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COMET

STF

STORIES OF SUPER TIME AND SPACE

Locked in Ice Caverns on Neptune in

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SKY TRAP
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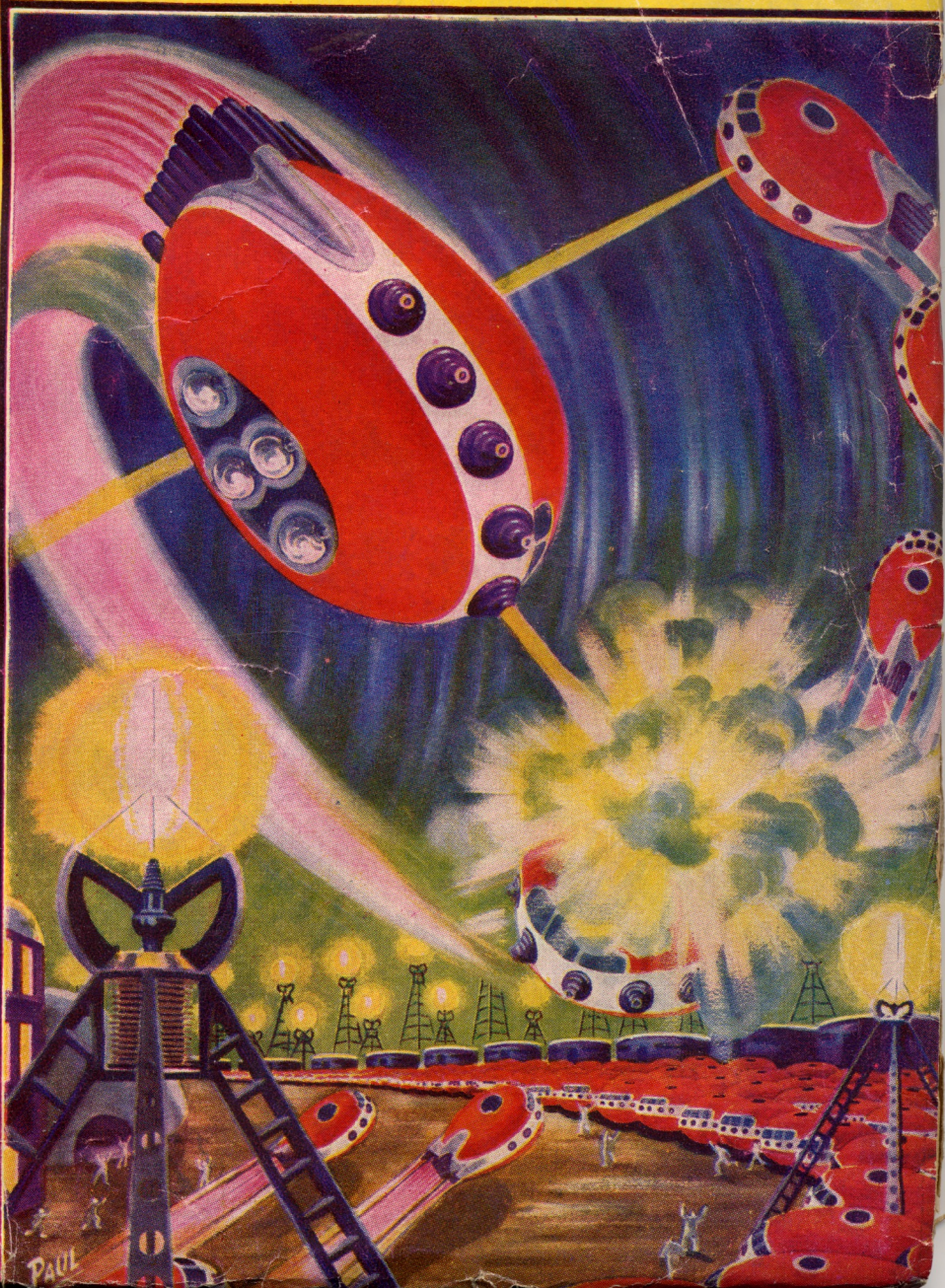

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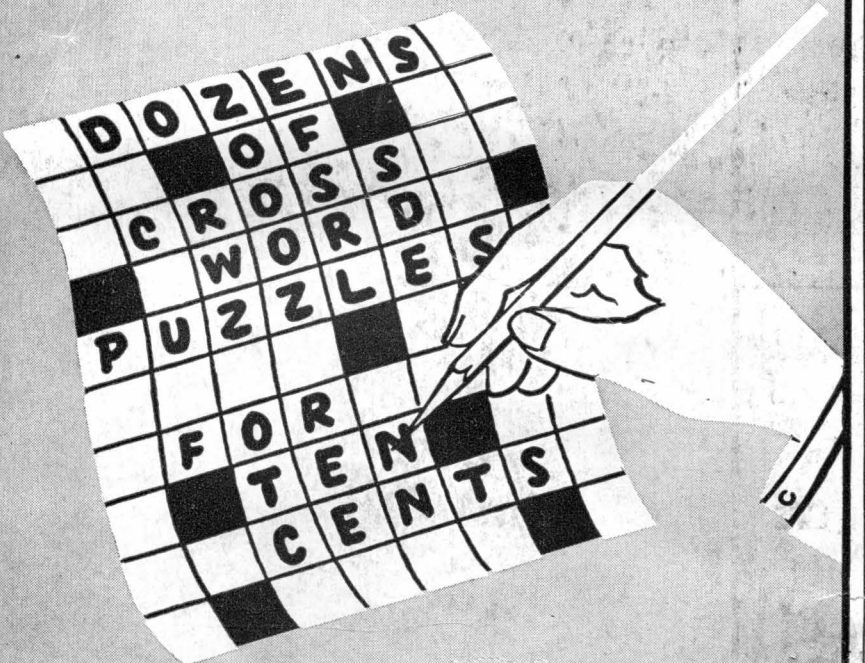

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May, 1941

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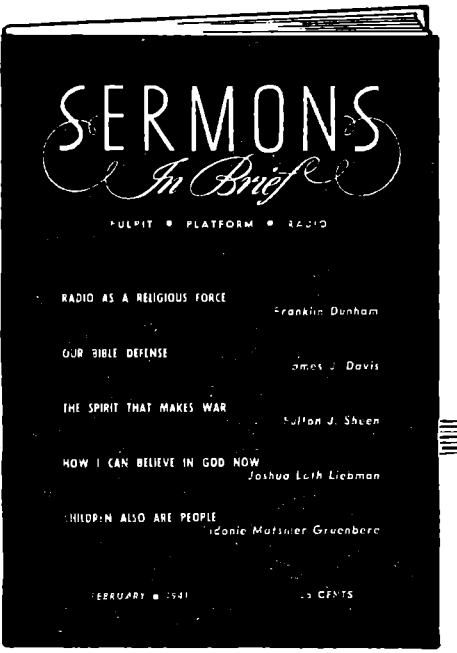

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He saw the huge ball that was Neptune circle below, like a weak green light bulb.

ICE PLANET

by CARL SELWYN

Ricker squeezed the trigger. Men fell. Black oily smoke curled up. The others scattered, leaving five smoking mounds behind.

"IF it's going to happen," thought Bill Ricker, "it's got to be quick." Lounging deep in his red-leather chair, he peered out of the port as the sleek space ship streamed through the darkness. He could see nothing outside but a big, humorous-eyed young man who was his own reflection and the pale green globe that was Neptune. The great planet hung like a ghostly emerald in the void, sinister in its loneliness. But bleak, desolate, a snowball of frozen gases, it was hardly the place for an ambush . . .

"Pretty, ain't she?" said the whiskery old fellow across the aisle.

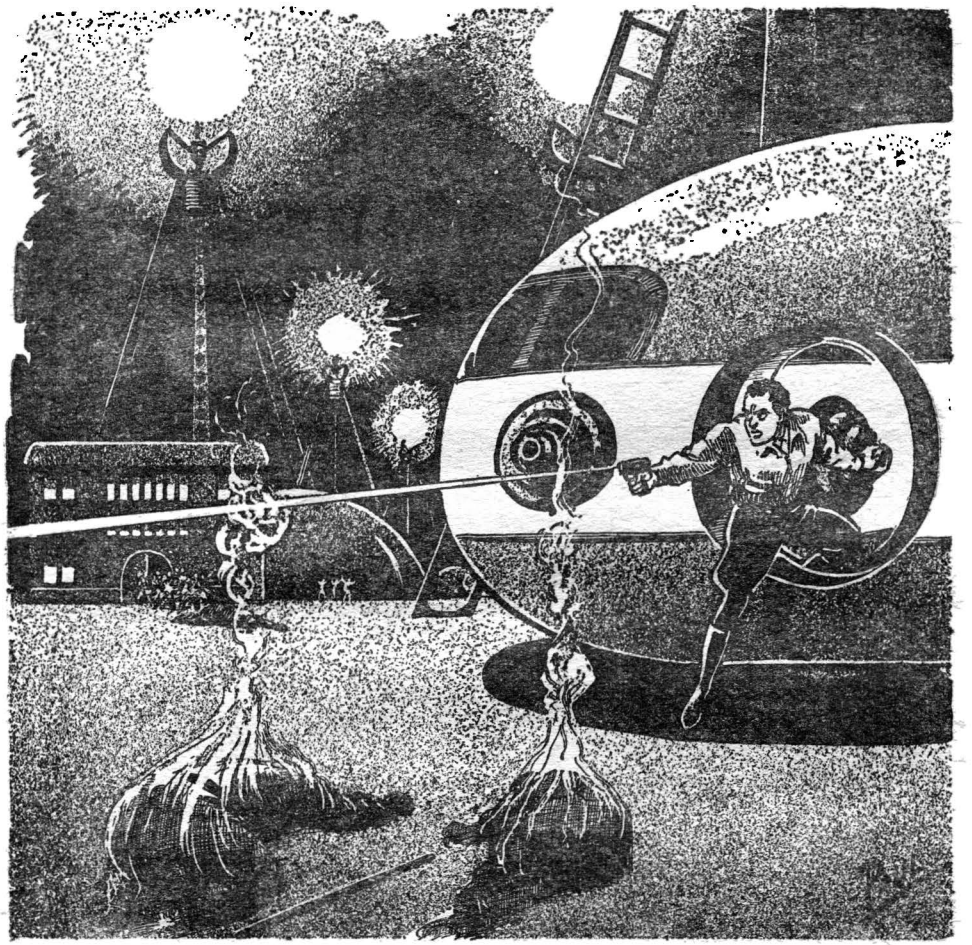
"Neptune?" Ricker glanced at the sourdough, then followed his gaze down the narrow aisle. "Oh—*her!*"

There were twelve seats but only five passengers. Further down was a tubercular-looking Martian and near the pilot room sat a fat man with a woman. The fat man chewed sleepily on a dead cigar and the woman stared out of the window. They were handcuffed together.

"Ever seen the orchids on Amor?" said Ricker. "Well, she's just as beautiful—and just as dangerous . . ." She was obviously Venusian but her skin wasn't exactly yellow, he decided. It was golden brown, little different from a deeply-tanned Earth girl.

"They say she shot his head plumb off," said the old codger.

"Yep, she certainly mowed him down."



The sourdough lifted a bony finger toward Ricker's brief case. "I noticed th' tag on yer kit there," he ventured. "Says th' *Planetary Times*. Be you one o' them telenews fellows?"

Ricker grinned. "Shore am, podner," he said.

"Gonna write about this here murderess arriving on Pluto?"

Ricker nodded good-humoredly. "That's my job."

Slowly a faint siren hum penetrated the cabin, not unlike the sound of a power plant. A power plant it was too, the ship digging in full blast as it skirted the pull of Neptune. Ricker turned away from his garrulous neighbor, saw the sea-tinted planet had doubled in size. It was a perfect sphere, without a mark on its surface, a ring of solid hydrogen and helium. A worthless world, thought Ricker; worthless as was half the universe—because the woman in the seat up front had killed a man!

"Molly Borden—Benjamin Adison . . ." the sourdough mused, apparently still awed by such infamous company.

"Yep," said Ricker, remembering a line from his last story: "In the flash of a pistol those names became linked forever . . ." It was odd, he reflected. One was a woman nobody at the trial had ever seen before, the other was a man whose name echoed throughout the spaceways. Benjamin Adison was to stellar travel what Wright had been

to terrestrial aviation and in his sixtieth year when, at the completion of his work on planet-warming, he had suddenly become *corpus delicti* in the perfect telenews story. A stolen secret, a mysterious woman, a person high in the government—it had all the angles. Then Senator Trexel was acquitted, Molly Borden confessed. Now she was journeying to a life sentence on the penal planet.

"Too bad she burned Adison's plans when they trapped her." It was Ricker's self-appointed traveling companion again.

"We lost the resources of four worlds by that little trick," Bill agreed. "The police found enough in the ashes to convince them it was the plans." He smiled to himself slightly, like someone who expected something but wasn't quite sure he could count on it. He was probably the only one in the universe who wondered if those ashes really were the plans. What if they still existed—what if Molly Borden hadn't been working alone after all—what if those plans for an apparatus that could heat a whole planet were in the wrong hands—? Well, it would be a great telenews story at least, worth following this woman all the way from Earth on a hunch . . .

The Martian began coughing again and Ricker watched him get up, very tall, thin, emaciated. He was typically Martian with his dusty brown face, beaked nose and heavy handsomeness. He walked slowly down the aisle toward the water fountain.

"Funny how Adison's daughter swore she'd seen Senator Trexel leaving her pa's laboratory," continued the sourdough.

"Trexel proved he was somewhere else at the time," said Ricker. "He's got a bad reputation but it's graft—not murder. Dorothy Adison's just a dizzy debutante. She left for a hunting trip immediately after the inquest, couldn't be located for the trial. But with Molly Borden's confession there wasn't—"

It was a sound like a handclap. Ricker glanced up, then stiffened erect.

The Martian stood in the aisle beside the detective and the woman. He stared calmly over his shoulder at Ricker and the sourdough and in his right hand was a pistol leveled generally at them both.

"Please be very quiet," his lips moved in soft, even tones. Then without taking his snaky eyes from them, he spoke to the woman. "The key is in his left vest pocket," he said. "We'll take a small boat and drop out of this before the pilots can be warned."

RICKER stared like he was watching a tele-movie. Molly Borden's face was expressionless as a doll as she fumbled at the detective. Ricker heard a click and the fat man toppled out of his seat into the aisle. His limp body settled awkwardly on the floor, legs under the seat, and from the back of his head welled a dark stain that seeped into the carpet.

"He slugged 'im," breathed the sourdough.

"Shut up!" threatened the beady-eyed Martian. "The first sound of alarm will be your last!" Coughing quietly, he stepped aside to let the woman pass and she moved up the aisle like a robot. Green eyes straight ahead, she did not even glance at Ricker as she passed him.

Ricker realized in open space their scheme would be absurd but here, with the pull of Neptune on their side, they'd fall away in the darkness before the pilots knew what had happened.

The Martian turned quickly as he passed, kept the gun on them. "Open the lock and get ready," he told the woman. She threw the lever on a safety door, entered the boat and reached for the switch to slide the boat's door shut after the Martian was in.

Both doors close simultaneously, thought Ricker; the boat drops when the doors close.

The Martian backed slowly through the door like a great dark crawfish.

For an instant his pistol was out of sight.

Ricker sprang from his seat like a panther, dived head first as the doors slid home.

The pistol roared.

But the flash of the gun was an instant behind the hand that knocked it aside. It clattered to the hull of the boat as Ricker bowled the man to the floor.

Both were on their feet like cats. The Martian leaped for the pistol. The woman flattened against the wall.

Clang!

The door clamped shut and Ricker's stomach rushed into his chest. Blood suddenly throbbed in his ears. His feet seemed nailed to the floor. The Martian and the woman swirled dizzily before his darkening eyes. It was like being in an elevator when the cable broke.

They were hurtling down, down through the darkness toward Neptune . . .

Weak and sick, when his head quit spinning, Ricker struggled to his knees. The first thing he saw was a small instrument panel in front of him. He stared at it a moment, collecting his senses. One register read "ninety-three" but it didn't sink in at first. Then he gasped.

"Ninety-three *miles!*" They'd fallen that far—straight down! No wonder he's gone out. The normal jump of these boats was only twenty miles before the autobrake took over. The gravity of Neptune—! He remembered then.

His gaze leaped to the Martian lying in a corner of the cabin. The thin fellow moaned slightly and his eyes were closed. His pistol lay beside him and Ricker stepped over, snatched it up as his eyes flickered. When they opened, the gun barrel was pointed at them.

"Tables're inclined to turn when you take a dive like that." He grinned at the bewildered man. The woman, crumpled near the door, stirred and sat up. She stared at them a moment as her ivory face changed from puzzlement to rage.

She glared and finally asked, "What are you going to do?"

"Make the scoop of the century," Ricker's blue eyes twinkled. "I'm Bill Ricker of the *Planetary Times*. I'm going to contact my boss and give him a chat with Benjamin Adison's murderess after her most sensational but unsuccessful escape." The idea was positively brilliant. "I don't think the law'll mind—the Patrol can have you when I'm through."

"You won't get me before a radio," snarled the Martian, his eyes like black marbles.

"Well!" said Ricker, feigning surprise. "The dear boy's publicity shy! Afraid your boss'll be annoyed if you make a fool of yourself?" The question went in the man like a barb. He said nothing, but his swarthy cheeks paled a shade. Ricker's elation soared. "I followed Molly Borden all the way from Earth thinking something would happen." He grinned. "I thought another plane'd attack and try to rescue her but you, my weak-lunged friend, were melodramatic enough. Also, when the Patrol gets through with you maybe we'll know where those *plans* are."

The woman started, perceptibly. "I burned the plans!" she flared.

"That's what the police thought," said Ricker. "But they thought you were working alone, too, and your Martian chum here has rather disproved that. No, Molly Borden. There's more to the Adison case than came out in the trial. There're others involved. I'm going to find out *who* if it's my last story."

"You blundering imbecile—!" the woman broke suddenly. But quickly she stopped, clinched her teeth and lowered her eyes. Since Ricker had known her, this was the first time she'd lost that notorious composure and he made a mental note of it. He had the telenews man's objectivity about murderers, millionaires and chorus girls. Molly Borden wasn't a cold-

blooded killer to him, nor a most lovely woman. To Ricker she was just a good telenews yarn . . .

He waved the pistol toward the boat's little air lock. "Get in there, both of you," he ordered. "It'll keep you out of mischief while I contact the *Times*."

The lock was slightly larger than a closet, about one quarter the size of the whole boat. Standing well away from any sudden move, Ricker forced them in, sullen and tight-lipped. He spun a wheel giving them enough air and slid the door on the hissing chamber. Then hands on his hips, he surveyed the interior of the cabin.

From about waist-high on all sides and sloping overhead, the walls were transparent—glassite, a foot thick. At the nose of the triangular shaped room was a control box, instrument panel and a small radio outfit. Ricker stepped over quickly, his pulse pounding with glee.

He checked the auto-pilot; it was idling the boat correctly in its wide driftless circle. Then he clicked on the transmitter, found the New York beam and sat down.

"Ricker calling *Times*, Ricker calling *Planetary Times* . . ." As he waited, he glanced through the glass, saw the huge ball of Neptune circle beneath him. The planet glowed like a weak green light bulb in the lonely darkness and he shivered to think twelve inches of glassite was all that stood between him and the vacuum of stellar night, the long dead fall to those snows far below . . .

"*Planetary Times*. What is it—?"

"Gimme th' Chief!" His fingers tattooed excitedly on the panel. "Chief? This's Rick. Got th' biggest story since the ice age. Molly Borden's escaped with a Martian. What? No! Don't start an extra yet!" He paused for breath. "Gimme a Mercury-to-Pluto hook up. I've got Molly and her accomplice *here*—for a personal interview."

"Jupiter's jumpers!"

Ricker had never heard the Chief so gone wild before. "Yep. That's right." He laughed. "Do I get that raise? Just a moment and I'll put Molly Borden on the ether . . ."

He turned half-way around, half rose from his seat—and froze.

Beside him, outside the glass, was a huge glistening shape, like a space beast swimming in the void. It gleamed bright silver in the light from the cabin and as he stared, mouth open, it THUMPED against the side of the boat.

Panic jumped in Ricker. He almost fell over the instrument panel.

Then he made out a row of darkened ports, a shark-like prow. He realized then slowly. The shadowed bulk outside was a space ship. It showed no lights, no life . . .

THE ship drifted past like a falling leaf, a ghostly hulk floating aimlessly down toward Neptune. As it disappeared below the glass, Ricker caught a number and an insignia.

It was the liner they had just left.

"Chief," Ricker spoke to the transmitter. "Stand by! There's something wrong! The Jupiter-Pluto Liner—the one we were on—it just passed without signaling." He grabbed the controls, eased down on the throttle. Top-jets humming, it was but a moment till the liner came in view again.

Ricker circled the falling ship, saw no trace of a light. Its jets were off but the gyro-brake must be working because it wasn't falling fast. He moved closer alongside, shot out a spot light. The white beam glowed weirdly on the silver hull, its dead staring windows. He flicked the light through the glass of the liner's control room—and his heart jumped.

It wasn't a Negro or a Mercurian. He could tell by the features which still clung to the face. It was an Earthian, in the stained uniform of Stellar Liners, lying on his back across the instrument board. His arms stuck out stiffly, crumbling hands palm up, and one pipe-like leg swung with the motion of the wallowing ship. His face

was black, black as a charred hunk of steak—as if his head had been sprayed with a blow torch . . .

Ricker spasmodically snapped off the light.

It was several moments before he turned it on again and played it through the ports of the lifeless cabin.

They were all the same. The other pilot lay in the aisle. The detective lolled restlessly near his seat. The old sourdough swayed, upright in his chair—with his head almost burned away.

Ricker clicked off the light, pulled away from the drifting tomb and bent over the transmitter. "Chief?" he said hoarsely. "Everybody on that liner's been murdered. They're black—burned. I don't know how. I think—"

"Do you think you're the only plane with a radio?"

Ricker looked around helplessly as his nerves turned to high tension wire. The very hair on his head tingled. It was a voice vibrating through the walls of the boat itself. An insane metallic voice from nowhere.

Suddenly little dots of fire began to rain over the boat, sparkled on the glass roof. Then a stream of crimson light gashed the blackness outside and a drone of rockets came softly into the cabin. He caught a glimpse of a space ship circling over. The light disappeared in a cascade of sparks again. The plane vanished behind him.

Ricker gripped the panel and his nails whitened. He began talking to the transmitter, very clearly and carefully.

"Chief!" The humming increased as the plane neared again, coming in from behind. "Can you hear me? There's another ship outside. They're using impact phones and it isn't a Patrol boat. I think I'm in for trouble." The little pointer on the transmitter dial quit vibrating.

"We burned off your aerial," chattered the mechanical voice through the walls. "Open your space-door and prepare for boarding. And no tricks! We have a sight on you."

With clinched fists, Ricker gazed into the blackness a moment, then resignedly walked over and opened the lock. The Martian stepped out with a smirk of malicious triumph. The woman's face was expressionless. Of course they'd heard the voice, too, probably recognized it, and Ricker made no pretense of covering them with the pistol. Doubtless, *he* was the prisoner now.

The Martian coughed behind his hand. "Soon," he said, "I shall repay you for this delay."

"It's all in the game," said Ricker.

The boat trembled as the craft outside clamped to the air lock.

RICKER opened the lock when the order came and a dark, rat-like little man in gray coveralls entered the cabin. He carried a pistol of a type Ricker had never seen before. It looked like a revolver with the barrel sawed off.

"Nice work, Vanger," he greeted the Martian. He glanced at Molly Borden curiously, then with narrow-eyed admiration. Ricker waited stiffly. The Martian motioned to him.

"Watch this man, Gurren," he said. "Don't hesitate to shoot if he tries anything but I'd like to find out what he knows when we land."

Land! Ricker's forehead wrinkled. Where could they land? The nearest habitable planet was the radium-warmed Pluto and prison was what they were escaping. And who were they? Could they explain the liner and its cremated passengers? As he was marched through the lock into the other plane he decided information wouldn't do a corpse much good but he'd certainly find out all he could until he became one . . .

The ship was egg-shaped, its interior bisected into cabin and blast-engines. Small but powerful, Ricker inferred from the heavy insulation. He was led into the cabin where another man, also wearing coveralls, with ear-phones on his head, sat at the wheel. He was squat, like a tractor.

He eyed Molly Borden appraisingly.

"Hello, Hines," said the Martian. "Get rid of that boat out there and let's go."

"Right," said the big fellow, reluctant to take his eyes from the woman.

They cast off, circled the boat and then settled just over it. Hines jerked a trigger-like lever on the wheel. Ricker glanced through the viewplate.

The boat beneath him glowed red. A puff of white smoke—it was *gone!*

God o' Mars! Ricker stared through the glass hardly believing what he'd seen. A little chill tickled the back of his neck. The boat had vanished in clear space, like a magician's trick. This plane must have some sort of heat gun—a disintegrator.

Vanger, the Martian, laughed in a voice irritatingly shrill. "And you tried to interfere with us," he jeered at Ricker's amazement. He pushed him into a seat in a corner of the cramped cabin, then turned to Gurren. "It took you long enough to find us," his tone changed to displeasure.

"The liner circled back and radioed the Patrol," the ratty fellow explained. "We thought we better put it out of the way." He grinned. "We just gave 'em a small dose—cooked 'em. When the Patrol comes, won't they get a headache trying to figure that out?"

Vanger laughed with him till a fit of coughing darkened his face.

Ricker ground his teeth. So that's what happened to the liner! They'd blasted it like the small boat, but with only just enough heat to—. Ricker thought of the friendly old sourdough. The dirty yellow weasels!

Suddenly he sprang up like a whip, lashed his fist into Vanger's mouth. The Martian crashed backward into the instrument panel. Ricker started after him with blind fury in his heart.

Something banged into the back of his head, stunning, blackening.

As he fell, he saw Molly Borden standing over him with a wrench in her hand. Her green eyes glinted with a look he could not define as he wavered into blackness . . .

"WE can't fail!" The words reached Ricker through a haze of pain throbbing in his head. "With all that equipment, it'll be like capturing a rabbit hutch. And won't I just love potting several rabbits I know. The chief of police, the judge, twelve rabbits that were on the jury—I really can't wait!"

Ricker opened his eyes, fought with his whirling senses. The Martian leaned against the opposite wall, the other two men worked silently at the controls. The woman sat on the floor with her legs neatly crossed, a cigarette spiraling toward the ceiling. Her green eyes played the Martian like a piano and apparently the strings of his black heart were attuned.

"But," Molly Borden purred, "you don't know what I went through on that liner, Van. After we passed Uranus and nobody came, I almost gave up. I knew there wasn't a livable place after Jupiter and—well, I had no idea you could have located at Neptune . . ."

"So!" Vanger glanced toward Ricker, interrupted her. "Our publicity agent's with us again!"

Ricker met his eyes evenly, said nothing. Sinking into his mind was what he had just heard. *Something* was located on Neptune; something would be like shooting rabbits . . . But Neptune was covered with snow a hundred miles deep. Its surface was a bleak hell of frozen, screaming winds. Nothing could hide, or live on Neptune. And equipment—rabbits—?

He turned to the port, looked out as in his mind three facts suddenly and logically came together: Benjamin Adison could warm a planet and his plans were stolen—Neptune was barren with ice and— He saw the planet slowly spreading out beneath them like a convex plain of white glass . . .

"That's right, telenewsman," the Martian interpreted his movement.

He coughed like a dog sneezing. "Take a good look. Out of that desolate waste soon will come the most terrible armada of all history. We shall sweep everything before us—in a blast of white heat. Did you notice what happened to the boat we escaped in? Such will happen to your war planes. Who opposes us will quickly become a crisp black corpse."

"I presume," said Ricker dryly, "that you have Adison's plans. They were supposed to be able to heat a planet but your Neptune still appears cold as ever. Do you care to elaborate on this little scheme of yours?"

"Certainly." Vanger smiled like a cat in the canary's cage. "As to Neptune, you will have a personal showing in due time. As to the Adison Unit—you've seen an application of it destroy a plane in a matter of seconds. This ship is equipped with four guns that can cut through a yard of steel instantly. And the guns are controlled in range, intensity and breadth of contact. They can reduce a space liner to dust at ten feet—or melt a pin-head a mile away. What will you think when you see ten thousand planes like this—and materials for a million?"

"I'll think you're a damn liar," said Ricker, "till I do see 'em. And even then I won't believe you can lick one Patrol boat." He was bluffing and he knew it. Obviously Vanger knew it, too, for he winked at the imperturbable Molly Borden, his nasty smile still there.

Ricker cursed himself. If he'd called the Patrol instead of trying to be smart and contact the *Times*, this would have been nipped in the bud. What if it all *was* true? He'd seen what this ship could do. He'd also seen those dark crumbling bodies in the liner. And he'd followed Molly Borden on the wildest hunch. What had he run into? And what a story—if he lived to tell it . . .

"Landing," voiced Gurren from the wheel.

Ricker felt a sinking sensation as the plane slowed its descent. Looking out the port, he saw the surface of Neptune gradually flatten into an endless table of sleek gleaming ice, ghostly blue in the pale light, like a frozen lake in moonlight. They sank closer and the bare expanse swelled to a dim monotonous plain of mirrored shadows. Far out, above the razor-smooth horizon, a dull red ball cast its feeble light across the lonely scene. Ricker felt a twinge of helplessness, homesickness. That weak orange light was the sun . . .

Gurren fought the controls. The plane wallowed like a ship in a storm and outside a wind that was almost visible tore at them with grim, icy fingers. That sweep of wind, Ricker knew, was an endless hurricane that scoured the dead surface of Neptune to the smoothness of tin. It was a wind of tinted methane, a five hundred mile gale, eternally . . .

What live secret teemed on this forgotten planet? What lurking fate awaited *him*—when he'd learned its festering secret—too late?

Bump!

The plane jarred down to a rough landing, streamed across the snow in a swirl of wind-driven ice dust. Ricker thought of what the Martian had said. Ten thousand planes—where? The man was mad. There was no place on this naked planet to hide a factory.

"Forty-four-five!" said Hines. Apparently it was their magnetic position on Neptune. Ricker remembered it.

"Right," said Gurren. "Dig in!" He threw the brake, made a breathtaking stop and held the plane like a wild horse against the wind.

Hines pulled a trigger on the wheel. A misty cloud of white—*steam*—suddenly frosted the windows. An angry hissing penetrated the walls and the falling sensation rose in Ricker again, though he could see nothing through the ice-coated ports. His eyes widened.

The plane had landed, but *it continued to fall!*

Ricker stared at the pilots with mixed exasperation and astonishment.

He glanced at Molly Borden but she was blasé as ever. Finally he turned to Vanger.

"Would you mind telling me what's going on?" he asked with more nonchalance than he felt.

"Not at all." The Martian grimaced with what was his smile. "Since you won't live to repeat it, we're bound for the perfect hideout—beneath the snows of Neptune."

He laughed and the sound of his laughter mingled with the whispering hiss of steam, seemed to echo from the painted windows which had now turned black.

Ricker watched the windows. His eyes narrowed again when they glowed again with the reflection of light outside. The light was brighter than before.

Then, suddenly, as if by some quick heat, the ice vanished from the windows, and, if he felt surprise at the wizardry of their descent into the snow, what he beheld now was with a staggering shock.

The ship floated down into a cavernous box-like place that stretched out into miles of smooth floor surrounded by white, glistening walls of sheer ice. On the floor, long geometrical rows of flat buildings, like an automobile factory, striped one side of a wide smooth landing field. On the other side of the field stood a large house like an office building and behind it lay a silver, windowed dome from which ran heavy tubes curving into the ground. Upon the field, forming a great dotted circle around it, rested literally thousands of egg-shaped space ships.

Ricker stared through the viewplate as if watching the very gates of Hades open before him. They landed slowly. And despite his astonishment, he absorbed everything he saw with the photographic memory of a good telenewsman.

The place was an immense chamber deep in the icy rind of the planet —apparently resting on the very surface of Neptune itself for the floor appeared to be rock, different from the glistening walls and the roof. And the roof—glancing up, Ricker saw the low sleek dome held no mark of their entrance! The ice had instantly frozen behind them again as they passed through. This place was impregnable, perfectly hidden. A hundred miles of snow was at once a shield and camouflage.

But how?

Then he saw how. Along the walls reared tall tripods, similar to radio towers. At the top of each flared a ring of yellow light—it was blinding to look at. Like looking full at the noonday sun. And through the windows, he could feel the sweaty penetration of—heat!

