear."

"Oh, Curt—be careful!" she cried.

"It's not Thoryx or the guards I'm afraid of, but Querdel and his evil link with the Allus."

Curt had grabbed up one of the di-electric swords, and Otho and Ezra and the other released captives were similarly arming themselves.



"This way!" rumbled the deep voice of Aggar.

The hulking Cometae captain led them through the corridors of the prison building, toward another entrance than that which opened onto the plaza.

"Fiends of Pluto!" gasped old Ezra Gurney, hastening beside Captain Future. "This is the queerest bunch I ever went into a fight with!"

Curt realized the strange spectacle he and his companions must present: the two radiant, electric forms of Zarn and Aggar leading, he and Ezra just behind them, the Brain gliding at their side, with lithe Otho and ponderous Grag following closely.

Behind them in turn came the fierce-eyed, newly released Venusians, Earthmen and other captives, followed by the score of Cometae, vanguard of the rebels who had joined forces with Zarn and Aggar.

All had swords for weapons. All were grimly tense as they emerged from the building into a narrow street at the rear of the towering prison. Aggar led the way along it, in a rapid trot.

They met no one. The city Mloon seemed deserted beneath the flaring coma-sky. It was well into the sleep-period, and most of the city of the Cometae was wrapped in slumber.

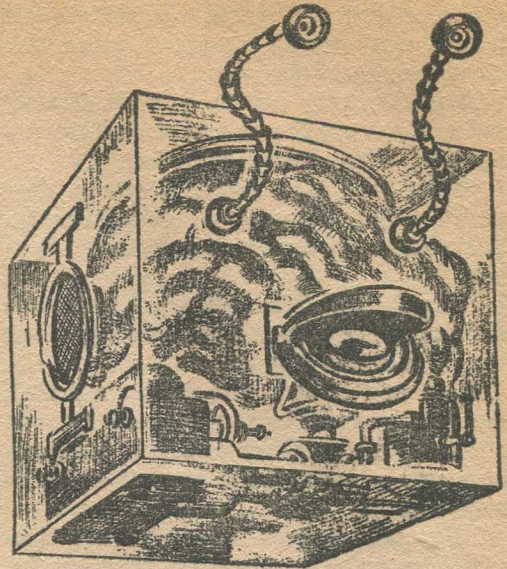
"We're circling around the plaza to approach the palace from the rear," Zarn told Captain Future as they hurried along. "Our comrades were to meet us there at this hour."

From a branching street of the alabaster city, a solid mass of armed Cometae poured out to join them a few moments later. As they hastened on, other bands of the Cometae were coming in from side streets.

Aggar's secret organization of rebels was functioning well. By the time they approached the network of narrow streets behind the looming palace dome, the conspirators numbered into the hundreds.

"The others will be on their way here by now," Aggar declared as he signaled to halt. "But there are two thousand guards inside the palace, and as many more within easy call."

"What's your plan—to rush the en-



THE BRAIN

trances?" Captain Future asked tensely.

"No. The guards would slam the gates on us before we could get through," grunted the big Cometae rebel.

He turned to his fellow officer.

"Zarn, I'm going inside with a small band, by a little-used entrance I learned of when I was captain of the palace guards myself. We'll try to dispose quietly of the gate guards. You can bring the main force in when you hear our signal."

"I'm going with you, Aggar," Curt said quietly. And the other Futuremen and Ezra Gurney hastily chimed in.

Aggar laughed.

"All right. The one you call Grag may be useful."

Aggar quickly designated a score of Cometae to accompany them. Then he and the Futuremen led the small band toward the palace.

**T**HE vast, white synthestone structure loomed above them like a man-made mountain when they reached its massive rear wall. Aggar led them to a narrow entrance in one of the indented angles in the wall.

"A servants' entrance," he muttered. "There should be only two guards on duty. Stay back out of sight."

They remained as he bade them,



while Aggar himself sheathed his sword and strode boldly toward the inconspicuous entrance.

Two Cometae palace guards sprang suddenly from the entrance and barred his way with drawn swords.

"Why are you here, Captain Aggar?" one demanded suspiciously. "You are not on palace duty any longer."

"You fools! Haven't you heard that Khinkir is dead and that I've replaced him?" snarled Aggar.

Half convinced, yet still doubtful, the two guards lowered their swords a little. Then Curt and his companions saw a wonderful feat of swordsmanship.

They saw Aggar suddenly hurl himself forward, drawing his blade as he plunged in and wielding it like a brand of light. It ripped into the breast of a Cometae guard and out again, struck down the other man at the very moment his mouth was opened to yell an alarm.

"Hot work," panted Aggar as Curt and the others came running up. His massive face hardened. "And don't waste any pity on these palace guards, strangers. They've long been the instruments of Thoryx's tyranny over the people. I myself was one of them, until I could stand such injustice no longer."

They had crowded into the entrance now and stood inside the palace of the Cometae kings. A narrow corridor, which could be closed by a huge gate of metal, led to a flight of ascending steps.

"Up this way," said Aggar, hastening up the stairs. "We're working on scant margin of time now!"

Curt Newton heard then, from somewhere deep within the great palace, a burst of thrilling, rippling music. Long, falling chords quivered in his ears with alien tonal beauty of muted strings.

"That's from the Lightning Feast," Aggar grunted. "But it hasn't begun yet or we'd hear it."

They came up into a long gallery, one of a maze of cross-halls and passages that intersected the palace's vast bulk. Luxury was evident everywhere here, the alabaster walls hung with

beautiful tapestries of red and gold, the floors soft with silken rugs.

Aggar shot rapid orders at the score of Cometae he had brought along, directing them to work their way back through the palace and overcome the gate guards at the main rear entrances.

"Then give the signal. Zarn and the others will pour in, and all will be on the knees of the gods!" finished the husky Cometae officer.

He turned to Curt.

"The main force of the palace guards is always close to Thoryx. They'll be in the great court for the festival. This way!"

They raced along deserted, splendid halls whose occupants had apparently all been drawn by the mysterious festivity. Soon they reached an upper gallery, from which they could peer down into a large court that was situated in a wing of the palace.

The court was circular, open to the flaring coma-sky. It was two hundred feet in diameter, paved with alternating blocks of red and white that made a beautiful contrast to the alabaster walls.

AT THE very center of the court bulked a thing like a squat, upright copper pillar. Not far from this stood a wide double throne, upon which King Thoryx and Queen Lulain were sitting. The old noble, Querdel, hovered close beside the king, as usual. Scores of Cometae nobles were standing expectantly around the court, facing their rulers.

Captain Future perceived that a solid ring of palace guards encircled the rim of the court. In an alcove, musicians played instruments from which rippled the haunting, alien music that now was loud in all ears. It was music that pulsed with a fierce, feverish undertone of expectation and avidity, music that set Curt's pulses jumping as he listened.

The Futuremen gazed upon this strange scene with wonder. Upon no far world had they seen a more brilliant and unearthly spectacle than was presented by these radiant Cometae rulers, gathered here for festival beneath the glow of the comet sky.

Thoryx raised his hand and the mu-



sic died to an undertone. The king's voice came clearly to the watchers in the gallery.

"Let the Lightning Feast begin!"

The squat copper pillar at the center of the court began silently to extend itself upward, like an unfolding telescope. Higher and higher it extended, until it was a slim rod reaching hundreds of feet into the sky.

"They're raising the radiance rod," Aggar muttered tautly. "If we're lucky, the feast will drown out the noise our men make at the gates."

The Brain hovered over Curt's ear.

"That rod is designed to attract increased electric radiation from the coma!" Simon whispered. "Is it possible that—"

The sentence was never finished. The copper rod had now been raised to an unbelievable height above the palace. As it attracted electric energy from the vast coma overhead, its whole height was wrapped in a purple, brush-like flame that grew in intensity with each minute.

A slender lightning bolt smote from above into the court! Its jagged white brilliance blinded Curt's eyes for a second, and its reverberating concussion of thunder almost deafened him.

But he had seen that thin bolt strike Thoryx, the king. He had glimpsed the white brilliance of unthinkable electric energy splashing over the ruler's body.

Then as Captain Future's dazzled eyes cleared, he heard Thoryx laughing in exhilaration! The king was unharmed by that jolting stroke.

Now bolt after bolt of dazzling flame was striking in the court, with continuous shock of thunder. The bolts were hitting the Cometae nobles, who threw their hands up as though to welcome and attract the crackling flashes, and who laughed in wild intoxication as the lightning struck at them.

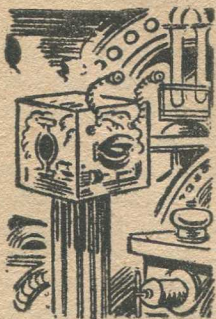
A mad, unbelievable phantasmagoria, it seemed, as the almost continuous lightning played like dancing witch-fires upon the luminescent, revelry-mad figures of the Cometae.

"The Lightning Feast!" Aggar was shouting to the Futuremen. "Electric energy is food, is life itself to us

Cometae. Even the concentrated energy of lightning cannot harm us, but serves only to stimulate and intoxicate."

## CHAPTER IX

### *Dark Triumph*



THEY turned suddenly from the unearthly spectacle, as a mass of armed Cometae came pouring down the gallery in which they stood. Then they recognized Zarn at the head of these hundreds of men.

"Our forces are inside the palace!" cried Zarn above the shattering reverberations of thunder. "I've ordered them to spread out through the building, to encircle the court."

"Good! When they're all in place, I'll give the signal for attack!" exclaimed Aggar.

"Too late for that—look down there!" yelled Otho.

A Cometae—one of the palace guards—had flung himself into the mad festival of lightning in the court. The man was swordless, wounded, shouting something in choking tones.

"One of the gate guards who got away!" roared Aggar. "No time to wait now! Down at them, men! Let none of the nobles escape!"

A mad roar of long-repressed hate answered him from the throats of the Cometae rebels. Swords gleaming, they charged behind Aggar and the Futuremen toward a stair leading from the gallery down into the court.

Zarn was shouting alarmedly to Captain Future.

"You strangers can't go into that court! You're not like us—the lightning will destroy you!"

"A little thing like lightning isn't going to keep us out of this!" Curt Newton exclaimed recklessly.

The court was a scene of mad confusion. From a dozen entrances, Cometae rebels were pouring in and fiercely engaging the palace guards.



Swords were gleaming, men going down in death, and the chaos of lightning and thunder still raged.

Curt glimpsed Thoryx standing in appalled irresolution, his weak face distorted by alarm. But crafty old Querdel was fiercely shrilling orders to the guards.

Then Captain Future and his companions clashed with the guards around the edge of the court. Curt glimpsed a roaring Cometae soldier lunging toward him, a shining figure whose sword was stabbing fiercely.

Captain Future parried the blow by a swift stab of his own dielectric blade, then ran the point through the man's throat. The guard crumpled to the floor. The Cometae, deathless as far as age or sickness were concerned, died as swiftly as ordinary men when a vital organ was stricken.

"Cut through them—get to the king and the nobles!" Aggar was yelling fiercely, through the crash of thunder.

"Demons of Mars, what a crazy fight!" gasped Otho. His blade flashed to one side, parrying a blow aimed at Curt's back. "Did for *him*!"

The Brain hovered above the battle, coolly calling warning to Curt and the others as the guards desperately shifted their tactics.

All around the court, the defenders were being pushed inward as the maddened rebels sought to reach the royal tyrant. Curt as he fought was half blinded every few moments by the appalling hiss and crash of striking threads of lightning.

As Captain Future had banked on, the dancing lightning bolts always struck Cometae, attracted by their intrinsic electric charge. The bolts could not harm the Cometae. But their blinding flare and the deafening explosions of thunder made infernal, unnerving background for this desperate assault.

Somehow the ring of palace guards held firm around Thoryx and Lulain, spurred by the undaunted orders of the clever Querdel.

"We've got to smash through them now before the other soldiers arrive here from their barracks!" Aggar was shouting to his Cometae rebels. "Think what you're fighting for, men!

Freedom, the end of tyranny, the chance to be normal men again!"

And it was at this moment, when desperate resistance held the battle's fate in the balance, that Grag tipped the scales.

**L**IKE a monstrous metal genie, Grag strode forward from where he had fought beside Curt Newton. The great robot's massive metal body could not be harmed by the swords of the Cometae.

He advanced, flailing mighty arms, his huge balled fists knocking guards aside like tenpins. Swords stabbed in vain at his metal body. Cometae opponents leaped on him to pull him down, and were brushed away. Grag walked through them like a stolid, avenging giant.

"Come on, Otho—what's holding you back?" his voice boomed back through the thunder.

"Grag's broken the ring! Push through and cut them up!" Curt yelled.

The attackers plunged forward through the breach. The circle of palace guards was disintegrating.

A sword touched Curt's right arm. The electric shock that flew along it from his opponent staggered him. He struggled fiercely to keep from falling. By superhuman resolve, he transferred his own weapon from the paralyzed arm to his left hand, and stabbed fiercely back.

He downed his assailant and pressed on, fighting like a red-headed fury. Beside him, Otho uttered his hissing heart-chilling battle-cry as he slashed and struck with uncanny swiftness. Ezra Gurney's shrill, exultant yell came from behind them. Aggar was roaring orders through the inferno of crashing thunder and dying screams.

Sheeted lightning flares illumined Grag's figure as the dauntless robot strode forward in an orgy of destruction, his flail-like arms sweeping all before them. It was small wonder that the Cometae guards broke before this awful personification of inhuman vengeance, upon whom their swords could make no impression.

"They're breaking up! Cut through to Thoryx!" bawled Aggar's stento-



rian voice. "Get the tyrant!"

"We've won!" Zarn yelled to Curt, as they swayed together in the fight. The rebel captain's face was flaming with triumph. "Look, they're trying to flee—we've broken the tyranny forever!"

"Curtis!" came the thin, urgent cry of the Brain from nearby. "Curtis, listen—"

There was no time to listen. Captain Future was exchanging deadly thrusts with a raging Cometæ guard, who seemed suicidally bent upon slaying Curt Newton at any risk to himself.

Curt got through the man's guard, poised for the stab that would finish the fight. A blinding thread of lightning wreathed the Cometæ for a second, the blaze and concussion staggering Captain Future backward.

His opponent, as though drawing new strength from the lightning stroke, leaped forward as Curt stumbled over a fallen man. Captain Future desperately swung up his dielectric sword as he fell—and his antagonist literally spitted himself on it.

"Nice swordwork, Cap'n Future!" cried Ezra Gurney. The old veteran's wrinkled face was flaring with blood-mad excitement. "We've beat 'em—we've got 'em runnin'!"

Curt saw that it was true. The remnants of the palace guard were being hacked to pieces. And the nobles whom they had protected were now being fiercely assailed by Aggar's rebels.

Aggar was bawling continuous orders to his followers, to cut through to the Cometæ king who cowered at the center of his nobles.

"Kill the tyrant!" echoed Zarn's maddened cry. "Remember what we fight for, men!"

"Curtis, listen!"

This time, there was such taut urgency in the rasping cry of the Brain that Captain Future turned toward him.

Simon Wright, hovering close by his shoulder, was the strangest figure in all that weird scene of infernal combat. Dancing flares of lightning glanced off the Brain's glass lens-eyes as he spoke.

"Curtis, the man Querdel whom you described to me is escaping! I saw him slip back from the fight a moment ago—yes, there he goes now!"

CAPTAIN FUTURE, glancing a little wildly around the crazy, crowded scene, spotted the fleeing noble for himself. He barely glimpsed the sinister Cometæ councillor as Querdel darted out of the court into a palace passageway.

Instant alarm drummed in Curt's mind. He remembered what Zarn had told them. "It's said that Querdel has a way of communicating directly with the Allus."

Was *that* why Querdel was fleeing the fight? There was no time to weigh the possibility. Captain Future plunged across the court toward the passage in which the old wizard had disappeared.

He had to fight his way half across the court, through still-resisting Cometæ nobles and guards. He finally won past them and raced into the corridor.

He was aware of the Brain gliding beside him, and of Grag and Otho racing loyally down the passageway after him. Then Curt burst into a small, vaulted chamber that had the look of a primitive laboratory. Unfamiliar electrical instruments stood around its walls.

But Captain Future's eyes flew to the center of the room. There stood the radiant figure of the old councillor, Querdel. The Cometæ noble was facing an enigmatic object.

The thing was a towering, dull-black globe that was ten feet in diameter. It rested upon a tripodal metal pedestal. The most arresting feature was the fact that its dead-black spherical surface was covered with a crawling, metallic film, whose gleaming substance constantly changed pattern.

Querdel was standing utterly motionless and silent in front of this strange, looming object. But the terrible intensity in the old noble's face and eyes as he confronted the globe was significant.

"He's *thinking* into that thing!" Curt exclaimed sharply. "It's some kind of transmitter of mental force,



connecting with the Allus—"

Captain Future plunged forward with his sword poised. He meant to kill Querdel, without parley. For Curt sensed terrible danger in the superhuman efforts of the man to contact the mysterious Allus.

But before he ever reached Querdel, something happened. The crawling, metallic film upon the black sphere suddenly spun and seethed with inconceivable rapidity.

Out from the sphere pulsed a wave of what looked like black light. An emanation of unguessable force, at sight of which Querdel's strained eyes flamed in wild triumph.

"Curtis, look out!" came the thin cry of the Brain. "He's reached the Allus—that's a wave of force—"

The warning came too late. As it reached Curt's ears, the pulsing wave of blackness took hold of him.

He stood petrified, rooted to the floor. For he was experiencing a sensation of mental assault such as he had never felt before.

Into his brain beat the sharp mental commands of other minds—a collective intelligence so vast and alien, Captain Future felt his mental defenses tottering and crashing before its assault.

He knew, in a wild flash of perception, what was happening to him. He knew that the electric mental pattern of his own brain was no longer commanding his body. The will of more powerful minds, broadcast as a wave of electromagnetic force, had invaded and taken possession of his brain and body.

"I must not oppose Thoryx and Querdel and their guards. I must submit to them."

**T**HAT was the command of an alien will, flowing out from the sphere in a wave of dark, electromagnetic force to dominate Captain Future and all his fellow-rebels!

Curt struggled wildly to resist that dominating, hypnotic wave of mental force. He could not. He was like a child in the grasp of a giant. He knew now that the Allus whose aid Querdel had called were mighty indeed.

Yet Curt Newton's fighting soul

rallied for an instant against even this overwhelming attack. By extraordinary mental effort, he opened his lips.

"Grag! Otho!" he gasped to the Futuremen, who were now bursting into the room. "Get away! Save Joan and—and—"

He could not finish. His brain was reeling under the crushing mental attack.

Curt staggered, still trying to resist as his last mental defenses crumbled. He glimpsed the triumph on Querdel's evil old face. He saw the dark wave pulsing out through the corridors and courts of the entire palace.

Then his mind was crushed into complete, senseless acquiescence.

## CHAPTER X

### *Road to Mystery*



OTHO had been fighting furiously in the court of the Lightning Feast, helping Zarn and Aggar and their followers to break the resistance of the demoralized palace guards. Then the android glimpsed Captain

Future and Simon racing into the corridor in pursuit of Querdel.

At once, Otho broke off to follow them. Even in the fierce blood-madness that always swept him in battle, the android's prime loyalty was always to his beloved, red-haired leader. As he plunged after Curt and Simon, he yelled to Grag.

"Come on, Grag—the chief needs us!"

Grag came hurrying clankingly with him, stolidly brushing aside unfortunate Cometae who got in his way. A moment later Otho and Grag burst into the vaulted laboratory of Querdel. They halted, appalled by the weird spectacle before them.

From the great black sphere at the center of the room, the wave of dark, hazy force had pulsed out to engulf



Captain Future and the Brain. It was flowing around Querdel, too, but the old Cometæ councillor showed nothing but triumph on his evil features.

But Curt's face was ghastly as Otho had never before seen it. An agony of mental struggle was in Captain Future's eyes as he gasped out a few words.

"Grag! Otho! Get away—save Joan—and—"

Curt did not finish the words. Grag and Otho saw Captain Future's agonized face become suddenly masklike, expressionless. They saw Curt stand now as stiff as a statue, staring stonily into nothingness. And the Brain, too, was poised, speechless, motionless.

Otho realized instantly that it was that pulsing aura of black force which had somehow overcome his leader. But the android plunged recklessly right into the dark, outward-welling haze. He clutched wildly at Captain Future's arm.

"Chief, what's the matter?" he cried. "Wake up!"

Then Otho, too, felt a dim, chill sensation of alien forces seeking to invade and master his mind, of the attack of a powerful intelligence.

But Otho resisted that mental assault to which Curt and Simon had fallen victims! The android resisted, and so did Grag. They stood their ground, unheeding the flowing dark haze from the sphere, trying frantically to awaken Curt and the Brain from their strange stupor.

"Otho!" yelled Grag suddenly. "That old devil who did this has got away!"

The android whirled fiercely. It was

true. Querdel had taken advantage of their moment of desperate distraction to slip from the room.

Both Grag and Otho raced furiously down the passage by which they had come, to overtake and kill the Cometæ wizard who had called forth the power of the Allus.

That haze of unimaginable mental force, emanating from the laboratory Grag and Otho had just left, had pulsed outward to invest the whole palace. It was all about them like a nightmare dusk as they sped down the corridor, yet still it seemed not to affect them.

They burst back out into the palace court, looking about fiercely for Querdel. Then they forgot the wizard in the horror of the sight they witnessed.

Fighting between Cometæ rebels and palace guards had suddenly ended. It had been ended by the pulsing dusk of force that now pervaded everything. Under the influence of that terrible pall, the Cometæ rebels had dropped their weapons and stood about like mindless automatons, where a moment before they had been shouting their victory.

**B**UT the Cometæ palace guards and nobles remained unaffected by the weird force. They were disarming the stricken rebels, who could no longer resist them. Thoryx was shouting angry orders.

"Secure every rebel! Be sure to get the leaders!" he shrilled vindictively. "We'll teach the people what it means to challenge us, chosen by the Allus!"

Querdel, who had reached the king,

[Turn page]

**NO FINER DRINK... at sixteen—or sixty**

PURITY—

**PEPSI-COLA**  
REG. U.S. PAT. OFF.

... in the big big bottle!





pointed at the stunned Grag and Otho. "There are two of the strangers who were ringleaders!"

Cometae guards leaped toward the robot and android from all sides. With a bull-like roar of rage, Grag met them and hurled them back in broken heaps.

An alarmed cry went up.

"The power of the Allus has not stricken them! They are devils!"

"They are only two and you are hundreds!" raged Thoryx. "Get the electric blasting weapons and finish them!"

Grag was momentarily at a loss.

"Otho, what in the name of all the sun-imps are we going to do?" he yelled. "We'd better get the chief and Simon and get out!"

Otho whirled, his flaming green eyes instantly taking in their precarious situation. They were almost hemmed in by masses of charging Cometae guards, who had completely cut them off from the passage leading to the laboratory where Curt and Simon remained stricken.

"We can't get to Simon or the chief now!" Otho hissed. "And the chief told us to get Joan away. We've got to do that and come back later. Come on, Grag—this way out!"

Otho had spotted their only remaining chance of escape. An entrance in one side of the court remained still unblocked by guards. The android realized that unless they escaped instantly by that opening, the now-triumphant Cometae guards would bring up weapons capable of destroying them. Otho knew that the revolt was now a disastrous failure.

Ordinarily, Otho would not have dreamed of deserting his leader. But Curt's frantic last order to assure Joan's safety rang in the android's ears. Also he knew that only by saving themselves from imminent destruction could they hope later to be of any help to their two stricken comrades.

Grag comprehended his reasoning. The great robot plunged ahead with him toward the side entrance.

"After them!" screamed Thoryx through the still-reverberating crash of thunder. "They seek to escape!"

Grag and Otho were hurling themselves along a corridor, the flying figure of the android paces ahead of the clanking robot.

"Wait—I can stop them from pursuing!" Grag boomed, bringing up short in the corridor.

Grag had spotted one of the barred metal gates designed to close off the corridor. He swung it shut. Then, instead of trying to lock it, Grag tore out one of the metal bars by main strength. He literally tied the heavy metal bar around the two halves of the gate, as though it had been a length of rope.

"That'll hold them for awhile!" he boomed triumphantly.

They could hear the whole palace in wild uproar around them. And through it all pulsed the dark haze of incredible mental force.

Otho and Grag burst into the open air, to find themselves at the rear of the looming palace.

"Come on!" the android urged. "If we can reach the prison, get Joan away in the *Comet*—"

Then as they came into sight of the great plaza before the palace, they halted, baffled. Companies of Cometae guards were running across it toward the palace, and other guards were pouring into the prison across the plaza.

"Now we can't reach the prison or the *Comet*!" Grag exclaimed. "It's head for the jungle—or else!"

**I**NSTINCTIVELY he and Otho started on a dead run through the narrow streets, away from the palace and plaza. They encountered only a few Cometae as they plunged through the slumbering city, and these few hastily recoiled from the alarming spectacle presented by the fierce-eyed android and the monster metal robot. Within a few minutes, thanks to the city's comparatively small area, they glimpsed ahead of them the green of the jungle.

There was no zone of cultivated land around the city. The Cometae, who did not rely on food to maintain their strange electric life, needed no agricultural acreage. Only a few hundred yards from the outskirts brooded



the green jungle that blanketed most of this fantastic world in the comet's heart.

Otho and his metal comrade flung themselves across the open space and into the jungle's shelter. They found themselves in a forest of tall, queer trees whose trunks were green as well as their grotesquely geometrical foliage. Vines and brush choked much of the space between.

The jungle was a place of translucent green light. At first, Otho thought this was wholly the effect of coma-light filtering through the foliage. Then as they slowed down, he realized that part of the glow came from the vegetation itself. Tree trunks and branches, as well as their leaves, shone with a faint, intrinsic luminance.

"This is far enough," Otho said finally, coming to a halt. "We mustn't go too far from the city, for we're going to have to get back in there somehow to help the chief and Simon and Joan."

His voice grated with frustration.

"Gods of space, how did things fall to pieces so suddenly?" he exclaimed.

"It was that old devil Querdel, who called the Allus!" said Grag, clenching his metal fingers. "That black sphere was some means of mental communication with the Allus."

"Yes, the sphere was both a transmitter and a receiver," Otho muttered. "And those mysterious devils, the Allus, used it to project a wave of hypnotic mental force that seized every rebel in the palace."

"But why didn't that wave of force seize us?" Grag wondered. "We felt it, but it didn't overcome us as it did the chief and Simon and Ezra, and all the rest."

"Grag, I think I understand why we were able to resist it!" Otho exclaimed. "The others are all humans—even Simon's brain is that of an ordinary *homo sapiens*. Apparently the Allus knew just what kind of mental force to utilize that would overpower a human brain."

"But you and I are not ordinary humans, Grag," the android went on excitedly. "Our bodies, our brains, are of artificial origin and differ in

pattern. The Allus' weapon of hypnotic force missed fire against us for a very fundamental reason. We're a couple of minds such as they never ran up against before!"

"Well, now what are we going to do?" Grag demanded practically.

Otho shook his head gloomily.

"I haven't figured it out yet."

He threw himself down upon the grass, leaning back against the faintly luminous green trunk of a big tree. But an instant after he did so, Otho bounded to his feet with an involuntary yell of pain.

"What are you trying to do—howl out to everyone where we are?" Grag reprimanded him.

"You touch that tree and you'd howl, too!" Otho exclaimed. "I got the devil of an electric shock from it."

"A shock from a tree? You're dreaming!" Grag scoffed.

**T**HE robot advanced his metal hand toward the luminous green trunk. A spark immediately bridged the gap.

"Why, it's true! All these trees and this vegetation are electrically charged!" Grag exclaimed, marveling.

"Now I understand," Otho declared after inspection of the growths. "This vegetation relies on the electrical radiation of the coma, instead of on sunlight, for its agent of photosynthesis. It must contain either a variant of chlorophyll or a totally different substance, capable of absorbing the electric radiation as a photosynthetic force. The process builds up a small charge in every plant and tree—"

Grag suddenly interrupted with a tense gesture.

"Listen, someone's coming!"

Otho froze instantly. They stood in the middle of the glade, listening. Then Otho, too, heard the stealthy rustling.

"Cometae coming after us!" he whispered hissing. "Thoryx' guards must have found our trail! And we have no weapons—"

The stealthy sounds filtered to them through the brush, from the direction of the city. Both the lithe android and the towering metal robot braced themselves for a hopeless battle.

Then a small gray shape burst out



of the brush and flew toward Grag, to caper in frantic, soundless joy around his metal feet.

"Why, it's Eek!" the robot said happily.

It was indeed the little gray moon-pup. His beady eyes were glistening with joy and his whole body was wriggling wildly as Grag picked him up. An instant later, Oog's fat, white little figure appeared also. The meteor-mimic waddled over to Otho and went through a bewildering series of protean changes expressive of his excitement.

"Now how in the name of the sun did they get here?" Otho marveled. "We left them with Tiko Thrin and Joan, back there in the prison."

"Tiko and Joan must have been seized by Thoryx' guards, same as the other rebels," Grag asserted. "That would scare Eek and he'd try to find me. He could do it, with his telepathic sense. Oog just followed him."

The two Futuremen now held a council of war. They decided to circle around through the jungle to the other side of the city, to find a place of concealment until the next "night." Then they would make the precarious attempt to get back into Mloon to free Curt and the rest.

So robot and android started through the luminous green forest. They made a strange pair as they swung along—the giant metal robot with his moon-pup clinging to his shoulder, and the lithe, fierce-eyed android, whose fat little pet cuddled affectionately under his arm.

Grag, who was leading, suddenly stopped. He made a gesture of warning. Otho hastily came to his side. There was a break in the jungle ahead. It was a narrow ribbon of smooth white synthestone road—a highway that began at Mloon and ran straight north through the forest.

"I never noticed this road before," Grag declared. "Since the Cometae didn't mention any other cities, where do you suppose it leads?"

"It leads north, and that means it leads to the citadel of the cursed Allus," Otho guessed immediately. "Come on, let's get across it and out of sight."

At that moment they heard a humming sound, rapidly growing louder. It came from the south. Grag and Otho hastily dived back into the brush.

They glimpsed one of the torpedo-shaped, six-wheeled power vehicles of the Cometae approaching from the south with great speed. The vehicle whizzed past them. But its occupants remained photographed on their minds.

**A** COMETAE soldier was driving the strange car. Beside him sat old Querdel. And in the rear of the machine lay a prone figure with red hair.

"That was the chief!" yelled Otho as the car streaked out of sight. "That figure in the back—that was Curt himself!"

Both he and Grag rushed back out onto the highway in a vain effort to overtake the car. But it had already vanished. After their first frenzied sprint along the highway, they realized the futility.

"That devil Querdel is taking the chief to the citadel of the Allus!" raged the android. "Why didn't we kill that wizard when we had the chance?"

Grag balled his mighty fists.

"They're not going to do anything to him. We're going to his rescue!"

As indomitably as though they had but a few miles to go, the two Futuremen started forward along the white highway in a swinging trot.

The endurance of Grag was practically limitless. And that of Otho's artificial body was almost as great. These two could stand indefinite exertion that would kill an ordinary man. For hour after hour, they followed the highway north through the jungle.

They met no one on that road. Hours passed, as they trotted grimly northward. It was hard to measure time, for the coma-sky that flamed overhead never changed. Oog whimpered with hunger. Eek cowered in fright on Grag's mighty shoulder, as flame-winged birds or flying reptiles flashed across the highway from the jungle.

They knew they had covered many



scores of miles, and yet the road went endlessly on. Then, through the scintillating haze, they glimpsed the outlines of a small black mountain ahead of them.

They came closer. Both Futuremen cried out in amazement. It was not a small mountain that loomed ahead. It was a black structure of mountainous bulk, rising stupendously from the luminous green forest.

"The citadel of the Allus!" whispered Otho, his slant eyes aflame. "Gods of space, what kind of beings are they?"

The Futuremen had come to the jungle's edge. A few hundred feet away rose the sky-storming black, eyeless walls of the sinister enigmatic castle.

The citadel had the shape of a squat, truncated cone. Its massive walls of black synthestone were blank and windowless, and sloped slightly inward. The only break in those walls was an arched entrance, without any kind of gate or door. The white highway led into this passage.

"Say, that's a break for us!" Grag exclaimed. "There's no gate or guards—we can walk right in."

"Don't be an idiot!" hissed Otho. "If the Allus have no gate or guards, it's because they don't *need* them. Get it through your iron skull that we're up against creatures such as our cosmos has never seen before. I'd as soon dive into the sun as to walk through that entrance."

