

MARCH 1941

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COMET

STF

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STORIES OF SUPER TIME AND SPACE

TWO FEATURES:

THE IMMORTAL

by Ross Rocklynne,
will be called
a classic

— STF —

THE STAR OF DREAMS

by Jack Williamson

—a vivid, gripping
novel about "Hell Stones"

— STF —

Stories by:

STANTON A. COBLENTZ

— STF —

**ROBERT MOORE
WILLIAMS**

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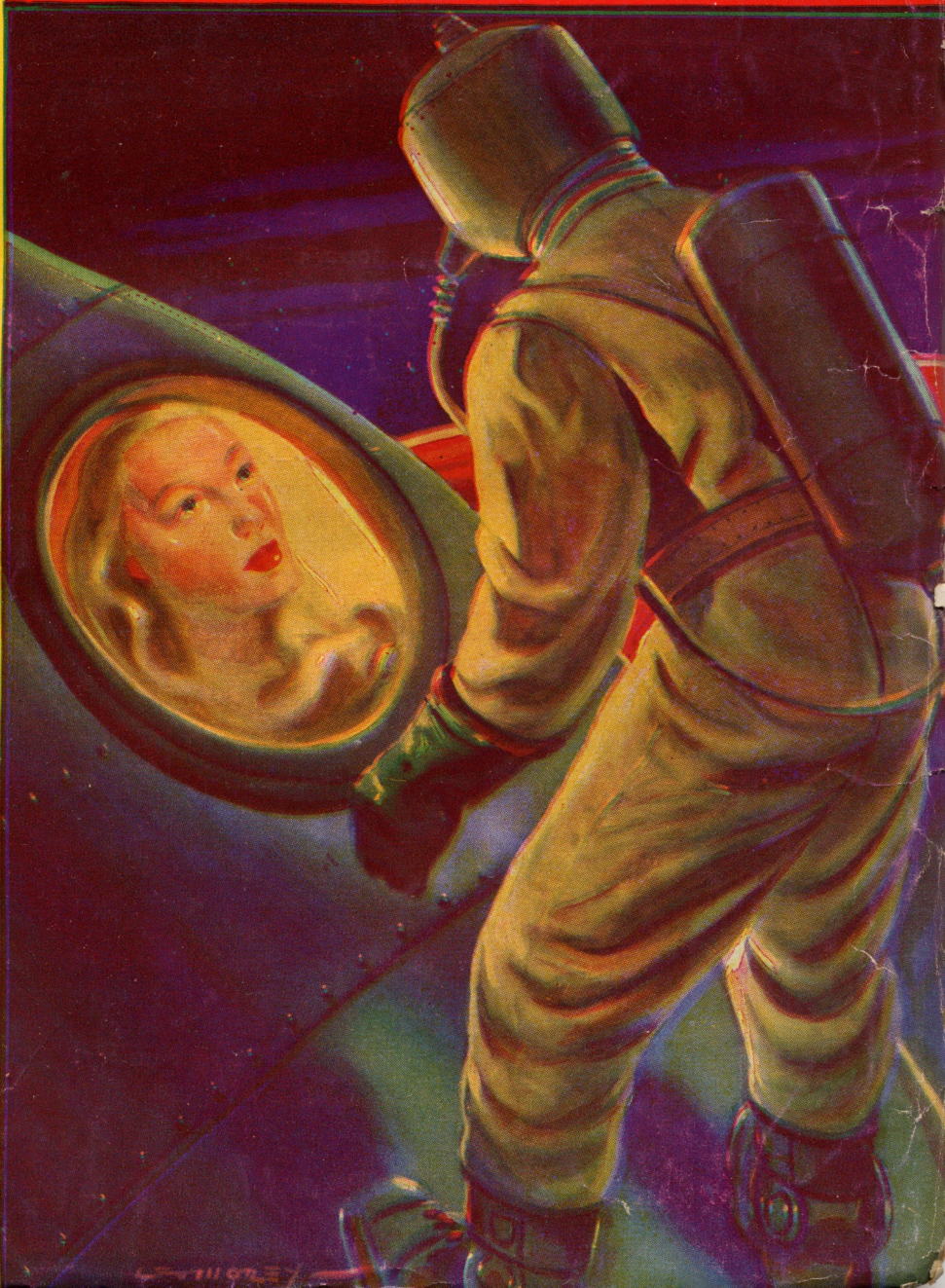
— STF —

**SHORT SHORT
STORY DEPARTMENT**

— STF —

EDITED BY

ORLIN TREMAINE



for a better understanding . . .

JUST AS the monks of old, during the dark ages, kept alive the glow of enlightened knowledge through the medium of their painstaking writings on papyrus—fighting against tremendous odds to preserve what their conscience and teachings told them was for the betterment of humanity . . . just as these same monks, through their inspired writings, DID bring about a far superior world than had ever been known before . . .

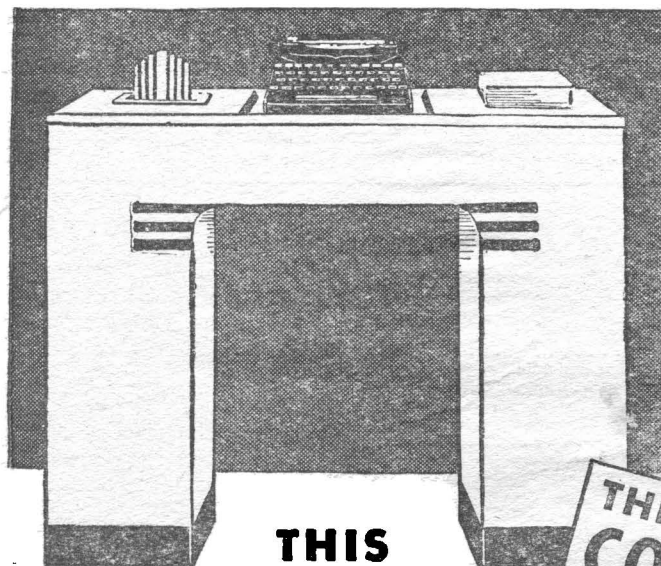
SO, in the present day and age—with personal greed, atheism, and widespread misunderstanding between nations and individuals bringing about another chaos—there are countless thousands of God-inspired teachers seeking to show us the light . . . seeking to prevent utter ruin . . . seeking to lead mankind forward, ever forward—the priests, ministers, rabbis and other members of the clergy, and leading laymen, in every denomination throughout the world.

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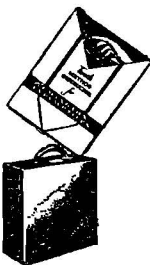
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March, 1941

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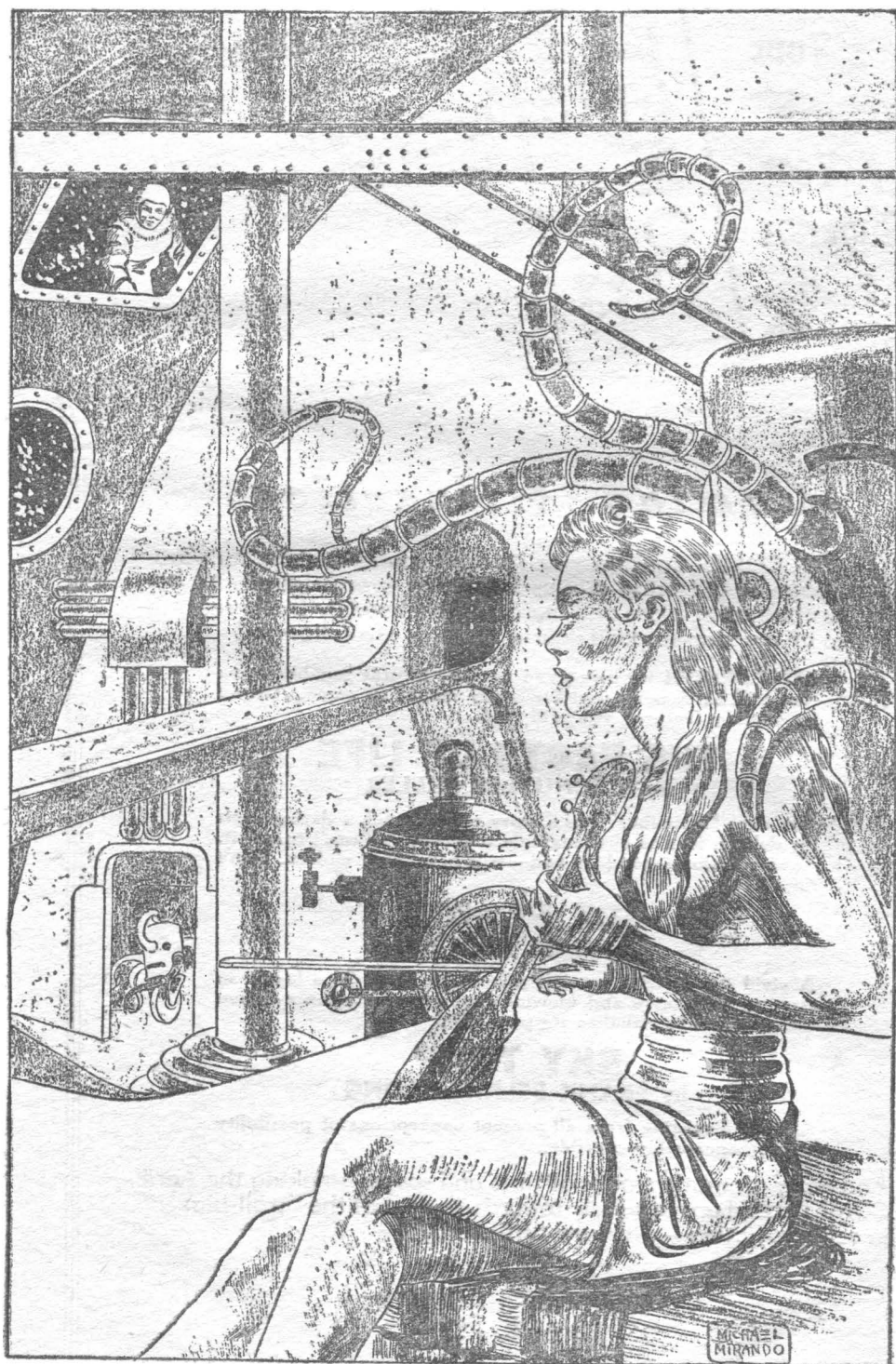
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*She sat there, bored, beautiful, changeless as time itself, playing some instrument—listlessly.
She saw him—but did not move—*

*Here is a story that will grip you in the spell that made classics of
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THE IMMORTAL

by ROSS ROCKLYNNE

NIERSON PONTY is gone now, back to Earth. I suppose I'll never see him again, but he told me a story whose truth was vouched for by the very expressions on his face. Mostly, they were expressions of torment, of hopelessness, of bitter resentment at the fate which has taken from him all that mattered—Naga.

Now he's gone back to Earth, but he doesn't belong there, or anywhere else except on a great ship which slowly circles the Sun. He belongs with Naga, his mate, that ancient, alluring woman whom death will not strike for an unthinkable length of time.

For those two, and now I, know the cause of death.

This planetoid I own is a miniature of Earth. It is equipped with the gravitation, flora and fauna of that planet. I was on that planetoid when Nierson Ponty driving on a blind angle through space, landed there, torn by longing and bitter, hopeless memories.

It was night on my planetoid. I was strumming softly on a guitar. Suddenly I was aware he had entered the room through the open door. He startled me, even frightened me, for I knew that no one besides myself inhabited the tiny asteroid. I thought of pirates, but discarded the thought, for Nierson Ponty did not look like a pirate. My second thought was of sudden pity, for, though Nierson Ponty was an unusually splendid looking man, a fair-haired giant, his eyes reflected the brooding torment in his mind.

I arose, laying the guitar aside. He looked at me dully.

"I'm Nierson Ponty," he said in a low, barely audible voice. "Just landed,

saw this light. I was out in space. Flying blind, in fact."

I finally urged him to sit down. He sat down, sighed, ran a slow hand across his forehead and eyes, as if he might be trying to wipe away the disturbances in his mind. He brought his head up again, after a while, and smiled faintly.

"You hesitate to ask questions," he said.

"Because I'm too polite for my own good."

He laughed softly, and sat straighter.

"Well, I think I'd like to tell you my story. Talking about it may help." For a fleeting second an expression of hurt and longing showed in his eyes. It made him seem much older than he was, terribly old, and he looked thirty. Then his deeply blue eyes centered on mine.

"What do you think causes death?" he said.

I said, "Man has been trying to find out ever since he realized he was alive. I don't know. Nobody does. A person grows, matures, goes to old age, senility—"

"Begging the question," he broke in. "Senility, then?"

"Cells break down, have to be rebuilt. That requires a constant supply of energy. Tissues become jaded, worn, finally lose the ability to replace themselves. Fatigue builds poisons—"

"There you are," he interrupted; and forthwith launched himself into a strange story:

TWENTY YEARS AGO, at the age of thirty, I left Earth. This despite the fact that I certainly do not look fifty

years of age, which I am. But I did leave Earth about twenty years ago, and you could in some measure verify that statement by inspecting my ship. It must certainly be out of date by this time. Perhaps rockets have gone out. The accelerations they produce are distasteful. Or perhaps you've got progressive firing tubes, small charge followed by progressively larger, thus providing a total effect of smoothness. There was talk about them. There was some talk about automatic trajectory charters, too, on the theory that each celestial body emits a characteristic mass radiation. I know I used to wish for something of the kind as I painstakingly charted a path that would take me to my destination. But I never reached that destination.

Above my instrument board were four screens which, together, afforded a view of the whole celestial sphere. That was by a periscopic arrangement, and magnification was effected by the then newly-invented photo-amplifiers. Though each screen revealed but a single quadrant of the spatial sky, through long practice I had mastered the difficult art of mentally welding the four into one, so that I actually saw the whole light-sprinkled sphere of the heavens in all directions—an eyes-in-the-back-of-the-head effect.

The Sun was not much larger than when seen from Earth, though the photosphere and corona were naturally etched very clearly against the blackness. I remember seeing Venus as a dazzlingly illumined body in Gemini. And seeming so infinitely far away, and at the same time so near—there is no perspective in space—was Alpha and Proxima Centauri, very plain. And there were thousands of optical doubles, stars which appear to be binaries, but are light-years apart.

That is the picture of the background through which I moved, and I myself was drowsily content, quite carefree. I had only a slumbering sensation that I must get to my destination on time.

But I never got there. Here is the

powerful influence that kept me from it.

In my port screen, a portion of the sky containing the constellation Hercules, and parts of those bordering it, were occulted. Now this was not a particularly astounding occurrence, since it might have been a stray asteroid. I switched on the photo-amplifiers, however, and discovered circles of light glowing against the darkness of the somber mass. The dark mass rushed upon me, filling the plate.

It was a drum-shaped cylinder, very large. The circles of light were ports, about two feet in diameter each, and were lighted for all the world as if the Sun occupied the center of that ship. It was moving at my velocity, though had I continued on my trajectory I would have crashed on its almost perfectly black surface. I swerved my ship, edging up. What was it? Suddenly I was mad with curiosity. Nothing like it had been built during my lifetime.

For a few moments, I crept back and forth along the vessel's flank, burning to get inside and discover its origin and occupants, if any. Then, well aware that I had no large amount of extra time at my disposal, I slipped into a spacesuit; first, however, attaching my ship magnetically to the other. I opened the airlock, and five minutes later I was standing atop my ship, looking across at the monster of the skies. And it was a monster. It must have measured five hundred yards across the diameter, and a hundred yards the other way.

For a long time, I was strangely loathe to move, like a person who sits alone in an empty, creaky house. How it was possible, I don't know, but I felt something of the strangeness I was to meet before ever I met it. Somehow I knew that ship was not of modern construction. It seemed old, old before Egypt!

In relation to the stars, it was not rotating at all. (Everything would have been very different if it had been rotating at any notable velocity, I

know now.) Thus I had no difficulty in maneuvering from my own ship onto the other, magnetic soles giving me firm, almost too insistent purchase on its metallic flanks.

With an indescribable reluctance, I approached one of the brilliantly lit ports, and, throwing myself flat, stared in. I saw what appeared to be a hallway, for my straight ahead vision was brought up short against an unadorned wall of gray-white metal about twenty feet high. There were two sources of illumination, both being plates of a translucent substance set flush with what I presume should be called the ceiling.

Those lights were interesting, for they seemed like pieces of the Sun. It was broad daylight in that corridor. I know now that that effect was gained by running high voltages through mercury vapor. They tried that on Earth a long time ago, but couldn't seem to make it practical for everyday use.

For a long time, I just looked, amazed at the implication of what I saw. Then I heard a sound so slight that it might have been termed merely a disturbance of the infinite quiet pervading the deep space in which the stars hung. Perhaps it was just the slight vibration imparted to the ship by the movements of the air through which *she* came.

My breath caught in my throat.

She was white of skin, not a dead white, but a white tinged with the pink of roses. Her features were regular, but not Caucasian. I could not have said from what race she came, but I felt certain that that race was extinct, absorbed into the life-blood of another people. Her figure was splendidly proportioned, like that of a goddess. Her clothing was simple and meager. She wore red and pink cloth sandals held in place by a scarlet ribbon above the ankles. A short length of vivid scarlet cloth depended from her hips, but her breasts were exposed or not exposed, all according

to the whim of her long, flowing, metallic yellow hair.

She was lovely, but then, when I saw her during that first instant, she was somewhat terrible! Her lips were possessed of a perfect curve, but they drooped too much at the corners, as if they had forgotten the function of laughter. But they were red, and her short dress was exactly that color. It was woman's vanity that made her do that. But why? There was no single person on that ship besides herself.

It was her eyes which frightened me. In color, they were as shadowy dark and deep as a Moon-crater. They were calm. If they had had the opportunity, they could have been most expressive. But they were not. Something glimmered in them, something awful. It was no supernal wisdom, nor was it an abiding philosophy. It was something else, and I knew what it was. It struck me like a physical blow. It made me sick with pity, and it made me forget everything else.

It was loneliness, the loneliness of eons of time.

I knew then that I would never reach my destination. Why? Because I loved her, loved the matchless beauty of her, and pitied the stark loneliness I saw in her eyes.

I lay there unmoving. She came forward slowly, and her feet did not touch the floor of that hall, nor did they move. There was no gravitation, and the slightest initial momentum could send her the length of the ship. She passed my peep-hole with that set expression of the face, with eyes that looked neither to left nor right. That was natural. She knew every square centimeter of those gray, cheerless walls.

She passed from sight, and then following her came a robot. None of your standardized robots with their humanized bodies, but a mere machine sprouting tentacles from its box-like structure. And it too passed from sight, following her like a servant ready to anticipate her every need.

And I lay still, thinking. Then I

arose. I walked over the whole surface of the ship, and finally stood on its perimeter, looking down at a slab of metal raised slightly from the surface. There was a knob. I turned it. The slab rose from its resting place, and I went into the cavity it presented, down a steep ramp, and stood in a tiny room, bare save for a shiny metal cylinder connected to tubes disappearing into the wall. The plate above me fell, shutting out starlight. At once, a dim effulgence stole into being above me; one of the Sun-lamps. Guessing the significance of the cylinder, I pressed the button set into its face. A needle quivered along a scale whose measuring standard was unknown to me. Slowly my suit lost its balloon rotundity, then collapsed. There was a good fifteen pounds of pressure in the air-lock. I opened my helmet, breathing good air, and then discarded my suit, letting it lie there. It stayed there for twenty years.

There was a door, kept closed heretofore by air-pressure on the other side. I pushed it open, crossed a threshold. I heard a whirring, a manifold whining of gears, of pistons, of other unnameable mechanical devices. I looked around, awed beyond words.

Machines studded the room, its walls, its floors. Strange machines which worked hurriedly, smoothly. I could not describe them; they have no counterpart on Earth, for they were built long before the modern civilization on Earth commenced. But I knew their purpose: the maintenance of living conditions—air, water, warmth, and, I later found, food.

As I stared, a robot came whizzing through a door. It did not pause, but made a straight path for me. Before me it halted, a single second, then made a circuitous track around me. I supposed that it had photo-sensitive plates which served it in lieu of eyes. It went to the wall, and its tentacles reached into the heart of a machine. There was a ripping of wires. The severed ends came to view and, bewilderingly fast, those tentacles

twined and intertwined with a flexibility human arms would never have been capable of. The leads went back, the mechanical turned, whizzed away through the door as if it had a million other things to do.

I followed it, descended a ramp that spiraled, and debouched into a room containing shelves filled to repletion with tightly rolled scrolls, books, I knew. I didn't pause, but crossed another threshold. Here were paintings, oils, I presumed. They were too splendidly fine for description. The passing years had not marred the delicate hues of their composition. Alive they were, alive and perfect as the ancient artists had painted them. Clothed in gorgeous yet simple garments, radiating an aura of gentility and graciousness, the people of the portraits did not look dead; and had they stepped from their golden frames, I could not have been surprised.

I left that room.

I passed through many rooms. Two or three were large halls, with statuary of noble, colossal beauty laid out in lines of geometric straightness. Other rooms were empty, save for furniture of strange design and exquisite detail. I could only look at them, for beauty becomes revered when it is coupled with age. And ever the sense of antiquity before Egypt or Babylonia or Chaldea rose within me. And all was quiet. Quiet.

Quiet, that is, until I heard the music. I opened a door, and it drifted in to me. It was wild, but sad, and the tones surged up and down a minor scale, reaching Alpine notes that seemed to quiver away beyond the limit of audition, descending to barely audible moanings.

I softly opened the door all the way, and entered the room of music. First I saw instruments, fastened to the walls—string, reed, percussion; and others whose means of playing I could not fathom, even had I been of a mind to. Directly opposite me was a meaninglessly smirking human skull, white as snow.

But now the music was stronger, quick, wild, gloating. Only to one who had experienced terrible emotions was that music possible.

And it was *she*.

I saw her, facing me, her head thrown back, revealing the lactescently white column of an ultra-Graecian neck. She stood near a port, and infinite space looked in on her. Her eyes were closed, as her fingers raced over the keyboard of an instrument which likened itself almost exactly to a violin. In her other hand was a bow, very short, dipping and ascending swiftly, drawing itself across strings which I later knew were made from the golden strands of her own hair.

How long I stood there, drinking in the music, and the perfect beauty of her body, I don't know. Then it ended. Her eyes, incredibly long-lashed, opened, and they saw me. For awhile we looked at each other, for seconds, while the wild notes fled out from the violin. Then her fingers stopped dead, lost their hold on that ancient instrument. In the air it remained, its resonant drum vibrating a medley of its last tones.

Her dark eyes, which opened no wider, bore apathetically into mine. There was no light in them. They seemed to turn dull, jaded. Then her lips parted, and words gushed from them, slow words of exquisite tone. She shook her head, slowly, too. Her shoulders fell, and her eyes closed; and then were gushing tears. Slight, jerking sobs shook her body. She turned away.

She thought I was a phantasm, a dream! I spoke, I don't know what words, but she turned again at the sound. I went toward her, and for one timeless interval, I looked down into her eyes, and I saw a spark of realization take flame. Suddenly, she seemed to fall toward me; and I gathered her closer in my arms, buried my face in the soft golden mass of her hair. Then she jerked her head up, looked into my eyes. And how bright hers were! Glad eyes, amazed eyes. She reached

up from her small height, pulled my head down; and for what seemed years, or of no time at all, our lips met. I, a child in years, and she, unutterably ancient, but exquisite woman.

Her hands warm on my arms, she pushed herself away. Her eyes were continually widening, brightening, like a variable star, as if she knew an emotion she could not fully grasp. She laughed, a trill of ecstasy. She loved me. How otherwise could it be so? She would have loved the first man who came to her. For she was a woman, and she had been without man for eons of time . . .

SO I came into my new life, as master of a ship which had been launched I knew not how long ago. I was happy, those first weeks, very happy. But as time drifted on, I began to wonder. Who was she? Where had she come from. How old was she? Even as I held her in my arms, speaking words that were meaningless, oblivious of the robots that swept through the air, tending to their age-old duties of maintenance and repair, I asked myself those questions. And she must have seen the wonder and puzzlement in my face, even as I saw the wonder and puzzlement in hers.

I knew that here was the most monstrous anachronism ever to exist. I knew that without really being sure.

She used one word which intrigued me as I tried to learn her language. Pal! Wasn't that a slang word used centuries ago, and didn't it roughly mean "friend"? I think so. I later learned that in her language it meant something to the effect of "love-companion." It struck me as queer, very queer. But I knew now that that word did not originate in twentieth-century slang.

My activities were not numerous during those first months, for they were entirely bound up with her. She liked to move. I cannot say walk, for one went places merely by pushing on walls. We would roam for hours at a

time over that ship. Up and down, up and down, through the immense quiet. And I understood why she insisted that we move. She had done it for so long. For years and years and years. It was her favorite occupation, though, of course, there was her music. Sometimes, in a gay mood, she would play instrument after instrument. She had had time to master them all. There was a flute, the purest and sweetest and happiest music I have ever heard. There was a large trumpet made of wood which emitted the blood-curdling roar of an angry lion. Other instruments, of wood and porcelain, produced the sound of wind and wave and insects. One instrument was interesting. It was a bleached human skull called the dead-throat. It could imitate anything, including the human voice and other instruments.

Seldom she touched the violin, and when she did, I wished she would quit. For nothing gay ever came from that violin, and the terrible, aged look always entered her eyes. That music never told of anything but suffering and sorrow, of the death of hopes, of the futility of all things. It was beautiful, but it was unbearable.

Shall I speak of such things as meals, when we were gods, higher than Olympus? We ate where we wished, when we wished, and that was seldom. I can in all confidence say that often days, and even perhaps weeks passed during which time we never ate at all. The robots would come laden with things that looked and tasted like fruits, vegetables, and sweets. But they were not. They were synthetic, wrought from the heart of cold machines.

Then I knew her language. I had been learning it all along, in that dream-ship of love and beauty, of hoary old age. While Earth lived its painfully complex life, I was living in happiness scarcely interrupted, learning an ancient, dead language.

I knew her name. It was Naga.

It was no small amount of courage which made me question her, for

sometimes there are questions whose answers it would be best for us never to know.

Her brows contracted in a frown, as she swung her eyes to mine.

"Who am I? Nierson," she said soberly, "your question has the implication that I am not human—or something else." She came very close, and from there looked at me searchingly. "I have seen a strange awe in you, as if I were not only your Naga, who loves you so fiercely, but something else. Do not protest. Nierson," she whispered, "I know there are other women. I have read that in the books. But I have never seen them! Are they different from me, from your Naga?"

A lump caught in my throat, an emotion of pity that I could not throttle. I could only look wordlessly at her, held speechless by the blackness of her eyes, by the long train of years heaped in them.

"Tell me," she whispered fiercely; then suddenly looked away, shoulders drooping. "It must be that I am different. I seem to have been alone forever! It seems so long. I cannot remember my father's face!"

I stroked her satin-smooth cheek. "Hush, Naga, of course you cannot remember your father's face. You were a child when he died?"

"I was a child when he died," she replied, her eyes appearing to turn about, delving into the recesses of dim, clouded memories. "There was an explosion. I remember the explosion very vividly. It was not loud. A puff of red light. And when it ended, he was not there.

"That was long ago. It seems much longer than it should be. I have read books, and never did a human life seem so dreadfully drawn-out as mine."

I suddenly took her arms in my hands, held her closely against me. I said slowly, "What was your country, Naga?"

Her lips formed the word slowly, too, as if certain realizations were crystallizing. "Mu."

My heart shuddered to a stop, then raced on. I felt a sickening pain in my throat, or in my mind, I know not which. I held her tight to me, not daring to show my feelings, to speak my thoughts. But she must have guessed something of what went on in my mind, for she wrenched away from me, shrank back, and it was shame that I saw in her glorious eyes. I said nothing at all, but drew her to me again, and kissed the apprehension from her face. But even as I did so, I was thinking. Mu! Was not that the name of a continent which sank thousands of years ago? I think it was, but exactly how long I do not want to know.

And she, Naga, had been born long before the passing of Mu, though she did not know it. She had supposed herself to be living a natural span of years, and though she undoubtedly knew in terms of numbers of years the length of an average lifetime, how could she know what a year was?

She had had no means, or knew none, of measuring the passage of time, but she had felt the drag of it.

"Naga," I said softly, "tell me everything, all you can remember. Of your father and this ship."

But she was silent. I could see the terrible thoughts revolving beneath her eyes. I could see her skin losing color by degrees.

Then she faced me, and every muscle in her body was tensed.

"You did not speak my language," she whispered. "There was no language at the time of Mu. You did not know of this ship, which my father built; yet everyone in the world knew of it. Therefore, it has passed from the minds of men, and Mu has passed from the minds of men. And only time could effect that awful thing."

"I remember stories of rumbling far down in the bowels of Mu; and wise men prophesied Mu's passing. So Mu has sunk." Slowly her lips framed a silent phrase: "Thousands of years," and she watched my face, searching it for some negation. But I could say nothing, I could only affirm her un-

voiced words with pitying eyes that could not deny.

She recoiled as at a physical blow. "Thousands," she murmured. Panic darted into her widening eyes. "Niersen, no woman—"

She turned away from me. She mechanically pushed against the wall, and went floating swiftly away without me. But I saw her face before she turned her back, and it was deathly white. All that day I followed her, keeping where she could not see me. For hours and hours I followed her, up and down ramps, through the whole ship, and always she floated along, her body stiff, as if she were in a trance of horror, and finally she entered her room, a room upon the walls of which were tattered mementoes of her childhood, dreadfully old looking things that must have been dolls. There was a mirror opposite the door, but it shone with a perfect luster, the ages not having affected it at all.

A robot came darting in above my shoulders, watching her, and when she undressed and walked toward a niche set into the wall, the robot pressed a button. Water under pressure leaped out. Automatically, as if following a custom long instilled into her, she bathed. Most of the waste water was sucked to the water refiner in the upper section of the ship, but that which remained in the air as little globules formed by surface tension was slowly wafted toward, and swallowed up by, a ventilator grating. She propelled herself then to a device which exhaled warm air. Dry, she simply closed her eyes, and was asleep. There is no softer cushion, for those who are used to it, than the air of a gravitationless ship. I left her, then, and went to my own quarters, where I also slept.

When I awoke, Naga was bending over me, and her metallic hair brushed my eyes. She was smiling, her eyes asking an unspoken question. I took her in my arms, and told her then that nothing mattered at all, but that I had her. And that was the truth. I had for-

gotten Earth, had forgotten everything; and the reason for my being in space at all was nebulous. I had started out from Earth, to save my fortune; and now that it was gone, I didn't care in the least. For I had Naga, and though she was the oldest woman ever to live, she was all that mattered.

Yes, it was easy to say that, that I would forget the unnatural length of her life. But the question, continually bothersome, stayed with me for almost twenty years. And when I did find the explanation, it was so simple that it was breathtaking. But that comes later.

I began to inspect the ship, its magnificent art galleries, its machines. The power plant was interesting, but its principle was incomprehensible both to me and to Naga. What was the power source?

"He took energy from space itself," she said.

"Cosmic rays?"

"Not that," she answered, puckering her brows. "There is a radiation the source of which my father never discovered. It does not come from the Sun. Nor does it seem to originate in the stars. It comes in great pulses, like the beat of a heart, and it seems as if it is born from emptiness itself. Father said it was the building matter of the universe, the ultimate mother of everything that is. It marks the transition from nothing to something. But he alone could explain that. I only know that matter is a manifestation, and only a mind such as my father's could say further than that."

Mars had been the ship's original destination, I gathered from Naga, and her father, anticipating a lengthy transit of the space between the planets, had built his ship accordingly, loading it down with his own personal belongings, and the culture of the whole world in addition. But he never reached Mars. Something had gone wrong with the driving equipment, the explosion which accounted for her father. And so the ship had stayed in

space, finally forming an orbit around the Sun.

"And I have been here with my robots since that time," she shuddered. "Terrible, long years."

But how many terrible, long years? It must have been thousands, but how? Why had Naga not fallen heir to man's invincible enemy? That was a question. I did not know till later, about the time I noticed that I myself did not possess the scars that passing years inflict.

I asked her about Mu.

"Mu was the birthplace of man," she answered. "It was the birthplace of all living things, and from Mu life spread to other lands. Over many thousands of years, the peoples of Mu rose from a savage state to a point where they were able to control natural forces. They had flying machines, and swift land cars, and an abundance of energy direct from the Sun. Government was tenuous, for the people of Mu were in little need of governing. It was truly a great civilization."

"It's all gone, now, Naga. Modern man has only begun to conquer his world. When Mu sank, he had to start over again."

Her face became a little strained. The terrible thoughts were revolving in her head again.

"There is so much time in eternity," she whispered, and it was a double allusion, I knew. She was thinking again of the long years ahead of her, and she was afraid of them . . .

WE were happy. In common with every moonstruck lad on Earth, I can truthfully say that she was different. One does not have to argue that point. But I lost her, and it was neither my fault nor hers.

The long years passed, and our ship slowly encircled the Sun.

During those years, we had many occupations. The most enjoyable was moving; I had caught that strange disease from her. For hours and hours at a time, we would move slowly

through the ship, sometimes pausing and tracing the paths of innumerable scratches on the walls, Naga at times being able to relate the exact origin of some, however faint they might be. And that was not incredible, for on that ship, where there were no events of importance, our ideas of events of importance were placed on a relative scale; and the infliction of a mere scratch on a wall was not negligible. And I began to see why she insisted that we shun certain sections or rooms for several years at a time. For, when the day of exploration rolled around, it was like discovering a new world. Those were moments of sheerest happiness, when we thrust open the lids of chests which we just dimly remembered having seen before; the same pleasure that people get from looking at old picture albums.

I read some of those old scrolls in the library. I learned so many things. It's impossible to tell all I did learn.

Yes, that life was very beautiful, but it ended, and I saw the signs. That was in the latter part of my stay with Naga.

We stood near a port, wordlessly staring at the perspectiveness panorama which is space.

"One of those bright lights is Earth," I pointed out.

She met my eyes, and hers were troubled.

"Did you want to go, Nierson?"

I told her I thought she might want to see her native world, but she shook her head slowly, and seemed to shudder. "I cannot bear the thought of that many people around me," she said lowly. "It is maddening, Nierson. These years in space have done something to me. I do not know what it is, but sometimes I feel that I have grown another instinct as powerful as some others. The instinct to be—alone."

She looked up at me swiftly, then away as quickly. I could only stare at her, when I heard that. I could say nothing. But I felt hollow, wretchedly sick inside.

That was the beginning, but there

were other signs. Sometimes, for hours at a time, I could not find her. She would be elsewhere, moving about the ship. Once I saw her, floating across a room. It chilled my blood. She moved along, her eyes out straight, seeing nothing, her arms hanging loosely at her sides, her golden hair fastened about her neck with a scarlet ribbon, a scarlet skirt depending from her slim waist. I looked once, then turned away. I didn't want to see her eyes.

Other times, looking for her, I would find her playing that violin-like instrument with its human hair strings. It was ghastly, the tunes she played. There was nothing of human happiness in them.

Once I went in to her, grasped her hand. "No more," I cried, and wrenched the instrument from her.

She trembled, her hands clasping at her breasts. The old ghosts which had risen in her ebon eyes slowly trooped away.

"Nierson," she said then, "I hope I shall want you always. But I am afraid—I am afraid."

Incidents such as these were like the shudderings that ran through Mu, and presently came up and overwhelmed her. I could do nothing, say nothing, hope for nothing. I could only watch.

And over and above all brooded that titantic enigma: Why had Naga lived so long?

I found out.

I too was not aging. I was no older in mind or body than when I had first found Naga, marooned in the depths of space, her big ship slowly circling the Sun. I thought at first it was some strange machine her father had invented, a radiation that lengthened life. But Naga and I never found such a machine.

We were reading, poring over ancient scrolls we had "discovered" in a room we had not entered in three years, at least.

Suddenly Naga gasped, and she was waving something in the air, too ex-

cited to speak. I knew what happened immediately. Naga had discovered a book she had *never* read.

Now that was something. To discover something new, really new, was to Naga the always longed-for event, something to provide a thrill seldom found in life. A scientist feels it when he isolates a new element, a doctor when he conquers at long last a dreaded disease. Naga felt it now, when she found a book she had never read.

We sat over this book written by a dead author of Mu, perusing every word, reading and rereading; and we found a certain passage, constructed of the flowery sentences most of the poet-authors of Mu used.

This is the way it went, as closely as I can remember:

"Born to live, and born to strive, and born to death only, after all. This is man's heritage."

"What use that we attempt these mighty things? What use that we learn? What use our glorious aspirations, that stop not even at the wall of stars in the heavens? What use at all, for that venomous, malignant thing we call death is the great negater of our hopes, finally shall negate our deeds, and our race itself."

"Where lies this death lurking? What plan conceived it, in what lair does it spawn? Why must it be? Why so inevitable?"

"No man knows."

"But some men have theorized."

"Bred into the universe, bred into the very stuff of which it is composed, is death. It stabs from the heart of the electron, on through the shell of the atom, up and out of the molecule, a strange force, not understood, but which men have given a name."

"It is this force which bows a man's back, wearies his body, tears down the life cells in irreparable damage; drags at him from the moment of conception, and after birth, and throughout life. There is no more insidious, innocent-seeming thing than that never-ending, life-draining pull which mortals must endure in silence and suffering."

"It is the pull of the planet. It is this that men call death. It is this that man fights, all unknowing. It is a fight he has never won. It is a fight the pull of the planet, with us always, always wins."

"And that is death, death ubiquitous and death undefeatable."

Well, when we read that, she was silent, lost in thought. Then she looked

up, smiling, but in her eyes was something sad and haunting, as if she had acquired a knowledge of events to come. But it was gone, instantly. Her arms crept around my neck.

"We could be immortal together," she suggested.

"Not immortal, Naga," I said.

She nodded slowly. "No. Someday I will die. I was a child once, but I have grown, in body and in age. But I do not know why."

But I knew. I told her why. And somehow I was glad. Death may be a curse in some ways, but in most it is a blessing compared to odious immortality. I have heard it said, Who wants to live forever? For circumstances, sooner or later, would burden a person with the knowledge that there is nothing new left to see.

But I knew she would grow toward death, as the thousands of years passed. Why? Because there *was* a gravitational pull out here in space—the mass of the ship itself.

Why haven't we of Earth discovered the principle, since we have been flying in space for a couple centuries now? Well, every space flight is a series of negative and positive accelerations; and acceleration is the most remarkable twin of gravity that there is.

After that, after Naga knew the truth, and knew that more of those years lay ahead of her, she changed. It was as if she were resigned to some horrible fate, had decided to endure it stoically. That was in the last year, I think.

Desperately I clutched at happiness gradually escaping. It was useless. Too often she was missing, going on those lonely walks of hers. More frequently I heard the unhappy tones of her music. And most of all, I saw the old somber ghosts troop back into her dark eyes.

It was heart-rending. The most I could do was to say nothing, to hope it would end.

It didn't. It was a disease, a disease which had eaten into her mind, her

soul, her flesh. And it was nerve-racking to stand back, helpless.

Once, very near the end, I caught her in my arms from behind, as she moved along with that unhuman stiffness of body, that rigid expression.

"Naga," I whispered, unable to keep the tremor of fear from my voice.

Her body quivered. Her lips trembled. Tears started from her eyes. Then, with a moan, she flung herself from me.

I saw her a few hours later. She came up to me, pressed her soft body against mine, and whispered, eyes sad, "Nierson, love me. Love me forever. And I will love you, do not forget."

For a while she stayed very near me. And I looked over her head at the stars. I tried to capture some of the calm and peace that they showed. I couldn't. Naga and I were above people. We were immortals, gods. And now, I knew, the whole glorious episode was drawing to a close. I knew it from then on, though it was unbelievable, a disaster I could not comprehend.

That was the last time I held her to me. She drew away, and left me alone with my horrible thoughts.

For a passage of time whose length I do not know, I stayed with her. I wandered around the ship, hardly knowing what I did. Then I heard her morbid music, and almost mad with the intention of breaking that horrid instrument across my knee, I pushed myself into the room.

She saw me; but the music did not stop. Her eyes were moist mirrors. They seemed to glow, as they had years before, brightening like a variable star. But that was not because of my presence, this time, no.

We stared at each other, eye to eye, mine as dull as they feel now, hers that ecstatic brightness. The agile fingers of her left hand played over that instrument board strung with strings made of her own golden hair, while her other hand, with the short bow in it,

brought forth that throbbing, unearthly music.

Then she flung the instrument from her. It sailed across the room toward the gray metal wall, but, as Naga had anticipated, a robot leaped from a corner, grasped it with a whipping tentacle, before it could smash itself.

She came up to me. She smiled, a pleasant movement of her lips that revealed her even white teeth.

"Good-bye, Nierson," she said, with all the casualness of a host bidding farewell to a guest. "Good-bye."

"Naga," I whispered hoarsely.

"It has been lovely, Nierson," she went on, precisely as if she did not realize the torment I knew. "But now it is over. You understand, don't you, Nierson? I have lived so long a time, and I have been alone. No one could stand up against all those years, and not be terribly changed. I was so lonely—but I know now it was not an intolerable loneliness. It is a loneliness which cannot be forgotten, for it has bred itself into my mind and body. It had crowded in beside those other human instincts. Now it seems to dominate them.

"I cannot do anything about it.

"I must be alone," she said, monotonously, her ebon eyes steady on mine.

I held my arms out to her; I felt a steady pressure begin at the base of my brain, enveloping, numbing my whole body.

Her eyes now seemed to be fastened on something out of sight. She had forgotten me, and what I meant to her, and remembered only some inhuman ecstasy of the mind which no man can comprehend.

Then her eyes came back again; there were tears trembling on the edge of her lashes.

"I am very sorry," she murmured. "Come back, sometime, Nierson. Will you promise me that?"

"How soon?" I choked.

"Not for awhile, Nierson. But come back. Please come back."

Her eyes grew abruptly dull, and she moved away, the ghost of a dream, and then she was gone.

And I left that ship, left her with her rooms to explore, her cheerless corridors to traverse, her soulless robots to attend her, and her deathless life.

For the first time in twenty years (ship-instruments told me that) I went out into space again. I drove on a blind trajectory, hoping there was a sufficiently large meteoroid blocking me. But there wasn't. And when I saw your planetoid, I had rationalized enough to land.

NIERSON PONTY finished his story with those words. My planetoid rotates swiftly, and the Sun had risen twice in the telling. Now it was setting

again. The slanting rays it shed made dark caverns on his face, and his eyes were lost in shadow. He sat straight enough, and his arms were lying loosely on the arm rests of his chair; but it seemed that all resiliency of spirit had left him. And I did not fully understand why.

"But she told you to come back!" I urged. "Go on back!"

"No use." His expression was strained. "No man could wait that long."

"That long?" I echoed.

"Yes." He laughed bitterly. "Yes, she told me to come back, but not for 'awhile'. I know Naga. Only too well she meant it."

He looked at me, smiling queerly. "Just how long do you suppose 'awhile' is to Naga?"

COMING TO COMET!

"VORTEX BLASTER"

BY

Dr. E. E. (SKY LARK) SMITH, Ph. D.

The First Short Story Ever Written By The Author Of:

"THE SKY LARK"

"SKY LARK OF SPACE"

"TRI-PLANETARY"

"SKY LARK OF VALERON"



COMPLETE IN ONE ISSUE

SIGNPOSTS IN SPACE

NEW concrete roads have stretched across the country in the last few years until long trips by car have become almost as common as short trips were a generation ago. And with the coming of the new roads has something which few of us fully realize—a drawing together of distant points, a growing familiarity with distant places.

In the horse and buggy days of our grandfathers, sign posts along the country roads pointed the way at each fork in the muddy trail. On stormy nights, when the rain, wind and darkness hid the landmarks, those signposts at the side of the road were comforting guides. Many a night, the Doctor, unharnessing his drenched and tired horse by the feeble rays of the oil lantern, remembered the trip as a series of welcome signs.

Today, rolling through the night, with the gentle purr of a motor under a long hood the only sound, we catch the gleam of glass-lettered sign posts along the road—and the signposts seem like company. They aren't as close together as they used to be, for we travel faster and farther. A convention in Denver, Colorado, next summer is within reach of a whole continent!

And as men began to desert the earth and take wing, new signposts began to appear. Beacon lights on the airtrails have become familiar. They are spaced evenly, in straight lines. They are farther apart than the signs on the motor roads—but they are as welcome to the aviator on a night of low visibility as were the crudely lettered signs of years ago to the driver of a tired horse.