"Show Miss Borden to her room, Hines." The Martian's voice brought Ricker's staring eyes back to the cabin. "I'll call for you shortly, Molly. And you, Gurren, lock up our meddlesome journalist till I have time for him."

The ship landed like a feather. Vanger opened the door, ogled a twittering good-by to the woman, and jumped to the ground. He strode off toward the office-like building beside the ship-encircled field. All the planes were shiny and new, Ricker noticed.

Gurren and Hines motioned the woman and him out. The floor was a kind of granite underfoot, Ricker saw. The field was about the size of a baseball diamond, the ships staggered in a wide circle around it like eggs in a giant incubator. And an incubator it was. From the shops a quarter of a mile away echoed the whirr of machinery, the clang of metal against metal, the stutter of riveting hammers. Pale blue light rayed from the windows and open doors, cast an aura of stark efficiency above the gleaming roofs and in the streets.

Several men passed, wearing the gray coveralls of his captors, and obviously a landing space ship was not unusual for they gave them no more than a passing glance. They stared

at Molly Borden, of course. But then she would have attracted attention in the Shangri-la where dead nymphs go.

"This way," said Hines, and led them across the field, past a center tripod toward the factories. Ricker had never seen the Adison unit before but he knew this must be it. Like steel columns, heat held back Neptune's sunless cold, forced a rigid hollow inside the living ice.

Hines and the woman walked ahead. Ricker followed with Gurren a few paces behind him. Neither of his guards drew their strange-looking guns and Ricker also knew that escape was impossible. It would be like trying to get out of a box buried in a block of concrete. And he was no Houdini . . .

A few yards into the canyons of the seething city and Hines stopped. "This is your room for the time being." He grinned at Molly Borden like a school boy at the teacher. He waited beside an open door which led into a living compartment of some sort. "If there's anything you wish—"

Next door stood a building from which droned a low monotonous chatter, the hum of a transmitter, the crackle of static. On the roof towered two poles from which hung a long radio antenna. An idea akin to suicide suddenly quickened Ricker's pulse.

"Thank you," the woman said to Hines who, since Vanger left, was rapidly becoming a two-bit cavalier on his own. Ricker glanced at Gurren out of the corner of his eye. He was also gulping in the beauty of the Venusian.

If that radio room was only empty! thought Ricker. If he could make it in time—get the door closed—

"Perhaps I should see if everything's all right," said Gurren, reluctant to leave. As Hines frowned nastily, he took Molly Borden's arm, started into the room with her.

Like a fleeing deer, Ricker suddenly streaked away.

A shout behind him. The door wasn't ten feet ahead. A hot white blast whizzed past his left shoulder. The door frame glowed red, steamed.

Ricker dived through the door.

HE caught the door as he went through, slammed it shut behind him.

A man whirled around from a mass of instruments. In that split second all Ricker saw was the man's startled face, his hand snatching a pistol from his belt.

Ricker leaped for him as from a catapult, brought up a swift short right. Smack! The fellow fell back into a bank of scattered dials. Ricker jerked the gun from his hand as he sagged to the floor.

Without another glance at him, he leaped to the transmitter. It was an ordinary radio outfit but apparently of tremendous power. He snapped the sending switch, kept his eyes fused to the door.

"Come out, Ricker!" It was Gurren's voice. "We'll burn you through the door!"

Ricker didn't answer. His ears strained for the warming tone of the sender. He knew they wouldn't blast the building; it would destroy the radio. And they wouldn't come through the door—for a moment.

A low hum sang in the room. The transmitter was working. Ricker bent over the mike, eyes on the door.

"Attention, all listeners." He spoke rapidly but without a tremor. "Ricker, *Planetary Times*—calling for help. Send Patrol to Neptune. Magnetic location—" God! what was that number! "Forty-four-five. Neptune, magnetic forty-four-five—"

The door opened.

"Get back!" said Ricker. "I'll kill the first man that enters!"

Molly Borden came through the door.

"Stop," said Ricker. "I swear I'll shoot if you come a step inside."

"Put down that gun," she said quietly. Gurren and Hines stood in the door behind her, their pistols leveled but unable to shoot with her directly in the line of fire. The woman moved slowly toward Ricker.

"Stop!" he said. God! Why didn't he shoot! This woman was dead anyway. The state had condemned her. It wouldn't be like killing anybody else.

She came on, slowly, like a lion trainer approaching a dangerous animal but with no vestige of fear. Her eyes knifed into his, unblinking, commanding, like the paralyzing fangs of a serpent. His finger tightened on the trigger.

"Give me the pistol. Please." Her voice was low, throaty but with vibrant confidence. With the spell of her eyes, it urged Ricker like the subtle demand of a hypnotist. "Please."

She halted before him, a gorgeous creature, like some great poisonous jungle flower. Her cold green eyes bored into him without a waver. Her face was expressionless, a thing of tinted marble. She held out her hand.

"Give me the gun, Bill Ricker," she said softly. "They'll kill you if you don't."

Ricker leveled the pistol at her heart. "I've never killed a woman—" Gurren and Hines moved around to get a shot at him. "Stay where you are!" said Ricker. "I'll burn a hole through her if you move a step."

He tried to avoid her seeking eyes, met them again. Their gaze met like live wires touching. A current passed between them that almost made sparks. Ricker's whole body vibrated to the electric force of her gaze. Her eyes became an irresistible power transfixing his very being.

For an instant he felt like a moth on a pin. Then without shifting her eyes, Molly Borden slapped the pistol from his hand.

It clattered to the floor. The men were upon him . . .

RICKER found his pockets contained one cigarette, a book of matches and a clipping from the *Times*. He sat down on the cold metal bunk, dejectedly lit the cigarette and stared at the dark windowless walls and the heavy door that made his prison. Finally he glanced at the clipping:

As Molly Borden, confessed murderess of scientist Adison, was hustled into a plane bound for Pluto today, the only question in the minds of the police and the thousands who witnessed her spectacular trial was "Who is Molly Borden?" The identity of the Venusian panther-woman remains as mysterious as her emerald eyes.

Since immigration officers apprehended her at the City Rocket Terminal as she attempted to leave the country, no hint of her past has escaped her carmine lips. Her fingerprints, photographs, the handsome assassin herself, have brought no trace of recognition from a bewildered universe.

Dorothy Adison, socially prominent daughter of the scientist, who left for Africa after the inquest at which she testified to seeing Senator Geb Trexel at the scene of the crime and was proved mistaken, could not be located for the trial. If Miss Adison can throw any light on the identity of her father's murderess, it is now inconsequential for the quick sword of justice—

Ricker crumpled the slip of paper, hurled it across his narrow cell. Why hadn't he killed her when he had the chance. *She* was a killer, heartless, cruel as a lynx—and doubly dangerous because she possessed the claws of woman. Her beauty was a mask of murder; the charm of her eyes—well, he'd fallen into them and she'd taken a gun away from him like a toy from a child.

His black thoughts returned to the fullness of his plight. Obviously, Molly Borden had pretended to burn the plans to keep the police off the trail of her henchmen. Then the law had virtually delivered her to their door-step again. Blind fools! He'd written story after story doubting those ashes they found in her stateroom. On the evidence of a few half-burned symbols and a charred notebook cover, the law had made a mis-

take endangering the very universe!

He was as blind as the police. At least he had expected something—but now here he was trapped like a rabbit in a box. With a plot forming around him that could shake worlds—with a story any telenewsman would give his typewriter-fingers for!

Vanger hadn't lied. His heat-gunned ships could stop any army. And here, beneath the lying ice-wastes of Neptune, such planes were being made like bubbles . . .

Ricker combed desperate fingers through his unruly hair, got up and paced the cramped floor. What was their plan? To attack Earth—conquer Mars, Venus, Mercury—all the colonies? No! It was unimaginable! But this unknown cave, those ships out there—?

He wondered if his attempted message had gotten through to the Patrol. But he hadn't had time to say he was *beneath* the location he'd given. They wouldn't find a trace up there on the ice and how could they guess what lay under a hundred miles of frozen gas?

He heard a key clink in the lock of his cell door. It opened to Hines' tank-like figure. He had his gun ready, apparently wasn't taking any chances since the incident of the radio building.

"Let's go, telenewsman," he ordered Ricker outside. Ricker walked out the door without a word.

Hines motioned him to go ahead, directed him out into the noisy street. The hum of machinery was deafening and in the buildings they passed, Ricker saw space ships in all stages of construction along busy assembly lines.

"Where do you get the materials?" he asked idly.

"Simple," said Hines. "Neptune's minerals have never been tapped before. We mine everything we need right here."

"And the men?" The streets were deserted but hundreds were at work in the shops.

"Every man has his price. We pay well."

Ricker remembered several mysterious disappearances in the industrial centers on Earth. They had usually been without families and of small means, however, and no extensive inquiry was made . . .

The gigantic cavern itself still fascinated him. Glancing up, he noticed the dome of ice was almost the hue of clear blue sky. It was perhaps a mile high and the suggestion of distance lent by the shimmering walls made the place appear even larger than it was. He wondered why there wasn't a constant dripping, why the chamber wasn't moist like a cave. Then he remembered it wasn't frozen water around them. It was frozen atmosphere, melting back into its gases—like dry ice.

Wouldn't the public eat this story up, he thought, as they wove between the evenly-spaced ships beside the field. Then he smiled ironically. *What* public? The only public he could reasonably expect was a jolly bunch of pallbearers . . .

They crossed the field, Hines with the pistol at his back. Ricker saw three new ships rolled out into line as they walked the short distance to buildings on the other side.

"What're these?" he asked, looking at the tall three-story house and the big silver dome at the rear.

"The Boss's place," said his guard. "And that dome's the power plant."

The Boss! Ricker's mind clicked. Who was the leader? Was it Vanger? Molly Borden? Somehow neither of them seemed to fit.

They paused at the door of the building. Hines pushed a button. A moment's wait, the door opened to Vanger's dusty face.

"Hello," he greeted. "I hope you found our humble hospitality to your liking, Mr. Ricker." He led them down a narrow corridor to another closed door. Hines left them, retraced his steps. Vanger opened the door, ushered Ricker in.

Ricker saw Molly Borden standing beside a small glass table in a spacious but dim-lit room. The walls were mirrored and a dull hidden light cast vague shadows upon heavy chairs and a sofa, gleamed weirdly upon chrome ash-trays, a carved bottle and glasses. The high-lighted silhouette of the woman commanded the scene. She stood carelessly, one crimson-tipped hand resting on the table, a cocktail glass glinting in the other. She had changed from her traveling suit, wore a shimmering gown that bathed her lithe body in a sheen of liquid silver. Had it been under any ordinary circumstances, Ricker would have whistled at the sight of her.

"Your stare tickles, Mr. Ricker," she said. "Won't you come in? Will you have scotch or—"

"He's a telenewsman," said a deep voice from a shadowed chair to the left. "He'll have scotch. And please turn on the light, Vanger. We must make our guest feel at home."

A sudden light glowed over the room. Ricker gazed at the person who had spoken.

He saw a large fat man lounging deep in a cushioned armchair. He had three folds of pale flesh for a chin below his thick lips, his eyes were puffed with the whites startlingly large and his skin was white, an unhealthy white—like a great white worm.

Ricker inhaled quickly. His jaw dropped.

It was Senator Trexel sitting there.

Ricker was struck dumb. He clutched the back of a chair as his mind swirled.

"So Dorothy Adison was right!" He heard himself speak the words as if somebody else had said them.

"Alibies are easily purchased." The fat man's heavy lips curled up at the corners and his hog-like eyes became slitted puffs of flesh. "But do sit down," he smiled. "We have much to talk about."

Ricker found his way around the chair, sank down slowly with his eyes upon the man. Dorothy Adison was right! The phrase roared in his mind. Trexel *did* have something to do with the murder. Had he hired Molly Borden to do it? Was he a member of this Neptune gang? Was he the *leader?*

"What will you have to drink?"

Ricker looked at the man as he would a Black Widow spider. "I don't drink with murderers—and traitors," he said carefully.

With an amazing swiftness for a man of his bulk, Trexel left his chair, stepped over and struck him smartly across the mouth with the flat of his palm.

"You will be careful of your words!" he breathed. "Another remark like that and you die where you sit!"

He returned to his chair, his composure regained as quickly as it left him. He took a cigarette from his waistcoat pocket, struck a match.

"Now talk, telenewsman," he said. "Who knows where you are? How did you suspect Molly Borden?" The light of the match made his face a white wax mask. He lit the cigarette, blew out the match with a puff of his pasty cheeks.

Ricker refused to open his bruised lips, stared at the man and kept silent.

"There are ways," said Trexel, "of making you talk." Vanger, behind Ricker's chair, coughed in agreement.

"I know," said Ricker finally. "And I imagine you could put Mercurian torture methods to shame. But I'll save you the trouble. There are three people who know where I am. One is my boss, the editor of the *Planetary Times*, another is Dorothy Adison who saw you leaving her father's laboratory after the murder and the other is—the President of the United States."

Molly Borden put down her glass with a sharp clink.

Trexel slowly took his cigarette from his mouth, dropped his tree-

trunk arm to his lap. Ricker met his eyes evenly. Would he believe it?

"You lie," said Trexel. "One of my men is in the President's office. I know every move he makes."

"The President knew your spy was there," said Ricker. "We found him more useful in your employ than in jail."

The fat man took on the look of a bullfrog caught in the glare of a flashlight. The cigarette smoldered in his hand unnoticed. He gazed at Ricker a long few seconds, as silence held the room like a stifled breath.

Then he looked up quickly to the Martian.

"Vanger," he said in a voice like Napoleon must have had at Waterloo. "Contact Number 12 at the White House, tell him to find out if what the man says is true. And tell him whether it's true or not to prepare for immediate action."

Vanger gasped, then choked with a cough. "Attack now!"

"Why not?" Trexel decided, twisting his cigarette into a tray. "We have enough ships to take Earth and the colonies can't do much with their supplies cut off. Any one of our ships can fight off fifty ordinary ones. Perhaps we should begin before Adison's daughter does cause trouble—since we can't find her to keep her quiet.

"Give the word for complete mobilization in an hour!" He stared at the ceiling a moment in silent thought. "We'll pick off the Patrol ships, have Earth surrounded by dawn in New York. When the city awakes there will be a new ruler—of the solar system!"

"Yes, sir." The Martian smiled and turned to go.

"Wait," said Trexel. He nodded to Ricker. "On your way, take this man out and shoot him." Ricker's heart jumped but he stared at the man without a change of expression.

"Shouldn't you first find out if he's lying, Senator?" Molly Borden's unruffled voice raised the fat man's bulbous eyes. "We shouldn't rush into this attack unless quite sure—"

"I know where I stand," said Trexel. "I have men close to every government on Earth. When I give the command, they'll take over while my ships destroy all resistance. And why delay longer? We'll strike before our luck changes."

Ricker stood up. "Listen, fat man," he said. "You hold all the cards as far as I'm concerned. But as far's Earth is concerned it's a different matter. You can't conquer a planet. Men will hide in mountain, jungle and sea. They'll leap at you from every bush and corner. What if you do burn a few ships—a few armies? What if you take every government? The people will rise again. You can't rule by force alone."

"History," said Trexel, "proves that men forget. They soon grow accustomed to new eras. They have learned to love tyrants before." He waved his hand to Vanger. "But this is no discussion of political philosophy . . ."

Ricker felt something jabbed into his side. It was a pistol in the Martian's hand.

"No!" Molly Borden cried suddenly. "Don't kill him!"

"What?" Trexel looked up at her as if she'd thrown her cocktail in his face. "What is this man to you?" His piggish eyes narrowed. Her exclamation surprised Ricker as much as it did the rest of them.

"You're tired, Molly," snapped Vanger. "Perhaps you should go to your room."

The woman's painted nails bent against the glass of the table beside her. She looked like a tigress about to spring. Why? Ricker almost forgot his own plight at the sudden change in her manner.

"Don't shoot that man," she said slowly. "I'm not—"

"Leave the girl here, Vanger," Trexel interrupted her with dead eyes. "Maybe I'd like to talk with her awhile. You go ahead and follow orders."

"Yes, sir," said the Martian, reluctantly. He pushed the gun into Ricker, forced him around to the door as he looked back at the woman with a puzzled expression on his dusky face.

They passed out of the room into the long darkened corridor.

RICKER'S mind was an ant hill of thought as Vanger marched him down the hall. His bluff had worked. Trexel feared his whereabouts was known. But the bluff, in working so well, had precipitated an early start of their scheme—and sounded taps for himself. Oddly, as the Martian pushed open the door and the yellow light of the heat units burst into his eyes, his own death didn't matter much, his dying didn't seem very real. In his brain was the vision of those charred bodies in the liner—they were real. And he could picture that same scene in each ship of Earth as thousands of egg-shaped craft met them in terrestial space, blasted a path of hell to the cities below.

Even his failure to "get the story" seemed insignificant. This thing was bigger than himself.

Ricker felt the pistol withdrawn from his side, glanced back at the Martian. The man's beady eyes fixed on him like a snake's.

As Ricker stared back, almost absently, Vanger's left fist whipped up, banged into his chin, knocked him backward upon the hard ground.

Stunned by the unexpected blow, Ricker got to his hands and knees shakily. He rubbed his numb jaw, gazed at the Martian through a quick red film of rage.

Vanger took careful aim at him. "Die, Earthman," he said softly. "Die with a blackened face, as all your brothers will."

Ricker didn't wait. The crouch he found himself in was not unlike the position in four years of college football. He hurtled at the man like a blocking-back gone wild.

Hiss-s-s!

White flames streamed over his head. White flame singed his hair and clothing, bathed his face in quick burning sweat. He struck Vanger high in the belly, carried him down in a perfect tackle.

Vanger's head knocked against the ground. Ricker's fingers shot to his throat like a striking cobra. But there wasn't time to throttle the man. He let him go, drew his right fist back just six inches and stabbed into the Martian's chin. Vanger's head slammed against the ground again. He lay still.

Ricker snatched the pistol from his limp hand, heard shouts and glanced about frantically.

He saw men running toward him across the field, about ten of them with others trailing in the distance. They must have seen the fight from the factory. They came on like a drove of stampeding horses. Between himself and the charging crowd, Ricker saw the ship he had arrived in. It was about the distance of a city block away.

Without any definite plan, he jumped off the unconscious Martian, raced for the ship.

To an observer at the side, it would have appeared that the crowd of running men and the lone sprinter were speeding to meet each other. But it was a match-meet for the space ship between them. The men apparently inferred Ricker's goal. They increased their pace. Ricker dug in with his long legs.

The ship wasn't fifty feet away. The men weren't a hundred. Ricker's feet pounded the rock of the field like a race horse going down the home stretch. The wind whistled in his ears, he scarcely seemed to run, felt as if he was gliding. But the men were gaining. With each panting breath, the distance between them and the ship narrowed. He saw they would get to it before he did. And if they got there first—!

He remembered the gun, clutched forgotten in his swinging hand.

Without breaking his stride, Ricker brought up the pistol and squeezed the trigger. There was no report. A stream the color of molten lead hissed from the barrel, like tracer bullets from a machine gun. Several of the men fell forward kicking like shot deer. Black oily smoke curled up from the pack. The rest stopped. Then they scattered in all directions across the field leaving five writhing, smoking mounds on the ground behind them. The smell of burning flesh came to Ricker's flared nostrils.

He was at the ship. He snatched open the door, leaped in and slammed it behind him.

He didn't remember taking off. The next thing he knew, he was in the air, circling high above the field.

Looking down, he saw men like little bugs swarming out of the buildings far below. He saw ships pushed out on the field. The ships spiraled up toward him.

RICKER'S first thought was to head into the ice, cut on the heat guns and bore through to safety. But no. It was slow going through the ice and they'd catch him before he'd gone a mile.

Below he saw toy ships rising, growing like mushrooms as they gained altitude. There were eighteen of them, he counted out loud. What chance had he against eighteen? He squeezed his triggers testily, felt a slight recoil as the hot breath of death licked out from all sides of his ship. Well, it'd be one fine fight anyway . . .

Suddenly he noticed the radio before him. Of course! Quickly he switched on, spoke into the transmitter.

"Calling Stellar Patrol, calling Stellar Patrol!"

"What is it?" The answer came so quickly Ricker jumped. They must be close by. "Is this Ricker? Where are you?"

"Where are *you!*"

"At forty-four-five Neptune. The location you gave." His message had gotten through. They were right over him, just a hundred miles away—and they might as well be on the other side of the sun. "What's the trouble? We've been looking for you since—"

"Listen!" cried Ricker. "No time to explain. I'm trapped *inside* the planet—under the ice. There's a cave here. Made with Adison's Heat Unit. I've found out what's behind Molly Borden. They have ten thousand ships here, plan to attack Earth. Senator Trexel's the leader—they're coming up after me now. You must do something. Quick!"

"What? How? How can we get to you?"

How *could* they get down here! Patrol ships didn't have these heat guns. God!

Glancing down, Ricker saw the ships closing beneath him like a flock of starved condors. In a moment they'd be in gun range.

"Gotta keep moving," he told the radio. "They're coming fast. Stand by and I'll try to think of something."

He streaked up to the roof of the icy chamber, sailed fast toward the far end.

And suddenly he did think of something—something so simple it seemed foolish.

"Listen!" he yelled to the radio. "Turn your ships around. *Sit down* on the ice! Give your rockets half throttle and let gravity pull you down as the ice melts under you. It'll take a long time but I may hold 'em off till—"

A flash of white lightning streaked across his view plate. The ship steamed, sweat formed little beads on Ricker's forehead, ran into his eyes. One was diving in front of him. Ricker squeezed his trigger, saw the ship flash into floating dust before him. He saw another coming down from above.

With a quick jerk of the wheel, he zoomed up and over, wheeled into a swift Immelman and dived.

The buildings, the field, the standing planes below whirled, surged up to meet him like a nightmare of falling.

He pulled out of the dive not fifty feet from the tops of the buildings, zoomed away again with the planes hot on his tail. They'd followed him down, were streaming after him like a swarm of hornets.

For the next ten minutes those below witnessed the weirdest dog fight in all flying history. There wasn't room to make a running battle of it. It was dive, zoom, streak from one end of the cave to the other like hawks fighting in a cage. Ricker twisted into every contortion his straining jets allowed. And still those ships closed in relentlessly, often striking one of their own number—which closeness of battle was Ricker's only ally. The ships closed in slowly, inexorably formed a ring of murderous heat around him.

It was a losing fight. Ricker knew it. He couldn't elude them forever. One well-timed blast and he'd go down in a swirl of ashes and smoke. And his constant fighting the controls to avoid the ships, to avoid crashing the walls and the roof, was wearing his arms to dead aching weights.

The ships tried strategy. They divided, Ricker saw, into five groups, waited for him at each corner of the chamber while the others gave chase. And these groups closed in with each wild dive he made.

Soon they would have him trapped between them. Well, the game was about up. It was a matter of minutes now. He might as well do as much damage as he could before they got him.

He banked over in a last dive, hoping only that the Patrol got in before the ships saw them. Even the Patrol wouldn't have much chance against these weapons. As he went over, saw the floor of the cave revolve around like a side wall, a streak of lightning struck the tail of his ship with an impact that jarred every rivet. The ship went crazy, spun down like a shot bird.

Ricker hit the wheel with all the failing strength of his arms. More by will power than anything else, he pulled out into a shaky glide. But try as he might there was no response from the elevator jets. He couldn't rise again. The ships fell like stones upon him for the kill.

Below, looming rapidly in the windows, he saw the long line of buildings, the thick circle of ships resting on the field. He fired full-blast as he passed over them. Buildings burst, split into halves as if an earthquake had struck them. Ships disappeared in a wide swath under him, hundreds went up in smoke.

The field fled beneath him, a deep smoldering trench following his flaming guns. The house across the field and the silver dome loomed up, raced toward him with the speed of a locomotive.

"The power plant!" Ricker suddenly yelled it at the top of his voice. If he could crash that—!

With a supreme effort—he didn't know how he did it for the ship was beyond all control—he keeled over into the metal dome as he left the field.

The painted wall of silver filled his viewplate. Each rivet stood out. He could have counted them. He saw the nose of the ship push into the metal. The glass of the viewplate caved in upon him. The instrument panel reared up, smashed him in the face with an ear-splitting explosion.

The world splintered in a hell of sound . . .

Oddly, Ricker wasn't knocked out. When the ship stopped bucking, he found himself sitting amidst the twisted wreckage of the controls, smoke curling through the torn hull and his face wet and sticky.

His mind was numb, unthinking

as he fingered a swelling lump between his eyes. His fingers came away red. He crawled out of the ship. Wires, tubes, warped transformers and machinery were everywhere. He heard a hum of ships outside. It was dark in the room, the shadowed wreckage reared in grotesque shapes like dancing demons. He couldn't move his right arm and, looking down, saw that his whole side was stained with warm blood. A feeling of coldness penetrated his dulled senses. It was like a deep ice cave.

Ricker limped to the door of the ruined powerhouse, stared out upon a scene like a polar twilight. Gray hulks, ships, bordered the ghostly field and black silhouettes were the factory buildings across the dismal space. Where the heat units had been were scarecrow towers, a sputtering orange flame at each peak—like small dying suns. Their heat was gone. The air was deadly cold, not the biting cold of a north wind but the numb rigid cold of breathless freezing. Yet the cold was alive, moving. It seemed to push against his body like air pressure. The temperature fell degree after degree as he stood there, like a thermometer with the red fluid leaking out the bottom.

Ricker smiled. He had destroyed the powerplant, the heat units were dying. The place was returning to ice again . . .

He passed a weary hand across his clotted forehead. Although he had destroyed himself, the work of Trexel was also ruined. It was worth it, his thoughts came slowly. The hell inside Neptune would return to its frozen gases.

How long had it been since he crashed? It seemed hours. But it must have been seconds for ships suddenly landed out on the field in a storm of rocket fire. As he grew weak from loss of blood and the cold, he noticed a surging dark wave sweep across the field toward the ships. Then the sound of shouts, screams, shrieks reached his ears. It was the clamor of fear itself. Slowly he realized it was men racing across the field, now white with frost. The men swarmed around the ships. He could see little in the dim light of the red flares, could make out only a writhing mass of vague shapes around the silver ships which reared above them like huge turtles.

As he watched, the voices grew weaker, died to low cries of crawling terror and despair. And Ricker felt himself grow weaker. The cold crept into his bones, into his heart, into his brain. He couldn't think fast. He thought slowly, leaning against the door. The icy walls of the place seemed to be sliding toward him, the roof descending. The field was cold as a snow-covered grave.

The voices out on the field were hushed. All was quiet, soundless with the utter silence of deep hidden places.

He was lying on the ground beside the door, staring up at the black glistening roof that was moving down upon him. He didn't think any more. He was very tired.

A hulking shadow stood over him. He felt it more than saw it. He saw two hands reach down. They dragged him across the field. He could see everything quite clearly but his eyes seemed set in a vise-like single focus. He noticed the twin tracks his heels made in the frost on the field . . .

Then it was warm, a soft clinging warmth that seemed to flow throughout his tired body—like life flowing into him again. He was lying on something soft and comfortable.

He opened his eyes, saw a woman's face before him.

Ricker stared at the face a long time. It was a perfect oval, wreathed in jet black hair, molded with deft yet full lips and a firm nose. The eyes were green. It was Molly Borden. Her green eyes were glistening, wet with tears . . .

"Why did you save me, Molly Borden?" he asked finally.

"I am not Molly Borden," she said. "I am *Dorothy Adison.*"

THE words meant nothing to Ricker for a moment. He just lay there staring up at her. Then with a shock like cold water, the meaning of her words crashed upon him.

"Dorothy Adison—!"

"Don't talk," she said softly. "Lie still and drink this." She put a glass of warm liquid to his lips. He gulped thirstily and the stuff darted through his veins like fire. Quick strength suffused his body.

He lay there, panting, a moment, then slowly struggled up on an elbow. His right arm was tightly bandaged with a piece of silver cloth. He saw it was a strip from the woman's dress, which was in tatters above her rounded knees. She sat on the end of the sofa. She was crying, softly like a child.

"Dorothy Adison," breathed Ricker. "You lie! She was blonde—an Earthian. You're Venusian and—It's a lie!"

She wiped her eyes with the back of her hand. "I dyed my hair," she said.

"But your eyes—they're Venusian—slanting—!"

"Make up," she said.

Ricker sank back upon the sofa. "But why?" he said. "Why!" None of this made sense. Molly Borden confessed killing Benjamin Adison and now she said she wasn't Molly Borden but Adison's daughter . . .

"You—killed your own father?" It was the only thing Ricker could think of to say.

"Trexel killed him," she said. The phrase seemed to harden her again. "I saw him coming out of the laboratory after father was—. But I couldn't prove it. He had a perfect alibi. And after the inquest, he tried to kill me—twice. I became Molly Borden to escape him, then got the idea of following it through. There was just a chance that confessing the murder might arouse Trexel's curiosity, make him get in touch with me. I took the chance—and it worked . . ."

It was too much to believe. "You mean you acted suspicious, let the police catch you and burned something to look like those plans? You risked a life sentence on Pluto—!"

"It was the only way. I played free-lance thief—Trexel believed I was at the laboratory after he left. I told him I stole what I thought were the plans. I told him the police frightened me into a confession of the murder—and they *were* none too gentle."

"But why didn't you tell the police—before you left for Pluto. They could have—"

"I could trust no one. At first I planned to tell at the last minute but after his message came—in jail—I knew I couldn't. It was delivered by the district attorney himself. He told me I would be taken from the ship before I reached Pluto."

Ricker understood a lot of things now. It was like finishing a jig-saw puzzle, when all the pieces are suddenly seen to fit. "Does Trexel know who you are yet?"

"I tried to kill him after you left," she said. "But I had only a knife—he was too strong. You saved my life when you stole the ship. Trexel went after you. I watched from the window."

Ricker glanced toward the window. The light was gone and in the room itself crept the chill of the darkness outside. The heat units were dull red embers.

Ricker sat up quickly. Swift pain drove him back down. "We've got to get out of here!" he said. "This place'll be a block of ice in no time, air and all! We can steal a ship and—"

"Steal it?" said the woman. "There's no one to stop you. The workers are dead. There's nothing to stop you—but the cold outside. It's sudden death out there now. It's too late."

Ricker gritted his teeth, arose despite the lightning pain. He waved aside her restraining hand, sat on the edge of the sofa till the weakness passed.

"We've got to get away," he said. "We can't stay here. We'll die."

"I know," said Molly Borden-Dorothy Adison quietly. "We'll die. It was far below zero when I went out to look for you. By now, the roof must have lowered half way down—it's probably 200 degrees below zero out there now. But I don't mind the dying so much. It's that I've failed that hurts. Trexel got away—father is unavenged."

Ricker had forgotten about Trexel for the moment. The thought brought him to his feet and he forgot his pain. Both Trexel and Vanger must have escaped. They were up in one of the planes. They had only to melt through the ice. "Trexel got away—"

"Yes," a calm deep voice from the door. "And he will complete his purpose!"

Ricker turned slowly toward the door. He heard the woman gasp.

Trexel and Vanger stood there. They wore heavy electro-suits, heat steaming from them into the chill room. Trexel held a pistol in his right hand.

"Notice the window, telenewsman," he said.

Ricker turned to the window, saw bright daylight outside. The heat units were on again—!

"YES," said Trexel. "The units are working. Did you think we would depend on a single source of power? It took a few moments but it was simple to switch on an auxiliary plant. And most of the men will revive, the cold struck them so quickly. Before you know it, everything will be as good as new." He smiled his fat, pasty smile. "Watch them, Vanger, while I get out of this suit."

The Martian pulled his own gun, Trexel struggled out of the hot clothing, dropped it to the floor and sat down heavily. Ricker stared as if he'd been struck with a mallet.

"Now," the fat man said, pouring a drink, "I'd like to clear up just one minor point before we dispense with you two. Did Ricker know who you were all the time, Miss Adison?"

The woman didn't answer, looked at him like a caged animal. But to Ricker there flooded a sudden ray of hope. Trexel might still believe his stall about the President knowing his whereabouts. Did he *still* have an ace in the hole?

"Yes," he spoke for the woman, "Miss Adison and I have been working together for weeks. But that doesn't matter, Trexel. In a few moments your hide-out'll be swarming with Patrol ships. They know where I am and they'll be here any moment."

The fat man laughed. "Still trying to pull that stuff," he scoffed. "Well, it doesn't go over again. I contacted Washington and my agents tell me there's no truth whatsoever in your story. No one knows where you are. You were both working entirely on your own." He raised his pistol. "But enough of this!"