"But the chief's in there—we've got to get inside," Grag anxiously protested.

"Not that way," Otho insisted. His eyes keenly inspected the looming wall. "I believe I can climb that slant wall and get on the roof."

"What good will that do you?" Grag demanded skeptically.

"I won't know until I try it, will I?" Otho flared. "But there ought to be some ventilation or other aperture in the roof."

"But I can't climb it!" Grag complained anxiously.

"I know—you'll have to wait here," Otho said hastily. "Keep Oog and Eek here, too. I'll reconnoiter and come back for you."

**T**HEN the android wormed himself through the high grass toward the wall of the mighty citadel. His rubbery flesh crept at the sensation that he was being watched by alien eyes from within the blank, massive pile.

Yet he reached the wall without mishap. It resembled the side of a steeply sloping mountain, above him. Otho could see that the great blocks of synthestone were tightly joined together by cement.

The joints gave his incredibly nimble and deft fingers a precarious hold. The inward slant of the wall helped him. With spidery agility, the android started up the wall. Clinging to holds from which a bird might have fallen, using his phenomenal litheness and skill, Otho climbed higher.

The climb seemed endless. He had ascended a thousand feet when he finally reached the roof. He drew himself onto it with a sigh of relief.

Now he made a startling discovery. The citadel was ring-shaped. At the center of its roof yawned a circular opening a hundred yards across. From it projected a ring of copper electrodes, pointing at the coma-sky.

"What the devil is the meaning of it?" Otho wondered.

He crawled silently across the synthestone roof to the lip of the circular opening. Then he froze, petrified by the unimaginable terror and strangeness of the scene which lay before his eyes.

## CHAPTER XI

### *The Allus*



CURT NEWTON awoke from the hypnotic trance that had crushed his senses into oblivion. Wonderingly, he looked around him.

He was lying on a couch in a small room. The walls, floor and ceiling were of black synthestone. There was no window, but there was a door, and



the door was open to a brightly lighted hallway.

"Now what in the name of Pluto's ice-fiends—" Curt began bewilderedly.

Suddenly, he remembered everything: the revolt of the Cometae whom he had helped Aggar and Zarn to lead; their triumph in the court of the Lightning Feast; then the escape of Querdel and the dark wave of force from the black sphere, which had plunged him into unconsciousness.

Sharp dismay invaded Captain Future's mind, as he realized that the others had been overcome like himself. They must have succumbed, he knew, as he had done. That meant that the Cometae rebellion was by now completely crushed, that Thoryx and Querdel—and the Allus—still ruled. It meant that Joan Randall must remain one of the deathless Cometae.

That thought brought Curt Newton to his feet in an excess of raging emotion. He was not through yet! He'd find a way to undo the devilish thing that had been done to Joan, to overthrow the tyranny that made the Cometae slaves of unguessably alien masters. . .

His rage faded away, and a queer chill possessed him as he glanced around. This black, cell-like room did not look as though it was part of any building of the Cometae City. He had seen not one such black structure in all that alabaster city.

He suddenly remembered a phrase that Zarn had used. "The black citadel of the Allus."

He was in that citadel now! The truth crashed home to Curt's mind in staggering shock.

Icy certainty possessed his mind. Thoryx and Querdel and the other Cometae rulers were but pawns of the Allus. The fact that he had been a ringleader of the revolt, added to the strangeness of his three unhuman comrades, had apparently made the Allus think him dangerous. They had therefore had him brought here.

So Curt Newton reasoned swiftly. And his reaction to the situation was characteristic. A grim, bleak look entered his gray eyes. His tanned face set in a fighting expression.

"So—I'm up against the real masters now," he muttered. "At least, I ought to find out what they're planning."

The Allus, the mysterious lords of whom all the Cometae spoke with such shuddering dread—yet whom none could describe! What was the core of truth in the fearful stories that he had heard from Zarn and the others, Curt wondered.

Was it true that the Allus came from outside the cosmos? Did he, Curt Newton, stand now inside the unimaginable stronghold of beings utterly alien to the universe? He still could not completely believe that. His scientist's mind rejected the possibility that the matter of one universe could ever exist under the physical laws of a totally strange cosmos.

Above all, what was the Allus' purpose? Whoever or whatever they were, why had they made of the Cometae deathless electric slaves? What unimaginable scheme of extra-cosmic or non-human minds was being hatched on this weird world inside Halley's comet?

"They can't plan just to kill me out of hand," Captain Future reasoned. "They could have had their Cometae underlings do that without delay, once I was senseless. What do they want of me?"

**H**E turned his attention to the door that led into the brightly lighted hallway. It was not a real door at all, but just an opening. There was no gate or barrier of any kind.

But Captain Future was not so naive as to believe he had been left completely unguarded. Examining the opening closely before venturing through, his keen eyes detected a faint, dark haze across it.

"That might be a barrier of some sort," he muttered. "I'll soon know."

He thrust his hand swiftly in and out of the haze in the doorway. Nothing happened. He felt no new sensation.

Doubtfully he started to walk through the opening into the hallway. But the moment his figure entered the haze, Curt suddenly changed his mind about leaving the room.



"No, I don't want to go out in that hall," he thought sharply. "I don't want to, at all!"

And he stepped quickly back into the room. Then a feeling of bewilderment overcame him.

"Why the devil didn't I go on through? Why did I change my mind? Of course I want to get out of here."

Again he started through the door. But again, the moment he was halfway through he changed his mind and came back.

He couldn't understand it. Was it some strange, warning instinct at work?

Nonsense! Curt uttered a low exclamation.

"What a fool I am! That's the barrier! A *mental* barrier!"

He understood now. That dark haze was a curtain of hypnotic force across the opening. Incredible mastery of mental science had devised that intangible curtain to affect the minds of anyone who attempted entry. That person would become mesmerized with the powerful conviction that he did not want to go through the door.

Curt's respect for the mysterious Allus went up several notches. Creatures who could invent and utilize such subtle powers knew more about mental currents than anyone alive.

"Why lock up your prisoners, when you can simply make them want to stay in their cells?" he reasoned. "Clever, simple and economical."

Calmly Curt went back to his couch and sat down. He was trying, in his clear-minded way, to assemble from his scanty facts about the Allus a working hypothesis concerning them.

But there was not yet enough data.

Curt felt that there would be facts in plenty before long, and that they would be highly unpleasant. But he doubted whether he would ever live long enough to make use of them.

"No doubts!" Captain Future reprimanded himself fiercely. "If you're dealing with creatures who use mental force as their chief weapon, doubt and fear would be fatal."

He sat there, letting his mind rove back to Joan Randall. He remembered her with vivid clearness as she had parted from him in that frantic last

minute at the prison, on the eve of the revolt.

Horror and rage shook Curt again as he remembered the unearthly, terrible beauty of Joan's altered form. He swore again that he would somehow win clear and find the means to restore the girl to normality.

Somewhere here in the Allus' citadel, he knew, was where it had been done—the metamorphosis of Joan into a Cometæ. Here, too, all the other Cometæ had been changed into electric beings. If he had only a single hope of finding out *how* the Allus had done it, of correlating his and Simon's and Tiko Thrin's researches to undo the process—

CURT NEWTON suddenly became aware that the dark haze in the doorway had disappeared. He was on his feet in an instant, striding toward the opening. He stepped through the door, half expecting that queer mental compulsion to operate again and force him back.

But this time, nothing happened. He strode through the opening without hindrance, to find himself in a long, lighted hallway.

Captain Future smiled grimly.

"They turned off that barrier of mental force by remote control. Which means they want me to come out."

He shrugged coolly.

"All right, gentlemen—I'll play."

He was near the end of the long hall now. It was a passageway with dead-black synthestone walls and floor, lighted by concealed sources of white brilliance. It stretched away in a broad arc, curving out of sight.

There was only one way Curt could go—down the hall. He had not the slightest doubt that was where the Allus intended him to go. Without hesitation, he started along the curving passageway.

He came to a doorway in the side of the hall. It was screened by an opaque curtain of dark haze. From the other side came unfamiliar rustling sounds, and now and then the clank of metal.

Curt Newton stopped and approached the door. He wanted to see



what was beyond it. But as soon as he started through the dark, opaque haze he halted.

He didn't want to go through that doorway! His whole being clamored against such an action, forcing him to step hastily back into the hall. He had, he knew, run into another barrier of mental force.

Curt smiled crookedly.

"It seems there's just one way I can go in this rat-trap, and that's the way they want me to go."

He went on along the curving passage. There were other doors in its side, but all of them were curtained by the opaque haze. He did not try to enter them, for he knew now it would be quite useless.

Captain Future's nerves were strung to highest pitch. There was something ghastly about these brooding black corridors, with their background of uncanny whisperings and rustlings and their emptiness of all visible life. The most hideous planetary monster he had ever met would have been almost a welcome sight in this forbidding, alien labyrinth.

He had followed the curving hall for several hundred feet, when he came to a door in its wall which was *not* curtained by the dark haze. Curt stopped, staring ahead at that innocent opening.

"So I'm supposed to go in there. But what if I choose to keep right on?"

Then he perceived that a little further ahead, one of the hazy mental-force barriers extended across the hall. He laughed mirthlessly.

"They leave nothing to chance, it seems."

Deliberately, he approached the open door. His muscles were tense for possible action, though none knew better than he the futility of physical strength against the mental masters of this weird stronghold.

Sounds came to him from the room or rooms beyond the door. They were louder and different sounds than the mysterious whisperings that had oppressed him. He sensed in there the presence of more than one individual.

Captain Future felt a terrific ten-

sion. He knew that he was at last to face the enigmatic masters of the comet world, the dreaded Allus. Well—he was ready for anything. He would not be surprised if the Allus were monsters more fearsomely alien than the weirdest inhabitants of the System's farthest worlds.

**H**E REACHED the door and stepped through it into a great, brilliant room of cruciform shape. He halted and stared frozenly at its occupants.

"Good God!" Captain Future said huskily. He was completely overwhelmed by surprise, in spite of his expectation.

The cruciform chamber itself was astonishing. Its four alcoves contained an array of apparatus and machines, of which even Curt Newton's scientifically trained eyes could tell nothing.

He did dimly recognize a big black sphere, sheathed by crawling, metallic films. This was the counterpart of the globe he had seen in Querdel's laboratory—the transmitter-receiver of mental force through which the Allus had intervened to suppress the Cometæ revolt.

But the other apparatus was unguessable. A massive, barrel-like chamber of copper, with a myriad tiny lenses set in its floor and ceiling, proved the central attraction in a quite bewildering mass of electrical equipment. Other mechanisms were as baffling. Yet the most staggering sight of all was the half-dozen individuals at the center of the cruciform laboratory.

"They can't be the Allus!" Captain Future told himself numbly. "They can't be—"

Yet he knew they were Allus. For some of them were working leisurely over certain of the unfathomable machines, with all the attitude of mastery and authority. And the rest were staring at Curt Newton expectantly.

These six Allus were—*men*! Just ordinary, normal-looking young men like himself! They were not even electric, like the Cometæ. They were dark-haired, fair-skinned young men who might have come straight from



Earth, and who even wore commonplace zipper-suits very much like his own.

One of them, a tall, likable young man with clear blue eyes, advanced a few steps toward Curt Newton. He smiled engagingly.

"Come on in," he said. "We've been expecting you. My name is Ruun, by the way. I'm sort of a leader among us Allus."

Curt still couldn't believe his eyes or ears.

"But you can't be the Allus!" he stammered. "Why, you're only men!"

Ruun laughed, and the other young men chuckled.

"That surprises you, doesn't it? I knew it would. It surprised Querdel, here, when he first found out that we were only human."

The Allus leader gestured his dark head as he spoke, toward a shadowy corner. Curt saw now that the old Cometae noble stood there, his radiant electric body shining through the shadows.

Querdel was standing in an attitude of extreme, almost cringing respect. There was an overpowering awe and fear in the old wizard's face as he watched the Allus.

Ruun, the young Allus leader, went on in earnest explanation.

"You see, if the Cometae populace knew that we Allus are just ordinary men, they would never obey us. So, through Querdel and Thoryx, we put out the legend that we were strange and terrible beings from the unknown. We played on the superstitions of the Cometae in that way."

Curt felt a terrific reaction from his previous tension.

"Then all that talk about your being from an alien universe was just a hoax?"

Ruun chuckled. "That's it," he said. "Do we look as though we came from another universe?"

**C**APTAIN FUTURE grinned shakily.

"No, you don't. You look as though you came from my own world, Earth."

"Actually, we're simply part of the Cometae race ourselves," Ruun explained. "We're a scientific sect who

have been working in seclusion to help our people. We've made some great discoveries in electricity and mental force. We even discovered how to make our people electrically immortal—though it seems that now they're dissatisfied even with immortality."

"But why did you have outside ships dragged into the comet?" Curt asked bewilderedly. "Why did you make electric Cometae of your captives?"

Ruun shrugged.

"It was wrong to drag those ships in here, I admit. But we needed certain materials for our research that we could obtain in no other way. And we thought we were recompensing the crews of those ships, by offering them electric immortality."

Curt Newton felt a vast relief. The knowledge that the Allus had worked a beneficent hoax on the Cometae put everything in a new light.

"Yet you crushed the revolt of Aggar and his men—" he said uncertainly.

"Of course. We didn't want any more bloodshed," Ruun told him. "If the Cometae people are dissatisfied with immortality, why, we'll change them back to normal again. We were only trying to help them."

Ruun went on eagerly.

"We had you brought up here because we think you can help us, stranger. It's obvious that you possess great scientific knowledge. We think you may know much about things outside the comet, which we have had no chance to learn."

"You'll restore to normal the girl I came here after?" Curt Newton interposed quickly.

"Why, of course!" Ruun declared. He pointed to the massive barrel-like chamber in the alcove. "It'll require only a reversal of that converter's circuits to change her back to normal, if she doesn't like being immortal."

Curt felt his spirits lift immeasurably. For the first time, his deep and agonized worry over Joan disappeared.

"I'll help you with any knowledge I have, if you're really working for the good of the Cometae," he said.



"Fine!" exclaimed Ruun. He turned toward Querdel. "You can go back to Mloon, now. Try to quiet down the people there."

Querdel, cringing in almost ludicrous respect, bowed tremblingly and squeezed past Ruun.

The old noble almost ran out of the chamber.

Ruun turned brightly to Captain Future.

"Now, stranger—"

Abruptly Curt's face had gone dead white. He stared at the young man and the other Allus with dilated eyes. His heart was suddenly pounding.

He had seen something, when Querdel had brushed past Ruun, that had made him doubt his senses. He had seen Querdel's elbow seemingly pass *through* the solid body of Ruun!

A ghastly knowledge dawned slowly upon Captain Future. If the old noble's elbow had passed through Ruun's body, it meant but one thing. It meant that Ruun wasn't really there at all!

True enough, he saw Ruun and the other Allus; he could hear them. They were a half-dozen ordinary young men, as solid and real as himself—to the eye.

Ruun was gazing at him puzzledly. "Why, what's the matter?"

Curt suddenly extended his hand toward the young Allus leader. He wanted to touch Ruun, to assure himself that the fellow was real, that his eyes had just played a cruel trick upon him.

**B**UT Ruun recoiled swiftly from his touch. And that furnished conclusive evidence for the conviction that had formed in Curt's shocked mind.

"You're *not* real, then!" Captain Future said thickly. "You're not real men at all."

Ruun's clean-cut face flared with anger.

"Are you insane?"

"Whatever you Allus are, you're not men!" Curt went on stiffly, staring at them. "You made me think you were. Ah—that's it! You're masters of mental science. You hypnotized me into believing that I was

talking to men like myself!"

As that bitter enlightenment burst upon Curt Newton, a sudden and awful metamorphosis took place in Ruun and the other Allus.

Their human-seeming bodies abruptly vanished. And Curt knew that his sudden enlightenment had broken the hypnotic spell in which they had held him—the spell that had made them seem human.

But what were these six shapes now poised before him, where Ruun and the others had stood?

Why, they were six black, opaque shadows! But they were shadows that had a definite form. And that form was a terrible one.

They emerged as shadows of a horrible travesty on humanity. The upright figure was that of a lithe, snaky body, with serpentine arms and legs, and a blunt, hideously ophidian head from whose face grew a mass of writhing tentacles.

Yet these ghastly figures were not solid matter, but were living shadows like dreadful silhouettes of madness come to life. As though the darkness of outer space had spawned fearful, nebulous, unhuman children.

"Gods of space!" choked Captain Future, staring wildly.

He knew that he was looking at last upon the true aspect of the Allus.

## CHAPTER XII

### *Mental Duel*



**CAPTAIN FUTURE** had faced terrifyingly unhuman creatures on many a world in the past. In the depths of Jupiter's mighty jungles, upon the floor of Neptune's planetary ocean, on worlds of far-

off suns, he had confronted beings far removed from humanity. But never had he felt the impact of such horror as he felt now, facing the Allus.

Had they been solid and real, the



terror of it would have been lessened. Even such hideous serpentine creatures as their outline showed them to be, even those ghastly faces of writhing tentacles, would not have been so appalling to look upon.

But it was the fact that they were living, moving shadows, black and monstrous silhouettes rather than tangible beings, that gave the last turn of the screw to Curt's horror. He felt every fiber in his body and brain clamoring in frantic revulsion.

The black silhouette of the nearest Allus, the one who had called himself Ruun, moved glidingly toward Captain Future.

"No! Stay back!" yelled Curt, hardly aware that he was shouting.

In an excess of mingled horror and loathing, he struck out frenziedly with his clenched fist. His fist went right through that opaque black serpentine shadow. He felt no contact with real matter.

He knew then that the Allus were not material, whatever else they might be. But what were they? Bodies of black gas? Of force? Did they even exist outside his own chaotic mind? Was he dreaming all this?

"Stand still, Earthman!"

The command rang inside Curt's brain like a clear, spoken voice. Yet he knew that it had not been spoken. It had been *thought* by the Allus, and the thought had reached his brain.

At the same moment, he felt his mind grasped by a powerful force. He had the same chilling, uncanny sensation as when the power of the Allus had reached from Querdel's black sphere to crush the Cometæ rebels.

Curt Newton stood rooted to the floor, unable now to move a muscle. Mentally, he was like a child in the grasp of these alien, shadowy creatures.

The foremost Allus—the one he still thought of as Ruun—was but inches from his face. That dreadful black silhouette was clear in every ghastly outline against the background of the lighted laboratory.

Captain Future's dilated eyes now perceived that from the shadowy

black figure of Ruun, a strange, thin filament led to the end of the cruciform chamber, to disappear through the solid wall. That filament moved when Ruun moved, remaining always attached to his immaterial black figure. Each of the other Allus had similar filaments, leading in the same direction out of the room like weird puppet cords.

"Earthman, you have penetrated our deception." The icy mental voice of Ruun was sounding in Curt's brain. "It is unfortunate that you did so. We Allus hoped to attain our ends with you painlessly, through deceiving you into willing cooperation. Now we must use other methods."

Curt found his voice. He could not move, but he could still speak. And strength and resolution were coming back into his numbed mind.

**I**T was the threat implicit in the monster's words that had galvanized him out of that deadly numbness. Curt Newton was a fighter. A challenge, a threat, was the most powerful of all stimulants to his indomitable nature.

"Then everything you Allus said was a lie," he said huskily. "You *did* come from outside our universe! No part of our cosmos ever spawned creatures such as you."

"It is true, we came from Outside," replied Ruun's icy thought. "Your cosmos of curved, three-dimensional space is merely a bubble floating in the abyss of extra-dimensional infinity. In your cosmos, you are like insects crawling around the inside of a spherical shell. You have never burst out of the shell, have never penetrated the outer abyss in which we Allus live."

"For our home is in that abyss Outside. There, where the laws of force and matter differ far from the laws of your universe, we grew to power and wisdom. We planned finally to enter the bubble of your cosmos. But, with all our power, we could not open a door through its shell from our side alone. The door must be opened from *both* sides."

"So, Earthman, we sent our thought through the wall to the man of the



Cometae you call Querdel. We could contact him. For thought, mental force, could pass from one universe to another, where matter could not. We promised him, and promised him truly, that he might attain immortality, if he would but follow our instructions and help us open the door between universes.

"We chose him as our agent, chose a man of this comet world, because the vast electric power of the comet would be needed to open that door. And he opened the door, and we came through."

The commanding mental voice of the alien creature came more strongly into Curt Newton's brain, as he stood paralyzed and listening.

"Earthman, why do I tell you these things? It is because you must realize that we are beings from a universe vaster than your own. Our powers make resistance on your part a futile folly."

Captain Future's hoarse voice was steady as he countered with a question.

"Why did you come into our cosmos? What do you plan?"

There was a tinge of amusement in Ruun's mental answer.

"Earthman, your thoughts are childishly clear. You fear we mean harm to your universe, to this little System's worlds. That perhaps we plan to attack them.

"You may dismiss such apprehensions from your mind, Earthman. We have not the remotest intention of attacking your petty worlds and peoples. Of what concern can they be to us, the lords of the Outside?"

"I don't believe that," Captain Future spat. "If that is true, why should you have dragged ships of my worlds into this comet, through your Cometae tools?"

The creature answered with bored disdain.

"The Cometae are our servants, it is true. We have used them, and have made sure that they did not escape, by transforming them into electric creatures who cannot now survive beyond this comet.

"But we need other servants than these people for what we plan. We

need men from outside the comet, men of your System's worlds, whose minds hold scientific knowledge about your cosmos that will be necessary to us in our work here. Men such as you, Earthman."

"You'll get no knowledge or help from me," Curt Newton answered unshakenly. "In spite of your denial, I'm convinced that you're planning an invasion of my System, or an abduction of its peoples to your worlds."

**T**HE thought-reply of Ruun had a quality of exasperation in its icy impact.

"We would not want to live upon your System's petty planets, even if we could. And we could not abduct your peoples into our universe, for matter of one universe cannot exist in the alien dimensional conditions of another. All that we want out of your cosmos is power."

"Power? Energy?"

It was as though a searing flash of lightning illuminated Captain Future's mind. He saw it now, the reason for this long labor of the Allus to penetrate his own cosmos.

Ruun had read his thoughts, it seemed.

"Yes, Earthman—it is energy that we are after here. Energy that we Allus need in our home Outside, which we have come into your cosmos to obtain."

"You mean—you'll drain the energy of this whole comet through your door into the Outside?" Curt whispered unbelievably.

"The energy of this comet comprises not a fraction of what we need!" throbbed the icy answer. "We require power on a vast scale. Your universe generates power on a scale commensurate with our needs.

"We shall have our Cometae servants build here for us a great transformer, which will first draw into itself all the energy generated by your sun. That energy will flow through the door we have opened, into our world Outside."

"Of course," the alien being added as an afterthought, "our power needs are so great that in time they will



exhaust your sun. But there are many other suns in this universe. It is not like our own dark, power-starved universe."

Captain Future had listened in growing horror. At last he understood the devil-spawned purpose behind these nightmare creatures from outside the cosmos.

An inter-cosmic theft of energy on a stupendous scale was what the Allus planned! At the thought of what that would mean to his own System,

terly alien offspring of a strange cosmos, saw no wickedness in the monstrous theft of energy they proposed. The morality of his cosmos was completely outside their minds.

With such alien beings, parley would be futile. The only answer to their plan was to destroy them. Yet how could that be done? Never had Curt Newton felt so helpless. His body was petrified by the mental grasp of the Allus upon his brain. Even had he been free, how could he

*Captain Future Struggles to Save a Dying Universe from the Chaos of  
Doom and Destruction*

IN

# PLANETS IN PERIL

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of its worlds starved of all power, of all the radiant energy of the sun itself being sucked into the outer abyss, apprehension froze Curt Newton rigid.

The shadowy creature before him now delivered its ultimatum.

"You can help us willingly with all your knowledge of this universe, and be rewarded by electric immortality. Or you can refuse. In that case, we will strip your mind of all knowledge and then destroy you immediately."

Curt's brain seethed with impotent rage. Yet he knew that anger against the Allus was foolish. They, the ut-

harm creatures who seemed wholly immaterial shadows?

"You cannot harm us in any way," Ruun read and answered his thought. "No weapon of this universe could make the slightest impression upon us. I advise you to see the folly of resisting our will."

Captain Future made a desperate, rapid decision. To get himself destroyed would remove all chance of his acting against the Allus. He must play for time—must pretend to cooperate with them, but must actually withhold any information that might be of help.



**H**E had no sooner hit upon this plan than Ruun's thought impinged upon his mind. And the mental voice of the creature held an ironic contempt.

"Do you really think that we are as easy to deceive as that, Earthman? I thought I had made you understand our mastery over you."

Curt realized that Ruun had read the desperate plan he had formed, even as he had formed it! Their knowledge of his mental processes was almost absolute.

"It is regrettable that you did not choose to cooperate willingly with us," the alien being's mental words continued. "It will require needless time to strip your mind of all your scientific knowledge. But I perceive now that this is what we must do, and then destroy you."

"No!" Curt Newton thought fiercely with all his mental power. "You'll get nothing from me—I'll give you no knowledge—"

He concentrated upon mental resistance, seeking to keep his mind resolutely blank.

But he felt his resistance weakening as the vast, alien intelligences of the shadowy creatures assailed him. These masters of mental pressure crushed down his defenses. He could feel their thoughts probing the innermost recesses of his memory.

Then came a dark senselessness.

Curt drifted out of unconsciousness, to find himself still standing in the cruciform laboratory. The group of shadowy Allus were a short distance from him now, and appeared to be in deep mental conference.

Captain Future realized what had happened. They had stripped his mind of all his scientific knowledge! They now knew everything about the laws of his cosmos which he himself knew. He did not doubt that they were discussing this newly gained knowledge in relation to their gigantic plan.

Curt realized that for the moment they had relaxed their mental grip upon him. But he well knew that as soon as they had made certain of extracting his last scrap of knowledge, they would destroy him.

His mind searched feverishly for a way out of this dreadful trap. His body was temporarily free, but he realized the futility of physical action. Neither a physical attack upon the Allus nor an attempt at flight had the slightest hope of success. Yet he must somehow keep them from destroying him, must gain time in which to work against them—

A desperate idea came to him. It was a stratagem that had perhaps only a slim chance of success, but it might work if he could keep his mind steady.

The group of nightmare shadows was turning again toward him, each Allus dragging with him that curious filament so like an immaterial tether. Again, Captain Future felt himself seized by Ruun's mental grasp.

"We have gained much helpful knowledge from your mind, Earthman," pulsed Ruun's thought. "It is unfortunate that we cannot utilize you as a servant, since a scientist of your caliber would be valuable. But your very clear hostility to our purposes makes it necessary to dispose of you."

Captain Future, in this moment, was thinking furiously, concentrating on the idea which had suggested itself to him.

"They looted all my other scientific knowledge, but they didn't learn about the thermodynamic constant of energy-flow in this cosmos!" Curt thought. "They don't know that constant will prevent them from ever conducting energy in great volume to their outer universe. I mustn't let them learn about that. I must keep that factor hidden in the depths of my mind above all else!"

**R**UUN'S cold thoughts pulsed in sudden sharp alarm.

"Earthman, have you managed to conceal some of your knowledge from us? What is this thermodynamic constant?"

The AMus had taken the bait! There was no such thing as a thermodynamic constant that would prevent energy-flow. It was merely scientific gibberish that Captain Future had improvised for his purpose.

His sole aim was to gain time. The



Allus would not destroy him as long as they believed he had valuable knowledge which they had not secured. Especially, they would not destroy him if they thought he possessed secret information about a factor that would thwart their great plan.

"Tell us!" commanded the Allus leader sharply. "What is this factor you managed to conceal?"

Curt answered with seeming bewilderment.

"I don't know what you mean."

"You are hiding something from us," Ruun insisted. "You possess more mental resistance than we had suspected, since you were able to conceal from us the existence of this important scientific factor."

So far, the Allus had been completely deceived by Curt's subterfuge. They now thoroughly believed that he guarded a secret of the scientific laws of this cosmos which was vital to them.

The Allus were great scientists—far greater even than Captain Future. Yet he had finally managed to deceive them on this one point! For their science was of an alien universe, and the physical laws of Curt Newton's world were wholly strange to them. From their point of view, it was quite plausible that there might be some limiting thermodynamic factor, which would upset their scheme of stealing the System's energy.

"If you will not tell us willingly, we shall soon take your secret from your mind forcibly," declared Ruun.

"I know nothing of such a factor, I tell you," insisted Curt.

His protestations were of no avail. Again the combined mental power of the shadowy entities beat down his mental defenses.

Again, he went into darkness as they probed his mind.

When Curt reemerged from that darkness, he sensed a quality of bafflement in the attitude of the shadowy figures.

Ruun's thought came ominously.

"Earthman, you are stronger than we supposed. Even while your mind lay completely helpless before ours, you managed to persist in your denial

of all knowledge of the thermodynamic factor."

The creatures had read Curt's mind. They had read there that he knew nothing of the supposed scientific secret, that it was all a fake. They had read the truth—but they had not believed it!

Captain Future had introduced a psychological element of doubt into the calculations of the Allus. They could not be certain now that the thermodynamic factor did not exist, in spite of the sincere mental denials of Curt's brain.

They could not be certain, either, that those denials were not mere pretense on his part.

Curt intercepted an Allus thought.

"Let us destroy this Earthman, Ruun. His so-called thermodynamic factor is purely an invention."

"You may be right, Siql," was Ruun's cold reply. "But we must be certain! If there is such a vital factor regulating energy-flow in this cosmos, we must learn of it or our whole purpose will be thwarted."

"Physical torture of the Earthman might produce the truth," came the chilly suggestion of another Allus.

"No. My reading of this man's mind convinces me that he would remain obdurate to the last degree under such pressure," replied Ruun.

CURT could "hear" this mental discussion, for he was still gripped by the vast mental force of the Allus, and hence *en rapport* with them.

"There is another means of forcing him to unfold the truth," Ruun went on. "As we have already observed, the intelligence of these human creatures is very largely subservient to their irrational emotions."

"I have already read in this Earthman's mind that his strongest emotion concerns a girl of his own race, whom we made into a Cometae some time ago. I believe that the threat of physical harm to that girl would constitute the strongest pressure we could bring upon him."

Captain Future felt a stab of agonized alarm. If he had brought terrible danger on Joan—



## CHAPTER XIII

*Secret of the Invaders*

He realized instantly that he must suppress such alarm. But it was too late. Ruun, as always, had read his thoughts.

"You observe that the Earthman betrays deep fear lest harm befall the girl," commented the Allus leader. "This proves that a threat to her safety is the strongest compulsion we can use upon him. Therefore, I will call Querdel and order him to return here at once with that girl."

The shadowy, monstrous silhouette of the Allus leader glided toward the black sphere in the alcove, which Curt had already divined was the means of communication between the Allus and Querdel.

Ruun's special black shape hovered beside the sphere a moment, then came back.

"Querdel had just reached Mloon. He is starting back here at once with the girl," Ruun announced.

"You can't do this!" Captain Future cried. "I tell you, it was all a fake on my part! There is no thermodynamic factor!"

"You will return to your cell," came Ruun's commanding, icy thought. "We shall summon you for further questioning when the girl arrives."

Curt made a frantic mental effort to break free, to attempt somehow to attack the shadowy group. It was quite futile. The minds that gripped his own sent him stumbling against his will from the cruciform laboratory, down the long, curving passage-way into his prison.

As he entered the little room, the mental compulsion upon him ceased. But now the curtain of haze had sprung across the doorway once more. When he tried to go through it, he found that the mental barrier was impassable.

Curt Newton sat down, overwhelmed by a horror greater than anything he had yet felt. His stratagem had recoiled upon himself. It had gained him time, but it had put the girl he loved in deadliest danger. The Allus would torture her until he told them about the thermodynamic factor.

And he couldn't tell them, for there was no such thing!



OTHO crouched frozenly upon the roof of the vast black Allus citadel, gazing down with incredulous eyes at the fantastic scene within the great central court.

"Devils of space!" whispered the stupefied android. "Have I been using dream-dust?"

In fact, the scene below him seemed more fitting to a grotesque and terrifying nightmare than to reality. Otho had seen queer things and places on many a world and moon, but never anything like this.

The circular open court that pierced the center of the Allus citadel was three hundred feet in diameter. Since its depth was the thousand-foot height of the building, it resembled a huge black well upon the rim of which Otho was crouched, looking downward.