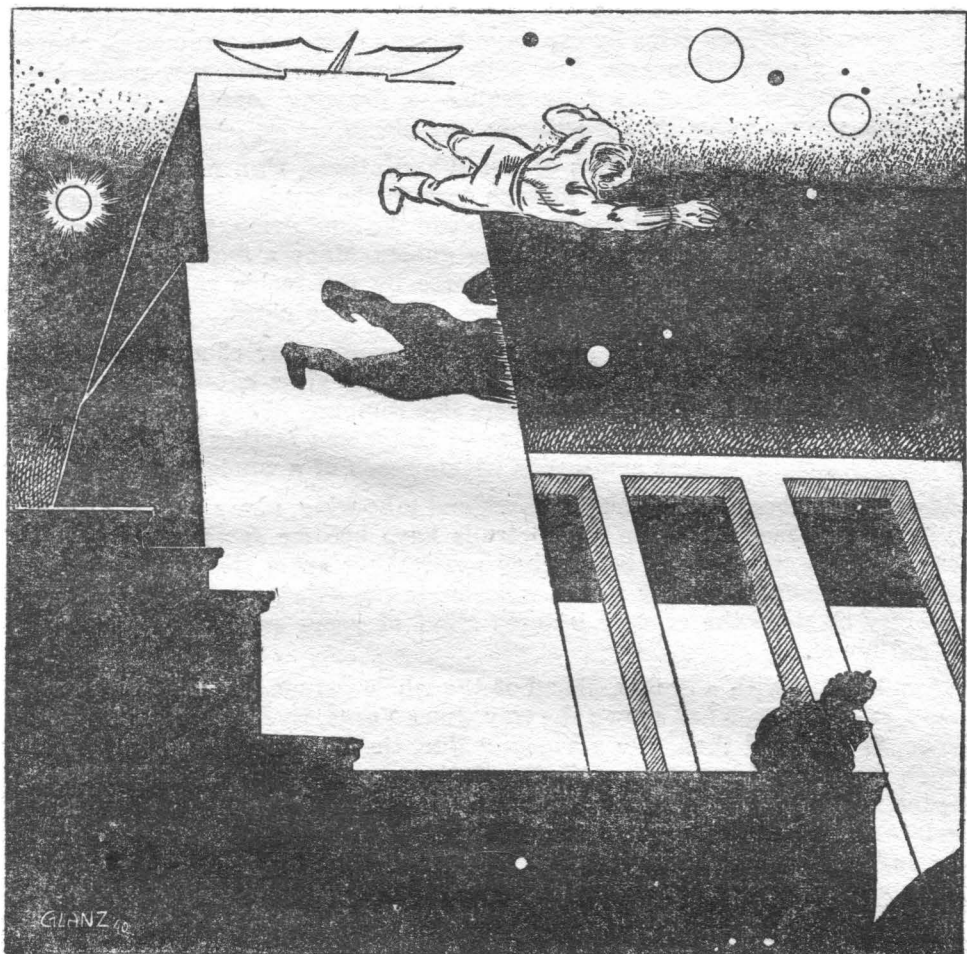
And leading with a dream, ahead of the whole parade, down through the years, science fiction has shown the way. Jules Verne, Ryder Haggard, Conan Doyle, Wells—and then, like a swelling tide, the writers of modern stories which have drilled and charted the pathways into space. Experimental rocket flight follows the lead of science-fiction. Stratosphere planes wing their way on a thousand mile trip in three short hours of flight, carrying passengers in air-conditioned cabins by means of specially equipped motors—and a new set of astronomical signposts will be developed for them.

But you and I have a set of signposts that stretch out and beyond the limiting pale of earthbound ships. We have traveled the spaceways together for a long time. Some of you have traveled with me for ten years, some for eight, some six. Some of you are new acquaintances, I know, but you may learn, by asking, that the skipper always picks interesting trails. He needs the support of a great and expanding crew, for he is on a new ship. The first test flight was a success but readjustments were made in the lines before it took to the spaceways for its second flight.

The motors seemed to settle down and run more smoothly in that second flight (the second edition) but there were still readjustments to be made, for we needed new fuel. We needed time for those adjustments, and our preparation schedule needed more space before takeoff—so we moved the date ahead one month to readjust that schedule to regular flight. Skipping the dateline of February meant only that our flight force was being improved and set. This issue we are testing the new fuel. It promises much. I hope you like it as well as I did. I can still shut my eyes and FEEL the spell of the immortal—and the horror of the hell-stones.

We need a bigger crew as the fuel changes. Will you help enlist it?—F.O.T.

by JACK WILLIAMSON The



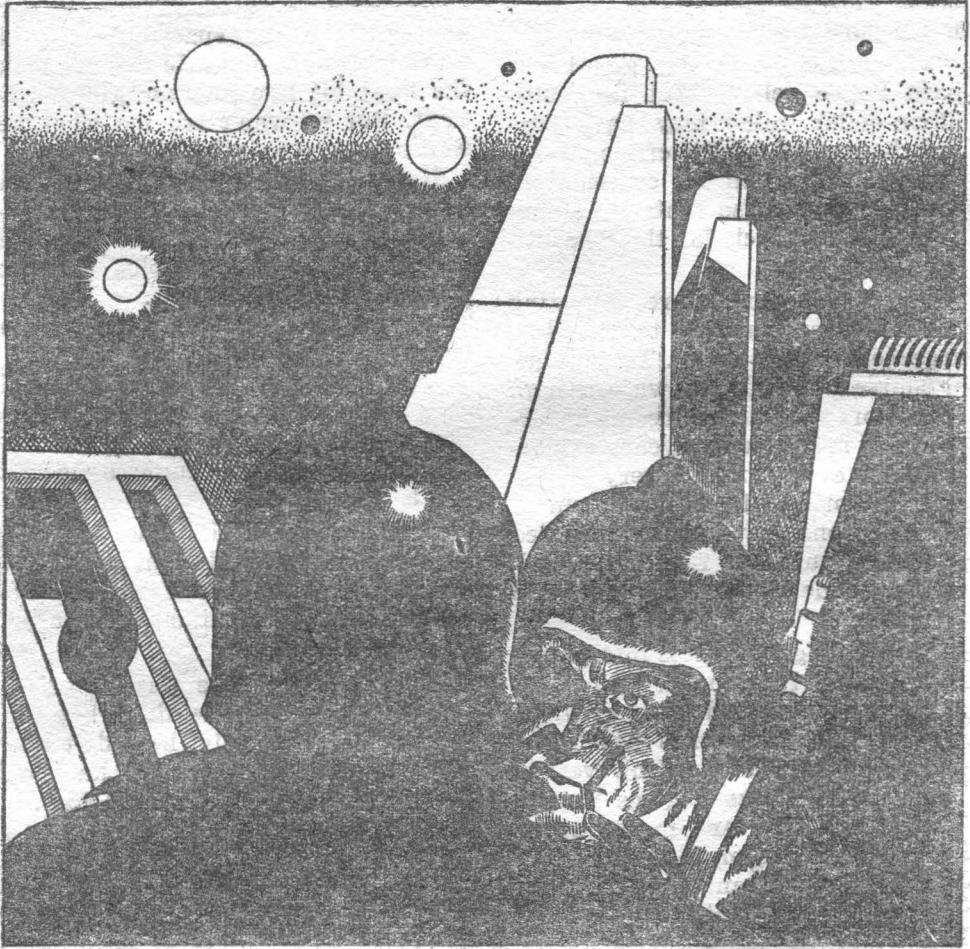
*A Mystery of the Spacelanes—the Hellstones—Fabulous—
Unbelievable—A Story You Won't Forget*

MOOON-TERROR. (Also, space-slang, *gillies!*) A disease common among people living under less than half normal gravity. Recurrent attacks, with intervals of comparative comfort, cause extreme distress. The syndrome includes changes in blood- and brain-pressure, and typical psychopathic symptoms. Early attempts at treatment, by centrifuge, drugs, and surgery of the inner ear, uniformly failed. Recent suc-

cess has been claimed, however, for the psykinetic technique, developed by Kung, Swedberg, and Haldane. See PSYKINETICS. — *Dictionary of Planetary Medicine*. University of Mars, 218 C. S.

The disaster was all Nurse Kane's fault. So, at least, young Dr. Haldane wanted to tell that glamorous red-head—though he never did. Slight and boyish, Bruce Haldane looked younger

STAR of DREAMS



He could see the guards' faces as he floated across the area—a perfect target—

than his twenty-four years. But the triumph of psykinetics was already making him famous. A good practise came to his office in New York's Tri-Planet Tower, and he felt little urge to leave the Earth on any sort of wild goose chase across the void.

Besides, he didn't like Mr. Casey's looks.

His day's work was finished, when the stranger came. Alone in his comfortable inner office, he had relaxed and snapped on the news-repeater. The wall screen lit with the image of

a doll-faced platinum blond. Her red-nailed hand held up a strange round jewel, that shimmered with spinning rainbow color. The announcer's crisp voice rattled:

"Venusian heiress missing! You are looking at an exclusive process reproduction of lovely Zara Carnadon, whose mysterious vanishing has shocked social circles of three planets. Her frantic relatives reported her disappearance today, to Space Police.

"See the jewel in her fingers! Her desperate father revealed to police

that he had recently given her a hell-stone — one of those most rare and mysterious of all gems, which he had bought through underworld channels for a reported seven-figure sum.

"The hell-stone is also gone! The Space Police believe that its multi-million-dollar value may have supplied the motive for the crime. Many, however, will recall the common superstition that these fantastic stones are simply bad luck for their beautiful owners.

"The Space Police are repeating their frequent warning to would-be purchasers of hell-stones. Their original source is still unknown — though prospectors spurred by dreams of fortune have spent twenty years exploring nearly every foot of every known planet. Efforts to trace the origin of any hell-stone have invariably led back to its purchase from some unidentified underworld character, and no farther.

"Any dealings with this interplanetary criminal ring, police point out, are dangerous. A good many previous purchasers of hell-stones have vanished, with their jewels. However, so long as these fantastic gems remain the most beautiful and most desired objects in the system, it is likely that this strange traffic and tragic trail of consequences will continue —"

Dr. Haldane snapped off the repeater. He had never seen a hell-stone. He wasn't likely to — not with office expenses eating up his income, and most of the system still unconvinced about psykinetics.

But the mystery fascinated him. He was trained to dig beneath the surface, for ultimate motivations. Why did the hell-stones come only through the underworld? Their unknown seller must be, by now, just about the richest individual in the system. What had he to hide?

The office communicator buzzed. Haldane pressed the key, and a bright miniature of Madelon Kane's red head appeared on the tiny screen. Her

green eyes were shining with excitement.

"A Mr. Casey to see you, doc," her crisp voice reported. "He's athletic and military and space-burned and terribly fascinating. He doesn't look the least bit like another gillies patient. But he won't tell me what he wants."

Haldane tried to glare into the twin lenses. But it was hard to glare successfully at Madelon Kane. He gave it up, and his serious blue eyes lit with unvoiced admiration.

"All right — send your Mr. Romeo in."

Mr. Casey was tall and straight and dark, with a thin black line of moustache along his full red lip. In his flowing green synsilk tunic, he looked like a televue idol.

"Dr. Haldane!" His voice dripped personality and self-confidence. "I understand that you can cure the gillies? I'm not the patient, of course. But, can you?"

Haldane didn't like Casey's crisp, aggressive manner. He didn't like the moustache. Especially, he didn't like the way Casey looked at Madelon Kane, who was waiting at the door.

"The moon-terror is part of the price we have paid for the conquest of space." With an effort at professional dignity, Haldane drew up his slightly stooped shoulders. "When we hurl ourselves out of the environment that has shaped our bodies and our minds for millions of years, painful adjustments are necessary.

"The task of planetary medicine is to assist those adaptations to the conditions of other worlds. I have followed up the pioneer work of my dead teachers, Kung and Swedberg, in developing the psykinetic technique."

Haldane nodded, in his best lecture room manner — and ignored the malice in Madelon Kane's green eyes.

"Yes—given the patient's cooperation—I can cure the gillies."

"Good," Casey said briskly. "I've a patient for you."

"Miss Kane will arrange the appointment."

Casey's dark handsome face looked covertly amused—as if he were entering a personal contest with the slender young doctor, from which he intended to emerge victorious in the eyes of the gorgeous nurse.

"Unfortunately, doctor," he said suavely, "you will have to call on the patient."

Haldane felt his face turn pink. He made a mental note to try to grow a beard. What was the use of being a famous psykinetologist, when you still blushed like a bashful freshman? His voice quivered:

"And where is the patient?"

Casey looked more amused.

"I'm not at liberty to tell you. You must come prepared for a space voyage lasting six days each way, besides whatever time you will require for the treatment. Transportation will be furnished for yourself and one assistant."

Casey's dark roving eyes went back to Madelon Kane. She looked startled. Then her fair skin colored slightly. Pleased anticipation began to sparkle in her cool green eyes.

Alarmed, Haldane caught his breath.

"I can't leave New York."

Casey smiled.

"Is it possible, doctor—I heard a rumor—that you're subject to the gillies, yourself?"

Haldane looked uneasily at Madelon. Her red lips were demure. But the laughter in her green eyes made him want to slap her. Gulping, he turned back to Casey.

"I did have the gillies, once," he said. "A vacation trip to the Moon, when I was a medical student. Kung and Swedberg tried their theories on me. The beginning of psykinetics. My case was the first cure."

Madelon's dancing eyes taunted: *maybe*.

"Forgive me, doctor." Casey's voice was smooth. "Shall we discuss your fee? The patient is extremely wealthy.

Estimate your usual income, and he will triple it for the time you are gone. He will insure your life, besides, for any reasonable amount."

"My income is adequate." That was hardly true, but Haldane was getting angry. "I told you—"

"One moment," Casey interrupted. "We have another inducement." His dark limpid eyes went back to Madelon. "That is a hell-stone."

The nurse uttered a soft little cry.

"Impossible!" Haldane remembered the news telecast he had just heard, about the vanishing of Zara Carnadon and her priceless jewel. He chilled again, to the cold shadow of that sinister mystery. "One of them is worth millions."

No longer mocking, Madelon's eyes were dark with awe.

"I saw a hell-stone, once."

Her wide eyes seemed to stare beyond Haldane, at some vision of utter loveliness.

"I touched it," she murmured softly. "Just for a moment. It was a small thing. Round as a child's marble, and no larger. But light and color were dancing in it, as if it had been alive. You felt something alive."

Her hands came up to the white column of her throat, in a gesture of pain.

"It was sad—the thing you felt. So beautiful—and yet so terribly sad. The spinning colors of it slowed and changed with sorrow. Because it couldn't speak to you. Because it was shut up in a hideous prison."

"The dance of it stopped. All the bright colors went out of it, until only a tired hopeless blue was left. Almost the thing in the jewel was dead. But it wasn't free—not even to die."

Her throat pulsed, as she swallowed against the catch in her voice. The office was suddenly quiet. Tears filled her dark eyes.

"It was the most beautiful thing I ever saw."

The red hair made a splendid cloud about Madelon's head. She was easily the most beautiful thing Haldane had

ever seen. He wanted desperately to earn that offered jewel, and give it to her. But cold alarm tapped his spine.

He didn't like Casey, or trust him. He remembered the warning of the Space Police. Whatever had happened to Zara Carnadon and the rest—he wouldn't put Madelon in that same unknown danger.

He whispered, "No."

Casey began another suave protest, but Madelon said:

"Wait outside, Mr. Casey. Doc, I want to talk to you."

Grinning, as if he knew he had won, Casey went out.

"Madelon —" Haldane gulped. "I know those stones are very beautiful and precious. I'd like for you to have one. But there's such a risk —"

Her green eyes glittered and she caught her breath.

"Why, doc!" she said softly. "Don't be an idiot. Did you think I wanted you to give the thing to me? There's something wrong with you—gillies or not. But remember the foundation you've been talking about, to train more men in psykinetics and rid the whole system of the moon-terror."

She patted his shoulder.

"Of course there's a risk. But we can sell the jewel for millions—if we really get back with it. Enough to do everything you've planned. You won't have to struggle on alone, while hundreds of thousands who have the gillies don't even know there is a cure.

"It's worth a risk!"

Haldane's eyes filled with tears. He didn't know what to do. He was suddenly aware of a whole new domain of psychology, outside the field of psykinetics. Inadequately, he seized her hand and pressed it to his lips.

"Why, doctor!" Her crisp voice broke the moment. "Anyhow, doc, you need a vacation. You took on too much work, when Kung and Swedberg died. You need a rest. And the voyage will give you time to finish your monograph."

"All right," said Haldane. "Tell Casey I'll go."

She opened the door.

"It's all settled, Mr. Casey." Her voice was eager. "When do we leave?"

The *we* made Haldane open his mouth, in sudden apprehension. She had no business sticking her pretty red head into this somehow sinister adventure. He started to protest that he didn't need to take an assistant. But he shut his mouth again—because he knew Madelon Kane.

Casey's voice had a ring of triumph.

"My space yacht—the *Starbrand*—is lying at Berth 280 on the Marsport field. We're blasting off at midnight—if you and the doctor can be aboard by then."

In Madelon Kane's efficient charge, the legal details of the guaranteed fee, insurance, and passports, were swiftly cleared up. The powerful Bank of Mars proved willing to underwrite Mr. Casey, as a "*valued client*."

But even the bank's guarantees couldn't reassure Haldane. He could not quite believe that any medical service could be worth a real hell-stone, to anybody. All Madelon's bubbling enthusiasm couldn't dispell his apprehensions.

It was almost midnight when they stepped out of an air-car, on the Long Island space-port. His first glimpse of the *Starbrand*, standing upright like a strange monument, black against the blue glare of floodlights, chilled him with fresh alarm.

"Doc!" Madelon's voice was thrilled. "Isn't it beautiful?"

Indeed the tall graceful pillar of the geodesic glider was beautiful. But all the beauty of its sleek, swelling lines spoke of a secret and deadly power. Haldane caught the girl's arm.

"Look, Madelon!" His throat was tense. "Pleasure yachts aren't built like that. It's a fighting ship. You can see that in every line. Maybe I'm no spaceman myself, but my patients have given me models enough. I know it, Madelon—there's a geodesic gun under that swell forward."

His voice dropped urgently.

"It's not too late—please let me go on alone!"

Her laughter chimed softly, unafraid.

"Maybe Mr. Casey needs a gun. You know you want me, doc. Suppose you get a touch of the gillies yourself—you look sort of green, already." Her voice turned sober. "Remember why we're doing this. To start your Psykinetic Foundation, and wipe out the moon-terror."

Her green eyes mocked him again.

"Besides, I think this mystery is fun."

"It's no fun to be dead."

But Haldane followed her toward the yawning air-lock, in the tail of the upended ship. Really, the jewel would mean a great deal. Two hundred years had convinced orthodox medicine that the gillies couldn't be cured. It was hard for one young man to shake that conviction—there had been too many quacks. But a rich foundation could do it.

In the cage of the tiny elevator that ran up and down the length of the ship, Casey was waiting for them. He looked trimly military in a gray-and-green uniform. His dark face smiled.

"Welcome aboard. We blast off in five minutes."

"Now, Mr. Casey," demanded Haldane, "will you tell us where we're bound?"

"It's Captain Kellon, if you please, now that we're aboard." He smiled again, at Madelon. "Captain Casey Kellon." A chill of warning came into his voice. "Still, doctor, I can't tell you where we are going—or permit you to find out. I must require you to hold this case in strict professional confidence. This trip will have to be simply a blank in your life.—Understand?"

"All right," Haldane nodded. "A hell-stone is worth that."

A brisk silent steward piled baggage into the elevator with them. He touched a button, and the cage started

upward. Behind them, the valves clanged. Haldane started—the sound had an unpleasant finality.

"I must be on the bridge," Casey Kellon was saying. "The steward will show you your rooms. You should be in your berths when we blast off." His dark eyes had a stabbing power. "This will be an interesting and profitable voyage—if you just play the game."

But what was the game? Wondering, Haldane tried not to shudder. A few moments later, he received another disturbing hint.

The cage swept them upward, through the levels of the ship. Haldane glimpsed a dark hold, the trim polished cases of the geodesic inflexors, close-packed rows of power-tubes, a spotless galley. Then, as the cage slowed, he saw a circular corridor, and stateroom doors.

"Casey — Casey!"

The screaming voice sawed his nerves. A girl in torn synsilk burst out of one of those doors. A tangle of blond hair half covered her tear-streaked doll-face—but it was somehow familiar.

A white-clad steward followed her out of the room, insisting:

"You must lie down, Miss, until we blast off."

The elevator stopped, on the level above. The corridor that ringed the shaft was richly carpeted, the walls paneled with dark polished Venusian hardwoods. The steward set out the bags. Kellon nodded below, with faint pity on his brown face.

"My sister," he said. "An invalid. This is her first voyage, and she seems afraid. It should reassure her, doctor, to learn that you are aboard." He smiled at Madelon. "Cocktails in the bar on the next deck, after we blast off?"

"Thank you, Captain," she cooed. "Certainly."

The elevator carried him on up the central shaft, and the steward let Haldane and Madelon into their respective quarters. The rooms were tiny, but luxurious. The doctor flung him-

self flat on his berth, waiting for the crushing pressure of the launching rockets.

The warning siren wailed through the ship. In the hush that followed, Haldane wondered if his own case of the gillies was really cured—or would he be shamefully sick, after all, when they reached whatever mysterious moon or minor planet that might be their destination?

Then something clicked in his brain. That girl's doll-face! In spite of the tears and the tangled hair, he remembered. He had seen her on the telescreen, that very day. She wasn't Kellon's sister. She was Zara Carnadon, the Venusian heiress, who had vanished with her hell-stone!

Haldane tried to get up from the berth. He wanted to warn Madelon, to get off this sinister ship. But the rockets made a thunder of sound, and the ruthless pressure of acceleration smashed him back against the blankets. Wherever it might take them, the voyage had begun.

CHAPTER II

THE bellow of the launching rockets stopped, and that crushing pressure ceased. For an instant the *Starbrand* hung free, and Haldane felt a sudden illness in his middle. Then the inflexors hummed, replacing the launching rockets with their powerful drive. The steady thrust of acceleration restored his physical comfort, but mental unease still tortured him.

Shakily, he tapped on Madelon's door.

"Why, doc!" Her cool voice laughed at him. "I believe you're going to have the gillies, after all!"

He decided not to tell her about Zara Carnadon. He had merely glimpsed the girl. There was a good chance he had been mistaken. If he hadn't been — well, this wasn't the time to do anything about it. If Kellon really had the kidnapped heiress and the missing jewel aboard, reck-

less accusations would be likely to result in immediate violence. Better just keep his eyes open, and wait. He might learn more. If his fears were justified, there might be a chance —

"I need that drink," he said. "How do you get the elevator?"

Madelon pushed a button, at the shaft. Kellon came down, in the cage, and took them to the level above. He went behind the tiny bar, and asked them what they wanted, and mixed the drinks himself. Haldane asked him:

"Would your sister like to join us?"

The brown face reflected nothing.

"Kay's very shy," he said. "She doesn't like strangers." His glass rang cheerfully against Madelon's. "Here's to a very merry voyage!"

For the doctor, however, it was not a merry voyage.

The ship, to be sure, was luxurious. The stewards were silently efficient and the food was excellent. Kellon was suavely polite. Madelon seemed to be having a huge good time.

But Haldane was miserable.

He had brought the manuscript of his monograph, that was intended to present the complete theory of psychokinetics to the medical world. Every day, he tried to work on it. But he found that any useful concentration was quite impossible.

For one thing, he couldn't forget the riddle of Haldane's "sister." He didn't see her any more. She never came into the public rooms, and the stewards carried meals to her. Kellon insisted that she was very shy. Haldane saw nothing that he could do about her.

But he worried.

And he worried considerably more about Madelon Kane.

The nurse and Captain Kellon saw a great deal of each other. They were always drinking at the bar or walking the circle of the narrow promenade or dancing in the salon. Kellon guided her down to explore the bowels of the ship. He took her to the bridge—where Haldane wasn't allowed—to

teach her astrogation. He told her exciting anecdotes, of his adventurous and somewhat mysterious past.

Haldane tried not to quarrel with Madelon.

He knew that she had a temper to match her red hair, and he respected it. He kept reminding himself that she had come on this rather risky adventure, not for her own advantage, but for him and the foundation. Anyhow, an expert psykinetologist ought to be able, at the very least, to keep on speaking terms with the girl he loves.

They were five days out, when it happened. Haldane asked her to read a finished chapter of the monograph—he might be able to cure diseases, as she had said, but he could very seldom spell them. Now she told him that Kellon was waiting for her on the bridge.

"Please, Madelon!" His voice quivered. "Do you have to see so much of him?"

A warning flashed in her green eyes, but Haldane was too much disturbed to see it. With her chin lifted, she inquired hotly:

"What's the matter with Casey?"

As an expert psykinetologist, Haldane might have remembered that people shut up day after day in space ships had very often quarreled violently, for no good reason they could remember after they landed—when they lived to land. But even the nerves of a psykinetologist can grow ragged, from Earth-sickness, and haunting fear, and the torment of jealousy.

"There's plenty the matter with Kellon," he said. "On his own word—if you'll just look at those stories of his—he's an ex-pirate. Or maybe still a pirate! I don't like his looks. I don't like the way he acts."

"Well, I do," said Madelon Kane.

There was more that Haldane could have said. There was his suspicion that Kellon was a kidnapper and a jewel-thief. But Madelon, with her red head high, walked out and left him. Pacing the floor of his tiny cab-

in—two steps each way—he presently heard dance music on the deck above.

Muttering impotently, and gnawing his fists, Haldane resolved to apologize. He saw her again at dinner. But she was extremely remote and polite, and Haldane couldn't bring himself to say anything in Kellon's presence. After dinner, she and Kellon played cards.

Haldane sulked in his room.

He couldn't blame Madelon. He realized that he must seem very commonplace and boyish, beside the dashing spaceman. He had never learned to dance. He had been too busy to cultivate many of the social arts, or even to let Madelon know that he was falling in love with her.

Those reflections didn't make him happy.

As the inflexors hummed the days away, and unmeasured millions of miles, Haldane had tried to form some idea of the *Starbrand's* course. Questions were forbidden, and he was bound by professional ethics. But there was nothing to prevent a private guess.

Watching from the view-ports on the narrow promenade, he could see that they were leaving the Sun behind. It contracted to a tiny disk. The inner planets vanished beside it. He attempted a sort of dead reckoning, based on estimated speed and direction. But he had neither instruments nor knowledge to take accurate bearings. He was sure, from the confusing way that the tiny points of Jupiter and Saturn swung about in the gulf beyond the sun, that the ship had repeatedly changed its course. He knew that these modern geodesic inflexors could give a far higher effective acceleration than the passengers would feel.

He gave it up. He didn't know where the ship was going—except that it was somewhere in the little-known fringes of the system. He felt lost, in the cold cosmic waste of remote stars and empty darkness.

At last, that night, Haldane went to sleep. He dreamed that he was back on Earth—in the immaculate new laboratory of the Psykinetic Foundation. He was running after Madelon, to tell her he was sorry they had quarreled. She fled from him, laughing, and called back that Casey Kellon was waiting to give her a necklace of hell-stones.

Then the splendid new building crumbled about them. A terrible chasm cleft the Earth, between them. Madelon was frightened, and called to him. Trying to reach her, he dropped into that black and bottomless pit. He fell, vertiginously. He went on falling.

Horror woke him.

Weightless, he had floated off the bunk. His frantic hands were clutching at the blankets. His body was tense and quivering and chilled with sweat of terror. With a hoarse laugh at himself, he caught the rail beside the bunk.

He knew what had happened. The *Starbrand* had merely stopped acceleration, robbing him of the illusion of weight. He had suffered the beginning of a very nice attack of the gillies. That was just the way he had felt, that time on the Moon.

Kellon's voice rasped from the wall-speaker:

"Attention, passengers! We're maneuvering to land. The motion will be uncomfortable, unless you are strapped in your berths."

It was uncomfortable. The inflexors hummed for a moment, and then were silent again. The rockets boomed repeatedly, spinning the ship this way and that. Haldane's stomach felt queasy. That unconscious racial terror of weightlessness wasn't easy to conquer—not even with the modern mental surgery of psykinetics.

At last the ship swayed and bounced deliberately on her landing stanchions, and was still. Haldane sat up, and the motion lifted him off the bunk. He floated gently back. He knew that the *Starbrand* had landed—on an

extremely tiny world. No wonder somebody had the gillies, here!

Magnetic sandals clicked outside. Haldane opened the door. Captain Kellon, smiling suavely, handed him a pair of metal-soled footgear, and a weighted belt.

"Doctor, we're on Veron." His voice had a cold ring of warning. "You won't find it on any space-chart, and I remind you that you must wipe it out of your mind, when you are gone."

His hard brown face smiled again.

"Put on these, and I'll take you off to see the patient. I can tell you now that his name is Vero Brand. He is my employer, and the owner of Veron. Those facts, too, you must forget when you are gone."

"Of course," muttered Haldane.

He didn't like the relish with which Kellon uttered that phrase: *when you are gone*.

Madelon opened her own door, across the tiny hall. It seemed to Haldane that she looked a little ill. But her red head was high, and she spoke to him very politely. Kellon gave her sandals and belt, and the elevator dropped them into the air-lock. They stepped down from the side valve, upon Veron.

"Oh!" Madelon stumbled, caught Kellon's hand. "It's such a grand adventure, Casey. I can't quite believe it."

Haldane turned away from them, angry at himself. He filled his lungs with the clean cold oxygen, and looked about with a watchful and astonished interest.

The *Starbrand* stood upright on a small field—and this worldlet was so tiny that every edge of the field was a horizon. The sky was a pale bowl of shimmering violet. That strange light was the fluorescence of the Chardion field—the envelope of electronic vibration that contained the artificial atmosphere, that the feeble gravity of Veron was too weak to hold.

Other ships, like round tapered metal pillars, made a row down the field. Three small freighters, battered

and oxide-stained. Another yacht, the *Sunbrand*, sleek and deadly-looking as the *Starbrand*. Two slender black space chasers—undisguised fighting ships. Guards in gray-and-green walked beside them.

Magnetic soles clicking on a path of flexible expanded metal, Kellon led them toward the edge of the field. A squat gray turret came into view. Haldane knew that great geodesic rifles waited there, ready to spit tons of death and demolition far across space.

He shivered.

Who was Vero Brand?

They came to the edge of the field. Holding Kellon's hand, Madelon caught her breath. Her red lips were parted with wonderment, and her green eyes were dark again. Softly she whispered:

"This — all this is beautiful!"

Once, Haldane knew, Veron must have been stark and bare and ugly. A mere half-mile rock, it was too tiny for gravitation to have rounded any harsh jutting pinnacle. But science had cloaked it with the Chardion field, and clothed it with pure loveliness.

Blue water turned hollows into crystal lakes. Terrace-gardens were luminous with blooms. Every sharp cliff was softened with its blanket of blue-flowering crimson Martian moss.

"The Chardion field is tuned to serve as an energy-trip," Kellon commented. "That keeps up the temperature. Also, the light-absorption makes Veron almost invisible." Again, warning rang hard in his voice. "Any passing ship would be far within the range of the guns, long before we could be discovered."

He led them forward again.

"There are elevator tubes cut through the rock," he told them. "But it isn't far to walk, and I want you to see Veron."

They crossed another near horizon. Madelon stopped them, with a little breathless cry. Ahead lay a little blue lake, rimmed with gardens and mossy cliffs. In the center of it was an island, reached by a fairy bridge. On the

island stood a fairy palace. Its spires and towers were jewel-like plastics, luminous and exquisite. The building was mirrored queerly in the still convexity of the lake.

"It's so lovely!" Tears filled her eyes. "I can't quite believe it."

"Mr. Brand's house," Kellon said. "You're to stay here while his treatment is in progress. Quarters will be ready for you."

Their sandals clicked across the bridge. Servants in gray-and-green, as silent and efficient as the *Starbrand's* stewards, were ready to welcome them. Haldane was ushered into a spacious suite, of appalling magnificence. His one rather battered bag had already come from the ship, and he thought it looked grotesquely out of place here.

"Madelon," Haldane asked, in the spacious hall between their doors, "may I speak to you, alone?"

He thought she looked a little ill. He wanted to beg her to forgive him for the quarrel, and to ask if he could help her. She nodded, the red head still proudly high. But Kellon broke in:

"I'm afraid you have no time, now, doctor. Mr. Brand wants you to come to his laboratory, right away. It is imperative." He turned to Madelon. "While the doctor's busy, may I show you Veron?"

Her green eyes glittered maliciously at Haldane.

"I'd be delighted, Casey."

"Good," Casey Kellon said. "I'll be back in half an hour."

She turned away. Suddenly, from her pallor, Haldane was sure she had just a touch of the gillies. Well, it served her right. But he was going to make friends as soon as he could, if she made him crawl on his knees.

"Come, doctor," Kellon said suavely.

They clicked out of the fantastic palace, and back across the fragile, jeweled bridge. The tall brown spaceman led Haldane over another close

horizon, and the doctor caught his breath.

In the midst of a broad green lawn, under the shimmering violet sky, stood precisely the sort of building he had planned for the Psykinetic Foundation. A white-walled laboratory, simple and spacious and clean.

A metal walk brought them to the door. Two guards, in the now-familiar gray-and-green of Mr. Brand's retainers, saluted Kellon and let them in. They sat down, in a simple waiting room. After five minutes, a thin pale man entered nervously.

"Mr. Brand," said Kellon. "Dr. Haldane."

Vero Brand looked frail and ill, in his white laboratory apron. His high-cheeked face was narrow and arrogant. His dark piercing eyes stabbed at Haldane. They were hollowed with suffering, haunted. Haldane pitied the man—yet wondered if he really deserved pity.

"You may go, Casey." His voice was rasping and high. "I'll talk to the doctor alone."

Casey went out silently, smiling. Haldane tried to forget that he was going back to Madelon. Vero Brand gestured nervously for the doctor to sit down again. He walked restlessly across the room, lit a cigarette, crushed it out. His haunted eyes came back to Haldane, suspiciously searching. His harsh voice grated:

"Can you cure me, doctor?"

"If you will cooperate," Haldane said. "Though it would have been simpler, on Earth."

"I can't leave Veron," rasped Brand. "I dare not!"

Again he clicked jerkily across the room.

"Won't you sit down?" Haldane urged. "Just tell me about yourself?"

Brand sat nervously on the edge of a chair.

"I've suffered from the gillies for twenty years—ever since I came to space." His voice was husky with pain. "The attacks are always worse. Nobody can understand the agony I

go through. I've experimented with quacks enough." His hollow eyes had an angry glint. "But if you can help me, I'll submit to drugs, surgery, anything."

His thin pale face was eager.

"What is your treatment, doctor?"

"Psykinetics," Haldane told him, "is a modern specialized development, based upon the old Freudian technique of psychoanalysis. In my view, the moon-terror is simply a peculiar psychosis. Naturally, physical methods, such as drugs and operations and centrifuges, have failed to relieve a disease that is mental."

"Eh?" Brand looked puzzled.

"You see," Haldane explained, "for millions of years, during the evolution of our ancestors on Earth, they were never free of the sensation of weight except when they were falling. Most falls had a painful ending.

"When one individual falls, and is injured, a conditioned reflex is established. But a million generations developed that simple fear-reflex, into a racial complex. The old behaviorists discovered, centuries ago, that falling is one of the only two things that can frighten a newborn baby.

"Now, here on Veron, you are virtually weightless all the time — which means that you continually experience that old kinaesthetic sense of falling. Here, of course, there is no real danger of a painful impact. Normally, the conscious mind, realizing that, is able to suppress that racial dread effectively.

"Sometimes, however, that old fear breaks through. Somehow, an individual is unable to defend himself from that ancestral, indwelling terror. The result is a case of the gillies."

"You mean —" Brand stuttered angrily. "You mean — that I —?"

Haldane nodded soberly.

"This is the theory of psykinetics," he said. "Your mind is simply unwilling to reject that old fear. You are using it, instead, for a sort of whip, to punish yourself for some crime in

your past—or for something, at least, that seems to you a crime.

"The thing may have happened when you were four years old. It may be absolutely trivial. But the only way that you can be cured is to expose that buried conflict to the logic of consciousness. You must find that old hatred of yourself, and vanquish it."

Brand's thin white nostrils dilated to an angry breath.

"What do you want me to do?"

"Just tell me about yourself," Haldane urged. "The technique of psychokinetics makes the process a good deal quicker and easier than psychoanalysis used to be. I'll make the necessary suggestions, as we go along. Now, just tell me what is in your mind. You must learn to associate feelings and ideas. Just—tell me."

Brand rose abruptly.

"I can't do that." His narrow face twitched, and his harsh voice shook. "There are things that I can't tell anybody."

"You can tell me," Haldane protested. "It's those bottled-up things—the things you feel guilty about—that are making you ill. I must remind you that my professional ethics guard everything you tell me."

The thin man made a wild, despairing gesture. His white, hollow face was twisted with suffering. Perspiration beaded it. His voice was choked and hoarse.

"Perhaps other people can tell you everything. But I can't, doctor. Why do you think I have to hide myself on an invisible rock, miles from the nearest inhabited planet? Why do you think I need forts to guard my life, and a space fleet?"

His laugh was a shrill, bitter rasp.

"Professional confidence, eh? That wouldn't mean a thing, if you knew. You would turn against me, with the rest. You would use my own secrets, to destroy me."

Haldane stood up, urgently.

"Listen to me, Brand. I can see that you have wealth and power and real ability. But all of them won't help

you, if you destroy yourself. That's what you're doing. I can see how far you've gone. You have a few months more. Then your mind will break—or your body—it doesn't matter.

"If you don't let me help you, Brand, you're—finished."

The sick man clenched his thin white fists.

"Get away from me," he choked. "I sent for you to cure me—not to pry into my secrets with your damned lying tricks." His voice rose shrilly, cracked. "You can go back. I don't want you here."

"You are paying me a very large fee to come here," Haldane reminded him. "The payment is guaranteed, whether I am able to cure you or not. It would be foolish not to take advantage —"

"You'll be paid." Brand gestured violently toward the door. "Now get out! One of my freighters is blasting off for Mars, tonight. Kellon will give you your hell-stone, and see that you are safe aboard."

"Now, get—"

Brand's voice was choked off. The threatening gesture froze. His narrow face went lividly pale. Agony twisted it, and his rolling eyes dilated hideously. He uttered a dry, gasping shriek. The weighted belt dragged his shuddering body to the floor. He snatched frantically at the leg of a desk, as if afraid he would fall out of the room.

He had the gillies.

CHAPTER III

A DOOR burst open. Two men in white brought a stretcher into the room. They lifted upon it the sobbing, screaming thing that was Vero Brand, and strapped down the jerking limbs. They carried the stretcher away. One of them looked back at Haldane with sardonic eyes.

"So you're the great psychinetologist?" he said. "You can cure the gillies?"

The closing door shut out the sounds of Brand's agony.

A little ill himself, Haldane walked out of the laboratory, back into the cold violet light of the Chardion field. The fantastic rugged landscape had lost all its eerie beauty. It was merely strange. The nearness of the horizon was somehow frightening. He couldn't escape a dim mad nagging fear that he would fall off Veron.

A guard followed him, on clicking sandals.

"Your guide, doctor," he said respectfully. "By Mr. Brand's order. Do you want to see Veron?"

Perhaps he was a guide, but he was also a keeper.

"Take me back to my rooms," Haldane said. "I want to see Miss Kane."

But Madelon had already gone, with Kellon. Haldane waited for her, fighting a dim but growing alarm. The luxury of the castle on the lake, and all the wonders of Veron, meant nothing to him. He tried to get the guard to take him to Madelon, or to carry a message to her.

"My orders don't include that, doctor."

Haldane urged and begged and questioned him, in vain. More and more, he felt that he was a helpless prisoner. At last—when he knew it must be almost blasting time, for the freighter—there was a rap on the door. He ran to answer, hoping that it might be Madelon. Kellon entered, alone.

"Dr. Haldane," he said stiffly, "Mr. Brand is a man of his word. Despite your failure, he has ordered me to give you the hell-stone you were promised. Here it is."

He held out a little black jewel-box. Mechanically, Haldane accepted it. He opened it, and an involuntary cry of admiration escaped his lips.

"Do you like it?" Kellon's voice had a suave, maddening mockery. "The name of it is the Star of Dreams."

The jewel, against the black velvet, was a drop of living, incredible light. A little crystal sphere, no larger than

the end of his thumb. But the dancing color and splendor within it somehow filled his eyes with tears.

"Madelon," he whispered, "will love it."

Queer, how the jewel made him think of Madelon. The red sparks that danced in the bright tiny globe were suddenly the red of her hair. The emerald flecks were the green of her eyes. He saw her lips in the wings of red, her fair skin in the moon-white shadows.

"She must see it." He snapped the box shut, and looked into Kellon's hard brown face. Alarm choked him. He tried to swallow it. "Where—where is Madelon?"

Kellon's smooth face held a secret triumph.

"I've brought you a message from her," he said suavely. "She has decided to remain on Veron. She must like our little world, because she has promised to marry me. She asked me to bring you her farewells."

Haldane gulped incredulously. Perhaps they had quarreled. Perhaps he had been jealous and unjust. After all, any woman might prefer a dashing spaceman to a struggling doctor, and the strange luxury of Veron to a suburban bungalow. But it wasn't like Madelon, not to tell him so herself.

"I don't believe it," he blurted.

"What you believe is no longer important." Kellon's voice rang cold with undisguised dislike. "You have the hell-stone, and that's what you came for. The freighter *Moonbrand* is blasting off in fifteen minutes. I'll escort you aboard."

Haldane caught his breath.

"I won't go—not until I've talked with Madelon."

Kellon said nothing. He merely made an amused hard smile, and let his steady, space-burned hand drop toward the bright ion-gun at his belt. He nodded toward the door.

Haldane felt sick inside. But there was nothing he could do. He had trained himself to conquer the secret terrors of the mind. But he wasn't

fitted to deal with hard fists and flaming jets and the savage law of space. He picked up his bag, and walked obediently ahead of Kellon.

An elevator dropped them out of the palace, through the heart of Veron, to the space port. Haldane stumbled unwillingly into the *Moonbrand's* air-lock. A blue-jowled, sloppy looking fat man was waiting there.

"Captain Roe," Kellon told him, "this is Dr. Haldane. You have your orders." He turned to Haldane. "Captain Roe will take you to Mars. My suggestion, doctor, is to keep to your cabin and mind your own business."

The valves clanged. The elevator lifted, to the gloomy passenger deck. A cowed, hungry-looking cabin boy showed Haldane to a dingy, cramped cubicle. The blasting-siren wailed, and Haldane lay down on the hard narrow bunk.

Booming rockets hurled the *Moonbrand* into space. Inflexors hummed, driving her away from the strange, invisible rock named Veron. Haldane sat up on the bunk. He felt weak and ill. He was tortured with an agony of doubt.

Had Kellon told the truth?

Had Madelon stayed behind, of her own free will? This dirty little room, the sodden blankets, the stale damp air reeking with soured human odors—all made a strange contrast to the splendid luxury of Veron. No, he couldn't blame Madelon, for her choice.

But still it wasn't like her, not to say goodby.

He opened the little black box. The Star of Dreams transformed the room. It banished the odors from the air, and the spots from the metal walls, and the soggy chill of the blankets.

A drop of living light. How could anything so tiny hold such perfect beauty—such haunting and somehow terrible beauty? His throat ached. Tears dimmed his vision of it.

The spinning colors in it seemed to dance with joy for a moment, in a

way that was somehow like the dancing of Madelon. Then they spun into a frantic madness. Red flared angrily. That brief fury ebbed into a weary and hurt defeat. The pulse of strange life became hopeless and slow, and the only color left was a dull sad blue.

"Madelon," he whispered to the jewel. "Didn't you know I loved you?"

Somehow, that set the wings of color to spinning again. Once more he saw the bright glint of Madelon's hair, and the cool green of her eyes. The dance swirled faster, and the colors grew wrathful. It slowed again, and they faded into blue despair. Sadness crept out of the Star of Dreams, and into his heart.

Was true beauty always painful?

Slowly, he replaced the jewel in the box.

Sitting dispiritedly on the narrow bunk, he tried to look into the future. In two weeks, he would be back in New York. He would collect his fees from the Bank of Mars, and find a purchaser for the Star of Dreams, and set about organizing the Psykinetic Foundation.

But Madelon wouldn't be there, to laugh with her green eyes at his blunders, and made her own clear-headed suggestions. He supposed he would have to look for another nurse. The thought filled him with a dull gray ache.

Suppose that Kellon had lied?

He tried to keep the fear out of his mind. Even if he knew that Madelon was a prisoner, there was nothing he could do. He couldn't even guess the location of that invisible, fortified rock, not within a hundred million miles.

He couldn't escape the urge to do something, to find out the truth—somehow. He grappled again with the riddle of Vero Brand. Where had the sick man got his millions? From the sale of hell-stones? Was the long-sought hell-stone lode on Veron? What was the secret dread that held Brand a prisoner there—the fear so terrible that he refused to speak of it,

even to save himself from the gillies?

But the answers, Haldane thought bitterly, were no use, now. He tried to forget those mocking questions. He tried to forget that he had failed, in the most important case he had ever attempted to treat. He tried to forget about Madelone Kane. At last, with the jewel in its case under his pillow, he went to sleep.

He dreamed of Madelon.