"Wait," said Vanger. He coughed behind his hand. "Why shoot the woman? Give her to me and she'll never speak a word of what she's seen if I have to cut her tongue out."

Trexel smiled. "So you, too, have been attracted by Miss Borden's beauty. But perhaps you won't like her so well as Dorothy Adison, Vanger. Have you thought how she would look without that yellow dye on her skin, without that makeup on her eyes and with Dorothy Adison's blonde hair?"

"I like blondes," said Vanger. "And if I remember rightly, Dorothy Adison was a beauty in her own right."

"Well," said Trexel. "A dead woman's little use to anyone. If you'll remember about that tongue-cutting—"

Vanger laughed till he began coughing.

Trexel raised the gun, pointed it

full in Ricker's face and laughed. Ricker could see his fat knuckle whiten as it squeezed the trigger.

Molly Borden screamed, flung herself in front of him. The Martian jerked her aside. Ricker's good left arm came up. Then it halted in mid-air.

To his ears came a sound like bubbling water to a man dying of thirst. He didn't believe it at first, paused, lips parted, listening. Then his eyes danced with a wild light.

Trexel heard it too. His face was like chalk. He stood there with the gun still poised, a great bear-like statue. It was the hum of rockets! Not the rockets of Trexel's ships, the jets of the Stellar Patrol. It was! The Patrol had gotten through!

Trexel stood like a man of stone. For a full ten seconds he didn't move.

Ricker knocked the woman aside, dropped to the floor. The gun flamed. Trexel pulled the trigger wildly. Ricker snatched the glass table from the floor beside him, hurled it up into the man's ghastly face. His thick mouth burst into a red spray as glass crashed. He fought to get rid of the table, its jagged edges cut into his arms and face. Ricker hurled a chair. It hit the man's head like a pole striking cement. Trexel's gun fell from his hand, thudded on the floor. He sagged down beside the wall.

The Martian didn't pull his gun. He stood, staring, listening to the cries, the sound of the planes and the guns outside. He didn't appear to see what was going on in the room. Suddenly he whirled, bolted to the door.

In the heat of his fury, Ricker flew after him.

Vanger dashed down the corridor, Ricker ten feet behind. He went through the door, started out upon the field. As Ricker reached the door, he saw Vanger stop suddenly, look up. The din of the Patrol boats was thunder in the echoing hollow. The air was filled with them. The field was littered with men running, falling and lying still. A boat swooped down toward the lone Martian standing there, fell like a bird of prey. Vanger started to run back toward the building. Tat, tat, tat! A long flaming line followed him, slowly, like a curse. Little puffs of dust spurted around him. The puffs stopped. The Martian halted. He stared at Ricker in the doorway and his face was puzzled. He coughed and his chin, his shirt became cherry-red. Then he crumpled to the ground.

Ricker turned, walked slowly back to the room.

At the door, he paused. He saw Dorothy Adison standing over the motionless hulk of Trexel. She swayed, one hand at her throat. In her other hand was Trexel's gun. Where the head of the fat man had been was a dark, dripping ball of horror.

The woman dropped the pistol. It struck the man's body, rolled to the floor.

Then she was suddenly in Ricker's arms.

LOUNGING deep in his red-leather chair, Bill Ricker squinted out at the port as the sleek space ship streamed through the darkness. He could see nothing outside but a big, humorous-eyed young man who was his own reflection and the green tinted star that was Earth—home.

"I hear you got a raise," said the tall blonde women in the seat beside him.

"Yep," said Ricker. "The Chief tried to get out of it but since the government offered his star reporter twice as much, he had to give in." He stared at the woman queerly. With her golden hair, her clear emerald eyes and perfect features she possessed a strange loveliness.

"Madam," he said. "What do you plan to do with your life? Have you no aims, no ideals, no guiding light?"

"Nope," she said. "I'll just follow you around, I suppose."

"And what if I get tired of it?"

The woman smiled. "I hit you with a wrench once—"

He touched one gorgeous blossom and it stiffened under his hand like a cat!

The FACTS of LIFE

by P. SCHUYLER MILLER

"THE ability to profit by past experience and to use this knowledge as a guide to future action may, ladies and gentlemen, be taken as the primary differentiation between the animal and the vegetable kingdoms."

Thus Professor Melchizedek Hobbs, principal of the Springville Free Academy, on the day long-gone when I began my higher education. I can see him yet, the apotheosis of the Victorian schoolmaster, Ichabod Crane, come to life: the sparse, sandy hair brushed carefully across his bony skull, his long nose trembling with the vehemence of his argument, his artist's fingers stained with the chemicals which he had lately been preparing in the school's laboratory, fum-

bling nervously with his mauve cravat and peering worriedly over the tops of his steel-bowed spectacles at our bright and shining faces.

To Mr. Melchizedek Hobbs every moment of every day was precious. Those of us who came to know him a little more intimately in the four years that followed realized that he was not like other teachers. His teaching was the driving purpose of his life, second only to the keen and insatiable curiosity which sent his vulturine nose prying into the intimacies of Nature and ferreting out improbable facts to the greater glory of botanical science. Now, on our first day at the Academy, he paced the rostrum like a moulting crane, wholly intent on the seriousness of his peroration.

Honeyed persuasion was in his voice, and a note of steel when it was needed, for by any standards Mr. Melchizedek Hobbs was no mean orator. Now he made an appeal to our young emotions:

"How often in one's journeyings is the heart warmed and the spirit moved by the solicitude shown by even the lowliest of God's thinking creatures in the care and upbringing of its young! How appalling is the contrasting lethargy which characterizes the race of the cabbage and the vegetable marrow! With what wanton abandon does the profligate thistle scatter its plumed seeds to the four winds, yet with what loving patience does the gentle hind nurture her fawn and bring it to maturity.

"Education, ladies and gentlemen, is not the prerogative of Mankind! The kitten learns from the wise mouser, its mother, to stalk its wary prey. The sparrow in its nest is taught to spread its trembling wings. Even the field mouse learns to know its natural enemies and to recognize them from afar. It is God's will on Earth that in every thinking race the parent should instruct its young, the adult impart the accumulated wisdom of its kind to the immature. Education, ladies and gentlemen, is the heritage of the animal kingdom—the privilege which divides us from the leek and the asparagus! I trust that you will not deny that heritage!"

Thus Mr. Melchizedek Hobbs, in the days when I first knew him. There were a few of us who tagged him through the woods and fields, listening to his painfully erudite disquisitions on matters of botany or zoology, following his kicking heels and flying coat-tails in wholly undignified pursuit of some new butterfly or beetle, or laboring home under the weight of collecting boxes stuffed with mosses and rare ferns. We learned little enough, I suppose, for I find it hard now to distinguish a primrose from a cowslip, but we appreciated the very real enthusiasm which was his, and his sincere desire to learn and to impart what he had learned.

THEN, in our turn, we graduated and went our separate ways. I heard that a maiden aunt in England—some forgotten relative of his mother's—had died and left Professor Hobbs an income which permitted him to leave the Academy and open a little greenhouse which was as much a laboratory as a business enterprise. I wrote him a letter of congratulation, and from time to time in my wanderings I sent him slips of rare or beautiful plants which came to my attention. And then, only a few months before my travels were ended and I came back to Springville, I happened on the Zulu rose.

Where it got its name I do not know, for to the best of my knowledge there are not and never have been Zulus in Madagascar. Probably some African explorer, a little off his regular course, paid a fleeting visit to the isle of marvels and bestowed his taxonomic benediction on everything that came to his attention. In any case, and by any name, the Zulu rose would be the same anomaly.

I had gone to Madagascar with some wild idea of finding and drag-

ging back to civilization the fabled man-eating tree. That I failed was probably due in part to the fact that it never existed, save in some retired colonel's fevered imagination. I panted off on the trail of the Aepyornis and had to be satisfied with a much addled egg, still on display in the Springville Free Museum and Loan Library. I shot lemurs and hunted for missing links, for Darwin's "Origin of Species" had been very much before the undergraduate eye during my college career. All I found, in the end, was the Zulu rose.

What first attracted me to the plant was the fact that it was never twice the same. There was a family likeness —about as much as there is between me and my brother Charles—but that was as far as it went. No self-respecting plant behaves like that.

The first that I saw was in a young lady's hair, and I only noticed in passing that it was very much like a full-blown rose, with crimson, satiny petals. The following morning, on my way back to the hotel, I saw the same rather spectacular blossom in a private garden and was somewhat puzzled by the fact that it was growing on a stalk very much like an Easter lily, with long, swordlike leaves in a whorl about its base. There were several colors on the same bed—reds and creamy whites and one lot of a striking orange color.

Then, in the forest, I found the things growing in an entirely different manner. At least, the crotchety old duffer who was guiding me swore that they were the same plant, although these were growing like parasitic orchids on huge mats of threadlike roots. The petals were more orchid-like, too, and less flamboyantly colored, and I assumed that this might be an ancestral form from which the cultivated varieties had been developed.

All in all, I think I saw some twenty different varieties of Zulu rose and no two of them were alike. That I did not see the one thing that was of importance, or even hear of it, can be ascribed only to the notoriously bad luck of the Abercrombies. I saw Zulu roses that were like thistles, and others that were like sunflowers. I saw them growing like water-lilies, like cactus, and like edelweiss. They weren't common, but wherever they were they seemed to be perfectly adapted to the environment they were in. Their perfume was really overpowering and not entirely pleasant, and I noted in passing that there were never any bees or other insects near them. Unfortunately, while I mentioned the fact to my old teacher in the letter I sent with cuttings of three or four of the plant's many varieties, I let it go at that.

Nearly a year passed before I saw Miss Liberty's torch raised over New York harbor and watched the friendly hills of the Mohawk Valley closing in on either side of the train. Springville was just what it had been fifteen years before—the same rutted streets, the same fly-specked store windows, the same sleepy horses in front of the Oriskany House—even the same sparrows quarreling under the eaves of the Methodist Church. Jim Selford hacked me up from the station—he's Mayor of Springville now, and proprietor of the garage which he opened with much misgiving when he was sure that the horse had gone to stay. In the course of our parade up Main Street he gave me thumbnail sketches of practically everyone of importance who had been born, died, or come to fame since I left town.

I had my first hint that all was not well when we passed the hole-in-the-wall that had, during my childhood, been a combined tobacco and sweet shop. It had an already weather-beaten sign over the door—"HOBBS —FLORIST"—and busy about the front of the shop was a familiar figure in the normal costume of a respectable upstate female.

Jim cast a glance over his shoulder at my question. "Her? That's Abigail Jones; tends for old Hobbs." He spat

accurately at the iron hitching post in front of the First National Bank.

Now I know Jim Selford. The boys I cronied with had spent a good deal of their time around his livery stable, and our own yard had backed up on his. There had been certain disagreements about the uses to which his pears should be put, if I remember. At any rate, I knew he was holding something back.

"How is Professor Hobbs?" I inquired innocently. "I suppose he's one of the city fathers by now."

JIM looked at me with suspicion, but I kept an impassive face. He uncrossed his legs, crossed them again, picked up the whip and gave the bay mare a cut across the rump that made her jump. "Geeup!" he answered.

I recognized the gambit. I must give before I would get. "Has he had any luck with the plants I sent him from abroad?" I asked. "There were some very rare ones that you won't find in any of the big botanical gardens. If he can grow them here, it ought to put Springville on the map."

That did it. Jim planted both feet with a clump and twisted the reins around the whip. He spat his quid into the gutter, dusted off the plug, and cut a new chaw. Then he turned on me.

"You're into it too, are you? Might of knowed! If there was ever a worse show an' hullaballoo than that old fool has raised I never seen it. If I was the Widder Jones I'd starve afore I'd leave my daughter tend shop for the kind he is. Batty—that's what's wrong with him! Crazy as a coot! And dangerous! Them damn flowers! Ptah!"

Then he closed up like a clam. I got not one word more out of him until we pulled up in front of my uncle's house, now mine. Then: "Go on up there," he said. "See for yourself. Giddap!"

Which, of course, is exactly what I did. Of all my old friends and cronies, Melchizedek Hobbs was the one to whom I had been closest. Jeremiah Jones had written me a few times from Chicago, where he was with some firm of chemists, and I gathered that Sydney Smythe was enjoying the spoils of aristocracy as cashier of his father's bank, but I was not anxious to see Sydney. The others had scattered or married and settled down, and I doubted that they would have much in common with footloose Jamie Abercrombie, who had too much money for his own good and had just inherited another slice that he hadn't earned.

I had dinner and a pipe and then set out along the well-remembered, maple shaded lane of Spring Street, past the old Sutherland place at the corner of Eagle, where a scrawny hedge had replaced the old white picket fence; over the limestone bridge across the Grooterkill, built by one of the Irish stonecutters who had been brought over to work on the Erie Canal; past the Jones house with its neat lawn and big red barn. There was someone on the porch, but I didn't stop. I didn't cotton much to Abigail, and there would be plenty of time in daylight to talk to Mrs. Jones.

Melchizedek Hobbs lived almost at the end of Spring Street, in a huge, rambling clapboard house that hadn't been painted since before Gettysburg. The grass, as usual, was rank on the lawn, but the flower-beds that lined the flagstone walk were pictures of tender care, and the big new greenhouse in the backyard shone like silver in the moonlight.

There was a light out there, so I went through the side yard and around the house. There was a high wire fence across the yard, with an iron gate, and the gate was padlocked. I rattled it and hooted. The light went out in the greenhouse, and a moment later I saw the gaunt, scarecrow figure of Melchizedek Hobbs stalking toward me.

He knew me at once, in spite of my handsome, flowing moustache and weatherbeaten complexion, and after fifteen years. Nor had he changed

much himself. He was a bit thinner and he had taken to a pretty obvious toupee. His nose seemed longer and sharper, and a little redder, and his clothes were a little shabbier than I remembered them. He was wearing a butterfly-wing bow-tie instead of the magnificent mauve cravats that I remembered, and it was on crooked.

WE went around to the front porch and sat in the summer moonlight, with the mingled perfume of hundreds of flowers wafted up to us from his garden, and the moist, rich smell of the Mohawk in the days before factory wastes and oil tankers turned it into an open sewer. We talked about old times, and about my adventures in far lands, and the exploits of others among his favorite pupils, but I could see that he was uneasy. So, very gradually, I turned the conversation to himself and his flowers. I told him of my experiences in finding some of the plants I had sent him, and he went into raptures over the things he had done with them. And then I asked about the Zulu rose.

It was like throwing a blanket over a coop of clamoring ducklings. I knew he was looking at me through the darkness, his long nose quivering with indecision. I knew that he wanted me to leave, or change the subject, but I knew that he would never ask me to do so. It was cruel, perhaps, but I simply sat and waited.

It seemed a long time before I heard him sigh. "Yes, James. Of course. You have been told something in the village. It was Jim Selford, I presume—he would be the one. Well—you have the right to know."

He got to his feet, and to my amazement began to pull off his coat. He dropped it at his feet and proceeded further to haul his shirt-tails out of his high-waisted trousers. Then, with trembling fingers, he struck a match and held it over his head.

He had on a kind of smock or cassock that came clear down to his bony knees. To the waist it was literally patched with little pockets, and every pocket was stuffed with rich black dirt out of which rose the leaves and stems of seedling plants in various stages of maturity. Some were no more than green buttons and some were well leafed out. Some were flourishing vines, that wound affectionately around his arms and his scrawny neck, and thrust tender tendrils down inside his celluloid collar.

If that was the way he went about, no wonder the town thought he was crazy!

He said nothing. He went down the steps and around through the yard to the greenhouse, and I followed. He unlocked the door and opened it, and I was stifled by a blast of tropical heat and fragrance that sent me winging back to Madagascar and the girl in the hotel.

He stalked down the long aisle of the greenhouse, and I was right at his heels. He lighted lamp after lamp, and as the place filled with light my jaw began to drop, until I must have looked like a candidate for the booby-hatch myself. It was incredible!

The place was full of Zulu roses of every size and description. There were thousands of them—all different—and they filled the greenhouse with a riot of fragrance and rich color that made my head spin. Then I saw something that sent cold fingers diddling along my spine, for as Melchizedek Hobbs walked down the aisle between the banks of plants their gaudy blossoms turned on their stems to follow him, their leaves and stalks stretched out to touch him, and a soft, expectant rustle went up from thousands of straining fibres.

He stopped at a second closed door. "These are the breeding beds and nurseries," he told me. "You are, of course, aware that reproduction in the Zulu rose is bi-sexual and that it does not take place until maturity. There were no male plants among those you sent me, but we have a number of them now."

He opened the door. The green-

house was L-shaped, and we stepped into a kind of vestibule at the angle. A new perfume flooded into my lungs. I felt my heart pounding, the blood rushing through my veins. I sucked the infernal stuff into my lungs and knew that I was breathing faster, my nostrils dilated, my eyes bright. I remembered a neat pair of ankles I had glimpsed from the cab on Fifth Avenue. I remembered the curve of a dark cheek—the quirk of a pair of soft red lips—the sidelong glance of black eyes. The stuff was an aphrodisiac of the most violent sort, and I saw the color come to Melchizedek Hobbs' pale cheeks and his nose twitching with emotion. He reached up and patted his toupee into place.

He pointed. The plants were growing in pairs, male and female, and their shameless behavior made me gasp. It was outrageous! It was incredible! It was against Nature!

Such abandoned love-making I have never seen in man, beast or bird, let alone a vegetable—and I have seen more than most. The twining stems—the caressing leaves—the squirming, kissing blossoms: I was staring like a silly girl. It was all in the most sensuous of slow-motion, for the things could move as they pleased, or very nearly so. It was like an underwater ballet, completely shameless and completely animal, and I wondered whether any of the town fathers had seen it. If they had, I suspected, Melchizedek Hobbs wouldn't be going about as he was. He'd be in jail, or riding down the turnpike on a rail with a coat of tar and feathers.

THE old duffer cleared his throat with a mournful sort of cough. I suspected that he was completely embarrassed. "You see?" he said plaintively. "These creatures are very near the animal in many respects, although they are botanically true plants. They have many traits which I had never thought to find in the vegetable kingdom. You may remember my remarks on that subject, from your school days."

He stared long and gloomily at the rioting blossoms, then cleared his throat nervously. "Eh, yes. These are my young adults, just at the mating age. They are grown in the outer beds, which you have just seen, and brought here when the female begins to mature. The—ah—pollination takes place, as you see, with much demonstrative display on the part of both sexes. I find it closely akin to the nuptial display of certain pheasants, although there are other aspects—but no more of that. The plants are long-lived, and they will enjoy a—ah—happy wedded life for some weeks, until the young plants begin to bud. Then the male is ignored, his—ah—wooing reflexes degenerate, and he withers away within a night."

He made his way between the beds of oblivious lovers. They were too intent on the business of life to sense that he was there. He opened still another door.

I heard the rustle of leaves as we stepped inside. It was hostile—alarmed—like the buzz of a rattler's tail among dead leaves. He lit the lamp, and I saw that every flower-face in the place was turned toward us. I saw more: their leaves were hugged up like shielding arms, wrapped around their stalks just below the great blooms. There was something alive under those clinging leaves—something small that moved.

Melchizedek Hobbs had taken up a watering can and an artist's palette with little cups of chemicals instead of paint. He went down the aisle, moistening the soil around one plant, stroking another's trembling leaves, feeding a third with lime or potash or some other stuff from the palette. Gradually their leaves unfolded and I saw the little new plants budding from their mothers' stems, just above the highest whorl of leaves. The shape the things took seemed to depend on the kind of soil they were in, but the young plants were all alike, tiny and green and shapeless, much like the embryo of any animal.

Professor Hobbs came back and set down his watering can and palette. His pale eyes were pleading with me to understand. He looked like some medieval sorcerer in his long black robe with its scores of little pockets stuffed with growing plants.

"They are very like animals," he repeated morosely. "The female of the species is quite essential to the normal upbringing of the young. It is not so much a question of nourishment, especially after the young plants have fallen off and taken root, but there is a strong—*rapport*, your French friends would say—between the parent plant and her offspring. Affection, almost. I am convinced that she teaches them the things that they must know to live in the environment in which they find themselves." His eyes were beginning to gleam. "It is very interesting! Very! I have placed young plants in entirely different soil, fed them entirely different salts, yet so long as they are near their mother they will endeavor to take her form. I have brought stranger-young to a bearing female and placed them among her brood, and they become like her. These—", he touched the tiny plants in his pockets tenderly— "these are orphans which no other plant would adopt. I have had to do so myself."

My head went around like a teetotum. The whole thing was a nightmare! Certainly I had never suspected what would follow my innocent gift of the beautiful flowers which had attracted me so in Madagascar. No wonder the town thought him mad!

WE went back through the long greenhouse, and again I saw stems and blossoms twist and sway to greet him. He touched one gorgeous purple bloom and it stiffened under his hand like a cat, but with the slow, painful motion of something which has no right to move.

"These are all my children," he said softly. "My first-born." He glanced at me apologetically and his face was flushed. "I must appear odd," he said. "You see, as I have told you, there were no male plants in the bundle which you sent me, and consequently, although it was not difficult to bring them to maturity, pollination of the female flowers was impossible. As soon as I understood a little of their morphology and metabolism I realized that they must be artificially fertilized if the strain was to continue. Lacking the male element, it was necessary for me to devise some mixture of chemicals which would serve as a substitute. Needless to say, I was successful, and these lovely creatures are the result.

"The methods of insemination which I was forced to employ were drastic in the extreme, I am afraid, but it will never again be necessary to make use of them. We have a fine new generation of young plants growing up and maturing, ready to mate and bring forth their own kind as you have seen. Many of the parent plants, alas, failed to survive. Some of the young died, too, but these you see here I brought up myself, with the aid of one strong plant which did endure my treatment. She is still alive, and these —the children of my science—the young whom I fed through infancy and taught as I once taught you, James—they look to me as to a father. They love me, James. They—and she —and no one else. It has been lonely."

We went back to the house. The cloying perfume of the weird plants still clung to us, and I could see the tendrils of the little "orphans" creeping and writhing over his cassock.

We went inside. It was as I remembered it, fifteen years before—not a picture or stick of furniture had changed. But there was one addition. On the taboret beside his chair, at the left of the great tiled fireplace, was a squat black urn, and in it—the plant.

I realized, of course, that this was the one remaining plant of those I had sent him—the veteran of his experiment—the "she" of whom he spoke. It was showing signs of age. Its waxen

leaves were splotched and greyish. Its silky crimson petals, deepening to scarlet at the heart, were faded. Not until he sank down in the old Morris chair and stretched his long legs out toward the hearth did it respond and bend down toward him.

He cradled the great blossom for a moment in his palm, and let his fingers slip lovingly down its slender stem. I saw its withered leaves tremble at his touch, and smelled the faint perfume that rose from it.

"She is growing old, James," he said wistfully. "She is sick and old, and I am all she has. She is very like me, in many ways, and her company has been good for me, but some day soon I must kill her, quickly and painlessly, before disease cripples her any further. It will be the kind thing to do."

I was all wound up inside. They were right in the town—this was mad, abnormal, unhealthy—but he had every reason to be as he was. A man wholly wrapped up in his science, lonely and misunderstood, suddenly confronted by these exotic, almost animal blossoms: no wonder his curiosity and imagination had been aroused—no wonder solicitude had become something like affection. And in their turn, I realized, these strange plant-animals had learned to look to him for the things which Nature, in this environment, did not provide. They were amazingly quick to adapt: I had known that from the first. So it was that when he fertilized them, taking the place of the missing males, the female flowers accepted him and gave him the weird affection which Nature stored up in them for their normal mates.

That affection, in Nature, assured the species of continued life. It was a blind mechanism, designed by evolution to defy drought and disease and famine. Nature has implanted it very strongly in most animals, but rarely in plants. The female plants looked on him as a mate; the young buds, in their turn, found in him a parent. Oh, it was all very simple to explain in terms of biology and psychology—except to thick-headed, well-meaning village folk of the kind that live in Springville, N. Y. They thought him crazy now, but they would think worse than that if I ever breathed a word of the truth in his defense.

There isn't much more, as it happens. What it was—a hunch—some flash of intuition—maybe the common sense I am supposed to have inherited from my Scots ancestors, and which has made Charles the figure he is on Wall Street—I don't know. I may have remembered the toupee and the bow tie and a word dropped here and there, and put a few numbers together. But next morning early I went down to Melchizedek Hobbs' little flower shop on Main Street to see Abigail Jones.

ABIGAIL'S brother had been my best friend in school, and is today, but she and I had never hit it off. She was a good twelve years older than either of us, and she was the perfect figure of the soured, dessicatedly righteous virgin whom we characterize by the tag, "old maid".

The shop showed plainly the care she devoted to it. Everything was immaculate—painfully so—and the potted plants were trim and crisp, the cut flowers fairly sparkling. I wondered where they came from, for there had been nothing but the Zulu roses in Melchizedek Hobbs' greenhouse, and then I remembered that the Jones family had had fine greenhouses of their own when I was a boy. That was when two and two made four, and I finally made up my mind.

I told her plainly, in so many words, what the trouble was. I took due blame on myself (and I am sure she has never forgiven me) and did my best to point out in a calm, rational, scientific manner that what had happened was the result of purely natural causes operating in a perfectly logical way. Her face never unfroze, her eyes never as much as glinted, and I don't know to this day whether she did what

she did because she wanted to or because she thought it was her Christian duty.

As I say, she heard me out without turning a hair. It was only when a sudden flash of inspiration came to me at the very end, as I was halfway out the door, that I thought I saw a bit of a twist on her prim lips. I remembered then that my uncle had had a very fine, large bull, and I told her so.

What happened that night, was in a sense, tragic. The bull got loose, as it had done before. It rooted and rampaged down the length of Spring Street, breaking through the Sutherland's new hedge, plowing up the Pitkins' dahlia beds, scaring a grey mare and spilling out two spooners in a buggy, chasing Constable Nate Williams up a lamp-post, and topping off the evening by raging through Melchizedek Hobbs' greenhouse from end to end. By the time a posse had ramped through after it, and been chased by it, and hosts of small boys and frantic dogs had followed them and fled before them, the species Zulu rose was extinct in the Western Hemisphere.

I say extinct. Melchizedek Hobbs had come out in his crazy smock to drive the beast off, and it treed him. It tore the robe off him and trampled it to ruin. I know, for I was the one who got him down out of the tree when they had cornered the bull.

The old plant was left, and I have always had to give credit to Abigail, much as I sometimes dislike her, because she let him keep it after they were married, up to the point where it began to shed on her rugs. No woman could do more. He killed it then, quietly. And to this day, though Melchizedek Hobbs still potters around the greenhouses and sits in the back of the new store when Abigail will let him, he has never so much as mentioned the Zulu rose nor his ill-fated attempt to teach young plants the facts of life.

Coming Next Month

CITY, CITY!

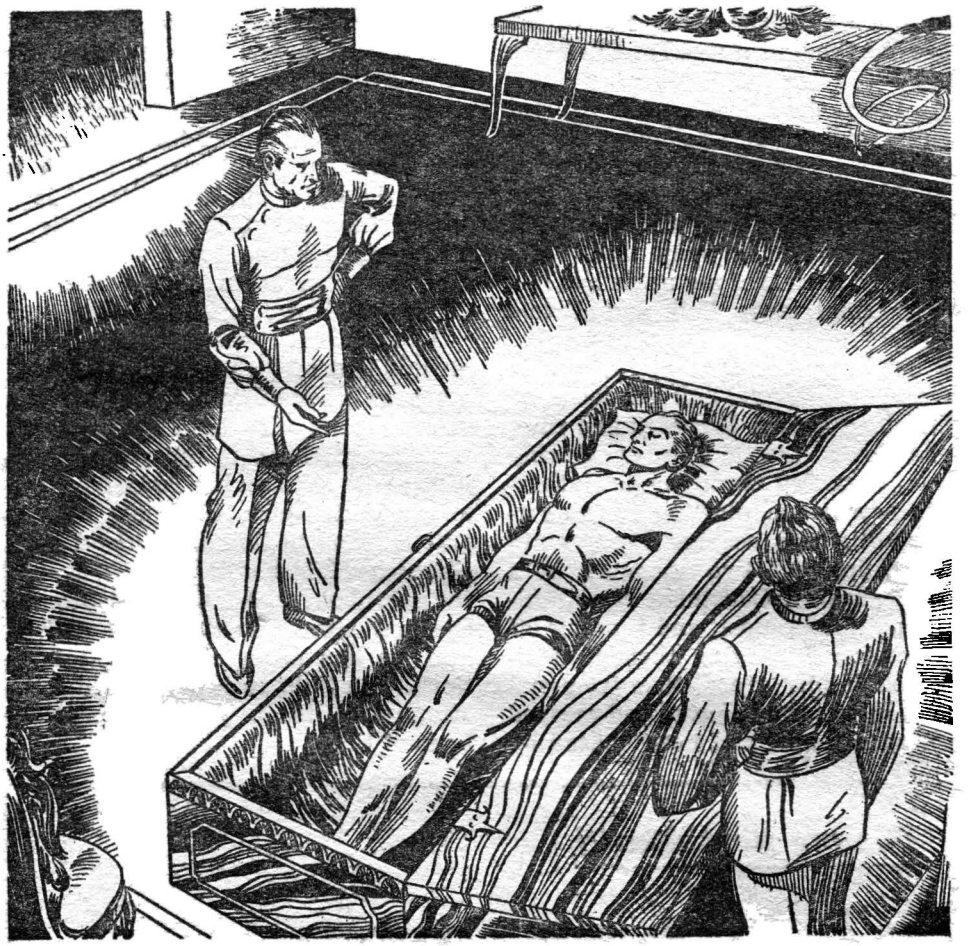
by Chester S. Geier

Mystery in Space—
Mirage or Reality?

The spacemen visited a city and examined it one day—the next day there was no indication that it had ever existed.

★

Don't Miss the Strange,
Vital, Scientific Explanation



He looked down on a perfect male form. Its broad chest seemed poised for breath—its eyelids ready to open.

WE ARE

THE radio announcer's voice gave staccato news flashes.

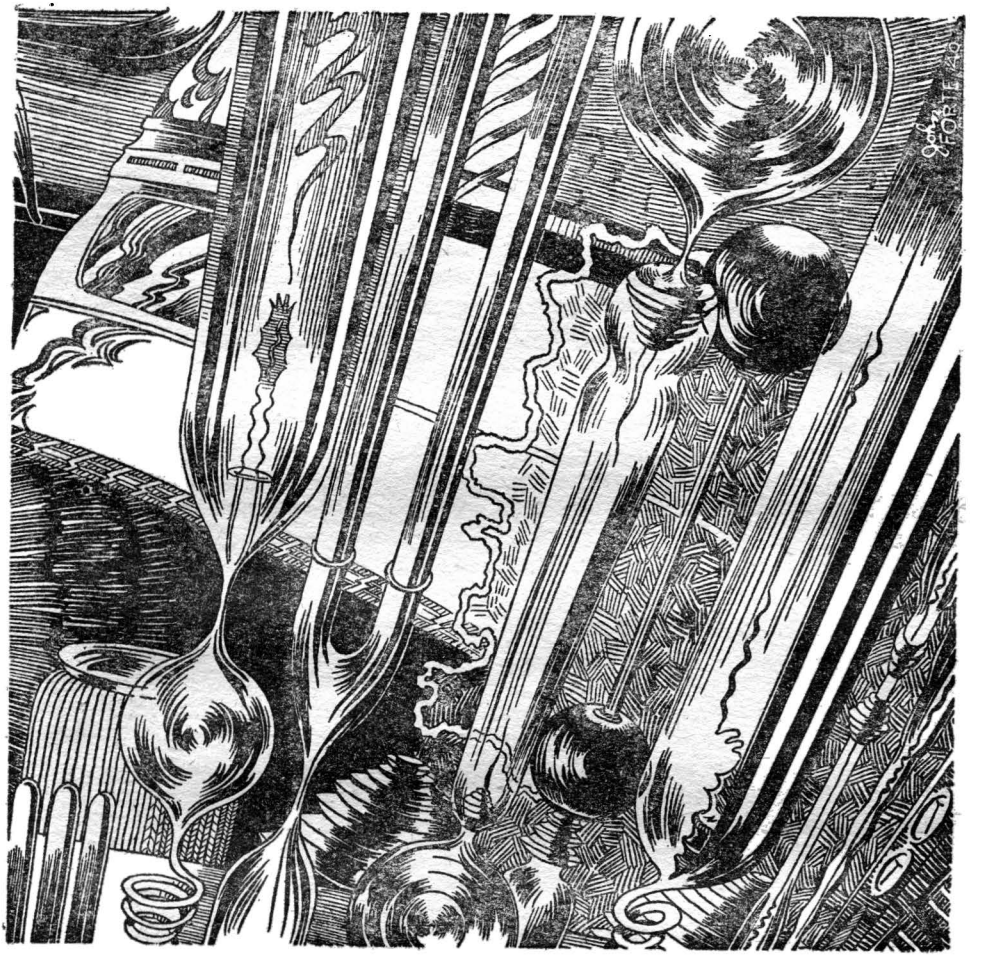
"Carson City, Nevada. The body of an old prospector was found today, ninety miles south. Apparently burned, his clothing charred, he was within a mile of the huge pit that marks the former site of Dry Gulch. This little town, as you'll remember, was blown sky-high last year, due to the criminal researches of Dr. Bruce Moore in atomic power. Every man, woman and child was killed. Five hundred souls. Also every stick and stone vanished into atoms, in the most gigantic explosion recorded in human history.