Around the edge of the court rose a ring of eighty copper rods, that soared up out of the black well and far above the citadel roof. The tops of these rods, high above Otho, were bulbous electrodes, upon which played a ceaseless violet brush of electrical force. Otho perceived at once that this mighty ring of electrodes was designed to milk electrical force from the coma-sky.

The terrific electric voltage gathered by the copper rods manifested itself at the bottom of the well as a crackling, brilliant ring of electric flame. This ring of flaming force completely encircled the interior of the court, in a dazzling wall twenty feet high. It was in fact a ceaseless falling cataract of electric energy.

"There's enough power in that to light up a planet!" Otho thought astoundedly. "What are they using it for?"

He craned his gaze downward, seeking to discern details on the court's floor. His eyes fastened on an enig-



matic central object.

"What the devil can that be?" he wondered mystifiedly.

The torrents of flaming electrical energy that walled in the court were canalized, through massive transformers and conduit cables, toward this central object which so puzzled him. Evidently all this stupendous power was used by the Allus simply for the operation of the central object.

But what was the thing? It looked like a massive arched door-frame which stood perpendicularly upon the black paving. Otho judged it was ten feet high and almost as wide. This arched frame was of solid copper, studded every few feet with heavy, bulging coils, to which were connected the multiple conduit cables that conveyed electric power.

But inside the opening of this elaborate frame there was—nothing. Nothing but a featureless blackness. It was as though space itself did not exist inside that massive arch, so strong was the impression it gave Otho of utter, lightless emptiness.

"If I could only get down there and see for myself what it is!" he muttered, all his curiosity and passion for adventure on fire.

Then he realized the practical impossibility. He might be able to clamber down into the court, though even that was doubtful, because of the vertical nature of these inner walls. But even if he could do that, he still would not be able to penetrate the stupendous ring of electric flame that walled in the whole court.

"That ring of force would blast me or anyone else who tried to go through it," Otho admitted to himself. "But what's it all about? What's that arched frame of blackness, and why does it have to use such terrific, constant power?"

He strained his keen eyes desperately to inspect the object far below.

"It seems to be the very keystone of the Allus' citadel—"

**S**UDDENLY Otho gasped unbelievably as he looked downward. He was witnessing something that made his feeling of nightmare even stronger.

A black, shadowy figure was emerging from that mysterious, coil-framed copper arch. The figure did not go through the arch—it simply came out of it!

It was like a monstrous, moving silhouette of repulsively serpentine outline. Even at this height, Otho's super-keen eyes could detect the essential inhumanity of that shadow's alien dimensions.

"Gods of space!" he whispered, appalled. "Is that one of the Allus?"

The opaque black shadowy figure was gliding away from the arch toward the side of the court. Otho perceived that from that black shape there trailed a thin, shadowy filament which led back into the mystery-arch from which the creature had emerged.

The dark figure glided unharmed right through the encircling wall of electric flame, to disappear through a doorway which led from the court into the citadel around it. But Otho could still see the filament of shadow it trailed behind it, which still led into the arch of mystery.

"What the devil kind of entity is that?" the android gasped. "Creatures of shadow that come out of a door to no place, on a shadow-string! Creatures that can walk through that blasting wall of force!"

He soon saw another of the Allus. For that these were the mysterious Great Ones, Otho could no longer doubt.

He saw one of the shadowy creatures coming from the citadel into the court, gliding into the arch of blackness to disappear. In the next minutes, several such beings came and went through the arch. All of them who emerged from it trailed that curious shadowy filament after them.

Otho felt badly upset. It had long been the reckless android's boast that he was afraid of neither man, beast or devil. But these Allus were none of the three. As far as he could see, they were just opaque shadows of hideous form. But no mere shadows, he knew, could have mastered a planet as they had mastered this comet world.

"No wonder the Cometae are scared to death of those creatures," Otho thought, stunned. "How in the devil



can a man fight a shadow?"

Then a more cheerful thought occurred to him.

"Still, on the other hand, how can a shadow fight a man? The things may have some queer mental powers, but aside from that I don't see what they could do. I'll bet they haven't been able to get the chief down!"

His active mind began to make plans. He and Grag had to get into the citadel somehow, to help Curt if he needed aid.

Otho rejected the possibility of entry by climbing down into this central court. Too many of the shadowy Allus were coming and going constantly down there. He'd be sure to be detected, even if he were able to make it.

The android quickly decided to return to Grag and explore the exterior of the citadel for a possible way inside. There was no opening anywhere in the roof, but they might find one somewhere in the walls.

Hurriedly Otho retraced his way over the synthestone roof of the mighty pile, and with spidery agility and quickness climbed back down the outer wall. Then he raced for the edge of the luminous green jungle.

Grag greeted him with a complaint.

"You took long enough up there! I was beginning to think they had you. What did you find out?"

"Plenty!" retorted Otho. He told rapidly of what he had seen.

**T**HE big robot listened incredulously.

"You mean those Allus are nothing but shadows?"

"They look like shadows, but there must be more to them than that," Otho corrected. "The point is, there's no practicable way into the place by the roof. We'll have to look for some crack or window in the wall."

The two Futuremen started to reconnoiter the mighty citadel, moving around it and keeping always in the concealment of the jungle. In less than an hour, they were back where they had started from, baffled. The structure's whole exterior was blank and without openings, except for the single entrance into which ran the white road from Mloon.

"Not a chink big enough for a Mercurian rat to get through!" exclaimed Otho, exasperated. "Well, there's only one thing to do. We'll have to dig a tunnel up into the cursed place."

Grag stared at him.

"Are you crazy? There's that big, wide entrance right in front of us. We'll go in through it."

"Don't be dumb all your life, Grag!" flared Otho impatiently. "Didn't I tell you that entrance would be guarded somehow by the Allus? A child could see that."

"Querdel went in and out of it in his power-car," retorted Grag. "I saw him come out and speed south, while I was waiting for you."

"Naturally, the Allus would let Querdel in and out, for he's one of their tools," Otho pointed out. "But you can bet a planet that if we tried to walk in there, we'd run right into a terrible trap."

"We've got to get in, and that door's the only way in, and so I'm going through it," Grag announced calmly.

And the big metal robot, with Eek still clinging to his shoulder, stalked straight out of the jungle toward the entrance of the citadel.

Otho swore furiously, and then hastened after the robot, with Oog trotting hastily at his heels. The android caught up with Grag just a few yards outside the yawning entrance.

"Grag, don't be an idiot!" Otho pleaded. "If you weren't so cursed thick-headed, you'd know that we'll never get in this way."

Grag paid no attention. The robot's simple mind was thoroughly made up. Curt Newton was inside, here was a way to get in, and he was going that way without any further talk. Grag could be obstinate upon occasion, and this was one of the times.

They now could see that the big, open entrance that pierced the citadel's massive black wall was curtained by a zone of dark haze.

"See—that haze is a force-barrier of some kind!" Otho expostulated. "It'll either blast us to bits, or else set off an alarm that will bring the Allus down on our heads."

"Aw, it's just a little dark haziness,



that's all," replied Grag with sublime denseness. "There's nothing to be afraid of."

"Gods of space, give me patience!" raved Otho. Then he uttered a grating laugh. "All right, if you're determined on committing suicide, I'll join you. I'd just as soon get killed here and now, as to have to put up with your company any longer."

And as Grag strode forward into the entrance, Otho accompanied him with angry despair.

**C**AUTIOUSLY they entered the dark haze that curtained the doorway. They felt nothing whatever. And in a moment they had passed through it into a big, vaulted black gallery that was utterly empty. There was no alarm.

"You see?" said Grag blandly. "There wasn't anything to be afraid of."

"I can't understand it!" stammered Otho, his jaw dropping in amazement. "The Allus must have put that hazy curtain of force there to bar out intruders! Why, in the name of all the ten thousand separate devils of the nine worlds, didn't it keep us out?"

"I'm afraid your nerves aren't very good, Otho," said Grag patronizingly. The robot looked calmly around. "Let's see what's in here. I don't see how we're going to find Curt in this big labyrinth."

Dumfounded by the fact that there had been no alarm or challenge, Otho followed the robot through one of the doors that pierced the walls of the big inside gallery.

They found themselves looking into a maze of curving passageways, whose black recesses were illumined by a bright, sourceless white light. Otho shrank back and pulled the robot with him, as he glimpsed two dark figures gliding across one of the distant corridors.

They were two Allus. The unearthly black, shadowy creatures of monstrously serpentine outline looked like dark ghosts as they moved across the distant passage. They trailed behind them the curious, dragging filaments of shadow that seemed permanently attached to their weird forms.

"So those are the Allus," muttered Grag as the two black silhouettes disappeared. "They don't look like any race I ever saw."

Otho's attention had shifted.

"What the devil is the matter with that cursed moon-pup?" he demanded angrily.

Eek, crouched on Grag's shoulder, seemed convulsed by a spasm of terror. His little gray body was trembling violently, and his beady eyes were dilated with fear as he tried to hide under the robot's arm.

Eek's cowardice was notorious among the Futuremen. He was inclined to scare at anything unfamiliar. Yet never in the past had the moon-pup exhibited such abject terror as now.

"He's afraid of the Allus," Grag said solicitously. "You know, he's strongly telepathic—it's the way moon-dogs communicate. He must be getting some fearful thought-impressions from the Allus in here."

"Say, maybe we can use Eek to find the chief!" Otho whispered excitedly. "We know Curt's in here somewhere. But if we go blundering around searching for him, we're sure to be discovered. But Eek ought to be able to sense Curt telepathically, and lead us to him."

Grag at once accepted the suggestion.

"I'm sure he can do it. I'll tell him what we want."

Grag told Eek by thinking, since that was the way he always gave his orders to the telepathic moon-pup who could not speak or hear.

"Find Curt, Eek!" Grag ordered. He added as an inducement, "If you can get to Curt you'll be safe, Eek!"

Safety was what Eek craved most, at the moment. Galvanized, he scrambled down onto the floor and started on a run along the outermost of the curving corridors before them.

The two Futuremen followed, praying inwardly that they would meet none of the Allus. They believed that Eek would sense and fearfully avoid the shadowy aliens, and so it proved. For after leading them for some minutes along the corridors, Eek darted through a door in the wall.



**T**HE door was curtained by one of the barriers of dark, hazy force. That did not prevent the two Future-men from entering. They found themselves in a small cell. Eek was leaping and bounding in frantic pleasure around a man who had risen in astonishment to his feet.

It was Curt Newton.

"Grag! Otho!" exclaimed Captain Future incredulously. "How in the name of all that's holy did you get in here? Were you captured?"

Otho explained their adventures in swift, excited phrases. As he did so, the android noted the haggardness and pallor of Curt's features. He thought that he had never seen such a strain on his leader's face.

"So we walked right in through the front door, and Eek led us to you!" Otho finished. "Though I still don't see how in the world we were able to pass the barrier of force across the entrance."

"Otho, I can understand that," Curt Newton said eagerly. "That barrier is a curtain of mental force—a pattern of electromagnetic thought-impulses, which impresses upon the brain of any man who enters it that he must on no account go through the door. My cell has such a barrier."

"But," Curt continued, "that barrier of electromagnetic thought-impulses is designed to bar out *human* intruders. Its frequency must be the same as the frequency of impulses in the human brain. You and Grag, though, are not ordinary humans."

"Your artificially created brains function at a different electrical frequency than the human mind. Therefore the thought-barriers of the Allus have no effect upon you two."

"Sure, that's it," said Grag complacently. "I figured that all out before, and that's why I knew we could pass the barrier."

"In a space-rat's eye, you did!" retorted Otho wrathfully. "You were just dumb enough to try it, and got a lucky break, that's all. I should have remembered that the Allus' mental force failed against us before."

Captain Future interrupted with a fiercely impatient gesture.

"Listen to me! The coming of you

two is a godsend. It may furnish a chance to save Joan from those alien devils."

"Joan? Is she here?" exclaimed Otho startledly.

"She'll be here soon," Curt answered.

He told rapidly of the intention of the Allus to extort further information from him by threatening the girl.

"Why, the dirty so-and-sos!" swore Otho. "I'd like to exterminate the whole shadowy crowd of them!"

"Otho, maybe we can do just that, if we can make a particular effort," Curt declared feverishly. "The clue that explains the nature of the Allus is in what you saw in that central court. I want you to tell me every detail you noticed, especially about that arched doorway into nothingness."

Otho complied, quickly describing the entire scene he had witnessed, when he had spied upon the Allus from the roof of the citadel.

Captain Future's gray eyes flashed.

"It all fits together," he breathed.

"It's incredible, but I believe it's true."

"You mean, you know now what the Allus are?" Grag asked, staring.

"I'm sure of it," Curt replied. "There's only one explanation that fits all the facts. The Allus have no material existence at all!"

"What are you talking about?" exclaimed Otho dismayedly. "Chief, are you sure you're not delirious?"

"I tell you, it's the only answer," Curt insisted. "The home of the Allus is in the four-dimensional void outside the bubble of our three-dimensional cosmos. Therefore, the material bodies of the Allus out there must be four-dimensional matter."

**H**IS eyes flared with excitement.

"Such matter could not enter our three-dimensional cosmos! That's not just my own opinion. When he questioned me, Ruun remarked that energy could pass from one universe to the other, whereas matter could not. Therefore, it's scientifically impossible for the Allus to exist in our cosmos!"

"The ones in this cursed citadel certainly exist!" Otho exclaimed. "Why,



they've mastered this whole world!"

"They do exist, but not materially," Curt qualified. "Those shadowy figures consist not of matter, but of photons—particles of energy!"

Rapidly, Captain Future unfolded the astounding explanation that his brilliant mind had pieced together from the scientific evidence.

"The Allus are real, four-dimensional creatures inhabiting the four-dimensional abyss outside our cosmos. They needed power, and decided to enter our cosmos and set up here a giant transformer, which would draw in the energy of our sun and pour it into their own strange universe. Their initial step was to open a door between universes, first getting into contact with Querdel and the Cometae rulers and persuading them to aid.

"The door was open—but the Allus couldn't themselves come through it. Their four-dimensional bodies couldn't exist in our cosmos. But energy, which is dimensionless, could pass back and forth through that door between universes. Atoms, which are particles of matter, couldn't pass through. But photons, which are particles of energy, could.

"So the Allus projected artificial bodies of photons through the door! Their shadowy figures that we see here are merely photon-patterns, which are directly connected by those filaments of energy with their tangible bodies on the other side of the door. They project their minds along that filament into the black photon-bodies that we see here. Thus, in those photon-shapes, the Allus are able to act in this universe."

Captain Future's gray eyes were blazing now.

"It's the only possible scientific explanation. And it gives us a thousand-to-one chance of ridding our cosmos forever of the Allus' threat."

Otho gasped. "I get it, Chief! If we could close that door—"

"If we could close the door, it would cut the filament connection between the Allus' real bodies in the outer abyss and their photon-bodies here, and thus end all their infernal activities in this universe!" Curt finished for him.

## CHAPTER XIV

### *Curt's Way*



THE three comrades gazed at each other with a common excitement, crouching close together in the little black cell.

"Can we do it, Chief?" asked Grag quickly. "Can we close that door?"

"It should be possible," muttered Curt Newton. "From Otho's description, the mechanism consists of a frame of super-powered magnetic coils, which set up intersecting fields that cause an unprecedented space-strain. Theoretically, scientists have always known that a strong enough strain would rip open an aperture in three-dimensional space. Actually, it's never been done by any System scientist, because it would require vast power.

"But the Allus are using vast power—power of this comet's electric coma. By means of it, they keep the space-strain always operating, the door constantly open. They daren't let it close."

"Then if we wrecked those magnet coils, the door would close?" cried Otho.

Captain Future nodded.

"It would. But can we get at the coils? You said the wall of electric flame around the court had no break in it."

"The devil, I forgot that!" exclaimed Otho, crestfallen. "And that stumps us. The photon-bodies of the Allus could go through that ring of electric fire, but it would blast you or me in an instant."

"I don't think it would blast *me*!" Grag suggested eagerly. "You know the outer surface of my body is dielectric metal. I'll bet I could get through it."

"I doubt it." Curt hesitated. "Yet there's no other possibility. Grag, if you're willing, we'll try it. Come on—let's get out of here."

"I thought you couldn't pass



through the barrier of mental force across the door of this cell?" objected Otho.

"I can't, of my own accord," retorted Curt. "But you two can drag me through it."

"Great space-gods, I never thought of that!" exclaimed the android. "Come on, Grag—get hold of the chief."

Grasping Captain Future firmly by the arms, the two Futuremen approached the cell door. As they entered the curtain of hazy force across it, a frantic clamor awoke in Curt's brain.

"I don't want to go out into the hall!" he thought fiercely. "I don't want to leave the cell!"

His obsession was so powerful that he struggled fiercely to pull back into his prison. But Grag's great grip dragged him out through the hazy curtain, despite his resistance. The moment they were out in the corridor and clear of the mental barrier, Curt's mental revulsion ceased to exist.

"Thanks, boys!" he muttered. "Now we've got to find a way to that central court where the door is located. It should be in this direction. I suppose we have not much chance of reaching it without the Allus' knowledge."

"I've got Eek here with me," Grag told him. "He's scared to death of the Allus, and can sense them long before we can see them. He'll warn us of any of them ahead."

They began the hazardous search through the labyrinthine halls and corridors of the vast black citadel. Twice in the next few minutes, Eek showed wild panic when they were about to enter passageways. They hastily took other turnings, knowing that the little moon-pup had sensed Allus ahead.

They passed unoccupied laboratories and supply rooms, in which lay great masses of mechanisms and apparatus of totally new and unfamiliar design.

Curt guessed that these were part of the giant transformer the Allus planned to build, for the theft of limitless power from this cosmos.

ONCE only Eek's panicky warning enabled them to shrink back as one of the dark Allus glided across the corridor ahead. Curt was near despair. Their time was short, for soon Querdel would arrive with Joan. Then the Allus would summon him and find him gone from his cell.

They entered a corridor, whose far end blazed with a sunlike brilliance that outshone the citadel's sourceless illumination.

"That's the court of the door!" Otho hissed.

They hastened forward to the end of the passageway, and then crouched concealed in its mouth and gazed out into the court stunned.

Ten feet from them towered the blinding, crackling wall of electrical fire whose unguessable energy poured down like a cataract from the tall electrode rods. This wall of electricity, encircling the whole interior of the court, formed a blinding barrier to their vision.

Captain Future strained his eyes to peer through the flaming barrier. He could only dimly descry the massive apparatus at the center of the court—the ponderous copper arch of the door, and the heavy magnet coils that studded that arch.

A few Allus were coming and going, passing through the wall of crackling flame as though it did not exist. They were fortunately using other entrances of the citadel than the one in which the Futuremen crouched, but Curt realized that discovery might come at any time.

"Look, you can see all those filaments of energy that connect them with the door!" Otho whispered, pointing.

Curt counted no less than twenty of the shadowy threads that led from the door through the electric barrier.

"Then there's no more than twenty of the Allus in the citadel!" Curt muttered incredulously. "Twenty—and they've mastered a world!"

"Shall I go through the electric wall now, Chief?" Grag asked eagerly. "See, there's no Allus out there right now."

"Yes—try to make it, Grag," Captain Future said tensely. "If you get



through, wreck those coils around the door. All depends on you."

An opportunity had come to them sooner than Curt had hoped. For the moment, there were none of the dark Allus anywhere in the court. Grag hastily strode out toward the blinding, crackling wall of electric flame. The giant robot stalked right into the cataract of force.

They saw Grag stagger and stop. The robot swayed drunkenly, half hidden from view by the torrents of raving, brilliant energy that were overwhelming him. Then Grag fell backward out of the wall of flame and lay motionless on the paving.

"He couldn't get through!" Captain Future exclaimed. "Quick, Otho—help me get him in here!"

They darted out to the fallen robot. He had fallen clear of the crackling cataract, and they were able to seize his massive metal body and drag it back into the precarious concealment of their passageway.

Grag lay utterly lifeless. Curt hastily unclamped the broad metal chest-plate of the robot's mechanical body, then peered into the maze of intricate wiring and apparatus that constituted Grag's vital organs.

"The electricity of the wall got through his outer insulation and short-circuited his electric 'nerves,'" Curt said quickly. "His nerve-fuses are blown out."

**I**T TOOK Captain Future but a few moments to replace the fuses, which were designed to protect Grag's electrical nervous system from too great a voltage. Then he clamped down the robot's chest-plate.

Grag scrambled bewilderedly to his feet.

"What happened? Didn't I make it?"

"No, and it's useless for you to try again, Grag," Curt said somberly. "The Allus' photon-bodies can go through that wall, but we can't."

"Nothing could go through that cursed torrent of power, except one of the Cometæ!" hissed Otho in baffled rage.

Captain Future suddenly stiffened. He stared fixedly at the android.

"Otho, you're right! One of the electric Cometæ *could* get through that wall! I could get through, if I were a Cometæ."

"Chief, what do you mean?" exclaimed Otho anxiously. "You surely can't be thinking of—"

"Otho, the only way for me to slip through this barrier and close the door is to become a Cometæ," Captain Future declared.

The grimness of desperate resolution had come into Curt's gray eyes. His haggard face was set in lines of determination.

"There's one thin chance that I could do it," he continued rapidly. "In the cruciform laboratory where they questioned me, I saw the converter mechanism which the Allus use to transform ordinary men and women into Cometæ. I observed it as closely as I could. I believe that if I could get access to it without their knowledge, I could use it to make myself a Cometæ."

"It's crazy!" burst out Otho in a clamor of frantic expostulation. "Even if you do succeed in closing the door, then you'll be one of those pitiful electric people!"

"Remember that Simon and I believe we can find a way to retransform the Cometæ back to normal," Curt reminded him. "When we find the way, I can become my old self again."

"But suppose you never find such a way?" said Grag, aghast. "Then you'd be a Cometæ forever."

"That would be no sacrifice if I can save our universe," Captain Future said quietly. "Anyway, if we can't find the way to undo that metamorphosis, it would mean that Joan would have to remain a Cometæ. And I'd want to share her fate, then."

The quiet statement put an end to the objections of the two Futuremen for a few moments. Then Otho made a hopeless gesture.

"It's foolish even to talk of it," muttered to android. "How are you going to get access to that converter mechanism without the Allus' knowledge? You said that it was located in what seemed their chief laboratory. Some of the Allus will be there, too."

"We'll have to draw them out of



there somehow—and at once,” Curt said swiftly. “We’ve little time to work.”

He looked at Grag.

“Grag, you can help divert the Allus’ attention. Will you do it? It means taking a chance they might destroy you.”

Grag uttered an offended growl.

“What do you mean—will I do it? Have I ever refused to take chances? And aren’t you yourself going to take the craziest chance of all?”

“Then do this,” Captain Future instructed the robot. “Make your way back out to the entrance of the citadel. Set up a big uproar there at once. Start smashing everything you see. That should bring all the Allus in the citadel. Try to keep them out there as long as you can.”

Grag’s photo-electric eyes gleamed with understanding.

“I get it, Chief. I’ll make a racket that’ll go down in the history of this comet!”

And the big robot, without further discussion, hurried away back along the passageway by which they had come. Little Eek, his moon-pup pet, went with him.

A FEW minutes later, the dim sound of a distant, banging clamor reached the ears of Curt and Otho. From the volume of noise, Grag was more than living up to his promise of creating a disturbance.

Crouched in their precarious concealment, Curt and his comrade glimpsed several Allus gliding swiftly through the inner corridors, in the direction of the citadel entrance. They passed out of sight.

“That should have drawn every Allus in the place out there,” Curt muttered. “They’d be startled and alarmed by the fact that someone had entered their citadel, despite its barriers. Come on, Otho!”

In a hasty run, the tall, red-headed planeteer led the way through the maze of labyrinthine passages in the direction of the cruciform laboratory. His remembrance of the citadel’s interior plan did not fail Captain Future. In a few moments, he and Otho reached the entrance to the fountain-

head of Allus science. A glance inside showed them that it was unattended now.

Grag’s disturbance had quite evidently drawn away its occupants. The distant clamor of that disturbance was still going on.

“We’ve little time!” Curt exclaimed, panting, as they sprang into the laboratory. “It won’t take long for the Allus to gain mental mastery over even so unfamiliar a type of mind as Grag’s.”

He ran to the big converter mechanism in an alcove which the Allus had utilized to make the Cometae into an electric race.

Its central feature was a massive, barrel-shaped copper chamber, eight feet high. In the floor and ceiling of this chamber were set a very great array of clustered, tiny lenses. Around the copper chamber, and connected to it by complex cables, stood a number of totally unfamiliar mechanisms, whose purpose was quite unguessable.

“Oh, Chief, this is hopeless!” groaned Otho after a look at the enigmatic mechanism. “We don’t know anything about Allus science. We couldn’t fathom the design of this apparatus in days of study—let alone in the few minutes we have.”

“That’s true,” Captain Future admitted tautly. “But even though we don’t know how the thing works, we may be able to put it into operation. A savage wouldn’t have the faintest idea how an electric light works, yet he could turn it on if he found the switch.”

Curt was already tensely examining the complex mechanism.

“The Allus used this machine for just one purpose—the conversion of men and women into electric beings,” he was muttering. “It stands to reason the Allus would have the thing set to project the correct forces that cause that metamorphosis in the cells of the human body. If we could find out how to turn it on—”

Yet during the next few moments of frantic study, Curt Newton almost lost hope himself. The science and mechanics of the alien Allus were completely unlike those of the System. Even Captain Future, master of Sys-



tem science, could comprehend almost nothing of the converter's design.

But he did locate the heavy main cable that brought power to the machine. Hastily he traced the cable in search of a switch.

He found no switch. The cable went straight into the complex apparatus around the copper chamber. At one point, the cable passed through a square box on which was mounted a silver disk. But though Curt twisted and tugged at the disk, it did not move nor was there any result.

"It looks as though it might be a switch—but it can't be moved," Curt said in exasperation. His haggard face was dripping with sweat. "Yet there must be some kind of power cut-off."

**F**RENZIEDLY he retraced the power cable, but there was no break in it except that square box and silver disk. Captain Future felt his hopes sinking fast. His plan had been too fantastic to succeed, after all.

He could hear the distant clamor of Grag's disturbance dying down, as though the Allus were overpowering the android. Few minutes were left now. Curt told himself wildly that he must not get rattled, he must think—

"Thinking, that's it!" Curt cried hoarsely. "That must be it! The Allus have immaterial photon-bodies. They could have had these machines built for them by their Cometæ aides, but the Allus' photon-bodies could not turn on a material switch. It'd have to be a switch embodying a telepathic relay, a switch they could turn on by thought!"

"Chief, what do you mean?" Otho exclaimed bewilderedly.

Curt paid no attention. He was staring at the silver disk on the enigmatic switch-box. He was concentrating every ounce of his mental power upon that disk.

"Power on!" he was thinking, over and over.

Something clicked inside the switch-box! The delicate electro-magnetic vibration of Curt's projected thought had operated a sensitive relay.

The massed apparatus around the copper chamber hummed with sudden

power. From the myriad lenses in floor and ceiling poured a gush of brilliant blue light.

"We've got it going!" Curt exclaimed. "I'm going to try it. Otho, if my attempt fails, you try to get away and warn the System of the Allus' plan. Here goes!"

Before Otho could protest further, Captain Future stepped into the chamber—into the full flood of blue force!

He felt an awful, instantaneous impact through every fiber of his body. He reeled beneath the shock of a force cunningly calculated to effect the deepest molecular and atomic changes.

There was a sharp clicking somewhere in the converter's auxiliary apparatus. The blue force changed abruptly to deep purple. A new, staggering shock ran like lightning through Curt Newton's swaying body.

It seemed to him that every cell of his brain and being was on fire. Sick and fainting, he reeled against the side of the chamber. The tinge of the projected force that bathed him was now altering to green. It was running through the spectrum in quick, sharp changes.

Captain Future realized dimly that each change was bringing into play a new frequency of unknown forces. Each alteration was patterned to break down the molecular and atomic structure of different elements of living cells, then remold them into new, strange patterns.

Curt seemed swimming in liquid fire, he felt as though he were breathing flame through his burning body. The wrenching at his body's subtlest and deepest structure made him think that his very flesh was exploding.

The great waves of sickness and weakness that came over him began to dissipate. The fiery torment of his body passed into a strange *tingling*.

"Gods of space!" he heard Otho exclaim hoarsely.

Curt opened his eyes. He still stood in the chamber. But the spectrum-hued forces had reached the end of their gamut and had automatically cut off.

Captain Future looked down at himself. His whole body *glowed*! It



shone with brilliant electric radiance that matched the uncanny tingling which he felt in every fiber.

"I've done it," he said huskily as he staggered out of the copper chamber. "I'm a Cometae—"

He swayed from sick weakness. Instinctively, Otho leaped forward to support him.

But as Otho's hand touched him, the android recoiled with a cry of pain. His arm hung limp, paralyzed by the electric shock of contact with Curt's shining body.

A shuddering horror threatened to dominate Curt Newton's mind in that moment. He had suddenly realized to the full how ghastly a gulf now separated him from all ordinary humanity.

## CHAPTER XV

### *The Door to Outside*



THE distant clamor of Grag's struggle with the Allus had died completely away by this time.

"Chief, they must have overpowered Grag!" Otho was exclaiming frantically. "They'll be back

here in a moment!"

The urgency of his cry penetrated through the sick spasms that still gripped Captain Future. Drunkenly he staggered across the cruciform laboratory. He grasped a heavy metal bar he had noticed amid other tools in a corner. Then, in an unsteady run, he tottered with Otho out into the corridor.

His body still felt utterly devoid of strength from the terrific shock he had undergone. He felt at each step that he could not make another, but always his indomitable will forced him forward.

His outraged, metamorphosed body clamored for rest. He told himself despairingly that even if he could manage to reach the inner court, he would not have enough strength to do what must be done to close the door.

Yet blind purpose kept him stumbling forward through the corridors.

They emerged, Curt and Otho, into the central court. A few yards in front of them loomed the blinding, crackling cataract of electric flame that walled everything inside the court. With a convulsive effort, Captain Future pitched forward into that raving torrent.

Stunned, blinded, shocked by impact of inconceivable electric force, he came to a halt in the middle of the roaring barrier. He was standing in a raging inferno of electricity that would have destroyed an ordinary human being in the wink of an eye.

Yet, weirdly enough, Curt Newton felt suddenly stronger. His tingling electric body was drinking in the energy that was now its food, from the flood of electrical power in which he stood. He could feel that new energy seething through every fiber of his being.

"Chief, hurry!" Otho's frantic cry reached his ears.

Curt lunged on, through the wall of electricity and into the interior of the court. He stumbled straight toward the massive door.

It was surrounded by the bulky, enigmatic pieces of apparatus which fed it unceasing power from the electric cataract. But the door itself towered up above everything else.

It was a massive, arched copper frame, ten feet high and eight feet wide. Inset around this frame were sixteen bulging, complex coils, linked by baffling complexities of wiring to the mechanisms which fed them power. Curt knew that these were the magnet coils whose intersecting fields set up the constant space-strain that held the door open.

But it was the door itself at which Captain Future wildly stared, like a man turned to stone.

"God!" he husked through stiff lips.

It was not an expletive of astonishment, but a prayer. He, first of all men, was looking through a rent in the fabric of the cosmos into the outer abyss. He was looking Outside!

The arch of the door framed darkness. But it was no darkness such



as Captain Future had ever seen before. It was the murky dusk of a world whose light is too alien for human eyes ever fully to discern.

That murky twilight shrouded a scene that no human gaze could entirely comprehend. For the world into which Curt Newton gazed was a world of the Outside, where there are four dimensions instead of three. And he, a three-dimensional creature of a tri-dimensioned universe, could not receive clear sense-impressions of such a world.

**T**HERE seemed to be a city in the murky dusk of that Outside universe. But its buildings were of a fantastic geometry that defied reason. Those black structures rose from slender bases and mushroomed outward like giant, angled black fungi growing upon slender stems.

The streets of that mad city were all perfectly straight to the eye. Yet each of those streets returned upon itself to form a circle, in insane defiance of three-dimensional geometry. The perspective of the black city was that of a surrealist nightmare, for the most distant of the mushroom buildings bulked far larger to Curt's eyes than the nearer ones.