She was standing beside his bunk, tall and slender and beautiful. Her face was pale, her dark eyes brimming with tears of bewilderment and fear. She was trying to tell him something urgently important.

Only, somehow, she couldn't speak.

Haldane woke tense and trembling. It was hard to dispell the impression that Madelon had actually been with him in the room. He sat up on the sodden blankets and snapped on the dim unshaded light and opened the jewel-box.

The Star of Dreams flashed joyously. It flamed into red wrath. The wrath died once again, into a slow dull blue pulse of hopeless despair.

"Madelon," Haldane whispered, "what has happened to you?"

The weary colors throbbed again, and died. He turned the jewel on his palm. Every movement of its dancing lights spoke to him of Madelon. What grim mockery had made Kellon name it the Star of Dreams?

What was a hell-stone, anyhow?

He remembered a report that he had seen, from a laboratory of the Space Police. The tested jewels had been absolutely weightless. They were too hard to be scratched by any other material. They didn't conduct heat or electricity, and they were unchanged by the highest temperature of the electric furnace. Chemical and spectrographic tests failed to identify the matter that composed them—if they were composed of matter.

He let the jewel drift off his palm. He remembered reading of one that had come out of its setting, when a society dowager dropped her brooch

on the street, and floated away like a tiny balloon. A bubble of cold, mysterious light.

What was it?

Wearily, Haldane recaptured the Star of Dreams, and put it back in the box. He tried to sleep again. And once more he thought that Madelon was with him. She was trying to speak to him, wrathful and weeping and afraid because she couldn't.

Abruptly the room spun, and fell with them. He grasped for Madelon, and woke, and knew that she had been only a dream. The jewel-box was clutched in his clammy hand. A smothering silence filled the ship. The hum of the inflexors had stopped.

Weightless and clumsy, Haldane hastily pulled on his clothes. Sharp intuition told him that something was wrong. He slipped the Star of Dreams into a zipper-topped inside pocket, and hid the empty box under the bunk, and flung himself out into the circular corridor.

The frightened-looking cabin boy was staring into the elevator shaft. Gripping a hand rail, to keep from going head foremost into the dark pit, Haldane demanded:

"What's happening?"

"An armed ship," stammered the pasty-faced boy. "P-p-pirates, maybe. They fired a geo-torpedo, and made us cut our inflexors. They're locking valves, now, to c-c-c-come aboard. I guess they want m-m-m-men—we've no valuable cargo." He shuddered. "I don't want to blast with pirates. The *M-M-M-Moonbrand's* bad enough."

Down the black shaft, valves clanged. Air hissed. The elevator mechanism hummed softly. Haldane thrust himself back, as the little cage stopped in front of them. The trembling boy fled into an empty cabin.

Two big men in Space Police uniform stepped clicking out of the elevator, followed by the freighter's blue-jowled captain. Pointing a fat grimy finger at Haldane, the latter rasped:

"He your man?"

"He is if he has the stolen hell-stone," said the one with the inspector's badge. "Search his quarters, lieutenant."

The lieutenant clattered into Haldane's room. Clinging with sweaty hands to the rail, Haldane felt sick and helpless. He saw what was happening, but there was nothing he could do. In half a minute the lieutenant came back and thrust the empty jewel-box under his nose, snarling:

"Where is it?"

Haldane said nothing. It wasn't necessary. Rough efficient hands found the Star of Dreams, and tossed that droplet of wondrous light triumphantly in front of him. The jewel was alive with frantic light again, the purple of alarm.

"That's all we wanted, Captain," the big inspector said. "We won't delay you any farther. You can turn the doctor over to the regular authorities on Mars—if he doesn't decide to cheat the lethal chamber by hanging himself in the elevator shaft."

"We'll take care of the doctor," promised Captain Roe.

The little elevator dropped, with the three.

Haldane gripped the rail with wet, tense hands. Real police wouldn't leave a suspected criminal to continue the voyage—with veiled instructions for his murder. Suddenly he was quite certain that Madelon hadn't willingly stayed behind. He remembered Kellon's "sister." Vague suspicions crystallized, into a grim conviction that Veron was the rendezvous of the criminal ring that had been selling hell-stones, and stealing them back, and abducting the women who bought them.

The elevator flashed up past him. Fat Captain Roe was returning to his bridge. Down the shaft, metal clanged. In a few moments, the valves would be unsealed. The ships would separate. The pseudo-police would carry the Star of Dreams back to Veron. Presently, no doubt, Captain Roe would

order him to be hung in the *Moon-brand's* elevator shaft.

Haldane's clammy hands trembled on the rail. He wasn't trained to deal with hard men and cold metal and flaming ion-jets. But he tried to thrust that reservation out of his mind. There was nothing else to do.

He dived headfirst into the narrow dark shaft.

He had no weight to speed him, for the inflexors still were silent. But the bottom of the dim-lit shaft came silently to meet him. The valves were swiftly closing. Four pairs of massive metal jaws, that could slice through skin and flesh and crushing bone.

He had to pass through three of them. He flung himself into the *Moon-brand's* lock-chamber. Cold metal scraped and bruised his skin. Now to get through the twin outside valves, into the lock of the other ship. The closing slit was already terribly narrow. His body—or sheared-off fragments of it—might be left adrift in space between the separating ships.

No place, he muttered, for an expert psykinetologist!

But he clutched those polished, inexorable edges. He thrust his head between them. He kicked and squirmed his way through the first pair. He hurled himself between the second. His head and his chest went through, but his hips were caught.

He stifled a scream. He lunged and twisted desperately. Clothing tore, and skin slipped. He snatched his feet out of danger. The great jaws closed, behind him—and the inner valve, before him—with a dull ringing clang.

He was safe!

The magnetic clamps were released, with a muffled clatter. Rockets coughed, driving the two ships apart. Inflexors hummed. New acceleration flung Haldane against the bottom of the lock. He lay there, drenched with sweat of exhaustion, gasping for breath.

Safe! He laughed grimly at the idea. He knew space, from the long confessions of his patients. He had heard

of men who stowed away in air-locks. How sometimes they were asphyxiated, when the air in the chamber was used up. How sometimes the cold of space reached them. How sometimes they had been discovered—and disposed of, spewed into the frigid vacuum, by the mere opening of a valve.

The crew of the *Moonbrand* might discover his absence, and guess what had happened. They might heliograph — A psykinetologist wasn't trained to deal with such grim situations. Haldane tried to thrust the danger out of his mind. He pulled himself upright, shakily, and began to clamber into the stiff bulk of the space suit hanging on its hooks in the corner by the side valve.

The inflexors hummed, and time dragged away. The tiny chamber was utterly black. The deadly chill of space crept into it. Unable to exercise, lest he exhaust the air too fast, Haldane grew cold even in the insulated suit.

The icy air grew damp and bad. It didn't help him to know there were three gallons of oxygen in the flat tank at his back—of course he had no key for the locked valves. His breathing became hurried and painful. His stiff, tingling limbs began to cramp.

Despite all that discomfort, he tried to think.

He struggled again with the riddle of Vero Brand. Why did the sick man stay on Veron, when his illness would have been relieved merely by return to the normal gravity of Earth? Was it to guard the hell-stone lode?

But it occurred to Haldane that he had seen no evidence of any mining operations on Veron. If that had been the answer, modern machinery would have completely pulverized the tiny rock, years ago.

Brand had received him in a huge laboratory. A new idea caught his breath. Suppose that a whole generation of hopeful explorers had been wrong about the natural origin of hell-stones? Suppose Brand manufactured them, in that laboratory?

That would explain why none had been found anywhere else.

But it didn't solve the riddle. It didn't explain why Brand must hide himself on a fortified invisible rock, and market his precious wares through underworld agents. It didn't account for the abducted women.

The black and ominous face of mystery mocked him yet.

It leered inscrutably, out of black oblivion—

A clean breath of warm conditioned air revived Haldane. Slumped in the space suit, his body was stiff and cold. It took him a moment to remember where he was. Then he knew that the ship had landed, probably on Veron.

For the inflexors had ceased to hum. Only the feeblest tug of gravity reached his dead body, and he had an eerie sense of floating disembodiment. The upper valve had opened, above his head. In a moment the side valve clanged open, also. The metal floor was flooded with the cold violet light of Veron's sky.

Stiffly, Haldane tried to move his numb, aching limbs. His problem now was to get out of the lock before he was discovered. But his chilled body failed to respond.

The little cage of the ship's elevator dropped in front of him. The tall man in it wore Mr. Brand's gray-and-green. He let a tiny bubble of liquid light off his strong brown hand, and caught it again. Haldane recognized the jewel, and the hand.

The Star of Dreams—

And Captain Casey Kellon!

IV

THE elevator twice lifted and returned as other men left the *Sunbrand*. Then the ship was silent. There was only the click of metal sandals outside, where a sentry must be watching. Haldane rubbed painful life back into his stiff limbs, and climbed awkwardly out of the heavy space armor.

This was his chance!

A hasty movement plunged his head painfully against the upper valve. He looked for weighted belt and magnetic sandals. But the departing crew had emptied the racks. He would have to go without them—and face the risk that some too-vigorous leap would make him a satellite of Veron, a helpless target, spinning around the little rock until Brand's men found him.

He crouched in the side valve until the shadow of the guard had passed, and then hurled himself. A psykinetologist wasn't trained for such grim feats. But he might as well take whatever advantage there was in the perilous lack of belt and sandals.

The leap sent him skimming across the field, a few feet from the surface. The feeble tug of Veron's gravity drew him down, but very slowly. He tried swimming in the air, to guide himself.

This was the night side of the rock. the sky overhead was purple-black, but all the horizon was streaked upward with the purple fluorescence of the Chardion field. The row of ships stood against that strange aurora, like weird black monoliths. The click of the sentry's feet made an unchanged rhythm.

There was yet no alarm.

He was bound for the huge white laboratory building. He had to find out what Brand did there. Plunging head foremost into a mossy bank, he crept up a backbone of rock. He launched himself like a living projectile across the tiny dark valley beyond, toward the next peak.

If he missed it, he might become a moon of Veron.

But his grasping fingers caught wet moss. He pulled his body down into a miniature pass. Before him, immense upon the center of a tiny lawn-covered plateau, the laboratory loomed black and ominous against the violet dawn. Metal footgear clacked. Guards were at the door.

Terror came back to Haldane. Once he had had the gillies, and now that

vertiginous sickness stirred in him again. For a moment it seemed that the rock was tilting unstably beneath him. Falling.

But he thought that Madelon was calling to him, in a voice of fear. He caught his breath, and crouched again, and hurled his body across that small dark plateau. A silent swimmer in the sweet cold air, he soared over the heads of the clattering guards. His flight seemed terribly slow.

"Gotta light, Joe?"

The clicking stopped beneath him. A tiny flare lit two dark faces, gleamed on guns. "Ssssst!" A hiss of warning, and the light was gone.

"Attention!" Kellon's hard voice rapped from the door of the laboratory. "You saw the Dr. Haldane who arrived here yesterday. He was discovered to be a criminal, with murderous designs on Mr. Brand. He was ordered deported to Mars on the *Moonbrand*. But a heliogram just received states that he isn't aboard. He may be on Veron. Keep alert. He's worth ten thousand dollars—dead or alive. The guard will be doubled."

"Yes, sir."

The roof parapet was plunging at Haldane. He broke the paralysis that gripped him, swam furiously upward. The ledge brushed beneath him. He sailed across the dark flat roof, clutched the rim of a ventilator shaft.

He caught his breath, and tried to still the painful throb of his heart. He wasn't trained for such things. If one of those men had chanced to look up, he would have been a perfect target against the brightening sky.

But now there wasn't time to stop.

He thrust his body into the square ventilator shaft, and dropped into darkness. The metal walls vibrated to the humming of a fan. His exploring hands trembled with fear of those cutting blades. The sound seemed terribly near, before he found the metal handle that he sought.

He opened a square inspection door, and looked out into the laboratory. From his position in the shaft, it

looked upside down. The gravitation of Veron was too weak to correct that false impression. He couldn't help an uneasy expectation that things were going to fall off the ceiling.

Haldane was trained to deal with minds, not with machines. He recognized a big atomic converter, but most of the gleaming silent bulky things were strange to him. There was a wide crystal disk, with a metal star set in the middle of it. A huge open glass tube was suspended below—or, really, above it.

These puzzling machines were still. At first the room was empty. Haldane was about to clamber out of the shaft, when a lock snapped. Metal sandals clicked. Out upon that ceiling, as it seemed to him, walked Vero Brand.

Behind him came the same two men in white, with the stretcher. Strapped to it, now, was a struggling girl. She uttered a weary, sobbing scream. Haldane glimpsed tangled blond hair, and a tear-stained doll-face.

Kellon's "sister!"

Beside the stretcher, the sick man spoke to her.

"You needn't be afraid, Miss Carnadon." Then she was the kidnapped heiress! "I'm not going to kill you." Brand made a short, harsh laugh. "On the contrary, I am going to make you virtually immortal."

She didn't seem to hear him. She sobbed and screamed again, sobbed and screamed, monotonously. Brand made a silent gesture, and the two men carried the stretcher to the crystal disk. They laid it on the metal star.

Brand touched buttons at an intricate control-board. Motors hummed. The huge transparent tube descended, to enclose the helpless girl. Brand nodded, and the two men went clicking out of the room. The atomic converter began to thrum.

Presently a second star-shaped electrode, in the tube above the girl, was tufted with hissing blue fire. Arms of terrible crackling flame reached down

from the points of the star, toward the screaming girl.

A thick luminous mist filled the tube and hid her struggles. Her muffled screams were drowned, swept away on a river of roaring power. Vero Brand stood watching his dials and controls, with hollow feverish eyes. He looked drawn and pale, and his movements were nervously jerky.

Haldane could see that he was very ill.

Perspiring, frantic, he was fighting back the gillies.

At last he stopped the thrumming converter. The shining mist disappeared and the star ceased to glow. The girl was gone. There were only her empty garments and the stretcher—and a tiny point of shimmering fire.

A hell-stone!

Slow creeping horror made Haldane ill. Here was the secret of Vero Brand, and it was blacker than he had dared to think. No wonder the man hid himself. No wonder he had the gillies! Haldane shuddered again. He knew why the Star of Dreams made him think of Madelon. It was Madelon!

Brand tossed that bubble of strangely prisoned light and life on his trembling palm, and caught it again, and put it in a pocket of his white laboratory garb. His hand came out clutching a bright ion-gun, pointed straight at Haldane.

"Climb out, doctor," his hoarse voice rasped. "The alarm has been ringing since you touched the inspection door." His gun gestured at the empty stretcher. "This little ceremony gave me time to discover you. Have you anything to say?"

Under the menace of the trembling gun, Haldane clambered out of the ventilator shaft. He let his body drift down to the floor. He set his feet to leap. He could see that Brand was very ill. His chance might come yet.

"If the gillies hit me," Brand warned shakily, "I'll burn you down first." His sunken eyes glittered watchfully. "If you have anything to say—"

"The hell-stones?" Haldane gulped. "They're actually made of human bodies?"

Brand made a nervous nod.

"Of human beings, rather. In the powerful space-warp, generated in the tube, matter is condensed into a special non-atomic and non-gravitational state. But the mind, also, is essential to the crystallization. The beauty of the stone depends upon the youth and vitality of the subject."

The ion-gun quivered.

"Is that all—before you die?"

Haldane caught his breath.

"Wait, Brand," he gasped. "Won't you let me help you?"

"You tried," the sick man rasped.

"You refused to cooperate—and I can understand why," Haldane was talking desperately. "But now I know your secret. There's no reason why we can't go on. The gillies is killing you. You try to fight it alone. But you can't win. Right now, you are teetering on the brink of a black pit of fear—"

Suffering twisted Brand's narrow face, and it gleamed with sweat.

"Stop it!" he choked hoarsely. "I'll kill you."

Haldane moved a little toward him.

"Just tell me what's the matter," he urged. "Tell me how you made the first hell-stone. If you refuse to express the fear and the guilt that are bottled up in you, Brand, you are going to die. Just tell me."

The gun fell.

"It's a hideous thing," the sick man whispered. "Worse than murder, I sometimes think. Because the victim is shut up forever, conscious and yet completely helpless, in a dreamy prison."

His hollow eyes brimmed with tears.

"Twenty years ago, I perfected the space-warp process." His croaking whisper trembled. "I made the first hell-stone from the woman I loved—because she had betrayed me. Her name was Elaine."

His thin body quivered with sobs.

"That was my revenge." He made a brief harsh laugh. "I sold the jewel to my rival. He bought it for Elaine, before he knew she was gone. There was nothing he could prove, but that was why I came to Veron."

Brand's haunted eyes peered at Haldane, dark with wonder.

"Well, doctor, what do you think of that?" His harsh voice grew a little softer. "You don't hate me, for what I have told you? You can forgive what I have done?"

"It isn't my business to judge you," Haldane told him. "But to cure you. Because the gillies is just one peculiar symptom of a sick mind. When you are cured, nobody will have any reason to hate you."

Brand's shaking hands put the ion-gun away. Tears rolled down his white narrow face. He came clicking across the floor, to grasp Haldane's hand in tense fingers.

"If you can cure me, doctor—if you can end that old hard bitterness of hate and remorse and fear—if you can help me find peace—I'll do anything for you." His hollow eyes blinked. "I'll give you Veron, for a hospital—it's only a hateful prison for me."

"There's something, Brand, I want more than that."

Haldane searched that pale, emaciated face. A cold terror clutched his heart. He had to swallow twice before he could ask:

"Can you—unmake a hell-stone?"

"Oh, your nurse!" Regret shadowed Brand's white face. "Sometimes it can be done," he said. "The reversal technique is very delicate. I have very seldom attempted it—considering the number of women in the system, and the value of hell-stones. If I fail, you will have neither woman nor jewel. But I'll try, if you wish. Where's the stone?"

"Where's the stone?" Haldane echoed, harshly. "Don't you know?" He peered into the sick man's face. "Your Captain Kellon has it—if you

don't. He followed, in the *Starbrand*, and took it away from me."

"Casey?" Brand shook his head. "I can't believe it. I've trusted everything to Casey. He has always been my agent, to sell the jewels and procure necessary supplies. It's impossible—but I'll send for Casey."

He turned to a televue communicator beside the control panel. Two minutes later, Kellon came in on clanking sandals. Smiling suavely, he looked at Haldane without surprise.

"Sure, I've got the stone." With a hostile stare at Haldane, he tossed the limpid *Star of Dreams* and caught it again. "And it isn't the first one I've recovered." His hard voice was insolent. "Nothing to get hot about, Brand. He wouldn't have got to Mars alive. Captain Roe was going to take care of that. The insurance on him didn't cover suicide."

Anxiously, Haldane broke in:

"Can you bring back Madelon?"

"I'll try—if she's worth that much to you." The sick man gestured to Kellon. "Put the stone under the tube."

With a sullen scowl, Kellon obeyed. The great tube dropped again, to cover the *Star of Dreams*. The atomic converter thrummed into mighty life. The star-shaped electrode flamed again, and a bright mist filled the cylinder.

"Well, Mr. Brand!" Kellon's sardonic voice cut through the roar of power. "Listen to me!" The tanned spaceman was crouched a little, and his ready ion-gun glittered. "Do you think this is your game? Well, it has been mine for twenty years. And no little squirt of a doctor is going to take my place."

He nodded grimly at the shining tube.

"You can ruin a pretty stone, if you like," his hard voice rapped. "But it isn't going to do your little doctor any good. And he isn't going to cure your gillies—or stop you from making hellstones. Because I'm going to burn him down, right now."

And the deadly ion-gun swung upon Haldane.

The slim young doctor gulped for his voice and tried to stop the trembling of his limbs. He wasn't trained to deal with guns, but with the secret terrors of the mind. He made one last effort to use his training.

"Wait a minute, Kellon," he said. "Are you sure you want to kill me?" He tried to smooth the rasp of fear from his voice. "Remember, I'm the only man who knows how to cure the gillies."

Kellon's dark face smiled, above the gun.

"I haven't got the gillies," he said. "I think I can learn how to run the space-warp condenser after Brand is gone."

"But you will have it." Haldane's voice rang low and cold. "Because the gillies is nothing but the expression of fear and guilt. You're young, and you're tough. You've never felt it yet. But you will—as your crimes pile up and your guilt weighs on you, and you stand all alone in defiance of your kind."

Kellon's face went pale with anger.

"You're wrong, doctor," he rapped. "Get ready—"

But his brown finger hesitated on the firing key.

"The day will come," Haldane said. "Your own deeds will destroy you." His voice rang low and urgent. Unwillingly, Kellon stepped a little toward him. The gun wavered and dropped. "You can kill me. You can defy all mankind. But you can't defeat yourself."

Kellon listened, and fear was in his eyes.

"The ground will break from under you," Haldane told him. "You'll feel that you are falling—of course you'll know you aren't, but that won't help. Because that fear-reaction is millions of years old. When your guilt complex gets hold of it, it is stronger than reason. You'll be sick, Kellon. Sick all over. So sick you think you're going to

turn inside out. So sick you want to die."

Haldane's voice dropped urgently.

"You can feel it now, Kellon. The floor is rocking. It is beginning to drop from under you. You're about to fall. Your stomach is coming up in your throat. You can't breathe. Your flesh is crawling with horror. You've got to grab for some support, before you fall out of the room."

Haldane's voice was very soft.

"You thought you were tough, Kellon. You thought you could murder me and step into Brand's shoes after you had finished murdering him. But you can't. You've already piled up a greater burden of crimes than you can bear.

"You've got the gillies already."

Kellon screamed, then. He dropped on his face, clutching with frantic terror at the leg of a laboratory bench. The ion-gun went out of his hands and floated across the room. He really had the gillies.

"It's hard to believe," muttered Brand. "I trusted him." He caught the drifting gun. "Strange, the things that men will do, out of greed and fear and hate. My crimes are more than his. But I think that you can save me, doctor."

His thin face smiled a little gravely above the banks of instruments.

"And Casey, too, in the end, I hope," he added softly. "Because we've got a job to do. I've wanted for years to

stop this terrible traffic. Casey objected, and I was afraid, and we needed the money to keep Veron invincible. But now I'll never make another hell-stone. I'm going to live to undo some of the frightful crimes I have done. Casey will help me, I hope.

"Thanks to you, doctor."

"Sure," Haldane said anxiously.

"But watch your machine!"

The converter ceased to thrum. The bright mist cleared and the great tube lifted. Madelon was standing on the disk. Suddenly she flushed, and snatched up the synsilk tunic that had belonged to Zara Carnadon.

Haldane thrust himself to meet her. They came together, swimming in the air. He gripped the warm reality of her hand, touched her shining hair. Hoarsely he whispered:

"Oh, Madelon—are you all right?"

"Of course, doc." Her green eyes were shadowed and dark. "But that was a terrible time. To be frozen, so you couldn't move and you couldn't speak and you couldn't really even think. You only—existed."

Her shuddering hand clutched him hard.

"Doc," she whispered, "can you forgive me, ever? I never did like Casey, really. But I knew we were in danger, and I thought I should be nice to him." Her green eyes flashed again. "Besides, you were so horrid!"

Haldane kissed her, and they floated blissfully.

Don't Fall to Read

"THE FACTS of LIFE"

by P. Schuyler Miller

A story so unusual as to fasten itself in your memory along with "Succubus."

IN THE APRIL "COMET"



THE PSYCHOLOGICAL REGULATOR

THE nurse at the desk of Floor 24, Ward 5, flexed a smooth, tan arm and looked at the hall chronometer. She sighed inaudibly. 20:13:09, said the dial. Two more hours on duty for Miss Markett Travenor, F-2349464-23a-10-256W-26. Which was to say that her file was Female number 2349464 in the Register of Persons, that she lived in apartment 23 on floor 10 in building 256 on

the West side of parkzone 26. Examination of her face and figure would have convinced you that one as lovely as she could have existed by accident only in the Twentieth Century. Happily, however, by the year 2046 (in which she was born), scientific mating was no dream of a few forward-looking visionaries, but a reality: she was the lovely offspring of a couple carefully paired.



by **ARTHUR
COOKE**

Long tentacles reached out and seized the red-clad warriors, bearing full loads of them back into the city.

Markett looked down from her chronometer, her green eyes darkly thoughtful. Dr. Ward Alfreed (M-2536478-13a-20-358E-22) was late. She looked down the white-enameled corridor, then at the indicating finger of an elevator. It had not moved. Easily she pressed a communicator attached to a strap of her uniform. Immediately a voice spoke:

"Entrance hall speaking—Central Information Desk."

Markett snapped a button. "Lee?", she asked. "Is the hotter down there yet?" "Hotter," in the year 2066, meant boy-friend.

"Dr. Alfreed," replied the voice, "is going up now with Patient—just a moment—Patient sixty-six twenty-five."

"Thanks," replied Markett, snapping off the contact. She picked a card from the full-view files before her. Patient sixty-six-twenty-five, Psycho Clinic. "Marked degeneration," read the card. "Cowardly tendencies—fear of falling, fear of floating, fear of slipping, fear of standing still. Three attempted suicides unsuccessful due to lack of creative technique. Prognosis: doubtful. Use of Psychological Regulator suggested. E. B." All that,

and the date for the operation—today.

She rose and faced the elevator as sharp-tuned ears caught the almost imperceptible hum of doors opening. Dr. Alfreed nodded cheerfully to her, twitched his head for her benefit toward the man whose arm he was grasping. Patient sixty-six twenty-five, no doubt, she thought, glancing again at his card. Name was Clark Stevens (M-3972677-234a-150N-190), she saw. Tall, too, and well-built. But, somehow, his posture and bearing were almost utterly lacking in masculinity; at the moment he looked the role of a weak, vacillating subject of a rehabilitation test, and he shocked Markett's sense of what was right and decent with his overlaid body. He wore a shirt and trousers, seemingly improvised from a number of the one-piece, short-sleeved suits worn by the world as fashion and comfort decreed. Yet there was something about him—? She wrenched her eyes back to the figure of the doctor, small, compact, and natty in leatheret bandolier. Pity, she thought with professional coldness, must not interfere with her operative functions. However, the sight of Stevens could not help but make her think of pictures she had seen of nurses in the old days, hideously overlaid, their freedom of movement hampered. She, as all nurses of this enlightened era, wore only a bandolier, to which was attached a harness carrying the various items which must always be on her person, regulation shorts, and shoes.

Dr. Alfreed took the patient's card from her and scribbled notations. She turned to take the patient's arm, but, with a cry of fear, he cowered from her.

"Now," she said soothingly. "Let's come along and not have—" she was backing him into the arms of the doctor, of course. He pinioned the patient, and winked at Markett. "Sorry," he said. "He's afraid of women too. Forgot to tell you. Let's take him in." And the little doctor lifted the big-boned patient easily to his shoulders,

holding him helplessly balanced, and trotted down the enameled corridor into a high-walled, darkish room. He dumped the psychotic into one of many deep, padded chairs, and Markett promptly slapped thick, strong bands of a tough plastic across the man's knees and chest. Patient sixty-six-twenty-five began to weep.

The doctor busied himself with a little projector and screen that constituted the equipment of the room. "What reel?" he called to Markett.

She wrinkled her nose. "Are you going to do it in one shot or work him up to it?" she asked.

"One shot. Might kill him, of course. But if it doesn't, we'll have reclaimed a citizen—and from all accounts a good one. He used to be an organizer for a coal-mine before this happened to him. Pathetic, isn't it?"

"Yeah," agreed Markett, busy fastening meshes of pure copper about the limbs and head of the now quiet patient. "But how about these—these *swathings* of his? Do the bus-bars have to contact his skin?"

"No," said the doctor. "We'll just turn the stuff on and see what happens. It's as strong as they come—you wouldn't understand it; I've studied ancient history, so it's a little clearer to me."

"Well," said Markett, uncertainly, as the doctor turned off the lights and started the projector. She settled herself in a comfortable double seat, and the doctor joined her, while Experimental Reel Seven, Full Power, went clicking through the camera and onto the screen. But they, being otherwise absorbed, paid little or no attention to it.

The patient—sixty-six-twenty-five—whimpered and tried to scrape off the copper bus-bars that confined him. Then his eyes drifted to the screen, and he beheld a marvelously real landscape, not frozen in paint on canvas but quivering with life. A rabbit started, and the patient, who had never seen a rabbit, recognized the little creature, and worked his jaws.

There was an unfamiliar taste in his mouth, as though he were champing something tough-fibred, like a woven cloth or bit of soft wood. He had never eaten meat, so to the still-dominant presence of his ego there was no connotation.

As though he were slowly turning he saw the landscape move, and a walled city came into view. What a walled city was he couldn't say, but the words were in his brain; and quivering with rage, he wanted to tear down the massive bastions with his own hands, and rend the mailed men who were pacing the ramparts. He clenched his right fist, and felt the hilt of Al Azaaf, his scimitar. Slowly Roald stood up from the grass and settled his greaves about his thighs. "Rouse up, sons of Yggdrasil," he hissed fiercely, and his men—his terrible Norse, scourge of the coast—appeared from bushes and brakes, drawing axes from belts and fitting pikes to shafts.

"Seventy-and-nine of us there be," growled Roald without preamble, "and of them an hundred and eighty or more. Who complains?" There was silence on the moor, save for the clank of metal as when dirk touched against breastplate.

Roald grinned savagely and swept aside his long red beard to spit. "The less men the more booty," he snarled. "Eh? And women—?" He laughed tremendously. Then, whirling his sword he roared, "By the hammer of Thor—Come on!" Roaring wildly Roald and his red-bearded band made across the common at a dead run.

There were screams from the city, and much blowing of horns. Arrows began to smack into the clayey soil about them, and Roald raised his buckler. He saw the gates of the city swinging shut; yelling inarticulately he tore a blazing torch from the fist of a companion and hurled it into the knot of porters and marketmen that was struggling with the heavy bar and hinges; they scattered in terror, only a second before the red demons

were within the gates, slashing and clubbing with keen swords and murderous axes.

Roald was the spear-head of the attack, and as he and his men plowed contemptuously through the rabble . . . tradesmen and shopkeepers . . . he laughed wildly. "Guard ho!" he yelled. "Who will come to do battle with the chosen of Odin. The curse of Cornwall and the damned, stinking Isle of Britain? Guard ho!" Slash! through the shoulder of a boy with a pike. He drove a mailed fist into the face of a gammer who was struggling aside, unwilling to leave her heavy basket of turnips behind.

Roald grinned savagely in the eyes of an archer. "Draw," he shouted, and as the Englishman reached he spitted him on the curve of Al Azaaf. A new blade crossed his, and with dirk and sword he ranged up and down the length of a square with his foe, a dark-eyed young man who fought precisely and quietly. Behind him he felt the spearhead break into bits and the body of the guard charged the Norse. The youth extended his body in a strange thrust, and Roald cursed the queer, slim weapon he used—a thing like a dart with a hilt. The Viking slashed once, and the youth parried. Roald slashed again, and there was the shock known to swordsmen as steel clashed steel. The youth was weaponless, and Roald cut him down where he stood, kicked the body in the ribs, then spun to defend himself against assault from a clumsy pike.

The Viking grinned savagely, and swept aside his beard. "With this draught," he roared to his men, "I name this city fief to the Vikings and to Roald, and all its values, be they goods or women or children, fief also to their conquerors." He glared about him from the eminence in the walled city's central square, on the scene of desolation and butchery. He stood among his Norse having left not one of the hundred and eighty defenders. "Skoal!" he roared, and drank.

And Six-six-twenty-five, otherwise known as Clark Stevens (M3972677-234a-150-N190), shuddered violently, stared at the screen that had just run blank. "What—?" he began, sitting erect. "Damn!" said Stevens, finding himself strangely trammelled by web-works of pure copper. He wrenched his hands free and tore the wires from his ankles and head. "You!" he roared at a couple snuggled in an easy chair.

"Quite recovered?" smiled Dr. Alfreed, unfastening the plastic bands that were restraining Stevens. "A little dizzy?"

Stevens glared at him, and the Doctor backed away. There was a blinding flash about three inches away from the doctor's chin, and he went down and out. The patient, rubbing his fist, squinted through the gloom and perceived Miss Travenor. "Ah," he said gutturally. He stepped out of his improvised shirt and trousers; Markett saw with relief that he was wearing the conventional shorts and bandolier beneath. More unconventional than his former attire, however, was the patient's new behavior. He spurned the doctor's body with one foot and picked up the nurse. "Excuse me—" she began plaintively.

"Shut up!" growled Stevens, slinging her over his shoulder.

And that was that.

Dr. Alfreed awoke to realize that he had committed a serious breach of experimental technique. It had been a mistake not to observe the screen during the process of rehabilitation, and it had been a grievous mistake not to check on the patient's reactions. He cursed softly to himself when he saw clearly enough to be sure that neither patient nor nurse were anywhere in the room.

Alfreed was a thoughtful man; he realized that, in the old days, someone would have gotten hell for a blunder of this nature and scope. In the old days technical superiors would have fired the responsible party for the incompetency when revealed, so

Alfreed was thankful that these were not the old days. But further than that he did not think. Perhaps, therefore, he was the truly responsible party for what was to happen to his snug little world of file numbers, ventilated houses, air-conditioned clinics, amiable objectives and pneumatically complacent nurses.

He wasn't spectacularly worried, having no technical superiors to whom to answer. But he had failed in a social duty. Enough of his careful conditioning had remained to remind him of that.

"Oh, Hell!" he swore softly, thinking of the consequences.

He reached over to his hyper-typer, banged out a full report of the affair and shot it into a tube system, one of whose many mouths gaped from a nearby wall. This, too, was routine. If anything worked to correct his mistakes this would. Section headquarters all over the city would be semi-automatically notified, bulletins flashed to rural districts. Within half an hour millions of citizens would be informed—not alarmed—by the quick-changing public information screens.

And with a sense of duty well done he retired to his quarters on the same floor and stared for a while at a forbidden bottle of wine. Then he got drunk.

Clark Stevens carried Markett Travenor as far as the elevator door. Glancing back at the prostrate form of the man he had hit in the jaw his eyes narrowed. Something of cold reason was coming back. Then, suddenly, he became aware—but acutely—of the girl he was carrying in his arms. "Ah," he said. Abruptly he shifted one of his hands a trifle; the girl shivered and giggled.

Slowly awareness returned to Stevens. Then he let her drop to the floor. She looked at him again, quizzically, like a trusting child. This man, she thought, is masculine. But not with the familiar air of equality to which I am accustomed—but overbearingly male. A sort of aura covered his body

—she sensed something brutish, irresponsible, uncivilized. Everything he did confirmed this idea:

"What—?" said the girl. She scrambled to her feet, not taking her eyes off Stevens.

The man shook his head dazedly. "I won't hurt you," he said. "I'm all right." He hesitated. "I'm—different." Markett nodded. "What I did back there in England—" he said slowly, and paused. "Do you know?" he asked. "Could you see what I did?"

"No," said Markett. "I should have watched and checked, but the doctor and I let it go."

"The doctor," said Stevens. "The man I hit?" She nodded, half smiling. "And you'd better be getting out of here," said Markett. "He might wake up angry." She pushed the button of the elevator, and the doors rolled open. "Come on," she said, as the man stood silently. "You're not afraid any more, are you?"

"Afraid?" Stevens laughed. "I was. It was something that happened in the mine—" He drew a hand across his eyes; the elevator's doors rolled shut, and they began their ascent to the roof.

"Explosion?" asked Markett. "They happen, I hear."

"Maybe. What the hell?" he said, grinning happily. "I'm here, you're here, and I'm just after storming a castle in England with my Norsemen. It was terrible, but somehow—I don't know. I shouldn't be proud of the things I did." He shuddered a little. "Killing. Maiming. And I burned the town when there was nothing left I could take from it."

The doors of the elevator rolled open, and a flood of sunlight poured into the tiny cage. "There," said the man, pointing out a plane. "That's the one we'll take."

"Did you fly here?" asked the girl. "I thought you were afraid."

"No," said Stevens, confidently opening the unlocked door of the plane. "This doesn't belong to me."

Markett gasped, as her twenty-odd

years of inculcated respect for property came down on her head like a ton of bricks. "You can't!" she cried. "It isn't yours—you said so." Her voice trailed off as she saw the baffled stare in his eyes.

"Come in," he offered, making room for her beside the pilot's seat. Limply she entered and closed the door. "Now," said Stevens, "what did you say?"

"The plane isn't yours, Clark!" Oddly, she flushed as she called him by his given name.

"Well," said Stevens, puzzlement written over his face, "it is now." He started the motor with one kick at the pedal and the plane snapped into the air, hovered for a moment, and shot diagonally up, through and above low-hanging cumulus clouds that glittered in the afternoon sun.

"Why did you come here?" asked Markett. Somehow she felt safe.

"More beautiful," said Stevens. "And I have plans."

"Plans?" asked the girl. "For yourself?"

"For the world," said Stevens. He nodded his head over the control board, and a shaft of light was caught in his hair; made it shine like little curly brass wires. "I must ask you questions," said the man. "I am different. Can you see it?"

"I can," said the girl. And at that moment she felt that it would be a better thing for man if she were to seize the controls, send their ship tearing down to smash into the ground.

Traffic control ship seven (for the district) swooped three times on the hovering plane. Pilot Petersen scratched his head. "What's he doing?" he asked Engineer Handel.

"I dunno. Hold it," said Handel, bending over his radio set.

"Report from hospital," said the radio. "Psychotic escaped in plane. Give warnings. The plane will be identified later; its owner is undergoing a serious operation and no records are immediately available. Be advised."

"That must be it," said Handel practically. "He's out of all accepted zones and he hasn't got any right to hover over a residential district. Call him, Pete."

Petersen aimed his short beam radio antenna in the general direction of the disputed plane. "Calling Monoplane of class ten," he said into the mike. "You with the brown body and blue wings. Can y' hear me?"

Harshly a voice answered. "We hear. What is it?"

"Sorry," said the pilot, "but you're hovering over a residential area. That's not allowed. What's your number, pilot?"

"I have no number," said the voice, "and I have no license. Stand off or take the consequences!"

"It's him—the psycho," hissed Petersen to Handel. "Call HQ on your set while I keep him busy."

"Right," snapped the engineer, tuning in the traffic center.

The pilot turned to his set, his brow wrinkled. How do you handle a psycho? Humor him. "What was that you said?" asked Petersen, smooth as silk.

"Stand off, you fool, or take the consequences! I'll give you five seconds to get away."

"Wait," said Petersen. "Why don't you—" Then he gasped, as his plans crumbled. The psycho's ship had winged over with terrible speed and was heading for his ship nose-on. "Stop!" he shrilled into the mike, his hand on the throttle. Then he sent his own plane into a loop that made his bones bend, and streaked for altitude, with the demon plane and its demon pilot on his tail. "I warned you," ground out of the speaker. "You'll do well to tell the world that there's one man alive who's not afraid to kill or be killed to achieve his ends. Spread the word, friend!" And, when Petersen looked around, the plane was a vanishing speck in the north, as he watched it reach the blending point and vanish in the sky.

Handel, gibbering in a corner of the traffic ship where the last loop had flung him, cried, "What happened to it?"

"I don't know," said the pilot soberly. "Did you get HQ?"

"Yes, but the loop smashed my set. What do we do now?"

"Fly back, but fast," said Petersen, giving his ship the gun.

"Pete," said Handel,

"Yeah?"

"What do we do with a thing like that? I mean how do you finally get rid of them?"

"I don't know," said the pilot slowly. "Lock them up once you catch them, I suppose."

"Catch *that*? He tried to ram us! As he said—he's not afraid to kill or be killed." The engineer shuddered. "Do you think," he asked, "we'll have to kill him?"

Petersen frowned. "I hope not," he said, his eyes ahead of him as he prepared to land. "But if there's no other way—what else can we do?"

"How long since they killed a man—purposely, I mean?" The ship was rolling to a stop.

"I dunno. Maybe a hundred years; maybe more. And who that was, I don't know either."

The two left the plane and headed for the manager's office, their faces wry. Petersen was thinking of blood. He was hoping that if they had to kill the psycho they'd do it some dry, quiet way. And Handel, nursing a bruised lip, was hoping exactly the same thing. Mankind, after many years of mutual hatreds had at last reached unanimity, and an idealistic one at that.

The stolen plane crashed to a halt through the brush and bracken of the abandoned clearing. Markett looked about her.

"Do you know where we are?" asked Stevens.

"I think so," said the girl slowly. "It must be a park district that's being allowed to lie fallow. Probably it won't be touched by anyone for a few years. Or wouldn't have been."

Stevens stared at her. "You mean—?" he asked.

"I mean that in a matter of hours the world will be down on you. Sheer force of numbers will make you yield to them. Oh, Clark, can't you see that you're *wrong*?" Her eyes suddenly widened with dread as she saw his hands work convulsively.

"Get out," he ordered, and she obeyed, thinking wildly of a dash to safety. Safety among the trees? Without a man to help her for perhaps hundreds of miles! Meekly she stood, waiting for what might happen. She could not believe that her life was to end at the hands of a madman. She found it hard, indeed, to believe that Stevens was mad. Confused, rather, by the overdose of the Regulator to which he had been subjected.

"Brave woman," he said. "I see you do not fear my madness. *That* is well. You are to be my mate—no, my wife."

"Wife?" she replied calmly. "But marriages are no longer customary. And, even when they do happen, it is only through consent of the bride."

"All this," he said slowly, "must be changed. There is no life in this world, no struggle." He thought further. "Men must fight—if not each other, as I did in England, then something bigger. We must fight now to bring life to this silly paradise we're in. Even if it means the spilling of blood."

She, the nurse, shuddered at the thought of blood. For radio-knife surgery had made incisions a dry affair, without confusion or infection. Accidents were few; many lived their entire lives without seeing their own blood. "Can you do it alone?" she asked.

"I can start alone," he decided. "I shall find my warriors in the madhouses and the clinics. Many of the inmates of these institutions are no more mad than I; they've merely been put away because they saw clearly, as I do."

"But they'll find us. They'll find you!" she cried in sudden anguish.

"They'll find you! Kill you!" Suddenly sobs choked her.

"They will forget me after awhile. They will think I was a fool and drove my plane into the ground or a hillside. So I shall wait. And then, when it is clear, and they have grown weary of looking, or expecting an attack from me, I'll go out after my men and women. We'll place them where best suited; some in transportation; some in utilities, and some in communication. And some with the Psycho Regulators. Then we strike, strike *there*, and the world is free again!"

Markett grew white as she realized that this dream of power could be more than a dream. She looked up into his face, quiet now. What had happened to him. Would he become more and more obsessed, more violent? Perhaps if she could persuade him to wait—to stay there quietly with her while he worked out plans—the influence of the Regulator would begin to wear off.

Over the course of some two hundred years the white man of North America had lost what backwoods skill he once possessed. The little party snapped twigs and stumbled over stones as they advanced through the wilderness at the dead of night.

"How long?" asked a neuro-muscular specialist.

"About ten minutes more," said a general practitioner.

"Excuse me," said the specialist, who became violently sick in a bush. Returning he said, "'M not ordinarily weak like this, but—"

"I understand," said a civil engineer. "It's a pretty revolting notion at best." He hefted a pick in his hand, and sighed.

"I don't see why—" began the specialist in loud and irritated tones, only to be cut off by a terrified chorus of "shh!"

"Sorry," he whispered. "I was saying that I don't see why there aren't special bodies of men for this sort of thing. I mean, why pick men like us to do work we haven't studied?"

"Haven't had the opportunity," said

a pianist. "And there's good reason why we haven't a body of men as you suggested."

"I can't think of it," whispered the specialist.

"Assume," said the pianist, "that there is a group chosen—by lot, I suppose—to keep in line all eccentrics like the gentlemen on whom we are about to call. Then how do we keep this group in line?"

The general practitioner pondered, and, still pondering, fell into a brook. "Sorry," he gasped, being helped out. "But I have the answer to your question. How to keep them in line, I mean—if they misbehave you stop their salaries. Right?"

"No," said the pianist. "Because if they're trained to inflict suffering as a negative bribe to good conduct how are we to keep them from utilizing their training as a negative bribe to the end of exacting tribute?"

A historian unexpectedly spoke up: "In ancient days that technique was known as the 'shakedown racket'."

"Indeed," said the general practitioner, pondering again. "There must be some way of insuring good conduct," he brooded. "Why not set up two rival bodies of men to check on each other?"

"Because," said the specialist, now quite won over, "they would either join forces—disastrous to the common welfare—or they would struggle openly for supremacy and the victor would assume that he had the right to oppress common folk."

"I see," sighed the general practitioner. "How much farther?"

"As I remember it," said a radio engineer, "the message came from the plane as it lay half wrecked by their dwelling. That makes it about—there." He pointed, and silhouetted in the starlight they could see the outlines of a monoplane. "Type ten," said a transportation engineer, regretfully tightening his grip on an electric drill's ponderous bit. "Shall we kill him first or get the girl to safety?"

"Kill him first, I say," volunteered

the historian. "All in favor?" There was a soft chorus of assent. "Well, then," said the historian, "let's get as close as possible before he wakes up."