"The pit remains, ten miles wide. A heavy mist hangs over it. It is thought that the dead prospector may have wandered in, choked, and staggered a mile out before dying. But why are his clothes burned? Authorities are investigating.

"Chicago—"

Voices rose in comment above the trivial news items which followed.

"Criminal researches is right!"



ONE

An alter-ego becomes a physical duplicate.

by EANDO BINDER

said Dr. Earl Dean, host of the house-party in his Beverly Hills home. "I'm a scientist myself. I believe in the freedom of human thought and study, in the interests of the human race. But for a man to annihilate five hundred human beings by sheer carelessness, in an admittedly dangerous field of science, is worse than criminal. It's bestial!"

Murmurs agreed. Feeling had run high against the man who had destroyed an entire town, even though a year had gone by.

"I think he should be retried and executed," Dr. Dean continued. "Like any wanton murderer."

A quiet voice cut through the affirmative babble.

"I think Dr. Bruce Moore should be exonerated!"

Dean swung in surprise and fastened his eye on his young guest.

"Exonerated, after taking five hun-

dred lives? You don't mean that, Smith!"

The younger man eyed him steadily. "I do—"

But he got no further. Carroll Dean had grasped his arm.

"Let's dance," she suggested hastily, pulling him away.

On the dance floor among other couples, she wagged her head. "Father is great at argument. Especially on that subject. I saved you just in time."

The girl in Dennis Smith's arms was young and lovely. A golden tan and brunette hair were offset by a cool white summer gown. Vivacity sparkled from her warm brown eyes. But quite suddenly her flow of light talk halted in mid-sentence.

She looked at her companion with a puzzled expression.

"Dennis," she began slowly, "father just introduced us an hour ago. Yet I feel I've met you before. Where?"

Dennis Smith smiled down at her. He was tall, athletically built, under thirty. They made a striking couple together, gliding through the patio. He was aware of that, and tightened his arm about her slightly. But only for a moment. Then he moved away again, keeping a rather exaggerated distance from her supple form.

Curiously, his eyes reflected a hidden pain.

He answered her negatively.

"I'm afraid not, Carroll. I'd certainly remember, if I'd met *you* before."

He lifted one eyebrow gravely, to emphasize sincerity.

"There!" The girl almost missed a step, exclaiming the word. "Those little mannerisms! They're part of a person. I *know* I've met you before . . . . college!"

She gave the last word triumphantly. "Five years ago. Chem class—" Her voice trailed away thoughtfully as she tried to place him.

Dennis Smith's features stiffened.

"You're mistaken," he said almost sharply. "You never heard my name before. We didn't go to the same college. I went to Northeastern, as I mentioned before. I met your father this afternoon at the library. We both happened to ask for the same reference book. We talked, and he invited me to this party. That's the first I ever saw of him—or you."

The girl still looked skeptical.

"Why did you defend Dr. Bruce Moore?" she queried, changing the subject. "Don't you shudder, as everyone else does, at the terrible thing he caused? Killing five hundred people?"

"Do you?" Smith asked.

She shook her head.

"I pity him," she said softly. "He isn't a cold, emotionless scientist, as everyone pictures him. I knew him, you see. At college, where I thought I'd known you. He was sensitive, warm-natured, human. The shame and disgrace must be a bitter load for him to carry."

"More than you can know!" Dennis Smith muttered.

"You knew him too?" Carroll exclaimed. "Then you must have gone to my college after all!"

She stared at him for a long, searching moment.

"Is your name Dennis Smith?" she asked abruptly. "Or is it something else I'd know?"

He shook his head wearily.

"Of course we're Dennis Smith. Why would we masquerade under another name—"

"*We!*" gasped the girl.

Smith was startled, then grinned sheepishly. "I find myself using the plural at times, for no earthly reason. This music is danceable, isn't it?"

He had tacitly dismissed the subject. She was still glancing at him often, however, as they whirled around the floor.

"You're strange somehow," she breathed. "At times you have a faraway look in your eye." She hesitated. "Almost as though you're not really here at all—mentally!"

She laughed at herself.

"I'm being downright silly. First, I try to conjure you up out of my past acquaintances. Now I'm imagining

you're not quite what you seem. Next I'll be seeing Bruce Moore before me, when he doesn't dare set foot outside the state of Nevada! But I promise you I won't. Let's enjoy the evening."

Carroll Dean didn't know how close she had hit to the truth. She didn't know that at this moment, six hundred miles away, the amiable smile registered by Dennis Smith was born in the mind of a man who was not smiling. . . .

"ENJOY the evening!" Bruce Moore murmured bitterly aloud. "Can I ever enjoy an evening again—except by proxy?"

He sat in a darkened room, before a screen that reproduced in perfect detail the patio in which Carroll Dean danced. Her face was large in the screen. It was being viewed from close proximity. From about the position of one who might be dancing with her.

It was the scene exactly as Dennis Smith saw it. And the sounds that Dennis Smith heard vibrated from the radio-speaker at Moore's elbow. In effect, through the eyes and ears of "Dennis Smith", Moore was there in Los Angeles. And through the vocal chords of Dennis Smith, Moore spoke with Carroll Dean.

The girl was in the arms of a proxy, a biological robot!

Dennis Smith did not exist, except as a name—a common, everyday name—that would pass unquestioned among men.

Yes, the name "Dennis Smith" would, but not the name Bruce Moore. If he should dare step foot himself on that patio floor, a hundred eyes would turn balefully on him. A hundred people would shrink away from him. A hundred voices would call him "MURDERER!"

Worse than that, police would grab him, hustle him to the California courts. In five minutes he would be convicted, sentenced, executed, for a "crime" that had no parallel in history, neither in magnitude nor blind injustice.

Moore's thoughts flew back.

Back to that grey September morning when he left his laboratory at the outskirts of Dry Gulch. He had picked the small, isolated town because of lurking danger in what he was doing. He had warned his brilliant but erratic assistant not to tamper with the huge cyclotron while he was gone.

Bruce Moore had tentatively broken down silicon atoms into pure energy. He had simply advanced a step from the great researches of Anderson, Laurence, and Urie in that direction. They had broken down Uranium, a radioactive element, into barium and energy. Moore had taken a non-radioactive element, silicon, and split that —into one hundred percent energy!

But only a few atoms of it. If he could split and control larger amounts, he would have what atom-smashers would call dynamic electron-flow.

What the popular press would call "atomic power."

His car had taken him eastward. He had to order special heavy-duty screens to hold fast the giant of power he wished to liberate.

The explosion had caught him a hundred miles away.

The most appalling explosion of all time, equal to a million tons of guncotton. Perhaps all the mighty energies locked in a gram of matter had burst out at once. Ground-waves had ripped the road before Moore's car, sending him into a ditch. A blast of sound followed that vibrated his body like a tuning fork. The final wave of concussion had knocked him head over heels into a spiny cactus patch.

All this a hundred miles from the spot.

Anything within that radius had suffered worse. Speeding back, Moore's hair almost turned grey. All cars along the highway were wrecked. Bewildered passengers were rising from the dust. Some lay moaning with broken bones.

The nearest town, within fifty

miles, had apparently been struck by a tornado. Most frame houses were down. Every window in sturdier brick buildings had been shattered. All the streets, paved and unpaved, were in worse condition than if they had been bombed by heavy artillery for hours. There had been dozens of deaths and hundreds of wounded.

Moore would never forget the woman dashing from the ruins of a house with a dead baby in her arms, screeching that America was being bombed from the air by an enemy.

He skirted the town, tight-lipped, hollow inside.

Within fifty miles, all trees and even low desert shrubbery had been blown flat. It was like the area around the famous Siberian meteorite of 1908, which had razed flat millions of acres of forest. Great dunes of sand had been shoved outward, forming a series of rings. And Moore knew what he would see when he neared the great wound in the Earth.

He rode his car on the wheel rims for the last ten miles, tires slashed to ribbons, across country. There were no roads or telephone poles visible. No sign of manmade things, except here and there a splintered board or pitted brick.

Finally he stood at the edge of the vast, smoking pit. This had been the town a few hours before. All was gone. Every building, every street, every person. A heavy mist, very likely the atoms of the things destroyed, slowly settled. All gas gone, and only this raw rash marked the former town of Dry Gulch.

Bruce Moore found himself on his knees in the scarred Earth, shoulders heaving.

"I did it!" he kept moaning aloud. "I wiped out five hundred lives!"

The terrible self-denunciation slashed again and again through his sensitive mind.

He was hardly aware, an hour later, that hands pulled him erect. Nor that he kept yelling those words at them—and then laughing horribly. For it was a joke, after all. A grand, diabolical joke that he who had devised the mighty destruction should be alive.

II

THEY took him to Carson City, for trial.

The charge was manslaughter. In any other state of the union, he would have been sentenced for life, or executed. But the Nevada courts—known to wink at gambling, speeding, divorce—let him free for lack of evidence, since his assistant and laboratory had been blown up. It was an amazing decision, but the presiding judge had relegated the case to the status of a railroad accident, or a defective dam. An act of God.

Moore hardly knew whether to be glad or sorry, in the awful days that followed. A nation-wide and world-wide reaction set in against him. The explosion had hardly been greater than the eruption of public opinion now.

Must cold-blooded scientists be allowed to wantonly destroy human life for the good of research? Must people tremble in fear lest any moment this same madman—freed by the Nevada courts—would send them to oblivion? Moore had laughed when they found him. Nero fiddling while Rome burned. He would go shrieking down in history as the greatest wholesale murderer known. A scientific Bluebeard. And so on. . . .

He was denounced from one end of Earth to the other.

All the states except Nevada rushed through special warrants. They warned him that if he set foot outside the boundaries of Nevada, he would be arrested on charges preferred by the relatives of the dead. He would be summarily executed. And all over the world, governments posted notice that no country would harbor such a dangerous maniac.

The reaction in scientific circles was equally as great. More or less un-

known, Moore was looked upon as a charlatan who had given their class a black eye. Scientist groups formally declared him an outlaw of the laboratory. The university that had granted him a degree withdrew it, striking his name off the lists.

Moore felt as if a net were slowly closing about him, strangling him. He was confined to the state of Nevada. In any other spot on Earth, he was a criminal meriting death. And even in tolerant Nevada, its seventy thousand people shunned him. When he went to Las Vegas and Reno, for a little companionship, hardened gamblers and not-too-puritanical people shrank from him as from a monster.

In a month, Moore saw his position starkly. He retired to his former laboratory-home, isolated in the hills, where he had developed his experiments to the point where he needed the bigger supplies of electrical power available in Dry Gulch.

Bitterly, he contemplated the dreary future.

He was a world-wide pariah. A friendless, shunned man. He was thirty, unmarried, an orphan. All the universe had conspired, it seemed, to cut him loose from human society. He walked alone, little more than a ghost. No leper had ever been quite so abandoned by his fellow men.

He grew thin, grey-haired, surly even with himself. Suicide sang its siren song. It would be the only escape. Every time he tuned the radio, references were made to the disaster. "Moore's butchery" became a standard cliche, to which were compared tornadoes, typhoons, famines, riots, gang murders, and all violent death.

Cyanide. That was the quickest. Looking out over the world that had disowned him, he raised the bitter draught to his lips. But the beaker was knocked from his hand.

"Not that, Bruce," said a calm voice. "Don't give them the satisfaction!"

Moore whirled, startled. He hadn't heard the car come up, nor the footsteps approaching from behind.

"Jed Wheeler!" Moore exclaimed.

He couldn't say any more. He could only stand, woodenly, waiting for the other to show his repulsion at facing the man who had scientifically assassinated five hundred innocent humans.

But Wheeler smiled instead—a friendly warm smile that seemed to spread blinding sunshine over the world. And his handclasp was firm.

"Good to see you, Bruce old boy!" Wheeler said casually.

Moore stared.

"Do you mean it?" he stammered. "Don't you know that I'm a murderer, a beast, a—"

"Shut up," Wheeler returned easily. "We were roommates in college. Remember those days? We'd talk far into the night. You on dynamic electron-flow. I on lab-made protoplasm. I say it's good to see you, and I mean it!"

And then Moore was babbling against his friend's shoulder.

"Good to see you? Jed, you don't know how good! You're the first person who's touched me, without shuddering, in months. Eternities!"

Pity shone behind Wheeler's scoffing smile. "Don't take it so hard, Bruce. Chin up. I know what you must have gone through."

"But when every soul on Earth shuns you—" Moore half moaned.

"Carroll Dean," Wheeler said. "I thought she'd come back to you. Hasn't she—"

Moore's face hardened. "No," he said harshly. "One little word from her might have made it easier. One little visit. One smile. Damn her! Damn all the world—"

"That's it!" Wheeler slapped his back. "Get mad. Good and mad. You're down but not out!"

Moore stepped back, more composed. He gripped his friend's hand again.

"Saved me from a bad moment, Jed. Just one friend is all I need. Just one man to come and talk to me a little."

Wheeler kicked at the broken beaker on the ground, shaking his head.

"Ready to take your own life! The greatest gift in the universe—"

His voice trailed. Something in his tone caught Moore. And when his friend looked up, he saw the bleakness of his eyes. The lines in the face, the pale skin, the droop of the shoulders.

Wheeler answered the unvoiced question.

"Cancer," he said briefly. "Docs give me three months."

They looked at each other. One man who sought to escape the bitter burden of life. The other who clung fast to measured hours.

"God, I wish I could do something for you," Moore murmured.

"Maybe you can!" Wheeler drew a breath and went on. "I've come to you because I think you're the only man on Earth who might help me. In my car I have a large box. It contains a form made of artificial protoplasm. I've worked on that for six years, since college. Succeeded, too. Help me with the box."

They strode to the car. One at each end, they lifted down the oblong box. It was the size of a coffin, and of that weight—filled. Wheeler lifted the lid.

Moore gasped.

He looked down on a perfect male form. Its broad chest seemed poised for a breath, its nostrils ready to flare, its eyelids at the verge of blinking open. It might be the body of a man who had just drawn his last breath—or was ready to draw his first.

"Artificial?" Moore whispered.

Wheeler nodded.

"But perfect in every detail—lungs, heart, veins, blood, brain, muscles. Six years ago I started. Six years ago I had an operation for a cancer tumor. The cancer spread. No hope for me, unless—"

Again he drew a breath and went on.

"Unless I succeed in transferring my psyche—my mental self—into this brain! Oh, don't stare at me as if I'm mad. I don't know if it will work—hypnotic projection and all that. But I can try. If I fail—well, I'd be dead in three months anyway."

His tones were practical, determined.

"No doctor or biologist would agree to help me, of course. Criminal research, playing with a human life. But you, Bruce — I figured perhaps you. . . ."

He paused.

Moore finished for him.

"You figured I wouldn't care. That being a pariah already, in the eyes of the world, I have nothing to lose. A murderer of five hundred can add one more to his list without stigma. I can't damage a reputation already smashed. And you're right, Jed. I'll do it!"

A MONTH of feverish preparation.

Moore almost forgot his own problem. Wheeler had a truck bring in his biological apparatus. Glucose injections in the veins, warming pads at the feet to induce circulation, adrenalin in the heart, a chest pump to suck in air—and the artificial corpse came to life.

"That was easy enough," Wheeler said. "I had it 'alive' before. The hard part—the unknown factor—is to transfer my mind to the new brain-medium. If it works, I have a new vigorous body, free of cancer. And the world will benefit immeasureably. If it doesn't work—"

He shrugged.

Stripped, he lay beside the bio-man. Moore began the carefully rehearsed program of hypnosis—whirling mirrors, softly winking lights, massage of the forehead. Wheeler's eyes closed. Beside his ear a phonograph record drummed a command:

"Attention, mind of Jed Wheeler! Enter the new body!"

Over and over, Wheeler's own recorded voice prodded his mind to that grave, unknown step. Moore watched, trembling and fascinated. If it worked, another frontier would be

reached in the science of mind—and life.

An hour later, Wheeler had sunk into the third stage of deep lethargy, hardly breathing. Moore started. The bio-man was twitching. Its head swung from side to side. Broken mutters came from its lips. Its eyes opened, staring.

Was it working? Was the mind of Wheeler already in its new home? Moore trembled. It was weird, uncanny. And yet, it was rigidly scientific. No man had proved that it could *not* be done.

Suddenly Wheeler's wasted, cancer-ridden body heaved convulsively. Moore could sense the spirit departing. Then it lay still, unmoving.

Wheeler was dead!

At the same time, the bio-man sat up. Its eyes looked around in awareness, centering on Moore. The strong lips moved. The artificial larynx drew breath across its vocal chords in speech.

"Bruce! I see you. I'm in the new body. But it won't work! I'm in this brain, but slipping fast. No way to anchor my mind here. Thanks anyway, Bruce. Goodbye. . . ."

The bio-man tumbled back on its bed. Two corpses lay side by side.

Moore's nerves gave way. He held his head in his hands, groaning. Again, indirectly, he had been a murderer. Another life had sped away under his hands, as though the gods had cursed him with the power of death-dealing.

Perhaps hours passed. Moore wasn't sure. But a sound gradually wormed its way into his consciousness. A sound that brought the roots of his hair up stiffly.

Breathing!

The bio-man wasn't dead. It was still breathing, warm, carrying on the reflexes of life. It lay there like a young, virile man in restful sleep!

"Alive!" Moore thought. "Why doesn't it die?"

He jumped as the bio-man's lips opened and repeated the thought aloud: "Alive! Why doesn't it die?"

Breathing!

The bio-man wasn't dead. It was still breathing, warm, carrying on the reflexes of life. It lay there like a young virile man in restful sleep!

"Alive!" Moore thought. "Why doesn't it die?"

He jumped as the bio-man's lips opened and repeated the thought aloud: "Alive! Why doesn't it die?"

"You talk!" Moore gasped. "Are you really alive? Tell me!"

"You talk!" the bio-man again reiterated. "Are you really alive? Tell me!"

Moore moaned, half in terror, and ran out. He drew in deep lungfulls of fresh air, trying to keep from screaming. When he went back, in, he was calm. More than that, his eyes shone. Something had struck him like lightning.

He had talked over the project with Wheeler enough to know something of the mechanism involved. Briefly, the brain of the bio-man was responsive to thought. It lay ready, like a wax disk, to take the impress of anything engraved into it. Telepathy, mental rapport, psychic radio — science had no exact term for it as yet.

But of one thing Moore was certain. The bio-man could be kept alive, if he were fed And he could be directed around like a robot, perhaps—

Moore tried it.

"Arise!" he commanded. "Come to your feet!"

The bio-man stiffened and slowly raised on its elbow, as though absorbing the thought and interpreting it in mental images. Then, obediently, it came lithely to its feet and stood erect. Its face was blank. Its eyes looked at Moore without recognition save that he was part of the general background.

"Step toward me," Moore ordered. "Three steps."

The bio-man took three steps, with the assurance and poise of a strong, athletic body.

"Nod your head—Lift your right arm.—Turn half-way around—point to your nose—smile!"

Moore was satisfied, finally. Without fail, the bio-man had obeyed every command—those given mentally as well as orally. And gradually, breathlessly, Moore had let an astounding thought creep into his mind.

The bio-man could be Moore's proxy! Through this human-like robot, Moore could live and move in the world of men, unchallenged!

"Your name!" Moore cried. "Something common—Smith! Dennis Smith, a young man like millions of other young men! Now repeat it to me, as I give the mental command—"

The bio-man opened his lips.

"I—am—Dennis Smith," it said.

Moore flung his hands up in triumph.

His bitter, soul-searing exile was over!

III

BACK in the patio of a Beverly Hills home, Dennis Smith and Carroll Dean still danced. The girl had drawn closer into his arms, saying little, watching his features. Features that reflected the expressions of Bruce Moore with the fidelity of television. At times she frowned, as though still vaguely wondering if she had met him before.

"Hi, there, Smith!"

Dr. Earl Dean was calling from the side, and beckoning for them to approach. Beside him stood a tall, thin-haired man with critical eyes that seemed to bore through each and every guest, searching endlessly for something.

"Pat Vayder," Dean introduced him. "Star director for King Studios. Pat's interested in you, Smith."

"In what way?" Smith asked, surprised.

Vayder's uncomfortable eyes were riveted on his face.

"Have you ever acted, Smith?" he queried. He went on in a booming, authoritative voice that for years had directed the highest-paid stars of screendom.

"You're screen material, Smith, Definitely. Build of an Adonis. Facial character. Photogenic."

Smith gasped. "But I've never had the slightest experience in acting!"

"Not necessary," Vayden declared. "Male appeal. You have that. Girls watch you. They all have here. I've watched *them*. And ask Miss Dean."

The girl blushed. "Really, that isn't fair! But, Dennis"—she turned her glowing eyes on him—"this is a wonderful opportunity. You must accept!"

Earl Dean smiled expansively at the group.

"When I met you this afternoon, I knew you had *something* on the ball. By God, Smith, you're made! When Pat picks 'em, they're stars."

Three pairs of eyes were on Dennis Smith. He flushed. A flush born in the mind of Bruce Moore six hundred miles away, transmitted faithfully by the sensitivity of thought.

In the next second, Moore's hand flashed to his telepathy-control, disconnecting the power-wave for a moment. It left the sounding board of Dennis Smith's proxy face pleasantly blank. Otherwise that face would have astounded the others by spreading over with an ironic, bitter grin.

What would they say if they knew? The infallible Vayder, picking a proxy for a star discovery! Singling out a lab-made lump of artificial protoplasm, not even human! And how he would choke and splutter if he knew he was offering stardom—even if by proxy—to the most hated, despised, scorned man on Earth!

Moore laughed, in the privacy of his far-distant home.

A warm, happy feeling spread through him, melting some of the chill of his crushing exile. Through Dennis Smith, he once again lived and moved among people. He was no longer on an island universe of human antipathy.

Vayder's professional eyes on him

approvingly. Earl Dean's gaze fatherly and benign. Carroll's warm, glowing eyes telling him she thought, too, he had appeal few other men had. All this was part payment for the tidal wave of denunciation that had beached him on the shores of lonely isolation.

Moore drank it in.

Why not accept? Why not carry the hysterical comedy through, take their money, and let them flash his image on all the movie screens? The image of a biological robot! Only he would know the truth. He would laugh secretly at the whole world, as the whole world had unfeelingly scarred his soul.

But first he would play with them. He would extract every last ounce of grim pleasure out of it.

His hand went to the telepathy-control.

Dennis Smith, in Beverly Hills, shook his head.

"I'm afraid I'm not interested, Vayder."

The director almost choked on the olive he was nibbling.

"What? Don't you realize what I'm offering? I'll sign you without a screen test, even!"

The dead Jed Wheeler had done a superb job on what was meant to be his new body. Molding synthetic protoplasm as clay, he had modeled a human form perfect from all standpoints. Except for his tragic failure in mind-transference, he would have lived and breathed like a Greek god among lesser mortals. In Pat Vayder's eyes, Dennis Smith was the ultimate in matinee idols.

Earl Dean stared in surprise at Vayder, seeing his phlegmatic composure for once disturbed.

"A thousand a week to start, Smith!" the director offered.

He was pleading!

A ghost of a derisive smile touched Dennis Smith's lips, but quickly flicked away.

"I'm really not in the market—"

"Two thousand a week!"

Smith turned away rudely.

"I'll think it over," he said airily, leaving the director looking like a child from whom a mountainous dish of ice-cream had been taken.

AWARE that Carroll Dean was following, Smith wandered out on a verandah overlooking beds of scented flowers. The cool night breeze rustled over them. Overhead gleamed the rising full moon.

Carroll touched his arm.

"I think I admire you for it, Dennis," she said in a low voice. "You declined glamor. You have some greater purpose in life. What is it? What do you do?"

"Nothing," Smith returned, watching the startled injury in her eyes at the brusque evasion.

He was playing with her too. Why not? She as well as the rest of the stupid world had thrust him into enforced exile. Why not make her suffer a little? Through the guise of Dennis Smith, Moore could make all the people suffer with whom he came in contact. They had had no pity for him. He need have none for them.

It was particularly appropriate to hurt Carroll Dean.

At college, years ago, she had severed their companionship, and hurt him. It was no accident that Earl Dean had met Dennis Smith. Smith had sought him out, inveigled into his good graces, practically invited himself to the party.

But at first only as a test. Only to assure himself that the bio-man could pass freely among humans and be accepted as such. As a test of his "disguise." Meeting Carroll Dean again, after all these years, had been of secondary interest.

Now it was more.

"Nothing," Smith repeated. "We do nothing at all. We—"

He stopped at the girl's widening eyes. That *we* again. Strangely, Moore had found himself thinking in the plural quite often. Training the bio-man, associating with it for months

previously, he had almost come to take it as another being. As a companion rather than an instrument. He would have to take more care against saying "we." The world must never know that Bruce Moore, mass murderer, moved among them freely by proxy, despite their rigid precautions against him.

"You're strange — strange!" the girl was murmuring. "There's something about you—something. . . ."

"Something — like this?" Smith swept her into his embrace. His artificial arms circled her slender waist, crushing her to his broad chest. His synthetic lips pressed savagely against hers, with all the ardor and warmth of human lips.

She gasped, struggled for a moment, then yielded. Eagerly, the kiss was returned. Her arms tightened about his neck. Her whisper breathed into his ear.

"Dennis—Dennis dear!"

Moore, far away out of ear-shot, laughed wildly, triumphantly. Carroll Dean in the arms of a non-human creation, breathing affection for it! Pressing her sweet young lips against hand-made psuedo-lips and thinking them real! Did she remember the human lips she had turned away from, years ago?

Now, to add the crowning touch, the bio-man pushed her away, roughly.

Red flamed into the girl's face.

"Childish, aren't we?" he said insultingly.

"Dennis! You're — you're brutal! You've played with me. And I thought, all the while that we danced and talked, that—oh!"

Her hand flashed stingingly across his cheek. It failed to register any slightest pain to the remote flesh of Moore. In that, too, the girl was duped, deceived, unknowing that she was a pawn in a stranger game than a man had ever played before.

This was all perfect—perfect!

Dennis Smith smiled imperturably at the blazing-eyed girl. Deliberately he shrugged, hitching one shoulder higher than the other. He was showing utter indifference, telling her to leave and peddle her papers.

"Bruce!"

It was a startled cry from the girl. Her anger had abruptly changed to wide-eyed wonder. She was staring at him as though seeing a ghost.

"You're Bruce Moore!" she gasped. "You must be! Those mannerisms — the way you just now hitched your left shoulder. I can't forget those things. No other man could do it just that way."

She was squeezing his arm.

"I must be mad—and yet I'm not. You're not Bruce Moore—physically. But your air, your manner, sometimes the tone of your voice. . . ."

"Bruce Moore, of all things!" Dennis Smith scoffed.

But in his isolated home, Moore was cursing himself. The girl was sharp —too sharp. She was seeing through his "disguise." If she exposed him, all his plans and hopes were shattered. All his chance to live and move in the society that had ostracized him.

"What utterly senseless things are you saying?" Dennis Smith pursued quickly. "Look at me. Am I Bruce Moore—my build, my height, my face? They're all different."

"Plastic surgery!" the girl hazarded wildly. "I know how he—you—must have suffered, in exile. Your one thought must have been to escape. You did it, somehow. I know you're here. I feel it. You're Bruce Moore!"

"I'm not!" Smith flung back, angrily.

It had become a ridiculous scene, with their voices rising.

IV

A MAN stepped from the shadows of a portico. He strode forward and gripped Smith's arm.

"I'm Commissioner Lewis of the City Police," he barked. "I heard what Miss Dean said. I'm here as a

guest, but duty comes first. If you're Dr. Bruce Moore—"

Carroll looked at him startled, then interrupted.

"Of course not, commissioner," she laughed weakly. "I'm sure you heard wrong."

The official shook his head politely.

"No use to shield him, Miss Dean. The state of California has a standing warrant for the arrest of Dr. Bruce Moore."

He looked closely at Smith.

"You sure don't look like your pictures. But plastic surgery can do some marvellous changing. Thought you could sneak out of Nevada, eh? Well, Dr. Moore, now that we have you out of that state, I can promise you a quick trial and execution!"

Lewis' face showed both repulsion and triumph. Repulsion at sight of the man who had caused death to five hundred innocent people. Triumph at having captured him. He was, in his own opinion, a crusader crunching Evil.

Dennis Smith squirmed in his firm grasp. Bruce Moore squirmed mentally, six hundred miles away. Had he this quickly been trapped and exposed? How could he save the situation? Save the bio-man, when the truth became known, from destruction, and himself from maddening re-exile?

Dennis Smith flung off the powerful man's hand with a savage wrench. Jed Wheeler had also endowed his artificial body with exceptional strength, speed and skill. It would be simple to leap over the verandah railing to the garden and escape. Lewis carried no gun.

Smith tensed for a movement, then relaxed. He would escape, but be branded as a criminal. He would be little better off than before. A faint smile ghosted over his lips. Why not play his cards subtly? There was one daring way out of this dilemma.

He spoke.

"Just a minute. The accusations of Miss Dean are ridiculous. She nor you have any proof. You can't arrest me on assumption." He smiled easily. "You think I'm Bruce Moore. But Bruce Moore is back in Nevada, I assure you."

"I'll take you into custody and check on that," growled the police commissioner.

"I have a better suggestion," Smith countered. "Suppose we take a plane to Moore's place in Nevada. If he isn't there, or anywhere in the state, I'm it. I'd like to meet this famous—or infamous—character myself!"

Carroll Dean half gasped and looked sharply at Smith. Her hand went to her throat.

"But Br—Dennis, you can't—"

Moore gloated to himself. This was the best way. Carroll thought Smith was Moore. And Lewis did. Seeing Moore *with* Smith, their suspicions would be over once and for all. And the world's possible suspicion, in future situations. In fact, Carroll's near-exposure was working out as a splendid help in Moore's scheme to break from his exile.

"I'll take you up on that!" Lewis said quickly. "I know your little game. You figure when we arrive in Nevada, you'll once again be free, according to that state's court decision. On the soil of Nevada, you're free. But I'll clamp you with bomb-proof extradition papers. You won't get out of it, Dr. Bruce Moore!"

THE special police plane soared from one state to another in less than two hours. It landed in the town nearest Moore's home. Waiting squad cars of the Nevada state police took them along the rutted road to the isolated place.

The press had already caught it up.

"SCIENCE BLUEBEARD TRAPPED IN CALIFORNIA! California police, in conjunction with Nevada police, making final check to prove Moore tried to escape exile through plastic-surgery. Nevada police will yield Moore if it is proven he stepped beyond state boundaries!"

Seated in the squad-car in the lead were Deinis Smith, Carroll Dean, Commissioner Lewis and two police. They had spoken little, all tense over the coming situation. Time and again the girl glanced at Smith with an expression of puzzled dismay.

She finally whispered to him.

"Why are you exposing your plastic surgery disguise so openly? As Bruce Moore, you'll be executed mercilessly!"

"What do you care?" Smith shrugged, hiding a smile.

His smile faded. Something like a sob came from the girl. Her voice was a threadbare murmur.

"I love you," she said simply. "I always have, Bruce! It was a mistake to leave you. Father kept me away, after that."

Shock came over the bio-man's face. Shock that was reflected from the mind of Moore. Then, a whirlwind of rage swept him. She lied! It was Dennis Smith she loved. His magnificent body, strong features, manly grace. Not the Bruce Moore of before.

She would suffer for this too. For showing him so plainly, without knowing it, that she had considered the "former" Bruce Moore not big or strong or manly enough for her.

Faintly, in the back of his mind, Moore was grimly amused. He was being jealous—of his own proxy! Of a Frankenstein creation. Destiny was weaving a strange pattern.