Most ghastly of all were the dark creatures who glided in troops and throngs through the straight-circular streets of the Outside city. Their bodily outlines were vaguely like the silhouetted shadows of the Allus whom Curt encountered. There was the same blood-freezing suggestion of serpentine bodies and limbs, of faces that were masses of feelers only. But the forms of those dark citizens of the abysmal city seemed to change in outline with each movement they made. And they walked *through* the walls of their own city!

Captain Future, rooted in horrible fascination by this ghastly vision into the Outside, noted then the most hideous detail of all. Through the door, into the murky dusk of the four-dimensioned city, ran the score of shadowy filaments that connected the photon-bodies of the Allus in the citadel with their real bodies in the Outside metropolis!

"Chief, the Allus are coming!"

Otho's distant yell broke the trance of horror that had held Curt Newton petrified.

He flung himself upon the magnet coils that studded the arch, endeavoring to tear loose their feed-wires. But the tough wiring resisted his stamina.

Baffled, Captain Future lifted his heavy metal bar and thrust it with all his strength into the complex windings of the lowest magnet coil. He tore and twisted, in frantic haste, until a flash of brilliance showed that he had shorted and destroyed the coil.

He destroyed a second coil in the same manner. And now the aperture of murky darkness in the door had grown smaller. The space-strain that held the door open was weakening!

"Hurry, Chief! They—"

Otho's warning cry was suddenly cut short, at the moment that Captain Future wrecked the third coil.

The dark opening of the door was now but a few feet in diameter! With mingled fear and frantic revulsion at the insane world beyond that opening, Curt raised his bar to hack at the fourth magnet coil.

"Earthman, stop!"

The mental command rang icily in his brain, and at the same moment he felt his whole mind and body frozen motionless. He made a superhuman mental effort to complete his movement, but could not control a muscle.

The Allus had come! Their dark, monstrous photon-shapes were all about him, beating down his will and resistance with all the vast mental force they possessed.

"Earthman, you die at once for this attempt."

The most awful thing was that even now, there was no trace of so human an emotion as anger in the Allus' mental voice—nothing but icy condemnation.

"You have tried to thwart our great work, to close the door that was so hard to open."

**C**URT knew that he was going to die with the bitter taste of failure in his mouth. If he'd had but a few moments more—



He stood there, frozen with the heavy bar still upraised in his hands, knowing that the Allus were gathering their mental force to slay him in his tracks.

"Curt!"

That scream was in a girl's voice. The radiant figure of Joan Randall had burst suddenly through the electric wall, running toward him.

Not until later was Captain Future to know that Querdel and Thoryx had brought Joan to the citadel just as the Allus overpowered Grag. Not until then was he to learn that the sudden alarm, which had brought all the Allus to this court, had left both Grag and Joan temporarily free to act.

To Curt, the girl's appearance was startling as a miracle. And it was no less amazing to the Allus. The dark masters whirled toward her shining figure—

Their startled diversion of attention left Curt Newton free for an instant of their mental grasp. He felt strength in his body once more. And instantly he completed his arrested movement, to bring his bar crashing down upon the door's fourth magnet coil.

The coil flashed and burned out. The shrunken, dark opening of the door instantly disappeared. The weakening of one of the intersecting magnetic fields had ended the space-strain that kept open the aperture in space.

The door to Outside was closed. The filaments which connected the real bodies of the Allus with their photon-beings had been severed! The sole link between two cosmic worlds had been cut in twain.

"Curt, look!" gasped Joan.

The Allus' dark, shadowy shapes still stood all around them. But now they had no movement or life. Now they were mere clouds of photons, since the minds that had animated them were forever cut off.

Their shadow-shapes became rapidly more tenuous, more immaterial. They lost outline, drifted away and dissolved—into free photons, into nothingness.

"Joan, we did it!" Captain Future said hoarsely. "We closed the door.

And they'll never again get anyone on this side to open it for them. They're penned back in the Outside forever. They can never loot the power of our universe."

From outside the flame-walled court came the triumphant, booming shout of Grag.

"Chief, guess what happened! When the Allus came rushing here and left Joan and me free, Querdel and Thoryx tried to kill me. But they didn't!"

"I'll say they didn't!" came Otho's spluttering, excited cry. "Chief, Grag finished off both Thoryx and Querdel!"

"Then it's all over," Captain Future whispered wearily. "The Allus gone, the door closed, and the tyrants of the Cometae dead."

But Joan Randall stood looking up at him. There were tears on her strangely shining face as she contemplated his radiant, electric figure.

"But Curt, you are a Cometae now!" she sobbed. "Why did you do it?"

"For the same reason that you did, Joan."

He stepped forward and took her in his arms. He had hungered for her all this time, tortured by the knowledge that he could not even touch her electric form.

But now that his life and flesh were also electrified, now that he too was one of the radiant Cometae, there was nothing to prevent him. And to Curt Newton, it seemed worth all the agony of that terrible transformation, to be able to hold her close to him again.

**B**UT there was deep dread shadowing Joan's face as she gazed up finally in his arms.

"Curt, what if you are not able to find a way of undoing the transformation? Then you'll never be able to leave the comet. You'll have to live on here as one of the Cometae, never roaming space again."

He looked down at her steadily.

"Joan, I hope I can find the method of reversing the change, for the sake of the Cometae people. But if I can't, I wouldn't mind living here the rest of my life—with you."

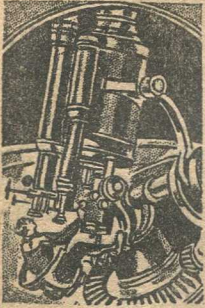
She buried her face in his shoulder, and her voice came to him as a muf-



fled whisper. "I'm almost selfish enough to hope that you don't find the way, Curt!"

## CHAPTER XVI

### *Lost Paradise*



CURT NEWTON stepped back from the work that had so intently engrossed him. He glanced around at the group that crowded the Allus' cruciform laboratory. His shining figure stooped slightly from fa-

tigue. "What do you think, Simon?" he asked with some anxiety.

The Brain, whose strange form had been hovering beside Captain Future and collaborating in the work, answered with his usual deliberation.

"I don't know, lad. I think we've got the right combination of frequencies, but of course we can't be entirely sure."

There was a pause of oppressive silence in the laboratory. The Allus were gone forever from this citadel, in which they had plotted to steal the power of a cosmos. But the shadowy influence of those alien beings, about whom so little really would ever be known, seemed to haunt the somber halls and corridors where once they had been masters.

Like unearthly monuments to their colossal ambitions towered the big, unfamiliar mechanisms of the laboratory. And the people in the room felt patently uneasy.

Beside the Futuremen and Joan, the group included Marshal Ezra Gurney, Tiko Thrin, the Martian scientist, and the shining figures of the Cometæ captains, Zarn and Aggar.

Aggar was now the chosen ruler of the Cometæ. His people had acclaimed him as such, in the wild revolution that had swept away the nobles and their guards forever when word of the Allus' eclipse had reached Mloon.

Weeks had passed since then. And

during all that time, Captain Future and the Futuremen had labored to solve the enigma of the Allus' alien science. They had disassembled and studied one after another of the dark masters' strange machines, in the hope of learning a method by which to reverse the circuits of the big converter and use it for re-transformation of the electric people.

Curt himself was a brilliant scientist and he had the help of the Futuremen and of Tiko Thrin. But even so, he had been baffled. The design and purpose of the Allus' apparatus had seemed unfathomable. It was only by long, toilsome study and experiment that they had finally made a tentative rewiring of the converter.

"I believe that it will now project forces of a frequency-pattern to reverse the molecular metamorphosis and make electrified cells normal again," Captain Future said slowly. "But I can't be sure!"

He gazed with a tinge of doubt at the big, barrel-shaped copper chamber and its surrounding apparatus.

"We had to work so much in the dark," he added, frowning. "We had to try to understand the designs and thought-processes of creatures that never even belonged to this cosmos. And if we've erred and have got the frequencies wrong, this will destroy a man instead of making him normal."

Joan touched his arm reassuringly. "It will be all right, Curt. You've just worked too hard on it."

Captain Future declared his resolution.

"I'm going to try it now—on myself. I won't allow another man to take the first chance with it."

"No, Curt—you musn't!" Joan cried, her eyes wide with alarm. "If anything happened to you, the rest of us would never be able to solve the problem. Let me be the first!"

"Heaven forbid!" exclaimed the Brain.

"Do you think I'd let her?" protested Curt Newton. "Not in a million years!"

Aggar settled the argument by stepping into the big copper chamber. The new Cometæ ruler bellowed in his bluff voice:



"It's my duty to take the first risk for my people. Go ahead and turn it on."

**R**ELUCTANTLY Captain Future opened the switch that fed power into the redesigned converter. He and the others watched tensely.

Brilliant red rays streamed from the lenses above and below, to bathe Aggar's massive figure in a weird aura. They saw the Cometae ruler stagger from the shock, but he remained resolutely upright.

The red shifted into orange, the orange into yellow, as the changing frequencies of force ran down the spectrum. By the time the hue had reached violet, they could see that the intrinsic electric brilliance of Aggar's body was rapidly fading. And when he stepped out of the chamber, he was no longer a shining figure but a normal man!

Weak and swaying, Aggar looked down at himself, held his hands wonderingly before his eyes. A great joy lit his eyes.

"I'm a man again!" he said hoarsely. "I'm an electric travesty no longer. I'll age and grow hungry and get sick now, and finally I'll die. But thank the gods, until then I'll really live!"

Captain Future was the next to undergo the metamorphosis. And after that gruelling ordeal, when he too stepped out as a normal man again, Joan insisted on being next. When she emerged, Curt took her thankfully in his arms.

"Now for my people!" Aggar roared joyfully. "There's not one but won't want to trade back that pitiful electric immortality for real life!"

It proved so, indeed. The next days saw a great migration of the Cometae people along the road from Mloon to the black citadel. They passed by day and by night through the copper chamber, until at last the last of the Cometae had regained normal humanity.

There were feastings and rejoicings in Mloon beneath the coma-sky. Infants would be born again, and the cries of children would be heard once more. The comet people were returning to the ancient ways of their race.

But Ezra Gurney was worried. He confided his fears to Curt and the Futuremen.

"How in the name of Pluto's fiends are we fellows from outside the comet goin' to get back out of it, Cap'n Future? Our ships are still here, but we can't get 'em out through that coma!"

"Don't worry, Ezra," Captain Future advised. "There won't be any difficulty about that."

Nor was there. The great magnet which the Cometae had built, under orders of the Allus, was now made the instrument by which their ships were enabled to leave the comet. It was not hard to alter the magnet so that it projected a beam of reversed polarity out through the coma's shell.

Into that beam, one by one, rose the spaceships that had been held captive so long. And each ship, as it entered the beam, was flung out with a force as great as that which originally had dragged it in. Each ship was hurled through the opening made by the beam in the coma, to find itself in the familiar void of System space once more.

The *Comet*, ship of the Futuremen, was the last of the craft to depart, for the tearful farewells of the grateful Cometae had been long. But at last the Futuremen and Ezra and Joan found themselves in space once more.

"What a relief!" cried Otho, gazing around with sparkling eyes at the familiar vista of black gloom and bright stars. "I'm cursed if I ever want to go within a hundred light-years of any comet again!"

"You'd be back there yet if it wasn't for the help of my little dog Eek," declared Grag, proudly caressing the moon-pup that was snuggling in his arm.

"What are you talking about?" cried Otho. "That little pest didn't do anything but go into one panic after another."

"Sure, and it was Eek's wonderful faculty for getting scared that guided us through the Allus citadel," boasted Grag. "You didn't see Oog helping us any. He hasn't enough brains to get scared like that!"



Otho began to rave, and the Brain and Ezra Gurney intervened. Chuckling, Captain Future left them in the control room and went back to look for Joan.

**H** E FOUND her in the cabin, gazing intently backward through a window at the brilliant flare of Halley's comet. It was growing rapidly smaller as their ship throbbed toward Earth.

To Curt's surprise, he found a glimmer of tears in her eyes when he turned her around.

"Why, Joan, what's the matter?"

"Oh, nothing—I'm just foolish," she murmured. "But I can't help feeling a little sorry to leave the comet."

He did not understand. Joan looked up at him with deep emotion in her fine eyes.

"Out here, Curt, you belong to the whole System. I know you love me, but duty comes first—your obligation to use your scientific powers to help the System peoples.

"But if we'd been forced to remain on the comet world, cut off forever from the outside, nothing else would have come first for us. It could have been a paradise for us. But it's lost now."

Curt Newton bent and kissed her.

"Joan, don't feel like that. Some day when our work is done, we'll find our own paradise. I know a little asteroid that's waiting for us. It's just like a garden. Some day."

THE FURTHER EXPLOITS OF CAPTAIN FUTURE  
IN

## PLANETS IN PERIL

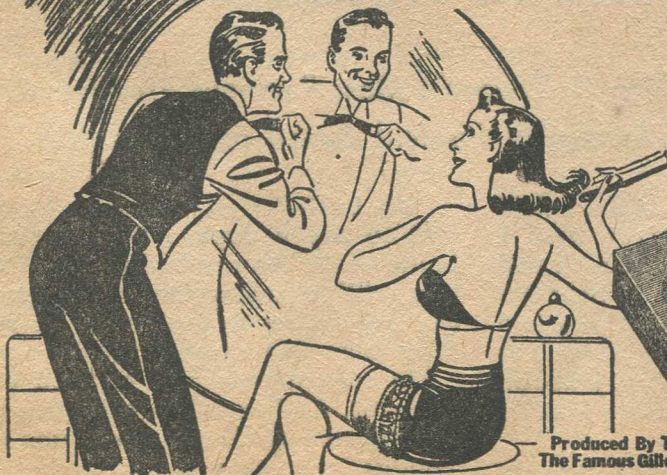
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I had become a lion, my director a bear. The sight almost made me lose my appetite

# The Lion-Hearted

By WILLIAM MORRISON

*The Hormones with Which Hollywood's Most Pompous Producer Came to Grips Were a Thoroughly Insolent Bunch of Bad Actors!*

**M**AIDA HARRISON screamed in terror and I smiled, happy at last. I had been waiting all afternoon to hear her scream like that. Now that she had come through as I expected, there was nothing more for me to worry about. As I was walking away from her, an assistant came over to me.

"There's someone waiting to see you, Mr. Turner," he said.

"Did my secretary make an appointment?"

"No, but—"

"You are a dope, and you should know better than to bother me," I told him. "You understand how busy I am, producing five pictures at once. Next time this happens, you're fired."

He turned pale and cringed away from me. And then I saw the stranger. He was one of those people who look younger than they are. His face was thin, and behind his glasses, his eyes were big and staring. I could see that he was extremely unimportant.



I don't associate with such people if I can help it.

"Who let you in?" I demanded.

"Nobody. I found my own way."

I could tell he was lying, and I decided that somebody would get fired for this.

"All right," I said. "Now that you're here, find your way out."

"Not before I talk to you, Mr. Turner." He swallowed nervously. "Let me introduce myself. I'm Dr. Brackett."

That reminded me. At noon, my steak was too underdone, or maybe it was too big, and after eating it I felt very heavy. I could hardly keep my eyes open. And a little while ago, there had been a pain in my stomach. So I asked him about it.

"I'm not a physician," he replied. "Although I suppose it actually doesn't require a physician to make this diagnosis. One look at you is enough to tell me that if you ate less, you'd feel better. However, that isn't what I wanted to speak to you about.

"I'm a Ph. D., a physiologist. I have made some very startling discoveries about hormones. What is more to the point, I feel that I am on the point of making some even more startling ones."

"So what?" I remarked.

I could tell what was coming. Even if he hadn't insulted me by saying I ate too much, it would have made no difference.

Sure enough, he wanted money. All he needed was a few thousand dollars, and everybody in the world would know how wonderful he was. A genius, no less.

"What made you come to me? What have I got to do with physiology?"

"I've heard of you, Mr. Turner. You're one of the most famous movie producers in the world. You've got courage and daring. You are known as Richard Turner, the lion-hearted."

Even though it was true, it didn't do him any good, because I don't like to be patronized. Also, I have yet to see any other producer in a class with me.

"Money doesn't mean very much to you," he rambled on, "and—"

So that was the way he figured. If I had a billion dollars, how long did he think it would last once I started to throw it away?

"Dr. Brackett," I cut him short, "I can give you your answer in one word. No! Also, if you will please excuse me, I have business to attend to. Over on Stage Five, Maida Harrison is by now rehearsing a scene in which she has to laugh with horror. Mostly, she giggles, and there is only one person in the world who can teach her to laugh with horror, and that is me."

"But, Mr. Turner—" he persisted.

"Deleahanty!" I motioned to the chief studio cop, who was nearby. "Throw this nut out!"

Deleahanty grabbed him by the back of the neck and proceeded to give him the bum's rush.

**S**O THAT was that, and I thought that this Dr. Brackett had gone out of my life.

The picture was going along like all my pictures do, a smash hit in the making. I was giving the public what it wanted: a beautiful star, Maida Harrison; a handsome leading man, George Carter; and a sneering villain, Bruce Archibald. It was three fourths done and by a miracle, nobody had swallowed more than the usual overdose of temperament. I was almost happy.

I sat down in the studio restaurant with Frank Malone, the director, for a bite of lunch. A waiter hurried over to me, and I began to glance at the menu. Then I lifted my eyes from the sautéed mushrooms, and I saw a face I knew.

"I recognize you," I said to the waiter. "You're that stunt man I fired a year ago."

He shook his head.

"My name is Brackett," he replied calmly.

"Now I remember. The doctor that thinks I eat too much." I turned to Frank Malone. "Imagine that, Frank. He thinks I should go hungry!"

Frank was so outraged, he couldn't say a word. But you couldn't keep this doctor quiet.

"We have some very good diets



for reducing, Mr. Turner."

Frank Malone was scared, because he knew I can't stand being insulted. But I smiled. Like a tiger, when I smile, I'm dangerous.

"If you're a doctor, what are you doing, waiting on tables?" I asked softly.

"Because that's one way of earning a living."

"How long have you been working here?" I went on.

"Two weeks."

"Delehanty!" I beckoned to my chief cop.

"Yes, Mr. Turner."

"Take a *good* look at this guy before you throw him out again. I told him I wouldn't have him in the studio. I—mean—what—I—say!"

"Yes, Mr. Turner," he nodded hurriedly.

"Every time you find him here, throw him out!"

"Yes, Mr. Turner," he repeated dutifully. "Come on, you!"

This Dr. Brackett had the cold nerve not to look scared.

"Mr. Turner," he said. "In case you should want to see me, here's my address."

"And why should I want to see you?" I demanded.

"You might be lonesome," he insinuated. "Frightfully lonesome."

I told him what he could do with the address, and then Delehanty did his job, not too gently. Because I am an honest man, Delehanty threw after him the wages that were coming for a week's work.

Another producer might have let this spoil his appetite, but not me. I ate a two-pound steak. Once again I forgot all about this Dr. Brackett.

In order to finish the picture, we needed sunlight of the kind we always have in California. So the next day it rained. You won't believe it, but I saw the rain myself. The day after, however, the sun was beautiful. But when I came to the studio, about eleven o'clock in the morning, work had not yet begun.

I was boiling, and I looked around for somebody to fire, but nobody caught my eye. So I walked over to Frank Malone.

"What," said I, "is the meaning of this?"

"It's the make-up," he answered. "Somehow, it doesn't look right."

I STARED at Maida Harrison. Sure enough, her face looked different. I didn't know what had changed, but I could see that she wasn't as gorgeous as she used to be.

"Come with me," I ordered.

Malone and I walked over to the make-up department. There I laid down an ultimatum.

"Either," I told them, "the make-up is on, perfect by twelve o'clock, or else everybody is fired. That is final!"

You should have seen them run around like mad. By a quarter to twelve, Malone began to shoot the final scenes of the picture.

That shows, I thought, what it takes to make a film. Executive ability. The heart of a lion. Courage to rise to bold decisions. If not for me, the director, the stars, the writers, everybody—they would have been stuck for days. But me, I give an order, and things get done.

After that I was busy with some plans for a new musical. Two days later, however, I saw Malone again.

"Well, is the picture finished?" I kidded him.

He was afraid to look at me.

"It would have been, Mr. Turner, but—"

"Yes, Mr. Malone?" I said icily. "I am listening."

"Well, we've had to throw away all the footage we took the last few days."

"Get new cameramen!" I snapped. "This is ridiculous!"

"But it isn't their fault," he protested. "The make-up—"

"The make-up department is fired!"

"It isn't their fault, either," he said weakly.

"Very well. You, Mr. Malone, are fired!"

"You can't," he shrugged resignedly. "I've got a contract. My agent demands his ten per cent. But the fact is, nobody is to blame. The—the faces of the players have changed!"

"Tell them to shave off their beards," I ordered. "This thing is getting sillier by the minute."



"It's really no joke. George Carter has the look of a wolf. Maida Harrison resembles a cat. And Bruce Archibald doesn't look sinister any more. He's like a sheep." Malone mopped his brow.

"Contract or no contract, Frank Malone, you—are—fired!" I said firmly. "I do not keep lunatics on the payroll. Only my writers."

He was afraid to look me in the eye. I started to tell him that if he had wasted three days' work because he had taken one drink too many, I would sue him. Then I looked up at him, and I almost fell off my chair. Because Frank Malone's face was suddenly the face of a big, good-natured bear!

Something in my brain went pit-a-pat. What could have happened? Who had dared to do this thing to me, Richard Turner? Who had dared to change my actors, my director? I was bursting with fury. If I could have laid my hands on the person responsible, I would have strangled him alive.

And then I began to wonder. It was a terrible thing—but how had it been done? Magic? I don't believe in magic. I am a modern man, free from superstitions. But if not magic, what?

For two whole minutes I stared at Malone, wondering. Then a thought entered my mind, and I laughed.

"What's funny, Mr. Turner?" he asked unhappily.

"I just got an idea. It's so colossal, it'll be gigantic! We'll remake that picture by Fell, 'The Island of Dr. Corot.' What a cast we got!"

"You mean 'The Island of Dr. Moreau,' by H. G. Wells. We could buy the rights, but I don't think—"

"That's the trouble, you never think. Now, take me—"

**T**HE more I thought about the idea, the better it seemed. Maybe this person who had changed my actors had really done me a good turn. I actually got excited. I stood up, and began to walk toward the door.

"Don't waste time, Malone. I'll dig up a couple of writers and put them right to work. What a story!"

"If I were you, Mr. Turner," Malone said hesitantly, "I wouldn't go myself. I'd send someone for those writers."

"Ah! You mean, it isn't dignified for a big man like me to go running around after a couple of typewriter hacks. You're right, Malone. I'll send my secretary."

"Mr. Turner, it isn't that!" he protested. "If you'll just take a look at yourself in the mirror—"

I pride myself on being immaculate. If my tie had been crooked, I would have blushed for shame. But it wasn't that.

As I stared into the mirror, something began to work in back of my brain. I no longer resembled—yes, that was it!—I no longer had the face of a human being!

I collapsed into my seat, and groaned. Malone stood there and looked at me. Instead of sympathy, I could see pleasure on his bearlike features.

"You're fired!" I shouted. "This is the last straw."

Then I covered my face with my hands. I felt like I wanted to die.

I didn't even go to the restaurant for lunch, but had it sent over. Oyster cocktail, cream of tomato soup, three or four lamb chops, some potatoes and two desserts. Because I felt so terrible, I had a double order of strawberry shortcake, and a hot fudge sundae.

When the waiter brought what I had ordered, I was afraid to let him see my face. I turned my back to him.

"Put it down on the desk, clumsy!" I yelled. "Now get out of here."

He closed the door behind him, and I sat down at the desk, feeling sick.

Why did this have to happen to me? Everybody in movies knew me as Richard Turner, the lion-hearted, the man who had more courage in one little finger than the whole rest of the industry in all their heads put together.

Who was the first man to stop making musicals, and turn to westerns? Who was the first man to stop making westerns, and turn back to musicals? While everybody else stood around



waiting and shivering, I plunged right in. They said I was either crazy or fearless. The whole industry admired me. And now this horrible thing—

I went over to the mirror again and forced myself to look carefully. If I was no longer a human being, what was I? A sheep, like Bruce Archibald? A wolf, like George Carter?

I saw right away that I needed a haircut. But that wasn't the main thing. It was my features that I was worried about. My eyes were small and sharp. My mouth was big, my skin yellowish—

I had the face of a lion! I didn't really need a haircut—I had a mane!

For a moment I didn't know what to feel. I was proud, and yet ashamed. It is one thing to have the heart of a lion. But it is something else again to have his face. This might turn out to be acutely embarrassing. Especially to a producer.

I started to feel bad, and groaned. Then I said to myself: This is silly. The lion is the king of beasts. I should be pleased, not sad. And I actually roared, just to see how it would sound.

**I**T was wonderful. It was so frightening, I scared even myself. And for a whole minute I was happy. Then, suddenly, I felt ashamed once more of being an animal. Almost before I knew it, I had growled again.

After what had happened, I had no appetite. But I forced myself to eat, in order to keep up my strength. Out of a sense of duty, I even had still another dessert. Then I thought what to do.

That evening, I was supposed to be guest of honor at a big dinner. How I would have liked to roar at the other guests! But I knew I had better not go. My dignity must go unchallenged.

The next day I was to be introduced to two senators, an admiral, and a governor. They mustn't see me looking like an animal. Why the Will Hays office would object! The day after—I picked up a phone and told the chief studio doctor to come right over.

**B**Y THE time he came, I was fuming. A stunt man had just tried to break his neck. Instead of answering my call right away, the doctor had to waste a half hour trying to patch him up. I said to myself: In a couple of days, when I'm better, this doctor gets fired.

"Well, Mr. Turner," the doctor began heartily, "I hope there's nothing—"

And then he stopped. He had just got a glance at my face.

"Don't tell me it's a hallucination!" I shouted. "I've got the heart of a lion. Now I've got his face, too!"

The doctor stepped back nervously.

"Please, Mr. Turner, not so loud," he begged. "When did this happen?"

"It could have happened a year ago!" I growled. But I just found it out now. What are you going to do about it?"

"I've never come across— Well, really, Mr. Turner, this isn't quite in my line," he said feebly.

"Are you a doctor or are you a quack?" I demanded. "If you're a doctor, stop hemming and hawing, and cure me! If you're a quack, get out!"

"You don't understand, Mr. Turner!" he pleaded. "This is something unprecedented in medical annals. The alteration of your features in this—er—remarkable manner—" He hesitated. "If I could only print your picture in the journal of our medical association!"

I am a man with a calm, an utterly calm temperament. But I picked up the telephone and threw it at him. He ducked.

"It's as if a peculiar set of changes had been induced by hormones—" he went on.

I stopped listening. That word "hormones" was familiar. I had heard it before. But where?

Something clicked in my head like a flash of light, and I had the answer.

"This doctor!" I exclaimed. "He's the one that did it!"

"I beg your pardon?"

"This doctor—what's his name?—Clackett! The one that was a waiter!"



You know how a doctor's mind works. This dope whose salary I'm paying said to me:

"Perhaps, Mr. Turner, you had better take a sedative. I know that the discovery of changes in your features has excited you. I think it might be better—"

"If you think I'm crazy, you're crazy! Get out of here! And send in Delehanty," I roared.

Pretty soon Delehanty knocked at the door.

"Wait a minute," I said hurriedly.

I ran to the bathroom and lathered my face with shaving cream.

"All right, Delehanty. Come in."

He came in, and I could see that he, too, thought I was crazy. I had already shaved that morning. But I never bother my head about what an inferior person thinks.

"Delehanty," I began. "You remember that Dr. Clackett you threw out twice. The one that posed as a waiter."

"Sure, Mr. Turner."

"Find him at once, and bring him here!" I demanded.

I am surrounded by fools. Instead of doing what I had ordered, Delehanty paused.

"He gave you his address, didn't he, Mr. Turner?"

"Idiot! If I had his address, I wouldn't need a detective to find him." Delehanty trembled.

"You have no information that could be of help?" he quavered.

"He's a physiologist, and he works with something called hormones. Now get out—and find him before you're out of a job!"

I washed off the shaving cream and called the doctor again. He wrapped up my face in bandages.

"In case anybody should ask an embarrassing question," I said, "what disease am I sick with?"

"You have a contusion of the skull. You slipped in the bathroom and bumped your head against the wall," he suggested.

"Everybody knows I'm not clumsy," I said indignantly.

"Very well. If you prefer a disease on the order of chicken pox, you may have it. Chicken pox, or measles, or

small pox. But you'll have to be quarantined," he added.

I thought the question over and came to a decision in a flash, as I always do.

"Let it be a contusion," I said.

**W**HEN I walked out of my office everybody stared at me. You might think they had never before seen a man with a bandage on his face. I walked fast, and pretty soon I was over on Stage Five. I must have looked like the Invisible Man, with only my eyes showing, but nobody was interested in me. Everybody was interested in what had happened to himself.

Did you ever see a cat with tears in its eyes? That was Maida Harrison. Bruce Archibald, the sheep-villain, was running around as though he had lost his head. Normally, Archibald couldn't have scared a mouse. And from what I saw of George Carter, he was not going to get any more fan mail from now on. No girl would have trusted herself with a wolf like him.

I held up my hand.

"Listen, everybody!"

There was a sudden quiet. Then George Carter snarled.

"Who the devil are you?"

I am not afraid of dogs, but wolves are a bit too much, even for a man with a lion's heart. I drew back.

"I am Mr. Turner," I said with restrained dignity.

"What are you wearing that bandage for?" he demanded.

"I fell and bruised my head."

"Says you!"

Before I could stop him, he had leaped at me and begun to yank off the bandage.

They all took one look at my face, and it was like a cloud that had been dissolved by the sun. Maida Harrison stopped crying and began to laugh. Bruce Archibald was next, and after him George Carter. I thought everybody was having hysterics.

I waited. When it is necessary, I can have patience.

"Have a good time," I said, my outraged dignity at its supreme test.



"You are pleased to find that we are all in the same boat. That is fine. Go ahead and laugh. But when you are finished, listen to me."

As I had expected, they laughed themselves out. Then an assistant director, who had a face like a fish, but whose name I do not recall, came over to me and complained.

"Mr. Turner, this is a terrible situation! We were supposed to do a few days' shooting to begin the picture, and now we're stuck."

"To begin the picture, or to finish it?"

"To begin. There aren't many scenes left to do, but they come at the beginning of the picture. We put them off until last."

My brain resolved the crisis in a flash.

"And now, because everybody's face has changed, you can't go ahead with your schedule. Never mind, you just listen to me." They could see I had a plan, and they listened.

"Tonight I am assigning a couple of writers to prepare a script in a hurry. The day after tomorrow, we begin shooting."

"Shooting what?"

"'The Island of Dr. Moreau,' by Bernard Shaw, or somebody."

I could hear George Carter snarl, and suddenly it struck me that the idea wasn't popular. Carter bared his wolfine teeth.

"We've been trying to find out what has happened to us," he said hoarsely. "And—we—can't—guess!"

"I can tell you," I said. "It's something called hormones."

He opened his mouth wide, and I could see his sharp fangs. He looked terribly hungry.

"How do you know?" he demanded.

"A man was talking to me about them," I said evasively.

"You don't say! So *you're* the one who's responsible for what has taken place!"

"Me?" I protested. "I give you my word of honor, I had nothing to do with it."

"Don't lie to me, Turner!" He practically howled at me, and my blood ran cold. "You'd better see to it that we change back again—or else!"

"I am doing my best," I assured him hastily. "I have sent out an emergency call for a specialist."

"He'd better be a good one! Because if he isn't—"

"If he isn't—" I repeated nervously.

"Then I'm going to dine on the king of beasts! Have you ever seen me wolf down a lion's heart?" he snarled ominously.

**T**HE terrible significance of what he had said sank into my brain. I shivered. Whether he changed back or not, I decided that his was one contract I was not going to renew.

"Ladies and gentlemen," I began.

Then I realized I had made a mistake, because there was not one of them that resembled anything remotely human. I tried a different tack.

"My friends," I said. "In a few hours at most, this specialist, Dr. Clackett, will be here. Your treatment will begin at once. Undoubtedly, he will be able to cure you in a few days. So have patience."

They were murmuring to each other, in little groups. As there was no reason for my staying, I got the assistant director to wind the bandage back around my head, and went back to my office. As I walked along, I could see stenographers pointing to me and trying not to giggle.

Have a good time, I thought. In a day or two I will be well again, and then you will all be fired.

I received a telephone call from Delehanty late in the afternoon.

"There's no Clackett listed at Central Casting," he reported.

"Imbecile! I didn't say he was an actor."