Stealthily they crept into the clearing and approached the little shack of boughs and trunks which had been flung together.

"Not bad," whispered a structural operator. "Well chinked, ventilated—in a primitive way one couldn't wish for anything better."

The neuro-muscular specialist took a heavy pair of operative forceps from his bandolier, and pushed on the door. It swung open after offering only a slight resistance. The seven others crowded into the large room and distributed themselves strategically. The pianist squinted through the dark and whispered, "There he is. I mean they are." Lying on a sort of semi-permanent bower were the two outlanders, side by side.

"I saw," whispered the transportation engineer, "I hadn't thought it was anything like *that*—"

"He probably threatened her," said the specialist. "That *must* be it." He raised his forceps and said uncertainly, louder than he had meant to, "Well!"

And Clark Stevens awoke. "Now," he muttered, and his eyes opened. Like a shot from a gun, his lean body snapped into steely action. The specialist he grasped by the wrist, flung away like a rat.

There was a shrill intake of breath in the room, and the men with weapons poised were frozen where they stood. Every man there knew what should be done, what had to be done for the safety of their civilization, and had spent time studying the use of the weapon he carried. But they couldn't do it. The genteel conditioning, in which all thoughts of physical violence had been carefully weeded out from birth, left them helpless before this man.

Stevens rose before them, and, in the gloom of the hut, his eyes blazed like twin embers of a burning city.

He uttered one inarticulate roar, and started for them. That galvanized them into action; they were capable of as swift motion as he, but in another direction. They dropped their weapons and fled.

Stevens watched the last of them vanish, then felt a hand take his.

"They—they didn't hurt you?"

Silently he drew her through the door and their bare feet felt the loam of the clearing. The nightwind fanned their faces. He turned to her. "I made them run," he laughed, and she smiled. Markett was used to the bursts of childlike glee, and she loved her husband. He had insisted upon some sort of ceremony which apparently was tied up with Roald. And beside the usual broad grin was a kind of shrewd, calculating glint.

"They can't fight. They've forgotten how. But now they know it."

"Then," she whispered, "we're safe."

"Safe," he repeated broodingly. "From men, yes. But they have their machines. And machines can be set to kill as well as to build. We must move on."

Markett turned slowly and looked at the leanto where they had been living. She laughed, a little nervously.

"Strange," she said. "At first I didn't like our—home. It was small—smaller than any of the apartments in the District Dwellings. And we always had to go outdoors for water—cold water that I couldn't drink because it hadn't been distilled so that all the salts and taste had been removed. Must we go, Clark?"

He held her tighter. "It was our home," he said, "but we must go on!"

FAR to the north, where sane men did not go, where enormous trees guarded the silent paths of animals to the water-hole, there was a fire, man-built, cunningly piled against the bole of a tree and slanted away from the wind so that it would burn through the long night as a bed of glowing embers, little tongues of blue flame leaping up

now and again to warn off any bear or wildcat that might seek easy pickings among the silent forms huddled in a circle. Men they were, big men with gnarled beards and knotted shoulder-muscles, sleeping restlessly and lightly, with one hand lying near cunningly constructed spring-guns and flat, gleaming backwords, into whose steel blades had been let threads of blue and red enamel in glowing, wide designs.

The crack of a twig broke the stillness of the forest night. With a grunt, the largest of the men sat up, his fist closing tight around the hardwood hilt of his sword.

"Hibron?" he called softly. "Is it you?"

Through the dusk strode a figure—a huge-boney male whose hair and beard were like twisted, golden wires, whose loins were girded in the pelt of a lynx, and who carried a hardwood staff a weaker man could not have lifted. He thundered: "Who're you and who d'ye take me for?"

Around the fire men sprang to their feet, gripping weapons and raising bows. Their leader held his sword at guard and eyed the stranger coldly. "I mistook you for a missing member of our party," he said. "Name yourself, stranger." There was an angry growl from the men around the fire; they advanced, their weapons twitching.

"Are you Fotchy?" spoke up a man in the background.

"Not Hibron nor Fotchy nor any of your people," answered the stranger, surveying them. "I'm Clark Stevens, wildman and sworn enemy of the city people. Who are you?"

The bearded man lowered his sword. "Come by the fire, enemy of the Fotchy, for their enemies are our friends. Are you alone?"

Stevens beckoned into a brush and a slim, firm-muscled woman dressed briefly in patched remnants of cloth came forth. "Markett, my wife," he explained. Then to her: "These men are our friends, but who they are, I do not know. They are honest people, I think. Let us sit by their fire."

He and the woman crossed their legs before the blaze, and one of the band piled wood on top. As the flames rose, the forest shadows were driven back, and every pebble in the little clearing cast its long shadow on the ground. The black-bearded man seated himself before the two strangers and his people arranged themselves in council behind him.

"Selim, Stevens," began the leader. "I am Isral, one of the judges of the clan of Hebers, expelled and hunted down by the accursed Fotchy these seven generations and more. Are you, too, hounded by the murderous, invading swine?" The firelight gleamed on his nose and played about his curly beard and hair.

"These Fotchy," said Stevens slowly. "I have never heard of them. But I am hounded by another kind, perhaps. I have forsworn the cities of gleaming metal and glass, with their tasteless water and pulpy food. This I have left to live in the wilderness with my wife, and for that reason, they seek to kill me. These Fotchy—who were they?"

Isral spat. "They came from over the ocean and conquered all things. They imprisoned women and tortured men. Their leaders grew fat and luxurious while the common people were ground into the earth. The Hebers (those who we are) were singled out for destruction, though no one seems to know why. All this have I heard from my father, and there is much in the story that is strange.

"The Hebers were driven into the wilderness one winter to die, but even then we were a hardy people and most of us survived the snow and sleet of the first season. There was trouble as the isolated people met and formed clans, and much struggling for power. In the midst of this they neglected to store up sufficient food for the next winter and many died. For years—twenty, thirty, perhaps—they lived as brutes, with little more than fire to aid them. But, as a new generation grew up, they learned to make things

with their hands, to build crude machines, and to turn the laws of nature to the common welfare. And from this time, we have risen in numbers and the enjoyment of life."

Isral held up a gleaming sword. "We work with iron and pottery and wood, as well as such metals as we can find in the mountains of the north; we have flocks of goats, sheep and bison. Although we live close to nature, we are not helpless before natural forces, though wholly dependent upon them. We whom you see here are a hunting party sent far south to capture living deer for breeding purposes."

He fell silent and stared inquiringly at Stevens, who cast his eyes over the man, and solemnly extended his hands. The gold-bearded man grinned and said: "You are a *real* people. I will be your friend." From the group behind Isral was a pleased murmur. "Then," said Isral, "you will come with us to the North and live with us, and tell us all you can about the world you have left. There may be much that we can put to good use."

"I will," said Stevens. And he was thinking, "These men can fight!"

DR. ALFREED has begun by discussing the Stevens affair hotly in the Medicos Club; a colleague had mildly objected to his neglect of duty. Alfred had flared up and called the colleague a dirty name. From then onward Alfred's progress was spectacular. There was a challenge to debate the question, and Alfred had won hands down. His opponent had presented his case clearly and logically, then retired from the stage. Alfred had walked on with a sneer, the subconscious necessity of defending himself boiling in his breast.

His speech was like nothing that had been heard from the debating platform for a hundred years or more, for he began by lashing out bitterly at the private life of his opponent. Patiently the audience waited for him to get around to the issue in question, finding themselves strangely stirred

by the wild denunciation. One man yelled from the floor: "He's right! I'm for Alfreed!" and the cry was repeated in the hall.

At this the doctor frowned heavily on the audience. "Enough of this!" he barked. "You, my friend, have seen the menace of this wildman loose in our midst. I say to you: *Hunt him down! Clark Stevens must be destroyed!*"

The abrupt switch in logic disturbed the crowd not at all. For a hundred years or more they had lain fallow, ready for the first demagogue who came along with a phony cause and a platform technique. In a tremendous burst of enthusiasm the doctor was cheered off the platform and carried through the streets in a spontaneous demonstration, and the cry of the first man to rise had been mutilated into "Right for Alfreed!" which rang all over the city by nightfall.

Deposited at his doorstep the doctor made a gracious speech, referring to the menace of Clark Stevens, and, passing a hand before his eyes, begged to be excused. Once in his apartment, Alfreed fell into a chair, astonished at himself. As he analyzed the matter there had been a psychological necessity to excuse his own mistake by violence misdirected, or not directed at all. But it was a good thing at any rate. Knowing in his heart of hearts that what he told himself was not true, he pledged himself to release what he already thought of as "his men" as soon as the menace of Stevens was eliminated. Then he went to bed. But all night there rang beneath his window the cry or challenge: "Right for Alfreed!"

When he woke, it was to find that his men had been working fast, ranging over the city, spreading the news to their friends—news of this wonderful Dr. Alfreed who had emerged from public obscurity to denounce the dangerous maniac who had been permitted to menace the city by the soft-lings in administrative control.

His door-signal flashed. "Come," he

called luxuriously from his bed. "'Lo, Winters," he greeted an agitated colleague who strode into the room.

"Alfreed," snapped Winters, "how did you do it? And how are you going to stop them? It isn't healthy, this concentration on the death of one man."

"One ruthless, murdering maniac," said the doctor coldly. "Do you call unhealthy the operation that removes a cancer?" He sat up in bed and brought his fist down emphatically on his knee. "No! The day that Clark Stevens dies I shall rest from my labors, but until then it must and shall be my only thought—and not mine alone but all the people in the city. And those who say otherwise shall be *crushed!*"

Winters stared him in the eye. "If you're not mad," he said, "you're giving a very accurate imitation of megalomania. But, for the sake of the record, I assure you that I shall never be a Rightman, and that many others have told me the same. Alfreed, you'll never get a majority in any election, so why continue a futile opposition?"

The doctor frowned. "Get out," he said. "You will see how a man gets what he wants. He *takes* it!"

As the door closed on Winters' back he relaxed in bed. "*Rightman*," did the old fool say? Not bad. Not bad at all. He leaped out of bed and dressed. He was nervous, almost hysterically so. As he strode down the corridor of the dwelling, his friends greeted him with cries of "Right!" They were on his side, he thought.

He had to make a speech in the breakfast room of the dwelling and left with the cry of "Right for Alfreed!" crashing in his ears. Time to organize now, he thought. The enthusiasm must not be allowed to die down, for once cold reason was permitted to set in, his cause was lost. There could be no such thing as full debate; he must imbue his followers with such a sense of their truth and right that they would, unthinkingly, stamp on the first murmur of opposition, without listening to what the opposer had to say. Had he really been

fooling when he intimated to Winters that he would take over by force? Maybe. He didn't know yet. First thing the Rightmen would need, he decided, would be some sort of identification. Badges—stars? No, these were too flimsy; they might get lost easily, or then some scoundrel who had no right to them, who did not swear allegiance to the cause, might get hold of them.

What was needed was an ensign more substantial—a staff, perhaps. How about a rod, he thought. A nice, heavy one, of course—it'd look better that way—and it should be painted with bright colors. They could even wear bandoliers and shorts of the same color. Red, of course. Red stood out, attracted attention, and was the color of enthusiasm and violence. The sight of solid red ranks would at once intimidate opposition and attract recruits. "Right Red," it should be called. "Right Red" for the "Rightmen." It is the duty, he thought, of the Rightman to defend his person against irresponsible attacks, that he may be preserved for the good of the state.

And, a few hours later, these same words thundered through a microphone to all parts of the city: "It is the Duty of the Rightman to defend his person against irresponsible attacks that he may be preserved for service to the state!" And a thousand bright Red staffs swung up in salute, while from the throats of the bearers came the chant: "Right for Alfreed! Right! Right! RIGHT!"

ISRAL pointed. "See, Stevens, the sharpened tops of the stockade; logs half buried, upright, ten feet out of the ground showing, so close together that a rabbit couldn't squeeze through. We're safe here from any animal or man, I think."

"I see," said Stevens, shifting his rucksack. "It's most ingenious. But shouldn't you have sentries posted there by the gates?"

"We usually do," said Isral, puz-

zled. "I don't understand—" He broke off sharply as his eyes caught something. "Thundering heavens! *The gate's open!* Somebody's going to catch hell from the judges for this. Come on!" he shouted at the straggling column of men carrying, in a sort of palanquin cage, the live deer they had gone so far South to capture. "I can't understand it," he mused fretfully as he and Stevens and Markett ran on the double. They halted before the picketed gate and Markett wrinkled her nose. "What's that smell?" she asked.

Stevens grimaced at the foul stench that drifted over the high palisade, and turned to Isral for an answer. The Heber had forced his face into lines of composure, but beneath his weather-beaten tan, his skin was white with shock. "Fever," he said, pushing open the gate. "But twice before it has come, and both times we were able to combat it. Now—look—" Hopelessly he stretched forth his hand, and Stevens turned his head.

There was a long street of neat little houses, log houses, punctuated here and there by little shops of artisans. At the end of the street was a meeting-hall on which, in wood contrasting with the rough, unfinished logs on the outside, was nailed the six-pointed star, tribal symbol of the Hebers. But the pottery wheels and grindstones and forges before the shops were untended, and there was no smoke of cooking from the neat little chimneys of the houses. Lying in the street, or half hidden in doorways, were drawn, gaunt figures, women, children and old people.

With a little cry of alarm, Markett bent over the form of a child and felt its pulse and skin. "Still alive," she said anxiously. "How do you combat this?"

"A kind of berry," replied Isral. "But there were none growing this year when we left. They were small and bitter."

"I know the general type," said Markett. "The bark does just as well,

if you soak it in water. Have you any of the wood about?"

"Here," replied the Heber, pointing to a bush outside the gate. "This is the kind that grows the berries. And there are others in the forest." He turned to the bearers. "You!" he barked. "Go pull up every fever-bush you can find and bring it here. You, Samel, draw clean water from the Old Well and fill some tubs. Wash them first. You three, dig a trench. Some of our people are past any service save that."

"That settles it," broke in Stevens grimly. "You can't live here any longer."

"Why not, friend?" asked Isral, his eyes on the men who were carrying out his orders.

"This sort of thing might strike you any moment. To save those who are still here, we have to kill every fever-bush by uprooting and stripping the bark. How many people live here?"

"There are about two thousand in this suburb. Of these, one thousand may already have died; others have fled to our other cities and towns. In them, if the plague has not been spread; and we have means of keeping it down if there is time for warning; we have seventy thousands in all."

"Seventy thousand," Stevens whispered to himself. Then, with a great roar, he cried: "We'll do it!"

"What?"

"Go South—all of us, men, women and children. We can do it easily—take the city from which I fled and live there, peacefully and healthily."

Isral stared at him. "How can we take a great city of the South?"

"Isral," answered Stevens, "you don't know what has happened to men in the great cities. They have become soft and helpless. A score of them, all armed, came after me, and fled at the first sign of opposition. A band of determined infants could take the city, for these city-dwellers are incapable of violence. What do you say to that, friend?"

"I say," declared Heber slowly, "that we'll do it!"

THE HISTORIAN faced the little group of men, sweeping the small room with a glance. "Where's Denning?" he asked.

The General Practitioner coughed. "The Rightmen got him," he said. "Since Alfreed linked up the entire scientific council with what he calls the subversives, none of us have been able to appear in public safely. Denning's apartment was raided last night and I think he's been liquidated."

The Neuro-specialist drummed the table-top nervously. "It's incredible the way this psychopathia has spread all over the city. In three short months Alfreed and his followers have become so powerful that they do not need to intimidate opposition; they're a majority."

"You're wrong there," said the Historian. "They make a lot of noise. But the investigation has shown—well, let's hear it from first hand sources. Would you please repeat what you told me this morning, Gallacher?"

A tall, thin man arose. "Despite appearance to the contrary," he began, "Alfreed has only succeeded in winning over a certain part of the population. Those people who have succumbed, and become Rightmen, are those whose social position has been such as to require a minimum training in social consciousness and responsibility, those whose functions are such to require the minimum application of intelligence.

"These people, despite the facilities that the city offers, have been leading very narrow, cramped lives. Their emotional attainment has been very low, frustrated in many cases. Thus, the terrific emotional appeal of Alfreed's insane program has swept them away, made them willing followers."

"What," asked the Practitioner, "has been the actual range of violence

and intimidation on the part of the Rightmen?"

"Enough to have a demoralizing effect upon the city as a whole. In fact, enough to make many feel insecure to such an extent that they would join the Rightmen sheerly for self-protection. The cases of violence against citizens, although still small in number, have been increasing, and have been sufficiently ferocious to paralyze, almost completely, any attempt at public opposition."

"Quite right," agreed the Historian. "You were correct in one sense," he said to the Neuro-specialist. "Alfred does not need a majority to win an election, or to seize power now. He can either intimidate the citizens into voting for him, or to refrain from voting at all."

"What has been done to combat Alfred, without using his own methods, of course?" asked an engineer.

"Rightmen have been captured by the ambulance squads, interrogated, then treated with Regulators. The interesting thing is that, once removed from Alfred's influence, they return to normal very quickly, and a bit of Regulating makes them permanently immune."

"The difficulty is," he went on, "that, so far, the psychopathia has spread more quickly than the antidote. What we must do is set machines to capture the Rightmen, Alfred in particular, and regulate them. We cannot afford to use violence ourselves because of the deadly effects it has upon those involved in its use."

The Historian nodded. "We must move quickly," he stated, "because I greatly think that Alfred will make an open bid for full power very shortly. Unless there is something else to come up, gentlemen, I suggest we adjourn and get to work."

A TENT camp for women, children and the animals had been pitched far outside the city, and the forty-thousand armed men of Heber were swinging down one of the great, out-

moded superhighways which led into the city. Overhead circled spotting planes, a vivid red in hue, marked with symbols strange to the Hebers, and even to Markett and Stevens. "Something must have happened in the city," the girl hazarded. They could see it not far off, and from it issued along the highway men marching in ragged file, with none of the snap and precision of the Hebers.

"Fools!" spat Stevens. "If they want to reduce our numbers why don't they drop weights from those planes?" Markett was shocked. "That's a very clever idea," she said. "I wonder that nobody's thought of it before."

"They haven't the military mind," said Stevens. "Such things do not occur to them." The men from the city were drawing nearer; calmly the Hebers unshipped their weapons, front ranks armed with spring-bows, rear ranks with throwing darts and the savage backwords that could cut down a grizzly bear in midcharge.

An especially large plane roared overhead, and, from it, thundered a great voice. "Halt your forces!"

"Dr. Alfred!" cried Markett. "That little fool's trying to order us around."

"Ignore that," advised Stevens. "Go straight ahead. Meet that mob and you won't find any resistance worth speaking of."

"I have arranged for everything," said Israel serenely. "Quarter will be given when asked; corpses will not be mutilated, and no vengeance for our own casualties will be taken once resistance has stopped. We will accept them as equals once we have the city in our hands." He fell silent and the tension grew as the two armies marched toward one another at a steady gait. The huge red plane of Dr. Alfred yawped hysterical injunctions at the advancing Hebers, who didn't even look up.

Then, suddenly, there was a brief exchange of throwing-weapons and the armies made contact. Automatically they split up into groups,

clubbing and slashing. Stevens waded into the thick of it, swinging a broadsword. He was startled to see that all the enemy were wearing vivid red shorts and bandoliers and were uniformly armed with heavy, short clubs. Remembering the timorous party that had first sought to kill him, he was dazed at the savagery with which the city men came to attack, with a suicidal disregard for their own safety and lives.

Further speculation he could not indulge in, for he was hard-pressed by a piquet of men who charged with strange cries of "*Right for Alfreed!*" One he spitted on his point; another's legs were cut away from beneath him, and a third landed a wild blow on Stevens' shoulder before the sizzling sweep of the backsword cut him down.

Stevens' head was curiously clear in the midst of the turmoil. With a mental start, he realized that something had happened; that this sort of thing no longer seemed glorious. He was not afraid; he saw it as a necessity, but now he realized that his only desire was to get it over with as soon as possible and have done with violence and fighting fellow men. Mechanically he fell in line with a spearhead of Hebers and worked his way along it to the apex; there he stayed, slashing and parrying till a concerted attack from behind dissolved it into skirmishing knots of men.

But now, from the city, came forth things that made the warriors gasp in amazement. Metal cylinders, upright, wheeled, each equipped with tentacle-like projections. They bore down upon the fray, plunging into the ranks of the red-clad fighters. For a moment, Stevens thought them to be reinforcements, but, now, he saw that the machines were for another purpose. The tentacles lashed out and seized the red-clad warriors firmly, yet, it appeared, carefully, so as not to do them harm, and, when their arms were full, turned and made back for the city.

Stevens swung wide of a head that bobbed, and a red club came down on his head, while another crashed into his ear. The world spun around, then the ground reached up and struck him sharply. And, suddenly, it was night.

"Hold your head up," said a voice.

Stevens opened his eyes. "Markett," he whispered. "What is it?"

"Concussion. You've been unconscious for three days. And what days!" She rolled her eyes.

"Exciting? What happened?"

"We were on the verge of losing the battle—they had us outnumbered—when the pursuit machines attacked the Rightmen—that's what the red-clad fighters are called. That completely demoralized them, and they broke and fled back toward the city. We were almost too amazed to know what to do, but Isral ordered us on, so we advanced after them. When we were almost upon the entrance, a voice came through calling me."

"You?"

"Yes. The council was watching the whole affair through tele-screens in the control room. They asked us what we wanted, who we were, and so forth. Isral and I explained, and they offered to take us in if we would lay down our weapons and promise to come peacefully; if we did not, they said they had a sort of gas which would make us all lose consciousness."

"So you agreed?"

"Certainly. You see, they explained about the Rightmen, too. The people we were fighting are not the city's army; they were a sort of club taking orders from Dr. Alfreed. A historian told me that it was what you call a dictatorship. They had seized control of the city (although the council had escaped and continued to work opposition, preparing the pursuit machines, etc.) and were beating down the people, not allowing any freedom of speech, so when they saw that we were losing, the people came out and attacked the Rightmen from behind. At the same time the pursuit machines came out, because, of course, no one

except the council knew that there was a weapon which could be used against Alfreed's army.

"It was really the citizens who won because there were not enough of the pursuit machines to beat the Rightmen; all they could do was to create confusion in the Rightmen ranks, and work demoralization by carrying off fighters."

Stevens was silent for a moment, then: "What happened to the Rightmen—those who weren't killed?"

"They were Regulated, Alfreed among them, and all came out sane again."

"And Isral—the Hebers?"

"Doing fine; they're going into arts and crafts, something which the Chief Historian says has been a lost function with us. We needed them badly."

He scratched his head. "Somehow," he said, "I feel different. I'm not the old, frightened Clark Stevens that I once was; and I'm not the man I was when I first ran away with you."

"I want to live here, in the city. Yet I'm still not satisfied with it. It has to be changed."

He broke off as the Neuro-specialist came in. "Hello," he said, "what's up?"

"'Lo, Stevens," replied the man. "Feeling all right?"

"Yes."

"We want you on the council. There was a faction that wanted to regulate you again, but most of us agree that we need men of your kind here, so long as they're not extremists. You seem to have levelled off to just the right point to make you valuable."

He nodded. "Strange, Clement, but I feel the same about you fellows. At one time, I thought you were all fit for scrapping, but now I see that the city needs you as much as it does me. I think that's the answer: we need all kinds of people; no one kind can be permitted to dominate, but no one kind can be suppressed, either."

"Of course," said Markett. "After that one big burst of violent battle, you worked the ego of Roald the Viking almost completely out of your psychology. Only the part that I like, that I love, is left—and I think that will stay put."

Stevens reached out and took her hand.

"I—I'd like to wear cloth again instead of leather, Clark." Markett said—and both men laughed.

THE RANSOM FOR TOLEDO

by NEIL R. JONES

A fascinating story of an artificial underground world in which the stars, the sun, the moon and the seasons are reproduced mechanically.

IN THE APRIL "COMET"



*"Have no fear, lady,"
the counsellor said, "you
will not share the honor.
You are exempt."*

HEADHUNTERS OF NUAMERICA

by STANTON A. COBLENTZ

THERE was a stunned sensation in Downey's head as he slowly regained consciousness. He had the feeling of one who has been drugged, or sandbagged; and for a moment he could not quite recall where he was or what had happened to him. He was only aware of a dull,

hammering sound from somewhere in the distance; and aware also of the aching pain and the stiffness in every joint and muscle of his body. It seemed to him at first that his eyelids were glued together, and would never open; and when at length he forced them apart, he realized that

he was in darkness, except for a faint light that slowly widened at the further end of a narrow gallery.

A low moan from just ahead of him caused him to reach out; and, more by feeling than by sight, he recognized the slim form sprawled full-length on the floor. Judith Barclay! As this name flashed across his mind, recollection came back with a great leap, and his tortured brain reconstructed the scenes of the last hour or two. The announcement of the outbreak of war, followed almost immediately by the appearance of the raiding planes! His appeal to Judith, when for the twentieth time she had shrugged her thin shoulders and refused him; then the alarm, and their flight together through the panicky crowds toward the air-raid shelters! Their terrified halt, when a bomb plowed up the street just before them; and their dash into an immense section of concrete pipe, where some construction work was under way! And, finally, the thudding sound of a concussion; Judith's scream—and darkness!

"Well, by thunder, that shell pretty near got us!" he reflected, scarcely wondering at the changed appearance of the pipe, which he attributed to the explosion. Then, as he reached out and felt for the girl's arm, he asked, "How are you, Jude? Hurt?"

"No, I'm all right, Mort," she answered, weakly. "Only, a little—a little funny in the head."

He glanced out along the tapering dimness of the pipe, and saw the light at the further end slowly widening. At the same time, the noise of renewed hammering came to his ears. "Well, the rescuers are getting here pretty quick," he remarked. "Guess the raid's over."

"Thank heaven!" she sighed. "I—I don't think this was a very wise place to choose, Mort."

He bit his lip, wondering why, even in their present grim location, her least remark should have the power to torture him.

"Don't you—don't you smell something peculiar? A little like ether?" she went on, in faltering tones; while he, as the light at the end of the gallery brightened to a glare, tottered to his hands and knees, and then fell back to the floor of the tube, feeling sick in the head.

"There's something wrong with the air, by Christopher!" he muttered; and then cried out in astonishment, "Say, do you see that?"

By the bright light at the end of the gallery, two figures were visible. Two men wearing clothes like Scottish kilts, bright crimson and emerald-hued, and with bare arms and knees! Over the lips and nostrils of each was a drooping, scarlet-tubed apparatus, a little like a gas-mask, though different from any gas-mask that Downey had ever seen. And in the hand of the foremost was a minute shining stick, from which suddenly a dazzlingly white searchlight ray shot out, illuminating the two trapped persons as if by a blaze of sunlight.

Downey thought that the strangers started back in surprise; but all that he was certain of was that, after a second, they were motioning him to come out of the tube.

This Downey was able to do only very slowly, while helping the girl, who was tightly clutching at a large beaded handbag. So painful was their progress that the man's mind, still dazed, had little chance to reflect on their rescuers' appearance. Doubtless the strangers were vaudeville performers who, caught by surprise, had had no time to change their costumes.

But when Downey finally came to the end of the tube and stared out, he gasped and staggered, clutched one hand to his forehead, and sank full-length to the ground, in reeling bewilderment.

Surely, the shock had turned his mind! The long marble lines of the Government buildings, which had dominated the scene only a short while before—they were no longer to

be seen! The sandstone mansions of Bannerton Row, just to his left, had vanished! He was in the midst of a wide park, featured by gnarled old elms—gnarled old elms a hundred feet high, where there had been not even a sapling!

But if this were only a nightmare, why did Judith share it? For her dazed exclamations showed that her eyes told the same story!

As they breathed the clear air outside the tube, the hazes cleared rapidly from their minds; the strength seemed all at once to course back to their limbs, and they were able to rise to their feet. But each second only added to their befuddlement.

The red-and-green-clad men were but two out of a score. All wore kilted costumes, with bare arms and knees; and all were arrayed in bright colors: purple and gold, chrome yellow, crimson, and milky white. And all had crowded around them with wild exclamations, calling out in high-pitched tones that neither of them could at first understand.

At length, from amid the din, two cries made themselves evident, shrilling in a strange ascertainment, "Who are you? Who are you? Where do you come from? Where do you come from?"

To this Downey replied, in a voice that sounded cracked and broken even to his own ears. "Who are you? Who are you? Where do you come from?"

His answer was an outburst of laughter which, beginning in a low ripple, gradually rose to an uproarious crescendo.

This demonstration was checked by the arrival of a tall blue-and-orange-clad individual, who stood out from the others owing to a large gemmed silver star that crowned his bald pate.

Raising his left arm authoritatively, the newcomer instantly silenced the crowd; and, stepping toward Downey and the girl, spoke in slow, crisp tones that were quite under-

standable despite their foreign ring:

"Better tell us, sir, where you come from. I understand you were both found among the ruins."

"Yes, I guess that's right, Downey replied. "That is, the ruins of the bombing raid."

"Bombing raid?" several voices caught him up, sharply. "Bombing raid?" And the men turned to one another with muttered exclamations; while one or two put their hands significantly to their heads.

"I do not know what you mean, sir," said the star-crowned one. "Must I tell you we are a civilized people, and have had no bombing raids for three hundred years?"

Downey grumbled something beneath his breath, thinking this a poor time for jesting. But incisively over all rose the voice of Judith, "if you have had no bombing raids for three hundred years, then what year is this? Didn't we go through a raid only a little while ago?"

The starred one cast Judith a piercing glance, and replied, contemptuously, "I suppose, then, you've forgotten this is the year 314!"

"That is, 314 by the new reckoning," another voice explained. "2270, if you prefer the Medieval calendar."

Downey and the girl stared at one another, dumbfounded. Could it be that they had slept for more than three centuries?

"Do not forget," the starred one continued, fixing Downey with a severe scowl, "we have yet to account for your presence here. A few days ago, digging among the ruins left by the savages in their war hundreds of years ago, we came across a big concrete tube which, on being opened, gave out fumes that produced temporary unconsciousness in the investigators. Later, as they worked with gas-masks, you two were noticed within. It is evident that you entered sometime after the first opening was made, while the workers lay drugged by the fumes. But where did you come

from? That is what we cannot understand."

Downey's mind reeled. An explanation, amazing and yet barely possible, had flashed over him. What if the impact of the explosion had sealed both ends of the concrete tube where he and Judith had sought refuge? What if the tube had been buried beneath the earth, to remain there for centuries? What if the poison gas released by the bombs had entered their retreat, too diluted to kill them and yet strong enough to produce suspended animation? He remembered reading of a new war gas which could cause precisely that effect; and he knew that such substances did exist in nature: as, for example, the paralyzing fluid which the hunting wasp injects into the spider, to keep it indefinitely alive though seemingly lifeless. If such a poison could operate for weeks or months, what was there to prevent it from being effective for a year? for ten years? even for three hundred years?

Then might this not be what had happened to Judith and himself? In their profound unconsciousness, time would have no meaning for them; generation after generation might be born, grow to maturity and old age, and pass away while they slept their dreamless sleep, to be awakened at last when the opening of their tomb had released the poisoned fumes and let in some pure air.

By some swift intuition, Downey felt sure that this was what had happened.

But his new acquaintances were not to be convinced by his explanation. "I do not know where you are from," said the starred one, while his green and orange costume glittered brilliantly in the sun. "You do not talk like natives of our Nuamerica. You know our speech as if from old books, and there is a foreign ring to your voices. Your clothes are strange and clownish—I half believe you have robbed a museum. Either you are foreigners who have no passport, or

fugitives who seek an outlandish disguise. For that reason, I proclaim you under arrest! You will come with me to be examined by the High Councilor!"

To the accompaniment of a sound as of rattling chains, three men stepped forth from the crowd. Each drew out a little pistol-like machine, and pressed the trigger; and from the muzzle of each apparatus there shot forth thin shining wires, which, with incredible swiftness, wound themselves about Downey and the girl, binding their arms to their sides beyond possibility of release.

Then, with a brusque "Come!", the starred one stalked away; while the two prisoners, poked and shoved by half a dozen guards, started slowly down an avenue of elms toward the huge triangular doorway of a remote building.

II

AS they passed along the tree lined boulevard, their eyes were attracted to several edifices of strange forms and colors. Some were shaped like gigantic mushrooms, and were of a sky-blue complexion; others were like huge inverted sea-green funnels; while the queerest of all was an enormous crystalline sphere that rested on a wide base of black marble. "You see, Jude," Downey remarked, "this is the twenty-third century, sure enough. Was anything like this ever known in our own time?"

"They do look crazy," Judith admitted, "but I'd be crazier yet if I believed what you want me to. We must both be dreaming. That's the simplest explanation."

On reaching the triangular doorway, they passed into a hall whose softly glowing walls were lined with a satiny claret-colored cloth. The floors were of alabaster; the air was rich with pine-incense; and the golden incense burners, upon ebony tables, gave something of the effect of an Oriental temple.

But it was not this that arrested the newcomers' attention. Their eyes were immediately drawn to a figure who, clad in lush crimson, sat on a throne that dangled ten feet above the floor, being suspended from the ceiling by chains. As Downey adjusted himself to the subdued light, he was able to make out that the man was old, very old; his face was seamed and pitted until it might have been mistaken for the mummy of Rameses.

Yet his movements belied his age. He was able to act with the swiftness and decision of youth; and his words, when at length they came forth, were spoken rapidly and with force.

Surrounding him like courtiers, on the floor of the hall, were half a dozen elaborately robed men with faces as creased and scarred as his own. Yet all, despite their appearance of extreme age, moved with an almost youthful robustness; their bodies seemed erect and well developed, with none of the flabby or wizened quality that might have been expected to belong to their years.

It was with a vague discomfort that Downey noted the owlish stares these ancient beings cast at him, nudging one another, and ogling him with unhealthy peeps and squints. In his eyes they were the most repulsive creatures he had ever seen.

Judith, also, appeared to have something of the same feeling. Pressing close, she whispered into his ears, "What is this? The hall of the Harpies?"

The silver-starred dignitary, who had preceded them into the hall, had paused before the suspended throne, and was speaking to the crimson-robed old man, whom he addressed as "High Councillor." Downey could not make out much of his words, but could see how he paused occasionally to point to Judith and himself; and he noted with apprehension the avid gleams in the eyes of the High Councillor, who stared down half curiously, half malevolently at the

two prisoners as they stood silently amid the guards.

At length the Councillor motioned the starred one away; beckoned Downey to approach him; and spoke, in the high, piping tones of advanced age:

"Stranger, I do not know where you come from: whether you be a spy from across the ocean, or one who was hidden away by misguided parents in order to escape the Decapitation Draft. In any case—"

"What is the Decapitation Draft?" Downey could not help breaking out.

The Councillor's fist came down angrily, pounding at the vacant air.

"Do not think to save your head," he shrilled, "by pretending ignorance of one of our most honored customs! As I was about to say, unless you can satisfactorily show where you come from, you will be sent to the body-testing rooms; and if you pass, as I believe you will, judging from your sturdy-looking frame, you will be put on the list for early decapitation. Such is the law of Nuamerica, of which I am the local administrator."

Downey gasped. Could it be that every one in the twenty-third century was mad?

"Well, are you going to speak or not?" piped the Councillor, leaning down from his throne until Downey thought he was about to fall off. "I'm giving you your chance to prove where you come from!"

As simply as he could, Downey attempted to state the facts of his origin; although he felt convinced that there would be little gain in arguing with a lunatic. And, as he foresaw, his words evoked only merriment. "Truly, stranger," said the chief tormentor, after he, the courtiers and the guards had all rocked back and forth with laughter, "you have little imagination, if you cannot think of a better story! So you were born in the year 1915! That is, 1915 by the old reckoning! Why, that would make you older than I! And I'm the most elderly man in this dis-

trict, even though I won't celebrate my two hundred and seventy-fifth birthday till next year!"

Downey stared, and said nothing, more convinced than ever of the Councillor's madness.

"Of course, if it were not for you young man," the leader went on, meditatively, "I would have been in my grave two centuries ago. It is you who supply us with the robust young bodies to keep our old heads alive. I well remember how, just two hundred and nine years ago, I was pronounced at the point of death from heart disease—and the transfusion to a young body was performed barely in the nick of time. Since then, I've had the operation repeated once every thirty years—which accounts for my present good health."

From amid these rambling phrases, Downey had begun to catch a gleam of horrible meaning. Was the old man really mad after all? Or had he and his followers been kept alive through some dread process of grafting new bodies on to old heads?

Even as these questions flashed across the young man's mind, he heard the renewed rasping of the Councillor's voice, "I give you one final chance, sir! If you can't explain who you are and where you're from, you will be honored, according to the law of Nuamerica, by giving your head—"

He was interrupted by a half muffled cry. Judith, with one hand to her mouth, had vainly tried to keep back her horror.

The scowl on the Councillor's mummy face gave way to a faint smile as he turned to the girl, and said, "Have no fear, lady. You will not share in the honor. Don't you know that the Official Head Commission only last year exempted women from the Draft?"

And then, blandly turning to the guards, the Councillor ordered, "Take the prisoners to the body-testing rooms. I believe we are up on our schedule, are we not?"

"Yes, Your Highness," returned the leader of the guards, bowing until his bare knees touched the floor, "there is no reason why your desires should not be executed within three days."

"Splendid!" approved the Councillor; while Downey, his arms still bound by the cramping wires, felt himself being drawn away in the midst of his grinning, kilted captors.

III

STRIPPED to the waist, Downey stood in a gray steel room that somewhat resembled the turret of a battleship. Gun-shaped implements bristled from the grim painted walls; a veritable arsenal of knives glistened behind him; while in the foreground was a series of tall machines equipped with an intricacy of dials and tubes, to one of which Downey's left arm had been strapped.

Just behind Downey stood a queer looking individual; robed in black, although with bare knees, according to the local custom; and with a black mask, and two tubes like doubly long opera glasses attached to his eyes. Eagerly he was bending over the dials, and reciting, half as though to himself, "339. 339.1. 340.1. 340.3." Then, with sudden enthusiasm, he snapped off the mask and glasses, revealing a wizened ancient face, and exclaimed,

"Young man, I congratulate you! You have passed!"

"Passed what, Doctor?" demanded Downey, as the examiner freed his arms from the straps.

"Passed the body test! You have come through with high honors! I never saw a more perfect physique! No flaw—no disease! Your score is more than three hundred and forty—and two hundred and thirty, as you may know, is considered a good average. I shall recommend you for immediate decapitation! My congratulations again, young man!"

Downey glared at the blacked

robed one. "I don't know what you're talking about," he said. "It seems to me nearly every one here has lost his head, but that's no reason I want to lose mine!"

"Ah, but it's considered a glorious thing, young man! To be decapitated for your country's sake! Not every one can rise to such heights! Your name will be enshrined in the Tablet of Heroes!"

"I can get along without that," stated Downey, drily. "All I'm asking to know is what this nonsense is all about."

"Nonsense? You won't think it's nonsense, young man, when you put your neck under the knife!"

Noting the look of bewilderment and horror on Downey's face, the Doctor continued in a different vein:

"Well, maybe I'd better explain. I'm coming to see you're sincere in claiming ignorance. Not that I can accept that silly story about the twentieth century. But judging from your looks, your queer accent and out-of-date manners, you are undoubtedly from some foreign country, where maybe the people are uncivilized and don't know anything about decapitation."

The black-robed one seated himself on a little revolving stool, crossed his legs, and slowly went on:

"The original invention was made about three hundred years ago, by a physician named John Knight, who lived in an ancient city called New York. Was it necessary, Knight asked, for our best and most brilliant minds to be taken from us at the early age of seventy or eighty owing to some bodily defect? If fed by a vigorous blood-stream, the brain would continue to function indefinitely—perhaps for centuries. But a vigorous blood-stream, after senility had set in, could come only from another body. Therefore, Dr. Knight concluded, if an old man's head were grafted on to the body of a youth, the old man might continue to live,

with new limbs and organs, but with mental faculties unimpaired. Think what a boon it would be for the race, if we could keep our great geniuses alive for hundreds of years!"

"But how was it possible, Doctor," broke in Downey, "to attach one man's body to another man's head?"

"It wasn't possible until after long experimentation. But the same principle had already been applied in the grafting of limbs. There was a gas, Etherene by name, which would produce suspended animation for a few hours, even stopping the heartbeat and the circulation of the blood. Any part of a man's body might be cut off while he was in this condition; and if ligament was fitted to ligament, bone to bone, and blood-vessel to blood-vessel, the removed portion might be attached in its proper place to the body of another Etherene patient. Of course, this required skilled surgery. But it was found that, by making proper measurements in advance, it was possible to graft arms, legs, ears, eyes and even whole bodies on to new possessors."

"That doesn't explain," remarked Downey, grimly, "where the new bodies would come from."

"No, it doesn't." The speaker arose, pointed to a crimson wall-chart marked, "Selective Decapitation Draft," and then went on to state, "There has been a great deal of trouble on that score. In fact, the Anti-Draft Revolution of the Twenties was fought on these grounds alone. First, as to whose lives would be preserved by the new invention. Of course, our rulers voted themselves that privilege. Also, the friends and relations of the rulers. Then all persons whose income tax was high enough were automatically entitled to remain alive. Furthermore, those who got in by what is vulgarly called graft—unfortunately, there have been some scandals on that account. And, finally, if there were bodies enough to go around, a place was to be made for the geniuses, such as

great scientists, philosophers, poets, etc.

"I regret greatly to say, however," the Doctor concluded, with a sigh, "that we have never yet gotten that far down on the list."

"That still doesn't tell me," Downey insisted, "where you get the young bodies to attach to the old heads."

"Well, that has always been a problem," admitted the Doctor. "At first we used the bodies of criminals condemned to capital punishment. But the age was a humane one, and abolished capital punishment. Then we called for volunteers. But people showed a decided lack of patriotism. So finally we adopted the draft. All young men between twenty-one and thirty-one must be permanently registered. If they are selected in the great annual lottery and are found to be without taint or disease, they will have the blessed fate of giving their bodies to rejuvenate their country's aged leaders."

"But are the drafted men the only ones taken?" inquired Downey, anxiously.

"No, we are broad-minded. We offer the same distinguished lot to criminals—and to aliens without a passport. That is how you gained your chance, young man. As it happens, we are now far down the list. Your turn will come in just three days."

With a groan, Downey stared at the gray, knife-lined walls that hedged him about like a fortress prison. For the first time in his life he regretted—and bitterly regretted—the care he had always taken to keep in prime physical condition. He chewed his lips in mortification to think that he had come to the twenty-third century only in order to nourish some tottering dodo with his life blood. But for one reason above all others he was stabbed with grief: a vision had burst over him of Judith's eager face and burning bright blue eyes; and with a rush of vehement emotion it came to him that he could

not, must not die! How would she fare, alone and friendless in this strange century? To escape from the bleak steel walls appeared impossible; yet for her sake, more than for his own, he must find a way to avert the threatened doom.

IV

TWO days had gone by. Up and down the length of a long curtained room Downey slowly paced, with drooping head and drawn white face. Sumptuously upholstered chairs and carved tables were ranged about him, as if to lend luxury to his final hours. But it was not these that he observed; his eyes were drawn constantly to the door, which was crossed with steel bars, beyond which two kilted figures stood beside an ugly black apparatus resembling a machine-gun.

Bitterly he reviewed in his mind his fruitless efforts to free himself. The windows were locked and grated; the single door was guarded, and he was under constant surveillance. Every effort had been made to render his last days comfortable—but what comfort could he take when he was held like a doomed ox in the stall, awaiting the slaughter? He had hardly slept and barely taken food; and the final irony, he thought, occurred when he was handed a steel plaque which read, "The Purple Badge of Heroism. Died for his country this Thirty-Third day of May, in the year 314 of the New Era."

"Well, guess I'm as good as dead already," he reflected as he stared at these words.

He had flung the iron plaque to the furthest corner of the room, and had sunken into a chair with his head buried in his hands, when a rattling at the door caused him to start up abruptly.

"A visitor to see the prisoner!" he heard one of the guards droning, automatically. And the other respond-

ed, as automatically, "Let her in! Let her in!"

Leaping up, he observed Judith peering dismally through the bars.

"Mort!" she cried, in tones of mingled joy and sadness; while as he sprang forward to meet her he observed that two kilted women and a guard accompanied her. He also noted—and was a little hurt at the incongruity of the fact—that she had taken pains with her make-up: she was carrying her handbag, and the rouge on her lips was particularly thick, and the powder was smeared on her cheeks in great white patches.

"Mort, I—I've done everything," she exclaimed, as she flung out both hands to him. "But it was—it was no use. They wouldn't even let me see you till this minute. I—I've come to say good-bye, Mort."

He noticed that her big blue eyes were brimmed with tears. And in the tumult of that moment his own eyes were moist. With a swift impulse, he drew her to him, bending down and pressing his lips against hers. But, even as he did so, a powerful restraint seized him against his will. Caught by a sudden spasm, he turned aside, inwardly cursing—and sneezed.

Then again he sneezed, and again, and again, with fierce explosiveness; and the tears rolled from his eyes, which began to grow red and inflamed. Seven times in all he sneezed; then, with a growl, he muttered, "Damnation! There goes my hay fever again!"