THE squad-cars rolled to a stop before the ramshackle old house Moore had bought years before, in which to begin his dangerous researches. An annuity from an electrical invention had provided his living comfortably. At the edge of desertland, the house stood forlornly against the skyline of distant mountains.

It was here that the loneliest man on Earth had spent a year, more shunned and avoided than any hermit.

Commissioner Lewis led the way to the front door, knocking loudly.

He turned. "There won't be any answer, will there, Moore? You can't be inside and out here both at the same time." His voice became harsh. "Why don't you give up the game, Moore? This is a waste of time—"

He started.

The door swung open creakily. A man stood framed in the doorway, peering out with a surprised expression.

"Bruce Moore!" gasped Lewis. Bewilderedly, he glanced from him to Dennis Smith.

Carroll Dean stood stunned. She stared in disbelief at Moore, then slowly clutched Smith's arm, as if to make sure he hadn't vanished.

Moore looked over the group, hiding his triumph. He and his proxy were face to face. No one could deny they were two separate persons, now. The last link had been forged in his foolproof plan.

"Yes, I'm Bruce Moore," he said, acting his part. He laughed bitterly. "I'm not used to visitors. None has been here for a year. I'm a leper, a pariah, a dangerous maniac! Perhaps you had better go before I blow you all to atoms!"

Commissioner Lewis recovered himself.

"No need for that, Moore. We're here on official business. It's all a mistake, however. I just want to know one thing. Do you know this man—Dennis Smith?"

Moore followed his gesture, peering at the bio-man blankly.

"Never saw him in my life before."

Dennis Smith stepped forward. "Let me explain, Dr. Moore. It seems I was suspected of being you, with your face and body remodeled somehow."

The two men stood face to face. Even in the moonlight and the electric light from the open door it was clear. Moore was two inches shorter than Smith, with narrower shoulders, darker hair, and embittered fea-

tures that contrasted sharply with the clear-cut classical face of the proxy. Side by side, they were like black and white.

Moore held the pose—the double pose—for several seconds, to allow that to sink in to the watchers. Then he grinned.

"How ridiculous!" he said bitingly. "Hardly flattering to you, Mr. Smith. May I offer my condolences for the insulting comparison?"

He extended his hand.

Smith hesitated. There was faint repugnance in his face. Finally with a reluctant air, he took the hand. Moore and his proxy shook hands.

Moore drank the dramatic moment to the full. Within himself, he was laughing hysterically. No Bergen had ever handled his Charley McCarthy more cleverly, or with such important effect. The eyes of the duped world were watching, through Commissioner Lewis. A flash-bulb went off. A reporter with a camera had inveigled a ride in one of the squad cars. The morning papers would play up the event, perhaps in a derisive fashion. Dennis Smith would never again be suspected of being Bruce Moore.

So much for that.

Moore smiled to himself. Why not make the comedy a farce?

Smith turned to Lewis. "Well, I hope you're satisfied, commissioner?"

"Sorry," the red-faced police official grunted by way of apology. "All a mistake—"

"A rather stupid mistake, I'd say," Moore put in blandly. "Anyone can see that Smith is an upright, honest, worthy citizen. Whereas I'm a murderous soul with a bloodthirsty gleam in my eye!"

"Dr. Moore," Smith said, as if impulsively, "I consider it an honor to meet you, regardless of world opinion!"

"Honor!" Moore retorted to his proxy. "But I'm a brutal, cold killer. I have the blood of five hundred innocent, harmless people on my hands. You've read the papers. I'm a beast, a monster, a savage—"

"Please! Bruce!" It was almost a moan from Carroll Dean, biting her lips.

Moore turned to her for the first time. "Miss Dean! An old friend of mine. Nice of you to call on me in my lonely hours—"

Carroll Dean whirled and fled from the cold, harsh voice. Commissioner Lewis turned away with her. Smith followed. The squad-cars rolled away again, leaving the lone man standing before his citadel of exile.

V

"I'VE hurt you, Carroll," Moore hissed to the wind. "As you hurt me, once. And I've made an utter fool of you, Lewis. Now I'm free to go out in the world and hurt, hurt, hurt! Revenge! Revenge for a year of misery, degradation, ruin!"

He stood shaking his fist out over the desert.

Then, suddenly, he darted back into the house. In a back room, he sat himself before his radio and television controls. With the bio-man speeding away in the squad-car, amplified sight and sound were needed for full control of the proxy.

At the base of the proxy's skull, under the skin, he had inserted a sensitive tele-radio transmitter, run by nerve-currents. In constructing the artificial body, the genius of Jed Wheeler had solved one of nature's secrets—that the human nervous system was an electrical circuit. In the bio-man, a super-strong heart pumped energy through a valve, supplying this current. It was almost exactly the principle of an auto's generator constantly recharging a battery.

Going one little step further, in his months of experimentation, Moore had inserted the tele-radio unit, connected to the optic and auditory nerves. Thus all that the bio-man saw and heard, Moore saw and heard. The unit had enough power to transmit

the most distant scenes, by frequency-modulation, developed in 1939. The new type of radio transmission that eliminated static, fading, and all previous disadvantages of radio.

Moore thereby "lived," for all practical purposes, in Smith. Knowing his exact surroundings, it was easy through telepathy control to guide the bio-man unerringly in its contacts with the world. The telepathy-rapport—mental radio—Moore could not explain. It was something that Jed Wheeler's dead soul alone knew the explanation for.

Moore breathed a sigh of relief, now.

He had gambled, having the bio-man face him. It had taken rigid, precise timing to have first himself speak, commanding the proxy mentally to remain blank. And then mentally to direct the proxy to speak, keeping his own features expressionless.

But it had worked—splendidly! Fortunately, it had not been broad daylight, revealing it all too unmistakably.

There had been one other danger. That Lewis, still suspicious, might have insisted on searching the house. He might have connected the disappearance of Jed Wheeler to Moore.

Fortunately again, Jed Wheeler had come to Moore's place in utter secrecy, not wishing the authorities to know of his unlawful experiment, dealing with a human life. No one had known that Wheeler visited Moore. No one knew that his moldering body lay buried under the house. The disappearance of Dr. Jed Wheeler had been marked "unsolved" in police records.

Moore tuned his television screen carefully. Now he would carry on as Dennis Smith, living a new life by proxy. The scene, as viewed through the bio-man's eyes, was that of a squad-car, with Lewis to the left and Carrol at the right.

Dennis Smith glanced at his companions. Lewis was still red-faced, uncomfortable, undoubtedly cursing himself under his breath for a complete fool. Carroll was quiet, listless, avoiding his eyes.

Smith reached for her hand. She half drew hers away, uncertainly. She looked at him questioningly.

Smith whispered in her ear, above the motor's hum. "I'm sorry about before, on the verandah. Forgive me, Carroll?"

Her eyes were on him searchingly. She saw only sincerity, and more. She squeezed his hand, smiling in answer. Her head leaned toward his shoulder.

Moore, alias Smith, was not through playing with Carroll. Let her fall completely for an artificial man! Let her rush headlong forward, and be one day cast aside, as she had cast aside Moore.

But her head failed to reach his shoulder. She checked the impulsive movement herself. At the same time she slowly pulled her hand from Smith's.

"Carroll!" he said with an injured air. "I'm sincere! I don't hold it against you that you accused me of being Moore. What's wrong?"

"I—I don't know," she murmured tonelessly. Her voice changed. "He looked so lonely! So much in need of —me!"

Smith started. He was about to speak, but there was interruption.

COMMISSIONER LEWIS had stiffened, listening to the squad radio's constant drone. The announcer's voice had suddenly become sharp, tense.

"Attention, all cars! Go to scene of Moore's explosion. The heavy mist hanging within the pit for the past year has begun to roll out in huge quantities. A rancher's home was engulfed. The rancher, his wife and four sons have failed to come out. No cattle have escaped alive.

"The nature of the poisonous mist is unknown, as yet. Scientists from several cities are rushing to the scene. All police within range of this call go there immediately, to help in

confining the mist. Warning—use extreme caution!"

Lewis' voice barked to the driver.

"Sounds like an interstate emergency. Head for the scene."

The driver slewed the car around and took the next cross highway west. But first calling for a halt, Lewis motioned his two passengers out.

"I want to go along—" Smith remonstrated.

"Impossible," Lewis snapped. "Get a lift somewhere and take a train back to California."

The squad car sped away. Alone on the highway with the girl, Smith cursed and then watched a pair of headlights approaching from the opposite direction. He stepped in the road and flagged the car down. A man stuck his head from the window.

"How about a lift?" Smith asked. "In the other direction?"

The man stared. "Are you crazy? I'm not going to turn around and—"

"Then you'll stay here!"

Smith barked the words. At the same time he jerked open the car door and pulled the struggling man out. Enraged, the car-owner pulled free and swung his fist. He was a large, powerful man, quick on his feet and obviously handy with fists.

The blow might have knocked any other man cold. The bio-man's head barely snapped back slightly. Knuckles had cut themselves against a hard, adamant chin. With a short laugh, Smith tapped him back. The blow seemed effortless. But the man's eyes went glassy and he fell forward.

Smith caught his tumbling form, picked him up in his arms, and carried him easily as a child to the grassy edge of the road. Then the magnificent body leaped back for the car.

Carroll had watched the episode in amazement. Now she leaped in the car herself, beside him.

"Get out!" he snapped. "There may be danger ahead."

"I'm going along," the girl snapped back. "I must—I tell you I must." She bit her lips.

Smith stared for a moment, then slammed the car in gear and roared away.

"You acted like a maniac, taking the car," Carroll said after a while. "Why are you so interested in that mist from Moore's explosion?"

"Because I think it may be a world-wide menace!"

The girl gasped, looking at his grim-set lips.

Back before his controls, Moore's lips were just as grim-set. All the past episode was wiped from his mind. All his malicious playing of a game of revenge. This was no game now. This was stark peril—for the whole world!

And he, again, was the cause of it.

Moore alone knew what the mist was. He had revisited the pit once, before Wheeler had come. He had been vaguely alarmed then. But after the arrival of Wheeler, and the task of training the proxy for its role, Moore had forgotten the pit and its strange vapors.

An hour later, they neared the scene. Smith had driven at what seemed a reckless pace, at the powerful car's top speed. But the strong fingers, fast reflexes, and sheer strength of his superb body had handled the car with ease.

Brakes squealed as he stopped before a group of police cars. When he leaped out, a figure strode toward him from the uniformed men. It was Lewis.

"You, Smith?" The commissioner looked angry. "No civilians allowed here. This is a grave emergency."

"Graver than *you* know," Smith retorted. "What's going on?"

Instead of reiterating the command to go, Lewis explained. He had the air of a frightened man who had to talk to someone.

"The rancher was found staggering around an hour ago. He had seen the mist coming, tried to hustle his family away. It caught them all, though. He saw them die in horrible convulsions. Saw their flesh fall from their bones! He managed to run out

of the mist edges. He gasped out his story to those who found him, then died. When they tried to move him, his flesh came away like soggy dough—"

Lewis gestured. Smith saw the body in the light of cars' headlights. Or what was left of a body—a skeleton from which most of the flesh had sloughed away.

A bearded man stood over it, muttering.

"Impossible!" he kept saying. "There is no known disease, or gas, or any agent that can cause flesh to drop from the bones as if cooked off!"

"Radioactivity!" Smith spat out at the scientist. "The mist is a radioactive gas, more potent than radium. Its rays burn all flesh instantly."

"Radioactivity!" the little scientist gasped. "That's it!" Horror swept over his face. "The mist is rolling out of the pit in a flood. It will engulf the next town!"

"It will engulf the whole world, in time," Smith said.

They stared at him, and then turned to the west.

The pit was five miles away. Over it billowed a glowing, phosphorescent cloud that was slowly creeping out over the surrounding territory. Somewhere in the pit, vast new quantities of the terrible radio-vapor were streaming forth.

"We'll stop it," the scientist said, with a hollow confidence. "But first we're locating the source of the gas. We sent a man in a sealed diving suit, with a tank of oxygen on his back. When he finds the source, we'll know what to do—"

"You fool!" Smith grasped the little man's arm, squeezing. "That gas will go through anything—anything! He's doomed—"

A shout came from the police group. Several men held the limp end of a rope. They hauled it in now. Ten minutes later, the diving suit arrived. A gasp of horror went up. It was charred, rotting. No one dared look in, at what lay there.

"Good God!" whispered the scientist. "Good God! It's radioactivity, all right. And if that gas sweeps the world, poisons all the atmosphere—what can we do?" He clutched at Smith's arm, moaning. "How can we stop it?"

VI

SOMEHOW they all turned to Dennis Smith. His strong features, powerful body, and calm manner labeled him a leader, a man to follow.

"Stop it?" Smith repeated slowly. And then they shrank back a little at the diabolical gleam in his eye.

Stop it—why? Moore asked himself that. Why not let the gas roll out over Earth and destroy every living thing? Destroy the world that had unfeelingly trampled his soul to dust?

Only for a moment the blazing, satanic thought ground through his mind. It was succeeded by utter remorse. And then a mental groan.

Were the jealous gods punishing him for seeking one of the greater secrets of the universe? They had destroyed the laboratory in which had spawned the first groping toward that source of illimitable power which stoked the fiery suns of space—atomic power. Were they now destermined to wipe out the troublesome pebble of Earth entirely, with its inquisitive, prying little minds?

So it almost seemed. And he, Moore, had been the one to place Earth in jeopardy. On his soul it rested. This was no longer a question of society's crime against him. This was death for all mankind!

What *could* be done? No man could race into that blinding, choking, lethal gas cloud and come out alive.

No man!

But what of Dennis Smith, the proxy, and its great, wonderful body? . . .

Dennis Smith straightened up. His voice barked authoritatively.

"Batteries! Get all the batteries from the cars. Rip them apart. Take

out the lead plates and heap them together. Hurry!"

Lewis and the police stared uncertainly. But the scientist nodded. "Lead—I see! Hurry with those batteries! I think this man knows what he's doing."

Fifteen minutes later a pile of lead battery plates lay before Smith. He took off all his clothes, standing naked. Ripping the trousers down the seams, he formed a bag and tossed the plates within, slinging the load over his shoulder.

The men watched, gasping. Any of them would have broken his back trying to lift the burden. Dennis Smith carried it as though it were a bag of feathers. Muscles stood out like cords over his magnificent body.

Without a word, he stalked toward the mist.

"You can't go in there like that!" Lewis protested. "You won't come out alive—"

Smith flung words over his shoulder.

"If I don't, get all the lead you can. Millions of tons of it. Make a wall of it around the pit. It will be the only hope—if it isn't too late by then!"

And he stalked on.

Smith reached the edges of the slowly spreading cloud of glowing gas and plunged in. Would he make it? Moore didn't know. He sent the proxy on, toward highly probable doom. And with it he sent all his chances of breaking his exile. If the bio-man failed to return, Moore faced a lifetime of bitter loneliness. He could never fashion another bio-man. Only the dead genius of Jed Wheeler could do that.

Smith went on. His eyes and ears, more than humanly sharp, kept constant vigilance. The gas was bright, stinging, blocking vision for more than a few feet ahead. A steady, increasing hiss sounded ahead.

Suddenly his sharp ears heard a sound back of him. A human cry!

He whirled, then dropped his bag and leaped back. He caught Carroll in his arms, just as she fell with a choking gasp. She had stumbled after him into the mist. Her clothing was already smoldering as radioactive rays drilled through and through.

"Carroll, you little fool—"

"I had to follow you, Dennis!" she mumbled, as if in a feverish delirium. "I love you. I want to die with you."

"But I may not die—"

She hardly seemed to hear, sinking fast into a coma. "Want to be with you always. Love you—Bruce!"

She went limp.

Bruce! Had she said that name last, or had he heard wrong? She had followed Smith into the mist, and yet in her last breath before fainting had said—Bruce! Did it mean—

His thoughts broke off. No time for such trifling conjecture.

Smith was running, with the unconscious girl over his shoulder. Safely out of the mist, he put her in the arms of police, with orders to revive her and then hold her from running in again.

Then the bio-man raced back into the mist, at a faster pace than any human runner had ever achieved. He picked up the bag of leaden plates and continued his run. Even with the crushing burden, his flying legs propelled him over the rough, uncertain, veiled terrain faster than the hundred-yard dash had ever been run.

Relentlessly, Moore drove his proxy. Over the edge of the pit, down the slope, five miles to the center point of the great crater. Tirelessly, the legs pumped, the strong heart beat, the lungs sucked in air. Jed Wheeler himself had not known what a super-being he created from the test-tube.

The lungs also sucked in radioactive gases. Their slow, searing bite began to damage the tissue. And the bio-man's skin began to turn red as gimlet rays ate inward. Would even the super-strong bio-man's body stand against this killing environment?

"We must!" Moore was half moaning, back before his controls.

"We must!" Dennis Smith roared at the mists, plunging on.

He did. Or they did. Moore felt as though he himself were there, running that incredible marathon. Smith's body and his mind—together they had made it.

THE hissing vapors were thickest at the center of the pit. Smith could see no more than five feet. But he made out the smoldering, smoking mass, puffing jets of radioactive gas upward like a geyser.

He knew he would find that. Under his cyclotron, he had produced bits of disintegrating matter. The explosion had blown all into atoms—except perhaps a little speck of still-disintegrating matter. This had nestled into the ground, like a seed. It had smoldered for a year. Perhaps the constant cosmic rays had acted like rain, nourishing the atomic spark.

Suddenly, after a year, it had blossomed into open flame. A supernal flame that called everything its fuel. Everything made of atoms. And all Earth was made of atoms.

Water to quench it? He laughed. Water was made of atoms that would burn fiercely in this atomic furnace. And so was carbon dioxide, carbon tetrachloride, and all ordinary agents of fire-fighting.

Only one thing might stop this budding world-flame. It went back to a fundamental rule of combustion, including the combustion of life.

No fire could burn its own ashes.

Lead metal was the ashes. All radioactive elements died out eventually into cold, dead lead. Even this atomic flame burned the lighter elements into the heavier one of lead, giving off excess energy. Left alone, the super-fire would burn all Earth and only a shrunken lump of lead would circle endlessly around the sun.

Smith spent little time thinking of these things.

Rapidly he worked. He shredded the lead-oxide battery plates in his strong fingers and strewed them over the smoldering mass. It was about three feet in area. Then, with a whole plate, he dug the coals up and mixed them thoroughly with more sprinkled lead oxide.

He watched with agonized eyes.

Would it work? Was there enough lead to choke off this malignant patch of spreading fire? Or would it worm through, eat greedily into surrounding matter, and swiftly expand out over the pit, and state, and country? Then burn eagerly into the ocean and be carried as a firebrand to all the continents, with the whole world its prey, eating inward finally to the heart of the globe?

He let out a choked cry of triumph, a few minutes later.

The glow had dimmed. The atomic-fire was damping! The geyser of by-product radioactive gas pouring upward drooped.

It had worked!

Smith stumbled away. No need to stay and watch. The embers would take hours to finally blink out. There was still a chance to save himself. A slim chance. In a sudden tide, pain overwhelmed him. His skin was on fire. His bones felt hollow, eaten. Every muscle had turned to limp rubber.

Moore felt the pain, for telepathy carried that across.

"Good work, old boy!" he found himself groaning. "We did it, all right. Now keep going. Don't give up. It won't be long now—"

Abruptly he stopped. And abruptly the bio-man stopped. It stood still in the still-hanging mists, with radioactive fires burning into it viciously.

"Stay there and burn," Moore was suddenly screeching. "Why should I save you? Carroll loves you—your fine, great body. Stay and burn, I say!"

Moore knew he was half mad. Jealousy, again. Jealous of a proxy, a biological robot. Jealous because the eyes of a girl looked upon it with the glow of love she had denied Moore years ago, and would deny him now

because of the being known as Dennis Smith.

"But God," Moore groaned, then, "if you stay there and burn, my last hope of proxy life is gone!"

It was all tragic, mad, insane. No man in all history had been faced with this soul-stabbing choice.

What should he do? How could his spinning mind ever solve this damnable maze of fate—

MOORE gasped. The front door had opened. Previous to that, a car's motor had roared into the yard, stopping with shrieking brakes. Footsteps came into the room. The light, short steps of a woman.

"Carroll!" he gulped.

She stood in the doorway. Her quick glance took in the tele-radio apparatus, the view as seen through Dennis Smith's eyes.

"I thought so!" she cried. "You're Dennis Smith. Dennis Smith is you. No matter how crazy it seems, Dennis Smith is some kind of proxy. Isn't that true, Bruce?"

Moore nodded. No chance to fool her again. The secret was out—at least with her. "Dennis Smith is a biological robot, a laboratory man, run by telepathy. Run by my mind. We are one."

He glared at her then.

"And you love him!" he laughed. "You love a test-tube dummy. A thing! A piece of animated clay. I'm glad you found out, Carroll. You'll burn with shame every night for the rest of your life—"

He stopped.

She was staring at him pityingly, slowly shaking her head.

"Did it hurt so much?" she murmured.

She moved toward him.

"I made a mistake, that time years ago. I was young, headstrong. You poor, stupid man! You think I love Dennis Smith. But I saw you in him all the time. It's you—you! Not a proxy who merely happens to express your personality. Your every gesture, mannerism, thought was in him, behind that body that meant nothing—"

She had reached near him. Moore came to his feet. And the kiss that burned his lips held all the promise that the girl had expressed once before—even though to a proxy.

The proxy!

Moore gave a cry and leaped back to his controls. The bio-man still stood in the mists, slowly burning away. But he wasn't burning. A whipping wind had swept down into the pit, dispersing much of the radioactive fog. And no new vapors came from the center, where a few embers of atom-fire were spluttering and dying.

"Come back," Moore commanded. "Take some car—any car—and hurry here."

"Won't the police follow, and see him come here?" Carroll protested. "You don't want the world to know—what I know!"

Moore grinned.

"If they can catch him, let them!"

They didn't. Dennis Smith strode in two hours later. Two figures worked over him, applying salves and tannic acid to his lobster red skin. The proxy lay breathing stertorously, at the limit of its endurance. But the breathing quieted. Its tremendous vitality won out.

"He'll be all right." Moore turned away with a sigh of relief. "I need him. I can do many things with him."

"Not hurting people," Moore said earnestly. "Not revenge against the world. I'm over that. But Dennis Smith, out in the world, can lend a helping hand where needed. I can live and do good through him. That's the code of science."

He swung slowly on the girl.

"Sure you don't want to change your mind before it's too late, Carroll? I'm still an exile, in the eyes of men. Sure you want to marry and live with the loneliest man on Earth?"

"I'm sure," she said.

Hand in hand, they went outside and watched the dawn spread a rosy glow over the world.

"Hit 'm, Boss. Sock 'im again!" Baron Munchy piped, jumping up and down in ecstasy. "Him all bad. Say Boss no good."

Here is Adventure and Danger. Mud-fishers, and a girl, — and a quasi-human looking for trouble.

DERELICTS of URANUS

by J. HARVEY HAGGARD

LONNY HIGGENS, once of the earthly planet, stretched out in the conning-tower of his mud-submarine, an aquatic monstrosity of globular reinforced steel that was at home either above or below the surface of the squirming mud seas of Uranus, and sighed lazily.

"Blast it!" he moaned sleepily and almost regretfully. "There's something about this planet that makes you have spring fever the year round, and it gets worse and worse! Lonny Higgens, you're a lazy, nogood fool! —and you'll never get around to the things you used to dream about."

The circular hatch was open over his head, showing a patch of black swirling mists through which dark midges maneuvered in tiny swarms. Just as he was dozing comfortably, forgetful of the humming insects on the outside and the occasional flopping sounds made by things that squirmed in the muddy ocean, something dropped from the mist, falling plunk on his forehead. He jerked sidewise, just as another pellet of balled mud struck him on the end of his nose. He glimpsed a tiny visage, half insect and quasi-human, peering over the hatch rim for an instant.

"Baron Munchy!" exclaimed Lonny irritably, recognizing this curious specimen of Uranusian life. "Cut that out, or I'll wring your little neck. I haven't got time for any of your monkey-shines."

A winged thing soared down from the mists, landing on the chair beside his couch, and "Baron Munchy," like a dragon-fly come to mysterious human life, folded his transparent wings back like a cloak and paced back and forth.

"Me mad! Me plent' mad," rasped Baron Munchy, who produced his tones by a vibration of his wings.

"Ah, beat it," snorted Lonny, turning his head away. The small being had brought with him the dank, stagnant aroma of the outer swamps, and that reminded him of untended net-lines hanging in the mud. He was bored with Baron Munchy and his endless lying and conniving. When he had first come to Uranus, two years before, the little rascal had showed up on the landing deck, more dead than alive from a terrific beating at the hands of several of his fellows. Baron Munchy was a born fighter. He survived under the ministrations of the lonely terrestrial and had become attached to the mud-submarine. But he dearly loved to stir up trouble, and nothing pleased the little demon more than to shout insults at mud-monkeys until they fought among themselves. "Go way. I'm tired of listening to your silly chatter."

"Me mad as heck!" cried Baron Munchy, sitting down on the edge of the chair like a tiny mannikin and doubling his tiny fists beneath his chitinous chin. "That man say the Boss no good. He say the Boss one big blonde devil. He say—"

"Shut up," protested Lonny. "Raeburn's all right. He's just a mud-fisher like me, and has got to get along. It's natural that he doesn't like a rival, and I'm not a bit riled by your chatter."

He was presently snoring and Baron Munchy looked across the space through squinting, calculating eyes. For a moment the mischievous glitter in his faceted eyes became dulled, and then he soared across the bed and sat astride Lonny's neck, using the adam's apple for a saddle. Lonny roused with a start and gulped. The small insectlike visage was thrust grimly down to the end of his nose, and a tiny finger was raised emphatically.

"He say he knock the holy feather from you, Boss," he chirped grimly. "He say you fish for pearls in mud that belong him. He say that girl make him one fine cook, and—"

"Huh!" demanded Lonny Higgens. "What girl! Oh, he probably means Lana. Blast it, Munchy, can't you let a guy sleep? If she wants to fall for a flat tire like Raeburn, it's no business of mine."

Grunting reluctantly, Lonny got up and stretched, cursing in a fervent undertone, at which Baron Munchy looked hopeful.

"Good Lord, Munchy," he growled. "Why I ever put up with you and your stirring up trouble is more than I know." Yet he knew that the little creature's chatter had helped to break the deadly monotony of the long winter hours in which he had managed to teach pidgin English to the Uranusian.

He climbed up the ladder, through the hatch, just as a rocking movement was apparent in the hull of the mud-submarine. Down past the oblong landing he saw great circular movements in the mud, where his nets had been a few moments before. Tiny midges were falling into the mud and being drawn into the gyrating vortices.

Now thoroughly awake, he leaped down and across the landing. In a few seconds he stood cursing at the broken strands of the anchor-lines where his nets had been ripped away.

"Damn you Whirl-Rays," he cursed, shaking his fist in the direction of the whirlpools that surged in and out like living things, which of course they were, under their coating of slimy mud. The Whirl-Rays had a way of forcing a stream of mud in a downward spout and creating a resultant whirlpool which sucked everything into its voracious clutches. "That's my tenth set of nets you've got that way."

Baron Munchy fluttered out from below and landed on the railing, preening his wings. There was an I-told-you-so expression on his insectivorian countenance . . . . when he saw the angry expression on the terrestrial's face and heard the flow of vitriolic words, he hopped up and down with impish ecstacy.

"My goodness, Boss," he chirruped. "You heap mad! Maybe somethin' goin' happen now, huh? Maybe you whip tar out of Raeburn, nuh?"

Lonny swatted at Baron Munchy with his open palm, but the blow never landed. Out of the mists, coming soddenly from somewhere across the squirming quagmire, came the sounds of a human being crying in desperation.

"Help! Help!" sounded the voice, and the thing that so startled Lonny Higgens was that the words were unmistakably feminine.

"Good Lord!" he exploded. "Do you suppose Raeburn really has got Lana in his mud-submarine! Damn it, Baron Munchy, why didn't you say so before you spoke?"

II

CONTRARY to the general belief earlier than 2070, when the explorer Ramundsen first dipped down through the screening vapors of Uranus, the temperature never approached the freezing point, and

lurked instead nearer to the boiling mark of water. The boiling point on Uranus varied greatly, however, due to unbelievable fluctuations of the atmospheric pressure.

Lonny made poor time, slogging along on the mud-shoes fashioned with tough vines over a framework of metal. There was a limit to the speed you could make on such contraptions. Baron Munchy, bordering on a nervous frenzy at the promise of activity, had darted ahead, his filmy wings dissolving quickly in the swirling mist.

He had a good general idea as to the whereabouts of Raeburn's mud-submarine. Likewise, he had a fairly good estimate of the mud-fisher's capabilities and did not think that Lana Hilton would suffer much if Raeburn had not gone completely wacky.

At times the going was pretty good, where the mud was entwined with thick layers of lightning-kelp—so called because tiny sparkles of static electricity darted from it at each step of his clogged mud-shoes.

Mud, mud, mud! All Uranus was one vast ball of squirming mud! Thirty-two thousand miles through of squashy mud. Stuff that would run through his fingers, and through the webs of his shoes, and which would suck greedily at his body if he so much as lost his footing. Mud that would never solidify due to the varying turmoil of barometric pressure. Mud that could never dry completely due to the quasi-soluble consistency of Uranusian silt.

Two years he'd been here now, fishing for the precious mollusks whose pearls might win him the security and prosperity he had never been able to wrest from the over-populated earth. Two years it had been—or nine days as time was reckoned on Uranus. Nine times he had gone around the muddy world, keeping up with daylight—such as it was—and now—blast it—the world was getting him—absorbing him mentally as well as physically—or so it seemed.

Only four days before (Uranusian, a bit less than a year) the feminine aridity of the planet had been shattered by the coming of that headstrong, unreasoning female, Lana Hilton. Prior to that, there had been company of a sort on Uranus—Link Raeburn's mud-submarine had often drifted near enough for an occasional chat.

But Lana's coming had made a crowd on Uranus, if three can be called a crowd, and Lonny was beginning to wish for the unbroken isolation of other planets with no form of life whatsoever. There was only one method of obtaining Uranusian pearls.

That method was relatively simple. You had to invest every cent of your savings or heritage, as he had done two years before, and you had to pay towing charges to some space schooner that was coming near Uranus. Sea food came cheaply on Uranus but clothing was a different problem, and you had to have a goodly stock of that.

Then, when you did find enough pearls to warrant the voyage home, you had to send out an S. O. S. to a nearby space vessel, and the captain, fearing the loss of his command if he disobeyed interplanetary law, would have to come several million miles extra to pick you up, sans submarine, of course, which by that time would be a rusted chunk of worthless metal anyway.

He was wet to the skin when he heard voices through the mist. To his nose came the suffocating down draft of the fishing vessel, mingled with the faint aroma of ammonia.

"Sock 'im! Smack 'im down!" he heard Baron Munchy shouting at the top of his tiny voice. "Plaster 'er another! Lead with right, dadblamee!"

Fearing the worst, Lonny tried to hurry, with the result that he became tangled in his mud-shoes and had to flounder the rest of the way. On the landing he shook off as much of the mud as was possible, kicked off his mud-shoes and staggered toward the shaft of light boring up from the hatchway.

In the center of the control room Baron Munchy was stalking back and forth, yelling like a referee. Link Raeburn's angular body was sprawled back disgustedly on a low bench, while Lana Hilton was flopped down in a chair at a table, her dejected face propped up by both hands.

"Whyn't you wallop in kisser?" demanded Baron Munchy, hopping up to the table beside her and trying to lift an arm. "Smash him over place, Lana!"

"Damn that mosquito!" snapped Link Raeburn wearily. "Can't you swat him? Why doesn't that fool Lonny keep him home where he belongs?"

"What's the big idea?" demanded Lonny, looking from one to the other and clawing miserably at his mud coating. He gazed accusingly at the girl in tattered metalline slacks and faded blouse of vitrisheen.

"So you finally got here," she commented casually. "I thought that would bring you. He's chivalrous, isn't he, Link?"

"Look here, Raeburn," snorted Lonny, doubling a grimy fist and turning to the flint-featured man. "Are you trying to play some sort of a game?"

"Ask Lana," said Raeburn, puffing at a smoking stem of mud-kelp. "She was the one that screamed."

"Maybe it's me that's nuts!" exploded Lonny indignantly.

"Right!" chorused the twain boredly.

"Sock 'em Boss!" wailed Baron Munchy, shadow-boxing on the border of the table. "Don't lettim get away with that! Splatter 'em."