"There are two Clacketts in the telephone book, boss. One is a dentist, and the other a hardware dealer."

"I am capable of looking in the telephone book without your help!" I growled.

"We're working on another lead right now," he protested. "I'll let you know when we have any results."

I know detectives. It was no surprise to me when the evening ended without Delehanty's "results." My chauffeur drove me home, and for the first time since I owned a Rolls-Royce,



I didn't want people to see me in it. I rode with the shades pulled down.

When I got home, I gave the evening off to my butler, my valet and the maid. I kept only the cook, because I knew that if I didn't eat good food, I would be too weak to go on.

When I was undressing for bed, a thought struck me. If it hadn't been for the way other people acted, and for the mirror, I wouldn't have known anything had happened to me. I felt the same as I always did; no better, no worse. Why, then, should I let myself be upset about this thing?

You see, I have a philosophical mind. But it didn't do me any good. While I was wondering about what a difference mere appearance could make, I fell asleep.

The next morning, Delehanty still hadn't found this Dr. Clackett. And it came to me in a flash, why, as I glared at him.

"Delehanty," I said bitterly, "you are a low-grade moron."

He stuck out his lower jaw.

"Yeah?"

Even my menials were becoming insolent. I took up another notch in my self-control.

"You told me this man's name was Clackett. It's really Brackett," I reminded him.

"I told you?"

"You insisted. Go quick, and waste no more time. Find Dr. Brackett!"

That was all that Delehanty needed, a little help from my brain. In the afternoon he dug up Dr. Brackett at the university.

For a doctor, I didn't have to pretend. I unwound the bandage then and there.

"See, Dr. Brackett, what has happened to me!" I snapped.

He stared for a moment.

"I don't notice much of a change," he said calmly. "You were the king of men, Mr. Turner. Now you are the king of beasts. Just as regal as ever."

"I have no time for jokes," I retorted impatiently. "I have the face of a lion, and you know it. I think *you* are to blame!"

"I have done nothing," he said coolly.

"When you worked as a waiter, you must have put something into the food at the restaurant!" I accused him.

His eyes gleamed behind his horn-rimmed glasses.

"Maybe. But no judge would believe you," he added easily.

"Never mind what a judge would believe! Just between ourselves, we know that you are responsible," I snapped.

**H**E SMILED at me.

"I admit nothing," he said. "But if I *had* been responsible, this is the way I would have managed everything. As I once tried to tell you, I have discovered certain growth hormones that are extremely specific in their action.

"That is, one set of hormones will affect the growth of the ears. Another set will affect the nose, a third the eyes, and so on."

"So what?" I demanded.

"So this. By combining these hormones in the proper proportions, I can shape a person's features in any way I please. I can alter the ears of a man's head so that they resemble those of a wolf. Or I can affect his ears, his nose, his eyes and his jaw, so that his whole face is that of a wolf."

"Like you did to George Carter!" I told him.

"Let me remind you, I admit nothing. I say only that I *could* have done it," he purred.

"But what made you do it to my actors?" I insisted, outraged. "What harm had any of these people done to you?"

He cocked his head insolently.

"Suppose I figured that the change would mean money out of your pocket, and that then you'd be in a hurry to see me. Suppose I wasn't certain at first that I'd be able to put the hormones in your own food. Suppose I decided to get at you first through your stars."

"I see," I told him. "You were angry at me. You would dare to commit an act of petty vengeance. Ah, well," I sighed, "all of history's great men have been maligned in their time."



And, I am, alas, no exception."

"Not at all," he denied. "I am a scientist, not a blackmailer."

I took hold of his coat lapel, so that he couldn't get away.

"Look here, Dr. Brackett. You are right when you figure that this means money out of my pocket. Every one of my actors has to be changed back, or the enormous sum that has been spent on the picture will be thrown away."

"A hundred thousand dollars?" he suggested.

"A half million, no less. And that isn't a publicity agent's story, either." Then I put my famous charm to work. "Now, Dr. Brackett, I have always liked you," I said with dithering cordiality.

"You don't say!" he sneered politely.

"Yes," I insisted, not to be discouraged. "From the moment I set eyes on you, I felt that you had everything a man needed to have in my organization. You were a man with ability. A man with charm. My heart warmed to you right away. And that happens with very few people," I added pointedly.

He bowed.

"I am flattered. Animals have always liked me," he grinned.

I swallowed twice and counted up to twenty.

"So if you could please get to work right way—"

"Just a moment, Mr. Turner." He raised his hand. "We agree that the changes that have taken place in your actors are due to hormones. We agree that I have made some unusual discoveries about hormones, and that I may be able to help you. But there is something about the treatment that you should know."

"What is it?" I almost panted.

"It will be expensive," he purred.

I narrowed my eyes. I had forgotten how narrow they were to start with, and now they almost closed. "You do want to blackmail me!"

"Don't be absurd, Mr. Turner. I want nothing for myself. I should like you to donate twenty thousand dollars to a research fund, which will be administered by the university for

the good of humanity. After all, if your picture has already cost you half a million—"

"Call it what you will, this is blackmail!"

He got sore.

"You're not only an animal, you're a stupid one!" he shouted. "This money you pay in will go for research that will help me restore you to your original condition. Do you object to that?" My heart burst with relief.

"Object? Dr. Brackett, I object so much, I'll make it fifty—no, twenty-five thousand will be enough to start with!"

"Good. Then I will get to work." His thin face actually beamed.

"On me?" I said quickly.

"On the actors. Every day they stay away from the camera means money out of your pocket. And besides, Mr. Turner, I can experiment on them. Then when I come to try my hormones on you, there will be no danger."

"It's a good idea you have there," I admitted. "A swell idea. So get started right away."

"Of course." He glanced at me, and smiled again. "Mr. Turner, I honestly thought that you would be pleased and flattered at looking like a lion."

"Pleased? Certainly I'm pleased!" I had to tell him, though it made me gag. "Once in a while I'm even overwhelmed with joy. But most of the time, I am plain embarrassed. And I'd like to change back as soon as possible. So hurry up, Dr. Brackett, as much as you can."

**T**HE fellow could take only five people at a time. We chose George Carter, Maida Harrison, Bruce Archibald, Frank Malone and the assistant director. Dr. Brackett began to feed them pills, and to stick needles into them.

Did I say I could read men? I am known as the shrewdest judge of character on the West Coast. And I decided I had made no mistake about Dr. Brackett. Because that boy had ability.

In a week, my stars were looking human again. We went ahead and finished the picture. Then he started



work on the less important actors, perfecting his technique, as he told me. And meanwhile I walked around, looking like the Invisible Man in my bandages.

Finally it was my turn. Dr. Brackett came over to me.

"Mr. Turner," he said, "you forgot to give me that check for twenty-five thousand dollars."

"Did I? How stupid of me. I shall have it attended to right away," I assured him.

I went over to my secretary and had her make out the check. By an

through my blood, changing my face. I thought to myself: Wait till I am back to normal again. What I won't do to that man for the way he made me suffer!

At the end of a week, I stared in a mirror. My heart sank. I looked just the same!

Dr. Brackett shook his head.

"I don't understand it," he said. "It's worked with everyone else. It should work with you."

He fed me more pills, stuck me with more needles. And he began to work hard on that research he was telling

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intentional mistake, I had her pre-date it a month. When Dr. Brackett tried to deposit it, the bank would call his attention to the error in the date.

He would come to me, I would apologize and give him a new check—and then I would stop payment.

This would take another two or three days, and by then I would be cured. I felt so good thinking about how Dr. Brackett would be fooled. I ordered myself a special dinner. My appetite was picking up, and I ate so much that I felt stuffed.

Later on Dr. Brackett fed me his pills and stuck the needles in my arm. I could feel the hormones running

me about. Another week passed. No change!

I was becoming frantic. I realized now I had made a mistake in thinking this man had ability. But there was nobody else who could help me, nobody to turn to.

One day he marched up to my desk.

"Mr. Turner, there's a little matter of a check I want to discuss with you."

"A check?" I said blandly.

"Yes. You pre-dated it. Now, I don't intend to change you to your real character until I have the money. So you'll just have to wait a couple of weeks more."

That was why there had been no change!



"No!" I shouted at him. "Let us waste no more time. Here is a check correctly made out." I wrote frantically. "Go cash it, quick! Then change me to my real character."

He went away, got his money and returned.

"This time you change," he told me.

He shot the hormones into my arm. Then he bandaged my face. A week later, he took the bandages off. "Your real character," he said. "It fits like a glove."

The first thing I saw was that my mane was gone. I sighed with relief. Oh, how I hated this man! What I would do to him now!

Suddenly I gave a cry.

"Dr. Brackett! My face!"

"How curious!" he laughed.

"It's the face of a pig!" I screamed.

"Your real character," he said.

"That's what you asked for."

**H**E KEEPS giving me promises. I don't really believe him any more. But I'm tired of having my lunch sent up to me on a tray. I'm

tired of looking like the Invisible Man. Everyone else in the studio is feeling pretty good these days, but not me.

Sometimes I think I am doomed for life. But other times, I feel it's up to Dr. Brackett. If he really wants to, he can change me back. Maybe some day he will forget how I threw him out when he first came to see me, and tried to cheat him later. Maybe he will decide I have suffered enough.

He did say that when my character is transformed, my face will be transformed, also. So he has recommended a psychologist. Every day—for twenty-five dollars an hour—this psychologist tries to transform my character.

Meanwhile, I have lost my appetite. I eat a lot, but only to keep up my strength, of course. And every morning, I run to the mirror—hoping, hoping, hoping, not for more money, not for greater success, not for anything that any other human being wants. Hoping only that same day, I won't look like a pig any more.



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## HOW CURT NEWTON BECAME CAPTAIN FUTURE

*The World's Greatest Space-Farer Begins His Trail of Adventure When He Battles for Justice on Pluto!*

**U**PON the icy surface of the Arctic planet Pluto, there gleamed a big glassite dome like a bubble of warm light. This was the small Earthman trading-town that was the one outpost of Earth on the frontier planet. For this was in the wild, early years before the bigger domed cities to come had yet been built.

Across the blizzard-swept icefields of the bitter planet, a small group of native Plutonians trudged toward the Earthman trading town.

These natives of Pluto, towering men whose bodies were completely covered with long black hair and whose eyes were huge-pupiled ones of odd expression, hauled with them several sledges piled high with the furs they regularly brought to exchange with the Earthman traders.

### The Young Earthmen

With the Plutonians marched an oddly dissimilar figure—a young Earthman, hardly more than a youth.

He wore a heavy felt cold-suit that could not keep out all the bitter chill of the screaming wind and snow. Yet his youthful, handsome face and clear gray eyes were vivid with excited interest.

"What do you get in exchange for the furs, Oraq?" he asked the towering Plutonian leader beside him, speaking the latter's tongue fluently.

Oraq answered gloomily. "We get little enough, these days. The first Earthman traders were fair, but now they cheat us."

Curt Newton—for the Earth youth was he—looked incredulous. "You must be wrong, Oraq. Earthmen wouldn't cheat you."

### First to Visit Pluto

Curt Newton was eighteen years old. And this was his first visit to Pluto.

This was the last stop upon a voyage that had taken him and his three stranger tutors and guardians out through the whole System. This exhaustive tour of the System had been designed by the Brain as the conclusion of Curt's unparalleled education.

Unparalleled had been Curt's education, indeed! For eighteen years, he had lived upon Earth's Moon where he had been born.

There his three guardians—Simon Wright, the Brain, Otho, the android, and Grag, the robot—had reared him and given him a training in scientific wizardry and in physical and mental skill which no other tutors could have given.

The growing youth had chafed to leave the Moon, to see the rest of the great System that pioneering Earthmen had explored and colonized. But not until now had the Brain deemed him ready.

### Planet to Planet

Now, for months, they had been making their way from planet to planet in their small space-ship. Young Curt Newton had learned the secrets of Martian deserts, the depths of Jovian jungles, the great plains of Saturn and the sky-storming mountains of Uranus, all at first hand.

They had been for weeks here on Pluto. They had been dwelling with the Plutonian natives, in their strange ice-city of Qulun, north of the Avernus Sea. Curt had already evinced his unique knack of making

### MEET THE FUTUREMEN!

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friends with non-terrestrial planetary peoples.

He had become a comrade of the simple, primitive Plutonians—sailing the stormy ocean with them, hunting the *korlats* and other great fur-bearing beasts, and now he came with them to trade their furs with the Earthmen.

The little party reached the double-doored entrance of the small domed trading-town and entered. The interior was warm and light. Great atomic generators that throbbed in a guarded building poured forth a flood of power to heat and illuminate this domed enclosure.

Oraq, the Plutonian tribesman, grunted in discomfort. "It is too hot in here. Let us trade the furs and leave before we grow sick."

But young Curt Newton had thrown back the felt helmet from his red head and was breathing in the warm air with relief.

"There is where we trade the furs," Oraq said, pointing to the biggest of the metalloy buildings crowded inside the dome.

### The Trading Post

The building had a cavernous interior, piled with great bundles of valuable Plutonian furs and with cases of cheap trade-goods. There were a few other Plutonians hanging about, and a crowd of rough Earthman hunters and trappers who stared at Curt as he entered with the Plutonians.

"First time I ever saw an Earth youngster trail with the Hairies," remarked a burly Earthman. "Look, he can even talk their lingo."

Curt Newton felt uncomfortable. He didn't know much about Earthmen. He'd had small contact with them during his eighteen years.

The two proprietors of the trading post had come forward—a gross-faced, stocky man of middle age and a thin-lipped older man. They looked appraisingly at the bundles of furs Oraq's men had hauled in.

"We trade," Oraq mumbled, speaking his few words of the Earth language with difficulty. "We want knives, spearheads."

The older man nodded and brought out six cheap steel knives and as many spearheads, which he laid down.

Oraq's face fell. "Not enough," the Plutonian articulated.

"It's all you'll get," retorted the thin-lipped trader calmly.

Curt Newton burst forth. He had been watching indignantly. "Why, that's robbery!" he declared. "Those furs are worth a thousand times what you're offering. Take them someplace else, Oraq."

### Lords of Power

The men in the room burst into a guffaw. And the thin-lipped older trader told Curt sourly, "You must be new to Pluto, boy. There are no other traders on this planet. Wilson and Kincaid—that's me and my partner—have the only trading post here. For we have the only atomic power plant here, to keep a post going with heat and light."

"That's right, sonny," smirked Kincaid,

his gross-faced partner. "That's why these Hairies call us the Lords of Power."

Curt looked incredulous. "But the Planet Patrol of the System Government—"

Kincaid chuckled. "Sonny, the Patrol's got enough to handle these days in the inner planets without coming away out here. The only law out here is the law of the Lords of Power, and don't you forget it."

Curt's eyes flashed. "I'll see that System law comes here!" he flamed. "I'll see that the Government hears of your cheating, thieving monopoly!"

The thin lips of Wilson, the older partner, became thinner and he looked dangerously at the red-haired youth.

"Boy, you've got things to learn," he said calmly. "You've got to learn who the Lords of Power are." And Wilson spoke to the burly men behind Curt in sharp command. "Teach him who we are, men."

Curt tried to spin around, but a stunning blow from a clenched fist caught him before he completed the movement. He reeled and felt another blow split his lips, and his head rang with the shock.

He was only dimly aware then of further smashing blows, of falling strengthlessly to the floor, of heavy boots kicking him. He slipped into a merciful unconsciousness.

### The Quest for Justice

When he awoke, sore and bruised and cold, he found himself being carried over the ice-fields by Oraq's Plutonians. Oraq helped him as he unsteadily tried to stand erect.

"They beat you and threw you out of the dome!" raged Oraq. "They held us off with their atom-guns, and would have slain us where we stood if we tried to stop them."

The Plutonian added fiercely, "We shall gather all the tribes and attack these evil Lords of Power, and destroy them."

"No!" Curt said through puffed lips. "It's for me to see that justice is done, Oraq. Take me back now to your city."

When they reached the ice-city of Qulun, and Otho and Grag and the Brain learned what had occurred, the android and robot exploded with rage. Hands had been laid upon their beloved ward and pupil!

"We'll go back there and blast them!" snarled Otho. "We'll make these so-called Lords of Power sorry they ever saw you before they die."

"No!" Curt Newton contradicted. His young eyes had a strange, cold new light. "We'll mete out justice to them—not mere vengeance. We'll force Wilson and Kincaid to go back to Earth and surrender themselves to the justice of the Government."

"But how can we do that?" Grag objected. "They'll never leave Pluto of their own accord."

### The Sonic-Silent Beam

"I think they will," Curt declared. "The atomic generators are all that make their domed trading-town habitable. And we can 'kill' those generators, by using the



inhibiting damping-ray that you showed me how to produce. That, and the Brain's 'sonic-silent' beam, will force them out."

"The 'sonic-silent' beam?" cried Otho. "Say, I begin to understand your plan now! You're figuring to use it to—"

"Yes," Curt nodded. "That's what we're going to do."

Curt's youthful, bruised face suddenly changed from its coldly grim expression. A look of dismay appeared in his eyes as he met the oddly intent gaze of the Brain.

"I forgot myself for a moment," Curt said uncertainly. "I was giving you orders. I didn't mean to do that."

The Brain broke a long silence. "Curtis,

But though the engineers labored frantically, the great cyclotrons remained dead. The toiling men never dreamed of the little ship that was hovering far up in the dusky sky, playing upon the dome the invisible inhibiting force that "killed" all atomic activity.

### Chill in the Air

The air in the dome began to grow cold as the powerful atomic heaters ceased functioning. It had been dark for hours except for make-shift lights. More and more chill grew the air, frost gathering on the dome. The shivering Earthmen watched anxiously as the sweating engineers labored at their

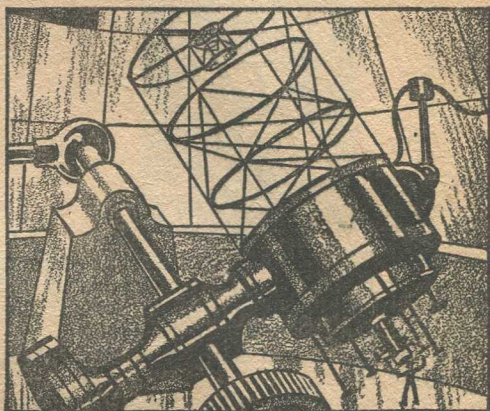
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you need not apologize. We shall do as you suggest."

### The Dawn of Manhood

That moment, all four of them knew, marked a change forever in their relations. It meant that Curt Newton was no longer their pupil, their ward. It meant that he had suddenly become their leader—that new, grim purpose had suddenly brought manhood.

That night, the big atomic generators in the domed trading-town suddenly went dead. The puzzled engineers, after working for a time in vain, summoned Wilson and Kincaid.

"We can't understand it," they told the two self-styled Lords of Power. "The generators *should* work, but they just don't."

"You mean, you don't know your business!" raged Kincaid. "You get them working, before we all freeze."

fruitless task under the lashing words of their employers.

Then Kincaid and Wilson and all their men suddenly started. A clear voice had suddenly spoken loudly from the air around them.

"Go to Earth and surrender yourselves to System law!" it commanded.

"Who said that?" snarled Kincaid, drawing his atom-pistol.

"It's nobody—it just came out of the air!" gasped a man.

Again the voice spoke, from the empty air around them, repeating its command. It was loud, louder than any ordinary voice.

The men could not dream that it was the "sonic-silent" beam of the Brain that produced the effect—a beam of sound vibrations pitched *below* the limits of audibility but focused so as to become suddenly audible vibrations at a selected distance from the transmitter.



Over and over it repeated its eerie command. The darkness and increasing cold and the grim voice from empty air began to crack nerves.

"We can't fix these cycs," the engineers finally confessed.

"Let's get out o' here!" begged one of the men. "We'll freeze if we don't. An' that voice means trouble."

"It's just a trick," hissed Kincaid. "But we'll go. We'll head for Uranus and wait there a while, and come back with new generators."

### The Unseen Voice

They hastily loaded their great bales of valuable furs into their space-ship, and took off for Uranus. They established a camp



among the Black Mountains of that planet's equatorial region, near the Canyon of the Endless River. But on their second day there, the unseen voice spoke again.

"Go to Earth and surrender yourselves to System law!"

For two days, the voice spoke, hour after hour, repeating that relentless command. The raging Wilson and Kincaid searched furiously for its source without success. In desperation, they turned their atom-guns at random on the mist-hidden cliffs overhead. The only result was to start an avalanche from which they and their ship barely escaped.

The Lords of Power and their men flew to Saturn. They made new camp near the Valley of the Silicae near the southern pole of that world. But again the voice remorselessly prodded them. There seemed no source of it. Curt and his comrades were projecting the "sonic-silent" beam from miles away.

The Silicae came crawling upon the camp of Wilson and Kincaid, attracted by their indiscriminate firing at nothing. The great gray inorganic monsters made them hastily remove camp northward. But in their new camp by the Wandering Lakes, deadly puff-balls from the Fungus Forest came upon the wind. And the grim, cold voice was still with them.

### No Escape!

More than a little fearful, the Lords of

Power essayed another attempt to escape their maddening tormentors. They fled to Jupiter and endeavored to hide in the vast fern-jungles south of the Fire Sea. But though they had pitched their camp in the ancient Jovian ruins which were shunned by all Jovians as the Place of the Dead, the cold voice reached them.

"Go to Earth and surrender yourselves to System law!"

In panic, the followers of Wilson and Kincaid deserted them, stumbling away through the fern-jungles in mad flight from the unknown. And at last utterly broken in nerve, Wilson and Kincaid steered toward Earth.

Curt Newton's ship followed at a distance, still prodding the fugitives with the "sonic-silent" beam as they landed near Government Tower.

"Surrender yourselves to System law!" came the inexorable order.

At that a bewildered Planet Police chief and equally bewildered System President listened as two broken, haunted-looking men babbled a confession of having defrauded Plutonian natives by means of an illegal monopoly.

Later that night, the System President sat in his office high in Government Tower reflecting on the strange occurrence. His thin, aging face expressed sudden startled wonder as he heard a space-ship landing on the truncated top of the tower. No ship but his own ever landed there.

### Four Strange Figures

He rose to his feet to call officers. Then he froze. In his office door had appeared four figures that seemed unreal. They were a tall Earth youngster, with red hair and clear, purposeful gray eyes; a lithe, green-eyed android; a giant metal robot; and a Brain brooding in a square transparent serum-case, watching with lens-like artificial eyes.

"It was we who drove Wilson and Kincaid to confess," Curt Newton told the President quietly. "And I wanted to tell you this: the furs in their ship were stolen by fraud from the native Plutonians. The value of those furs, in needed goods, should be given to the Plutonians."

The President stared, and then as the four strange visitants turned to leave, he asked a dazed question. "Who—who are you?"

The redheaded youngster turned, for a moment. "Just someone who didn't want to see the whole future of Pluto's people wrecked for profits."

Then a quick, humorous smile lit his gray eyes and he added, "If you want a name to call me by, why, you can call me Captain Future!"

It was thus that Curt Newton became Captain Future!







The Electrostat immobilized the Martian's electro-gun

# The Hole in the Sky

By MANLY WADE WELLMAN

*The Evil Hideout Lurked in the Depths of Space, Defying the Entire Solar System to Lay Siege!*

**O**NCE a century the police of the Martio-Terrestrial League might slip up—for instance, in sending that little rocket cruiser to Mars from Ganymede without arms or men to defend it. Loafing along the space-lane, it suddenly vibrated to a baleful radio warning.

"Cruiser ahoy! Lay to, or we'll bomb you!"

The police pilot and his crew of three stared at each other across the controls. The two passengers, both prisoners, sitting side by side on a rear bench, started to their feet. The biggest of them, a roan-haired, black-eyed giant, strode forward. The other,

small, nondescript and worried-looking, came along perforce. A band of flexible metal shackled his left wrist against the big man's right one.

"Last warning, cruiser!" the radio yelped. "We count three, then start bombing. One! Two—"

The pilot struck control keys and fired his forward brake-rockets.

"Lay to, it is," he groaned into his transmitter, as the cruiser quivered to a floating halt in dark space. "But what's the idea? We're on official business—"

"Stand by to admit boarders," growled the other radio voice. The stranger came alongside, a rakish



craft, studded with weapon-ports. The craft had been sighted an hour before, but not those ports. Those had been cleverly hatched over. Clanks and scrapings sounded as a closed gangway snapped over the police cruiser's lock panel. Then came a hammering summons outside. The pilot opened up.

**I**NTO the cruiser tumbled a gaunt, hard-eyed man with a ray-thrower at the ready.

Half a dozen more men were at his heels, fierce, shabby, heavily armed fellows.

"Nobody moves," cautioned the leader "or the old blasteroo starts right here—Hi, boss!"

That final whoop resounded at sight of the big prisoner, who roared back and sprang up. His little shackle-mate fluttered behind like a banner. So small and diffident a person is easy to forget, even when one is moored to him.

The roan-head threw his long free arm around the leader of the boarders, in an anaconda embrace of welcome.

"I knew you'd come get me!" he cried.

"The coppers radioed us, boss," panted the other. "Xulrra picked it up. They offered to trade you back for the return of the Electrostat! No okay message from you, so I knew you'd refused to make the trade."

"I knew you'd come get me," repeated the big captive. "Now I'm free, we've still got the Electrostat—"

The police pilot spluttered angrily. "Before there's any more idiocy," he protested, "understand that this prisoner is Cale Spohn wanted for piracy, robbery, murder, sabotage, rebellion! He was arrested on Gany-made, in disguise—"

"And now we're taking him over," broke in the lean rescuer. "We're Cale Spohn's own gang, pal—and we know all about his record. We've tried to top it for years." He bowed mockingly. "I'm his second-in-command, Imberton. Been waiting here for a police craft to bring him along."

"Good-by," added Spohn shortly, and turned toward the open panelway.

Then for the first time he seemed to realize that he towed a disconsolate little figure along.

"Hey," he growled, "who are you?"

"P-Penny Wiggins," was the quavering reply. Eyes in the thin face were wide, a timid tongue wet the lips. "They're sending me to Mars for trial because I—I'm accused of juggling accounts in the Spaceways Payroll department. I was second assistant book-keeper—"

"Who cares what you were?" snapped Imberton. "You don't come with—Oh, I see. He's shackled to you, boss. I'll fix that." And he lifted his ray projector.

Little Penny Wiggins cowered, and Spohn barked a protest.

"Hold it, you'll singe me! Let these cops unlock us."

"Can't," spoke up the police pilot. "The lock's a time-snap, Spohn, and you know it. Opens once a day, at dinner time."

Imberton leveled his ray again.

"I can cut off his hand, then the thing'll slip off—"

The little man gave a gusty cry of alarm, and his manacled hand squirmed against Spohn's. Spohn yelled in turn as those slender fingers, inspired perhaps by fear, dug deeply into his wrist. He struggled to get away.

"We're fastened too close together!" he warned Imberton. "You can't cut off his hand without scorching mine, too."

"Then I'll turn him all into atoms, except his left arm—"

"Which I'm to wear for hours, huh?" Spohn snarled. "Nothing doing! Wiggins, you come with me."

He dragged the little man through the panel-port and out of sight. The other outlaws followed. Imberton hung back to address a warning.

"Give us five minutes' start, pal. If you move before then, we'll make you hard to find with anything but a junk-scoop." He sneered. "Next time you take one of us prisoner, guard him with a fleet."

The panel clanged behind him.

"Where do they head?" asked one of the crew.

"To the Hole in the Sky, so-called,"



said the police pilot. "Heaven and Cale Spohn know where that is."

"What'll happen to that poor little splinter they took along?"

"I wonder," said the pilot gloomily.

**T**HE outlaw craft had once been a pleasure cruiser, spacious and jaunty and powerful. Pirate workmen had pierced her sleek sides with battle ports, each with a ray nozzle or bomb thrower—enough, all told, to fit out a first-line battle rocket.

Side compartments and most of the staterooms had been converted into power chambers and ammunition storages. Only the control room and a few cell-like cabins remained for the tenancy of the fierce crew.

"Stand out for home," commanded Cale Spohn, aboard his own craft. "Watch that police cruiser. If it contacts the space patrol, we may have to fight."

He sat down near the controls, which Imberton had taken. Wiggins, tagging along perforce, stood beside him. Spohn glared at him in contempt.

"If it wasn't so messy, Wiggins, I'd ray you loose from me, after all."

The little fellow, dwarfed to cricket size among so many huge space fighters, looked up in quivering protest.

"Please don't," he begged. "The time-lock will open soon. Then—"

"Then we'll be rid of you," finished Spohn. "Out into space you go!"

"Please don't," pleaded Wiggins again. "Can't you take me with you?"

Spohn lighted a cigarette from Imberton's case, and shook his great roan head.

"We're going where strangers aren't encouraged. The Hole in the Sky."

"The Hole in the Sky," repeated Penny Wiggins slowly. "That—it's a figure of speech, I suppose. How can there be a Hole in the Sky? Look, Captain Spohn. Let me live. I can help. Honest, I'd be worth keeping—"

Several stalwart villains laughed loudly, and Spohn snorted.

"Hah! You'd make a peerless outlaw fighter, wouldn't you?"

Wiggins made little gestures of self-effacement.

"Oh, I don't mean I'd fight. But

I can do other things. I was a book-keeper—"

"There's no bookkeeping to do in the Hole," said Spohn.

"And once I did work in chemical farming."

"Chemical farming?" repeated Imberton, glancing up from his controls. "You mean, crops in a trough of water?"

"Water treated with salts and solutions," Wiggins elaborated for him. His thin body seemed to puff up a little. "Once," he said proudly, I produced some prize-winning tomatoes and carrots—"

"Tomatoes!" echoed his hearers in chorus. "Carrots!"

They had lived for months on food concentrates. Even Spohn looked at his shackle-mate with hungry interest.

"You could raise a crop for us?" he demanded, almost wistfully. "What about seeds?"

"I have plenty."

Wiggins dug his free hand into a pocket, and produced half-a-dozen paper packets. They bore appetizing pictures of garden products. Spohn licked his lips.

"Think of everything, don't you, Wiggins?"

"Oh, I didn't think of anything like this," disclaimed the little fellow. "But I knew they let you raise gardens in prison. If you've got chemicals and water, the sun does the rest."

Spohn was thinking of crisp green salad.

"Looks as if you'll have to live—if the garden grows."

Wiggins looked pathetically hopeful.

"Then I get my freedom?"

"Who said anything about freedom? demanded Spohn, scowling again. "You're going to the Hole with us. You'll live—there. You're one of us now. Understand?"

The little man nodded. His eyes grew bright. They were really fine eyes, the best feature in all his skimpy person.

"If I'm one of you now, Captain, tell me something." He paused, as if summoning his courage. "That thing you mentioned to this other gentle-



man, Mr. Imberton—the Electrostat. What is it?"

**A** MOMENT of silence, broken by Spohn's tornado laughter.

"Doesn't the whole inhabited System wonder about that!" he crowed. "Lots of people have heard of it, but nobody understands. Tell him, Imberton."

Imberton complied.

"Burke Rausch invented it," he said. "Rausch was the Martio-Terrestrial League's most brilliant mechanician. The Electrostat is reputed to counteract and nullify all electric forces when put in action. That means it would silence most machines—a wonderful defense for people like us.

"So," he went on grimly, "we ambushed the ship carrying it from Mars to Earth. We had to kill Rausch, who tried to use it on us. Then we took the Electrostat to the Hole."

Imberton grimaced.

"The boss here hid it so safely that none of us can find it," he complained.

"Which means you hunted for it everywhere," Spohn grinned. "Glad I hid it so well—All right, you little runt, now you know about the Electrostat."

The narrow shoulders shrugged.

"But if Rausch, the inventor, is dead, how can anybody run it?"

"Rausch had a partner," replied Spohn. "Heth—John Heth. He knows the principle, I hear. Could use the thing. Well, if one man can learn about the Electrostat, so can others. Even if we don't puzzle it out, the whole System is dying to ransom it from us."

"I've studied science—elementary mechanics," ventured Wiggins. "If you'd give me a chance—"

"Shut up!" growled Spohn. "I wouldn't even let you look at the thing, you little worm. Stick to that gardening you promised, and be glad you aren't being booted out into space."

Wiggins swallowed and seemed to be trying to make himself smaller. More silence, while the outlaws grinned at his worried pallor.

Imberton spoke from the controls.

"Stand by to enter port."

Through a forward pane showed the sky, a soft, black curtain jeweled with unwinking stars. But dead forward of the ship's nose was a round, starless blackness. Wiggins stared.