"Your what?" the guard inquired, not quite catching the words. "What kind of fever did you say?"

"Hay fever," Judith answered. "It's a pestilence that used to rage in the twentieth century."

"Never heard of it," said the guard; at which the girl, drawing a mirror and powder-puff from her bag, began to smear her face anew; while Downey once more sneezed violently.

"Sounds mighty dangerous!" concluded the guard; and opening a little black tube on the wall, he called into

it, "Send Doctor ZX down here at once! The prisoner has a fit!"

Downey was just completing his third sneezing spell a minute or two later when the black-robed Doctor arrived. With a dismayed gasp, he stared at Downey; then opened a little case and took out a mass of batteries and wires, which he attached to the prisoner's wrists and ankles, while he clamped two tubes to his ears and listened.

While he was doing this, Judith was using her powder puff again, and Downey once more sneezed.

"I don't know just what the disturbance is," the Doctor at length decided, gloomily. "There's some hidden functional derangement. The heart-beat is too fast. And the nerve pressure is too low. It's too bad, young man, that you should have to spoil a good record."

Downey's answer was to sneeze once more.

"I can't imagine what causes the fits," meditated the Doctor, while conducting a further examination. "It's something new to medical science. For all I know, it may be contagious. Worst of all the germs are probably in your body, and would infect any head to which you were attached."

"It was considered worse than smallpox in our own time," contributed Judith.

The Doctor paced slowly about the room, shaking his aged head doubtfully; while he himself, as Judith continued operation with the powder puff, all at once began to sneeze.

"By my old head, I do hope I haven't caught it too!" he snapped, withdrawing from Downey anxiously. And then, with sudden decisiveness, "That settles it! I'm afraid I have bad news for you, young man. All our decapitation heroes, as you know, must be in the best physical condition. We can't take the chance of having them contaminate an old head. Our rule is, 'Safty first.' So you see, young man, I am left no

choice. I will have to withdraw my recommendation!"

"What?" demanded Downey, rushing toward the Doctor in a wild outburst of joy. "Does that mean I won't be decapitated?"

"Keep away from me!" snarled the Doctor, making a dash toward the door. "Of course it means that! There's no use arguing, either! Henceforth you'll have to earn your living like any ordinary head-wearing citizen!"

* * *

As Judith's attendants and the guard withdrew, a startling thought burst over Downey.

"By heaven, Jude," he exclaimed, "how did I happen to get hay-fever already? My death-plaque said it's only May. And you know the fever season doesn't begin till August."

Judith looked up at him with streaming eyes in which a faint light was dawning. "Silly!" she said. "Why do you think I kept rubbing so much

powder on my face? Don't you remember, you always used to complain, you were allergic to it, and it made you sneeze so much?"

"Well, thank the Lord for face powder!" cried the rescued man, as he suddenly realized how long and ingeniously the girl had been planning to save him—and realized, also, what such planning implied.

"It is lucky I brought my handbag with me from the twentieth century—and the face powder in it," stated the girl.

But his arms had already reached down to seize her. And, for the first time, she responded fully to his embrace.

"I—I—I didn't know how much I cared, Mort," she sobbed, "until I thought—I thought they were going to kill you!"

"Well, after all, decapitation has some merits," he smiled back. "Come to think of it, Jude, it doesn't matter much to me what century I'm in, so long as I'm there with you."

ANT SOCIETY AND DICTATORS

Dr. Thomas C. Barnes of a Philadelphia Medical college sees many of the "ant societies" organized on the same basic principles as modern "totalitarian" states. The rank and file, while active, are, he says, whipped into greater activity by especially active individuals, the leaders.

Agriculture, slavery, and war are part of ant life just as they are part of the philosophy of dictator states.

Drinking a certain heavy water formula makes the ants easy-going. So does alcohol.

The SPACEAN

Published by the Interplanetary Patrol. Editions on all Space Ships.

Planetogram Service—FEBRUARY 2,009—Vol. XXI No. 3

FLASH ★ ★ ★

Planetary Coma is reported by two more ships. Although in widely separated areas, it appears to be contagious, and all ships must remain in space until after medical inspection. The cause remains a mystery, although the foremost medical minds have been working toward solution. It is no longer fatal if caught in time. All ships are equipped with serum.

FLASH ★ ★ ★

Space liner X Q 20 came into port with a strange metallic coating. So far analysis has proved futile, and there is no record as to when the coating adhered to the surface. The crew was as amazed at the sight, as the spectators, when the ship reached port since it did not adhere to the portsight. Until we know what the metal is, it will be generally known as gold plating from the exact resemblance. Cutter M V 927 is going to follow the same route, and try and locate the cause.

FLASH ★ ★ ★

The heavy fleet is almost ready to leave Mars, and the trouble on the Binaries will soon be under control. The call for volunteers resulted in many times the number of men who could be used, and the Commander wishes to thank all men who have offered their services, whether he has been able to use them or not. The crews are being trained strenuously, and by the time the fleet reaches battle location, the men will be accustomed to their posts.

FLASH ★ ★ ★

Patrol Cutter M V 13 sent out S O C when within gravitational pull of Jupiter. All power tubes reported blown out, and ship a helpless wreck from encounter with three pirate craft. Slowly being drawn toward the planet, and must receive help before pull becomes too great. Three ships reported on way to intercept, but as yet there is no report of success.

FLASH ★ ★ ★

Only three men were alive on board M V 9, when the hospital and rescue ships reached her. These were an assistant engineer, the third officer and one passenger. So far names are not known.

FLASH ★ ★ ★

The crew of X Q 45 was found guilty of criminal negligence in the accident with M V 126 resulting in 26 fatalities. The outcome of the trial is not public as yet, but the officers will be sentenced.

ORDERS

Admiral Alan H. Smith ordered to take one section of the heavy fleet from Mars to the Binaries. Order to take effect immediately.

Captain C. T. Trent from Mars station 18 to Earth 3.

Captain P. S. Brown from Jupiter station 2 to Saturn station 1, both assistants to accompany him.

Lt. Martin Riggs, relieved of command of cutter M V 8, to take charge of cutter M V 701 when finished testing.

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SPACE LANE GOSSIP!

It seems that second officer P. of a ship docking at Mars got hold of some home brew from one of the natives. He spent twelve days in irons before his mind returned to normal, and we hear that he will start the next trip as an able spaceman. Must have been the drink that lets you down.

Who is that beautiful gal who waits for L V 32 to dock, and always disappears with the same officer?

It must be that Johanes Goebbels forgot about blast clearance, and George Dixon kept his word. We didn't see the encounter, but boy what a shiner!

A heavy delegation is due in from Mars, and I mean heavy. No names can be mentioned but we can say that it looks as if all the officials of the planet were on the same ship—for what?

Rose T. and Billy D. certainly have got it bad. The Captain tells me that he'll have to move the engines into the Telly room if it gets much worse. Why don't you step out kids?

Believe it or not, Maxim Putsky claims that his clothes were all stolen in the middle of space—and after having seen his three hundred pounds it is hard to picture less than two men in them.

ARRIVALS:

Space Liner X Q 62 with 90 tons of Maxipar and twenty men on vacations from the Saturn mines.

Space Liner X Q 47 with 65 passengers and varied cargo of freight from Jupiter.

Cutter M V 7 for extended repairs and overhauling. All crew members extended furloughs for entire stay in port, after the three year absence.

DEPARTURES:

Space Liner X Q 50 for Mars, with 100 tons of iron castings and nine passengers.

Space Liner X Q 41 with the last of the crew members for the heavy space fleet. These are all trained men and have seen service before. Ship to intercept the fleet 300,000,000 miles beyond Mars.

Cutter M V 20 on extended patrol duty. Trip will cover at least three year period, with full vacations upon return to home port on Earth.

TWENTY YEARS AGO IN THE SPACEWAYS

The terminal at Rocketville, Main U.S.A. Earth, is functioning without trouble, and an average of one ship every fifteen minutes has either been docking or leaving for another planet. The stratosphere connections are a great help, and passengers from any part of the earth may reach their ship and be in space within a few hours.

The hotel has been more than half filled from the day of opening, and expects to be filled to capacity within a few months. The eating facilities are superb.

The fate of the cruise ship "Blithe" has been discovered. It was literally knocked to pieces by a storm of meteors. There is no hope of finding any survivors. Even if they had managed to leave the big ship in lifeships, they could not have escaped the rock fragments. National rites will be held for the 309 lost.

The Spacemen of all the universe wish to extend their sympathy to the friends and relations left behind.

The Binary expedition has returned, and reports human inhabitants on the planets. Plans are being made to establish space ports and facilities for docking ships.

FORTY YEARS AGO IN THE SPACEWAYS

A strange black ship circled the earth yesterday, and was observed from every watchport, where visibility permitted. We had no record of

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such a ship, and the patrol was sent out for information.

Contact was made in mid circuit of the 300,000 foot level, and patrol men boarded the strange craft. The ship was finally brought down at London-port.

We have visitors from a planet so distant that even the location is unknown in this system. They can not be called men, as they have no solid bone structure, yet they bear resemblance to our own race in many respects. Telephotos will be in all papers as soon as released by the officials, but more information must be obtained before we will know who they are.

They hesitated to land for several hours, although they saw space ships leaving port in several parts of the globe. It appears that they have been attacked whenever they made contact on an inhabited planet, until this try in the Earth universe. Although a race on a peaceful mission they have been met by force on every strange planet.

Their language is strange, and men are trying to form some standard basis for conversation, to replace the signs which have had to be employed. Their ship is a marvelous piece of engineering although lacking in all things which we would consider necessary for comfort. Their fuel is strange, and their power equipment capable of driving to greater distances than even our greatest dreams.

Good must come from this strange visit, although it is difficult to make ourselves understood. We welcome any race which comes with peace in mind, and must show them every courtesy.

FIFTY YEARS AGO

In the turmoil resulting from successful rocket flight one ship stands out above the others. It employs some of the principles employed on the first ship, but is greatly improved. The interplanetary company has acquired the patents, and appears to have out-

distanced the many other concerns who have come into existence overnight. Their financing runs into many millions, and they have absorbed several of the smaller concerns with all their acquired patents. The name EDMONTON will be heard often in the next few years as the outstanding genius of rocket ship design.

Some of the plans of the company have already been made public, and it appears that their ships will have comfort as well as the safety of the greatest inventions.

Work has been started on spaceports, both in Europe and this country, with facilities for handling several ships. This seems to spell expansive plans for the company, and perhaps they will help absorb the surplus of workers which has bothered governments for many years. It is possible that in the future it may even become a foremost industry, with ships constantly arriving and leaving port.

NEW PROJECTS

A real estate development has opened up on Saturn. The mineral deposits have created a great demand for labor, and the land company is trying to sell homes to permanent settlers. Advertisements will soon start appearing in our papers, setting forth the opportunities on the strange globe. Every comfort has been provided and long term financing may be arranged for the domed and conditioned territory.

HONOR ROLL

George Mannus gave his life in a search for help when the Patrol cutter M V 17 was forced down on Jupiter. He met death by attack from the terrible "Tusky," which every spaceman fears. When the search party found him, the body of the beast was only a few feet away. He succeeded in inflicting mortal wounds, but not before

he was seriously injured himself. His pressure suit punctured. He died before they reached port.

Manny Perkins passed away at Lunar station one. His service pre-dates any other in interplanetary, and they are sending his remains to earth. He loved the company as few others ever can. It was his life dream. Every new ship was like another child to him, and could hardly be considered fit for service until he had been over it from one end to the other.

Every once in a while some young officer thought he overstepped the bounds when criticising navigation, but until the day of his death he could do a lot of persuading with his fists, and officials always thought it a good thing for the young men to mix with him and be set down a couple of pegs. He lived hard, and gave the universe every ounce of energy he possessed.

SCHEDULES

Space patrol will soon have to report from set locations every twelve hours. It will seem almost like watchmen who have to reach timeclocks at certain times. It will be a great help in keeping track of the ships but the men will be bound to feel tied to their work more than has been the case. The space patrol has formerly enjoyed almost complete freedom of action within zones.

NEW INVENTIONS

The new visiplate wave conductor has shown marvelous results. In the first tests it has carried clear images for twenty million miles. There is little doubt that within a short time dealing can be carried on between two planets, with the goods in question seen by both parties. The wave en-

ables dimensional broadcast, so that a person or object appears in natural form.

The new Electronic guns are being rushed to Mars for installation on the heavy fleet. They have only just passed the first tests, but will enable the fleet to put an immediate stop to the Binaries' war, without killing the millions of inhabitants. They destroy practically every type of material, without injuring human beings. The Binarians are apt to find their buildings nothing but ashes over their heads.

Plexometal is being manufactured commercially, and will soon replace all other materials for use in space. Its lack of gravitational attraction makes it ideal for rocket use, and will cut down blast fuel consumption for clearance by almost two-thirds. It is amazing to see a sheet of solid metal almost float in the air, but it holds high hopes for the future. The actual weight is only 9 oz. per cubic foot.

DISCOVERIES

A new race is reported from Jupiter. They appear to be almost ethereal beings, and are only found above the thirty mile level of the mountains. They appear to be immune to climate, but exist in such rare atmosphere that man has difficulty in reaching them. It may be a long time before we know a great deal about them.

Another huge gold deposit has been reported from Mars. This will mean a drop in price again, although it will probably still remain a profitable element to mine. Too bad it couldn't have been nickel or tin.





HEALING RAYS IN

CHAPTER I

STRANGE BARGAIN

THE big library was of platinum-and-teakwood. There were two occupants, a monstrous man who wore expensive vitrilex, and a wisp of a girl in a wheel chair. One entire wall space was taken up by a chart of the solar system. Below the chart was the label: *Marshall Space Lines, 1990 to 2055, First In Astral Commerce.*

Spaceports, marked by red pins,

dotted the entire chart. The large man was humming as he thrust other scarlet pins into Ceres, Pallas and Juno with such a savagery as one might use in thrusting swords.

"Feel better, dad?" The wisp of a girl was speaking. Misty locks of sheeny hair lay on the back of the invalid chair like starclouds on a summer night. A beautiful frame for a picture of lifeless, transparent features.

"I ought to! It took fifty years to scalp the Thallin Starways!" gloated



*Crumpling slowly, Frenchy Lagrieux
toppled into the depths of the abyss
and disappeared.*

SPACE

by J. HARVEY HAGGARD

Keith Randolph Marshall, looking proudly at the carmine clusters that marked new interspace commerce lanes. "You bet! Fifty years to skin old Rufus Thallin's hide! Why, every ship he owns is mine now.

"He's going to come and beg! I've got it figured out. He'll come today, before the foreclosure. He'll be on his knees and I'll like it. He'll want more time on his notes, the ones I bought from mortgage owners long ago. That's another little surprise for him. Right now my secretary is waiting down below, and will send him up."

"You must be very proud," said the

girl listlessly, and the leonine man brought his paces up very short. Pain marked the tycoon's face. Deepening lines went snaking from his puckered brows.

"Eh? I'm proud enough, but I'll never be really happy! That's the bitter edge of crushing an enemy, I guess. I'd give everything I ever owned, turn over every red copper, if I could only make you well again, cure you from the Venus plague. You know that, darling."

Wistful eyes glimmered moistly, and her feeble hands pressed his monstrous one against her cheek.

"As a last resort," bellowed a new voice, "I'd even take you up on that, Marshall! I believe you were expecting me!"

Marshall spun and his gray mane quivered. It angered him to be caught off guard. Glaring past the glistening pyrite cases of interplanetary souvenirs, he saw the doorway. In it stood a man garbed roughly as are those accustomed to space travel, a great fellow fully as large as himself, who had to stoop to get in.

Stalking forward grimly came the mastodonic spaceman, while wellworn asteroid boots cut insolent gashes in the varnished teakwood floors, leaving scars that struck sparks in the owner's outraged eye as he watched the careless advance.

A spectacled secretary thrust his head in at the doorway, panting in an effort to overtake the caller.

"Mr. Rufus Thallin to call upon you," he gasped and withdrew apologetically.

"Mister who?" demanded Marshall.

"Rufus Thallin was my father," announced the young giant softly, and his grey eyes kindled. "They put him away yesterday, scattered his ashes to the infinities he loved. He made me promise to keep the old Thallin Starways going, whatever I did. That's why I'm here."

There was a small spaceship on Marshall's desk, spindle-shaped, a model of the latest Marshall anti-gravity spacer. It was a symbol of power, of survival of the fittest in space. Marshall was shocked by the news, but pretended a sudden interest in the miniature.

He stared through a window over his acres of a vast California rancho. So old Rufe Thallin, lean of girth, leathery of visage, was dead. Queer that he would never face him again. The executive went over to his desk and plopped down in a chair.

"Have a seat, son," he said in a quavering voice that surprised himself. He knew at once it was the wrong tone. Young Rufus had straightened,

had scuffed new chicken tracks into the polished floor.

"Don't call me son!" burst out the young man angrily. "My father told me all about how you've hounded him, underbid all of his contracts, drove his spacers out of business. I'm warning you I'll do anything, anything at all, to get back at you. That's how I feel about it!"

The young whippersnapper! This was more like it. Marshall was glad he wouldn't have to waste sympathy on the young pup.

"Have a stogie, kid," he growled condescendingly, "and don't get huffy! Your old man stuck to out-moded rocket pushers, and I graduated with anti-gravity wings. He always was hard-headed!"

With two clattering steps young Rufus stalked forward and slammed fists down on the desk before Marshall.

"Listen, Marshall!" he snorted. "I know all about that! Don't go over that and rub it in. What do you think I've been doing at California Astro-Tech? I've studied up some good stuff that will make your gravity wings look like rowboats. I've got a propulsion system that will knock weeks off the regular schedule. All I need is a try! I'm asking that you give me a few months' time. With that new drive in performance I'll raise money and pay you back."

In another few minutes this young devil would be on his knees, promising anything, even his soul.

"Too bad, Thallin," said the astral magnate with cold satisfaction. "Can't do a thing for you. We're not flying kites! You played and lost. Take it like a man. If you've really got something good, and can put on a demonstration, I'll handle it at a profit for you—"

He wasn't prepared for the next move. The blonde caller of Nordic dimensions seemed to leap over his desk. One big hand grabbed the lighted cigar and ground it to shreds. The other seized his shirt front.

"You'd like it that way!" he challenged. "Then I'd be penniless, and you could make an easy steal! Nothing doing. I'm not out of the game yet. If I thought I was I'd grab your spindly old neck in my hands and wring it, right now. We'd both go out in grand style."

Sweat popped out on Marshall's forehead. It was hard to tell just how far the young jackanapes would go. Then the wheel chair lurched forward.

"Get back, Thallin," commanded Marshall as a frail hand thrust a flame gun at his caller's middle. "Or I'll tell Alyce to sear you. You're going a little too far with your threats!"

Rufus glanced at the muzzle of the electronic gun, flushed and backed away. The girl, already panting with the exhaustion brought on by excitement and the scant action, let the weapon fall back into her lap. It was hard to think of this shadow of a woman as that young and beautiful society debutante whose pictures had been plastered over all the pleasure bars from Mercury to Pluto. Venus plague strikes without mercy! In less than a year she was but a ghost of that former self.

"Guess I kind of forgot myself," admitted the young man sheepishly. "I sort of owe you an apology, Miss."

"You ought to be jailed," stormed Marshall uncertainly, rising partly to his feet. His big visitor did not cringe.

"You're big and strong," scoffed young Rufus scornfully. "And all puffed up with your own importance. Like a robber baron! Lots of power in your hands, and worlds to tremble at your decisions, but there's some things you're weak at. One thing—"

He looked suggestively at the limp little being in the wheel chair, so pallid and impassive. Her handling of the gun had been almost mechanical and quite without feeling. Marshall swayed, and young Rufus knew he had struck a vital spot.

"Thallin, I'll kill you for that!" he promised brokenly.

"She's your daughter, isn't she?" demanded the blond giant ruthlessly. "And a year ago she was queen of the interplanetary eafes. The doctors that attend her say she'll die in six months. What will you give for her life, Marshall?"

Falling back loosely into the seat, Keith Randolph Marshall began to quiver in every muscle of his body. Because he knew by the other's manner that he was serious.

"I've studied all the tricks of modern medicine," continued Rufus goadingly, "and know all the late practices and kinks. I'm not such a fool at that as I may be at running spacelines in the void!"

"I'll tell you," whispered Marshall savagely, his soul bare for the other's gaze. "And I'll tell you the truth! I'd give every cent I ever owned if she were sound and well. I'd give every spaceship I've got if she had the vitality of your exlike body."

Whirling around, young Rufus pounced without warning, snapped up the flame gun from the girl's lap, and held it before him. Then he began to rock with wild bursts of laughter.

"There's only one chance for her," he chuckled. "It's a cure most doctors, even now, are afraid to speak much about. But I've seen it happen. Out in space, a person's body is permeated with lots of solar rays you never get on Earth. Sometimes unhealthy tissue will heal like magic. The chances are slim, one in a hundred, but they're better than nothing."

Now Marshall's eyes were glazing with horror, and he seemed too paralyzed to move. The other's mockery drove him frantic.

"You wouldn't dare!" he gasped. "The physicians have said the shock on going to space will kill Alyce. It would be plain—murder!"

"You're a man of your word," yelled young Rufus. "I'll take that word. Don't forget that, Marshall! If I ever come back, it'll be to collect!"

With the flame gun held expertly he leaned and scooped the girl's fragile

body up in one powerful arm, then backed slowly away. Reaching the doorway, he leaped out of sight. His pounding feet echoed from down the hallway.

CHAPTER II

TWO LIVES ARE GAMBLLED

STAGGERING toward his desk, Keith Randolph Marshall began to jab at buttons affixed on its top. When servants appeared, he began screaming orders to pursue and apprehend the kidnapper.

Almost unable to breathe from sheer horror, he slumped at a window and gazed into a courtyard below. The big man was springing lightly across the lawn, and the puny wisp of the girl looked a light burden in his massive arms. A last leap, and they went through the open port of the moored space-flyer.

Spurts of flame came from smoky rear jets. A sound like thunder rolled into being, shaking the house and rattling the windows. For an instant the space-flyer was cushioned on a turmoil of flames. Jets beneath the prow tilted the nose upward. Then it darted swiftly into the heavens.

People over the solar system called the grizzled old man a dictator of the spacelanes, yet it would have been hard, even for a close acquaintance, to recognize Keith Randolph Marshall in the broken man who now stooped over the tele-panels, pleading for a wireless connection with the Space Police Bureau.

His next connection went through to a Dr. Haliburton, in the Medical Towers Building of San Francisco. Marshall was calmer now, but controlled himself only with an effort.

The mirror cleared to reveal a tall man in laboratory apron, bent absorbedly over a retort. As the features turned to Marshall, a look of surprise gleamed behind gold-rimmed glasses and he tugged at the point of a distinguishing Van Dyke beard.

"What's wrong, Mr. Marshall?" he demanded. "Is Alyce ill—"

"Everything!" gasped Keith Randolph Marshall. "I'll explain later. Tell me, do you know young Rufus Thallin?"

"Indeed I do," responded the scientist with a frown. "I've been in private practise for several years since leaving the faculty of California School of Technology. An excellent pupil. Aptness for medicine. A future for him there, if he wants it . . ."

"Since you speak of it," went on Dr. Haliburton curiously, "he was here only yesterday to talk over old times."

Marshall was tense as spring steel now and trying hard to conceal his extreme excitement.

"Then he's pretty good in a medical way?" he wanted to know savagely.

"Pretty good is no word for it!" exclaimed Dr. Haliburton. "Why, I saw him do a plastic operation once that would have stumped an old hand at surgery. It was on a Venus expedition of the faculty, and a man had become drunk and staggered into a grove of leper-plants. The flesh was peeling from both hands, and Rufus operated—with only a native dirk, mind you! He grafted plastic protoplasm to the tendons and saved both hands. An exceptionally fine bit of surgery . . ."

"Just what," demanded the dictator of spacelanes, "does he know about the Venus plague?"

Dark eyes narrowed and sparkled through the transparent lenses.

"Blue virus!" he exclaimed. "He's very interested. We discussed it at length, and also went over the records of your daughter's case. I gave her six months to live, as you know, and he—"

"That damned devil!" snorted Marshall in uncontrolled rage. "He was planning it all the time. Now he's kidnapped her and taken her to space."

For a moment the physician was stunned. He went quietly to a cabinet case and jerked open a drawer. His

face above the beard became ashen.

"Her case records are gone," he said dazedly. "You must be right."

Incoherently, Marshall poured forth the story, and the savant listened incredulously, tugging at his trim beard.

"If she dies," shouted Marshall, swinging his fist, "he'll pay for it in the atomic blast chamber, with his life."

When the telecaster was silent, Dr. Haliburton stood for a long while, merely staring.

"No other would have dared!" he whispered awedly. "And there is a chance, a tiny chance. He risked his life on it. How I wish I had his courage!"

RUFUS THALLIN was afraid neither of his pursuers nor of their bullets as he fled from the Marshall manor. Not as long as the precious little bundle in his arms held the dim spark that was heir to the Marshall millions. Widely opened blue eyes were peering up at him, but not with fear. Only with a strange wonder that bordered on mental stupor.

"Don't be frightened," said young Rufus as they lumbered into the port aperture of the space flyer. "I'm not going to hurt you."

He laid her on a pendant space cushion and she did not struggle.

"I'm not frightened," she said in a leaden tone. "All you could do is kill me. And I am not afraid of death. Neither would you harm me bodily, since I am no longer attractive as other girls are."

Hand on the controls, Rufus faltered, looking back at the tumbled maze of glinty hair.

"Whoever told you that?" he demanded, feeling poignantly sorry for her for the first time. Up until the present instant, he had considered her impersonally, rather as a key or possible solution for his own troubles. It made him aware of the tremendous risks he was taking with her life. Yet it was too late to back out now.

Under his guidance, the space-flyer lurched up at the sky, hurled itself through the thinning blue stratosphere and smoked a fast trail for the outer depths of space.

Strange, or was it?—that up till now he had thought only of that final memory of his gaunt death-beckoned father, of the promise he had made looking into the stern exactness of fading eyes.

When young Rufus swore he would keep the Thallin Starways going, would preserve that proud tradition that went back to former times when the first gallant rocket-ships bellowed like fire-breathing monsters and hurtled fearlessly into the void, he had meant every word of it.

His feelings changed. Again the girl was only a pawn. Everything else had failed. He had seized upon her and the sickness that lay prey to her body as a means toward an end. He felt that there was a good chance of her being cured when exposed to the healing rays of the void. He was gambling not only her life, but his own as well. For if he failed in his mission the Space Police would hound him to an eventual ignoble end.

In the visor screens, earth was falling away swiftly. As he watched a scattering of dots appeared, drifted slowly across the face of the globe into space. Police craft, of course.

The girl's pale face was watching and he knew that she also was aware of the pursuit. To those who followed their spaceship could be but a dwindling mote that floated out of place in the pattern of encircling stars.

Yet they had him! He read that conviction deep in her listless eyes. The jaws of a gigantic trap were closing down about him in space. With the superior speed of the Marshall gravity-impelled speedsters, overhauling was certain, and then it would be a mere matter of clamping him in magnetic grapples and making up a forced boarding party in space toggings.

He pushed the controls down, built

the discharge blasts to their limit, and mopped sweat from his brow.

"They'll catch you, won't they?" He was surprised at the limpid words. Alyce was lying on the swinging spring-couch, watching him in a detached lethargy.

"Good girl!" he exclaimed jubilantly. Her faint interest was evidence that there was still sap left in her body. "No, I don't think they'll catch us. Now, don't move around and exert yourself. Just remember that I'm your doctor now, and a pretty good doctor at that."

Right now those radiant, penetrating rays might be going through the hulls of the ship, passing through diseased cell tissue, rearranging the cellular patterns. He was determined not to frighten her. Words might soothe her. So he pointed to the dots in the rear vision screens, which were becoming larger.

"They're getting closer! That's because they're using the gravity repulsion system, and I'm still using rockets. The rockets are on full blast. There are about ten police ships hot on my trail. If I depended entirely on rocket blasts, I'd never get away from anti-gravity chasers."

As he spoke he was engrossed in making changes on the oval mechanism board.

"My new drive doesn't use an explosive blast," he explained. "The fuel doesn't explode, but changes into primitive radiation! This radiation shimmers away—at almost the speed of light. Due to its increased mass with its enormous velocity, it will exert an enormous force in the opposite direction."

An instrument on the board cackled, and he flipped a switch. A telescreen began to lighten. Those pursuit spacers were dangerously close now. Close enough to see uniformed men standing on their bridges, peering through glassite. From the nearest cylindrical shape a long tentacle was shot forth.

Magnetic grapple! It slithered past

the front cowling of his space flyer, looped out and whipcracked back. If it had fastened to the outer beryllium hull, escape would have become impossible. Through transparent portes on all sides he saw the bulky noses of the Space Police ringing him in. Many eyes were watching him over the sights of grapple rockets.

Big Rufus Thallin grinned, turned and waved goodbye through the nearest port, then slammed a power throttle down.

"So long . . . Howling Jupiter! What a jolt!"

Long trailers of flame vanished behind his jets. Now only a shimmering column of radiant force appeared. Rufus was jerked back against the seat. It was as though the space-flyer had just scooted into motion from a standstill.

One startled glance told him that the girl had passed into a coma. Jerking himself upright, he began to fight the throttle, which was jammed to the last notch and held there by the motion of swift acceleration.

In the nearest police craft a top-notch pilot was staring with popping eyes as the fugitive craft leaped ahead.

"Great blazing Antares!" exploded the "ace" spaceman, following the departing space-ship with his eyes. "Where'd he get that power? Lordy me, what speed!"

"Feed the juice into this star wagon!" groaned a Space Police commander, deeply chagrined. "He's got some new propelling force that has everything beat."

"They're getting away," gritted the pilot bitterly. "They're getting away, and we can't do a thing. All we can do is stand here and watch while that crazy man escapes to space with the poor girl."

In the craft ahead, Rufus' body was pulling away from the throttle. Blood was clogging up in his respiratory system. Though his breathing was smothered he held on grimly. The throttle snapped and he catapulted in

a wild heap across the control room, smashing against a wall.

A sickening knowledge swept him. The lever had snapped at a crystallized joint, and was of no use now. He dropped it and went crawling across the floor on all fours.

Alarmed by the smoothness of the space-flyer's motion, he shot a fearful glance up at the accelerometer, to find the needle floating at zero. The power-thrust of radiant force had ceased as quickly as it had come into being.

It took little effort to get to his feet now. The police craft had kept on his trail and were gaining again. Automatically he reached out and snapped the rocket blastors into action to steady his spaceship. With the new propulsor disabled, he could only coast along with his newly gained momentum. The police ships were getting big again on the visor screens.

CHAPTER III

AN OLD FRIEND

HE reached for the flame gun at his belt, then glanced at the pale features of the girl on the swinging couch. No, it wouldn't do. He wouldn't resist when they boarded. They'd get him in the end and it would only endanger her life foolishly.

A chattering of the space wireless signal told him he was being contacted for communication.

Heart sinking, he plugged in, cutting in a serried bank of glowing tubes. Static rattled, and a mottled picture began to form.

"That's odd!" he told himself. "They didn't try to contact me before. And odd because those police are blue devils for radio wizardry. I've never seen their power so low!"

A pleased chuckle came from an amplifier.

"Don't worry none, Doc," the hoarse voice continued. "It ain't th' coppers! Hell, my televiz panel's not so hot, but I like 'em that way."

Murky on the reforming mirror, he saw a dark visage with keen piercing eyes, a tiny mustache over a cruel hyphen of a mouth. The features were vaguely familiar.

"Who are you?" he demanded of his mysterious caller. "And where are you calling from?"

"My name's Frenchy Logrieux!" spoke the black image. "We're up ahead of you, some fifty space-ships, and every one a battler. The police won't dare come up to us, so just head your space-flyer into our middle, Doc. Look here, Doc, remember these!" Great hamlike hands were thrust before the televisior screen. Scarred and misshapen, the flesh had obviously been grafted back to the tendons.

"Venus Colony!" exclaimed Rufus Thallin amazedly. "And the leprous fang-weeds. Now I remember you, Frenchy."

"Sure you do," grinned the slit of a mouth. "And I ain't never forgot a young doc by the name of Thallin. When I hears the police broadcast, giving out that you'd kidnapped ye a wench and made off wid her, I says, now he's after yer own heart, Frenchy. I got a bit of sparkle for romance in me blood, and here's a good half hundred stout spaceships flyin' the skull and crossbones that'll see you through, Doc, till high hell freezes over."

"Okay," returned Rufus Thallin. "I'll make a run for you. Give me your position, and I'll split right through."

He sighted the cluster of dark hulks against a darker background of space, but he also sighted the police craft, moving near again and preparing to fire out their magnetic hooks. Pushing a starboard jet-throttle down, Rufus corrected his angle of flight, losing a precious bit of momentum as he did so, heading his space-flyer straight for the pirate craft.

The space police were drifting away in the rear. Temporarily, their pursuit would be ended. It was impossible

that they had not noticed the large flotilla of piratical spaceships ahead. To have tried to break through would have been sheer folly.

The black spindular hulls held a rough circle formation. Rufus aimed the prow of his spacer through them and flashed beyond. Ahead of them was the dull grayness of open space.

He was hardly aware that the futuristic image of Frenchy Logrieux was still on an upper panel, and that the keen piercing eyes were flashing rapidly over the interior, coming to rest at last on the motionless shape of Alyce Marshall.

"Right nice little space-flyer ye got there, Doc," chuckled the space buccaneer. "Care to join up with a bunch of me hearties?"

"No thanks, Frenchy," answered Rufus Thallin, waving farewell. "This makes us even."

"Sure thing, Doc," said Frenchy Logrieux, smirking significantly toward the bed. "I got a streak for frills meself. Happy voyage, Doc, and I can't say I care much for yer taste fer wenches."

The image faded and Rufus Thallin said nothing. He had no relish for the idea of being obligated to a pirate. He was glad that his score was even with Frenchy Logrieux.

Ahead of him, a black planet was swimming out of the void. Dark and foreboding, that lustreless sphere had an evil repute throughout the solar system. It was a barren, lifeless world, and one to be avoided by living creatures. Rufus Thallin headed the spacer in that direction. He knew that it was Pluto.

Repairs were made, and Pluto was far in the shimmering wake of the improved radiotron—again an opalescent beam of pure radiation hurled the space-flyer into the astral depths at speeds his accelerometer was incapable of registering.

The outside planets, discovered only during the last decade, came and went. Tiny Minerva, like an icy pearl under its coating of liquid air, whisked by.

The black spongy mass of huge Seigfried, a burned-out hulk of a world, lumbered to the rearward. Then at last huge Hermes, the outer guardian, with its monstrous satellite Cerberus, hove into view. A sentinel and his watch-dog.

Now they were in open space, with only the vast abysses beyond. Days flickered by rapidly. The sunlight, so much fainter now, was collected by huge mirrors and thrown into the front compartment of the space-flyer, where Rufus Thallin had rigged curtains to give the girl privacy when she slept. Days were marching by unmarked—for here in space there was no beginning and no end—only the roll and sway of the spaceship as it plunged on and on.

Rufus Thallin was fighting the battle of his life, despite the extraspacial serenity. Not with actual, living opponents. That was what made his struggle so hard. He couldn't get his big fists on the blue virus that made diseased flesh look like jelly in a strong sunlight.

Always there was the grim knowledge that behind them the pursuit would never end. Though the Space Police had been thrown off the trail, they would be questing even now for new leads, new spoors that might send them speeding in the wake of the space-flyer, even here in this Stygian depth of outer space.

Of course he had a watch to measure hours. He used it to plot a diet of synthetic foods for the girl, and followed it religiously. He was not so careful with his own.

Her spark of life was still glowing, though dimly. It needed kindling. New energies must build that spark to a flame, but those energies could not be fed from the outside.

He could take a microscope and look deep into her body, see the arteries pulsate, watch the slow rivers of great veins heading back toward her heart. But the virus, if such it was, remained invisible, a skulking menace he could only sense. A menace vulnerable, as

he knew, only to the mysterious radiations that came out of the macrocosmos.

Yet before nature began its healing work that inner spark, the vital "will" to live, must be nurtured. The body itself would only respond when her desire to continue life had been instilled. And that would never be when she lay in that perpetual coma, not caring whether she lived or died.

He began to plot desperately, knowing that this twilight state would not last forever. Perhaps the sound of a loved one's voice, the awakening of old memories of earth, would reach through the gloom and arouse her lethargic brain. At least it was worth a chance.

The curtains across the control room were shoved back against the wall. He was sitting nonchalantly before the mechanisms when the space-wireless began to sputter, roar harsh words.

"This is ZIX, Earth Space Station in San Francisco!" shouted the amplifier. "Tonight we are cutting into our regular programs so that a frightened, sick old man can make a last desperate appeal over the ether. To ships of space, and especially to one pirate craft on whose board is a kidnaper, we give you the voice of Keith Randolph Marshall!"

The thin face against the coverlet had moved. The eyes were wide and staring, watching him. He hoped desperately that she was listening as well.

Over the space wireless a familiar voice began speaking, vibrantly but brokenly.

"I am hoping that Rufus Thallin, kidnaper of my daughter, will hear me now. If you do, you will know that your crime will be forgotten if you return my little girl to me. She is all that I have, all that I have ever loved. Somehow, against my better judgment, I feel that she is still alive. Bring her back to me, and you may have my pledge. Every spacer of the Marshall Spacelines will be turned over to you."

The announcer's voice, booming and sympathetic, cut back in, "So you have heard the final plea of a tired old man, whose health has been broken and is under the constant care of doctors, who is hoping against hope that a miracle may be achieved, and the hard heart of a criminal softened by a father's plea..."

Alyce was moving. He didn't dare look, as he pretended to deliberate the words from the radio, then stalked across the metal floor slowly. He snapped the switch on the announcer's voice, then wheeled about.

She was standing there, a frail phantom, but her eyes were like jets of flame. Terrible hate burned from the wasted contours. Now she was tottering toward a wall, with one hand reaching where a holstered flame-gun was hung. The weapon was too high. Upon this realization, she collapsed.

Rufus caught her in his arms, returned her to the couch. There he administered a sleeping gas. Even after that brief exertion she must have rest.

But he was exuberant. Seized with unbearable emotions of delight, he grabbed the controls and sent the space-flyer in dizzy spirals and crazy patterns while the girl lay sleeping.

His scheme had been triumphant, though not as he had expected. A tiny mechanism, unrolling a strip of celluloid film, had been buried on the space wireless, and a beam of light had carried his clever imitation of voices from the supposed broadcast.

The spark of life was being fanned, not by an emotion aroused from the sound of a familiar voice, but from hate. She had seen him standing there, uncaring, with a grin on his face, and she had wanted to kill him. Wanted to do it so badly that she had wasted her last bit of strength when her eye chanced to fall on the flame-gun.

Rufus Thallin chuckled. He hadn't planned that she should hate him so terribly, but that would do just as well. It would give her a reason for living.

There was a terrestrial calendar in

the bottom of a cabinet drawer. At its top was a picture of a nearly nude beautiful girl, poised over the waters of a moonlit lake. Laughing hoarsely, the earthman began ripping the months away, one by one. At last he came to a sheet encircled by a ring of crimson. That meant death for Alyce. That was the deadline set by the physicians who had made their examinations on earth.

His big hand continued to jerk away at the month sheets, until the calendar year was bare, and only the picture of the alluring girl beckoned at him from the calendar. It would be a great joke on those brilliant savants. For the six months had gone by—and as many more.

And Alyce Marshall had just learned to hate.

CHAPTER IV

SPACE THE HEALER

THERE were a hundred ways to build hate in the mind of the convalescent, and Rufus Thallin used them all. He circled back among the worlds of the planetary system, and began skirting the habitable planets to arouse her curiosity. That was the way he encountered Frenchy Logrieux again.

Luck had not gone well with the little pirate. Several rash encounters with armed merchantmen had cost many piratical lives. There had been no plunder, and much grumbling had ensued among the remaining buccaneers. The ships began to split up into small groups and drift apart. Finally his own quarter-deck was the scene of a bloody mutiny. His officers had been butchered and Frenchy Logrieux was abandoned on Cerberus.

He was sitting on the edge of a big spire of glassy rock, overhanging a gulf, when the space-flyer landed. Weeks of exposure to the weather, of living on fruits and tubers, had given him the appearance of a wild man.

"*Nom du Nom*," he had screamed

with delight, flinging himself bodily against a glassite porte. "But it's me old friend, the Doc! How's the kidnaper? And this little wench that ye—"

He paused uncertainly, having lurched over the threshold, for the woman sitting quietly on the edge of the bed was surely not that wretched, pitiable slip of a human being he had glimpsed on the sick-bed months ago. To Frenchy's mind, this was a creature of Heaven's fashioning, a graceful feminine being such as he had never seen outside of Paris, and he could never return there. Such of her rounded limbs as he saw were flushed with glowing health. The eyes were of a cerulean blue as seen only on earth. Yet the cascading wealth of cloudy hair was the same.

"This lydee, I mean," he stammered. "Why, where'd ye get her, Doc? She's class, she is! A beauty if I ever see one—jes' like a dream, if ye don't mind my sayin'—"

Rufus Thallin rose from his seat and frowned irritably. He had seen the pleased smile flicker over the woman's face. It might have been hard for him to explain his own irritation.

"I'm certain the lady doesn't care to hear of it," he said gruffly. Alyce shot him a malignant glance.

"Oh, but I do!" she cried indignantly. "And the man is human, just as I am human, though you treat me like a dog."

"Come on outside, Frenchy," snapped Rufus angrily. "I want to talk to you." The amazed pirate followed him into the chilled gloom of the Cerberusian landscape.

"She hates me!" he explained hurriedly. "And it's necessary that she keeps on hating me. Sometimes she tries to kill me, and she always keeps plotting—"

"Oh yeh?" grated Frenchy Logrieux, bringing his big doughy hands up in a strangling motion. "Whyn't ye give her this, Doc? The best lookin' wench in the world won't do that to Frenchy. I'll fix her up good and

proper, Doc, if ye'll only get me back to a little asteroid I know of—"

"Keep your hands off her!" commanded Rufus, shuddering a bit as the scarred hands fell on his metallin shirt. "And we'll see about the other."

Shaved and freshly clothed, Frenchy Logrieux was handsome in a dark furtive way. His gallantry and thinly veiled compliments seemed to amuse Alyce Marshall, yet they drove Rufus Thallin into a silent fury. He resolved that the space-flyer would leave Cerberus without Frenchy Logrieux, and that was all there was to it.

He needed a fresh water supply for the space-flyer. It had landed in a big valley of tremendous naked rocks. Each night it rained on Cerberus and the water flowed into a large crystal pool at the other end of the valley. Frenchy showed him a path leading down to the water.

"Ought to do, after it's distilled," commented Rufus, bending over to examine the chemical rings deposited on the rock by higher water levels. It was Frenchy's opportunity. Rufus saw the swart features in the pool's reflection, then felt the shock of a blow that hurled him down into the deep pool.

He sank swiftly, for the water was not as heavy as that of earth. Long arms pumped like pistons, stirring up filmy clouds of white silt from the submarine floor. But he quit struggling. No use trying to swim in that thin fluid. He'd have to climb!

Lungs near to bursting, he jammed his hands into the crevices of the precipitous walls and began to pull upward. His fingers tore on knife-edged formations of lime and silicate, leaving crimson smears in the water below, but he kept climbing.

At last his head broke water and he gulped in precious lungfuls of rarefied atmosphere. Frenchy Logrieux was nowhere in sight. The thin air was being split by a clap of thunder. Rocket blasts!

Dripping water, he lurched up

along the trail, his bleeding fists clenched at his sides. Young Rufus Thallin had cast off his exhaustion with his first few lungfuls of air, and as he raced up the broken trail of glassen fragments his grim face became as dark as a thundercloud.

He saw the space-flyer, cushioned on its jets of rocket blasts, could make out Frenchy's dark face hovered over the controls. Then the flames died away with a final swoosh and the space cruiser settled. The pirate was fighting the controls insanely, his nervous fingers flying everywhere in an effort to get a response from the rockets.

Rufus darted across the blackened rock, still warm from those first flame spurts, and his big fingers searched deftly along the outer rim of the airlock. Both the inner and outer doors of the airlock slammed open. The girl was lying on the bed, her arms and legs having been bound hurriedly from strips of her torn skirt.

Now he halted in the doorway, shouted for the pirate to come out.

"I've got a gun, Frenchy!" he yelled. "Come out with your flippers in the air, if you want to live! You didn't think I'd leave the space-flyer so you could run it, did you?"

A roaring figure came out suddenly. Frenchy had a knife in one large crooked hand and was going to chance the ray. Rufus pulled the trigger of the flame-gun, but it had become jammed with silt in the sandy floor of the pool. He used it to parry the metal that darted down toward his heart.