"Aw, sit down," growled Link Raeburn, plucking thoughtfully at the delicate outline of a tiny mustache. "Lana yelled all right. That was her way of calling the meeting to order. The three of us constitute the majority on Uranus. And in case you're getting ideas, her virtue's safe. She's got quite a problem on her hands. Tell him, Lana."

"You seem to be doing all right," said the girl, crossing her legs nonchalantly.

"Well, to put it shortly, her mud-submarine, which was a second hand job, finally caved in from oxidation. So she came around here and demanded that I put her up with room and board for half of her take."

"Look here," demanded Lana Hilton, taking a chamois bag from her bosom, which when opened, displayed a goodly fortune of pink Uranusian pearls. "My shack begins to crumble. Any minute it'll be heading down to the muddy locker, and that dirty robber wants them all for my keep. Everything I got, I tell you."

"Nuts! The gal's buggy," said Link Raeburn coldly. "She's safe enough, I tell you, and if she weren't there's not a blasted thing you could do about it. This planet has got her brain whirling. I told her she'd better sound out an S. O. S. and take a powder for earth."

"What do you expect from me?" exploded Lonny. "I told you I would have nothing to do with that nova-skirt from the first, when she tried to play us one against the other."

"I give up!" cried Lana Hilton, spreading empty hands in a gesture of defeat. "Once I had the lead role in a chorus, and I gave all that up for this. I thought I could handle men with kid gloves, but when it comes to you, Lonny, I'll say you've cast-iron defense."

"Raeburn can have you!" snorted Lonny. "For all I care!"

Spat! Her open hand had snapped out and landed on his cheek.

"Swat 'er, Boss!" pleaded Baron Munchy delightedly. "Whee! Does that dame have a punch!"

"Maybe I exaggerated, a trifle," stammered Lonny, taken aback by the startling reaction.

"That's better," returned Lana Hilton, beginning to pace the control room worriedly. Lonny Higgens wiped a gob of mud thoughtfully from his

chin and grinned when he saw that her hand was grimy.

"Oh, hell!" he said grudgingly. "I'll have to get back before this mud cakes up on me."

"So long," said Link Raeburn, without looking around.

"C'mon, Munchy," called Lonny. "No fireworks."

"No fireworks?" repeated Baron Munchy dolefully.

"None at all. Lana, I'm still a white man, though it's much against my will. If worse comes to the worst you can have an extra room in my mud-swimming hovel. And you can keep your handful of marbles."

The girl whirled around, wide-eyed with surprise. A sunburst of hope and relief spread slowly over her features.

"So you are human, after all!" she gasped. "I'll just take you up on that before you change your mind, but in order not to have a misunderstanding I'll let it be known that I'm going to pay half my pearls, whether you like it or not. Don't stand there grinning like an ape! You act as though I ought to throw in a kiss for good measure."

"Go ahead," snorted Link Raeburn smirkingly. "Right on that muddy kisser."

Climbing back into the upper mists, Lonny almost regretted his decision. She had donned a slicker suit and a pair of mud-shoes and was ready to go. The mist swirlers were tumbling about as though alive, and Lonny had never felt so uncomfortable in his whole life.

III

HE had to admit that Lana Hilton was adept on her mud-shoes, but she was short of wind and soon began to lag. I would get stuck with a woman — he thought bitterly, not realizing that he spoke out loud.

She didn't know what she was talking about—he decided, but for the sake of not starting an argument he kept that to himself. In the meanwhile he slowed his pace to match her own and said nothing. Tiny sparks of miniature lightning shot up from matted mud-kelp and rippled along the supple curvature of her body. She was just goodlooking enough to be a constant cause for trouble among the more populated centers of interplanetary civilization—a regular jinx for a fellow who wanted to get along with the least effort possible.

He led the way along the thicker clumps of vegetation, choosing the firmer directions for her faltering steps, and for long moments he heard nothing but their own heavy breathings and the sounds of their feet slogging.

A whirl-ray came out of the mire, sending its tiny maelstrom careening away at a tangent, and leaving a phosphorescent wake. He saw the girl shudder and avert her eyes. Lonny's own hand had slipped quickly inside his slicker to clutch the holster of a Z-type ray gun.

"Back at home," she said thoughtfully, "the suckers all thought Uranus was something of a paradise, something like the south seas. And I fell for that stuff."

"Yeh," agreed Lonny grimly. "And after you got here you were too thick-headed to give up the thing as a bad job, too afraid to face your friends with failure. So you punish yourself with your own temper."

"I supose that's advice from one who knows," she retorted sarcastically, pausing to rub the cramped muscles of her leg, then going on as he looked back. "Don't—think—I'm crazy—if—"

"Now what's the matter?" demanded Lonny irritably, pausing to see that she was stopped, and was clutching desperately at her throat, pulling at her collar.

"Air—I can't get air," she gasped. "How — about — you?" Almost instantly, breathing was becoming difficult for Lonny. He peered around with dismay and saw that the mist was rising dangerously and that visibility was much stronger. Out of the dis-

tance came a faint eerie whisper, as of distant winds dying.

"Lana, it looks like we're in for it," he said grimly. "That's high pressure you feel. Pretty soon your ears will begin to ring. And if we don't hurry we may never get back to boast about things here to our sappy friends at home."

When the heavy pressure areas came over Uranus, mists rose high in the air and dispersed slowly. Swift expansion of atmospheric gases caused a tremendous surface pressure that would last for some time. It meant a quick crushing death under air compression if they didn't reach the mud-submarine.

Lana Hilton was white with fright and trying hard not to show it. A strange metamorphosis was taking place in the heavens. Lancing colors of orange and red shot up like gigantic swords to flash across the sky. His ears began to throb dully. As the mist rose Lonny saw that they had come too far to the left and that the mud-ship was a hundred yards directly to their right. He saw something else, too.

A man was running across the muddy surface—if his fast wobbling progress on mud-shoes could have been described as a run. It could be only one person—Link Raeburn.

A terrible fear seized him. If Raeburn reached the mud-ship and shut them out, they would die horribly. He began to hurry forward—slipped and fell awkwardly. Lana made a wry face and helped him to his feet.

"The rat," she gasped. "He heard you refer to my bag of pearls as a mere 'handful'. It wouldn't do you any harm to think once in a while before speaking, big boy." Handful—of course her small collection was a handful compared to his own rich pickings. So that was why she had come with him!

The world was going around in a whirl now, but Lonny kept staggering onward. Link Raeburn had disappeared. The mud-submarine kept dancing tauntingly before his eyes and then disappearing. If it sank before he reached it the work of long endless months would slip from his grasp. And with it would go his life. Back on earth, they would never know and Raeburn would live a life of affluence and ease.

"We've got to make it, Lana," he gritted, though every breath was a torment that sent hot flames of pain shooting through every cell. She turned a game, tortured face to his and nodded vehemently.

A whole school of whirl-rays came rippling toward them, crisscrossing the mud with gleaming trails, and Lonny found his Z-ray weapon—sent the purplish beams of annihilation down into the centers of quivering, living whirlpools. Once he went around and around in narrowing circles toward the opened maw of a whirl-ray, only to see the lower shape dematerialize before the deadly emanation.

THEY were at the very edge of the submarine, were clambering across the muddy landing, using their last reserve of strength. Link Raeburn was working at the catches of the hatch cover, and had just succeeded in undoing the fastenings. Now he gave a tremendous heave and the thing fell like a trapdoor.

Hurled on by his wrath, Lonny made a dive for the traitorous visage, but as he dove his foot slipped and he skidded sidewise. His head came down upon a railing brace with a sickening impact and the gun went spinning. Through the darkening chaos of his mind he felt the submarine starting to submerge.

The mud was creeping up toward his body, was sucking at Lana's ankles, crawling in a tiny avalanche toward the dome of the hatch cover—now closed. They were beaten—whipped—done for. Now Raeburn could go back to earth—concocting some wild tale as to their death. He

would be laughing at them and enjoying every luxury.

Lana was either dead game or so angry at Link's betrayal that she refused to give up. Though her face was distorted terribly from heavy pressure and agony, she pressed onward—was crumbling at last to her knees—and pointing wildly.

Lonny saw what she meant. He could have shouted for joy but breath would not come from his compressed lungs. The gun had fallen upon the lip of the hatch cowling and now the cover was jammed. Through a narrow slit he saw Raeburn's eyes—narrowed and beastial—and his hands, working like mad to free the mechanism.

If he went down that way — it meant death for him too. Under heavy pressure the mud would send terrible pseudopods grasping through the slit. Lonny could have laughed. But there was no time for gloating. He saw the hatch door come up again, and then his foot had settled over the gun and he was helping Lana down the stairway.

"Tough luck, Link," he whispered huskily, as weakness overcame him and he tumbled down the stairs. Dimly he became aware that the hatch lid was down securely now, and that the submarine was sinking rapidly.

Lana Hilton clung to the upper ladderway for a moment, then released her hold from paralyzed fingers and fell like a rag doll, bouncing down the steps to come to rest across his own body. A trickle of blood came from her mouth, but she was grining.

That was all Lonny knew, for the darkness came up to swallow everything.

IV

"WHO hit'm boss? Boss hit'm heap hard!" Baron Munchy, hardly able to lift the damp towel, was dragging it across his mouth, smothering him. Link Raeburn watched the operation interestedly, but not cautiously, from his position before the instrument panel. Lana Hilton was sitting up dazedly, rearranging her hair.

"I knew it was too much to expect," she commented. "Couldn't leave us alone, could you, Link? I was just beginning to like the idea of getting away from you for good. Ooooh, my head!"

"I hope our friend had the foresight to stock his larder well," said Link Raeburn with a shrug. "We may be cooped up here for some time."

Lonny sat up, shaking his head dazedly.

"I ought to whale the tar out of you," he cried angrily. "But I've got more sense than to do it at a time like this. Maybe I'll do it when the sub-boat comes up to the surface again. I never did have too much faith in you, Raeburn."

Link Raeburn laughed. "You won't do it then, or ever, Lonny. There isn't an ounce of fight left in you. The planet's got you. I've always believed that you had enough pearls stacked away to make a fortune on earth, but you kept putting the time for departure off into the future."

His taunts acted as harsh irritants to Lonny Higgens, who doubled his fists and took a couple of steps forward.

"Slap 'im down, Boss," urged Baron Munchy, and Lonny stopped, his shoulders falling.

"That's right," he said, grinning at the little elf. "Fight to the death, like all these insensate creatures of Uranus. No, I'll not do it. I'm saving myself, against the day I'll get back to earth."

"You're a fool," said Link Raeburn. "Next time I'll get you for keeps."

"At least you can save it until we get up from here," returned Lonny, brushing past the other and examining the instruments. "Depth indication—now four thousand feet. And sinking slowly."

With luck, they would be on the

surface again in a few hours. Then he would either knock the tar out of Link Raeburn or kick him out in the mud. He felt a deepseated, lethargic contempt for the mud fisher. The dapper man was a despicable murderer at heart, and now he felt only a distant sort of loathing for him.

Lana was different. In a way she might have been a good sort. He had a hunch that Uranus was affecting her much as it had him, bringing forth his irritable nature, sapping his energy, dulling his sensations in a sluggish, remote way. He had an idea that she would cut an amazingly attractive figure in one of the late translucent evening gowns, back in one of the live spots of the populated planets. At the moment, she was highly intolerable and self-centered. He would do well to be rid of both of them.

Baron Munchy was soaring up and down the room, catching midges, when Lonny descended to the lower decks. The atomic motors, he found, were in good condition for an emergency. The trouble with them was that they provided merely a horizontal propulsion. The natural buoyancy of the vessel, coupled with the lessening of surface pressure, would have to raise it from the murky depths.

The lower deck was almost hemispherical in shape, and fully occupied with power apparatus.

"They steal'm, Boss!" warned Baron Munchy vindictively. "Now you fight, huh?"

"Fighting wouldn't do any good," Lonny explained wearily. "People don't fight on Uranus. They're always fagged out, enervated."

"Fagged—" began the impish creature helplessly.

"I mean that life is too boring to be taken seriously," went on Lonny. "Otherwise, I'd have knocked the slats out of that smirking back-biter long ago. I may have to do it yet."

"You oughta fight'm," declared Baron Munchy angrily. "They steal house. Steal everything! Why no earthmen fight, Boss?"

"Because earthmen have to get mad to fight," returned Lonny, "and you can't get mad here somehow. Oh, shut up! I don't know how to explain it. Earthmen just don't feel violent emotions here on Uranus. They don't get mad at anything! They don't fall in love! They're just sapped dry of everything."

His head was aching. It was a good thing his body had recovered from its exposure to the heavy pressure area. He climbed the rampway for the upper deck, and stood motionless, breaking upon a surprising scene.

ALL of the compartments had been searched, and he saw his cache of Uranusian pearls open to view. The wall safe hung ajar—apparently the deft fingers of Link Raeburn had encountered no great difficulty in finding the combination. His eyes were glittering with fascination, and the girl, too, seemed unable to wrench her eyes from the inviting spectacle.

"That's enough," gasped Link Raeburn, "to set a fellow up for life."

"Yeh, and here we are," returned the girl hollowly, "stuck deep in the mud of Uranus."

"Maybe you forget who they belong to," snorted Lonny, stalking into their midst and slamming his treasure back into its hiding place. "The indicator says we're at six thousand five hundred and forty-one feet."

"Then we've stopped," said Raeburn. "It read the same five minutes ago."

Lonny stood watching the gauges and found that the other was right. The mud-submarine had indeed come to a halt. It meant that some sort of an equilibrium was being established in the barometric storm center that raged above.

"I'll start the motors and try jarring the ship around a little," he said, seating himself before the mechanisms. At a touch of his finger, dial bulbs lighted up, and from the lower depths came the whine of machinery. Almost instantly they felt a sidewise

lurch, and then a slow climbing motion.

"It looks good, anyway," said Link Raeburn. "We're going up again."

"Thank Heaven for small favors," breathed Lana thankfully, and watched attentively as Lonny began juggling the controls alarmedly. Link's eyes watched the indicator, and began to show new amazement.

"We're not ascending now," said Lonny grimly. "I don't know what's the matter. The motor-drive is okay, but we're making a crazy circle, over and over, and not getting any higher."

"You're nuts!" burst out Raeburn, stalking forward, waving his arms. Yet the yellow pallor of his face showed that he too had noticed the mud-ship's erratic behavior. "It's just not possible! Uranus is all mud—just plain fluid mud!"

"Or that's what we've thought, up to now," said Lonny significantly.

"What do you mean?" demanded Lana. "You can't mean that we're trapped here with a fortune just in our grasp."

The whine of the lower motors mounted, and as a result the mud-submarine began spinning around like a top. Yet the depth pointer had not moved.

"It means that there's some sort of a skeletal core to Uranus after all," said Lonny with a vanquished sigh, snapping off the motors and pushing back from the controls. "Add what's more, it means that we've bumped into it."

"But how?" demanded Raeburn. "Even if there is a solid core, nothing would prevent our ship from floating up again."

"Unless our vessel happened to get caught under a ledge," returned Lonny pointedly. "We sank while the pressure was heavy, and then when it lessened, began to ascend. We climbed a short way and stopped. Then our horizontal screws sends the ship around in a short circle, indicating that we are in a shelving pocket. We can't descend unless the pressure storm gets violent again! And we can't climb through a shelving ledge of solid core. So our chances of getting out of here are rather slim."

Raeburn's furtive eyes were glowing, like those of a beast at bay. He whirled around, struck out wildly at the controls, started the engines and sent the mud-submarine spinning around again, but to no avail. Lana Hilton watched his every move, and she too was like a tigress at bay.

Like animals they glared around at the berylumin hulls, thinking of the millions of pounds per square inch waiting beyond—trying to press in upon them. An instant's exposure to that and a human body would be but a pulpy mass.

They felt helpless and insignificant. To the two who glared unbelievingly at the controls, the apparent unconcern of Lonny Higgens amounted to madness. He appeared not to be able to fully appreciate the true reasons for their violent perturbation. He was humming a tune through his teeth, and searching among tiny wall nitches, from which he presently withdrew a tiny skillet.

"No use getting excited," he told them. "The chances are that the pressure storms won't come around soon enough to do us any good. At any rate, there's nothing to stop us from eating while we're hungry—that is, while the food supply holds out."

V.

"YOU'RE not human," said Link Raeburn accusingly, and he shook a quivering finger at Lonny. "Here we are in the face of death, and all you think of is your stomach."

"There's not much choice," said Lonny Higgens, "when a fellow's empty. And the menu never changes here. Besides, eating might help you to think."

"You shouldn't think while you're eating," reprimanded Lana. "It'll give you indigestion."

"Great Space!" broke out Raeburn. "You too! Who gives a hang about indigestion? Listen, you pair of fools, we're snagged down here on the bottom of a sea of mud. Pearls won't mean a thing to us in this fix! We'll be lucky if we ever get out of this with a whole skin." He began pacing up and down the room, swinging his hands, while Lonny inspected the storage compartment.

"Looks like a fish dinner," he sighed. "Of course there are clams, of the mud-kelp variety, and Uranusian lobsters—they're really delicious at this time of the year. Then we've got a very good variety of that piscatorial wonder known here as a whirl-ray, whose steaks are rather tasty. But in the last analysis, just fish."

"I'll take the same," groaned Lana Hilton, rolling her eyes toward the ceiling with an attitude of unwilling acquiescence. "Between going nuts and getting the d. t.'s I'll take the nuts. Maybe I can forget a few trifles of life by just being in your company. At least it'll keep me from thinking over what a swell opportunity I had for being a good little girl. By the way, Lonny, do you think there's a Hereafter, here on Uranus?"

"Why not?" asked Lonny with a grimace as he laid thick white slices of whirl-ray in the skillet and turned on an electric grid. "I suppose they'd picture there as some sort of a glorified place where mud just couldn't exist."

"Yeh, probably with green fields, waterfalls, and mountains," returned Lana, leaning on her fist with a reminiscent sigh, "Gosh, sometimes I wonder why I ever left those good things, and then again—what's the diff?"

THE fried steaks sent a not unpleasant aroma drifting through the control room. Lonny sat a tiny side plate on the table, and pulled up a high slender chair like a baby's high-chair, to which Baron Munchy soared. He tucked a napkin under his chin and sat waiting, with tiny knife and fork raised high. The sight was so amusing that somehow Lana found time to laugh.

"You really coddle the little rascal, don't you?" she asked, "and for some reason I never really considered these manlike dragon-flies with having any intelligence whatever."

"Oh, they're smart in a way," agreed Lonny between bites. "You know I've always had a theory that his race of beings came from one of the moons of Uranus. There are four of them, you know. I suspect he came from Umbriel."

"Well, little man," said Lana. "Maybe you're an Umbriellian. But where is your umbrella?"

"Or an Arielite," suggested Lonny. "Without a lantern."

"Or a Titanian, or an Oberonian," said Lana.

"Slap 'em down," sighed Baron Munchy in a flattered manner. "Give both barrels."

"Say, let up with that kind of chatter, won't you?" groaned Link Raeburn, after trying again and again to get the mud-ship from beneath the deep ledge. "I'm going batty, I tell you. Completely batty!"

"Probably it's the pressure," commented Lonny. "High blood pressure."

With the table cleared, Lana's good spirits had taken another slump. She went gloomily with Raeburn to check the air, food, and water supplies of the strange craft. When they returned Lonny Higgens was curled up on a couch, snoring lustily.

"I don't get it," said Raeburn, throwing up his hands in despair. "He isn't like a man any more. He isn't like anything living. It's his ship, and he ought to know more about it than anyone. Oh well, if everybody else is going to give up the ghost, why should I worry?"

"Sure," said Lana. "Why should we worry. Maybe his surmise wasn't true. Maybe it's something else hold-

ing us down. Maybe it's our imagination."

She sat down, her mind in a daze. How long she sat there in a trance-like state she didn't know, but a movement from Lonny Higgens aroused her. Link Raeburn was stretched out on the floor, his mouth wide open, eyes closed with complete exhaustion and utter relaxation.

"I think I've got an idea," said Lonny, stretching his arms and staggering to his feet. He looked at the controls and found that they were at the same depth. 6,541 feet. Their position had not altered a trifle. "We've been here over eight hours. No barometric storm ever lasted that long on Uranus. The pressure must have been released on the upper surface by now. And we've got to have a heavy pressure area again somewhere. It just occurred to me that we might create that heavy pressure on the roof of this ledge that we're under, which would suffice just as well."

"But how?" demanded Lana, and followed as he went to the berylumin hull at one end of the control room and pulled down a shutter. He had exposed a transparent plate of glassite, now black as ink with the outer mud, in whose center a pair of binoculars had been frozen into the vitreous substance.

"We'll use the field glass as a terminal," he explained, making disconnections at the control board and bringing two current wires in the direction of the wall. He affixed one wire to the binoculars and clamped the other against a rim of the porte. "This glassite will act as an insulator and we can force an electric current through the outer mud. There's a possibility that the current will react on the watery content to release hydrogen and oxygen through electrolysis. I really don't think it will work, but it's a good way to occupy our minds."

SHE watched as he made the terminals secure, then stepped up the amperage on the desk instruments. Very faintly, blue lightning flashes of electricity could be seen streaking through the outer mud against the glassite. For long moments they watched as nothing happened.

Then he sighed disappointedly.

"No use, I guess," he said reluctantly. "Too much outer pressure for gases to form."

"You mean—it's the end?" she asked in a tiny voice. Her hands reached out and caught him by the shoulders abruptly. For a moment the outer mask of her face had slipped and her frightened soul stared through. When Lonny started to draw back, she held on.

"Gosh, Lonny," she said hurriedly. "Maybe I'm a little fool to break down like this. I think—I think I may even be going to cry. But I've seen what you're really like these last few hours —under the stress of everything, I mean. You're really pretty decent and brave. You needn't deny that you've got courage, and a lot of other admirable qualities. Your only trouble has been in letting the awful lethargy of Uranus get hold of you. That's all that's wrong, and what you need is something to jar you loose from this planet. Then you'd be a great guy. I really mean it, Lonny."

Her eyes were shining like stars. She was on the verge of a complete breakdown. Yet Lonny Higgens was held as though in a spell, for her words had done something that had not happened in a long time, had broken through his apathy.

Now, moving swiftly, she pressed her lips against his own, and they stood in a long silent embrace. Lonny's head was whirling, and he stumbled back, his hand crashing against a rheostat. A thunderous surge of high voltage crackled suddenly, kniving along the glassite, and the motors from the lower decks sang a mounting, thunderous song.

At the same time, everything shifted. Something had dealt the mud-submarine a tremendous blow from above.

They were sent careening against the hull and then to the floor, which began to tilt. Link Raeburn had been thrown to his hands and knees. Now his eyes goggled up at the instrument panel. Lonny Higgens sat sprawled out with the girl a tumbled heap in his arms.

"Good going, Lonny!" cried Raeburn incredulously. "We're sinking again. How did you manage to do it?"

Lonny blinked through a cascade of tumbling russet curls and looked up wonderingly.

"I suppose the electrolysis worked after all," he answered weakly. "Under the pressure, the high voltage must have produced liquid oxygen, and then ignited it. And if the propellors are working we ought to be able to wriggle out into the clear some way."

"That puts a different light on the entire matter," said Raeburn, getting to his feet and drawing a ray pistol from his pocket. "I told you I would do you in for good the next time I made a try. Get up, Lonny, and start saying your prayers."

"My goodness," gasped Baron Munchy, crawling up over the edge of the control chair and looking on with glittering, faceted eyes.

VI.

LONNY HIGGENS got up slowly, then glanced lazily toward the control instruments, where the depth indicator had dipped down noticeably.

"That's all very well in due time," he said, "but we're still under the ledge, and not out of danger by any means. If we don't shove from under it we'll land back in the same shape."

"Get over to those controls then," ordered Raeburn.

Lonny grinned and went to the familiar seat. The craft was making larger circles as it descended, indicating that his guess must have been correct, that they were in a pocket, and that the pocket was broadening. Somewhere at the bottom of that pocket was a tunnel opening upon the outer ocean and it was up to him to find that opening—blindfold. If they could only keep descending until the vessel entered the channel their main problem would be solved. But if the pressure generated from the explosion was dissipated too suddenly, his mud-ship would ascend into the trap and stay forever there on the muddy ocean floor.

He felt a lurch. The ship had paused and was sinking no longer. This then, was the limit. It would not go low enough. He saw the horror in Raeburn's eyes.

They would die from starvation here. The gun in Raeburn's hands would be merciful, if it relieved them from the more hideous death that was certain to come.

The hull shuddered, slipped against a rocky outer substance that seemed to give way suddenly. He felt the relaxation of the outer barrier through the controls, knew that the propellors were driving it out and into the true bed of the Uranusian ocean. The needle indicator paused uncertainly, started to rise. By the expression on Raeburn's face he knew that the other had not guessed that their trap was behind them.

It was his chance. Lonny's hands moved swiftly on the controls. A surge of power sent the rear-drive mud-propellers spinning. Too much power. The ship tilted swiftly and Raeburn lost his balance. The man at the controls left them in a flash.

Lonny seized the wrist that held the gun, wrenched it away. It went skidding across the floor. Then he stuck out fiercely at the sardonic features so close to him. Raeburn rocked backward, flailing out with both hands, as Lonny came in again, both fists landing solidly. His antagonist spun backward, then fell helplessly to the decking. Baron Munchy was jumping up and down in ecstacy.

"Hit'm, Boss! Sock 'im again!" he piped, but Lonny picked up the gun,

slipped it into his pocket, and shook his head in the negative.

"There's to be no more fighting, Raeburn," he said. "I'll pick you off with the gun if you start anything. When we break the surface you can get your mud-shoes and go."

Four thousand feet. Three thousand. The mud-submarine was rising rapidly now, had passed the two thousand mark.

"You've really hurt the little fellow's feelings," said Lana Hilton, evading his eyes and gesturing toward Baron Munchy, who was beating his fists against the wall in sheer frustration. "He must have been praying for blood and thunder.

"I'll plaster 'im!" Munchy was squeaking. "I'll do him in!"

One thousand.

"He's a misfit here," said Lonny slowly. "He comes from Umbriel, or one of the other moons. On his own world he was used to great activity. Uranus hasn't affected him—acting upon his nerves—as it has the rest of us. But he's a misfit here. He expects the normal activity of his own satellite upon Uranus. That just isn't possible. I think he'd like it on earth."

"You mean—" began Lana, just as the mud-submarine broke the surface and began bobbing to a rest. Lonny followed Raeburn up the hatchway, watched him open it. The upper mists broke in damply, sending heavy white furlers about their faces. Link Raeburn looked glum and defeated as he donned the heavy mud-shoes and slogged away into the mist.

Lonny Higgens closed the hatchway and yawned. He was beginning to feel dog-tired again—a normal sensation on Uranus—but a grim decision had taken shape in his mind.

"Sure," he said, in answer to the question in her gleaming eyes. "I'm going to get out of here. I'm going to send an S. O. S. If that doesn't work I'll get a straight call through to earth, charter a space yacht, and have it sent to pick us up."

"Lonny, you mean, that—" began Lana, moving toward him with her lips invitingly close.

But Lonny Higgens evaded her. He turned his back and sat down in a chair, then yawned again. Uranus had him! Old rocking chair had him! Something had him, as long as he was on this blasted planet.

Lovely as Lana was, it would take more energy than he could assimilate to make love to her on this muddy world.

"I guess you'll have to save it," he sighed regretfully. "But you'd not be safe to try those tactics again—once we get back on earth."

Don't Miss . . .

THE VORTEX BLASTER

A Complete Novelette by

Dr. E. E. Smith

in the next issue of COMET

NEW TO SCIENCE-FICTION

THE building of a science-fiction magazine is an accomplishment which requires time, and the combined creative thought of many people. It is not a matter of choosing the best stories submitted each month, but of slowly molding the creative thoughts of writers and artists into new channels of thought which will stimulate the entire science-fiction world. That is a long range program. It is a program which requires cooperation, and one which assures growing cooperation.

First we must find the best available stories by the best available authors. These, combined into a first issue, assure a critical reaction from an audience which knows what it wants but is sometimes unable to find that something.

Second we strive, even as the reaction comes, to seek the fulfilment of the expressed desires. The second issue is therefore better than the first. By the time the third issue appears we begin to see the result of months of effort which lie behind the preparation and correspondence which went into the making of the first two issues.

We have exchanged ideas with writers. We have calculated the trajectory of the COMET just as surely as if we were launching a rocket ship, and the stories begin to zip into a program. There is a feeling of expectancy about the office—for we are working on the fourth issue, and the artwork is really beginning to click in that fourth issue.

We, as the fourth issue takes shape, have already scheduled and are illustrating the first great story of a series by Dr. E. E. "Skylark" Smith for the fifth issue—and we KNOW that the COMET trajectory has been set accurately for flight. For this first story of the greatest series (Each story is complete in itself.) ever to appear in a science-fiction magazine carries ideas ABSOLUTELY NEW TO SCIENCE FICTION!

You have felt the lift in interest as the months pass, because we are not following but LEADING. We are *creating* a new interest just as surely as we did in 1933-1934. We are not afraid to step forward, to choose new writers and offer them to you with full assurance that their stories will build; to choose new artists and move forward with them to stardom.

There are many magazines to choose from, to confuse the newcomer, but with the next issue there will be no question as to COMET being in the ascendency. We will perhaps be uncertain as to our release dates these first few issues—but as they appear you will be certain that each is pulling us toward new horizons, far horizons, as strange and thrilling as the voyage of the Skylark was many years ago. You will feel the lift and power of the drive to strange places; you will live through new experiences; and you will find a variety of interest which keeps you on the alert to know what lies ahead.

"THE VORTEX BLASTER," by E. E. Smith, Ph.D., is the first of many surprises which lie in the path of the COMET. Don't miss it. It is really something new in Science Fiction.

—THE EDITOR.

Suddenly Rog bent forward and shoved the prongs home.

WHEN TIME ROLLED BACK

by ED EARL REPP

LONG before Rog found the mysterious, shining ball back in the mountains, he knew he was far different from the rest of his tribe that lived along the river. He knew it because he didn't think the same way they did, and because there was a difference even in their appearance.

Sarak, who was the Old Man of the tribe as well as his sire, and Monah, Rog's mother, were short and heavy and thickly covered with hair. Rog was taller and straighter, and endowed with much less hair. Too, his face was much broader through the cheekbones and less heavy-looking around the mouth. There was

only one other in the tribe who seemed to be of the same physical cast as Rog, and that was Lo, a young woman who dwelt with her family in Sarak's cave.

Though the stalwart, blond young man took an active part in all the work of the tribe—hunting, skinning, tool-making—there were times when he would detach himself from the rest as though he were a creature of a higher world viewing a savage orgy.

Such a time was the delirious madness of eating after the lucky kill of a giant mammoth. All the able-bodied men of the tribe would aid in dragging the great, quiet animal into the clearing beside the river, and then, to the cries of men, women, and children, huge hunks of flesh would be torn off and devoured by all. The orgy did not cease until no one was able to stand without falling.

But Rog and Lo would stand back in the shadows and watch gravely, gnawing passively on smaller pieces of meat.

The others of the tribe realized that Rog and Lo were somehow different from them. And because of the young man's tremendous strength and because he was the son of the Old Man, he was not molested. But secretly the slow-thinking men and women classed him with Ta, the half-witted boy who sat all day playing with a stick.

None of them, not even the thoughtful Lo, ever stopped to wonder how far back their ancestors had lived in this spot. Nor did they care. But Rog found himself wondering if life had always been like this, or if it had once been superior or inferior to their mode of life. Sometimes he would grow curious enough to wander far down the river, or off into the hills, alone.

It was on one of those excursions, prompted by an increasing dissatisfaction with the life of the tribe, that Rog wandered back four or five ranges from the cave dwellings. He had just sat down to eat some of the dried meat he had brought along when his eye was caught by a glint of flashing metal off through the dense woods.

Startled, he leaped up and made his way nearer. Within ten minutes he was standing aghast, staring at a great, gleaming globe of silver, half buried in the soft, moldy ground. He was terrified, for an instant, and broke into panic-stricken flight before this thing that none of the aborigines had ever seen. Then Rog's overpowering curiosity brought him creeping back.

It was fifty times as tall as he was, just the half of it he could see. It sparkled in the sunlight like white fire. Then, down near the ground, Rog saw a round cut in the smooth surface. Something told him this was the way inside the ball, though there was no reason why he should not have believed it was anything but solid. But there was an inner urge that made him approach gingerly and take hold of the long crossbar that was set into the door.