"That," he muttered, "must be the Hole in the Sky." He turned to Spohn. "Is it—is it like those dark clouds off in space?"

Spohn shook his head.

"No. Not a dark cloud. Telescopes can see clouds, but nothing can see the Hole—except when a ship's set dead on, like ours, traveling at the Hole's speed. Because it's lightless and opaque, shutting out the stars—"

Wiggins scratched his head plaintively.

"I don't catch on."

"Nobody catches on," Spohn chuckled. "It's a stray asteroid, is the Hole, rolling 'way spaceward of the Asteroid Belt. We landed on it years ago, and Xulrra—clever, he is, even for a Martian—coated it with some special-formula black paint, which reflects no light to mention.

"Well, out of sight, out of mind. And we're heading for the Hole, safe before we're even there. That's why we didn't bother smashing the police cruiser's radio. Let 'em stew. We're safe!"

"We're on the beam," announced Imberton. "Home before you can say 'cosmogony'."

Even as he spoke, the outlaws ground to a halt in a solid pocket-pit of their black-pigmented little world.

As the ship halted snugly close at the end of the dock, Spohn gave orders to disembark. Oxygen had already flooded the space which the rocket cruiser had closed in. Spohn emerged through the panel, towing Wiggins. His radium flash struck no more light from the walls of the ebon pocket than a fire shows in a sooty chimney.

A rectangle of yellow radiance betokened the sliding back of a panel-way. The outlaws entered a great irregular cavern, lighted with radium bulbs. A guard brought his electro-automatic rifle to salute. He was Martian, with a petal-tufted head, a soft-tentacled body propped upright with metal braces, a long loose robe for



garments.

"Congrratulationss, boss," he slurred out to Spohn.

"Thanks. Xulrra, here's a fellow-scientist." Spohn twitched Wiggins forward. "When the time-lock falls open, you take charge of him."

One expression stuck in Xulrra's flowerlike skull.

"Fellow-sscienstist?"

"Oh, only chemical farming," Wiggins deprecated. "I'm to raise fresh vegetables for these gentlemen." He looked timidly up at his shackle-mate. "You were right to—to scold me, Captain. I don't really have any business meddling with big things like the Electrostat—"

"Then forget it!" exploded Spohn. "Stick to gardening, I say!"

**X**ULRRA, like most Martians, ate only delicate synthetics, and did not try to understand the Terrestrial hunger for natural greenery. He turned away, disappointed that Wiggins was no scientist, after all.

Not so the others of Spohn's band, Terrestrial renegades all. Dinnertime found them growling more than usual over their plates of concentrate, yearning for the fresh vegetables to come. At the end of the meal, the manacle that bound Spohn to his little recruit fell open. A cheer arose on all sides. Spohn laughed, rubbing his chafed wrist.

"Can I go now?" quavered Wiggins.

Spohn waved him to Xulrra, who led him down a rock-walled corridor. They came to a room in the rock, fitted with instruments, containers and a work bench.

"My laborratorry," explained Xulrra. "Sspohn iss chief—but I am morre imporrtant." This very proudly. "Without me, thiss band would be sstranded and sstarved."

"Really?" rejoined Wiggins. "Your science keeps them going?"

"Rright." The petaled head bowed, as if accepting applause. "With thiss misserable equipment, I maintain all thesse outlawss."

There was much more, for Xulrra loved to sing his own praises. He explained how this asteroid, a five-mile crumb of the eon-old catastrophe that

had exploded a planet between Mars and Jupiter, was a natural storehouse of all elements.

He, Xulrra, with simple tools and much Martian ingenuity, could synthesize most necessities of life—food, fuel, clothing, even munitions—from the stuff of the asteroid. He had built dynamos that ran an air-freshener, a water condenser and an artificial gravity control. The dynamos also powered the great electro-automatics and ray-throwers at the defense ports.

Xulrra's manufactures used up the interior of the asteroid, thus creating the caverns in which Spohn's outlaws lived. Other needful things were plundered from ships on the Mars-Jupiter run, whenever the asteroid's orbital-journey brought them close to the space-lane.

"Wonderful," breathed Wiggins as Xulrra came to a pause. He looked frankly impressed. "You're really a great scientist. I don't see how—why—"

"How I am sstuck herre?" finished Xulrra for him. "A bad joke of fate. In the lasst interrplanetarry warr, I ssold new weaponss to both ssidess—and both ssidess outlawed me. At leasst thiss drrudgerry iss betterr than sshameful death."

He was silent a moment.

"I knew Burrke Rraussch well—in the old dayss."

"Oh, the inventor of the Electrostat. And his partner—what's-his-name—John Heth?"

"He rrosse ssince my flight," said Xulrra. "But I am as adept as eitherr of them. If Spohn would trrusst me with the Electrosstat—*Rruh!* I could make it worrk."

Again a guttural snort as Xulrra pondered his mechanical and scientific superiority to Heth and Rausch. He resumed his lecture.

"This asterroid—it iss virrtually my insspiration. You ssaw the landing-hole? A grreat tube?" His mechanical voice grew even prouder. "I firrsst dessigned it as a rocket tube. Filled it with high-powered fuel, made from the explosive elementss of the asterroid—"

"Then you guided it clear out here,



at this end of the asteroid, where no enemy would look for it!" cried Wiggins; then paused, as if embarrassed at his own intelligence. "Didn't the astronomers notice?"

"I made this improvised landing-hole invissible firrsst," Xulrra explained. "The black pigment—my own formula. If any ssaw the flarre of ourr fuel, it was sset down as a me-teorr explossion."

"Wonderful," said Penny Wiggins again. "I don't often meet people like you—people who do things. I was only a bookkeeper, you see."

"You arre a sspace outlaw now," Xulrra reminded him. "Juniorr to all the crrew, and underr my orrderrss."

"Under Captain Spohn's orders," corrected Wiggins diffidently.

"Underr mine! I am chief sscien-tisst, and yourr chemical farmm—"

"Let's ask Captain Spohn and make sure," suggested Wiggins.

He spoke diffidently, but gave Xulrra no chance to demur. Walking out of the laboratory, he pattered nimbly down the rock-walled corridor to a point where a cavern-mouth bore a door marked "Capt. Spohn."

Pushing the door open, Penny Wiggins cleared his throat and paused.

**S**POHN and Imberton bent above a metal table, eying a small but intricate bit of apparatus. It was a round globe a foot in diameter, made of crystal on the outside and full of delicate, whirring machinery as complex as the work of a trick jeweler.

Both men glanced up at Wiggins. Xulrra had joined him at the door, gurgling and gesturing with all four of his squirming upper tentacles.

"What d'ye want?" roared Spohn. "Handle him, Imberton."

Imberton's long legs made a single stride from table to door. He clutched Wiggins by the neck and yanked him from his feet, shaking him.

"Who told you to butt in here?" he snarled.

"I ssaid to him—" began Xulrra, and paused as Imberton glared.

"At least you know enough to ask permission before coming here, Xulrra. Get out! Both of you."

He shook Wiggins again, but the

little fellow barely seemed to notice. Hanging in mid-air, he saw over Imberton's shoulder.

In the cave beyond, Spohn was doing something to that crystal globe. He slid it carefully along the metal table-top—and it disappeared. The table remained bare.

Released, Wiggins trotted meekly away after Xulrra.

Imberton returned to the cave. His face lengthened at once.

"Did you put it away again, Chief?" he demanded, and Spohn smiled.

"Yes. It'll stay hidden until I learn how to use it."

"You don't trust me?"

"Not a millionth of a mill," Spohn assured him, in the best of humor.

"Why should I? Aren't you an outlaw? Imberton, when they captured me, I heard that John Heth—Rausch's old work-mate—was on Ganymede."

"Plant some spies there, Imberton. Find out where he is, how we can snatch him out here. He's the one person alive who can operate the Electrostat."

"I'll pick a crew to go to Ganymede at once," said Imberton.

\* \* \* \* \*

Xulrra helped Wiggins find an old cylindrical fuel tank that, with a splash of a rust-ray, could be sliced in two to make troughs for the chemical farm. Wiggins searched here and there for a proper spot, and finally dragged his clanking vessels into a dim cavern just off the main entry hall.

"Just what I need. Small, cozy, unused—"

"But it iss ussed," interrupted Xulrra. "Thiss iss at the end of the dock-hole. Thiss trranssparent porrt ob-serrvess shipss enterring."

Wiggins looked through the pane, into the tube as into a telescope shaft. The stars outside changed aspect as the asteroid revolved.

"But I can't find any other cave. This is ideal," he pleaded. "Mr. Imberton! I appeal to you, sir!"

The second-in-command had sauntered in.

"Let him have the place," he said. "We're all anxious to see his garden grow."



"Garrdenss—Rruh!" grunted Xulrra. "I do not underrsstand—"

That was unfortunate, for Imberton knew how Martians are apt to sneer at Terrestrial appetites.

"Let him have the place," he repeated sharply. "We have new and better lookout chambers close to the surface. Who'd be able to find the dock-hole, anyway, if we didn't give 'em a radio beam to come in on? Slosh some of that black stuff on the pane to seal in the light, and get to growing some spinach."

Xulrra fetched a paint-gun and quickly covered the pane with shadow-colored pigment. At Wiggins' request, he removed a brilliant blue light on a stand, which they hooked up to the electric system. Wiggins arranged his troughs, filled them with water, and laid panels of wire mesh across to hold his seeds. He asked for calcium, phosphate and other minerals to enrich the water and hasten the growth.

"You arre verry adroit," praised Xulrra, watching Wiggins bustle around.

"Oh, you know how people are with hobbies," replied the little bookkeeper. "Now," as he moistened the arrangement of seeds, "let them alone for a while. Even a night's time will show some progress in growth."

Xulrra grunted.

"It iss time to ssleep," he said. "Come, yourr quarrrterrs arre with me."

**H**OURS passed. The soot-colored asteroid spun its way invisibly along. At the lookout points mentioned by Imberton, sentries sat on watch for the enemy that, one chance out of a million, might come. Cale Spohn and Imberton, weary of chatter and cards and command details, had turned in. All others of the outlaw gang, except for those on watch, were silent on their bunks.

In a cavern remote from the other living quarters, a cavern that housed the whirring dynamo which powered all the complex enterprises of the asteroid, Wiggins lay on a hammocklike bed. He was silent, relaxed, to all appearances sound asleep.

But in the dark, his mind was very active indeed, focused upon his companion in the chamber, Xulrra.

The Martian, out of his braces for the night, lay on a similar hammock, like a weary spider in its nest. But Wiggins knew that Martians do not sleep as do creatures of Earth. They relax, recuperate, perhaps they doze—but they do not sleep.

Xulrra, though silent, would be no more in dreamland than Wiggins himself. And Wiggins had something to do that Xulrra must not suspect.

He cocked an ear toward a motor that spun not far from where he lay. It was belted to a set of gears that gave power to some device of Xulrra's—that much he had seen before retiring. Wiggins listened, picking out by sound the position and action of the mechanism.

Then he dropped an arm over the side of his hammock, touched and seized a crumbly bit of rock from the rough floor. Carefully he tossed it, aiming by ear. There came a grating, grinding response as the thing was chewed up in the gears.

"What iss that?" demanded Xulrra, starting up. "Wigginss, what has happened to the machinery?"

"Eh?" sleepily. "I don't know—I'm no mechanic."

"Of coursse not! I, Xulrra, am the only mechanic herre," he snapped, in fierce disdain for lesser skills.

Xulrra flung himself from his resting place. He did not pause to strap his harness on, but wriggled across the floor like an octopus. Turning on a small light, he began to fiddle and fumble with the clogged gears.

"They arre fouled," he announced. "It will take an hourr to fix, at least."

He gave all his attention to the job, which was precisely what Wiggins wanted.

The little man slid cautiously out of his own bed. Before lying down he had taken off his shoes, and now he departed with catlike silence on stocking feet. He gained the corridor outside, stole past a dormitory full of snoring outlaws, and headed for the chamber where had set up his chemical farm.



Reaching it, he paid no attention to the blazing light, the troughs, or the seeds which, cunningly forced, were commencing to sprout in the dampness. He made his way to the painted port. A touch of his finger showed the pigment was not yet hardened.

"Good!" said Penny Wiggins under his breath.

Now he hurried to a trough, ripping a sleeve from his tunic. This he doused in the chemical-laced water. Returning, he began to swab and smear at the painted glass. The chemicals helped. The paint began to rub away.

Wiggins worked hard and carefully, and in thirty minutes had cleared the pane. He stood away from it. The light that had been supplied to grow his vegetables beat forth into space—a brilliant blue splotch, gushing along the landing-tube, now empty of the ship that had gone to spy out and kidnap John Heth on Ganymede.

**W**IGGINS left the chamber and headed for the quarters of Cale Spohn. He slunk into a dark niche to let one sentry pass by, and then gained the captain's door. It was locked, of course—Spohn was quite frank about trusting his followers—but Wiggins had come prepared for that.

From his inner pocket he drew a slip of soft, bright metal, which he thrust into the keyhole. After turning it knowingly this way and that, he drew it back into view. Certain marks upon it showed the position of guards and tumblers.

Again fumbling in his pocket, Penny Wiggins produced a clasp-knife, small but fine and sharp. Quickly and skillfully he whittled the metal slip into a key that, after several tries and alterations, opened Cale Spohn's lock.

He pushed the door inward with the utmost stealth and slowness. It did not creak once. Slipping through, he closed it again and stood still, listening in the gloom.

In a rearward cubicle, Cale Spohn snored lustily. Penny Wiggins moved to the table, placing upon it two hands that, had any of the outlaws taken time to notice, were long and strong.

The dark helped him concentrate on what those hands told him. The table-top from which the Electrostat had disappeared, almost before his eyes, was not as smooth or metallic as it seemed to visual examination. Close to the center was an area that seemed to vibrate a trifle, like a taut membrane.

"Atom-shift!"

Penny Wiggins did not say it aloud, only in his mind. He knew of the atom-shift ray, which could so alter the speeds and orbits of atoms and molecules as to make a solid substance as penetrable as air.

Cale Spohn, he had guessed and now felt sure, had such a ray device. Spohn used it to make an invisible trap in the top of his table. Under it would be a hollow space, in which the Electrostat lay hidden even from Spohn's closest comrades. The ray was off just now, but the affected atoms still had strange vibrations.

Wiggins ran a forefinger along the edge of the table. He found a stud, pressed it. At the same time, he plunged his hand into the vibrating area on the table-top. It was like dipping into water. Dragging out the Electrostat, he turned silently in almost the same moment and slipped out at the door.

He headed down the corridor, toward the sleeping quarter from which he had crept.

"Wiggins!"

A figure scampered up to confront him, Xulrra—harnessed into erect posture, and covered with his long robe.

"Why did you depart when I might need your help?" demanded the Martian. "And where have you been? I had to repair that motor all alone. And you—"

Xulrra broke off sharply, craning his flaccid neck. His flowery head stooped above the crystal globe that Wiggins was carrying.

"You have stolen it!" Xulrra hissed.

Wiggins stood perfectly still. He poised the Electrostat on his left palm. His right clenched into a fist so knobby and competent that it seemed to have been pilfered from



Spohn as well as the crystal globe. "Well," said Wiggins, in a level, hard voice that none of the outlaws would have ascribed to him, "what about it?"

Xulrra, a Martian and a scientist, was too absorbed in the stolen Electrostat to wonder at his companion's strange manner. His tentacles crept from beneath the robe, fluttering in excitement.

"You rrealize?" he slurred and chattered. "Thiss can command—overrwhelm—rrule thesse outlaws! I have mechanical sskill and ssensse. Let me ssee the thing. Sspohn always rrefussed, he knew that I might depose him—"

"I know you're dying to have it," Xulrra, broke in Penny Wiggins, still using his new hard voice. "But if you even try to touch it, I'll pick that fuzzy head off your body like a daisy. Get out of my way!"

**X**ULRRA was now aware of the change in Penny Wiggins. He retreated a pace, then spoke again.

"You forrget that one crry frrom me would rrouse all thiss outlaw crrew—"

Wiggins stooped with amazing swiftness. Against the rocky wall of the corridor he carefully laid the Electrostat. Without straightening, he threw himself at Xulrra.

Off guard, the Martian was bowled over. Wiggins, falling adroitly upon him, crushed out the wind that might have been used to scream for help. Before Xulrra could gulp in more, Wiggins caught him by the soft throat in one hand. He shook Xulrra's head violently.

Out of the open breathing-hole and into Wiggins's other palm popped a metal sphere the size of a marble—Xulrra's artificial voice-box, without which no Martian can form Terrestrial words.

Springing up, Wiggins popped the voice-box into his pocket. Xulrra, still down, whipped an electro-automatic pistol from under his robe.

But it took a second to aim. By that time Wiggins had again seized the pilfered Electrostat once more. With both hands he held it toward

Xulrra. His fingers found a series of tiny holes in the crystal wall, no larger than pores. As with a flute, he closed some of the holes, left others open.

A soft hum filled the air, a little glow lighted up the delicate machinery of the Electrostat. Xulrra's electric-powered gun pointed, but would not even click. Lashing out an unshod foot, Wiggins knocked the weapon from Xulrra's tentacle. It spun a dozen feet away.

Penny Wiggins now offered the cowed Martian the captured voice-box.

"Put it back in your face," he granted. "But if you raise your voice, I'll kick all the brains out of that petal-fluffed eggshell you wear."

Xulrra refitted the device and dragged himself tremblingly erect.

"You—" he babbled. "You can operate the Electrosstat!"

"Certainly," snapped his vanquisher. "Now, do you want some more of what I've given you, or will you do as you're told?"

"No—yess!" Xulrra whimpered answers to the two questions.

"Then head back to that dynamo cave, and quick!"

\* \* \* \* \*

Cale Spohn awakened, ill-tempered and blur-eyed, to a harshly official voice at his very shoulder.

"Tention, Hole in the Sky! We see you! This is the Martio-Terrestrial Police Patrol—surrounding you in space. We're giving you a chance to surrender before we start bombing and raying!"

It was Spohn's radio receiver, on a stand beside his bunk. He sat up, shaking the sleep out of his ruffled roan head.

A chill came to him, such as he seldom knew. Somebody had stumbled onto him—perhaps that police cruiser from which he'd been grabbed. He should have rayed it to atoms. Still, the act would have been observed by somebody else in space—

"Imberton!" Spohn bawled, and Imberton ran in from the next sleeping cave.

"I heard it, too, boss! They've got some hunch about our general posi-



tion, and they're trying to bluff—"

As though in refutation of that very thought, the radio addressed them again.

"We have you accurately spotted! That porthole you left open gave us a ray of blue light. Your space-latitude is C59G-80004K—"

"Blue light!" gulped Imberton. "That's the chemical farm set up by that little squirt Wiggins, in the chamber next to the dock-hole!"

**T**HEY dashed forth, yelling for the watch. The other outlaws, sleeping and waking, heard the yells and tumbled out of their burrows like frightened rabbits. One of them, who had already heard the radio summons to surrender, had rushed to the chemical farm chamber. Now he hurried back with a long woeful face.

"It's true, boss!" he told Spohn. "That black pigment is all off the pane. They could see that blue light a million miles!"

It hadn't been a bluff, after all. But Spohn was full of fight.

"Battle stations, everybody!" he barked. "Douse that light Wiggins set, and somebody bring the little rat here."

He ran back to his own quarters, switching on his two-way radio.

"Hello, Patrol! All right, you've found us. What d'ye figure to do with us? Come a-bombing and a-raying? If you want trouble, we'll give you plenty!"

Imberton was at the television. He lighted up the screen, took one glance, and turned with an ashen face to his chief.

"L-look here—"

He had dialed in a view of their position, his telefocal rays concentrating some hundreds of miles out, as though from a point well away in space. The screen showed a rectangle of starry sky, and a glowing patch in its center. Against that patch, the silhouette of their asteroid stood out clearly.

One of the police craft had fired slow-burning powder in its propulsion rockets, creating a temporary cloud of luminous particles. With that as a background, fighting vessels opo-

site the cloud could see the Hole in the Sky plainly.

"Like a bucket of coal in a snow-bank," snarled Spohn. He turned to the communicator radio. "Hello, battle stations! Trouble's due to break. Shoot at any ship you see!"

"But," came back a tremulous, unpiratical response, "our—our rays won't work! Something's gone wrong with the central power-feed!"

Before Spohn could thunder a reply, the radio went dead. So did the television, under Imberton's very nose.

"Boss," gulped Imberton, "we're done for. We'd better quit, before—"

"You'd quit to the cops?" bawled Spohn.

The lights went off suddenly. Spohn, too, was choking, but he managed to voice more defiance.

"So long as I'm still on my feet, I'll—"

Then he, too, was silent. For he was no longer on his feet. He was floating in darkness, as in a great roomful of quiet water. His head felt blurred and sick, as though from space-sickness.

"Gravity," moaned Imberton. "Gravity's gone blooey, too. I say we're done for. We can't fight, or see, or even get away!"

And neither spoke, there or elsewhere, until a landing party from the police craft cut the entry panels away with ray-blasts and floundered in to make their arrests.

That was that.

In the cabin of the police flagship, dosed with brandy-laced coffee, Cale Spohn recovered enough to sit up and glare at his guards.

"I suppose," he flung out, "some space-skunk in my gang sold out to you. You couldn't ever hook me except by working from inside."

"Yes, from inside—in a way," a diffident voice agreed. "But I got inside from outside. That's why I posed as a fellow-prisoner, had them lock me to you. So you'd have to escape with me along."

Spohn's burning eyes, like two corrosive ray-weapons, regarded the little figure in sock feet and torn tunic, who lounged opposite and eyed him mildly over the rim of a coffee cup.



"That's why it was so easy for Imberton to locate and stop the police cruiser," amplified Penny Wiggins helpfully. "It was planned."

Spohn's whole body seethed and quivered with rage.

"You!" he howled. "You did it! First you join up with us—"

"Did I have any choice?" protested Wiggins. "It was that or be—uh—'knocked off,' was your word. But I was prepared with a trump card, the chemical farming. I'd foreseen those outlaw appetites."

Spohn stared at the two grinning guards, and back at Wiggins.

"You mean," he said, "you let me go back to the Hole so you could scoop up my men, too?"

**A** GUARD nodded.

"We've got 'em all now, on the other ships. And the Hole's really a hole now—blasted to powder." He turned to Wiggins. "Keep talking, sir. I can't wait to hear the rest."

"What we really wanted most of all," resumed Penny Wiggins, "was the Electrostat. As soon as I found it, I knew you'd never be able to fight off

the patrol. I made Xulrra show me all the points of electric-power contact with weapons, radio, lightning, gravity. I put them out of commission, one by one, focusing only on the asteroid's power-centers, so that the police could use their own weapons—"

"Stop right there!" Spohn interrupted. "You talk as if you could use the Electrostat. But nobody could use it after we'd killed Burke Rausch. Except his partner, John Heth—"

"You embarrass me." Wiggins cut him off in turn. "You've an amazing talent for putting your finger on a faulty item, Captain Spohn. Correct. I was deceiving you."

"Oh, so you couldn't use the thing? You really didn't?"

Spohn eyed the little man narrowly. "How did you manage, then?"

Wiggins picked up the Electrostat beside him and fairly fondled it.

"I didn't say that I couldn't use it," he explained. "That wasn't my deception, Captain Spohn. That was only in assuming the name of Penny Wiggins. Because," and the little man patted the Electrostat, "my name is really John Heth."

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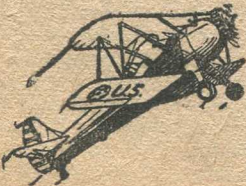
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# THE WORLDS OF TOMORROW

## PANIC ON THE EARTH!

*The Long-Dreaded Storm Breaks on September 12, 2028*

*—Creating Havoc and Vast Geographical Changes!*

**U**NTIL nearly the middle of the Twentieth Century, no one seems to have had any presentiment that the Earth was on the eve of diastrophic changes which would radically alter its face.

It was known, of course, that the steady shrinking of the cooling planet caused periodic bucklings of its solid crust, thrusting up great mountain ranges. But it was believed that the last great mountain-building period, which had produced the Alps, Rockies and Himalayas, would not be repeated for many millions of years.

As early as 1940, however, geologists revised their opinion on this matter. They concluded that the Alps-Rockies-Himalaya revolution had been only the initial phase of a great period of quakes and mountain-building which might resume activity at any moment.

Naturally, a contingency so remote aroused little apprehension. To the popular mind, the continents and seas, the mountains and valleys, were something unalterable and eternal. Only the long-term view of the trained geologist comprehended the fact that through geological time, the Earth's face has constantly fluctuated in outline.

### The Coming Storm

It was late in 2027 that the first signs of the coming storm manifested themselves as an unprecedented increase in volcanic activity. Dead volcanoes everywhere on Earth burst into new life, and the fire-ringed coasts of the Pacific saw great devastation and destruction, especially in Chile, New Zealand, Japan and Alaska.

After a lull of a few months, volcanic activity resumed with even greater violence early in 2028. Already, geologists had begun to suspect that a major geophysical revolution was at hand. But not until April, 2028, did they publish a warning to the world.

The people of Earth, already made greatly apprehensive by the unprecedented number of tremors and volcanic outbursts, were appalled by the prospect. They learned from the report of the World Government Geological Commission "these premonitory signs of deep diastrophic activity point clearly to a sudden culmination

of crustal movements which will undoubtedly cause the widest destruction in certain terrestrial areas."

### Panic!

The first publication of that warning threw Earth's people into a panic. The whole planet seemed suddenly a death-trap. It is small wonder that there was a great stampede of people who wished to leave Earth and seek safety upon Mars or Venus.

At that time, in 2028, interplanetary travel was only fifty-seven years old. The small number of space-ships available could not have accommodated a millionth of the panicky people who wished to get away from Earth before the catastrophe. These stormed the New York spaceport in such throngs that the World Government was hard pressed to restrain them.

The World Government acted promptly to allay the panic. It reminded that the geologists had pointed out certain areas in the interiors of the continents would be least affected. It announced a plan to conduct a temporary migration to those safer areas until the danger was past.

### Refugee Cities

Great temporary refugee cities were hastily thrown up in selected locations in Iowa, Bolivia, the Egyptian Sudan, Poland and Inner Mongolia. A swift flow of the world's populations toward those refuges took place upon a great scale in the months that followed.

Convulsions of the Earth's crust increased in violence all through the summer of 2028. Numerous "Arks" were built in that time, being crude space-ships designed to carry refugees to the nearer planets.

These primitive ships, constructed by enthusiastic but untrained people, were so faulty that the first two exploded and destroyed themselves in attempting take-off. The World Government then forbade any more of these death-traps from being completed.

On the morning of September 12, 2028, the long-dreaded storm burst. Earth's granite and basalt crust had been strained to the breaking point, and now it snapped in a score of places, folding in upon itself and raising whole areas from low to high



altitude, in continuous convulsions that went on for four days.

## Geographical Changes

The convulsion radically altered the geography of Earth, adding considerably to its land surface as the sinking crust heaved upward, in folding.

The Bering Sea between Alaska and Siberia was split by a great new-risen bridge of land, which is now called Amerasia. Another huge new mass rose in the latitude of the West Indies, completely connecting Florida and Venezuela. This

sessing peaks that rise to 35,000 feet. They have been called the Icy Mountains.

A whole great new island mass was heaved up in the South Atlantic west of Africa. Given the name of Nova Land, it is noteworthy for two extremely lofty plateaus that mark the sites of the former islands of Ascension and St. Helena. The Straits of Gibraltar were closed, and the ancient landbridge from Italy to Africa renewed, separating the Mediterranean sea into two separate landlocked lakes.

Japan also was joined to the continent of Asia by the convulsion. Australia and



made the former Gulf of Mexico into a land-locked sea, the present Lake of Mexico. The old Panama Canal was closed by a similar rising, but since surface shipping was little used in these days of air-freighters, that was not so great a calamity.

## Nova Land

Mountains rivalling the Himalayas thundered up from the east coast of South America, in Argentine and Brazil. Similar but even higher mountains rose on the west coast of southern Africa, these ranges pos-

New Guinea were welded together by a rising mass of land, and the two islands of New Zealand were made one. Norway was also joined to the European mainland, closing the Baltic.

## Property Loss

The destruction of property was tremendous, not only from the direct effect of the great quakes in the areas most affected, but also from the immense tidal waves that devastated New York, Shanghai, London and nearly every other coastal



metropolis. But the loss of life was comparatively small, for the sites of the refuge-cities had been wisely chosen.

They suffered terrifying tremors, falls of ashes, and ferocious storms, but came through little-scathed. The peoples of Earth were soon at work, rebuilding their shattered cities and exploring the strange, oozy new lands that had been brought up out of the sea.

Since 2048, there have been no recurrence of the convulsions, and geologists are now unanimous that this particular mountain-building revolution is completed.

For a long time there will be a quiescent period, in which erosion will gradually wear down the mountains and valleys into flat, featureless plains.

Far in the future there will occur other such revolutions, but by that time, the people of Earth should be sufficiently advanced in scientific knowledge to prevent such great destruction. In time, as Earth's solid crust grows thicker, these convulsions will cease altogether.

### The Future

In this 21st century, we are able to foresee much of the future of Earth. We know that we are now in the receding stages of a glacial period, and that for 20,000 years the climate will become ever warmer until most of the world is tropical.

But the glacial periods, caused by the eccentricities of the Earth's orbit and axis of rotation which bring about a fluctuation of solar heat received, will return again. We shall expect the great masses of ice to creep southward again every thirty or forty thousand years, for a long time to come.

We of the 21st century also know that some millions of years in the future, Earth will become a ringed planet like Saturn. Our Moon, which is now slowly receding from us, will in time halt its recession and will be dragged back toward Earth by the forces of solar tidal friction.

### Ring Around Earth

When it approaches our planet within a distance of 2.5 times the radius of Earth, the Moon must inevitably be shattered into a great swarm of debris which will take the form of a ring around Earth.

This stupendous event will undoubtedly cause the fall of a great rain of meteorites upon Earth's surface. Our remote descendants will be forced to prepare deep underground shelters for their protection during that rain of fire.

When it is over, there will be no Moon in the sky but instead, Earthmen will look up at a great scimitar of light belting the heavens like a more brilliant Milky Way—the ring that was once the Moon.

### The Aging Sun

Looking still further ahead, we can foresee the remote time when the fate of Earth will be affected by the aging of the Sun.

It seems certain that as the Sun finally spends its energy, it must collapse into the so-called "white dwarf" state, and will yield but a small fraction of its present heat.

In that case, Earth and its neighboring outer worlds would be frozen. But we of the 21st century believe that by that time the people of the Solar System worlds will have attained sufficient scientific power to cope successfully with that situation.

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# The SECOND INSTALLMENT Alien Intelligence

By JACK WILLIAMSON

*With His Two Companions from Astran, Dr. Winfield Fowler Penetrates the Dark Lands of the Krimlu*

## CHAPTER VI

### *Fowler Recovers*



I read this letter in the faint glow of the phosphorescent globe. So Austen was beyond the crescent, if he had been able to carry out his plan. The date of the letter was ten months back. Then the recent radio messages had obviously come from the Krimlu domain. But how had it been sent?

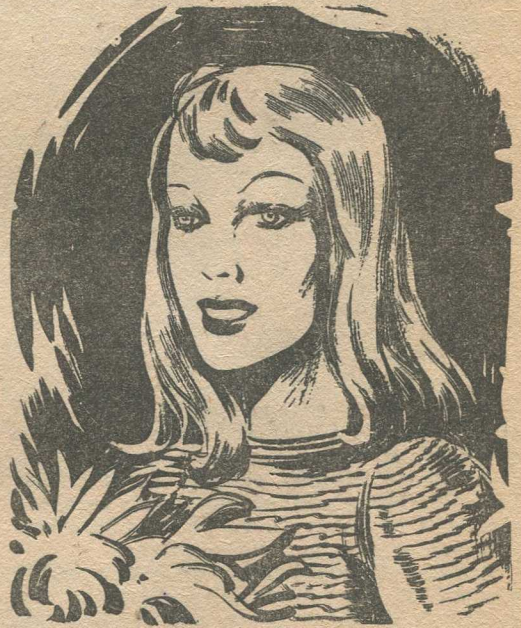
Austen was not one to appeal for aid for himself alone. Had he learned of some general danger to the human race? I thought of his phrase, "for the sake of mankind," and shuddered at a picture of the red lights sweeping over a great city like New York, decimating the terrorized population.