Arms interlocked, they went hurtling from the airlock to the black table of lavalike rock. The smashing jar of collision wrenched their bodies apart. For a moment the pirate seemed about to flee, and Rufus would have let him go. Then the beady eyes fastened upon the space cruiser, and he came for Rufus swinging. One of them would go back to earth with the girl. Frenchy Logrieux didn't intend to spend the rest of his life as a cast-away.

So the pirate came forward furiously, hacking the air before him with the long knife, and big Rufus Thallin backed slowly away. He was not fool enough to walk in close where Frenchy's snaking blade could find a vital spot. He was being backed up a slow incline to the edge of the precipitous spire where the pirate had been perched when they came. His footing narrowed to a mere ledge, with precarious depths to either side. Soon he would be able to retreat no more.

Glancing hurriedly about, he saw another parallel spire jutting over the gulf, some ten feet away. Poising quickly, Rufus leaped across the intervening gulf and landed catlike. Then he began to run down the incline toward the cruiser.

Frenchy Logrieux's blade was out of reach now, but he took a chance, poised for a moment, and hurled his weapon in a glittering streak. Expecting this move, young Rufus dragged his toe in the rugged slope, fell to his hands and knees. The blade clattered off into lower depths.

It is the unexpected that counts for most in a struggle. That was why Rufus Thallin spun around and again leaped the gulf between the twin glassy spires that overlooked the precipice. As he landed, his big fist shot out like a hammer, landing squarely on the swarthy chin.

Crumpling slowly, Frenchy tottered over into the depths and disappeared.

When Rufus went back up the trail he saw Alyce Marshall, standing in the outer porte. She had managed to free herself of the hasty bonds and was watching him strangely. He shook her away as she came to help apply bandages to a bleeding gash on his arm.

Alyce Marshall stamped a slender foot and her face became livid with cold fury.

"You heartless devil!" she shrieked. "I wish he'd killed you! He at least had the desire to be a decent, respectable citizen again, even if you—"

Rufus had frozen as the import of her words reached his mind, was watching her. She gasped to a stop, looked startled. He came closer to her, his eyes narrowed and suspicious. She glanced fleetingly toward the space wireless, and that stopped his advance.

"The dirty rat!" he cried wrathfully. "He communicated with the space police. Offered to sell me out, if they'd give him a fresh start. He did that, didn't he, and they made a deal with him? Of course they'd do that!"

She was not retreating and her little head was held high.

"Other people besides you can make bargains!" she cried. "And they'd have kept them with Frenchy Logrieux, even as my father would keep your bargain. Why don't you take me back to earth now? I'm not ill any longer, and I'm certain you can buy any number of sleek space-ships in return for my body."

"Well, why shouldn't I?" demanded Rufus furiously. "That's what I intended to do when we came here. If your father lives up to his word that is just what is going to happen!"

"Don't worry about my father!" burst out Alyce Marshall proudly. "He'll pay everything he promised. And I don't like to hear you cast evil reflections about him in everything you say. He said he'd give every space cruiser he had if I were sound and well again, and he'll do it, if you ask him to."

"What makes you think I won't?" demanded Rufus, striding for the controls. "At least I'm not going to be fool enough to wait here for the space police to come and trap me."

CHAPTER V

LUNAR RENDEZVOUS

LONG crater shadows were crawling across the dead seas of Luna. In the very edge of those long shadows which moved so slowly, tiny phosphorescent wrigglers, the only form of

life on the satellite, kept pace with the strange twilight of this slow dusk.

A cold, frigid world was the moon, passing into the dusk of existence, even as the month-old day was passing from the dead seas.

From out of space something moved, a silver dart that came twisting out of the reflected sunlight and leveled out in a long gravitational glide over the dead Sea of Serenity.

At last it swooped down, landed on a high ledge that was almost obscured by jetty walls that went ever higher and higher, to end brokenly where the last lingering rays of moonset made crowns of foamy refraction.

A man in a fat, grubby spacesuit of metallin came from a porte, gazed around, and having sighted a dim glow of light, went warily toward where the black wall was indented with a deep grotto. He stepped on the threshold, saw an atomic lantern glowing in the hand of a waiting figure, also clad in spacetogs.

"Rufus!" called the newcomer excitedly. "That you, Rufus?"

"Yes, Dr. Haliburton," returned Rufus Thallin. "Where's Marshall? Wouldn't he come?"

"Oh, yes," replied Dr. Haliburton, who was having the dickens of a time keeping his gold-rimmed spectacles on inside of his helmet. "He came all right. But he wanted me to make certain you were here."

"Go bring him," said Rufus Thallin. "I trust you, Dr. Haliburton, but I'm not so certain about Keith Randolph Marshall. Did he come prepared to complete the—bargain?"

The spaceclad man turned. He saw the academic features of the physician but dimly.

"He came with a property deed to every space-ship he has," said Dr. Haliburton. "I think you'll find that Marshall is a man who always keeps his word, no matter how the bargain is made."

Rufus Thallin made no answer but stood holding the atomic lantern until two spaceclad figures walked from the

space-flyer and came toward him. The faceplate of the larger helmet was turned into the lantern's glow and he made out the massive, aquiline countenance of Keith Randolph Marshall, glaring at him.

"You remember our bargain?" he asked curtly through the space-phones.

Marshall shook a leathern pack of documents in his metal-gloved hand.

"I remember," he muttered hoarsely. "And if Alyce is completely recovered, as you say she is, I will sign every space-liner I own over to you."

"Very well," said Rufus Thallin. "Follow me."

He led them down a curving corridor carved from solid volcanic rock, and at length emerged into a gigantic cavern. The floor of the cavern ended abruptly in a ledge that fell sheer into black depths. Perched on the brink of the black abyss was Rufus Thallin's space-flyer. No hint as to how it had been transported here could be gained from the black unfathomable shadows that girded it around.

Alyce was waiting inside. She was beautiful in that happy moment of reunion, vastly more beautiful than mere words could have told, and her blue eyes were radiant with expectant joy. The tall spaceclad man ran ahead eagerly and clambered through the aperture of an airlock.

Rufus felt Dr. Haliburton's gauntleted hand on his arm.

"Perhaps they'd rather be left alone," he said. "Remember, they'll be like strangers almost, meeting for the first time." Through a port they could see the big man, now without the upper portion of his space suiting, and the girl sobbing on his shoulder.

"You have done a wonderful thing," said Dr. Haliburton enviously. "Alyce is completely transformed. Rufus, there is some magical quality about the outer rays of cosmic space. If we could pin it down, we'd make enormous strides in preserving eternal health for the human body."

The young giant was looking up into

black vaults. When he spoke his eyes were dreamy.

"I can see them now," he whispered. "Big cruisers, done over with the new radiotron drive, whisking across the gulfs as though they were nothing. The Thallin Starways will blaze an eternal trail across interplanetary space. Dad would have liked it that way."

Dr. Haliburton sighed. "If only you'd think more of science, and not of—"

Rufus Thallin was no longer listening. He had whirled around and was peering into the indigo blackness of the cavern from which they had come.

"My nerves," he said at length. "I guess I'm jumpy. Let's go in now. I want a talk with Keith Randolph Marshall."

He waited for the slighter figure of the doctor to enter the airlock, waited until the inner sigh of atmosphere told he was inside. All of the while, Rufus stood tense, peering into a blackness that was so thick it was like a cushion. Then he, too, went through the airlock.

His metal arms moved swiftly, unfastening the middle of his space toggling. Keith Randolph Marshall was signing a bunch of papers against a beryllium strut.

"Here," he grunted, screwing up his fountain pen and returning it to his coat pocket, "They're yours, every space scuttler! The Marshall lines are yours, lock, stock and barrel."

"I told you father would keep his bargain," said Alyce Marshall, clinging to the arm of the erstwhile dictator of the spacelanes. "I only hope he never regrets it."

"He won't," said Rufus drily. "He won't, because I'll never get hold of them."

Another helmet fastening came loose and the slender upper body of Dr. Haliburton appeared. He adjusted his glasses hurriedly and glared at Rufus Thallin. A strange smile of triumph lingered on the heavy lips of Keith Randolph Marshall.

"Don't mind him, Alyce," said Marshall. "I've kept my bargain. Next week, after you've rested, I'm going to stage a coming out party for you. He has the papers, hasn't he? Come on. Let's get out."

"Wait a minute!" cried Rufus sharply. "Yes, I have the papers. But they'd never let me file them, not with charges of kidnaping against me. And once convicted, a thing your lawyers could see to, it would be illegal for me to own any property in space! Isn't that true, Marshall?"

The space commerce king shrugged his shoulders.

"Its truth does not concern our bargain," he began evasively.

"Nor do the space police who followed you," went on Rufus calmly.

"What's that?" demanded Dr. Haliburton. "I assure you, we came in utmost secrecy, and that—" He stopped, having seen the plain guilt on the face of Keith Randolph Marshall.

"Oh, damn the man!" stormed Marshall angrily. "What if I did? I'm a man of my word, and he's a man of his. Yes, your jig is up! You might as well give yourself up quietly, Rufus."

Marshall's hand came up from the lower part of his space suiting, holding a flame-gun that was pointed at Rufus Thallin, but that young man was no longer there. Leaping with all of his strength, he dove clear across the room. His shoulders struck the metal suiting and the gun flew from Marshall's hand.

One balled fist came up to a defensive position, kept on going. Rufus followed it with another, a straight punch that carried his full weight behind it. Keith Randolph Marshall went down. He wasn't out, but when he looked into the face of the man standing over him, he stayed down.

"Get out!" snorted Rufus furiously. "Get your spacetogs on and get out before I really do commit murder. Go out to your precious, skulking space coppers. And just let them try to take me—alive!"

He picked up the flame-gun where Marshall had dropped it and watched the three of them as they fastened space toggings about their bodies. Marshall was the first to go through the airlock. Dr. Haliburton, looking slightly dazed, went next. There was only room for one of them at a time.

Alyce Marshall stood hesitant, waiting for the hiss of escaping gas that would be the signal for her turn. As she did Rufus Thallin stalked to her side, wrenched loose the upper fastening of her spacetogs. When her face came free he brushed back her tangled hair and kissed the exposed lips savagely.

"That wasn't in the bargain either!" he ground out furiously, and spun on his heel.

She was gone. He sat at the controls and waited. She would be going from the outer door of the lock now, and the space police would be creeping nearer. Perhaps Alyce would tell them how he had gained entrance to the cavern, but by that time, it would be too late.

His hand flickered over the controls. A low thunder shook the space-flyer. On the outside a seething cushion of flames would be supporting it. Through the glassite he glimpsed retreating figures, saw the cavern abruptly become as light as day.

The space-flyer floated out over the edge of the abyss and dropped. It descended straight for three miles, then followed the curl of the titanic crevice toward the horizontal. Ancient civilized men had shaped the upper cavern, men of a lost generation, but this titanic lower abyss was a fault created by nature herself.

Rocket flames cast a weird illumination on the monstrous grotto, sent grotesque shadows leaping far ahead. The volcanic walls fell away from either side and were gone. Overhead he glimpsed crusty stars that twinkled like diamonds. On all sides were high black walls. The space-flyer had emerged in the giant crater called Copernicus.

The down-lash of flames became more furious, lifted the spacer high. Prow jets spat additional flames and sent the nose of the space-flyer angling vertically toward the dim, dark regions of outer space.

It held poised on the maelstrom of unleashed flame for an instant like a living thing of metal. He reached down, snapped on the radiation propulsion beam. Instantly the space-flyer began to accelerate.

The dark side of the moon was cleft asunder by a puff of high flame that lingered for a moment and then was gone. Only a thin column of shimmering light rose, slim and tall and straight. On its peak a space-flyer was hurtling on its way.

Rufus Thallin leaned back in his leathern pilot seat and relaxed. He felt very, very tired. A clicking sound aroused him. He turned to see a space-clad figure emerging from the airlock.

The helmet came away and she emerged from the spacesuit like a butterfly from a cocoon.

"You—you didn't give me time," said Alyce Marshall, evading his eyes.

"Look here!" snorted Rufus Thallin. "There was plenty of time to get out of the lock. What were you doing in there all of that time?"

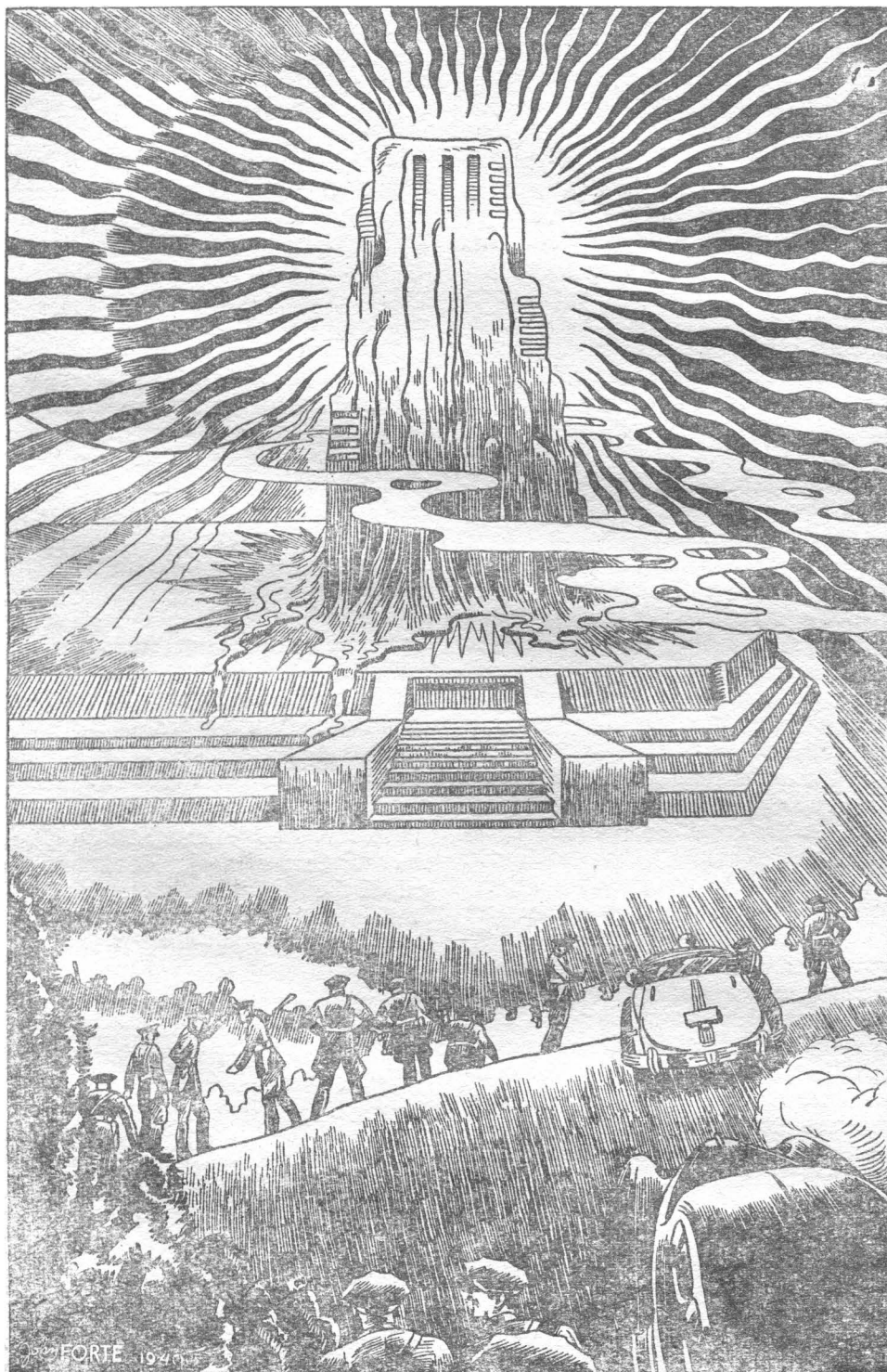
"Thinking," answered Alyce, folding the spacesuit neatly and putting it into place on a nearby rack. "And it was your own fault, Rufus Thallin. It was on account of what you did just before—before—"

"Anyway, I was thinking that you had deliberately made me hate you all along. But you overdid it, Rufus. Did anyone ever tell you how closely related are the emotions of extreme hate and the emotions of extreme—"

"Extreme what?" demanded Rufus Thallin in incredulous amazement.

"We can pull through anything, Rufus, if we hold out—together."

"Together, Alyce?" he whispered. "You mean it that way? Why, together we could lick the universe."



*Another explosion! Another! The tower seemed to lean forward—the steel was melting—
running away in little streams—*

DARK REALITY

by ROBERT MOORE WILLIAMS

Out of a future too dimly discerned to be comprehensible one was chosen. Why—no one knew or could know.

SLOWLY, wearily, the yellow sun went down the sky. From the east the night came on, as dark and as deep as the night that has no ending.

The last rays of the sun washed down over the planet, over the low rounded hills and the trees that grew on them, through the shallow valleys where the grass grew rank and luxurious. The last songs of the birds came undisturbed through the dusk. A deer snorted. From somewhere came the bark of another animal, a bark that ended in a howl, long-drawn and mournful.

Dawn world or dusk world?

The night flowed into the valleys, filled them with a mystic darkness. The darkness crept to the tops of the low hills. Slowly it crept around a huge ball that rested on top of the nearer hill. The ball, perhaps fifty feet in diameter, lifted a foot from the ground. It quivered, lifted two feet, then slowly settled back to earth.

The darkness came in around it, touched it, hid it from sight.

Lee Garth twisted in his chair. Wearily he laid the pencil down. The equations wouldn't work right. They kept trying to run off into impossible combinations. There was an erratic but persistent gadfly of thought buzzing in his mind, a vague shadowy movement in his brain. Like a ghost from shadow-land it twisted through his brain, twisting through the dark convolutions where his memory lay testing the open synapses, seeking a place where a short circuit would result in action.

Fretfully, Lee Garth picked up the

pencil. But there was a thinking in his mind, a formless thinking that was somehow purposeful. He sensed the import of that purpose. Tiny chills ran over his body, tiny rivers of icy cold. His fingers trembled. The pencil moved over the page. Garth was first puzzled, then perturbed, then lost in a vast unease.

Here and there upon this earth are fields where men, looking backward, see how the stream of history shifted.

There is a field in Greece.

XERXES gave his orders to his captains. He waited while his host was led forth. Footmen, archers, men with slings. The cavalry would not be of value, for the barbarians, up there, where in a narrow mountain pass. It did not matter. The light-armed troops were more than capable of dispelling these wild tribesmen. By noon, or the middle of the afternoon, the way would be clear to the peninsula beyond. Thus reasoned Xerxes.

When the night came the barbarians were still holding. Tomorrow, Xerxes thought, his troops would be victorious.

Tomorrow came and fresh troops went forth. And eventually the news came back to where Xerxes waited that his army had been routed and was fleeing in disorder.

It was fate, Xerxes perhaps decided. Fate was a chancy thing. No man could know for certain what the morrow would bring. Tomorrow was a dark reality and the paths to the future were uncertain and tortuous.

But if Xerxes had ravaged the peninsula of Greece in 480 B.C. in all

probability Plato would not have been born in 427, and he would not have had as his pupil a youth named Aristotle, and the thinking of the scientists of twenty-five coming centuries would have lacked the guidance of these two men. Into the dark reality of the future the human race would have followed other paths and the man-world of 1940 would not have come into being.

There is a pass in Greece called Thermopylae.

LEE GARTH watched, his eyes following the pencil. Cold winds seemed to blow on him. They blew colder each time he realized he was not dictating what the pencil was writing. He watched the factors appear on the paper. There was a meaning in those symbols, a meaning and a purpose stretching across the long, long gulfs of time, reaching from the amoeba, in the protoplasmic slime of steaming seas that are long gone, forward to the creature that shall emerge in some other era, in some century of the far future.

Through him the meaning ran, through Lee Garth, who was 37 years old in 1940.

THERE is a field in France.

The far-flung southern horn of the Saracen crescent, sweeping northward in its history changing flight, found the field in France where Charles Martel—Charles the Hammer—waited. With keen sword, and long lance, and hissing arrow, all day long the armies battled, and when the night came on, the Saracen host, smashed and bleeding under the blows of the Hammer, reeled backward, fled back out of France. To the Saracens, tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow, was the backward turning road. The glowing sun of Islam flickered, and never again burned so brightly. There was a shift in history, and another world evolved because of Charles Martel.

There is a field in France called Tours.

Lee Garth mopped the perspiration from his forehead. He stopped writing for a moment, pushed back his thinning hair, pulled a cigarette from the package on his desk, struck a match. The smoke was blue and indistinct in that shadowed room. Far off, from another world it seemed, there came the raucous hoot of an automobile horn. Somebody going home, or going to work, or going somewhere but probably going home, since the hour was so late. Didn't matter.

There was a gadfly buzzing in his brain.

Again the pencil raced over the paper.

JAN LIPPERSHEY'S children played in his yard, and now and again, when he would let them, they played in the shop where he worked. They liked to play with the things he made. Lenses, convex and concave. The children played with the lenses, and the telescope was born. Now men could see farther.

That happened in Holland, early in the 1600s.

Perhaps it was more important than Thermopylae or Tours.

Men looked at the stars. World on world on world—world without end—as far as the first telescope showed, the dance of the suns went on. Men made bigger lenses. Beyond those limits the suns were to be found. Did space go on forever? Bigger lenses, bigger lenses.

But still men could not see into tomorrow. It was a formless void of unreality and no instrument could penetrate it. Men had to go blindly into tomorrow, fearing, hesitating, drawing back, until they were kicked there by relentless time.

In 1940 men worked on a lens 200 inches in diameter.

IN 1940, all through a sleepless night, Lee Garth watched his racing pencil write factor after factor, watched the equations grow from page to page. Still the pencil raced. He watched it.

He did not think of Leonidas, who had withstood Xerxes, or of Charles Martel, or of Jan Lippershey, or any of the thousands of others who have warped the course of human destiny—Kepler, Newton, Watt, Einstein, Galileo, Copernicus, the little corporal who went down to Saint Helena. He did not even think of Lee Garth. For that night Lee Garth did not matter to himself. Nor ever again.

The dawn came in through the windows of the old house where he worked. Softly, quietly, silently, the night went and the day came. Another tomorrow became today, another dark reality lifted out of the formless void of the future.

GEORGE McNEIL, Scot production foreman in charge of the cable manufacturing department on United Electric's vast plant, stared at the order that had come down to him. His face a wrinkled frown, he studied the blue prints.

"Those domned monkeys with their domned slip-sticks," he grunted, referring to the drafting department, "have made another mistake."

Specification sheets in hands, he stalked out of his cubby-hole and headed for the office of the production manager.

The production manager examined the specifications. He called the head of the drafting department on the office phone and got a short answer for his trouble.

"The specifications are right," he said testily to McNeil. "Go ahead and fabricate them."

"I can build the domned things," McNeil retorted. "But I'll sweat in hell if I see any use for them. Solid copper bus-bars twenty-four inches in diameter! We don't build a generator—and neither does anybody else in the world—that needs such cables to carry the current it produces."

"They're just part of a big order that came down from the front office marked 'Rush'," the production manager answered. "But they do seem out

of reason——" His forehead wrinkled into a frown. He hesitated. "But an order is an order. Build them. What the customer wants with them is his business."

When McNeil left the office the production manager was still frowning. Twenty-four inch cables—. He scratched his head, as if to stir to life a sluggish idea. Then he got up, walked through the plant, up to the general offices, and the girl in the beautifully finished reception room said Mr. Tompkins would see him in a minute.

"The point I make is this," the production manager said to Mr. Tompkins, "if anybody is building a generator that requires cables of that size, we had better know about that generator."

Tompkins didn't show any emotion. He was a heavy man, not from fat but from muscle. Strength. He had to have strength to hold down his job as general manager. His eyes narrowed slightly and a tiny glow appeared in them.

"A fellow by the name of Garth placed that order," Tompkins said. "Garth? Garth? Where have I heard that name before? Umph!" He remembered the presence of his subordinate. "Thank you. You may go."

The production manager went.

Tompkins flicked a switch on his desk. "Call Railton."

He went on thinking. His eyes narrowed to slits and the glow deepened.

Railton came. "You called me?" he asked. He was a slickie, a front man. College, teck school. Knew all about electricity, and what made the wheels go round. Knew how to talk it. Well dressed, smart.

"Go call on Lee Garth," Tompkins said. "You will find his address in the files. Ask him if he will accept a ten day extension on the delivery date of certain items of his order. That is your excuse for getting in to see him."

"Lee Garth? He's a big shot theoretical physicist," Railton said. "Worth a mint. Made his money on a

bunch of inventions. The papers call him another Einstein, but I personally think they over-rate him. What has he been ordering from us and what am I to find out?"

"Find out why he needs solid copper bus-bars twenty-four inches in diameter, but don't let him find out that's what you want to know."

"What?" Railton recovered his composure. "Yes sir."

"Get going."

Railton left. When the chief used that tone, he wanted results, and to hell with expense and everything else that stood in the road of what was wanted.

DAWN OR DUSK? And which roads lead to the future? Or is there no future? Is there only the present and the past, and is the present only the husk of dying life?

Again and yet again and yet again the ancient yellow sun went down the sky, and night, ever growing bolder, came each evening out of the east. Again and yet again the darkness crept around the huge ball that rested on the nearer hill.

The ball did not lift again, did not move, did not stir or struggle. Like a huge stratosphere balloon made out of some strange metal, it rested there, unmoving.

Animals ranged through the night. In the darkness lonely dogs howled for lost masters. There was never an answer to the howling of the dogs.

SCOOP MARTIN'S index fingers moved so rapidly they almost blurred. He only used two fingers on the keyboard. Two were all he needed. The typewriter carriage almost ran over itself getting across the paper. It stopped abruptly and Martin read his lead.

"Secrecy shrouds new scientific development at Valley Park, where Lee Garth, the world's outstanding physicist, has a large crew at work on the construction of a large steel and concrete—"

Martin swore at himself, ripped the paper out of the typewriter. What a hell of a lead for a story. It didn't tell anything. Vague, ambiguous.

But where in the hell could he start this story?

He remembered that steam shovel, ripping the earth down to bed rock. Gangs of men, drilling into the rock and driving reinforcing steel into it. Other gangs setting up forms for the concrete that was to come. A concrete tower going up, a huge mixer being blocked into position, lines of trucks dumping gravel and cement.

Floodlights overhead so when night came the work could go on. Twenty-four hour a day schedule. Over the whole job the sense of desperate urgency.

Martin tried to think what that urgency might be. That would be his lead. A darned good one too. But he couldn't figure it out. All he could say was that out at Valley Park men were tumbling over each other getting done a job of work. They didn't walk. They ran. If a worker gave out, he stepped back out of place, and a fresh man took over his job while he rested.

It was costing a fortune. That didn't matter much. Lee Garth had a fortune. He was spending it.

Martin thought of Lee Garth. In getting in he had practically forced himself past an overworked secretary. Once in, he had found Garth in front of a desk covered with papers.

Garth was not a big man, not an impressive-looking man. You had to think twice to realize the reputation he had won for himself. Pale blue eyes and thin black hair. He looked like a dreamer, or a poet. Not very efficient. Or so he looked.

"Mr. Garth, I'm Martin of the *Globe*. We would like to have a story about you and about the construction work going on out here. What are you building? A new observatory, a laboratory, a workshop, or what?"

Scoop had smiled in his most winning manner. He had a nose for news and a way of getting it.

Garth blinked at him. He seemed to withdraw his mind from a vast distance to meet the problem presented by the newspaper man. He hesitated.

When he spoke, he gave a hint of the man he was. "Sorry, but I am not interested in publicity."

"Not interested in publicity!" Martin found that hard to believe, even from Lee Garth.

"But why all this construction work? What are you building?"

"There is a need for it. I am not quite certain I know everything about that need, that I really know anything about it, except that it exists."

"What is this need?" Martin insisted. "You've got twice as many men as you can really use. You're working your crews twenty-four hours a day. What is it you need? What are you doing?"

Fretfully, Garth answered. "I can't tell you about it. It wouldn't make sense because it doesn't exist now. It exists two million years from now."

Two millions years! What the hell? Garth was cracked, he was bugs, he was off his nut.

Garth punched a button. To that plain secretary he said, "Stella, show Mr. Martin out. And see that no one else without business here gets in. Hire guards."

"Yes, Mr. Garth."

There had been a sleek, prosperous-looking chap waiting in the outer office when Martin went out. He had heard the secretary say, "Mr. Garth will see you now, Mr. Railton."

TWO million years. Scoop Martin twisted at his desk, ran another sheet of paper into his typewriter. Two million years. Why, recorded history didn't run back over five thousand years. That guy Garth was nuts. Or was he? Those scientists talked damned funny at times. What would the earth look like in two million years? A baked, waterless plain, broken by jagged mountains? Dead, deserted, lifeless? Man and all of man's achievements gone?

This was 1940. If you added two million to that, what would the number be? It would be darned hard to remember that it was 2,001,940.

Two million years. It was a gag, it had to be a gag. Two million years didn't mean anything, didn't make sense. Yes, it was a gag. Well, he'd just make it a good one. There was his lead. He'd fix Garth for tossing him out on his ear.

His index fingers raced over the keyboard, his thin face writhed into a wolfish grin.

"Prominent Scientist forecast doom of earth in two million years—" Scoop let his imagination go. It would be a good yarn at that. Might even make the front pages. No, not likely. Hitler was holding down the front pages.

RAILTON came through the front office at a dead run.

Mr. Tompkins swallowed his annoyance at the sight of the young man leaning against his desk. Mr. Railton was no longer sleek and capable. He was panting and sweating, actually sweating.

"Chief," he panted, holding his side and gasping for air. "That guy Garth, he's got—he's got *atomic power*."

It was the first time Railton or anyone else had ever seen Tompkins show surprise.

"What?" he snapped.

"Atomic power," Railton parroted. "That's why he needed those bus-bars!"

Tompkins settled back into his chair. His face turned faintly purple. His eyes bored into the disheveled Railton.

"You got a lot of guts," he rasped, "coming back to me with a cock and bull story like that."

Railton whitened. Doggedly, he persisted in his story. "I'm telling you just what he told me."

"All right," Tompkins said heavily. "Tell me what happened."

"I went out to see him, and just as you suggested, I asked him if he would accept a ten day extension on the

delivery date of part of his order. Chief, as sure as we don't make delivery as per contract, that fellow will sue us for the last dollar in the treasury. He says he has to have delivery on August 21, without fail. He means it. What the hell he is working on, I don't know, but that man is in a hurry and he means business."

"We will make delivery as scheduled unless it is to our interest to do otherwise," Tompkins interrupted. "Get to the point."

"In order to pacify him, I told him we would guarantee delivery. Then I went over his whole order with him, to make certain that everything was right. When we got to those bus-bars, I suggested there must have been some mistake."

"He said, 'No. No mistake. The specifications are right.'"

"I protested that there wasn't a generator made that needed bars of that size to carry its load."

"He said, 'No, but there is going to be one. Those cables aren't any too heavy to carry the power of the bursting atom.' Those are his exact words. 'The power of the bursting atom.'"

Tompkins leaned back in his chair. Viciously he bit the end off of a cigar.

"Then Garth is crazy, instead of you!" he said.

Railton's face turned white. "Well—" He made futile noises deep in his throat. "Well, you may be right. Because, well—if Garth has discovered atomic power—it—it doesn't mean much to him. He isn't interested in it. He isn't working on it. He's working on something else, something bigger, and atomic power is just one of the little things he needs to reach the goal he wants. . . ."

Railton's voice trailed off. He was a slickie, a smoothie. He knew all about electricity, and the power industry. He knew all about uranium 235, and why it wouldn't work. He knew what atomic power would do to the power industry. He was wondering if Garth was crazy. Or what was Garth trying to do? What purpose was so

vast that atomic power was only incidental to it?

There was silence in the room. The clamor of traffic outside did not penetrate here. The only sound was the soft whisper of a fan pushing cool air through the conditioning apparatus.

Tompkins cleared his throat.

"Thank you. You may go."

"You mean—that's all?"

"That's all."

"But what do you think?"

Tompkins stirred restlessly. "I don't know what to think."

Railton left.

Tompkins sat without moving. Garth, Lee Garth. Atomic power. He didn't dare take a chance. Too much was at stake. He had to know. He picked up the phone. His secretary got the connection for him.

"Sullivan? This is Tompkins. There's a fellow out at Valley Park by the name of Lee Garth. I don't know but I suspect that somewhere in his house you would find blue-prints, if you look. If I were you, I would have one of your boys do a little looking. Yes, the financial arrangements will be taken care of to your satisfaction."

Tompkins hung up the phone. He turned his mind to other matter.

Sullivan ran a detective agency. If you didn't like your wife, he would make it easy for you to get a divorce. If your employees were demanding a higher wage rate, he could handle that too. Divorces, strikes, anything.

DAWN world or dusk world?

Overhead the sun slanted westward, and the night, black and ominous, came out of the east. The birds sang their songs as the day closed, and the animals that moved in the night awakened, and ranged abroad. And on the hills there was the sound of mournful howling, like the baying of lost and lonely dogs seeking their masters; but not finding them, not ever.

SCOOP MARTIN twisted in his sleep. Or was he asleep? It was hard to

know, when you were sleeping. You might be awake. Or you might be dreaming. But how would you know for certain?

He sat up in bed, stared at the window. The moon was shining through the window, casting a thin, ambiguous light into the room.

"Two million years," he whispered.

Hell, yes, he was asleep, he was having a nightmare. He laid down and rolled over. Suddenly he was wide awake.

The house was dark, Mike Ritter saw. Good. The boss wanted some blueprints, or plans, out of that house. Fifty bucks for them. They must be important if the boss was willing to pay that much for them. Well, his job was to get them.

He slipped through the darkness toward the house. Over to the right, at a distance of about three hundred yards, there was a lot of lights. He stopped to stare. A building of some kind was going up. Trucks were coming up a lane, dumping gravel and cement. Under the lights men were pouring concrete until hell wouldn't have it.

"What's the hurry?" Mike wondered.

Well, it wasn't his affair. His job was to get into that house. He turned. The beam from a flashlight struck him in the face.

"Buddy," a voice growled at him. "You better get out of here a damned sight faster than you got in."

Mike blinked. The boss hadn't said anything about guards. What the hell...

"Get going. And don't come back. Or is it a poke in the snoot you'll be wanting now?"

Mike got going. This would require some careful planning.

TOMPKINS picked up the morning *Globe*. The war was still going on. Raids on Britain. The blitz was coming. He read the accounts through.

What was this?

"Prominent scientist forecasts doom of earth in two million years. Lee Garth. . . ."

He read the article through. He thought heavily for a few moments. Then he spoke into the box on his desk.

"Get me Sullivan on the phone."

The bell of an invisible alarm clock was ringing in Lee Garth's mind. He turned over, tried to go back to sleep. Sleep was such a wonderful sensation, especially when you were so tired. He wanted to sleep forever, and forever. There wasn't enough time left for him to get rested. Days and yet more days the driving pressure of screaming energy had run through him. It had burned out his muscles, put a flutter in his heart. His whole body screamed for rest. He had to rest. He tried to go back to sleep.

The invisible alarm clock rang again.

Abruptly, Garth rolled over and sat up. Yawning, he flexed his arms. Every nerve ending in his body told him to lie down again, called to him to lie down, begged him. He was going to lie down.

The alarm bell in his mind rang again.

What did it mean, he wondered.

Oh, yes, now he knew. It was August 21.

Today United Electric began making deliveries. The construction work was already finished, the concrete dry, the forms already off.

Suddenly he was wide awake. Suddenly he was out of bed, and dressing frantically.

JIMMIE BLAKE excused himself from dinner. His dad and mother smiled wistfully as he dashed upstairs.

Jimmie whistled as he shaved. Shaving was really not necessary, but he imagined it was, and in consequence it was a ritual not to be neglected. For he was a man now. Next week he was going off to college again. He would be a sophomore this year. No

more green caps, no more hazing. The whistle swelled in prideful strength.

He looked out of the bathroom window. The sun, already at the edge of the horizon, flung its rays over the suburb of Valley Park. The grass was dry and the leaves were beginning to change color. It was September, September 8, 1940. Jimmie burst into song. One more week and he would be off to college.

Over there, perhaps half a mile away, he could see the sunlight shining on fresh concrete. Garth's Folly, they were calling it already. Garth had spent a fortune building a house that would stand to the end of the world. Two million years, that newspaper article had said.

Too bad. Garth had gone off the deep end, of course. Just when he was really becoming distinguished, he had cracked. Why didn't they have him in an asylum, Jimmie wondered, staring from the window.

Oddly, the landscape shifted. It blurred and twisted, just like it did when you looked through a pane of bad glass. But he wasn't looking through glass.

The air was tingled with a deep violet color. From somewhere, from nowhere and from everywhere, came a shrill whining note, a screaming frequency that lifted rapidly up the scale. It went quickly out of hearing.

The violet deepened to black and the light was gone. Suddenly knives were tearing at his flesh. His body was racked by a thousand pains.

Jimmie Blake screamed. The scream was choked off into horrible silence.

His father came to the foot of the stairs.

"What's wrong, son?" he called.

There was no answer.

His father went upstairs. Mystified, perplexed, he began to search.

"Jimmie!" he called. "*Jimmie!*"

There was no answer.

Jimmie's mother came up the stairs. Her face was suddenly white. One hand was pressed over her heart.

"What—" she began.

Her husband was standing in their son's room. She had not known he was so old, so haggard, and so tired looking.

"Jimmie's gone," he whispered.

He barely managed to catch her as she fell.

LEE GARTH'S face was white, drawn, pinched. Bloodless. His hair was twisted and tangled, there was a stubble on his face.

He lifted blood-clotted eyes from the screen in front of him, the screen that had suddenly gone blank as he flipped a dial set in the control-studded table on which his hands rested.

Deep in the heart of the tower of steel and concrete a lion-roar went into silence.

"God," Garth whispered. "Dear God."

His voice was cracked and chipped and lined with pain.

His head slumped forward, rested on the table.

Behind him there was a tiny creak as a door opened. He lifted his head to stare dully at the person who stood there.

"Stella? I thought I told you I didn't need a secretary any longer, to write yourself a check and go away?"

"Yes, Mr. Garth."

She came forward holding a tray.

"But I think you need me now more than ever. And so I stayed. I will leave if you order it."

He stared at her. She wasn't pretty, or he had never thought she was. But on her face at this moment was something that made her beautiful. Her eyes were filled with a deep glowing.

He remembered the years she had been his secretary, the years of hard work perfectly performed. If they worked until midnight, she had never complained. Summer, winter, spring, and autumn. Why she had never had a vacation! But then Lee Garth had never had a vacation. He didn't know what the word meant.

He stared at her, at the radiant glowing that was transforming her.

"But—but you must not stay here. You *must not*. Don't you understand? This is the end."

She set the tray in front of him.

"You must eat something. You haven't had a good meal in weeks. Here is a sandwich and a glass of milk."

He was vaguely aware of a gnawing in his stomach, a persistent ache.

"Why—thanks—Yes, I am hungry!" He looked at the tray.

The door creaked as she left the room.

He wolfed the food. He turned again to the table in front of him. He pressed buttons.

Under him, in the belly of the squat tower of concrete and steel, a lion began to roar. The roar increased until the whole structure was shaking with the pressure of inconceivable energies seeking release. It became a whirling, roaring, thundering torrent of sound, a screaming pulse of incalculable force.

MADLINE BROWN went out into the garden. Her mother watched her go. Not much longer, her mother thought, would she have a daughter. The girl was blooming into womanhood. Within a year or two some young fellow would claim her. The boys were already becoming a bother with their phone calls. Madeline Brown's mother wondered how it would feel to be a grandmother. Lord, she was getting old.

As from a great distance, she heard her daughter call. She rushed into the garden, recognizing the panic in that call.

Madeline was gone. There wasn't a sign of her anywhere. There was only the night coming down.

The mother's scream ripped through the gathering darkness.

"Madeline!"

There was no answer.

A WINDING river ran through Valley Park, and beside the winding river, in the star-sprinkled September night, John Bruce walked with Jennie West. The browning leaves were beginning to fall. Soon it would be autumn, soon it would be October, and after October, there would not be any Jennie West. There would be Mrs. John Bruce. John hoped that a clerk's salary would support her, but if it wouldn't, he'd darned well get another job.

They stopped beside the river wherein the stars up in the sky were reflected, and it was in his mind to kiss her, but she was in a mood for teasing and she slipped away from him into the soft night. Laughing, he started after her.

Suddenly she screamed in fright.

"Jennie! What is it? Where are you?" John Bruce shouted.

She didn't answer. He started running in the direction from which her scream had come.

He couldn't find her.

"Jennie!"

The stars shifted, the trees bent, the earth twisted, heaved, and rolled. His body was cut with a million knives. There was a whistle in the air.

Then there was silence.

SCOOP MARTIN almost jumped out of bed. He could have sworn the telephone was ringing. But it wasn't. Or was it?

Just another of those nightmares, he decided. He hadn't been sleeping well for over a month. It was hell not to be able to sleep.

He laid down again.

The telephone lifted him out of bed like a jumping-jack coming out of its box.

"Who is it? Oh, I'm sorry, chief, I didn't know it was you. What do you want? Working for you, hasn't a man got any rights at all?—Huh?—I'm sorry. Huh!—*Thirty-eight people gone, just like they had walked off the face of the earth?* And more reports

coming in all the time? All right, all right; I'm on my way to Valley Park right now."

OUTSIDE the police station, the street was jammed by a silent crowd, a tense, straining, shifting mass of people. Scoop fought his way through them.

Inside, the station was alive with reporters, A.P. men, specials, U.P. men, a leg man from every sheet in the city. They were all asking questions. A brawny man, with his uniform coat flung open, was trying to answer them. The phone kept interrupting him. Every time it rang, the room dived into silence.

"Madam, I'm sorry. Yes—yes—We'll send a detail right away. You look around the neighborhood yourself. Perhaps she has just gone to the drug store. Yes. . . . I'm sorry, but I don't know what to tell you. We'll do the best we can."

"Another one?" a reporter queried as the phone went back on the hook. The chief of police nodded.

The strained silence was broken by the harsh breathing of frightened men.

"Lord!" a reporter whispered. "That's seventy-three now. And nobody knows how many may have vanished without being reported!"

The phone rang again. The chief of police grabbed it.

"Hello . . . Oh . . . Governor. You're right we want the guard. We want them as fast as we can get them."

MARTIN found a reporter he knew, plugged questions at him.

"They just go out of sight, that's all," the reporter told him. "How it happens, why it happens, nobody knows, least of all the police. When the first two reports came in, they thought it was a couple of snatches, but they've been scared out of that idea now. There's no rime or reason to it. Youngsters, nineteen, twenty years old; boys, girls, couples. Somebody hears them scream, but by the

time anybody gets there, they're gone. God knows where they've gone or what has happened to them. Jack Lecroy, heir to the biggest fortune in this town, is gone. Two Polish factory workers, brothers, were in their room. Their old man went in to ask them something. They weren't there. College girls, shirt factory girls. It doesn't discriminate. Talk about the Pied Piper!—What's that?"

Outside the building a voice had begun to screech.

"It's the end of the world. The angel Gabriel is blowing his horn and the goats are being separated from the sheep. I'm ready, Lord, I'm ready. Come and take me—"

The reporter's face went a shade whiter. "That's another one gone off his nut. But he may be right, for all I know. Where you going?"

Scoop Martin was shoving his way toward the desk of the chief of police. In his mind a phrase had clicked.

"Chief, I'm Martin, of the *Globe*. Listen to me . . . I know you don't want to answer any more questions, but I've got an idea. About a month ago I interviewed a scientist living here in Valley Park, Lee Garth. Did you read the story I wrote? He prophesied the end of the world. Then he got busy and built himself a castle that a regiment of artillery couldn't blast down . . . Listen, maybe he knows more about this than he told."

The harassed officer stared at Martin, then grabbed his phone. Eventually he laid the receiver back on its hook.

"Garth doesn't answer," he said.

He bit off the end of a cigar. "I'll send a squad."

Two brawny young cops forced their way through the massed throng. The crowd caught the news that they were headed out to Garth's Folly.

They didn't come back.

Another squad, with orders to make a careful investigation, reported that the car of the first squad had run into a tree beside the drive inside the grounds of Garth's place, that the two

men were missing, and that Garth was not in his house but was probably inside his concrete tower.

"Maybe," Scoop whispered, as the report came through. "Maybe Garth is doing this. Or maybe—he talked about the end of the world two million years from now—maybe he was lying. Maybe the end of the world is coming right now. Maybe Garth can help us."

"If there is a chance that Garth is either responsible or can help us," the chief of police shouted. "By God, I'll get him out of that place if I have to blast."

The phone rang again. He grabbed it, listened. "We'll do all we can," he said.

He hung up, looked at his own men, at the reporters. "Another one gone."

His fist came down on the desk.

"I'm going to see Lee Garth. Come on, men."

He led the way. Scoop piled into the car. Those who couldn't get into the car, hung on the sides.

They came in sight of the tower of concrete. It was a squat fortress in the starlight. There wasn't a light in it.