Eagerly he pulled at it. Nothing happened. He p u s h e d, twisted, shoved, and still the thing would not budge. Then a gleam of comprehension flickered in his eyes. He grasped both ends of the bar and turned it the way a plumber turns a pipe-cutter. It moved!

The round entrance swivelled about on threads that were glass-smooth, until suddenly it swung aside on a hinge. Rog gasped and poked his head inside. He was so amazed that for a couple of minutes he could only stand in the portal, gaping.

THE ball was divided into floors, apparently, for there was a spiral staircase in the middle that went up through the high ceiling, and a continuation of the stairway going down into the lower half of it. From some small globes hanging from the ceiling a soft radiation was thrown into the room. There were gleaming tables

and cabinets and shelves of mystifying apparatus that Rog's eyes had never seen.

At last he ventured inside. He went from one glass-covered table to the next, frowning at the things he saw. He could make nothing of them.

There were twenty tables, and each bore a maze of strange symbols on its top. He was at a loss to divine what they meant, until he discovered that at the bottom of each chart there was a picture of a globe, with a tiny red arrow pointing to a section of it. Then he knew. The tables were supposed to tell him what was to be found on each floor.

All this Rog knew, although he had never seen metal before, or glass, or heard of a floor. But somehow he felt more at home in here than he did in the cave with Sarak and Mo-nah. With perfect confidence he went to the staircase and climbed to the first floor.

A low, shining fence leading from the stairway made it plain that he was to follow inside it and view each exhibit as he went. Rog went to the first table, and within five minutes he was plunged into a maze of conjectures and mysteries that made his aboriginal brain ache.

The first table bore a number of short groups of symbols, completely lost on him. There were flowing, cursive characters; then a line of wedge-shaped pictures; line after line of characters differing only slightly; and finally, at the very bottom, something he could understand.

There was pictured a figure that brought a quick smile of apprehension to Rog's face—an old man, bowed with age. Beside him was a young child, enclosed in a red circle that set him off from the old man. A word leaped to his lips. . . . Not, perhaps, the word that the artist had intended, but close enough.

"Beginning!" was the thought that came from his lips.

AFTER that the messages in the words and pictures made more sense to him. Stupefied, trembling with excitement at this thing that was happening to him, he went on and on.

He ignored the symbols as mere decorations, and read the pictures, hurrying from one group to the next. He stared long and amazed at amazingly life-like representations of the life of a tribe such as his own. The men and women even looked like his did—short, squat, hairy. The scenes showed them killing great animals somewhat similar to the ones on whose meat they lived, portrayed them chipping flint holes, and doing the other dozens of things life demanded of them.

But as he went on the life changed.

From cave-houses the migration was to peculiar dwellings of poles and boughs, making box-like affairs in which men and women lived. The tribe-folk, even, changed. They grew more upright and less hairy, and their faces looked something like the reflection that stared back at Rog from quiet forest pools.

The message of the pictures did not by any means unfold fully to Rog, but from the chain of scenes he began to grasp something. Life steadily became more and more complex, as though it were working toward something—with a purpose. Men grew taller, their dwellings bigger, their weapons stranger and apparently more efficient. He saw small tribal conflicts broaden into great wars between numbers of tribes.

He gaped at inventions which he could not begin to comprehend. Before his startled gaze caves gave way to great dwelling-places so large that men looked like ants beside them. He had to smile at the fanciful picturization of a man flying through the air in a fantastic machine. But as Rog neared the end of the exhibit, he realized that the story, if story it was, did not satisfy him.

In his crude, barbaric way, he had

great visions of improving life so that death was not such a stern, everpresent reality, and men would have time for things other than eating and sleeping and mating. He was a philosopher, if such a thing were conceivable of a man who lived on raw meat. And this story did not appeal to him, for as far as he could tell men grew more and more dissatisfied, instead of contented. . . .

Terrible wars were shown to him. Violent death stalked the streets of the beautiful cities. War after war piled on top of struggling civilization until at last a conflict that seemed to embrace every shred of man's life took place. After that there were scenes of cities utterly deserted, crumbling into ruins. The final picture made Rog gasp with shock.

They showed ten men laboring on a great steel ball, filling it with tiny miniatures and statues and boxes. The last picture was of one man lying under a transparent glass dome at the bottom of the ball.

Rog was suddenly frightened. He turned and fled back down the stairs and out the door, and plunged into the forest—

HE said nothing to the rest of the tribe that day. Somehow he knew he must guard his secret with his life. If the others found what he had discovered, they would crowd into it and tear to shreds these things that he treasured, simply through love of destruction. When he thought of that, his fists clenched and hatred blazed in his eyes. The ball must be kept safe, so that he could learn what it meant. It meant more than life itself, more than Lo, even, that he should solve the message in the shining globe.

But the next day he found time to sit by the river with Lo. "You were gone yesterday," she said. "Where?"

Rog's heart leaped into his mouth. He looked down in sudden confusion. "Only down the river," he lied. "I went to hunt roots."

Her questioning eyes told him she knew he was lying. But she was wise, and held her tongue.

After a long time he could hold himself in no longer. "Do you ever wonder," he asked intensely, "why we live this way? I mean—have men always lived like this, in caves, killing their meat and gorging themselves on it, and then starving until they killed again?"

Lo's dark eyes met his boring glance, but she said nothing. She was feminine enough, and civilized enough, to realize it wasn't an answer he wanted, but an audience.

In a moment he went on. "You and I aren't like the others, Lo. The Old Man and all the rest of the people aren't happy unless they are eating. But we can be happy talking, and . . . . wondering."

She smiled at him in happy understanding. "Luk-no says you are lazy," she said naïvely. "But I know you work hard even when you are quiet. Else how would you find things to make like the Thing that Floats?"

He warmed at her mention of his raft. It was only a short while ago that he had conceived the idea of tying a bundle of logs together to ferry things across the river, but now it was in daily use. But when his mind rested on Luk-no, he scowled.

"Some day I will kill him," he promised savagely. "Always he interferes."

Luk-no was a great, stubby trunk of a man who resented Lo's interest in Rog and took every chance to get in his way. His greatest delight was to carry tales of his laziness to Sarak, who would promptly beat his son with a club. Such treatment rankled under Rog's skin.

Then he forgot his hatred of the black-browed one in contemplation of other things. "I do not like the way we live," he said simply. "Our caves are cold and sometimes wet. Our weapons are scarcely able to kill the animals we need before they kill us. I do not like the way the Old Man rules us, telling us what we can do

and what we cannot do. Why shouldn't I make better things for myself if I want, instead of being beaten for not working? Some day. . . ."

Lo caught up the thread of thought quickly. "I know," she nodded. "Some day you will challenge Sarak and kill him. Then you will be the Old Man! You will be the one who rules!"

"So that is what you two talk of! I knew it was not how to get food for the tribe!" The voice was triumphant and harsh, close behind them.

They were on their feet in an instant, whirling to face the brutally-built man who had come up behind them. It was Luk-no. His little red-rimmed eyes were alight with anticipation.

"You came at the wrong moment," Rog growled sullenly. "We were not talking of that, but Lo grew over-enthusiastic."

"Well, and won't the Old Man be glad to hear this?" Luk-no taunted. "When I tell him, he will cave your head in like an acorn."

Rog's face was black with fury. "If you tell Sarak what you heard," he said tensely, "I will take your dirty throat in my hands and break it. Then I'll gouge your prying eyes out. I'll tear your tongue out so you can never tell anything else you hear again. Or perhaps I will just do it now!" He took a menacing step towards the smaller, burlier man, his club resting on his shoulder.

Luk-no cringed, essaying a grin. "You are too quick to anger!" he protested. "It was a joke."

"A joke," Rog mocked. "Like the time you toppled a rock on the head of one of the others who wished to mate with Lo! I don't like your jokes, dirty one. Go back to your caterpillar-grubbing before I change my mind."

But as Luk-no slunk away, he felt icy chills run down his back. He must be more careful! Here he had been on the point of telling everything to Lo. What would have resulted if Luk-no had heard! The globe, perhaps, would have been discovered and ruined!

And Rog, stalking away by himself, knew that he must be triply careful, for somehow he sensed that in that shining ball was contained the whole future of the tribe. . . .

IN the weeks to come he made many trips back to the sphere. With every visit his wonder grew.

By intuition and study he became convinced that the place was a repository in which some race long dead —a "tribe" was his only word for them—had sought to preserve the knowledge of their civilization for those to come later. His agile mind told him why it had been necessary.

Mankind had worked itself up to the point where it had too much leisure, and turned its energy to the destruction of others. The inevitable result was self-destruction. But the ten he had seen in the pictures stole away and created this museum of history and science, to aid mankind when it must again struggle upward.

Under Luk-no's subtle whispering the tribe grew incensed against Rog and watched him constantly, seeking to learn where he went on the days he was absent. They resented the things he "invented" with such regularity. Little did they realize he was but copying things he saw in the sphere.

The thing that astounded them most, even Rog himself, was the wheel.

He hacked a section of a log into a rough cylinder about three feet thick and bored a hole through it for an axle. Two of these "wheels" he joined together by a peeled pole and made a crude sort of cart, more, perhaps, like a wheelbarrow. But the simple contraption did the work of many men in hauling rocks and meat. Had it not been for the tremendous jealousy it aroused among other young men in the settlement, he would have been acclaimed a hero.

Another day he fashioned a device

consisting of a bent stick held in a permanent arc by a piece of rawhide. When a notched branch, skinned clean of bark and twigs, was launched by the bowstring, it flew with sufficient force to kill a squirrel. Rog was as delighted as a child with his bow and arrow, and spent many hours practicing with it.

There were other things in the museum that brought deep lines to his forehead. He was already beginning to comprehend the principle of the water-wheel and the pulley, but when he saw a man hanging from a great bag high in the air, or a hunter killing a bear by pointing a smoking stick at it, he was stupefied.

JUST six weeks after his discovery of the ball, he found something that froze him with sheer terror, that sent him running away, vowing never to return.

On this day he had gone down the stairs through a number of floors, until he came to a room in the very bottom of the sphere. The door to the chamber was closed. It was an unusual door, of a gleaming material that made him blink, and had a single character in the center of it: a red circle from which a small sector had been removed. The sector hovered over the gap, as if asking to be replaced.

Rog pushed the door open and went in, suddenly stopped. His face froze, then brightened with eagerness. Hastily he went to the bubble-like dome of glass in the middle of the room.

Then he was standing rigid with shock. On a low couch under the glass bell lay an old man clad in flowing, white garments. But he was different from the tribe's old men. He was taller and frailer. His brow was lofty, instead of being crowded down over his eyebrows, and his expression was serene in death.

Rog shoved his nose against the glass, studying the dignified figure. He wished, suddenly, that the old man were not dead, for he could undoubtedly explain all these things to him that had him puzzling so hopelessly. At last his gaze wandered to the maze of machines at the head of the couch.

There was nothing there that he could begin to understand. Just a battery of glass and metal and tubes. Two red wires led from the machinery to a board on which were a number of dials and things that Rog scarcely gave a second glance.

Then, all at once, he stiffened. His eyes fastened on a shining red circle of metal, exactly the same as the symbol on the door. And there was a section out of it, lying there asking him to put it back in!

NOW he went to it and lifted the heavy little bit of red stuff. It had prongs that fitted into corresponding holes in the rest of the circle which was firmly fixed to the board. Rog knew he was supposed to shove the sector into place. His fingers were trembling as he hesitated. Suddenly he bent forward and pushed the prongs home!

There was an instant of utter silence. His primitive mind told him that this was a moment of moments, though he knew not why. Gradually a low humming told him his action had taken results. The machinery glowed and wheels began to turn slowly, then faster and faster, until they were spinning discs of silver.

Rog's eyes fastened on the ancient's face. Why, he did not know. Perhaps he was asking him to answer. . . . He scowled. Were his eyes deceiving him, or had the placid white face become flushed?

"Agh!" A hoarse bark of terror burst from Rog's throat. The old man's eyes were open and he was looking straight at him!

The young aborigine had seen enough. He turned and fled, caring for nothing but his own life now.

FOR a week he was afraid even to think of what he had seen. His mind

was outraged by the thought of the dead returning to life.

He worked so hard with the tribe now that they were amazed at the change in him. It was growing on towards winter, and stores of roots, edible weeds, and dried meat were crowded into the smoky, dark caves in which they lived. The winters had been growing so heavy that the Old Man had even mentioned moving farther south, where they had observed birds and certain animals went in cold weather. This winter they were taking no chance of starving. Great supplies of food were being put in long ahead of time.

But in spite of Rog's industry, Luk-no found time to run him down, secretly, to Sarak. The two of them would mumble between themselves, Luk-no furtive and prattling, the Old Man smoldering with righteous indignation. And presently the Old Man, who was actually only about fifteen years older than Rog, would take it upon himself to chastise him. His great, bulging muscles would strain as he cudgelled him.

Rog sweltered under the mistreatment. . . . but this trouble was as nothing compared to the burning curiosity to know what he had done the last time he went to the globe. Even Lo could not be let in on such a secret. She, too, would class him with Ta, then.

The day came when he could stand it no longer.

Almost without his own volition he found himself far back in the hills, making swiftly towards the museum. He did not rush in as heretofore when he reached it. He crept up and poked his head inside the portal, wide-eyed and breathing hard. There was the sound of a twig's breaking behind him, and he whirled, flattening out against the wall.

"Do not be afraid." It was the smiling patriarch who spoke. "I am Johann Adam, the man you restored to life. I am here to help you."

But Rog could not understand the strange, musical sounds he made. He continued to crouch there, waiting.

The old man spread his hands. "I have slept long, if you represent man of today. But follow me." And he gestured to the boy, passing on into the sphere.

Then there followed an hour of the most thrilling, most baffling, conversation he had ever known. Johann Adam took a big pad and a writing-stick and made picture after picture, while Rog crouched near him, fearing to stay, and yet hating the thought of missing anything by leaving. The first time Adam extended the pad to him to him to see what he had written, he shrank back and almost ran away.

Somehow he knew that it was ridiculous, his being afraid of a man so much feebler than he, and he stiffened his feeble courage. But there was a tiny voice inside him that whispered that the ancient had a power that transcended that of m e r e muscles Rog remembered the smoking sticks that killed bears. . . .

Finally he glanced at the pad, and then took it. The diagram was a repetition of the old man and child in the chart in the room above. A smile claimed his features. He pointed upward and gave the pad back.

Adam was pleased. He seemed to inventory Rog's quick eyes and his smooth, broad brow. Then he was writing again. The younger man's fear broke down completely under the force of his desire for learning. Within a few minutes he was sitting on the floor beside Johann Adam, nodding and grinning and sometimes frowning in puzzlement. But a story was unfolding to him. He was learning how the sphere happened to be.

Laboriously he pieced together the fact that Adam and nine other men had foreseen what was to happen to the earth and its super-civilization. Knowing that destruction of modern culture was on the way, they had sought to preserve some part of it for humanity when — and if — men

emerged from the darkness at some future time.

They had constructed the globe and filled it with every scrap of knowledge known to man. Then they constructed the last room of all, the chamber in which Adam was to lie awaiting the renewal of his suspended life, or the death that would be complete.

On the eve of the last of the terrible, cataclysmic wars that burned mankind from earth like a searing flame from outer space, Johann Adam entered the globe and the others went back, to die.

Their supposition had been correct. The last great invention of the war gods, a corrosive gas, had got out of control. Within a space of years men were wiped from the face of earth.

What happened then Adam could not say. Perhaps man had struggled up from the bottom of evolution's ladder again; perhaps a tribe of high-type apes had been left after the catastrophe, and were now Rog's people, developed by a few thousand years. At any rate, the world was again stumbling through the dark shadows of the Stone Age. And from that murky period civilization was slowly crawling back to its former golden age.

And Rog knew who would take the lead in the advance. He himself, under the guidance of Johann Adam, would be the Old Man of all Old Men! He would be instrumental in leading his people away from the paths that would deter their progress. All this he would do, with Lo at his side!

He took the drawing-stick himself, then, and made what crude signs he could to tell of the strained conditions at the caves. Adam frowned and nodded slowly. Clearly he was worried. The death of this man, whom he knew was hundreds of years ahead of his time, might nullify all his chances of aiding the world.

Then a gleam of hope lighted his eyes. By pictures he showed Rog what to do. He was to bring Lo with him and stay here in the globe until he had learned enough to be able to convince the tribe of his superiority. Until the day when he must be recognized as the leader of them all!

He was reluctant to leave Adam, and yet eager to carry out his instructions. Trembling with anticipation, he took his clumsy club over his shoulder and ran back through the trees towards the river. . . .

He came back to the caves to find an angry group awaiting him. Sarak stood at the entrance to the cave, leaning on his club. He was an imposing figure in his anger. His sloping shoulders bulged massively under a mat of black hair, and his short body was tight with muscles drawn hard by hatred.

"Sluggard!" he spat at Rog. "You run off and hide, do you, while others work? Already black clouds gather, but you let old men and women, as well as the younger ones, find food to keep the fat on your bones during the long winter."

Rog stiffened with anxiety. He saw Lo watching him wide-eyed and white of face, and realized Luk-no was grinning at his predicament. He decided on a bold lie. "I was stalking a deer," he said. "I followed it far into the hills, but could not get close enough to kill it. Had I succeeded, it would have fed more mouths than what roots I could have gathered."

The Old Man snorted. "You do not even lie well," he snarled. "You carry only a club. Did you think to get close enough to kill it with that?" His close-set, red-rimmed eyes blazed. "Where is your spear?"

"I—I lost it," Rog faltered.

"Lost it, did you?" shouted Sarak. "Well, I have not lost my club, smooth-faced one! Feel its anger, now, and remember, when you feel like sleeping in the forest instead of working."

His wide mouth was distorted, baring ugly black snags of teeth as he advanced. The thick cudgel, weighted with a stone, came up over his head.

For a moment Rog considered

springing in to battle. His mind weighed his chances. Against Sarak, perhaps, he might have had a chance of coming out alive, but the tribe was incensed against him now. Luk-no would lead them against him should he vanquish the bloodthirsty Old Man.

Then blows were raining down upon his head and back. As best he could, he warded them off with his club, but the blood sprang from half a dozen wounds in the first few seconds. He went to his knees, dazed and bleeding. Sarak shouted and screamed and danced, in savage enjoyment of his tribal right to punish, justifiably or not. His thick lips gleamed with saliva.

And Rog bit his lip against the pain and bore it. He ground down the hate welling up within his breast, because he must come out of this alive. Whatever it cost him, he must endure it, or the secret of the museum might die with Johann Adam. A bitter laugh was torn from his lips at the thought that his only motive in living was to help the tribe!

The wall of leering faces swam before his vision. The ruler's countenance loomed before them all, twisted with savagery. His breathing was stertorous, rasping through clenched teeth. At last Rog could stand no more. The club fell from his hands and he sprawled on his face in the cavern.

SOMETIME during the night he awoke. His body was a mass of bruises and cuts. It gave him excruciating agony to force his head from the floor, but he did so, and cast a slow glance about him. Then he saw what he wanted.

Painfully he inched himself to Lo's side and aroused her, placing his hand quickly over her mouth to stifle the outcry. "It's me," he whispered. "Rog. Listen to me, Lo. I want you to go away with me!"

Instantly the girl was wide awake. "Go away!" she echoed.

He nodded. "Not for good. Just for a few moons. Then we will come back, and I will become the Old Man!"

Now Lo was trembling with excitement. Before she could question him, he bent nearer and whispered, "Pay attention to what I say, but don't ask questions. We are going back into the forest, to a great, shining stone I found. And we must go tomorrow, as soon as the tribe is not noticing us."

Then, hurriedly, he told her of the sphere. She was puzzled, almost inclined to doubt him, but the energy and sincerity of his manner told her he was not lying. A groan from one of the sleepers sent him scuttling back to his place, to lie there sleepless until the sun came up and shot long, golden lances into the cave.

He was so tense in the morning that he could scarcely force himself to pretend to work. Lo stayed near him. Fear and hope battled within him. Failure now would mean that Johann Adam would wait in vain, out in the forest, for him to come back. He would know Rog could not help him, at last, and then . . . . what?

He would become older rapidly, for he had many years on his shoulders already. Time would almost surely cut him down before he could find anyone in any of the tribes intelligent enough to know he was not a devil. A cold sweat broke out on his forehead at the thought of so much knowledge being wasted. Though he could not know it, his concern for the secrets of the museum marked him as the first scientist in many thousands of years.

When the sun had climbed high over the tops of the leafy trees Rog saw his chance. The others had scattered, paying him little attention. In a flash he had darted to Lo's side and hissed, "Now! We must run fast!"

THEY crept to the edge of the clearing and then sprang into the thick, cool darkness of the underbrush. Under the swift feet the miles slipped past. Rog was tense and anxious, Lo

eager as a child and a little frightened. She did not know what he did: That upon their reaching the sphere safely depended thousands of years of evolution.

And then, almost without warning, they were springing into the small circle of bare ground surrounding the shining ball of metal. They stopped just a few feet away from the closed door and stood hand in hand while Rog shouted.

After a moment the bar across the portal began to turn. Then it had swung open . . . . and in that same instant something took place that drained every drop of blood from Rog's face and left him shivering in dumb despair.

Not fifty feet behind them a confused shouting arose, and to their shocked gazes were revealed the running forms of a dozen of the tribesmen, led by Sarak, himself!

A groan of despair came from the lips of Johann Adam. Lo sank to the ground and waited for the clubs to end her life with that of Rog. But Rog was too stupefied to do or say anything. His club hung from nerveless fingers. The sight of twelve men rushing upon him seemed not to register in his mind.

Then he moved. The club swung up over one shoulder, and he stepped forward one pace. His words carried strongly across the intervening distance.

"Wait!" he shouted. "I would do battle with Sarak alone. One so weak and stupid as he has no right to rule!"

They stopped. It was a young man's right, if he were so foolish, to challenge the Old Man to battle. It meant that his wisdom and strength were questioned, and only by a battle to the death could it be settled. Sarak roared his acceptance, and the others were bound to wait.

He strode from the knot of savage tribesmen, cudgel lofted over his head. Taunts and threats crowded his flabby lips.

It was a daring move that Rog was making. Unless he challenged Sarak and demanded a fight alone with him, they would be massacred. Perhaps if he won, the tribe would still exact payment, for Luk-no was at the head of the men, waiting for his chance to avenge himself.

They crashed together with a sickening sound of stone on flesh. Blood spurted from Rog's head, where Sarak's club had grazed him. The sight of the blood brought a scream of triumph from the Old Man, he raised the weapon again in his stubby hands.

Rog released the club with his right hand and shot a hard fist into the other's face. Thrown off guard, Sarak had to fall back as his son swept in upon him. His years of experience saved him as he warded off every blow expertly. He drove in a hard sweep of the cudgel that rocked against the younger man's shoulder.

Again Sarak bludgeoned his way in, driving Rog back before him, bleeding and dazed. A sob of despair choked Rog. It was more than his life that was at stake today.

Johann Adam's fingers were locked in the folds of his garments as he watched the struggle. He knew as well as Rog what the stakes were. And it was a heartbreaking fact for him to realize that he was powerless to help. Interference by him, even if it resulted in victory for the boy, would mean the tribe would never accept him. Only as a tribal member could he aid.

Around the fighters a great crowd was collecting. The rest of the tribe had run up just after Sarak and Luk-no, and now they crowded in to watch the deadly combat. Their screams of hate filled the quiet forest.

Rog fought with desperation. In strength he was a match for his bloodthirsty sire, but he lacked the years of experience behind the Old Man's clubbing. He was forced to give ground time after time, wading

in with swinging bludgeon only to be brought to his knees by a clever blow over the back of the neck.

Sweat streamed down his forehead and blinded him, mingling with blood. His ribs ached terribly from a blow that had cracked several on one side, and one leg was wrenched so it would hardly support him. But still his shoulders writhed to his efforts to give Sarak a death blow.

Suddenly, as he backed to the very edge of the crowd, he saw a shadow rise swiftly over his head, in the black images cast on the ground. For a moment the battle with Sarak was forgotten in the more immediate danger of being clubbed from behind. He ducked.

Something smacked into the ground at his feet, and a man, his balance lost by the blow's missing, lunged past. Luk-no stumbled over the boulder that had almost cost Rog his life. In a flash the intended victim's club was raised and brought down on his back. With a scream of pain the black-browed one went down.

The Old Man had not been napping. As Rog's attention wavered he leaped in close and pulled his cudgel around behind him for a vicious roundhouse swipe that would crush his adversary's head. Rog's only warning was his hissing breath. He squatted down quickly, just as the stone swept over him, so close it raised the hackles on his neck.

In the next moment Rog's chance came. Sarak lunged off balance and twisted desperately around to recover it. Rog took one deep breath . . . . and then he leaped.

His club hissed through the air as he put all his force into a final effort. There was a solid crunching sound as the sharp rock connected with Sarak's skull. The Old Man went down without a sound, and he was Old Man no longer . . . .

In the moment's hush that fell over the group, Rog went swiftly back to Lo and Johann Adam. He stood between them and raised both arms for attention.

"Is there any other who wishes to be ruler?" he shouted.

There was not a sound. Luk-no crouched where he had fallen.

A glad tide rushed up in Rog's breast. He had won! He was the Old Man now, himself, free to do as he wished, and with the power to make the tribe do what he knew was best for them. He spoke once more.

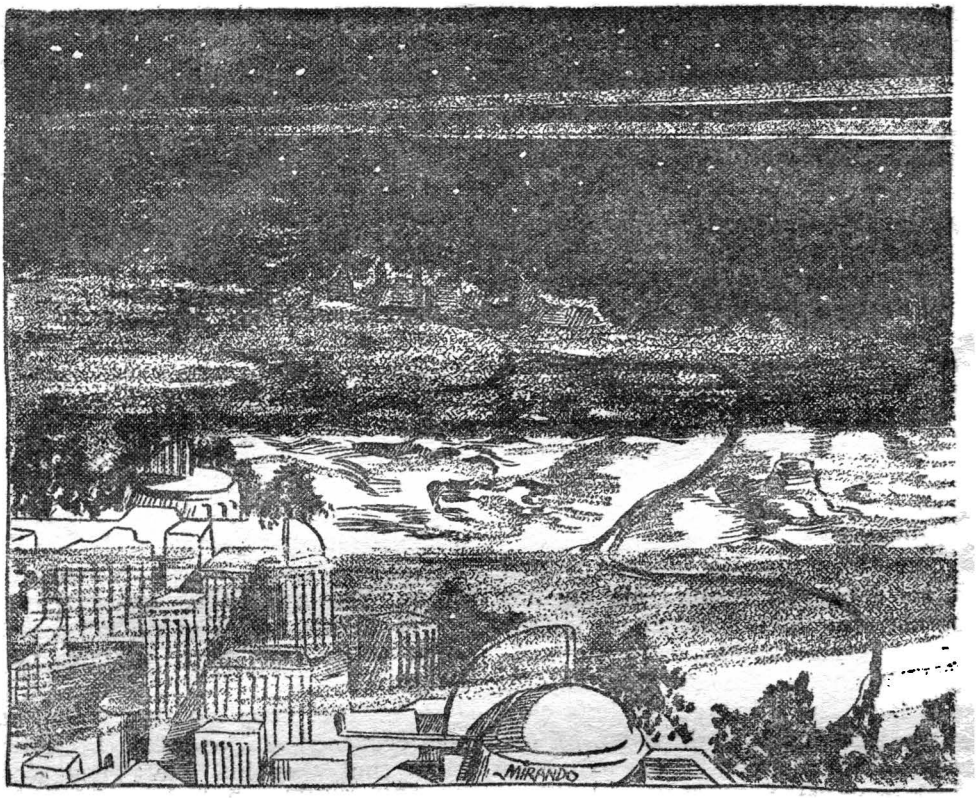
"Then, know this—I am your ruler and you are my people. But this old man beside me is far wiser than any of us. You will follow my wishes—I will follow his. You do not know what this means now, but you will later."

A few feet away the hapless Luk-no still crouched and awaited the death blow that was his due. Then Rog performed the first act of mercy mankind had known in many hundreds of years.

Sharply he said to him, "Get up. I will not kill you because I do not deign to dirty my club with your blood. But if ever you interfere with me or my mate or the old one, it will go hard with you."

Luk-no crept away, while amazement gripped the tribe. And in the eyes of the men and women Rog read complete victory.

Johann Adam shook his wise old head, realizing what had happened. "I have known men far more cultured than you to seize the opportunity you spurned," he murmured. "Perhaps with such a start, civilization will come to a better end, this time!"



"Because this guy's got more brains and guts than he had," was Rita's reply. "Woody fell out of the sun."

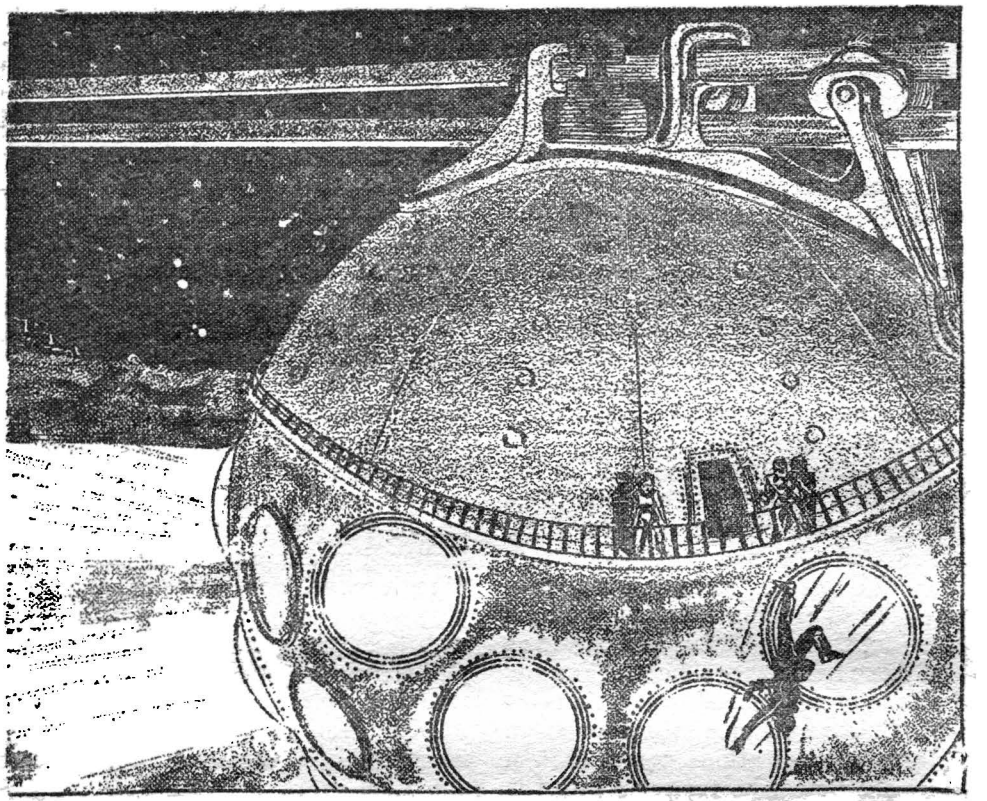
The RANSOM

CHAPTER I

INTRIGUE IN THE SUN

THE twilight hour had settled upon subterranean Toledo. At one end of the mile-high dome, Harry Graves sat in the operating room of the huge sun which each day made its less than a mile an hour trek across the rocky ceiling of the vast cavern. He watched the twinkling lights in the city far below flash on and grow in number like tiny fireflies at rest. The sun was turned out. Twilight from indirect lighting spread a pale, ever-dying glow upon the expansive ceiling of the cavern.

Harry waited for old Pete Schindler who should have arrived before this. Then he would turn on the stars for the month of August, and under cover of darkness they would quickly race the giant sun lamp back over its seasonal track to its sunrise position on the morrow. Harry was enthusiastic over his work. He had a mania for learning to operate all manner of vehicles on land or in the air, and he kept himself abreast with everything new. He was content to sit in the darkened sun and look down upon the city while he waited for Pete. The old gibbous moon was not due to rise for more than an hour yet, so there was no hurry. Once the darkened sun was returned, he and Pete had the moon to pilot. This was Harry's long shift, the end of one working week and the beginning of another. Old grizzled Pete worked with him on this new



for TOLEDO

by NEIL R. JONES

schedule. Harry rose, a tall, bronzed figure, muscular and rangy. Occasional close exposures to the great light had burned into his skin and had tanned him. He stretched and pushed back a shock of dark hair.