I tried to think what was best for me to do, if ever I got out of Astran alive. Austen had been able to round the Silver Lake in the north. I should be able to follow him. Clearly there was nothing for me to do but to find out as much about this strange world as possible, and to get his requested equipment to him as soon as I could.

I stayed in the cellarlike haven for a week. Twice each day the young chap, Naro, came to bring food and drink. He knew but a few words of English, and during the hour or so he stayed each time I had him trying to teach me the language of Astran. But my progress was slow, and I never learned more than a few score words. However, I developed quite a liking for the boy.

He had a simple, straight forward manner, and a good sense of humor. He was

the brother of Melvar, and two years younger. Their father, it seemed, had been carried off several years before when the flying lights had made a great raid. The mother had soon after fallen a victim to the sacrificial rites of the hated Jorak. The boy himself bore the scars of wounds he



Melvar of Astran

had suffered a few months before in a terrific battle with one of the Purple Ones.

On the second day Melvar came. She brought a great flask of aromatic oil that she poured over my wounds. It must have been remarkably healing, for in a few days I found myself entirely recovered. Before she left she told me that the priests had heard of my arrival, and that it was whis-

*See Page 111 for the Synopsis of the First Installment of this Great Scientifiction Serial Reprinted by Popular Request*



pered among the people that I was a supernatural being, sent as an omen of an attack by the Krimlu.

She told me, too, that there was talk that a sacrifice would soon be offered at the altar of the Purple Sun, to appease the angry Spirits of the dead. Sweet and innocent child, she seemed to have no fear that she, who had brought me into the city, might be the sacrifice. I did nothing to let her know my misgivings, although I did propose that we leave the city together as soon as possible. How I hated to see her leave the cubicle!

During the following days I questioned Naro constantly as to the doings of his sister and of the Astranians, but I was able to elicit little information, except that none of the Krimlu had been seen for several days and that the headmen of the nation were beginning to expect a raid in force. I persuaded Naro to keep a very close watch on the movements of Melvar, and to come to me at once if Jorak made any attempt to get her into his power.

During the interminable periods when I was alone I was driven almost insane by the monotony and the anxiety of my existence. But I had my scientific equipment, and I had Naro bring me a few assorted fragments of the crystal building



stone, which I tested and found to be real gems of several varieties. Many of the gems were simple enough in chemical formula, composed of the most common elements, so the synthesis of them by scientific means was not unreasonable.

A clay-bed would supply an inexhaustible amount of the elements needed for the synthesis of these gems, and I think the people of old Astran had been able to accomplish it. I examined the little glow-lamp, too, and found it to be simply a crystal bottle filled with the moist, crushed leaves of the red plants, which formed a culture of some kind of luminous bacteria.

**O**N the seventh night, when the pale ray of daylight that filtered down into my hiding place had dimmed, Naro burst into the chamber, panting, and wild-eyed with terror. His crystal sword was gone, his metallic mantle was torn, and blood was dripping from a deep scratch on his arm. He thrust into my hand a tattered scrap of paper, evidently the flyleaf of a book. On it, in an ink that was probably the juice of the red plants, the following words were formed in hastily printed characters.

Winfield: There is no hope. The priests will offer a gift to the Purple Sun. I am the victim. Already I am in the hands of Jorak. I am sorry, for I loved you. The Krimlu are coming tonight. Already their lights flicker above the mist. In the morning my brother will take you to the gate, and you may escape. If only it had been one night later we might have all got away together. Farewell.  
Melvar

No time was to be lost. I had been anticipating something of this kind. The guns were cleaned and loaded. My pack was soon ready. Naro took a part of my equipment. I followed the boy up the stair, with the phrase "for I loved you" ringing in my heart.

We reached the top and walked out into the red brush. Beneath the purple starlight the vast, fantastic-columned halls of Astran were gleaming faintly, and I caught a brief blue flicker from the great machine on the ruby dome.

Suddenly, with a sharp thrill of terror that made me catch my breath, I heard the awful, whining sigh that grew until it reverberated through the heavens, making the very air seem alive with its deep intensity. Above the emerald wall I glimpsed the green-tipped needle of crimson that made the sound. It was sweeping through the sky meteor-swift, while the pale blue beam stabbed out at it ineffectually. It passed in an instant, but others came, and soon the sky was lighted with the weird red radiance, and the very mountain top vibrated with the whistling roars. The things swept around and around in a mad confusion of darting flames. They were like moths about a candle.

We passed an amber palace wall and came suddenly upon a great, metal-floored court. Marching across it were a half-score of the Astranian men-at-arms, their accoutrements gleaming weirdly in the light of the strange things above. They saw us at once, and charged upon us with a shout. I dropped to my knees. Once my rifle spoke, and I rejoiced at its heavy thrust against my shoulder and the acrid odor of the smoke. I felt a man again as the leader of the soldiers fell upon his face.

Naro gripped my shoulder and pointed upward. One of the red things was plunging down, like a great red Zeppelin with a great green light at its forward end, its purple phosphorescent track swirling up behind it. The soldiers forgot us and scattered in mad terror. Naro jerked my arm and in a moment we had tumbled into a copse of the red brush.

For a moment the bloody radiance was thrown upon us in an intense flood, and the screaming roar was deafening. A few minutes more, and the thing had flashed up and away. A breath of hot purple mist passed over us. When we got to our feet and crept out of the thicket the soldiers were gone.

Swiftly Naro led me on, keeping in the shadows of the building or in the cover of the thickets. Once a man sprang suddenly at us from behind a sapphire pillar, diamond sword drawn. My pistol exploded in his face and blew his head half off. Naro possessed himself of the dead man's weapons, and we went breathlessly on. Three



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## What Has Happened Before

**D**R. WINFIELD FOWLER, young American physician, sets out, in response to an urgent radio message in search of his friend, Dr. Horace Austen who has disappeared in the hinterland of Australia. Fowler reaches the wild desert region surrounding a weird mesa known as the Mountain of the Moon. Alone, he camps on the desert the first night, and is disturbed by terrible noises and a hissing, fantastic display of ghastly lights playing up from beyond the mountain top.

In the morning, undaunted, he seeks a way to scale the mountain and finds a silvery ladder which leads him to the heights and then down the inside rim of a huge crater. He reaches the foot of this second ladder just as night is falling again, and is treated to a first-hand display of whizzing comets of light and hideous sounds.

Intent on finding a mysterious Melvar of Astran who, according to the radio message, can direct him, Fowler presses on as soon as it is daylight and narrowly escapes capture by a troop of fair-haired men in silvery chain mail. He encounters Melvar who proves to be a beautiful girl,

and she leads him to Astran, the crystal city, where she and the men in mail armor live.

Melvar hides Fowler in a grotto within the shining city which is partly in ruins, telling him that the soldiers frequently go out to hunt purple ghouls that look like people and yet which are almost indestructible. They are called the Purple Ones.

Awakening from a recuperative slumber, Fowler finds Melvar's brother, a lad, waiting for him with a letter from Dr. Austen.

He reads and learns that Austen had left this record here in Astran for whoever might follow him in from the outside world. He is going on to explore the mysterious region beyond the Silver Lake in an attempt to fathom the meaning of the flashing lights, rushing comets and whistling sounds.

Austen ends his letter by stating that he thinks the apparently supernatural manifestations result from perfectly natural forces in the control of a civilized power that might not be much above mankind's own state of advancement.

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## Now Go on with the Story!

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times, in other parts of the city, we saw the red shapes drop to the ground for a few minutes, and then dart up again, while ever the blue ray played back and forth upon them.

At last we passed between vast ruby columns and stood beneath the huge red dome. Before us lay a great space, fairly lit with a rosy light from the crystal walls. Around the farther side, seated tier upon tier, were thousands of the brilliantly-clad people of Astran. In the center of the great floor, resting upon a pedestal, was a globe of shining purple—a sphere of coruscating flame, itself immense and perhaps forty feet in diameter, but insignificant in that colossal hall. Standing at rigid attention, in regular rows about the pedestal were a few score armed soldiers, and as many other erect men in long purple robes. All eyes were fixed on a point in front of the gigantic globe.

**WE HURRIED** silently across the smooth metal floor, our footsteps drowned in the rushed sounds of the flying things above. We ran around the great purple sun-sphere of crystal, coming abruptly upon a terrible scene. Beneath the sphere was an altar of glowing red, priests and soldiery all grouped about it. By the altar, kneeling and silent, clad in a filmy green robe, was the beautiful form of Melvar.

Just behind her stood a tall hawklike man, in his hands a great transparent crystal vessel full of a liquid that gleamed like molten silver.

As we came around the sphere he was holding up the vessel and repeating a strange chant in a monotonous monotone. At sight of us he dropped into alarmed silence, an ugly scowl of hate and fear distorting his harsh features. For a moment he stood as if paralyzed, then he started forward as though to dash the contents of the crystal pitcher upon the silent girl.

I fired on the instant, shattering the ves-

sel and splashing the shining, silvery fluid all over his person. The effect of it was instantaneous and terrible. His purple robe was eaten away, set on fire by the stuff; his flesh was dyed a deep purple, and partially consumed.

He tottered and fell to the floor in a writhing, flaming heap.

In the confusion, and the dazed silence that fell upon the vast assemblage at sight of that horrible thing, Melvar, aroused from her resignation of despair by the report of the pistol, sprang to her feet in incredulous surprise. For a moment she looked wonderingly at us. Then she turned and shouted a few strange and impressive words at the priests.

Her white arms swept up in a curious gesture, and she turned and sped toward us.

We started running back the way we had come. The dramatic fall of Jorak, and the evident terror that Melvar's courageous words, whatever they had been, had inspired, served to hold the Astranians motionless until we had traversed the better part of the distance to the columns. But then they started after us en masse. I dropped to my knees at the columns and began firing steadily with the rifle. They fell, sometimes two or three at a shot, but still they charged on, their number overwhelming.

Then, outside, there was a sudden louder, shrieking roar. A flood of red light poured through the columns, and there was a terrific crash upon the dome. Dense clouds of hot purple vapor poured into the vast room. One of the flying lights had landed upon the roof.

The charging throng behind us stopped and ran about in confusion. We darted out through the purple clouds, making for the shadow of the nearest building. We kept close by the mighty walls until we reached the gate.

Daring the terrors of the night, we ran out and down the narrow trail. By dawn



we were several miles from Astran in the direction of the shining lake.

## CHAPTER VII

### *The Silver Lake*



At the coming of day we were walking over a gently rolling scarlet plain scattered with gigantic solitary boulders that sloped gradually down to the Silver Lake. The lake lay flat and a gentle white, clad in all the ominous mystery of that strange world, calling, beckoning us on, challenging us to learn the secret of

the farthest bank of purple fog, with a grim warning of the doom that might await us.

The red, fernlike sprays waved gently in the breeze, and the vivid, tiny white flowers seemed to sparkle with a million glancing rays, like frost in the sunshine. But the deep intensity of the red color lent a weird and unpleasant suggestion of blood. Beyond the Silver Lake, low hills rose, faint and mysterious in the purple haze.

Melvar walked beside me when the way was smooth enough. She was talking vivaciously. She had a keen sense of humor and a lively wit. She seemed to have an almost childish faith in my power and that of my guns—but I was far from feeling confident.

At sunrise we stopped by a little pool of clear water, drank, and made a meal of the abundant yellow fruit. Astran, with the scintillating fires kindled again in its jeweled towers by the rising sun, lay far behind and above us. When we had finished eating Melvar stood looking for a long moment at its glorious, sparkling light. She murmured a few words beneath her breath in the Astranian tongue, and turned again toward the Silver Lake.

In two hours we came to the shore of the great lake. The red scrub grew up to the brink of a bluff a dozen feet high. Below was a broad, bare sandy beach, with the gleaming waves, quicksilver white, rolling on it two hundred yards away. For a few minutes we stood at the edge of the cliff, in the fringe of crimson brush, and let our eyes wander over the vast, flat desert of flowing, argent fire. We peered at the misty red hills beyond, trying to penetrate their mysteries, speculating on what lay behind them. Then we scrambled down on the hard, white sand. Naro grasped his weapon and looked up and down the beach.

"It is along the shore of the Silver Lake," Melvar said, "that the Purple Ones are most frequently found."

"The Purple Ones again!" I cried. "What are they—decorated rattlesnakes?" Then, with a sickening sensation of terror, I remembered the horrible, half-human purple

corpse that I had seen the soldiers bringing into Astran. "Are the Purple Ones men?"

"In form, they are men and women," Melvar said, "but they dwell alone in the thickets like beasts. All of them are old and hideous. They are savage, and they have the strength each of many men. Our soldiers must always hunt them, and fight them to the death. A single man, even though armed, could do nothing against one of them, for they are terribly strong, and they fight like demons. Their country is not known, and no children of their kind are ever found. The priests say that they are of a race of dwarfs that dwell beneath the Silver Lake."

Here was another of the baffling mysteries of this strange world. In fact, I was coming upon unpleasant mysteries without solutions until I was weary. Lone, purple, savage animals in the form of emaciated humans who prowled about the country like wolves, and like wolves were hunted down by the Astranians! Again I shuddered at the memory of the limp purple corpse the soldiers had carried. With a strange chill of the heart, I remembered the human footprints that had been left where my ponies were taken in the desert, and of the eerie, insane laughter that I had heard, or thought I heard, above the whistling roar.

My thoughts ended with the construction of a mad hypothesis of a race of purple folk who lived beyond the Silver Lake, who were accustomed to make slave raids on the whites in torpedo-shaped airships, and who made a practice of releasing, or turning out, the superannuated ones of their kind to prey on the people of the crystal city. It seemed the only tenable theory at the time, but I was far from the hideous truth. I could see no reason, if one race could attain a civilization high enough to synthesize diamonds for building stone, why another might not be able to build ships as marvelous as the red torpedoes. But my reason rebelled at the acceptance of demonic and supernatural horrors.

**P**RESENTLY I roused myself and led the way down to the white waves. My companions held back nervously, warning me not to touch it lest I would die as Jorak had. But I succeeded in filling a test tube with the stuff. It was not transparent. It was white, gleaming, metallic—like mercury, or molten silver. I carried it back up to the bluff and set about examining it while Naro stood guard and Melvar watched me. She asked innumerable questions concerning the operation in hand, and irrelevant queries such as the appearance of a cat, and Fifth Avenue styles of ladies' garments. So often did I pause to answer her questions, to laugh at the naive quaintness of her phrases, or to let my eyes rest on her charming face, that the attempted analysis of the metal did not progress with any remarkable celerity.

The silver liquid was very mobile and



very light, having a specific gravity of only .25, or not even four times that of liquid hydrogen, which is .07. It was extremely corrosive. Tiny bits of wood or paper were entirely consumed on contact with it, with the liberation, apparently, of carbon dioxide, water vapor and a dense purple gas I could not identify. That suggested, of course, that the stuff contained oxygen, but as to how much, or in what combination, I had no idea.

A drop of it on a larger piece of paper set it afire. I found, too, when testing the electrolytic qualities of the liquid, that when I introduced into it a copper and a silver coin, electrically connected, that the stuff was rapidly decomposed into the purple vapor, with the generation of a powerful current, while the metal remained unaffected.

That was another puzzling result. My experiments, of course, were comparatively crude, and when I had gone as far as I could, I really knew little more about the silver liquid than in the beginning.

Despite Melvar's warning, and my own precautions, I splashed a single drop of it on my arm. She cried out in horror, and I saw that a splotch of purple was spreading like a thin film over the skin. There was no pain, but the muscles of the arm were seized with sudden and uncontrollable convulsions. Melvar tried to wash the stain off with water from my canteen. In an hour the color had faded, but the limb remained sore and painful.

By that time the purple disc of the sun was sinking low, and we took thought of how to spend the night. Naro climbed up on the plain to gather a few of the fruits for our supper. We found a little cave in the bluff that seemed a good place of shelter. I gathered an armful of the red brush and made a fire.

The leaves burned fiercely, crackling as if they contained oil. The fire produced a great volume of acrid, black smoke. Combustion was greatly accelerated on account of the increased atmospheric pressure here many thousand feet below sea level. Melvar and Naro were intensely interested in the performance, although they had seen Austen make fire while in the city.

Melvar slept in the cavern, Naro and I taking turns at standing guard at the entrance. The darting pencils of crimson were abroad again, but they passed far overhead, and we heard the sounds of their passage only as vast and distant sighs. In the morning we rose early and clambered back up the cliffs. I was in rather a puzzling situation. Clearly my duty was to get Austen's equipment to him as quickly as possible, but I liked neither to desert Melvar and her brother, nor to let them accompany me into the unknown perils of the region beyond. But the latter course seemed the best, and they were ready enough to go with me anywhere.

Retracing our course of the day before for perhaps a mile to get upon the upland, we set out for the north. The sun was just rising above the black rim when Naro shouted and pointed at the mist-clad red hills beyond the Silver Lake. At first I

looked in vain. Then I caught a faint flicker of amber light, pulsing up through the purple air.

**A**BRUPTLY a vast mellow golden beam of light sprang from behind the distant scarlet hills and spread up toward the zenith in a deep yellow flood. It seemed to vibrate, to throb with incredibly rapid fluctuations. Suddenly bright, swift-changing, formless shapes of green and red flared up within it, shot up the beam, and vanished.

The radiance dimmed and died. I could see nothing, but somehow I felt that an invisible beam of vibrant force was still pouring up into the sky. Here was another manifestation of the unknown power beyond the sea. The beam had come. So far as visibility was concerned, it was gone. What had been its meaning, its purpose?

Beyond the silver lake, low cliffs rose above a broad, sandy beach faintly veiled by the purple mist. The red hills were fainter still above them, and the thicker pall of purple haze that hung over the hidden place beyond stood out distinctly against the distant, steep, black wall that threw jagged crags to the sky so far above.

Out of that vale of mystery the ray had leaped—and died. Or had it merely faded, and was now invisible, pulsing still?

All seemed as it had been before, but from the attitude of my companions I knew there was more to come. They were gazing up into the sun-bright void above and waiting expectantly.

Then I saw, far above, growing gradually brighter against the sky, as if it were being projected there by a great magic lantern behind the hills, an upright bar of silver haze. Slowly it grew brighter and its outlines sharper until it looked like a vertical bar of silver metal in the sky—inconceivably huge. The length of the bar must have been miles, its diameter many hundreds of yards. It hung still in the heavens, neither rising nor falling. Here was the display, indeed, of alien science and power!

Presently I recovered from my first wonder and became conscious that the blue eyes of Melvar were upon me quite as much as on the astonishing thing in the sky.

"Melvar, have you seen it before?" I asked. "Is it real—natural? Is it made by man?" I waited eagerly for the reassurance that she could not give.

"It comes often," she replied. "Every day for many months of the year. The priests say that it is the evil goddess of the under-earth, who loves the Purple Sun and flies to the sky to meet him. But the Sun goes on unheeding, and the goddess cries silver tears until her Lord is gone from the sky. There is yet more to see."

I looked up again and saw that a faint-colored mist was gathering about the bar. It grew brighter, condensed, seemed drawn into swirling rings by a sort of magnetic attraction. And the iridescent mist-rings swam about the bar, moved ever faster until they were whirling madly. Their coruscating shapes grew brighter, plainer, until



they were vivid, spinning flames of color in the sunshine. I noticed that the red was about the center of the silver bar, and that the bands of color above and below ran regularly to the other end of the spectrum, with rings of violet at the bottom and at the top. During all this time I heard no sound. It was as still as death.

Still the color-rings spun and changed, growing ever brighter and sharper-edged. The red band grew larger about the center, until its diameter was the length of the cylinder. It gleamed with a lurid, scarlet light. Below and above were spinning, burning circles of orange, yellow, green, and blue, each thinner than the one next nearer the center, and of smaller diameter. And the violet rings had shrunk to great globes of violet fire, shining with painful intensity.

The thing was so strange, so utterly inexplicable, that I was grasped in a paralysis of unfamiliar terror. My breath choked and my heart beat wild with fear as I stared straight at it. I laughed. A wild, unearthly sound it was, like that I had heard as I lay beneath my tent beyond the barrier.

**I** WHIRLED around fiercely, but a firm, arresting hand was laid on my shoulder. From afar off, deep blue eyes looked into mine—eyes that were cool and sane and brave. They shone through the red curtains of insanity in my brain. They broke the spell of fear.

Suddenly I was very weak, trembling and sick. Melvar's lithe arms were close about me, her throbbing heart close to mine. And in her dark, warm blue eyes, were sympathy, and tenderness, and love. She was human; she was real. I knew that her love would shield me from these terrors. I smiled at her, and sank down weakly in the red brush. But she had saved my mind. I had wandered on the brink of the fearful insanity of terror, and she had brought me back.

I looked from her sweet face, so full of anxious concern, to the thing in the sky. But now it seemed remote, unreal, and I gazed at it with weak indifference. Presently I saw that the whole thing was beginning to sink as though a weight were being accumulated upon it. Suddenly an immense gleaming globule of silver fell from the lower violet globe and dropped straight for the Silver Lake, while the weird form of lights that had made it floated back to its former elevation.

The great shining sphere fell and struck the white lake with a deafening roar, sending out great concentric waves in all directions. The amazing thing sank again, released a second huge drop, and rose. The process was repeated again and again, the interval being, by my watch, about 3 minutes and 15 seconds. All day it went on, with the great waves washing up the bluffs about the beach, and before night the level of the Silver Lake stood perceptibly higher.

Here was the mystery of the origin of the Silver Lake explained, but by a phenomenon far more inexplicable than the sea itself. In vain I tried to account for it in

some rational way, or to assign some natural cause for the thing. My mind could hardly grasp it. It was almost unbelievable, even as I looked upon it. Reason could not admit such a thing in a rational world.

## CHAPTER VIII

### *Stalked by the Purple Beast*



So weak was I after that terrible experience it was noon before I felt able to go on. The phenomenon continued to hang in the sky all day, dropping regularly its forming burden of silver liquid. Presently I became accustomed to it, realizing that it threatened us with no immediate danger.

After a light lunch of the yellow fruit, and a deep draught of water from a little stream that paralleled our route of march for a mile or two, we set out for the north again. Still feeling mentally limp, I was not as much on my guard against the weird perils of the place as I should have been.

Several times Naro stopped and listened, declaring that something was following us, keeping in the cover of waist-high brush in the bottom of the little valley along the side of which we were traveling. But I could hear nothing.

Melvar, for once having ceased her eager interrogation, was entertaining me with the legendary account of the past great heroes of Astran. She sang me a few passages from the epic in her native tongue.

Her voice was clear and pure and very beautiful. Though the words were strange to me, their sound was noble and suggestive, and there was a powerful, compelling rhythm in the lines. She translated the story into English. It was about such an epic poem as might have been expected, dealing with the adventures of an immortal hero, who had once conquered the Purple Ones, set up the vast palaces of Astran, and at last lost his life on an expedition across the Silver Lake to battle the Krimlu.

Suddenly her sweet voice was interrupted by a low tense cry from Naro, who had fiercely gripped my arm. I turned in time to see a weird figure, gnarled and stooped, with long white hair, slink swiftly and furtively from a great rock to the shelter of the red brush. Squat and bent as it was, there was no mistaking that it was human in shape, and that the skin was purple.

"I guess a rifle bullet will fix it," I said. "The Purple Ones have more power than you know," cried Melvar. "Let us try to get on more open ground before it attacks. Then it will have to leave its cover."

We turned and ran away from the stream, to a rocky hillside where the red scrub grew low and scant. A crashing sound rose behind us. Once I turned quickly,



raising my rifle. The strange figure darted abruptly into view, and I fired on the instant. I think I hit it, for it spun around quickly, and fell to the ground. But in a moment it was up and running toward us with an agility that was incredible, springing over the red brush in great bounds, with a motion more like that of a monstrous hopping insect than of a human being.

His white hair was flying in wild disorder, his shrunken limbs plainly flashing purple. And a terrible sound came from it as it bounded along—not a scream of rage or of pain, but a weird, uncanny laugh that rang strangely over the red plain. Astounded, I hesitated there, trembling with alien terror.

Melvar called my name sharply, and I turned to run on. We reached a great flat rock that lay at the upper edge of the bare space, in the edge of the thickets again. I lifted Melvar in my arms until she could reach the top and scramble up. Then I looked back and saw the purple man leaping across the clearing with incredible speed, not two hundred yards away.

Naro and I scrambled madly up atop the rock. I dropped to my knees, seized the rifle that I had pushed up before me, and began to pump lead at the beast as fast as I could work the bolt. The recoils of the gun seemed almost a steady thrust. I heard the bullets thud into the purple body. I saw it checked or driven back by the impacts. One bullet took it off its balance and it fell. But in a moment it was racing on again, empowered by superhuman energy.

When my rifle was empty the Purple One was not twenty feet away. One arm was shot away, the side of the body fearfully torn. The purple face was a hideous, mangled thing. It did not bleed, but the wounds were covered with a purple viscous slime. One of the eyes was gone, but the other glared at us with a wild, red light. Anything of ordinary life must long since have been dead. But it gathered itself and leaped for the top of the boulder.

**T**HE day before I had showed Melvar how to use my guns, merely by way of proof that there was nothing supernatural in the working of the weapon that had slain so many of the Astranians in the temple. Now I pushed one of the pistols toward her. She was standing there motionless, calmly even. There was no panic in her face, and I knew that she would have the courage to use the weapon to save herself from the terrible brute, if things came to the worst. She smiled at me as she picked up the gun, gripping it in a businesslike way.

As the purple monster sprang upon the boulder, I emptied my automatic into it. Great wounds were torn in the dark flesh, and half the face was shot away, but the thing seemed immune to death. As the last shot was fired it stood before us on the rock, a terrible mangled thing, the red eye blazing with demonic inhumanity.

Naro sprang out before me, his crystal sword drawn high. As the beast sprang at him, he cut at it with a mighty sweep of

the razor-edged weapon. But the stroke, which would have decapitated an ordinary human, was parried by a terrific blow of the clawlike hand of the thing, and the boy was sent spinning back against me. We fell together on the rock.

Then it hurled itself toward Melvar. It all happened in the briefest of moments. Melvar swung up the automatic with a quick, sure, graceful movement. She was like a beautiful goddess of battle, with blue eyes shining brightly, and golden hair gleaming in the sun.

Again that mad laugh was ringing out, with a choking sob in it, for the thing's vocal organs were injured. It leaped at her, its lacerated limbs working like machines. The muzzle of the gun was not an inch from the throat of the beast when she fired. The awful head was blown completely off the body, and fell rolling and bouncing to the red brush below. The body collapsed, writhing from the boulder top. It was not quiet for many minutes.

The girl dropped the gun, suddenly trembling, and fell sobbing into my arms. Her courage and coolness had saved us all, and I was quite as much unstrung as she after the danger had passed. What a wonderful being she was!

It was so late in the day, and we were so completely exhausted, we decided to go no farther. Naro was not hurt. He was the least excited of the three. In a few minutes he descended from the boulder and carried the quivering body and head back across the clearing to dispose of them. We found an overhanging shelf on the north side of the boulder that would afford some shelter from the flying lights. We gathered some of the yellow fruit for supper, cleaned and reloaded the weapons, and prepared to spend the night there.

Naro called me aside and showed me a curious much-worn silver bracelet with a singular design upon it. He told me, in his imperfect English, that it had belonged to his father, who had been taken by the flying lights many years before. That was a curious development. It showed that there was some connection between the dreaded Purple Ones, and the terrible, pillaging red lights. But the full significance of it did not dawn upon me until later.

By this time I was in a measure accustomed to the passage of the rushing, whistling needles of crimson fire. Thus, during the first part of the night I was able to sleep, while Naro kept watch. At midnight he awakened me, and we changed places.

The sky was crossed and recrossed by the faint and flickering tracks of red, the night weirdly lit by the torpedo-shapes of scarlet flame that sped upon them. With a fatuous sense of security, I was leaning back against the boulder, smoking my pipe and caressing the cold metal of the rifle in my hand as I dreamed of what Melvar and I might do if we got out of this mess alive.

The red thing was upon me before I knew it. The light of my pipe must have been visible to it. The thing came plung-



ing down, flooding the landscape with its lurid crimson radiance, while the earth vibrated to its whistling, hissing scream. There was no need to waken my companions for they sprang to their feet in alarm. We all cowered back against the rock in the hope of escaping observation. But the thing had already seen us.

I PUT my arm about the warm, throbbing body of Melvar, drew her close to my breast. Her own cool, white hand grasped mine.

The red object came down swiftly, paused just above the crimson thickets before us, then settled deliberately to earth. It was the first opportunity I had had for a close examination of these weird rocket fliers. The shape was plainly cylindrical, tapering toward the ends. It was perhaps ten feet in diameter, and a hundred long. Set on the forward end was a bright green globe, perhaps three feet in diameter.

A clump of brush about the end of the cylinder burst into flame. As the bright crimson hue began to dull, I grasped suddenly the fact that the red color was due to the red heat generated by friction with the air, which was very great at the meteoric pace the thing attained. It lay there, not fifty yards away, the fire blazing and crackling about one end and eating its way into the thickets. The green sphere on the other end seemed to stare at us like a great intent eye as the red color slowly faded. Suddenly Melvar gripped my arm.

"Perhaps it does not see us after all," she whispered. "Let us slip around the boulder."

The instant we moved a great oval port opened in the side of the cylinder. The door and walls were of a bluish-white metal, and very thick. It was dark inside. A blood-congealing, eerie laugh sounded out of that darkness, and I shuddered.

Quickly five humanlike figures leaped one by one out through the oval doorway. With heart-chilling fear I saw by the flickering light of the burning thicket long, white hair hanging about faces wrinkled and hideously aged, toothless gums, red-glaring eyes, and purple skin. Without a moment's hesitation the five naked monsters rushed down upon us.

They were hideous to look upon as they came toward us with monstrous, springing bounds, actuated by some extraordinary force. Their muscles must have been far stronger than those of men, perhaps as strongly constructed as those of insects. And there was something insectlike in the way life had lingered in the body of the one we had killed.

I leveled my rifle, drew a bead on the neck of the foremost one, and fired. I had the luck to shatter the spine. The head dropped limply to the side as the thing stopped abruptly, groping blindly about with its talonlike fingers. Strangely enough, it did not fall. Instead, as one of the others ran close by it, the crippled monster sprang savagely at the other. In a moment they were writhing and struggling in the brush, tearing at one another with tigerish ferocity. The other three passed

by them as I finished emptying the rifle, without visible results.

By now the crackle of the swiftly spreading fire had grown to a dull roar. It swept fast across the brush, red flames flaring high and dense smoke rolling up into the night. The purple beasts did not appear to see it. They made no effort to avoid the flames. Were they invulnerable to fire?

The three rushed straight on toward us, disregarding the rushing wall of flame not a dozen yards to the right of them. The leg of one went limp, but he came on with scarcely diminished speed, laughing terribly all the while. The flames engulfed the fallen two and hid them. In another instant the curtain of fire had rolled over the others, and even the ship was hidden from our view.

SUDDENLY I realized that we were in as much danger from the fire as from the monsters. Already we were shrinking from the hot blast, half-choked by the acrid fumes. For the second time we made a mad retreat to the top of the boulder, and lay flat while I reloaded the all but futile rifle. I heard a terrible laugh from the flames, and in a moment one of the things dashed out. Its white hair was gone and the purple flesh was burnt black. I shot as it showed itself, and it fell. In another instant the flames had raced over it again. None of the others appeared.

We lay on the rock for several minutes, gasping in the cooler air that lingered near its surface. For a time the heat was stifling, but the scanty vegetation burned off quickly, and soon a cool breeze came up from the south and lifted the smoke. The metallic flying cylinder still lay where it had landed, its port now closed. The green light still shone in the forward end. About it the earth lay black and smoking. Between us and the ship I saw in the darkness the black shadows that were the five dead purple beasts.

I was just beginning to wonder if all the crew of this ship were dead, and whether we might enter and examine it, when the great oval door in the side swung open again, and something sprang out of it into the night. I heard a strange hissing, and a clatter of metal. In the semi-darkness I could see nothing plainly, but there was a floating shape of greenish mist with a vague form beneath. I strained my eyes to try to distinguish its shape.

Abruptly a narrow, intensely bright beam of orange light shot out of it to impinge on the rock. There was a dull thud from the rock, and it quivered beneath us. Then the orange ray went dead, but the granite where it had struck was cut away—obliterated! The beam had shone straight through the boulder, disintegrating the matter which it had struck! The smooth edges of the cut were glowing with a soft violet radiance.