"There it is, men," the chief of police said. "Drive up to it. We'll find out if Garth knows anything about this."

Suddenly, to the occupants of the car, the tower seemed to lean toward them. The trees seemed to shiver in a blast of passing air.

But there was no mind. The air was very quiet.

How could trees dance in a wind when there was no wind?

The ground seemed to writhe. It seemed to twitch.

Men screamed.

The car left the drive, plunged forward into a tree. The motor sputtered, coughed indignantly, died. Then the night was silent, except for the deep, bull-throated roar pounding from the tower which Lee Garth had constructed.

There wasn't a man in the car.

Scoop Martin never wrote his story that night. Nor any night thereafter.

GARTH had slumped forward, his head on his arms. He awakened to the touch on his shoulder, turned tired eyes up to the girl who had entered.

"You?" his voice was dull and low. "You still here?"

"Yes, Mr. Garth. Here, I have some breakfast for you." Her face was pinched and drawn and only her eyes were beautiful.

He gulped at the food. While he ate, she went to a small opening and looked out. She returned to him, and when he had finished eating, she spoke.

"The militia, or perhaps they are national guardsmen, are here. They have surrounded us."

"What?"

For a moment, he did not understand. "Oh. So soon? No! You must be mistaken."

He went quickly to the opening, stared through it. Minutes passed. To the woman who watched him, he seemed to grow older with each passing moment.

He turned. She was still there. He faced her.

"You—you haven't asked why the militia are here?" It was a question and not a statement.

"No sir."

Her answer left him momentarily at a loss for words.

"You don't know—what happened last night?"

"No. I do not need to know. I doubt if I could understand. It would make no difference." She spoke quickly, the words blurring into each other.

There was suddenly hunger in Lee Garth's eyes, the hunger that grows in lonely men.

"Stella—"

The flat smash of an explosion coming from outside jerked him back to the opening. A deep, angry drone sliced through the morning air. Another explosion slapped the earth.

"Bombers! A squadron of planes!

The fools! What are they saying about me out there, I wonder? No matter. I did what I had to do. Or tried. There is only one thing left to do."

There was no anger in his voice. There was only resignation.

"Stella," he said, "if you ran from the door, I think they would let you escape. They want me instead of you. You could say I had held you prisoner."

Her voice was level.

"But what about you?"

"I will stay," Lee Garth answered.

"Here?"

He nodded.

"No!"

"I really didn't mean I will stay here," he amended. "I will go there. I am needed, I think."

She did not understand. No one else would have understood. But she had no need for understanding. She knew the secret that surpasses understanding.

She shook her head. "If you stay, I stay."

His eyes met hers.

"There are numerous things," he whispered, "that I would like to do over, if I had the chance. You understand?"

The smile that lifted out of her eyes was the most beautiful thing he had ever seen. He choked. There was an obstruction in his throat.

"Stella—"

"Yes, Mr. Garth."

Smash!

The morning rocked with the explosion of another bomb.

"Quickly!" he gasped. "Stand here beside me. This tower won't stand a direct hit. There isn't a second to lose."

She moved to his side.

He put his arm around her. His free hand moved among the controls on the table.

Below them, in the heart of the tower of concrete and steel, a bull-throated roar started building up, started howling as energies beyond computation were set in motion.

"Don't be afraid," he whispered. "I think it won't hurt very long."

She was still smiling.

GOGGLING, Tompkins read the description.

"Perhaps as the result of a direct bomb hit, but more likely as the result of the release by Garth himself of some super-powerful explosive that burned but did not explode, the tower vanished in flame. The concrete glowed red, then appeared to run, then quivered for a moment like jelly. There was a blast of furious heat which forced back the attackers. The tower puffed into dust.

"There is now no question but that Garth was responsible for the people who vanished. They stopped disappearing when the tower dissolved. What Garth was attempting no one knows, but he escaped the stern justice that would have been meted out to him by committing suicide."

"By the great Godfrey!" Tompkins muttered. "That fellow had discovered atomic power. What he was using it for, I don't know. But he had it. Nothing else could produce a result like that. He had it. And I let it get away! I called Sullivan off, because that story in the paper about Garth predicting the end of the earth made me think he was a cracked fool. But he had atomic power. And I could have had it, if I hadn't called Sullivan off. He had it. And I let it get away."

Back and forth across the private office, he paced, muttering.

"He had it. He had atomic power. I could have had it. But I let it get away."

FOR an infinitesimal fraction of a second, as inconceivable energies were somehow released, the low hills and the trees growing on the low hills seemed to writhe and twist as if the light rays were being bent by some refracting medium.

Then the translating force collapsed.

Lee Garth fell. Not far, not over a

few feet. His legs buckled under him as he landed. He rolled. He stopped rolling. The ground was soft, and to his weary body it was a perfect haven for rest. Earth, soft earth, and rest. His senses reeled. As he lost consciousness, he felt someone tugging at him.

For a long time there was only the consciousness of complete relaxation, rest, surcease from striving. Rest! How he needed it.

But a confused babble of voices kept intruding. And someone was rubbing his head.

As he opened his eyes, he saw that his head was in a woman's lap. Who was she? And why should she have his head in her lap? He had never had anything to do with women. Oh. Stella. Oh . . .

"Mr. Garth," Stella whispered. "You had better stand up, if you can. There is going to be—trouble."

Oh, yes, trouble. There had always been trouble, but somehow he had not thought to find it here. But he got to his feet slowly.

He found himself in the center of a circle of people. Men and women. Several of the men wore blue, police uniforms. The men in blue had guns. The others had clubs. Some had rocks. Even some of the girls had rocks.

"It's Garth," he heard a voice say.

"Yeah, it's Garth all right," another voice answered.

"Gentlemen," Lee Garth said.

"Shut up!" a voice answered.

"What have you done to us, Garth?"

"Yeah, that's what we want to know: what have you done to us, Garth?"

"Don't try to deny it! We know you did it.

"Where are we, Garth?"

"You and your experiments!"

Lee Garth ran his eyes around the circle. A small, wolfish-faced chap caught his attention. He recognized the man. Martin. A newspaper man.

"Hello, Martin," Garth said.

"What the hell have you done to us, Garth?" Martin said, scowling. He

was truculent. He was also scared. He had a rock in his hand.

"I—" Garth began.

A man with a club stepped forward. "Whatever you've done, I want you to un-do it, see? You brought me here. You damned well better be ready to take me back, see! And be fast about it."

"But that is impossible," Garth answered.

"What!"

"I can't take you back. I can't return you. You're here, and here you will have to stay."

Anger ran through the group like a hurricane through a forest.

"Damn you, Garth!" a voice growled.

"What do you think we are—guinea pigs?"

"You're going to take us home, or else!"

"If you think you can move us into this damned country, where there ain't a house in sight and no sign there ever was one, you've got another think coming."

"Darn you, Garth."

In all the tumult Garth heard only one voice on his side, a girl's voice.

"John Bruce," the girl said. "You give Mr. Garth a chance to explain. He didn't do this without a reason."

"Aw, Jennie," the tall youth beside her answered. "You keep out of this. Garth brought us here without asking us, and he's darned well going to take us back."

"But I can't," Lee Garth said firmly. Silence fell.

In the silence Stella whispered. "Mr. Garth, we had better run, if we can. They won't listen, they don't want to listen. They're scared, and dangerous."

The difference between a crowd and a mob is an angry voice expressing the thoughts lurking in the minds of all.

"You can't return us, eh?" the angry voice said. "Well, we'll just fix your clock. Come on, boys!"

Lee Garth would have stayed, but Stella pushed him, got him started. He fought his way through the circle

of men. Then the two were running.

The mob gave chase.

The crack of a pistol shuddered behind them. A slug tore into a tree near Garth. The gun boomed again. Angry men screamed.

Run, Garth thought. It wouldn't do much good, but the instinct was to run, to preserve life as long as possible. Run! Through the trees, up the hillside. Men were coming. Run. Was this the right turning? It was. Up the hill, up the nearer hill.

Only he couldn't run much farther. His heart was beginning to hurt. Didn't matter. Death came to everything eventually, to Xerxes, to Leonidas, to Charles Martel, to Copernicus, and Galileo. Death was coming to him at the hands of those angry, frightened men, coming quickly, unless he found what he sought, what he knew was here, somewhere.

Where was the thing he sought? He had to find it, quickly. He couldn't run much farther.

They were at the top of the nearer hill.

Then Garth saw what he was seeking.

A huge sphere. A ball made out of some strange, silvery metal. It rested on top of the nearer hill.

Garth and the girl staggered toward it.

Out from it reached twin fingers of light. The streamers touched Garth, they touched the girl.

"We're there," Garth sighed. "We've found the place. We've won. We're safe."

Yelping with the lust to kill, the men came through the woods, came up the hill.

Fingers of light reached out from the sphere. A glowing streamer touched another man. He dropped the rock he was carrying. Another man. He laid down his club.

Something rode the streamers of light. A message. It whispered to the men the light touched. Their cries ran into quick silence. They looked at each other, they looked at Garth and the

girl with him. Both were leaning against the sphere. They seemed to be drawing strength from it. They were smiling.

An awed whisper ran through the men who had so recently been a mob.

"What is that thing, that ball?"

"Look at the light coming from it!"

"Say, I think we were wrong about this fellow, Garth."

"When that light touched me, I changed my mind about him."

"Let's go see what this is all about."

"Come on. Nothing is going to hurt us. I feel it."

Slowly, they approached. Anger had already left them. Now fear left them. Only awe remained.

Then a voice began to speak.

HERE and there upon this earth are fields where men, looking backward, say, "Here history was made. Because of what happened here, a new world came into being."

There is a pass in Greece, a field in France, a backyard in Holland. There are fields in America too.

There is a field two million years in the future!

DAWN world or dusk world?

The sun went down the western sky. Its rays were flung over the group clustered around the globe, over the listening men, who stared quickly at each other, then away, then stole a glance at Garth, leaning against that globe. Over the frightened, clinging, awed girls, who listened too.

In the air was a voice. It came from the sphere. It went directly to the minds of the listeners, whispered as a thought current in their brains, whispered as a ghost moving among the nerve endings. The voice said:

"Thus the human race reached its goal. There were not many of us left, a few hundred only. We had reached the point where mental activity alone interested us . . . Then our last genius invented what we can only describe to you as a perfect brain. It was a substance that would absorb and re-

tain mental impulses. It would absorb and retain our mental impulses. In effect, then, it would become us.

"That substance is housed in the heart of this sphere.

"We built the sphere, set forces in it that made it, to the best of our knowledge, all powerful. We armed it with incredible weapons. We built into it the apparatus to warp space—an adaptation of the drive we once used on our space ships. Then, on the brain substance housed in the heart of this sphere, we impressed the individual consciousness of each living person, and the knowledge that each person had in his own mind, which included all the knowledge that the human race has gained in more than two million years. We blended into one mind the minds of the two hundred humans who remained alive. Housed in a substance that was eternal, sheltered in a sphere that could not be destroyed, it became an almost perfect mind. We thought it was perfect. We discarded our bodies, as outworn tools. Physically, the human race died. Mentally, it would live forever.

"One thing we had never done—flown to the stars. We had reached the planets and had almost forgotten them. But the stars in the sky we had not reached. It was the last great voyage of discovery.

"We set out for the stars. And we reached them!"

The twinkling points of light that Jan Lippershey had shown to be suns lost in the immensity of space!

The voice died into silence, seemed to rest, then whispered again.

"And near Antares a meteor swarm struck us. Inconceivable powers were housed within this sphere. We tried to escape but the swarm was moving almost as fast as light. We tried to blast the meteors into nothingness, and we succeeded in this. But we could not succeed forever. Eventually even the powers of this sphere were near exhaustion. Thousands of pea-size meteors struck us. The force of those collisions cracked the sphere itself

. . . In time we limped back to earth, limped back to a place where we could lie up and lick our wounds.

"We discovered that the wounds would not heal, that the damage was irreparable. Energy was leaking from the sphere, a little by a little. Somehow we had erred in its construction.

"Somehow we had gone down the wrong road, had taken the wrong turning.

"We could not anticipate that this would happen, we could not see what would happen tomorrow. But we knew that our race, and your race, was dying here, that you, back in the mists of time, were moving down a road with death as your destiny.

"The drive that carries a race is not lightly ended.

"But the human race ended in us, in our error.

"It was our mistake. It was our task to correct it, if we could.

"We tried.

"We could not go back through time, but we could force our thoughts back to certain cyclic periods. We could reach only a few periods, most of them too early or too late to meet our needs. Eventually we found a time that was right and a mind that could understand. To that mind we gave instructions, to Lee Garth . . ."

The voice paused, sought for energy, slowly gathered it, then went on.

"That is why you were brought here—to repopulate a world, to take up where we left off, to correct an error made two million years after your time.

"We have taken the living from the remote past and used them to bridge the chasm of death. Yours to carry on."

There was silence. Men moved awkwardly, staring at each other, at that sphere, at Lee Garth. The girls, somehow, seemed to understand.

It was Scoop Martin who came out of the crowd, stood apologetically before Lee Garth.

"Mr. Garth, sir, is that right, what we heard?"

Scoop's wolfish face was a mask of fear, doubt, and hesitation.

Garth swallowed. He nodded.

"But—" the reporter gestured toward the globe. "How can men be in that?"

Garth answered slowly. "A lot can be learned in two million years. It is not impossible. You, the you that really exists, your mind, your consciousness, is a movement of thought within a suitable medium. Evolution provided a chemical medium, a mass of tissue, your brain. That is all you really are, the movement of current within your brain cells . . . The men who came two million years after us found a better medium than the brain. Upon that better medium, they impressed their thinking."

Garth hesitated, and when he spoke, it was not to Martin, but to someone else.

"Is that not right?"

There was a rustle in the air. A voice whispered.

"In essence, that is correct. It was not so simple as that, but you have the underlying thought. In the year that we have yet to live, we will teach you the process. Perhaps you may discover our error. Perhaps you will want to use other methods. We cannot advise on that point. The only thing that matters is that the race must go on to whatever is its ultimate destiny."

Sighing with the pulse of failing energy, the whisper ceased.

The group stirred again, moving restlessly.

"I'm sorry," Garth spoke, "that I did not ask your permission to bring

you here. But I had no choice. If I had asked for volunteers to repopulate the world of two million years from our time, you would have concluded I was crazy. So I had to bring you here without consulting you."

They didn't seem to hear him. They stirred uneasily. All malice was gone out of them. Only unease and trembling wonder were left.

Martin twisted. He spoke.

"We have to rebuild—to repopulate—a world. That's why we're here?"

Garth swallowed, fighting the lump in his throat. He nodded.

"It seems hard to understand, sir," Martin said. "But what can I do to help?"

The lump in Garth's throat rose so high he could not swallow it.

A bulky figure in uniform came out of the crowd. "What can I do, Mr. Garth, to help?"

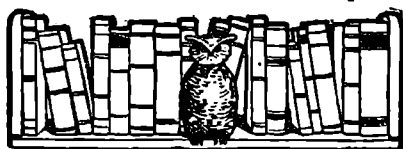
There was a confused babble of voice. "What can we do, Mr. Garth, to help?"

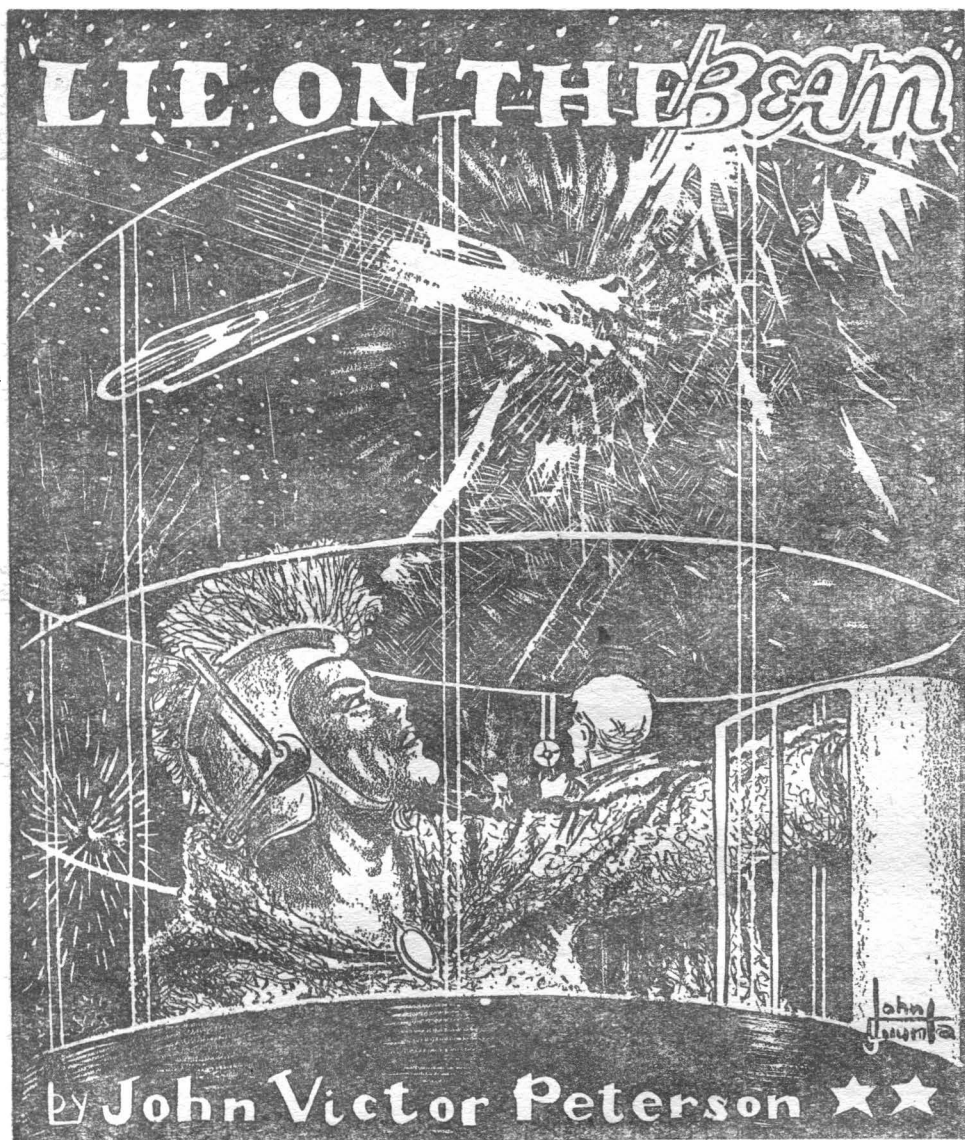
In that babble he heard only one voice, that of the girl at his side, asking what she might do.

"You might remember," he answered, "that—that my name is Lee."

And when, during the shadow night that followed, the descendants of the dogs the race had left behind them howled on the hills for their lost masters, now there came an answer. Men whistled to them. Slowly, hesitantly, fearfully, but gaining confidence as the whistles of men roused half lost memories, the dogs came down from the hills to their new masters.

Here and there, upon this earth, are fields.





There was a spatter of brilliance as it crashed into the mill. "Hurry with the warning," he called.

SWEEPING from perihelion, the black destroyer curved toward the gibbous white ball of Venus, its jets stabbing mocking fingers at the majesty of the sun whose clutching gravity it had cheated. Within the heavily shielded control cabin, the hard skull-face of the commander split into a fleshless smile. From his fanged jaws a single word was spat into the spaceship's intercommunication system:

"Adrakolarn!"

Back on dead sea bottoms the word had been but the weak utterance of a dream of yesteryear's greatness. First a muted whisper in the thin air of a dying world; then a keening through the faint, dust-driving wind; at last a clamorous cry banding together the spiritually reborn remnants of a vanishing race. . . . *Adrakolarn*—moment of destiny—moment of reckoning!

Throughout the urgently racing ship other skull-faced, chitinous-hided men thronged to bomb tubes and waited, heavy eyelids nature had fashioned as protection against the dust storms of the parent world drooping over eager, glittering eyes.

ADRAKOLARN—

THOUSANDS of miles away, on the surface of Sol's second planet, a heavy, milky fog crept like a sentient thing up the side of a towering apartment dwelling. In and out of window recesses it stole, climbing higher and higher as if seeking entrance.

Soundlessly, mysteriously a window slid open. The fog gained momentum before a sudden wind and swept into the dimly lighted chamber. The silvery-haired young man on the bed did not awaken. His slender form turned and twisted beneath thin coverings and the jargon of astronautics came thickly from his lips.

A nightmare possessed him within which he was plunging down into Venus' clouds in a small spaceship. Suddenly his ports were shattered in a head-on collision with a high-flying native pterodactyl. In the dream as in actuality the great dampness of Venus poured chokingly into his lungs.

Almost instantly the urgent buzzing of a television signal brought him struggling upright, coughing thick, humid air from congested bronchial tubes.

Half drunken from the high oxygen content of the surface atmosphere, Frederic Ward slipped from his bed and reeled over to shut the port-like window. Damn these Venusians anyhow, he thought, meanwhile wheezing, coughing and spitting. Probably thought one of their clique was sleeping here instead of a decently-evolved native of Pittsburgh, Earth. That froglike brute down in Air Control probably had the atmospheric switchboard all awry. Well, I'll buzz him when I get this telecall

answered. I'll tell him off proper. He has my temperature and humidity chart. Of all the nerve!

Still grumbling, Ward turned to the television transceiver, clicking on the audios and videos.

"Engineer Ward, Astronautics Authority, speaking."

The sight of Ward's room caused a grin to light up momentarily the fat, tired face on the receiving grid.

"What's up, Silvy? Getting acclimated to our lovely Venus?"

"What's on your mind, Wagner?" Ward snapped back, in no mood for joking even if the buzzing of the televisorphone had probably saved him from an oxy-hangover or, perhaps, even drowning in the early morning tidal mists.

"Plenty. Get out here soon's you can. One of the trajectory beams is out and there are a couple of earth cruisers nearing perihelion from Mars. If they don't get a signal at zero-one-three-zero they're liable to coast on into Sol. Surface weather here's damned near zero-zero, too. I need you badly."

"Where in the name of the twenty-seven local fish-gods is Portiz? He's emergency man, isn't he?"

Wagner's moonface dropped down six lines on the 441 line kinescope grid.

"Portiz," he explained lamely, "is incapacitated."

"You mean drunk?" Ward retorted sharply. "Isn't he on constant call just like the rest of us? Just because he's a cousin of somebody back in Washington is no sign that he can establish a semi-permanent site in Gasuki's Grill. And just because he's your immediate superior is no sign you have to whitewash his doings. I've seniority here. What I say matters! Give him the emergency call. We'll sober the lug up if we have to dunk him in the Draka Malarga. If a couple of those plesiosaurs got on his tail he'd swear off for good. If he doesn't show up, I'll report it to H. Q. and—"

"Okay, Silvy, okay," Wagner said tiredly. "Now get out here, please, sir. Oops! There goes the patrol signal!"

"Leave the circuit on!" Silvy Ward snapped and stood watching the video grid as Wagner jacked up the power in the distant radio receiver.

"... are two ships trajecting in which are not listed on the incoming flights. One on an A-orbit coming in at terrific velocity from base-direction Mars; one on a C-orbit out of Earth. Approximate distances, six and five thousand miles respectively. Should hit atmosphere simultaneously, thus endangering themselves and other incoming ships. Advise."

More trouble. Ward began to grumble again as he snapped off the televisior and began dressing. Always somebody who says to hell with the Authority and plots his own Hohman orbit. Unusually an eccentric millionaire with a luxurious spaceyacht filled with a swan-necked crew of "Oh, r'ally? You don't say?" debutantes and matrons, boyfriends, gigolos, etc. If they arrive in one piece without benefit of the AA's trajectory beams, range and landing beams, okay; if they get into trouble and the Authority doesn't get them to surface in one place, well then the Authority takes it in the neck and the paperwork is terrific over in General Inspection.

Ward was disgruntled. Leave it to Portiz to get plastered. Leave it to Wagner to let a keying device, a teletype, a station location marker, a transmitter, the instrument landing beams or something go blooey in zero-zero weather. Sure! Silvy Ward, old faithful Silvy's here to handle it and get a few more gray hairs thirty years ahead of Mother Nature's usual schedule. Back in HQ on Earth a radio engineer is considered something like a Martian maharajah; he just doesn't have to get down on his knees and fool around with leads and circuits, keeping one eye cocked on an oscillograph and the other on a multi-wave meter. But leave it to HQ to send me to this bronchitis-stimulat-

ing hole called Pali-Vanyi, Venus, with a drunkard and an inexperienced college graduate for my only assistants when the Old Man damn' well knows I should have at least four old timers.

Good man, Portiz, but he lets his reputation and connections carry him. Let Venus get him worn down to a frazzle and then started to drink like a native squid. Wagner's a good man, too. Fooled around with coeds and rocket polo too much in Astrotech, that's all. Boned for exams and passed them, but his knowledge is mostly theoretical. Usually blows up in a pinch, like now.

The air conditioning apparatus had practically straightened out the previously cockeyed atmospherics, and Silvy was waking up. But he was still a bit rankled as he zipped on rubberoid coveralls, donned a filtration mask, went out to the garage and drove his caterpillar-treaded fog flivver out into the nearly-liquid ground atmosphere of dear, damp Venus.

The fog certainly was settling in on Pali-Vanyi port! Usually the Hump, the five thousand foot mountain range which runs along the east of the field, breaks the storm winds which blow in intermittently from Draka Malarga, the mighty eastern sea. Sure, sometimes there's a real typhoon ripping beyond the mountain, chopping Malarga into thousand foot waves, at the same time there'll be a four thousand foot ceiling at the spaceport and probably ten miles visibility to north, south and west. But take tonight: the weather broadcasts said that Draka Malarga was practically calm and the plesiosaurs and their girl friends were probably sporting on the waves; Pali-Vanyi was completely fogged in! Ah, Venus, weatherman's headache and Authority's dire pain!

Visibility was nil. Even Fredric Ward's infrared headlights and special goggles could not cut the fog. He spent a good half hour on the fifteen mile trip north west ward and

glimpsed the station barely in time to jam down the hydraulics and squish to stop in the sloshy mire deposited by a recent typhoon.

WAGNER was looking blankly at the great bank of keying devices on the trajectory transmitters when Silvy walked in through the airlock. He turned around forlornly, laying a fat hand suggestively on a complicated blueprint.

"You look tired, Wag," the engineer stated; then his alert eyes caught the reason why. The flight chart explained that: a series of entries on the incoming flights column. In this weather that meant work for the operator at the station. Traffic Control normally brought the ships in by voice contact after said ships had consecutively swung off the trajectory beams and radio range beams; but with zero-zero weather, the Authority men had to concentrate upon the instrument landing beams as well. Wherefore Ward didn't reprimand Wagner. After all, if a keyer breaks down, it isn't necessarily because a human being has failed.

"I'm half dead," Wagner acknowledged with a forced grin. "Twenty ships came in in the last hour. Twenty of 'em off twenty different trajectory beams. Twenty of 'em on the landing beams. I just got the bulk of 'em in properly when a keyer goes out with Earth's two cruisers swinging into perihelion near the sun!"

"What're all those ships here for?" Ward asked as he stripped off dripping coveralls and proceeded to the multitrajectory beam transmitter.

"Usual thing. Owing to the present tense situation which has developed between Venus and dear old Red, the representatives of Earth and Venus have decided to have a conclave to effect measures against our dear Martian cousins. Everybody's afraid things will go smash when Mars and Venus are in opposition two Earth years hence."

"Oh," grunted Silvy Ward. Political wrangling wasn't his forte.

Removing the transparent cover from the silent keyer, Ward made a cursory examination. The keying device proper seemed to be okay. He promptly got out the circuit tester and started checking the continuity of the circuits.

Wherewith things started to happen with a vengeance. Traffic Control called, stating that a freighter was dropping in over the field and asking for the north-south landing beams. Wagner hurried over to cut in the juice on the remote controls.

Immediately the open receiver which was tuned to the Patrol frequency snarled out:

"Patrol V-11 calling Pali-Vanyi base."

The base station over in Traffic Control cut in on the same wavelength.

"Okay, V-11. Report."

"The ship on A-orbit from direction Mars is a destroyer. Not near enough to read markings. Refuses to answer our signals or to cut velocity. Advise."

"Contact ship," was the smug advice.

"Doing our best!" Patrol V-11 snapped back.

Wagner had his head half turned from the landing indicators to hear the patrol communications. From the corner of his full-lipped mouth he shot:

"What in the devil's going on up there, Silvy?"

"Dunno," Ward answered. An inexplicable chill was running along his spine. A conclave here in the twin city of Pali-Vanyi to effect measures against Mars— A destroyer coming in, refusing to answer the Patrol queries—

The inner door opened behind him. Ward spun around. Anger darkened his face as he glared at the tall, dark skinned man who had unsteadily come to rest against the door jamb.

The dark one looked owlishly at

Wagner and Ward, twisted a loose mouth open and mumbled:

"Portiz reporting for duty."

"In *that* condition?" Silvy Ward snapped.

"I'm sober as a king," Portiz answered.

"King Henry the Eighth," Wagner said softly.

II

THE fulfillment of his own particular mission was close at hand now, and the destroyer's commander was tenses at the jet keys. How great, he thought, the destiny of the new Leader of the race and through the Leader how great the race's destiny! No more worshipping of the ancient god, Zabir, Father of the Deserts. That had been frustrate, meaningless worship. Dawn after sudden dawn had passed and the race, without ambition, without a goal for its dreams, aye, even without its dreams, had waned into a purely subjective way of life, a fatalistic waiting for the end which every day came closer; now each dawn brought new hopes and life had become objective, meaningful. Zabir, you failed us; the Leader will not.

The moment is drawing nearer—

A SLEEK, luxurious spaceyacht blasted from its plotted C-orbit out of Earth and slanted down toward Venus' cloudbank. Within a plushy cabin on its topside an incredibly fat man in white tie and tails squatted at the controls, a self satisfied grin on his bejeweled face.

"Jimmie," he said to the ruddy faced navigator, "we'll show the Authority that we don't have to have instruments keying our course. We'll show them that we don't have to get a buzz every thirty minutes to tell us we're grooving our trajectory. No, sir, Jimmie, my lad. Now we'll show them Charleston infrareds clear down to Pali-Vanyi port. We'll show them that we don't need any antiquated

radio range beam to get us into that foggy port. That weather broadcast my daughter made us listen to a while back said that Pali is completely fogged in, but that isn't going to stop us. The Charleston infrareds will get us down.

"Sure, Jimmie, we proved that we can get from Earth to Venus without the aid of a trajectory beam; now we'll prove that we can get all the way down to surface without benefit of the Authority. We'll prove that this Astronautics Authority stuff is just a waste of the taxpayers money, that the Charleston infrareds will make landing on Venus so simple that even a freshman at Astrotech could get in safely. When Congress convenes again, we'll show them, eh, Jimmie?"

"Yes, sir," the navigator yessed. "What's this Authority business anyway? Just a political organization which takes the taxpayer's money for something that isn't necessary at all. Sir, when you get back to Washington, you'll show 'em!"

"Good boy, Jimmie," the resplendently clad individualist said with a smile, patting the young fellow's shoulder with a diamond-studded paw.

Wherewith Dewitt Charleston peered through the forward port at the onrushing, cloud-veiled sphere which was Venus and grinned very happily. And then, from the corner of a flesh-surmounted eye he glimpsed the red flaring of rocket exhausts on the port side, and not more than ten miles away.

"Somebody crowding in on us," Charleston said. "Release the broadcast antenna while I get the transmitter going. Let's see, what's Patrol frequency? Sixty Megacycles."

Below the spaceyacht a long length of antenna dropped, training some ten feet below the length of the four hundred foot hull.

Jimmie nodded an okay to his employer.

The fat one absorbed the microphone in a fleshy hand.

"Calling unknown ship on port side. Sy 2700 calling."

There was no answer.

"Rats," said Dewitt Charleston. "What do they mean, coming in on our trajectory?"

"But, sir," Jimmie protested, "our trajectory isn't listed with the Authority; they probably have this other ship scheduled to come in now."

"They shouldn't do things like that," Charleston protested peevishly with a sublime disregard for the necessarily intricate workings of the Authority. "No right at all. Might think we were ordinary spacebats or something."

Which is when the receiver, attuned to the Patrol frequency, caught Traffic Control's command to contact the unidentified destroyer. Forthwith a third ship made itself present in the extra-Venusian heavens; a red-lighted ship bearing the AAP of the Authority Patrol. It came blasting from Venus' east and over its transmitter came:

"Patrol V-11 calling destroyer. What is your mission?"

Silence. It is a ruling in the interplanetary code that all ships use the same wavelength when contacting ships of the Authority or ships under the guidance of the AA's facilities; since silence reigned, it was quite obvious that the unknown destroyer had not answered.

The patrol ship shot a warning flare across the destroyer's bow. It burned bluely in the darkness of the outer atmosphere, lighting up that entire quadrant of space, revealing the baleful circle-in-a-square insignia of Mars on the destroyer's hull!

The receiver burst again into life.

"Patrol V-11 calling base. Destroyer is of Martian origin. Advise."

But before an answer was forthcoming, a luridly flaring object leaped from the dark ship, speeding across

the obscurity of interplanetary space like a leaping bolt of lightning.

"Patrol V-11 to base. Destroyer launched torpedo. Trying to escape. Blast jet bank seven. Blast nine. Nine! Nine!"

The voice went dead. A lurid red sundered the black abyss of space. It was a void of baleful crimson in which two ships sped: Charleston's spaceyacht and the destroyer out of Mars. Where V-11 had been was only a glowing scattering of wreckage which faded into nothingness in the eternal night of the void.

"Pali-Vanyi base calling V-11. Calling—"

But V-11 did not answer. V-11 could not answer. V-11 was but debris dropping down into the everlasting clouds.

Charleston's fat face was covered with perspiration.

"Jimmie," he said, almost inarticulately, "something is very screwy around here. Maybe I'd better contact Pali-Vanyi and find out what's going on."

Cutting in the transmitter, Charleston began to bark excitedly:

"Sy 2700 calling Pali-Vanyi Base—"

Simultaneously a torpedo lanced from the destroyer's tubes, darting straight at the spaceyacht. Charleston keyed in the underjets to avoid it, praying fervently the while. A shudder ran through the yacht; then it was running as smoothly as before.

"What happened?" Charleston cried, his eyes darting feverishly from meter to meter.

"The torpedo ripped away our broadcast antenna," Jimmie said slowly. "We can't contact Pali-Vanyi now!"

"Damn them, damn them!" Charleston murmured. "We'll follow them; we'll find out what it's all about!"

"Yes, sir," Jimmie said, but his whole body was quivering and he was wishing he was far, far away.

III

DOWN in the radio beam station, Wagner, Ward and a very unsteady Portiz surveyed each other in stunned dismay for about ten seconds.

Fred Ward was struggling to put into speech that which he felt within. Here was crisis. Here was an intermingling of human and mechanical failings which had built up almost to the point of nervous dissolution in the men concerned. Probably of secondary importance now was the fact that two terrestrial cruisers were nearing perihelion at the sun; they depended absolutely on the keyed radio wave which would leap across their trajectory and crackle in their attentive receivers. But that keying device was out of commission and in all that great bank of two hundred keyers there was not another silent. There was not another which they could safely adjust to the cruisers' course without imperiling the safety of some other craft.

Over in Pali-Vanyi proper were some of the greatest political minds of Earth and Venus, closeted within a great hall whose entrance was barred, whose televisorphonic connections were cut off. It would take at least fifteen minutes to gain access to that hall, once reached, and probably another ten minutes to evacuate the great and get them to a place of comparative safety.

Up above a great Martian destroyer was diving down into Venus' mists, doubtless riding the radio range beam straight down toward the port. Its objective was obvious: the convention hall.

The radio range beam transmitter could not be cut off since there were a dozen ships due to hit atmosphere within the next few minutes. Six of them had bucked a Perseid meteor shower coming out of Earth and were low on fuel; it was imperative that they follow the beam down to Pali-Vanyi for a one-try landing. The excessive consumption of fuel in an at-

mosphere was prohibitive of their cruising around until the destroyer could be apprehended by Patrol ships and driven away. The beam had to be maintained!

As for the human element, Portiz was scarcely able to stand; Wagner had a fine case of the jitters and could do little more than botch things up royally if he tried to tackle a complicated task; Ward had gone to bed after a sixteen hour shift, and after two hours of sleep plus a dosage of unadulterated Venusian atmospherics had been awakened and called back to the station.

The nervous tension was terrific. The three inarticulate men stood there while the seconds sped, Wagner staring around with desperation on his fat face, Silvy Ward clenching and unclenching his hands, Portiz leaning his drink-pliant body against the bank of keyers.

Suddenly Ward broke the silence.

"Wagner, get that trajectory keyer going. First check the interlock cam relay; the circuits seem to be okay so it must be the relay. Portiz, get the portable glide beam transmitter unit and drive it out to the very base of the Hump on the eastern end of the field, and keep your receiver open on thirty-four megacycles; I'll give you directions from here. Come on, get going!"

Wherewith Ward spun around to the Pali-Vanyi radio range transmitter. There was a peculiar smile on his face as he released the controls on the goniometer unit which governs the direction of the signals by reducing or increasing the radio frequency in the four range radiators. They'll be on the beam, he thought; these Martian boys won't take any chances of missing on the first stab for it would take them so long to maneuver around for a second attempt that the element of surprise would be lacking and their prey would have gotten away. They'll ride the beam in from the west. When they get directly over the range station

they'll get the vertical radio signal from the station location marker and know that the field lies ten miles to the east and Pali-Vanyi ten miles south of the field. Switching their course ninety degrees they'll drop in right over the city and let go with everything they've got.

They're probably on the beam now and four hundred miles to the west. They're due to hit the strato-winds which any astronaut knows will buck them around. The thunderheads will make their compass blotto so the only direction they can be sure of is due east on the beam. If we shift the beam slowly by rotating the goniometer counter-clockwise, the quadrants of the beam will be reversed. They'll swerve their course to follow, and gradually instead of getting the A signal to the south they'll be getting it from the east, and instead of an N from the north they'll have an N from the west. They'll come into Pali from the South—"

THE radio range at Pali-Vanyi resembled to a great extent the radio ranges used for centuries before by the Federal airways of the United States of America, Earth. The increasing use of ultra-high frequency waves had made obsolete the four towers of the intermediate frequency range. Small, compact, the new range system had through the long decades of scientific advancement after the war years of the 20th century reached a stage of efficiency a hundredfold greater than its predecessor.

A small antenna array atop the broadcast station consisting of four vertical radiators mounted at the terminals of a horizontal X replaced the towers of yesteryear. The four bars of the X pointed northeast, northwest, southwest and southeast.

The NW and SE radiators sent out a steady N [dash-dot] in Morso code, the SW and NE a steady A (dot-dash). At thirty second intervals the identification letters of Pali-Vanyi

[dot-dash-dash-dot dot-dot-dot-dash] were transmitted from all radiators. A ship coming in from the west, directly on course, heard both N and A simultaneously and with equal strength so that they interlocked and formed a steady dash. A swerve to the north of the course meant that the N signal would be predominant in the ship's receiver; to the south, that the A would be predominant. Rotating the goniometer counter-clockwise would so change the radio frequency in the four signal radiators as to cause all on-course signals to swing similarly, and ships on the beam would follow it blindly around, especially when their compasses were put awry by natural causes. A 90 degrees swing would completely reverse the so-called N and A quadrants; hence the beam would completely lie. WHAT would the destroyer's speed be? Probably twelve or fourteen hundred m.p.h. Twenty minutes or less to swing the beam. With one hand Silvy Ward began to rotate the goniometer, casting an eye at a nearby chronometer. Ninety degrees, say, in eighteen minutes. Five degrees per minute. Easy now! With a free hand Ward reached out and snapped on the shortwave transceiver which was used in communications when testing experimental equipment. He picked up the microphone and called:

"Portiz, are you in position?"

"Yes, sir!" the answer came promptly.

"Directions, pal. Cut in the glide path transmitter now and stick with it until further instructions so that nothing goes wrong."

"Yes, sir. But what's the idea, Silvy?"

"No time to explain now, Portiz! I've work to do!"

Ward snapped off, and immediately reached out for the televisorphone. He dialed Public Service and asked for his good friend Duka Dwane, Venusian utility magnate.

"Duka," he barked after credential-

ling his way past a Mr.-Dwane's-in-conference operator, "this is Silvy Ward of the Authority. There's a Martian destroyer coming in with obvious intentions of bombing Pali. I want you to black out the city immediately."

"But, Silvy, think of the convention," Dwane protested. "I had to give them special fluorescent lighting; they'll be angry if I cut them off!"

"If you don't cut them off this time they'll never be cut off again. Kick that master switch over pronto. The Authority will take all responsibility!"

"Okay," lisped Dwane. "Okay, *sharnar!*"

Ward cut off wondering if that "*sharnar*" had meant "friend" or "bigshot"; it meant one thing in Pali and another in Vanyi, the city across the "tracks".

Four minutes gone. Twenty degrees. The destroyer should be almost west-south-west now . . .

"Wagner," Ward barked. "How are you coming?"

"It's the relay, right enough. I should have it clicking in a few mins."

"You've about twenty, so do it right! Buzz Control and tell them that we're going to cut off the landing beams on the south of the field and for them to light up all the eastern boundary lights."

"Yes, sir."

Six minutes gone. Thirty degrees.

IV

THE SPIRIT of the Leader rides with us, thought the destroyer's commander. The very force of his will has caused those fools below to leave their beam on. And they are members of the race that seeks to dictate terms to the Leader! So ignorant they are, so unenlightened. They are unfit to rule. By the great god Zabir—nay, not by that false god, but by the Leader, we are the only ones fit to rule and we shall!

"*Andrakalarn m a r s t i virki!*" he

shrilled into the intercommunication tube.

The moment of reckoning—in twelve minutes!

MEANWHILE Charleston's space-yacht was following the destroyer down the strange layer of wild winds in Venus' stratosphere. Some time before he had reached out a pudgy hand to turn on his infrared view-plates and the destroyer stood out sharply on the visual grid.

"Damn it!" the fat millionaire was thinking, "no state of war exists. Why should that Martian blast the patrol ship and tear away my broadcast antenna with a torp?"

The air was extremely rough. The yacht pitched and yawed, and with the pitching and yawing Charleston found his daughter Ginny at his side.

"Pater, what is wrong?" she queried in a post-deb voice.

"There's a des—" Jimmie started.

"Harrrrumph!" Charleston burst. Jimmie was squelched.

"Just following another ship down which acts kind of peculiarly," explained the millionaire. "Wish I could report him to the Authority. Can't, though, a—er—meteor tore away the antenna!"

"Why are you swerving your course?" Unquestionably Ginny knew her rocketships.

"Winds are pretty bad. Seem to be coming full force from the southeast if you can trust the compass. Had to tack around to counteract their force." Charleston of course couldn't admit that his infrareds didn't allow for variable headwinds and compass deviations and therefor weren't as dependable as the Authority's beams.

But his daughter could.

"Why don't you switch unto the Authority frequency? The beam's on 65 megacycles in case you're interested."

Charleston harrrrumphed again but reached out to switch on the receiver.

Immediately he started receiving the steady hum of the on-course sig-

nal, broken at 30 second intervals by the keying of P V, identification signal of the base station. A minute later he heard the dash-dot signifying N, meaning that he was to the left (and in his case presumably to the north) of his course. Keying in the port jets he swung to the right and received the on-course signal again. He noticed with satisfaction that the destroyer had done likewise.

"Ginny," he admitted weakly, "this radio range business is quite *the* business. Of course the Charleston infrareds—"

"Of course!" smiled the daughter.

It was Charleston's turn to be squelched.

Suddenly the range signals were interrupted by the beam operator's voice:

"PV, Pali-Vanyi. Notice to all spacemen. Due to the unusually adverse weather conditions at surface, the north-south landing beams will be left on permanently until further notice. PV, Pali-Vanyi."

Ten minutes had passed since Ward had begun rotating the goniometer. Ten minutes and Charleston and the destroyer were fifty degrees off the true course. Almost south-south-west of the field now and gradually bearing more to the south.

But Charleston did not know and he was praising the facilities of the Authority and remarking about how wonderfully his infrareds would work in conjunction with said facilities. The future of his invention (well, he had backed it!) took on a rosy hue. He would revolutionize interplanetary travel; he would simply make it easier.

V

SLOWLY Silvy Ward rotated the flat, indexed dial of the goniometer. Eighty-nine degrees gone. One more degree. The destroyer should be at the south of the field now, coming in unknowingly over the blacked-out metropolis. Soon he should hear the thunder of its rockets. Were his

computations wrong? Did the destroyer have improved compasses and other directional finding instruments which it was using instead of relying on the beam? If not, why did he not hear it coming out of—

A chill swept over him. What was that far, thin thunder throbbing across the night? The destroyer! And that other, higher pitched roar? The Patrol had said that there were two unlisted ships coming in! Who was in that other ship? If he could only warn them without the destroyer catching the signal! But, dear God, he couldn't!

Zero-one-two-zero! Over against the Hump Portiz was attending the portable landing beam transmitter. An ultra-high frequency beam was shooting up uni-directionally at the glide angle of a ship coming in for a landing from the west. A normal landing was to the south where the main runways lay; this descent—no landing there!—must be to the east and the five thousand foot Hump along whose base the boundary lights were ablaze in the dense fog. From the air they would present the aspect of an illumined city . . .

Ward cried out to Wagner:

"The destroyer is overhead. They're getting the station location marker signal. Listen—"

They could hear the blasting of jets as the ship swerved around to the east, to the direction which its occupants doubtless thought was south. It would be catching the glide path beam now and dropping down toward what appeared to be the city!

The second ship was coming in over the range station. It, too, was swerving . . .

"That must be the ship out of Earth," Wagner cried.

"If we could only warn them!" Ward said hopelessly. "We don't even know whose ship it is. It may be the Director coming to the convention."

Yes, the Director of Earth might be up there dropping toward certain doom.

Ward leaped to the shortwave transceiver. Simultaneously, it burst into life.

"Portiz calling Ward."

"Yes?"

"Sounds as if there's a large ship dropping in towards the mountain. What're your orders?"

"Leave the beam on and get to hell out of there. You've only got about two minutes!"

Silence. Sixty seconds of silence broken only by the receding thunder of the two ships.

UNDERJETS flaring redly, making rosy-hued the fog, the destroyer eased down toward the lights which told its commander that here lay Pali-Vanyi. Down, down on the glide path beam.

Commands spat from the commander's fleshless mouth.

"Ready at the bomb racks—*Unload!*"

Keying in the rear underjets he zoomed the ship.

The concussion of the unleashed bombs tore across the night, shattering ten thousand windows in nearby Pali-Vanyi. Martians in dehydrated chambers drowned as the heavy fog poured in; Earthmen choked and grew ecstatically oxy-drunk; Venusians leaped in hordes out into their natural element to see the flames licking against the Hump.

"We have destroyed the city!" the Martian commander cried, for in the churning chaos of atomic bomb explosions no details can be seen. "The Leader will bless us. He will—"

"*Oh, Zabir, Holy Father of the Deserts, what looms ahead? A mountain here? Oh, Zabir, no! Blast all underjets! Blast!*"

"Zabir, Blessed Father—"

The great destroyer's jets flamed futilely. It ground in against the Hump, splitting like a pod. From its halved entrails flames roared forth to further bloody the swirling tortured fog. The sound of the crash reverberated against the range station.

Simultaneously Ward cut in the microphone and screamed over the beam frequency:

"*Climb, ship of Earth, climb. You're on the Hump!*"

Peering out into the crimson-hued fog to the east, Ward saw spitting jet flames swerving upward, sweeping up and over in an Immelmann turn to safety.

"Ship of Earth," Ward continued, "proceed about fifteen miles west, make a one-hundred-eighty degree turn and come in for a normal landing. The beam courses were reversed because of an emergency; we are now correcting the variations."

Ward cut the microphone in again.

"PV, Pali-Vanyi. Notice to all spacemen: Due to an emergency the range was rotated ninety degrees counter-clockwise during the past half hour. Any ships following the western leg into PV should be on the southern leg. Come into the field from the south and swing around for normal landings in accordance with regulations. The beam is now in normal operation."

Silvy Ward arose, began to stretch his tired, slender body, and then he glimpsed the chronometer. It was within seconds of zero-one-three-zero.

"Wagner, have you got that keyer fixed?"

"Watch!" Wagner grinned at him.

There was a whir. The interlock cam relay in the device started to turn, keying out its message across some fifty million miles of space, a message which beyond a shadow of a doubt was crackling some moments later in the receivers of the two earth cruisers at perihelion, telling them that they were on their trajectory course and all was well.

The televisorphone buzzed urgently. Quickly Ward snapped it on.

Portiz' face appeared on the grid.

"Everything under control?"

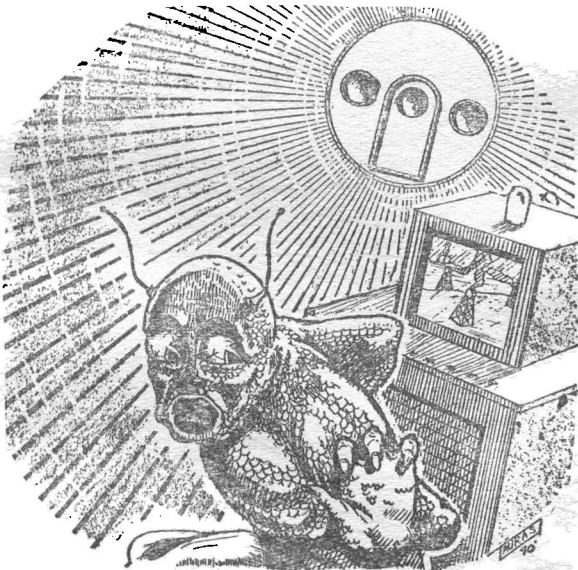
"Yes. And where in the devil are you?"

"Gasuki's. I needed a drink after those bombs landed on my tail."

SHORT-SHORT STORIES

MIRANDU

Here is the opportunity department for newcomers. Every month we will publish short shorts, giving preference to **FIRST STORIES**. If you have wanted to write science-fiction, now is the time to start. This department will discover the coming favorites.—The Editor.



COSMIC TRAGEDY

by **THOMAS S.
GARDINER**

"The generators exploded showering molten metal on the frightened Murians."

THE big man with the iron grey hair stared morosely out the quartz window and across the roofs of Greater New York. Far down the canyon streets a few motor cars still ran and over the swinging aerial bridges scattered pedestrians care-

fully wended their way. Their grotesque figures with the heavy metal helmets that reminded the watching man of the half-mythical sea monsters of the past or divers that used to explore wrecks were far different from the jostling crowds that had crowded

the ways only a few short days ago. But that was before the plague—the plague of the whispering death.

John Cortland, United Utilities Power magnate, sighed as he turned from the quiet streets below. Somberly he regarded a tiny light beam that came from the mirror of a galvanometer that trembled and danced continually. He mused over the events of the past few days and wondered at their meaning. Like a caged tiger he paced the metal lined room waiting for the word that would spell success or disaster. Five days before it had first appeared. A whispering, a singing and vibrating had manifested itself. It was not local but appeared simultaneously all over the earth. This whispering, as of elfish voices, was not annoying at first; but it changed and alternated from a shrill whine back to the eery murmuring that was first noticed. Young Cavendish at the Black Laboratories had first tracked down the cause of the strange sounds—as to its ultimate origin, that was still veiled in mystery.

At the end of the first day people had become nervous, at the end of the second many were on the point of breaking, and then mankind began to go insane. It was too much for their nervous systems and the vibration seemed to affect the inner ear. Suddenly a well ordered planet became a center of bedlam and chaos. Order could not be restored because there was no one to handle affairs. If Dr. Hankins had not discovered that iron would shield a wearer from the vibrations, mankind would have been doomed. As it was only a few of the earth's heavy population had been able to get the protecting helmets, and some had lived in metal lined rooms. This discovery of the shielding effect of iron led to the discovery that an electro-magnetic radiation between infra-red and the short radio waves was acting on the ozone molecules to set them into vibration. To cap it all the ionized Heavyside Layer that protected the earth from the ultra-violet

rays from the sun was decomposing also. Thus to the plague of the Whispering Death was added the threat of sun burn—a horrible burn that killed the skin and ultimately the patient.

Savagely John Cortland kicked at his chair as he paced across the room. There was one slender hope, a tiny thread that might save them at last. Europe was prostrated, Asia in turmoil, and America in chaos. All depended on the theory that the origin of the destructive vibration that had set their ozone molecules into their dance of death had intelligence back of it. The source of the radiation could not be found at this time, but that was not needed. If they could use the incoming radiation field as a carrier and heterodyne on it a super-imposed vibration perhaps the source could be destroyed. Japan had furnished the formula for the opposing field, and United Utilities Power the energy. All the great power stations on the planet had been connected up into a unit, all the tremendous kilowatts of energy had been flowing for hours into those great reservoirs of bound energy, the artificial space field invented by Minski of Stalingrad; and the great glass globes at Schenectady had taken this power and had built up a voltage unthinkable. The earth was going to hurl the thunderbolts of Jove.

For hours now he had restlessly awaited the signal to release this energy in answer to the Whispering Death. For hours the stunned planet had awaited the moment of decision. When he would release all this pent up energy that Niagara, Victoria, and countless other water falls and many great steam power plants that had been harnessed for man's use, the carefully pre-calculated voltage would hurl an electron stream at a target, the desired wave length would be omitted by the target, and would automatically heterodyne itself on the invading field. This frightful stream of energy would blast its generators into atoms, but it must suffice. It was earth's dying stroke.

A bell tinkled and eagerly John Cortland rushed to answer. A quiet voice said.

"We are ready. The potential has reached maximum."

The zero hour had arrived. Nervously John Cortland looked around the room, at the familiar articles, and once out the window at the sunlight and then back in.

He threw the switch.

PHOR, great leader of the once powerful Murlans, gazed through the matter shield across space to the planet hanging in the heavens. A great green disk outlined in pearly light with green continents and bluish-green seas pointed clearly to its nearness. The artificial satellite that housed the observatory was circling this planet with incredible velocity. This was just what they had been looking for, an habitable planet with intelligent beings on it to aid them in their problems. Long ages ago they had left their planet just before their sun had become a nova and had exploded. Only a few of their peoples had been saved and at the thought the great goggle eyes filmed in sorrow. The great journey through space had tried them all, generations had been born and some had died. By necessity they had kept their population down until they could come to a system which might support them. They not only needed a habitable planet but an intelligent people on this planet so that they could rebuild their civilization quickly. They were friendly and had no wish to harm the dwellers on this planet.

He did not entirely agree with the council that they should get into communication with these peoples before landing. Phor thought they were wasting time to encircle this beautiful world while attempting to communicate with them. Their atmosphere analysis had shown them small quantities of ozone and they were bombarding the ozone with a controlled radiation. This caused them to act as receivers and converters so that intelligent

communication could be set up. It was just like a radio without a receiving set. The ozone molecules did it all just before decomposing. To one side he could see the huge transformers and generators of the tiny moonlet's driving plant and ray generators. The actual projector hung like a huge mushroom some distance from the generating plant. The inclined buildings, due to the high radius of curvature of the moonlet, looked as if they were falling down all the time. Tiny figures of Murians ceaselessly worked about the great machines that had cared for them for ages.

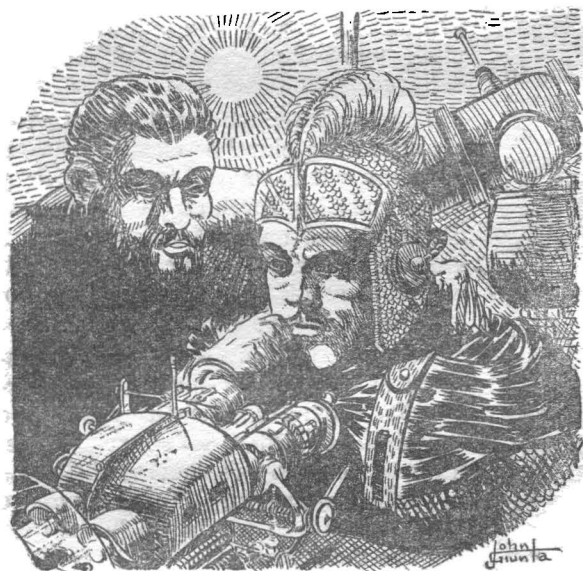
For days now they had been keeping up the barrage, hoping to get a response. Their electro-telescopes had shown them that this planet housed a people as intelligent as their own. Their great cities, ships, and power stations made them long to be with the planet's peoples. Together they could do wonders and here they were waiting in space. Why this waste of time? Of course the Council was right in believing that the sudden appearance of unfamiliar beings might start an interplanetary war, and they could not fight a war. Their resources were practically exhausted, their peoples few, and they had no desire to cause trouble. They only wanted peace and a place to live. He shrugged his scaly shoulders and cocked his vertical eye at the meters covering the walls. No response to their messages yet. What could be the matter? Of course the planet had a denser atmosphere than that they had been accustomed to, but no matter. They could adjust themselves to it. Strange about the messages though. They had been exactly within the audibility range of the Murians and their antennae had no difficulty in reading them. Of course the planet's men would receive them just the same. Still the prediction of Tum-tak that the denser atmosphere would increase the pitch of the ozone molecules had to be considered. However this increased pitch should not harm the inhabitants. Their antennae

received them very well tests demonstrated. They had not tested them for an effect on an inner ear structure, for they had never possessed them. Their sound transmission had been direct.

If they did not get a response within a few more revolutions about the planet they would be compelled to go down into the atmosphere. Wonder what that unusual activity about the power plants and the great crystal globes on one of the major continents meant anyway? Perhaps they were preparing to answer their calls. But why so much power as they seemed to be accumulating? What a peculiar field! That was unknown to them. Why these peoples had pumped more power into that one field than the Murians had developed for ages. Great

peoples these inhabitants of the third planet. Well, he would take one more glance at the great crystal globes before turning over his place to his aide. There it was now. The crystal globes were surrounded in crimson flame, they disappeared in blinding incandescence, and horrors, simultaneously their projector had been surrounded by a halo of radiation that arced across to the generators. These exploded showering molten metal on the frightened Murians. Phor did not see the full charge arrive, blasting the moonlet into incandescence and destroying the last of the Murians.

A great flare came into being in space between earth and moon. The earthlings were greatly mystified at it, but the Whispering Death had ceased. They were satisfied.



The PLANET of ILLUSION

by MILLARD V.
GORDON

*"We'll never be able to pass
the planet. It's either land or
crash."*

*"A phantom land and a phantom folk
Come sailing out of the deep unknown
With a soundless roar and a lightless flash
To conquer a void for them alone."*

—ROGER DAINTETH

"PLANET sighted!" sang out Kendall, eye glued to the electro-telescope.

"Where away?" rang Fred Broster from his place at the controls.

"Five point on ten left from star. Point three seven above the elliptic," came Kendall's voice again from the forward observation window.

"You're daft and dreaming. Snap into it and look again," Broster yelled, staring hard at the automatically-recording space-chart. "There's nothing here but a particularly empty species of nothingness."

The captain's keen gray eyes stared carefully at the glowing panel before him. On it shone out tiny points of light which revealed each of the different bodies through whose vicinity the *Astralite* was passing. A remarkable device actuated by delicate gravital detectors which marked out every body they approached.

And according to this chart, there was no such planet recorded in the depths of the device as that which Kendall had sighted.

"I'm not dreaming. Your chart is wrong if you can't find it there," Kendall remarked after a pause, still staring through the lens of the instrument.

Broster examined the chart again. No; there positively was no planet circling the star as his observer claimed.

"Come away from there!" he called, straightening up. "Dr. Seaward, will you please take the observer's place and check."

Seaward dropped the calculations in hand, walked across the control room of the great interstellar explorer, up to the very tip. Kendall stood aside while the doctor applied his eye to the lens.

"It's there all right, Broster. A little red disk exactly where he called it off; the chart's wrong."

Broster ran a hand through his chestnut hair, a puzzled look in his eyes. He glared at the space-chart for a moment, as if loath to believe that that faithful instrument could have gone haywire. Then he picked his way over to the electro-telescope to verify the sighting personally.

A moment later, the three were looking at each other wonderingly. All realized what this might mean: if that space-chart failed them, it might be all over with any possibility ever of returning home. Space-navigating in the bounds of the solar system was one thing; there it didn't matter whether you ran by chart or by observation. But here in the bounds of cosmic space, thousands of light-years from the sun, where they had to navi-

gate in the blackness of inter-stellar distances, the space-chart was all-important. Bodies out here were dark; there were no stars nearby from which they could reflect light . . .

"That chart will have to be overhauled" murmured the captain. "If it's gone wrong . . ."

"What about this planet? It's the only one around this star," put in Kendall, jerking a thumb in its general direction.

"Head toward it; we may as well give it the once-over."

The huge ship pursued its unvarying course toward the approaching star. At a single light-year away, they decelerated, slowed down. Riding the strange eka-gravity waves, the little-known carrier-waves for light and gravity which seemed to travel as fast in relation to light as light in relation to sound, this craft of the Thirtieth Century was able to accomplish what had for centuries been believed unachievable.

They approached until at last the gravital drag clutched the ship, started to draw it in toward that vast, fiery globe spurting forth countless tons of disintegrated matter per second, emanating energy inconceivable. Yet, withal, a small star, smaller than Sol and quite inconspicuous as stars go.

As they drifted, Broster and Seaward examined the space-chart thoroughly. But in vain; nothing could be found out of order: no short circuits, no tubes needing replacement. It was in perfect shape, but . . . it refused to light a white speck in its black field for the near planet.

They watched the planet grow larger, slowly made out surface details. A ruddy world, bathed entirely in red light, although the star around which it circled was white. Crimson clouds floated in masses of carmine seas and necine land-masses. The glow of the red world shone in through the stella-quartzite ports, throwing a weird, bloody glare on everything.

"This is a helluva world," growled

Kendall. "You'd go nuts there after awhile."

Seaward nodded. "Quite so. Red is a color that acts to irritate those who look at it overlong. I wouldn't advise staying on this world for more than a few minutes. We could easily go mad were we forced to remain here so much as a day."

"We'll land, anyway, and look around. If—" Broster was cut off abruptly as the shrill scream of the alarm pierced his line of thought. "What the devil is that?"

The sound of running feet from the far back of the ship came to their ears, then the fourth member of the crew streaked into the control room. "Space ships approaching us!" Arundell shouted. "Didn't you spot them?"

Broster wheeled around to the chart. Nothing indicated; according to it, there was no planet ahead of them, no space-ships behind them. He muttered something then hurried across to the side ports, swung out the periscopic plates, stared anxiously to their rear.

There were at least a dozen of the red bodies moving along in their wake. Large, all of them, and near. Ships almost as great as the *Astralite*, ships that looked dangerous.

"They're close," he grated, "too damn close. I don't like it."

"Neither did I. I was wondering why you didn't do something when I saw them in the port," Arundell exclaimed.

Broster jumped to the controls, pulled the lever that should shunt the ship to one side. But as the nose turned away, and the great mass of her began slowly to describe a long arc in relation to her former course, another exclamation came from Kendall: "They're spreading out to stop us!"

Broster cursed, reset the course. The planet was dead ahead now.

"Trapped!" he fumed. "The red planet ahead of us, and those ships behind us. What do they want?"

"It might be well to stop," Dr. Seaward put in. "They may want to look us over and nothing more. Unless

we arouse suspicion by resisting now."

"And they might steal the ship under our noses, too," protested Arundell.

Broster shook his head. "There cannot be a question of letting unknown intelligences enter this craft or hold it. We can't afford to take chances, even if the notion that other world dwellers are necessarily enemies is silly. We've got to assume that everything we see is dangerous until proven harmless or friendly. Those are our first orders: do not surrender the ship."

"Then we run for it?" asked Seaward.

"We do. Our offensive weapons may be better than theirs but it's another chance we're not taking. The very fact that we're outnumbered makes retreat the order of the day."

"Look there!" exclaimed Arundell. "They're beaming past us!"

One of the strange oval, multi-ported, oddly-ornamented, crimson craft had just shot a red beam alongside of the *Astralite*. Not touching it, but passing by, as if to show that, whenever they cared, this fleet could annihilate the intruder. Then, all the other ships surrounding them began to flash beams. Crossing and criss-crossing all about them save in front.

"Look," exclaimed Kendall. "You can see those beams as if they were in air."

"Marvellous and impossible," groaned Seaward. "We've run into a swarm of impossibilities today. Some philosopher once remarked that in eternity everything was possible—in fact, everything that could possibly happen has happened. It looks as if we're running into bits of that now. I should have taken my daughter's advice and let a younger man come this trip."

"It may be impossible, but it's so," broke in Broster. "And deadily. We're getting out of here fast."

He turned to the controls and a moment later the *Astralite* began to accelerate. There was a limit to the

speed they could reach as they would have to shunt again soon to keep from smashing against the red planet. Unless—

"Why not?" asked Arundell, following Broster's evident thoughts.

"They apparently want us to land on the planet. So we do go for it, then shunt aside at the last minute."

AT FIRST, it seemed as if the *Astralite* would leave the others behind, but it was soon apparent that the unknown ships could keep up with her. In fact were closing in.

There was one pursuer behind them that seemed to Kendall, as he watched through the lens, almost to be upon them. It was, he knew, some half-mile away in reality. He could see the curiously pitted nose of the craft, note the weirdly-streamlined mass. He observed, with astonishment, a little piece of wire seemingly flying loose from a bearing on one of the strange ships, which was streaming off behind as if in a stiff breeze. Yet space about them was empty!

"Look out!" called Seaward from the forward scope. "Here's more of them."

Coming around the planet from behind, spreading out along the side as if to form a welcoming arch were more of the weird ships.

"That ties it," exclaimed Broster. "We'll never be able to pass the planet. It's either land or crash."

"Then we crash" came the response.

"Man the guns!" yelled Broster. "Let's see how many we can take with us before we go."

The three others swung in the various weapons and trained them on the surrounding ships. Explosion-torpedo cannon, twin-rays for electric jolting comprised the types of offensive guns. They were getting very close to the planet, now. And it seemed as if the red ships were expecting the *Astralite* to slow down, for their beams shot occasionally in front of the earth-ship. The carmine bulk of

the planet loomed up over most of the view now. It was too late to shunt aside.

"Fire!"

No sound, no roar of explosions. They watched eagerly for results. But there were none. Not a single torpedo appeared to have hit its mark, not a single twin-ray seemed to bathe the surrounding ovoids. They fired again.

Kendall swore. The course of one torpedo was the stimulus; he watched it, saw its dark mass approach the nose of one of the vessels behind. Then he swears he saw it strike—and disappear.

Firing was useless. These ships were invulnerable to their weapons.

Broster looked up, bracing himself.

"Stand by to crash!"

The four stopped everything, turned to look at each other for a moment in silence. In a few seconds more they would simply cease to exist. No pain, no hours of lingering agony trapped in the wreckage. At the speed they were going, the entire ship would be volatilized, would fuse into a molten, glowing mass.

They turned again to the plates to look for a last time at the universe around them.

For six years they had traveled away from earth, far, far beyond any point man had ever dreamed of reaching. They were almost to the point where the order to turn back would have been given. Much had been learned; now it would be lost.

Broster gave her full acceleration.

They saw the planet seemingly leap toward them, saw cloudbanks flick past them. A great flat plain of ruddy rock, a dread expanse of barren granite. This in the veriest fragment of a second, then—

A momentary shock, as if each man had received an electrical jolt; a sudden flash of intolerable red. Darkness.

THE earthmen blinked their eyes.

They were in the ship, unharmed. They stood at their posts in the same position as before. And about them the

black of far space and the shining points of the star-studded Milky Way.

Kendall gazed into the lens of the rear port, beckoned to the others. The red planet was already a small, crimson disk behind them, passing into oblivion as they accelerated onward, outward.

Broster laughed. "It's all clear now. Why the space-chart seemingly did not function, why our weapons were useless."

"And why we were not killed, and why their beams could be seen in space," added Seaward.

"Because they weren't in space; they were in air. In the air of another universe."

"It was all an illusion," explained Seaward. "The ships, the planet, everything. That is why none of these things registered on the space chart; there were no gravity waves emanating from them because they were not there."

Broster leaned back in his chair. "We've all known that there are many universes beside ours, separated from us by the fourth-dimensional space-time sheet. That was demonstrated by Marilus centuries ago. Laboratory experiments have produced images of other planets. All this was just such an image.

"The space-time envelope must have been a little warped at this point. Enough so as to let part of the waves

emanating from the atoms of that section to pass through to our universe—and permit waves emanating from the atoms of our universe to pass through to them. We were able to see the red rays of their spectrum, nothing else. They saw us as a violet ship. But that was all."

"Then," put in Kendall, "that's why they seemed to be shooting rays at us."

"Right. We appeared to them, in their world, as suddenly as they appeared to us in space; it was a double mirage. At one end of the warp, they and their planet suddenly appear in what the instruments show to be empty space; at the other end, we appear out of nowhere, a strange ship headed for their planet. And, it must have seemed to them, that we went right through their planet, too. That planet of theirs, by the way, must be a tremendous one. Many times the mass and density of Jupiter. It's probably what causes the space-warp."

"What!" exclaimed Kendall. "You mean that thing's a permanent institution in space?"

"Certainly."

"Then let's go back and have a good look."

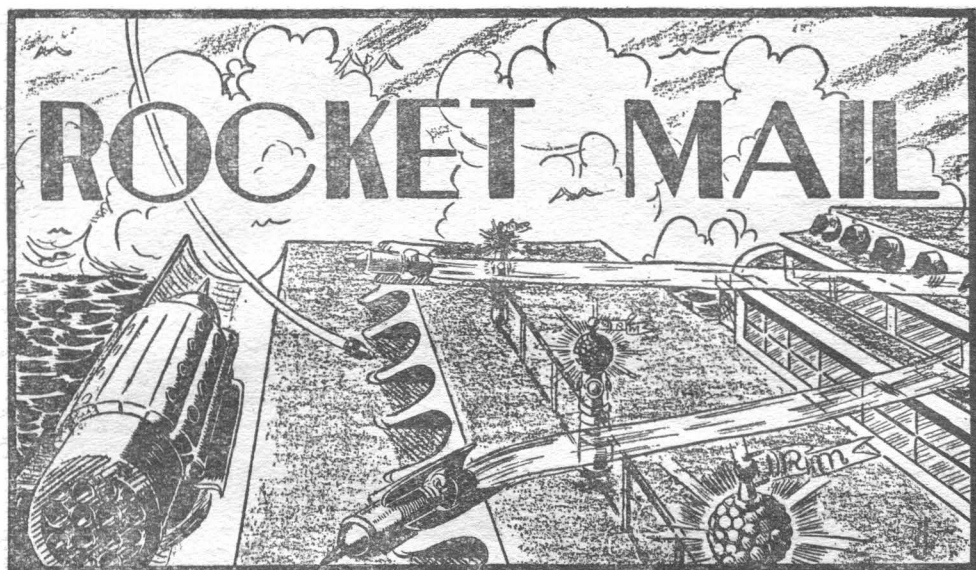
"Check," agreed Broster.

"We'll give their fleet and their planet the jitters again" laughed Seaward as he prepared the plates for special photos.

Watch the APRIL COMET

*.... for an important announcement which
concerns all science-fiction fans who plan
to attend the*

DENVER CONVENTION



Twelve Years Faithful

Dear Mr. Tremaine:

It is 1928. A high school lad eagerly awaits the arrival of a STF mag—only one of its kind then in existence. There is a breath-taking sweep and crude—yes I said crude—sort of magnificence about those first stories that is constantly surprising and stimulating his imagination.

He continues to read the magazines as they sprout up one, two, three. Pioneering the way they are. . . . Then the deluge!

Ten, twelve, fifteen magazines. Stf, stf, stf! Even the westerns and the slicks start printing them! Out of this muddle he tries to drag an interesting, thought-provoking story or so. And there are good stories in all of them—a few! Most of them, however, are formula, slanted or frankly, hack. Originality, the story for the story alone and not the standardized robot-like type, seemed to be almost forgotten.

And finally, 1940. The one-time high school lad is a broken-down old man. He's buying seven or eight of 'em, and saving half of them for rereading. He stumbles across COMET, and the first issue leads to a second. Now that old itch is back. He don't know what is coming, but he knows it will be different! He remembers the wide field that S and S covered and dominated when a certain Tremaine edited their mag. He remembers stories, years afterward. And he borrows a typewriter to grind out a short-short. . . .

That's several thousand of us. There's always room for a new stf mag, a good one, in our rubbry budget. . . .

I give Peterson first place this time with

The Moskowitz in second place. Darn glad to see his work somewhere outside fan publications. He's been their mainstay for a long time, and a good one. It's a story. In third place I put Arnold's "Twilight People," and trailing in fourth is Eando Binder. . . . Can't always lead as you did in first issue, Eando. For some reason the novelets lead the field this time and are almost equally good. Makes it tough to pick the best ones.

Okay, next we have fifth place so let's give that to Lowndes. And sixth—well, Winterbotham. I don't usually count beyond five so let's drop it there.

And another thing. I like your cover. It looks almost conservative. Personally I prefer a cover like *Unknown* has, but I know it takes pictures to snare the casual reader's eye. You are looking for steady readers of course, and your type of cover will click with anyone over sixteen.

Oh yes, I didn't mention the Spacean. . . . Interesting in a number of ways, but, aren't there any cartoonists on the staff of the Spacean? Sorry though, I guess Ziff Davis has sewed that up. If they haven't a monopoly on screwy cartoons we like 'em too. There should be several amateur artists on some of the Q ships.

And let's have a listing of fan mags one of these days. Names, prices and a brief comment.

Sincerely,
BASIL WELLS,
Springboro, Pa.

We're Trying for Them All

Dear Mr. Tremaine:

I sure am glad to hear that Jack Williamson is coming back; he is my favorite au-

thor by a long shot, and his "Cometeers" is my favorite story. I met him this summer in Los Angeles, and he sure is a nice person. I hope you will have Van Lorne do a story for you. His "World of Purple Light," "Glagula," etc., were excellent. Ross Rocklynne is another favorite of mine. Hope "The Immortal" is something like "Water for Mars" or "Anton Moves the Earth." Then it will truly be a classic. The only other authors you might get are either dead or unavailable; Stuart & Weinbaum, for example.

Personally I prefer Paul on the Covers, though some people I know think Morey is tops. Oh yes, how about a story by Schachner and C. L. Moore? Bring all the old-timers back!

I keep thinking of authors I like, so how about some Gallun, and what ever happened to J. George Frederick?

Very cordially,

TOM WRIGHT,
11400 Bush Ave.,
Martinez, Calif.

P.S.—Received the Tremayne Catalog, and some of the books advertised sure look interesting. "Scare Me" and "Sown in the Darkness" especially. Ah, yes, I see Arthur J. Burks, another good author for COMET! He seems to be about the best all-around author yet, i.e., he can write anything and make it interesting.

No Comment Needed

PLANETOGRAM
From Jupiter to Earth
November 13th, 2576
Dear Sir:

TELEVISION
CABLE SERVICE
Terminal 77852
on Jupiter

Planet Space Ship Y396XQ just delivered the first issue of the COMET STOP It is undoubtedly the best magazine describing present times that has been delivered way up here to Jupiter in a long time STOP I am an earth engineer working in a mine here on Jupiter, producing gravitation metal, you know, Uranium 701 STOP All of the miners sit around in the storage building each night and I have to read them stories out of the magazine STOP Natives have tried to steal it several times, just to look at the cover, they think it is wonderful, so do we STOP Keep up the good stories and departments, they are first class STOP Especially the "Spacean," it is tops in newspaper work of today STOP An excellent magazine, worthy of the present civilization STOP Awaiting prompt answer STOP. Signing off until next issue STOP.

Truly yours,

Earth Engineer 235-487
HENRY BUCHTAL,
Terrestrial address:
1899 So. Second Street,
Louisville, Kentucky

Dear Mr. Tremaine:

I want to write you and tell you that I am fully with you in the matter of having a Short-Short Story Corner.

As a beginning writer who has yet to gain recognition in the pages of any pulp, I am more than glad to see your proposal. As a science-fiction reader of more than five years, I am pleased to find a real s-f magazine again.

I have written numerous s-f stories in the last two years, have received many rejection slips, and a few personal letters and comments from several well known editors. I feel that your Short-Short Story Corner will give me a real chance, at last. Here's hoping to see my first story in print in the first genuine s-f magazine in many years.

Good luck to you and your new magazine!

Very truly yours,

RODNEY A. AHNER,
407 Park Ave.,
Yuba City, California

Dear Mr. Tremaine:

I am sure you will witness an overwhelming response to your request for reader reaction. I only hope that my humble opinion is not buried in the flood. In times to come, I predict that the early issues of COMET will be much in demand, and it would be a privilege to have one's letter in evidence.

Unfortunately I was not aware of science fiction's peculiar appeal at the time of your editing *Astounding*. But having discovered a few old issues, I would be well satisfied if you made COMET as interesting.

Morey's cover was excellent. Is the column of contents on the cover permanent? Personally I would prefer a larger picture. Morey also did the best interior illustration, though even this did not represent his best effort. You have undoubtedly heard this before, nevertheless please, please use Paul. Schneeman and Orban would also be quite welcome.

The choice stories of the issue, in my opinion, were "Lord of the Silent Death," "The Ultimate Image," "Primal City," "Momus Moon" and "Equation for Time."

Stories, if up to previous standards, by Williamson, E. E. Smith and Coblenz would be appreciated.

As an editor experienced in stf. you doubtless realize the great importance of an interesting and extensive readers' column. I hope Rocket Mail satisfies the demand. In closing this perhaps too lengthy missive, I shall transmit my approval of both the Spacean and a Short-Short Story Corner.

Your stfictionally,

S. C. GOLDSMITH,
70 Leuty Ave.,
Toronto, Ontario

From the Colorado Fantasy Society

Dear Science Fiction Fans:

You have all probably heard of the 1940 World's Science Fiction Convention and the tremendous success it was. If you were there you will not miss the DENVER 1941 WORLD'S SCIENCE FICTION CONVENTION for anything. If not, you should be equally anxious to attend after reading of the swell times you missed in various magazines. How would you like to meet the top science fiction authors, editors and fans? How would you like to chat with F. Orlin Tremaine, Ray Palmer, Fred Pohl and other editors about their magazines and science fiction in general? See E. E. Smith, author of the Skylark and Lensman stories, Robert A. Heinlein, and many other authors, to discuss their stories and your pet plots? Meet such famous fans as Forrest J. Donald, A. Wollheim, Bob Tucker, and Harry Warner, Jr. Other important fans whose letters you see in the readers' columns regularly—Robert W. Lowndes, Donald B. Thompson, Mororo Wiggins, and many others too numerous to mention.

How would an ORIGINAL cover or interior illustration by Paul Finley, Morey, Bok, or Krups look hanging in your den? You can't afford to miss this super affair.

It will be held in Denver, Colorado, July fourth, fifth and sixth, 1941. Free souvenirs, old and rare professional and fan science fiction magazines on sale, full length science-fiction movie, and honor banquet. BUT we can't do this by ourselves. WE must have the support of every one of you. It is your essential duty as lovers of Science and Fantasy Fiction. The Club, The Colorado Fantasy Society, was organized specifically to sponsor this convention—every cent taken in from this club is applied to making a bigger and better affair that will be well worth your trouble coming across the continent to attend. We earnestly request your attendance in this organization. It is only 50 cents the year. You will receive a beautiful silver and blue membership card, a generous supply of booster stickers, and a free subscription to the CFS (COLORADO FANTASY SOCIETY) REVIEW. This neatly mimeographed organ contains all the latest developments concerning the DEVENTION (Denver Convention). As we've said before we MUST have your support and will greatly appreciate it. It is your duty to progress and unite SCIENCE FICTION.

Sincerely,

OLON F. WIGGINS,
LEW MARTIN,
ROY HUNT,
3214 Champa St.,
Denver, Col.

One for Moskowitz

Dear Editor:

This is the first time I have written a letter to any Science Fiction magazine, but I felt it to be my duty to express my opinion on the story, "The Way Back." My opinion is "swell." Another good story is, "And Return," which has a new kind of plot. Give my congratulations to Sam Moskowitz and Eando Binder and lets have Michel Drawers (from the story, "The Way Back") back in another story. Keep up the good work and more power to the Short-Short Story Department.

Yours till the moon comes to earth,

WILLY BLAIR,
121 Bellair Ave.,
Springfield, Ohio

Thank You

Dear Mr. Tremaine:

Congratulations on the first two issues of COMET. It seemed incredible at first that there could be room for still another sf. magazine on the already well-nigh glutted market, but you seem to have what it takes. I am especially fond of the feature, The Spacean, although I do feel a little queasy when I read such entymological monstrosities as "Plutian" and "Venusian." All that is lacking to make it completely unpalatable is the use of "Marsian" or "Uranusian."

Sincerely Yours,
PAUL VOGENITU,
Box 325, Benj. Franklin Sta.,
Washington, D. C.

P.S.: The Short-Short Stories are definitely OK. Keep the good work up!

The Policy Is Shaping

Dear Mr. Tremaine:

Even with a dozen or so science fiction mags on the market, a good one is always welcome. And COMET looks as though it will be good, very good.

As the stories in a first issue are rarely an example of the type to appear in later issues, I won't make any comments on them except to say that in general there was too much fantasy and not enough science. (I may as well warn you that I'm one of those cranks who like their story well seasoned with plenty of science.) Binder's "Momus Moon" and Bruer's "The Oversight" were easily the best tales.

With that routine matter taken care of, there follows a few notes on what one reader wants in the way of fiction. From the tone of your editorials I take it that you plan to feature stories of the thought-variant type. Good! The field could undoubtedly use some new ideas.

At the same time, there is much in pres-

ent day science that is an improvement over the old t-v days. There is, for instance, the matter of characterization. In your *Astounding* of '34 and '35 there were dozens of stories that will live through the years, but how many of the characters will be remembered? Smith's Richard Seaton, Campbell's Aarn Munro, Williamson's Giles Habibula, and after that . . .? And the aforementioned characters all appeared in long stories, giving the reader a chance to get used to them. In the better science fiction mags today we have people; not stereotypes with labels reading hero, heroine, or villain, wandering woodenly through the story's pages.

The ideal science fiction story would be a combination of the old and the new. It would have a novel, daring scientific basis, such as that used in the old thought-variants, and it would have the characterization and writing quality of the better science fiction tales of today. Getting such stories will be a hard job, but if you do it you'll have a number of appreciative readers.

Your short-short story plan looks good. I might even write one myself. (You can regard that as a threat or a promise, whichever you prefer.)

The Spacean doesn't appeal. Such stuff is childish, unless woven into a story.

How about some stories by Murray Leinster and Frank K. Kelly? I don't recall reading anything by either since you left the editorial field three years ago.

Sincerely yours,

LYNN BRIDGES,
7730 Pitt St.,
Detroit, Michigan

COMET policy is taking form. There is just one thing we want to say about your suggestions. We will listen to and consider every one of them.—F. O. T.

Keep the "Spacean"

Dear Sir:

•One hundred per cent for Moskowitz! Yours is the best mag I've read since I started reading fantasy. My only Objection was some of the illustrations. The first one Was by Bok wasn't it. Raus mit Bok. HE is all-right for weird but not serious fiction. The one for "Ticket to Paradise" was all right but could have been better. How About Wesso? Forte and Binder were excellent. Keep up the good work and make Binder use more detail. "Momus Moon" and "Primal City" tie for first and "The Oversight" a close second. "Lord of the Silent Death" is the only story I didn't like. Too common. Oh, yes don't forget to increase "The Spacean" at least three more Pages. It's the best feature in a nearly perfect mag.

Yours in stf,
BRUCE L. HANSON
Hackensack, Minn.

They Will Come

Dear Editor Tremaine:

It is my great privilege to welcome you once more to the field of fantasy, and my only hope is that you will retain the role of an excellent "provider" for the many starved readers of fantasy as you so ably did five and six years ago. I, too, remember the classics that Sam M. listed, and I must say that if such things as *Colossus*, *Rebirth* and *Farewell to Earth* are to be found in your new mag, Comet, you may rest assured that your future as an editor of STF is firmly secured.

The title, much to my extreme joy, is a sane one and does not bring pictures of an infantile mind to the thoughts of the mag dealers. The cover presentation—without print on the drawing—is good, but others have tried and failed to put it over. Enlarge the picture a bit and I'll call for more of them. As to the picture—I made it No. 8 out of 11 covers printed during the month of October. Morey is a great artist, but by trying to emulate the latest crop of STF-artists—all splashes of brilliant color and no "plot" or art—he is ruining his very individual style. There was no sane reason for the ship to be painted like a prism. The old-timers, Binder and Morey, get an eager reception, and of the newcomers Forte and Holmdale—for science—and Kelley for fantasy—were the best of the lot.

The author's lineup was most impressive with the names of C. A. Smith and Breuer a gladsome sight to these old eyes. Now that you've roped them, keep them hog-tied—their absence has been too long as it is. The departments seem good with a promise of a huge rocket mail each month (perhaps you're the Messiah to bring back the letter dept of the "good o'le days") and an interesting editorial. A condensed Spacean is called for and a plea of "No more Features."

Bratton's Idea leads the spangled and tinsel parade because the thought of a "come-to-life" dummy gave me the horripulations. Wellman characterized Tom-Tom in a thrilling and realistic manner. That brain stimulant, *Equation for Time*, is second, and is closely trailed by *The Ultimate Image*, *Tickets to Paradise* and *Primal City*. I'm so glad that one branch of fantasy is not emphasized in COMET as in other mags. Binder's cover yarn, *The Oversight*, *Eyes that Watch*, 6, 7 and 8, with Williams and Chapman ending the procession. Possibly that is not a representative list, but all were good—so what to do? Cut down a bit on the shorts and print more 20- and 25-page novelettes. I hear that Paul is on next cover—good enough. How about Wesso, Morey, Paul, Bok and Binder as permanent art staff?

C. HIDLEY,
New York, N. Y.

Everything Rated

Dear Mr. Tremaine:

It was with keen anticipation that I awaited the appearance of your new STF magazine. The first magazine, STF magazine, that I read was a 1935 issue of *Astounding Stories* edited by you. It was because of that superb issue, and the superb issues that followed, that I continued to read STF and finally read all the other magazines I could get. This, however, is diverging from the present.

The first thing to greet my sight was the cover. Morey was fair at this. My choice for cover artists would be Finlay, Rogers, and Paul. The best interior artists are Finlay, Paul, Wesso, Binder, Marchioni, and Schomburg in the order named. Of course, there are others who can produce suitable interior illustrations—Holmdale, Forte, and Giunta are all right, Forte is the best of these—but my preference is for the others I enumerated.

With a marking system using ten as the highest and one as the lowest, I shall rate the features in the first issue of the COMET. Credit for the origination of this method of rating should, I think, go to Harry Warner, Jr. of 303 Bryan Place, Hagerstown, Maryland. For full information about it, and a good copy of a real good fan magazine, anyone interested should send Harry a dime for a copy of the second anniversary issue of his *Spaceways*. That is one fan magazine, Mr. Tremaine, that you or anyone else should not miss getting.

"Eyes That Watch", by Gallun	09.00
"Equation for Time", by Winterbotham	08.50
"Momus Moon", by Binder	08.70
"In Earth's Shadow", by Chapman	06.00
"The Ultimate Image", by Miller	07.00
"The Oversight", by Breuer	05.00
"Primal City", by C. A. Smith	04.00
"Lord of the Silent Death", by Williams	02.00
"Bratton's Idea", by Wellman	03.00
"Tickets to Paradise", by James	05.00
The Spacean	09.00
Editorial	08.00
The Editor's Note Book	09.00
Rocket Mail	09.00
Average	06.65

The above figures say more than words can say. Is there any way in which I might receive an original inside or cover drawing? I should appreciate it very much if I could get an original Binder or Forte drawing.

Sincerely yours,

RAJOCZ,
312 East Elm Street,
Scranton, Pennsylvania

Opinions Will Guide Us

Dear Mr. Tremaine:

About once or twice each year I put some of the popular science fiction magazines on the market, with the vain hope of even reading one story that will hold my interest and forget some of my earthly troubles.

I did enjoy three quarters of the stories in your first issue, and therefore, think that it is worthwhile writing you, and thereby give you an idea of my likes and dislikes.

First, I think you showed good taste in picking such good stories.

1. I like stories that are novel, alive, and perhaps a little brilliant; in order to keep my interest.

2. I like stories that contain a dash of scientific fact in order to gain a little knowledge with pleasure.

3. Since my grammar is poor enough as is, I will refuse to read stories by men who call themselves authors and yet have such feeble knowledge of the English language. (Many of your authors in this issue show a nice choice of words.)

4. Perhaps the most important feature in Science Fiction writing, is best attributed to the success of H. G. Wells' stories. Mr. Wells states that he attempts to make his stories as plausible as possible for any given fantasy, so that even if the reader does know the improbabilities of the stories, he at least won't be made too conscious of them by the author, and thereby disturb his reading.

The reader of Science Fiction as Mr. Wells knows doesn't want to be critical. He wants to forget realities of the present, and wishes to make the fantasies seem plausible while he is reading. This relaxes and perhaps broadens his mind.

I think good Science Fiction should have its ideas in the forefront and human interest in the background.

If the story can't be analyzed into:

- (a) Hero
- (b) Villain
- (c) Heroine
- (d) And they lived happily ever after.

—then it is probably not stereotyped and trite, and is probably worth reading. I am just a reader of your magazine and have tried to tell you what I like. I shall continue to read COMET since I believe you have shown good taste and excellent planning of this magazine, and above all I liked the stories.

Sincerely yours,

HENRY ZAHN,
Room 803,
100 Gibbs St.,
Rochester, New York

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