Anticipating no luck against this sort of enemy, nevertheless, I fired. I aimed just below the greenish patch. Something was exploded by the bullet. There was a vivid flash of white fire, and a loud, sharp report. The spot of green disappeared, and



there was no further motion about the cylinder.

At the time I had no idea what it was that I had shot. I supposed it to have been another of the purple beasts armed with a strange ray-weapon, and I thought my bullet had struck the weapon, causing an explosion.

## CHAPTER IX

### *The Battle in the Mist*



For perhaps an hour we waited there on the half-rock. As soon as the smoke cleared, we could see overhead more crimson needles flying high upon their vague red tracks. I dreaded the moment when one of them would land to investigate the fate of its sister ship that lay silent and presumably empty before

us. The ground was still too hot for us to walk upon. With a feeling of resigned and hopeless horror we saw one of the crimson pencils circle lower about the place, then disappear in the direction of its lair beyond the Silver Lake.

Even as the whistling roar of its passage was rolling down upon us, Melvar spoke.

"The Krimlu are coming," she cried. "There is no use to try to fight them or outrun them. But that ship must be empty. The walls are metal and strong. Perhaps they could not open it."

While there were several things about the proposition that were not very attractive, it seemed our best resource. Besides, I had a keen desire to see the interior of the thing. We gathered up our equipment, climbed off the boulder and hurried over to the cylinder.

I was possessed by a haunting fear that we would find something hideous awaiting us, but the bright pencil of light from my pocket lamp revealed no living being in the long interior, nor could I find even a trace of the green patch that had blown up in front of the door. We scrambled through the opening without difficulty. I found and turned a handle that swung the heavy door shut and evidently locked it.

Then I set about examining the mechanism, for I had an intense curiosity about the propulsive force that enabled the vessel to attain such terrific speeds. In one end were rows of long cylinders of a transparent substance, evidently filled with the metallic fluid from the Silver Lake. Pipes ran from them to a complex mechanism in the rear end of the ship, from which heavy conduits ran all over the inside of the metal hull. While my understanding of it all was far from complete, I was able to verify a previous idea—that the strange vessels were driven by use of the rocket principle.

It appeared that the silver fluid was decomposed in the machine, and that the pur-

ple gas it formed was forced out through the various tubes at a terrific velocity, propelling the ship by its reaction. The whistling roar of the things in motion was, of course, the sound of the escaping gas, and the red-purple tracks were merely the expelled gas hanging in the air.

The green globe in the forward end must have been the objective lens for a marvelous periscope. At any rate, the walls of the forward part of the shell seemed transparent. And the periscope must have utilized infra-red rays, for the scene about us seemed much brighter than it, in reality, was. We could see very plainly the burned plain and the granite rock, and once, through a rift in the clouds of smoke that were rising all about, I caught a glimpse of the gleaming city of Astran, high above us in the west.

I noticed a slender lever, with a corrugated disc at the top, rising out of the floor in the bow of the ship. Obviously the control lever. I took hold and gingerly pushed it back. Great jets of purple gas rushed past the transparent walls about us, and the ship slid backward along the ground.

The sensation of motion was most alarming. The illusion of the transparency of the bow of the ship was so perfect that it seemed almost as if we were hanging in space a few feet in front of the mouth of an open tube. It was impossible for me to realize that I was surrounded by solid walls of metal, until I touched them.

I think the wonderful telescope worked on much the same principle as television apparatus—that is, that the rays of light were picked up, converted into electrical impulses, amplified and then projected on the metal wall which served as a screen.

**I** CONTINUED my experiments with the lever. The control was relatively simple. The vessel was propelled forward when the lever was pushed forward, and reversed when the lever was pulled back. Slipping the little disc up or down raised or lowered the prow, and twisting the disc accomplished the steering.

By the time my cautious experiments had revealed all that, Melvar had pointed out three slender crimson craft wheeling low above us and evidently preparing to land. I pulled the knob up and pushed it forward all the way. A pale-red beam shot ahead. The black landscape dropped away from us, and we hurtled through the air of the night. I was amazed at the lack of any great sensation of motion. The jets of gas, for all their appalling roar without, were barely audible within the cylinder. Since the fore part of the ship was transparent from within, we had the oddest sensation of floating free in space.

I saw that the three ships had fallen in a line behind us, and were following at the same terrific pace. When we had reached an altitude of perhaps a mile, I twisted the knob to bring the helm about, and we shot over the Silver Lake, which lay like a white desert of moonlit sand beneath us, standing out sharply against



the dark plain around it.

In a moment we had passed over it, and over the low hills beyond into the bank of purple mist. I had hoped to have time to land and hide the vessel on the ground below, but I looked back and saw that our pursuers were gaining swiftly. Slender, twisting rays of bright orange and green were darting toward us from the pursuing arrowlike ships of red.

In the darkness and the mist we could see nothing of the ground below. The only visible things were a few mist-veiled stars above, and the bright scarlet torpedoes that hurtled after us. Quickly I circled, raising the helm. I was almost intoxicated with the indescribable sensations of our swift and lofty flight. I felt a new and wonderful sensation of freedom and power. I had but to move the little piece of metal in my hand to go where I pleased with the speed, almost, of light. But still came the trio of ships behind us, at an incredible pace, stabbing at us with the green and orange rays.

Then, high above the others, I brought our ship around in a hairpin turn and plunged directly at them. They tried to turn aside, while their rays shot quickly toward us, but our speed was too great. The foremost suddenly turned broadside toward us, attempting to get out of our path. I held our bow directly at it, raising it a trifle at the last instant. The keel of our vessel struck the other amidships. The terrific crash of the collision hurled us to the floor.

When I regained my feet we were falling in a crazy twisting path, our ship out of control. I saw that the one we had struck was broken in two and plunging toward the earth far behind us, while the other two were circling about, far overhead. The mist about us grew thicker until the other ships, and the fragments of the wrecked one, finally vanished. We floated alone in a world of purple fog.

I seized the control lever as soon as our wild gyrations enabled me to reach it, but my unskilled efforts only resulted in making us roll and twist more wildly. So long as we had been on an even keel the piloting had been easy enough, but the blow against us had been slightly sidewise, setting the ship to spinning like a top. It seemed that we fell an interminable time. Whenever the stern pointed downward for a moment, I pushed the lever forward, to check our fall as much as possible.

Through the mist I caught a glimpse of the dark ground below. In another instant the vessel struck heavily, throwing us against the floor again.

**D**AY broke at last, and we could see that we had fallen on a bare, gravelly hilltop. The clear space was only an acre or so in extent. We were shut in on all sides by a dense, dark forest of gigantic trees that rose threateningly, seeming to close in on us. The purple mist hung in a somber curtain overhead, only faintly lighted by the coming day.

Naro and I strapped on our packs, picked up our weapons and opened the door. The

three of us stepped out to face the perils of another world. What they might be, we did not know. But Austen had not let himself be conquered by the mere strangeness of the place. I still hoped to be able to find him, although a search in such a jungle as that about us seemed completely hopeless.

The walls of the rocket ship were still glowing dully red with the heat of its passage through the air, and we hurried away over the gravel for fifty yards to get beyond the fierce heat it radiated. The patch of sky above was a dull, dusky, luminescent purple. It seemed almost as if the mist shut out the daylight and lit the valley with a strange, weird radiance of its own.

All about us towered the forest. As the light grew better, we could see that the trees were red. They bore the same feathery fronds, star-like flowers of brilliant white and golden-brown fruits as the plants of the plain about Astran. But they were immensely greater; they towered up hundreds of feet. It was like a forest of the tree-ferns of the Carboniferous period, save for the deep bloody scarlet of the leaves.

The ground all about the gravelly knoll was low and marshy, and the air was heavy with the odors of rotting vegetation. There was no wind, and the air, under the great atmospheric pressure, was heavy, moist and hot. It hung like a weight upon our chests.

The crimson jungle seemed to possess a terrible life and spirit of its own. It did not belong to our world. The undergrowth was very thick. The higher branches were dimmed by the purple mist. It appeared useless to try to penetrate it. It was an evil jungle waiting to seize us the moment we crossed its bounds.

I got out my compass, and we decided to try to make our way toward the north, in the direction of the pass by which we supposed Austen to have rounded the Silver Lake.

When I had at last noted our position above the mist, with reference to the lake and the crater walls, we had been about fifteen miles south of the pass. I hoped by taking a course in that direction to come across some trace of Austen.

As we approached the north side of the clearing, I made a startling discovery. In the side of the hill was a deposit of iron pyrites. Not that there was anything remarkable about that. But the thing that struck me was that the vein had been recently worked!

I sprang down into the pit and found on the rock traces of copper that had evidently come from soft copper tools. Austen! I knew that Austen would have needed minerals if he had set up a wireless outfit in here. He must have been compelled to do an immense amount of work in collecting and refining the needed materials. I had a little doubt that he had been there, but it had been evidently weeks or months ago. Any trail that he might have made through the forest would have already grown over.



I THOUGHT the situation over. There seemed nothing better to do than to follow our original plan of exploring the jungle to the north. We plunged into the crimson gloom.

Without the compass we would have been quickly lost. Even with it, it was hard enough to travel in the same direction, walking over the marshy, sodden ground and breaking a path through the heavy undergrowth. We were soon covered with mud and dyed red with the stain of the weird vegetation.

For many hours we struggled through a wilderness of endless sameness—a dank

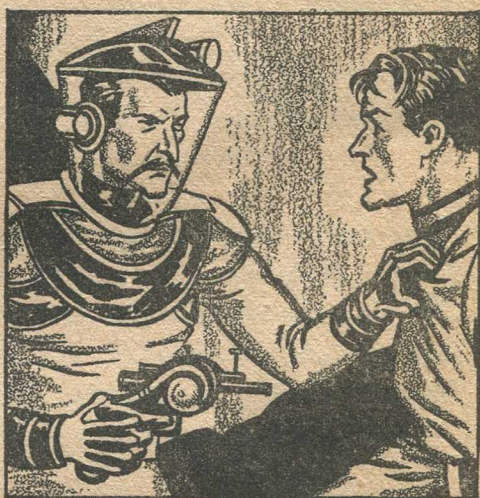
danger of our capture unless we stumbled unaware on the habitation of the Krimlu.

Abruptly the jungle ended, and we stepped out on a bare ledge of stone. Before us was one of the most magnificent spectacles that I have beheld. To the west of us a great black cliff rose perhaps a thousand feet—until it was almost lost against the lowering, smoky purple of the sky. Over it plunged a vast sheet of the glowing white liquid of the Silver Lake, falling in a gigantic, unbroken arch to the immense pool beneath us, where it broke with a deafening roar into a gleaming bank of soft silver haze. Surrounding the black

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morass, a crimson jungle, with the dusky purple sky hanging heavily in the tree-tops. At first the forest was quiet, with a silence that was dead and depressing, for there were no living things about us. No birds, no insects—not even a bright moth or butterfly. It was a wilderness of death.

But presently we heard, far ahead of us, a dull, constant roar, that grew ever louder as we went on. At last it grew so loud that we had to shout when we wished one another to hear our words. I was glad of the roar, for it drowned the sound of our progress through the jungle. But the forest was so dense that there seemed little

rock rim of the pool, the gloomy crimson of the forest closed in. The pool was a thousand feet across. The whole scene was colossal, awe-inspiring and impressive by the strangeness and intensity of its color.

There was no visible outlet for the silver liquid, so I knew that it must find its way off underground. I knew that we must be far below the level of the Silver Lake and the plain beyond. The fact may have accounted for the more luxuriant growth of the red vegetation.

Suddenly Naro reported the discovery of a comparatively fresh print of a hob-nailed boot in a little patch of mold on the rock.



That set us to looking again for traces of Austen, and presently we found a fairly well-defined trail that led off to the east. We followed it eagerly.

When we had gone perhaps a mile we came to an outcropping seam of coal. There I found the plain marks of a copper pick. Evidently a good deal of coal had been dug up and carried off down the trail.

## CHAPTER X

### *Austen's Retreat*



Beneath the shed was what appeared to be a small steam turbine, with a kettlelike boiler of hammered copper. Connected with

Perhaps two hundred yards farther on we came to the camp. It was on a little hill-top below a giant tree. By the trunk was a little mud-daubed hut, an open shed in front of it. Beside the shed was a rude clay furnace, with piles of coal, some strange ore, and large lumps of native copper lying by it.

It was a dynamo of crude but ingenious construction. Also there was a rude forge, hammers, anvils, saws and drills, all of copper or bronze, and a primitive device for drawing wire.

Simple as it was, that camp of Austen's was the most remarkable thing I came across in the crater. Austen was a wonderful man. Having not only an exhaustive knowledge of half a dozen fields of science, he had also courage and determination, patience and manual skill, and a great deal of resourcefulness at the art of invention.

Where the average man would hardly have been able to keep alive in the jungle, Austen had been able to do such things as smelt and refine ore, and set up complicated and workable electrical machinery. Of course, he was fortunate in finding himself in a place where practically no effort was needed to satisfy his physical needs, and where he found various natural resources in available and easily accessible form. But I shall never cease to wonder at his accomplishments during the time of less than a year.

I was struck by a sudden fear that we had come too late, and that something had happened to him.

"Austen!" I shouted, "Dr. Austen, are you here?"

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## UNDER OBSERVATION

(Continued from page 9)

beyond your recollection, pee-lot Bryson. "The Man Who Awoke" was, in its entirety, a series of progressive adventures of Norman Winters.

The second adventure, "Master of the Brain," to which you refer, is but the second adventure of a total of five before Norman Winters comes to the end of his travel down through time. If we had tacked that adventure onto the first, we still would have come out in the middle—with Winters returning to his tomb for another period of suspended animation. That's why we stopped where we did. If we add one more episode, it would only be fair to add them all.

However, if you kiwis would like to have all five adventures of Norman Winters, start writing in and telling the old Sarge, and we'll see what can be done about crowding one adventure into each issue—after "The Alien Intelligence" has been concluded—until you have them all.

### MORE CAPTAIN FUTURE

By Henry Buchtal

Dear Sarge: This is my third letter to you as a member of the Futuremen, and if C. F. keeps on being as good as it is now, I shall have no complaint to register.

Here is a word to Mr. J. G. Kavanaugh. In your last letter, which was published in C. F. you say: "Reader pest number one is the guy that suggests that Captain Future should appear more often." I do not agree with you; not at all.

Here is my reason. Mr. Hamilton is at the present time writing for many publications. Now, don't you think it would be better if he would concentrate on C. F.? That is, write only Captain Future Novels, the magazine being published more often, and so transfer all of his splendid creative genius to this particular group? Should he do that, write more novels for C. F., his income would not be lessened, but would balance. I hope you understand my theory.—Louisville, Ky.

First, Pee-lot Buchtal, you'd have to sell Author Hamilton on the idea of doing nothing but Captain Future yarns, and the old Sarge has yet to meet the writer who wants to keep doing the same set of characters month in and month out. But CAPTAIN FUTURE may become a bi-monthly and then a monthly—in the future. That depends on a number of things, the most important being the fan support.

About the other matter of your subscription, Henry, that has been referred to the proper department, and you should have no more FUTURE trouble.

### TELL IT TO THE MARINES

By Pvt. D. W. Shaw

Dear Sarge: I am a marine in Iceland, and accidentally got hold of a CAPTAIN FUTURE magazine. We don't have much recreation here, nor much to read, so would greatly appreciate the continuation of CAPTAIN FUTURE up here in this lonesome place.

I greatly admire Edmond Hamilton's gigantic imagination. I believe nothing is impossible. That is why the character of Captain Future fascinates me.—1st Marine Bri-

gade (Prov.), Iceland, 1-B-6-USMC, Care Postmaster New York City, N. Y.

There you are, you kiwis on the Home Defense Front. How about sending Private Shaw a copy now and then of CAPTAIN FUTURE, THRILLING WONDER STORIES, and STARTLING STORIES? And, while we think about it, don't forget your general contributions of books to the Victory Book Campaign for all the soldiers and sailors and marines. Your local library will gladly accept your contributions.

### BACK TO SCHOOL, SARGE

By Russ Milner

Deah Sargy-Wargy: Hiya, you old beer-soaked soak, you. No, you ain't ever heard from me yet. You see, I just didn't want to honor you by writing a letter to you. I'd write it to the janitor, but I don't know his address.

I am inclosing 25c (one-quarter, twenty-five cents, or ¼ of a dollar, just in case you didn't study your mathematics while you wasted the teacher's time in the first grade, that's as far as you got) for them eight science fiction novels.

Next, either print in this mag a list of the available back issues of CF, or else send me a list of them and their prices. Are any subscriptions being taken yet? If so, send me the necessary instructions on how to get them.

I agree with Pilot Maxwell that you should keep your silly chatter on the subject being cussed (that's what they usually do to it). By doing as he and me says, you improve "Under Observation" 101%. You could improve it a 102% if you'd make that section longer.

I think that it would be a good idea if you would put in a future game section. Why don't you put something else in the mag that we could send in place of the name-strip on the cover? You see, I'm going to send all the issues of CF when I get through reading them to the nut-house; the crazy-house would be a more fitting place for them.

Them red-flannel underwear I seen hanging out your window with my electron telescope must be irritating Hamilton because he made "Quest Beyond the Stars" just too, too fantastic. Oh, you want to know how Hamilton got them red-flannel underwear of yours. Well, I seen him sneak up to your hovel you call an office and borrow every pair of them. And just after his doctor had pronounced him cured of kleptomania, too.

In the "Worlds of Tomorrow" in the winter issue, it says that the moon has no atmosphere. Well, it does have too. It is highly poisonous. It is about 20 miles thick and is very thin because of the moon's weak gravitation. I found that out with the new spectroscope I have invented. Just between you and me and the third ring of Saturn, I think you're nuts!

Do you know? No, you don't. But anyhow I like Stanley Kovan and Denton Smith so much that I would like to kiss them and I hate J. W. Lewis and James G. Kavanaugh so much that I would like to feed them Uranium 235 and then jolt them enough to make the stuff active. We want at least one CF mag every two months.

Sarge, did you ever go to school? I don't think so. My goodness, such grammar! I found sixty-seven mistakes in the novel. I'm only three years old, but I could do better than that.

You'll be hearing from me the next issue, you hope not.—Box 103, Stinnett, Texas.

Fresh guy, hey? One of my junior junior midslipmen, eh? Never mind, a couple of voyages around the Solar System in this



space brig will cure you of this glib impudence. Just wait till we pass through the asteroidal belt and the old Sarge puts you out on the outer hull to spot-weld meteorite holes. But to answer your two or three half-way sensible questions before I feed you into carbon disulphide chamber.

Your eight science fiction yarns are on their way to you. You can procure the current issue of CAPTAIN FUTURE at your local newsstand. At present we have no list of available back copies. Maybe we'll soon put CAPTAIN FUTURE in the bi-monthly group. Until then bear with us.

You can argue about the Moon's atmosphere with Captain Future himself; you're not going to poison this atmosphere with your gas. And why blame the old Sarge for a few misplaced commas or misprinted words? Now climb back into your corral, you three-year-old yearling, before I pin your ears back with the needle off the acceleration gauge.

## SPEED IT UP

By Rodney Palmer

Dear Sarge: Thanks for printing my letter. It was remotely like being bashed by a fast freight to see it.

Bye the bye, the new magazine that you're putting out is pretty good. Bet it gains friends fast. I mean EXCITING NAVY STORIES.

[Turn page]

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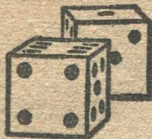
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But to **CAPTAIN FUTURE**. The title, "Outlaws of the Moon," sounds good. Could it be possible that the magazine is at last handing over some real adventure? It'll be a change. Wish some other scientific authors had Hamilton's imagination . . . and ingenuity. Tell him not to let his imagination run away with him.

The two shorts, "Worlds of Tomorrow," and "Captain Future's Boyhood" were all interesting. Who's Graph Waldeyer? I thought Millard wrote "The Cosmic Cube." Thinking it over, I've arrived at the conclusion that Hamilton is bad at love interest, and consequently leaves it out. The little bit of love making he does manage to weave into his stories is too mushy. People don't act like that—especially in stories, anyway.

Tell Edmond Hamilton to step up his story pace. We realize he has to fill up space, and to a certain extent, we're lenient. But after all . . . !

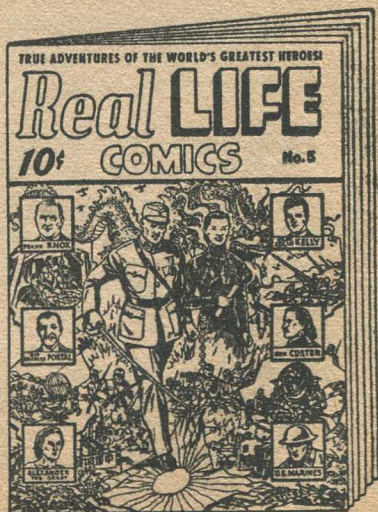
If he would only cut out beating around the bush, and plunge into the general drift! **ACTION IS TOO SLOW!**

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So you're not satisfied with the speed of light, Kiwi Palmer? You want Captain Future to rip through a story so fast that all you see is a blur of movement like a motion picture film which has jumped the sprocket, eh? And at the same time you don't want Hamilton's imagination to run away with him. Just, in plain English, what the blankety-blank do you want? Or do you know?

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Never mind the back talk. Grab a handful of waste and get busy wiping down that starboard atmosphere purifier. Graph Waldeyer is a writer of science fiction. He wrote "The Cosmic Cube" which we published in August, 1939, THRILLING WONDER STORIES.

## HOW COME? HOW COME?

By Roger England

Dear Sarge: How about another plan of the Comet? Boy, the story this time was a pip! How about offering Captain Future rings to the Futuremen? That would be swell. What are those different-colored rings that you always show coming out of Captain Future's gun?

The only thing that drives me nuts in these stories is that no matter what obstacle is in the way of the Futuremen, they always have some new invention to make almost anything possible. How can the Comet go so fast if it has so much resistance in its shape—I don't mean in space, I mean in the atmospheres of the different planets and worlds? Explain that one, will ya? Why don't you put in a vocabulary of Futuremen vernacular?—No address.

It seems to the old Sarge, Roger, that you can shoot question marks faster than Captain Future can shoot his proton rings. We'll refer your queries about Comet plans and Futuremen vocabularies to Author Hamilton. Your idea about facsimiles or copies of Curt Newton's planetary ring is good, but there's the item of expense. However, we'll file that one away for future reference.

Let's not get nose about the proton ring vibrations which the artist visualizes for you in technicolor. Maybe Ed Hamilton will explain the proton gun thoroughly to us sometime. The teardrop shape of the Comet is what enables the ship to pass through atmospheres with the least wind resistance. If this isn't clear to you, study automobile, train and plane streamline designing.

And, last but not least, whoever heard of a first-class hero who didn't manage to overcome the obstacles piled up before him? That's a peculiarity of all heroes in all types of stories, and when that pattern isn't followed, Kiwi England, you wind up with a defeatist yarn. And who wants to be a defeatist these days?

## A BIG RACKET

By Tom Brackett

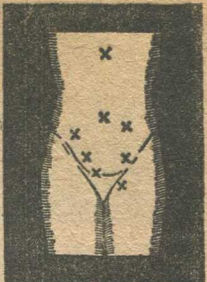
Dear Sarge: No, I didn't swipe any of your Xeno juice. It just came walking by. Am I to blame if it wanted to take up with me? I am? Well, I like that!

Now for the real business, the reason I am writing this letter: First the cover: Here is a real cover, in fact, your first good one in many a moon. Unless I am badly mistaken Bergey drew this one. Very good but for it being a little misty and the horrible look on the B. H.'s face, or is she supposed to look that way. The department, Under Observation is improving by the issue. (It couldn't be because my letter appeared in it, could it? Or could it?). Your replies are better every time the mag appears. But don't you think that "The Futuremen" department is a bit superfluous now that the life history of all of them has been written?

[Turn page]

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Continue the "Worlds of Tomorrow." Why not take Earth and give it as it appears in the future? See how the other fans feel about it.

The lead novel was very good. Good isn't the word for it, but it will have to do. Every issue is improving the novel something wonderful. But what is this that President Carthew gets killed? Have CF and The Brain perform a miraculous brain operation and bring him back to life. Why, what would the mag be without President Carthew? In my opinion, you might as well take Ezra Gurney out and let CF start playing Twiddly Winks. And, Sarge, take time out and MURDER the art dept. The Brain was upside-down again!

Well, one thing is that they know a good artist when they see one. The reason I say that is because they have Paul Orban back this issue and, boy, what illustrations. Slurp, slurp! That's just me guzzling your Xeno again and, oh, yes, what's this I hear about my not being able to plot a star course yet? Why, I'll have you know that I am an accredited rocketeer, and that ain't HAY as the saying goes.

I am glad to see that the HALL OF FAME novel is by Jack Williamson. It must be good if it's by him. I am going to wait and read it in one big dose for once and see if it's any better that way. I repeat you have done me a big service in printing the classics of yester-year in CF and SS.

REPEAT BROADCAST: WE WANT CF AT LEAST BI-MONTHLY IF NOT MONTHLY. So with this reminder I say "thirty." GET PAUL, KEEP ORBAN, LONGER NOVELS, LESS SHORT STORIES, STAY AWAY FROM BOK, STRANGLE XENO-GUZZLING SARGENT SATURN, and you will have a first-class mag. Stop, don't throw that brick, I'll be a good boy from now on.—P. O. Box 214, Winnsboro, Louisiana.

I'm having more trouble keeping that Brackett kiwi's snout out of my Xeno jug than plotting the entire course of this ship around the Solar System. I think I'll maroon him for a sojourn on Jupiter where he can see ten full moons at once—if he looks sharp.

Seriously, Pee-lot Brackett, the old Sarge was as shocked as you were at the sudden death of President Carthew, but I don't see what we can do about it now. It takes little things like that to make us realize that nothing is permanent on this transient world and that the Futuremen are not completely invulnerable or utterly successful. There have to be some set-backs to make their triumphs all the sweeter.

**AN ART CRITIC**

By Bill Watson

Dear Sarge: "Ooooooh," the groan wafted up out of the gloom, rippling and rolling.

**THE FUTUREMEN,**  
10 E. 40th St., New York, N. Y.

I wish to apply for membership in THE FUTUREMEN. I pledge myself to abide by all rules and regulations.

Name .....  
(Print Legibly)

Address ..... Age.....

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

I am enclosing a stamped, self-addressed envelope and the name-strip from the cover of this magazine (tear off name-strip so that the name CAPTAIN FUTURE and the date can be seen). You will send me my membership certificate and a list of rules promptly.

6-42



That is the identical sound I uttered when I saw those interiors for the latest CAPTAIN FUTURE. Please give this fellow Orban a good old "boot-ina-reer." His work has about as much detail in it as a mud fence.

Another fellow you can can is the old master (?), Marchioni. Ten years ago he was going strong—but now he's a pain in the toe. Morey (as always) is up to standard.

Where is Wesso? Don't tell me he has gone into retirement. Gad! What a calamity that would be.

Just one more burp on the art dept. Get Bergey off the covers. Use anybody else—Bok, Morey, Paul, Dolgov, Rogers, even Binder. But boot Bergey.

And now comes that epic (good Lord, what am I saying?) of science fiction, "Outlaws on the Moon." Hamilton is overworked. He must pour out this quarterly slop typing with his heels in bed, munching one of Dagwood's sandwiches, drinking a bottle of high-proof Pepsi-Pola on the side. His science is so full of loopholes the ardent fans feel it their duty to write and inform you of them. No wonder you're half-crazy!!

Honestly, Sarge, I'd be going nuts too if I had to listen in on all those crazy letters those drips out there write you. Poor man! (Meaning you, of course.)

I enjoyed the short about the guinea pigs very much, although it was a bit far-fetched. The Martian invasion all over again was boring 'til the first word. In other words, the pic was lousy!

Well, as I can see (or imagine) you're getting very tired of this letter. So we'll just turn the circuit and fade off into the distance. . . . I talk in riddles all the time so don't come out of this reeling like a Jovian on his first binge.—1299 California St., San Francisco, California.

All I can gather from your ethergram, Pee-lot Watson, is that you don't care for the art work. Well—that's all the way you look at it. And the old Space dog thought the irony in Arthur K. Barnes "Guinea Pig" was clever, too. Somehow, it made him think of this cageful of monkeys in the astrogation room. If I don't watch out, you junior pee-lots will be turning on the old Sarge and feeding him to the poisonous atmosphere of some alien world—oh, didn't I know it? Look at this!

## SET THE SARGE ADRIFT

By William Rivers

Dear Editor: I have been reading CAPTAIN FUTURE and THRILLING WONDER STORIES quite a while now, having enjoyed every novel, the last of which was "Outlaws of the Moon."

But now to get down to brass rockets, why in (censored) do you keep that drunken sarge around, as my pal William Ziegler so aptly put it. And another thing it gets awful lonesome out here on Pluto where I am stationed waiting for my next issue, so kindly make it monthly or at least bi-monthly.

"Outlaws of the Moon" was a story that I thoroughly enjoyed reading for the first three times while waiting for the next issue, but then I knew it by heart. So sealing this rocket tube, I remain yours till I am allowed to plot a course for the sarge and that will be directly into the sun, or better still I may send him out of the universe to heckle other pee-lots.—721 Gresham Pl., N.W., Washington, D. C.

The utter disrespect and insubordination of this kiwi. Rivers, you're all wet. The idea! Wouldn't even address your communique to the Sarge, eh? Go over my head and bellyache to the chief, huh? And you want to chart the old Space Dog a

(Concluded on page 129)


# TIGHTENS FALSE TEETH

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THE world's leading scientists and physicists of today are in accord on the theory that our present expanding universe is approximately two billion years old. What it was before, save that it was vastly different, they do not know. What the future some billions of years will bring is an even wilder guess.

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Captain Future splendidly lives up to his name when he answers the call of the PLANETS IN PERIL in this novel of space beyond space. You are going to get a big thrill out of the experiments of Tiko Thrin and the stirring adventures of the Futuremen.

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And, best of all, the Brain has some astonishing theories and helpful experiments which he works out to final proof that will astound you by their scope and significance.



All in all **PLANETS IN PERIL** is one of the most absorbing of Captain Future's adventures, and it carries a wallop like the kick of one of Sergeant Saturn's stern rockets. Don't say I didn't warn you.

As for the cover, that will certainly illustrate one of the most dramatic scenes of this book-length saga. **PLANETS IN PERIL** is a novel you will long remember.

There will be, in addition, the final installment of Jack Williamson's vigorous and imaginative Hall of Fame serial, **THE ALIEN INTELLIGENCE**, as well as a gala selection of short stories. As for the departments—they will speak for themselves.

Spatially yours,  
—THE EDITOR.

## UNDER OBSERVATION (Concluded from page 127)

course into the sun, hey? Now, wouldn't that burn me up!

Just for that, you—you Plutonian space pup, you can shine the brass work of the officers' quarters for the rest of this voyage. The only mutiny I'll tolerate in this control-room is that generated in a jug of Xeno.

But there's one thing the old Sarge wants to tell all you kiwis. I'd like to get more ethergrams—from all parts of this old globe. Science is universal, and truth will be triumphant. Honestly, I read every letter that comes in—even if I don't find space to print 'em all.

So, come on, open all rockets and pour the fire on from everywhere. Let's make the reader columns in **CAPTAIN FUTURE, THRILLING WONDER STORIES** and **STARTLING STORIES** the hottest spots in the Solar System. Barkis was just willin'. The old Sarge is anxious and eager. Pass me that Xeno jug.

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# FOOT ITCH

## ATHLETE'S FOOT



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As soon as you apply H. F. you may find that the itching is relieved. You should paint the infected part with H. F. every night until your feet are better. Usually this takes from three to ten days.

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### BEWARE OF IT SPREADING

Often the disease travels all over the bottom of the feet. The soles of your feet become red and swollen. The skin also cracks and peels, and the itching becomes worse and worse.

Get relief from this disease as quickly as possible, because it is very contagious, and it may go to your hands or even to the under arm or crotch of the legs.

Sign and mail the coupon, and a bottle of H. F. will be mailed you immediately. Don't send any money and don't pay the postman any money; don't pay anything any time unless H. F. is helping you. If it does help you, we know you will be glad to send us \$1 for the bottle at the end of ten days. That's how much faith we have in H. F. Read, sign and mail the coupon today.



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