A mile below him lay the city. Above, lay six miles of solid rock, and over that the dark, lifeless, frozen surface of the earth. For twenty-eight years, since the coming of the cosmic veil of meteoric débris, no ray of sunshine had touched the earth to break the monotony of the endless, perpetual night. Fifteen years before the coming of the cosmic dust cloud, astronomers had seen it approaching from the direction of the Pleiades, a cloud eight times the diameter of the earth and which astronomers predicted was of sufficient density to be held by earth's gravity. Mankind had prepared for the emergency in the time given them by building underground cities near the sites of the old ones left untenanted beneath the dismal canopy of the cosmic veil. Below, surface conditions were created synthetically. In the subterranean cities, a generation had grown up who had never known true sunlight and the natural conditions of the surface world.

A broad tunnel led to the surface from each city, closed at each end by a gate, with another gate in the middle. Aircraft of various designs plied from city to city, flitting above the ghostly cities of the surface. Science maintained observatories on the sur-

face, yet there was little to observe. At intervals of a few minutes, there occurred the monotonous succession of falling meteors from the depths of the cloud as they flared down from the sky. The observatories took temperatures, tested the quality of the air from time to time, gauged the barometric pressure and took note of any phenomena in connection with the dust cloud. Science had not given up on its problem. Eminent scientists stated their belief that civilization would some day return to the surface and see the sun shine again.

Meanwhile, life continued on in the subterranean world much in the same way as it had on the surface. Joys, sorrows, thrills and casualties were much the same. Industrialism proceeded in the same manner. Politics were just as competitive and bitter as ever. Love held sway beneath the glow of artificial moons and synthetic starlight. Crime and vice still flourished.

Harry's meditations were broken up by old Pete who tramped into the operating room of the dormant daylight orb.

"Been a nice day," he commented in greeting.

Harry nodded and grinned. He never could get over thinking what a ridiculous remark this was. The climate and weather of the underground cities remained the same day in and day out throughout the years. The older generation, nevertheless, were unable to break their habit of everyday comments regarding the weather.

"All set," replied that ancient worthy enthusiastically. "I'm ready. 'Bout time fer the stars, ain't it?"

"I'm going to put them on, now. The twilight is deepening."

Old Pete's short-cropped skull and growth of beard gave him somewhat the comical appearance of an animated pin cushion. Out of that pin cushion just now protruded an unlit pipe. His manner and two sharp, gray eyes suggested asperity.

"We don't rise so early tonight," he observed, referring to their lunar duties. "No hurry 'bout gettin' over there."

Harry Graves left the control room by way of the catwalk and little ladder, while old Pete puttered around in the engine room. Above him, all over the great ceiling, lay spread the various seasonal tracks for the sun and moon. In a good share of the cities, including Toledo, this similarity to earthly conditions was religiously kept. Other cities were not so particular or else followed other customs none the less elaborate yet unscientific and less natural. Harry made his way to the built-in chambers adjoining the aerial dock and snapped on one of the twelve sets of sky effects. Unlike the sun and moon, the stars did not move. They were permanently placed in twelve sets, a set for each month of the year. Only the visible planets moved automatically on small tracks.

Dusk was growing deeper. Harry reentered the sun, and soon he and old Pete were swinging across the ceiling at a dizzy speed. They were on the other side of the six mile cavern with its eight mile ceiling in a few minutes. Here, they transferred to the moon and whiled away the time until after it grew dark. Harry snapped on the soft, ethereal glow of the great lamp partly shuttered to a gibbous orb a few days past full moon, and at the right moment old Pete set the travelling mechanism in motion. Gradually, the moon rose above a shield at the cavern's mythical horizon.

It was such a night as any other night when they might have piloted the moon across the underground sky together. Old Pete fussed with the mechanism, rubbing the oil from his hands. Harry stayed at the controls or occasionally entered the narrow area behind the lamp itself for inspection. In this manner, the night wore away. It was not until an hour before dawn that both Harry and Pete sat bolt upright as an amplified voice boomed throughout the city cavern.

"Attention—citizens of Toledo! Attention!"

The municipal broadcaster was used only for an emergency when something had gone wrong in the operation of the underground city, and so both men stood at instant attention. Mentally, Harry's lightning concern was for the upper gate of the city where frost had reportedly snapped several bolts. Old Pete thought of that soft end of the cavern where water leaked in and had to be pumped out. There had been several rock falls at that point, and more were threatening. These possibilities —and others—they imagined in the brief pause after the initial announcement. The voice, an unfamiliar one, resumed.

"Citizens of Toledo! You are in grave danger unless you meet the demands of those who have your city under control! You know what happened in Agua Caliente two months ago. This is another job just like it. We have the atmosphere plant under our control. It is shut off and will not be turned on until two million dollars is left at the city hall. We know there is that much and more in the city. Get busy. We have the gates guarded at each end of the tunnel. All incoming craft is being held between the first and middle gates. Several of our airships are cruising above the city heavily armed. All other ships will immediately find landings or else suffer the consequences. Get busy, and get that money out of the banks, or else— We have oxygen masks. The air isn't going to be very healthy if you wait too long. We'll blow up the air conditioner if anything funny is tried. Get busy collecting that coin and no one will get hurt. Don't try to communicate with the outside world privately; you can't. We have all communication systems blanketed."

"Extortioners!" cried Pete.

"The same crowd that pulled the Agua Caliente job! They said so!"

"How long'll the air last?"

"I don't know. Probably eight hours anyway."

"What'll the people do?"

"Pay—like they had to do down Mexico way. Everything is too well covered to do anything else but. No signals for help can go out. That's neutralized. No one can get out of the cavern. The gates and elevators—"

Harry's words trailed off into the thrilling prospects of a sudden thought.

"Pete!"

The old man turned quizzically from looking down at the city which appeared tranquil enough.

"Everything isn't guarded!" Harry exclaimed.

"Huh? What d'ya mean?"

"There's an elevator passage to the surface from the city ceiling. You remember—above our October and February passage of the sun—the tiny platform!" Harry paused to figure up. "October 20th is about the closest to it!"

"Yeah—sure—I know. I get yer idea all right, but this is August. We're on part of the early May run, too, but that won't help, either."

"We've got to run the sun in under that platform!"

"Won't they become suspicious?"

"We'll have to chance it!"

Old Pete fidgeted. "It's most to dawn, now. May be the last run we'll ever make if they get wise."

"They're not likely to. Not many know about that elevator. All the other elevators are rigged about the edges of the tunnel. This one leads right up from the top of the dome."

"But October sunshine in August," the old engineer observed pessimistically. "It won't appear natural."

"That gang will have their hands too full to notice it."

"We hope!" added Pete in prayerful attitude.

"Takes three hours from dawn to reach that position in the ceiling. There's two hours yet before sunrise. Once I've reached that elevator, I can get to the surface in twenty minutes."

"What then? What'll you do up there? Ain't no ship of any sort around, is there?"

"No—only an observation room, but there's a broadcaster there."

"Sure, but ain't that blanketed too?"

"The nullifiers aren't covering that direction. It's too much outside the city area and away from the tunnel. I'm going to race up the sun when we get aboard. I can cut off an hour that way, and it won't be too noticeable."

Old Pete whistled dismally, belying the courageous heart in his old body. He looked out upon two airships cruising above the city, watchful and ominous, reflecting on what they could do to Toledo's daylight luminary if they had the desire.

Together, they watched. In the darkness, they could not see the congregations of people running about the streets. They only knew that the lights of surface vehicles were more numerous at this time of night than was usual. The soft glow surrounding the distant tunnel entrance revealed but a single ship hovering and cruising about the vicinity. No ships passed either way. The voice did not speak again. The low hum of the moon's mechanism drowned whatever sounds may have arisen from the city.

Harry chafed at the delay, pacing from one end of the operator's room to the other. How he did want to reach that elevator. Their nearest approach with the moon that night had passed the platform by more than a quarter of a mile. Had there been enough connecting tracks, Harry would have risked a hazardous trip by climbing along them, but he knew there were wide, yawning gaps where there were no tracks, where only a few star bulbs set into rocky hollows broke the monotony of the city dome. He discarded this wild idea almost as soon as he had conceived it. Old Pete was excited, too, and he was scarcely able to sit down for more than two minutes at a time. The moon's mechanism never had such faithful attention as the old man gave it that night. Each moving part was carefully oiled, and parts which were kept clean were given scrupulous polishing. He sniffed the air from time to time, declaring that he could already distinguish the taint, the growing impurity of its lack of being renewed or conditioned. Harry did not rely on either his own senses or those of his assistant, for he knew that if the air had changed at all it was still too imperceptible to be casually noticed.

Finally, that long, last hour of darkness passed away. The hour of dawn, automatically set, came on. Cautiously, Harry waited before racing the moon back to its starting position. One of the prowling airships was too uncomfortably near; and, besides that, he knew that he and old Pete could not start out in the sun until after dawn. There was plenty of time. Too much of it.

With the gradual brightening of dawn, they darkened the moon and raced it back across the sky. Quickly, they set to work on the sun, swinging the great carriage with its light metal wheels upon the side track which flanked the ends of the seasonal declinations. They slowly worked it along to the October-February track, turned it into the starting point and eagerly waited for sunrise. Harry knew he could not rush that, although he mentally promised the citizenry of Toledo a faster early morning than they had ever realized before.

"Want to take it a bit easy, son," warned old Pete gingerly. "Haste makes —"

"What's going on up here?"

CHAPTER II

When the Sun Rose

BOTH men turned quickly and saw the business end of an electric pistol aimed their way and behind it the type of man they knew would not hesitate to use it. Behind this man

with the cold eyes and hard face, a youth entered the operating room of the sun after pausing cautiously for a look around outside. He carried a gun, too.

"What's this funny work about shifting the sun?" the older of the two demanded. "Think we're fools not to notice everything?"

Had old Pete spoken, his reply would have been in the negative. Harry was caught without a suitable reply. In fact he didn't believe there was one which would satisfy this purposeful gunman. The youth walked boldly forward and slapped their clothes for weapons. They had none. Only Pete's pipe elicited any detailed search, and when the young gunman jerked this out of Pete's pocket, he promptly tossed it upon the floor. Pete swore something under his breath about young whippersnappers being still wet behind the ears. The youth smirked his handsome face disdainfully. Harry wondered how he had taken up crime. An older brother in the gang for him to emulate, probably. Born into it. No bringing up or proper training.

"Get this lamp back where it belongs and light the city up," the gunman ordered.

Harry moved reluctant of motion to the controls. There came a rattling sound from outside and the older gangster leaned out the doorway to investigate, leaving his younger companion on guard. Harry saw his opportunity, and his hands moved quickly to a lever. The unlit sun gave a tremendous jerk and raced into the dawn of the heavens a good thousand feet before Harry, barely able to cling with his knees, slowed the great luminary to a stop. The racketeer who had been leaning out of the doorway was gone. Old Pete and the younger gunman were rising, bruised and shaken, from positions against the farther wall where the sudden start had thrown them.

The old man stood up first, half out on his feet. Harry saw the boy get up and saw the sudden glance at the pistol lying in the corner. He was out of his seat like a shot and grappling with the youth before the latter could start for the weapon. The boy struggled fiercely, said not a word but fought and breathed hard. Harry found him easier to handle than he had hoped, though the youth was wiry and supple, knowing a few tricks which Harry, however, also knew and was ready for. Easy living and dissipation had softened the boy's muscles, was Harry's fleeting thought. He had the young desperado on his back quickly. Something in the indignant eyes and the contour of the body he held gave Harry a sudden suspicion. He pulled off the boy's hat, and a mass of brown hair escaped. The handsome youth was a very good looking young lady. Harry conquered his surprise.

"What're you doing with that gang?"

"What's it to you?" she snapped.

"Only that you're going to be all trussed up, my pretty one."

Her eyes blazed defiantly.

Old Pete was beginning to make things out, now. He stared his disbelief at the girl Harry held. "Where's the other one?" he asked foolishly.

"Dead, probably. Nobody could drop as far as he must have and lived."

"Woman, huh? I've heard of 'em bein' mixed up in such things as this."

"Pete, bring me some of that cord in the lower left drawer."

Quickly, he tied the girl's hands behind her back and thrust her into a chair. Then he went over and pocketed the pistol which the girl had lately possessed. Pete, meanwhile, retrieved his pipe, examined it concernedly for possible damages and put it carefully back into his pocket, mumbling plain enough for their captive to hear something about not even a crook doing that unless she were a woman.

"We'll go back to starting point," said Harry. "It's nearly time for sunrise."

"Dare we?" counselled Pete. "Won't

there be more of 'em waiting at the dock?"

"No—I don't think so. That other fellow we spilled wouldn't have looked out the door if there had been others."

The old man watched at a window as they sped back across the track and slid up to the dock.

"We'll beat the gun by six minutes," said Harry, turning on the blaze of sunlight.

Gradually, they moved above the artificial horizon. Once they were well clear of it, Harry increased their speed by half again.

"What's your game?" the girl asked suddenly.

Harry turned and smiled at her good humoredly. "You wait and you'll find out, good looking."

"Whatever it is, you're not likely to do it," she told him defiantly. "Think this gang won't get wise to something being wrong? We know the operation of this city inside and out. Don't you suppose operatives were planted here quite a while beforehand?"

"There's no harm trying," replied Harry.

"That's what you think. I'd hate to see you get rubbed out."

"Would you, sweetheart? What were you carrying this for?" he asked, patting the bulge in his hip pocket. "If I hadn't known you first, I could almost believe you."

The girl was an accomplished actress. In different circumstances he could have believed that she was concerned over his passing, so real was the pensive regret in her expression. But he laughed. This was such a quick change from her former demeanor. Before, she had been spitting; now, she was commencing to purr.

"What are you going to do if one of the airships fly up here to investigate?" she asked. "This is an unseasonable track, you know. There must be some secret way out of the city on this route."

Harry turned his startled eyes upon hers which were calm and laughing. She had divined his intentions. She had also drawn an unpleasant picture. What if one of the airships did come? His hand moved unconsciously to the electric pistol. Old Pete came in from a tour of the machinery.

"Keep an eye open for ships, Pete. Let me know if they act suspicious. Better get that gun in the drawer and carry it, too."

Pete immediately went to the cabinet and armed himself with his noisy old cartridge revolver which he himself preferred. Then he shuffled back to a window in the engine room where he commanded a widespread view. None of the ships were near. Those he saw were hovering close above the city. Back in the control room, the girl spoke again.

"It won't be nice for us when one of the ships gets wise and we're blown to bits. Why don't you be smart and release me. Then if they come, I can save you that fate."

Her manner was soft and compelling. She did look so helpless. But Harry only grinned and walked over beside her. "You just stay the way you are, and we'll all be better off. Don't worry, sweetheart, nothing's going to happen to you."

And then Harry did something very impulsive. He never did know what made him do it. He leaned over and kissed the girl full on the lips. He stood back, a bit startled and wondering at his own audacity. Old Pete burst in, excited.

"There's a ship levelin' this way!"

Harry rushed to a window. Sure enough, here came more trouble. The ship braked rapidly as it loomed up beside the sun. He felt the bump of contact, and almost immediately three men were on the platform. He held the electric pistol, waiting, ready to challenge them.

"Get in the engine room," he told Pete, "and move around in back of them when they enter!"

The old man moved fast. Harry stepped back and waited. He would let them reach the threshold. Then with Pete behind them—

His thoughts were rudely interrupted as something hit him over the head. The girl, dropping the remnants of her bonds off one wrist, stood with the metal tool in her hand, a smirk of mock sadness on her face.

"Come on in, boys. He's out cold as a herring. Look out for the old man on the cat walk by the engine room."

She bent over and reclaimed her pistol. The other members of the gang entered.

When Harry regained consciousness, he found his head aching madly. Confusedly, he collected his thoughts, reorganized and reenacted his movements up until the moment when everything went black. He had been waiting in the control room for the three members of the gang to enter. He looked about him. He was laying on a bunk in a strange room, a moving room, or was it his head? He made the effort of moving a hand to his aching head and found that his hands were bound behind his back. He was in the cabin of an airship. He knew that, now. He was spared further conjecture by the entrance of the girl into the little room, she who had lately been his prisoner.

"I'm so sorry I had to hit you like I did," she protested, "but those men might have shot you. They don't trifle about such things. I was out of your cords scarcely a moment after you'd tied them," she informed him sweetly, "but I put my hands back into them. I didn't want to spoil your fun —not that quick."

The growing redness of Harry's face reflected his humiliation. The throb of his head became secondary. He noticed that the air was becoming close. The girl sat on the edge of the bunk and regarded him impishly with veiled triumph. How lovely she was, thought Harry. It seemed scarcely possible that hers was a criminal mind, but she was all the more dangerous because of this.

"The air is becoming worse," she told him, "but the ransom money is nearly ready, and then we'll start up the plant again and clear. I'll see that you get a mask if the air becomes too bad—or we may close the ports and start our own reconditioner. The boss may want to put the city under the weather a bit to spike any ideas the honest citizens may get about preventing our leaving this place. Don't worry, sweetheart, nothing's going to happen to you."

With that, she leaned over him and he felt the soft, gentle pressure of her lips against his. She hastened away, leaving him with an aching head and a heart which beat faster. He traced those last, all-too-familiar words of hers for a suggestion of sarcasm and wondered.

From the motion of the craft, Harry knew that they were cruising over the city. Nor did they come to rest. He heard voices in a nearby cabin and gathered that another ship was to pick up the money. He heard the girl addressed as Rita, and he sensed from the conversation that she stood well respected and an important part of their operations. They also referred to some individual they called Carpy who was evidently the boss. Once, a bulky, red-headed man came in scowling, examined his bonds, said nothing, and walked out again apparently satisfied. Harry was chagrined to find that he was unable to make any impression on the strands which tied him. He hoped it was not the girl who had fastened them. Then he relaxed and grinned as he thought of the small, supple hands of the girl compared to his own. He wondered what they would do with him, aware of the fact that they would just as soon knock him off if the idea suited their plans.

The air was becoming very bad. It must have been worse down in the city. The girl entered again, and she was closely followed by the red-headed person and another individual who stood just inside the door. Red spoke.

"What you gonna do with this, Rita?" he queried, jerking a thumb at Harry.

"You leave that to me, Red."

Her good-natured sarcasm and mischief were gone. She was coldly implacable and imperious, Harry noticed.

"It's O. K. with me," Red turned up his palms resignedly. "Put him off or bump him off—it's all the same to me. But wait 'til Carpy sees him. What—"

"They've picked it up!" came the exultant cry from up forward. "There's the signal!"

All three of the gang hurried out of the cabin and left Harry alone. He heard cries and bits of conversation and knew that they were heading for the gate. With this realization, he sensed by the motion of the ship and the feeling imparted to him by its maneuvers when they reached and passed through the lower gate. Then they reached the middle gate and were let through. When they reached and passed the surface gate, Harry no longer doubted but what they were going to take him with them. Why? It was evidently because of some plan on the part of the girl. They might well have selected more important hostages to insure a secure getaway. They were past the surface gate and were speeding to parts unknown to Harry when Rita came back, this time with the tall, sombre man who had entered before and had not spoken. Nor did he speak now.

CHAPTER III

In Old St. Louis

"I'M going to let you loose," she said, "but you're not to leave this cabin. There's plenty of us to watch you. There's nothing much you can do, so you'd better behave."

Harry thanked her and was glad to get up and stretch. The dull ache in his head had lessened somewhat. The air was fresh once more. All openings had been closed while they were ascending the tunnel, and the ship's own air system was now operating.

He was left alone again, and he walked to a small window to look out. Impenetrable darkness such as had hung over the world close on to three decades was all that he saw. The ship was using no ground lights. He could neither see ahead nor behind but knew that there were three or four more ships. That their leavetaking of the awakened and no longer restrained Toledo was rapid the hum of the motors told him. He wondered where they were going. He walked around the cabin and examined it, undisturbed by the swift, even speed. He sat down on his bunk.

Less than an hour after they had left the surface gate of Toledo behind, Harry was aware of a braking of their speed, and he knew that wherever it was they were going they had arrived. He rushed to the window again. The ground lights were on. Other ships were also using strong floodlights which played below them over the untenanted expanse of a large surface city. The lonely buildings of the dead city reflected back the lights of the aircraft. Towering skyscrapers stood like ghostly sentinels over faint memories of a past life unobscured by the great dust cloud which held the planet earth in its dark grip. Harry had no idea what city it was. He had no idea which direction they had taken. It was plain that the gang had their hideout here somewhere. It was an unusually large city. He conjectured vainly, for he had no clue. It might have been any one of a dozen large cities within a restricted radius of six hundred miles or thereabouts.

"St. Louis."

Harry started at sound of the girl's voice behind him and turned. She had stolen up noiselessly behind him.

"See that long, flat building over there?" she designated. "That's where we land."

"Your hideout is in that building?" Harry asked.

"Practically a building within a building," she replied as he watched the ships ahead of them slide smoothly to a stop on the roof's frosty sur-

face. "The gang has a very comfortable suite of apartments constructed for surface conditions."

"And the entrance to the subsurface city of St. Louis scarcely more than four miles away!"

"Part of the city cavern is under the old surface suburbs," she reminded him.

"How many are there in the gang?" he asked.

"Eighteen."

"Where do I come in, and what's the game—kidnapping me like this?"

The girl smiled enigmatically. "Look—there they go!"

He saw one of the ships drop out of sight along with a square of roof beneath it, leaving a square black pit. Presently, the section of roof returned and another ship rolled onto it. The process was repeated. He had heard of these landing roofs of the old surface cities. Their own ship rolled to a stop on the elevator, and down they dropped. There followed an interval of darkness outside, and then they dropped smoothly into a lighted chamber and stopped falling.

"Come," Rita urged him. "Here's where we get off."

"That's what I'm afraid of," muttered Harry. For the first time since his capture, he no longer found himself restricted to the cabin. He followed the girl out of the ship. The others had preceded them. They entered an elevator, dropped seven floors and stepped into a luxurious apartment.

The personnel of the gang directed hostile eyes upon Harry. They were all assembled; standing, sitting, lolling around. Instinctively, he recognized the leader, the hard, frosty-eyed Carpy who held a black, bulging bag beside him on a sofa. He broke the general silence.

"So this is the prisoner. What happened to Woodcraft? Why ain't he with you?"

"Because this guy's got more brains and guts than he had," was Rita's nonchalant reply, not without a bit of subtle firmness, however. "Woody fell out of the sun."

"He did, eh? What's the idea pickin' up his murderer to take his place? Are you gone daffy, Rita?"

"Like a fox. I haven't been with you very long, but how often have I been right during that time?"

"Yeah—that's right," Carpy conceded, "but some day you'll pull a boner, maybe."

"I know what I'm doing."

"Aw, what's the diff, boss?" one of the gang offered. "If Woody couldn't handle his job, why should we cry if he ain't here to get his split? We got the jack we went after, didn't we?"

This had a general, mollifying effect on the entire mob as well as on Carpy. The leader rose and beckoned to Harry.

"C'mere, you!"

Harry's swift glance at Rita caught a bold, encouraging look. He followed Carpy out of the room. They passed through several more rooms until they came to a door with a glass like that in windows of aircraft designed for inter-city surface travel.

"Want to join up, I suppose?"

Harry realized the tight spot he was in and inwardly cursed the reckless and whimsical audacity of the girl who had brought him into such a mess. Yet an afterthought reminded him that she had spared him when it would have been so easy to have rubbed him out in typical gang fashion. He evinced an interest in easy money.

"We can use a good man," Carpy admitted. "If Rita thinks you'll do, then you're well recommended. She's got brains and good judgment, that girl. But get this straight. She's my dame. Don't think you've got a chance to compete. You work with us square and you'll get your split on the jobs we do. We only get together like this on big jobs like this one and the Agua Caliente set-up. The smaller stuff is split up into group work. We stay scattered until we're ready to pull something big. You try any double-

cross stuff or holding out and you'll get something like this. Look!"

He pressed a button, and a flood of light shone beyond the glass in the door. Harry looked into a chamber of the building beyond that part which the gang had refitted and hermetically sealed for their private use. It had been an office, and it appeared desolate and sepulchral with its thick layer of dust on desks, tables and other articles in the room. Nothing had been touched since the cosmic veil had buried the earth in its gloomy folds. Harry did see some recent footprints crossing the room to the opposite doorway. He saw something else, too, and his nerves jumped. A man on his knees before the open drawers of a metal cabinet, his face half hidden beneath a curiously antiquated fur hat seemed literally frozen in the act of pilfering the contents. The impression confirmed the truth. He was dead.

"Exhibit A," intoned Carpy emotionless. "Not our work, though. When we show anybody the cool way, we take 'em away from here and let 'em out. That guy's been there like that ever since the cloud came. He stayed above ground too long. It gives you a rough idea, though."

Both turned at sound of running footsteps. It was Red, and he was excited.

"Planes—airships, boss! They've found us out! Must have seen our lights when we landed and followed us! Saw 'em in the televisor! Cruisin' around up above, they are, and they're shining their lights on this building, so there's no mistake!"

Carpy swore an oath. "How'd they ever know enough to come here!"

"We must have been trailed from Toledo, sure!"

Carpy nodded yet seemed incredulous. Things had been taken care of too well back there. They returned to where the gang was gathered around the televisor, watching aircraft maneuver overhead in the light of their own beams which played upon one another and upon the building.

"Those are no police ships!" exclaimed the dapper Burke, looking up at Carpy. "They look to me like ships of the International Guard."

"That's what they are," Carpy agreed grimly. "Word must have got out of that city, somehow, about the job we pulled. It doesn't seem that they could have been far away—to trail us here like this so fast."

"We've got to get down into the cavern, Carpy!" Rita reminded him. "They'll blow us right off the map, if they want to!"

"What're those two round things coming down?"

Two globes, nearly two feet in diameter, were descending slowly as though filled with gas. Harry was well read on the operations of the International Guard, and he recognized the globes.

"Those are radio bombs," he explained. "They'll take the roof off the place when they strike and their operators in the ship overhead detonate them."

They watched, fascinated. The first of the globes hit the corner of the roof lightly and bounced away from the edge and toward the center. Nothing happened until the radio operator pressed an impulse button. They felt the building rock as they watched the bomb explode and shatter one corner of the building. The second missile came closer to the center of the roof. It exploded, and the televisor went dead. Another numbing shock rocked even the furniture on which most of them sat. Carpy moved to action.

"You're right, Rita! We'll never need the cavern any worse! Get the surface suits! We'll get out of here before they wreck the whole place!"

Harry felt Rita yanking him along, and he followed the rest to a chamber where surface suits hung on pegs. Like the rest of the gang, he took one down and put it on and was soon running with the rest of them whither he did not know. He had heard Rita mention a cavern and guessed that the gang had an emergency cavern

somewhere beneath the city. They were to leave the protection of the built-in apartment. That was why the surface suits with their helmet and oxygen supply were necessary against the terrible cold which existed outside. Two more detonations shook the building as they boarded a three-decker elevator. Two more radio bombs had been directed and exploded. On entering the elevator, they had left the protection of the heated apartment, and they were aware of coldness followed by rapid, automatic heating from the surface suits as the elevator descended to ground level. The surface suits possessed body lights which were turned on before they left the elevator.

They emerged into a basement and were quickly on their way through the dust and silence of the years. A tunnel, of comparatively recent construction, joined the basement of the building to the basement of another building. Cut ends of intervening pipes suggested the old city street above their heads. Radio communication on a general frequency peculiar to the helmets kept them in direct communication. Carpy urged them to hurry. Harry heard an imprecation as one of the gang stumbled and fell. The gangster rose to his feet and issued a warning.

"There's a stiff in the way."

It was another ancient corpse perfectly preserved by the extreme cold. The others avoided it, leaving the staring eyes still contemplating the ceiling as they had been doing since the coming of the dust cloud.

"We're going to walk in the open a way," advised Carpy, "so douse the lights."

They walked amid intense darkness, holding to each other in a double chain formation. Carpy and a few others knew the way. They stumbled against steps and ascended them. Again, just before they emerged into the open, Carpy warned them against using lights. They walked out upon a street but only knew it because they were told that. Impenetrable darkness surrounded them, pressed in upon their consciousness as something seemingly almost tangible. Further down the street, they were able to look back and see in the light of the circling aircraft the shattered top of the building they had abandoned. Two of the ships had come to rest upon it.

"They're in there lookin' for us!"

"Wish we'd left a time explosive."

"Hated to leave that place. The cavern's no soft livin', let me tell you."

"But it's safe."

"Sure—they won't find us a mile underground."

"Almost over St. Louis. Not quite."

"Quit the talk!" ordered Carpy. "They may have some sort of equipment for pickin' up our voices!"

Suddenly, their way was lit for them. The buildings, the ancient curbs and sidewalks, the front of shops and stores, became illuminated in a faint, spectral glow. Down through the black sky shot a long trail of fiery light in a graceful arc. Imprecations were uttered as the gang stopped dead in their tracks. The light disappeared in the distance, silhouetting the skyline as it plunged earthward.

"A meteor!" came the relieved tones.

Someone laughed nervously. They pushed on again. The meteors were fairly common. Out of the dark depths of the cosmic veil had come one of the frequent messengers in mockery at dominance over the darkened earth. The flash had upset their strained nerves.

Once he was fairly sure of his position, Carpy again used his light momentarily after which he and those with him felt their way and guided the rest to a door. Again they entered into a cellar, using the lights of the surface suits once more. Through numerous chambers and corridors they were led, through doors which were unlocked ahead of them and locked behind them. Then Carpy and Burke turned an inconspicuous square of cement which swung on a pivot, and

they trouped down into a secret subcellar, the way closed behind them. Harry marveled at the care and ingenuity which had been planned and was employed, and he was certain that they could not be found now.

They came to another elevator and boarded it. Like those lining the long tunnels of the subterranean cities, the car worked on a gear track lining the walls of the shaft and drove under its own power. Into the earth they dropped until they reached the cavern Carpy had prepared, fitted and stocked against just such a possible emergency as this.

CHAPTER IV

THE ROCK MOLES

CARPY kept the black bag with its treasure very close to him. The cavern was spacious and well fitted but lacked a finishing touch. The rock walls were bare and unsurfaced. Harry estimated the cavern to be more than two hundred feet long and somewhat less than half as wide. Doorways regularly spaced around the base of the cavern walls suggested private sleeping quarters which subsequent investigation proved Harry's initial belief. Automatic air reconditioners and a heating system were put into action before they dared remove their surface suits. Most of them, including Harry, were tired out, and they slept. Those who remained awake gathered around the televisor and watched developments on the surface. Before he drifted off into sleep, Harry wondered how his forced inception into the gang would turn out. The first safe chance he had, he intended getting away, but it looked as if he would have to see this adventure through. That girl. It was all her fault. Yet he liked her better than he cared to admit.

On awakening, he discovered that he had slept nine hours. Several of the gang were gathered around a long table eating food from cans, boxes and other containers. There was no preparation. The food stores contained only prepared varieties, much of it in the form of concentrated nutrition. Rita and Carpy were gathered with several others around the televisor. At the table, Pedro beckoned sweepingly to Harry who stood at the entranee to the chamber he had appropriated.

"Come and get it! Eat hearty, neophyte!"

Rita turned, a quick smile on her face for Harry, her eyes brightening. But Carpy turned, too, and she pretended only curiosity, once more contemplating the scene in the televisor. Harry walked over and took a look. The ships of the International Guard still cruised about the vicinity overhead. Carpy shifted the scene to other points.

"They've got an idea about our giving 'em the slip," he said, "but they don't know where to look. They think we're not far away. We're not, but we might just as well be as far as they're finding us is concerned."

At the table, Red jocosely related how foot units had explored through the buildings adjoining their surface hideout looking for them. He had seen them in the televisor batter down doors and walk right over the entrance to the subcellar where they had descended. Heilig, one of Carpy's better educated technical men, was less inclined to feel light hearted about it.

"Notice they didn't waste any time looking on high, upper floors, don't you? Always in the basements and on the lower floors—even in the streets where the sewers ran. They've got a clue. They know something. They're not fools. I'd like to be a thousand miles from here."

"Cheer up, Heilig!" jeered Red. "You're always a case of nerves."

"I hold up my end of the job in the pinch, don't I?" the technical man demanded testily.

"Take it easy. Take it easy." Again Red laughed. "We know you're a good man, or you wouldn't be here."

"I'd like to know what those damned, long-nosed things were doing so close to the ground," growled Heilig. "All at once they disappeared, and we didn't see them any more."

Harry was suddenly interested. "What were they like?"

"Long, metal cylinders," explained Heilig. "They were about fifteen feet long. Could have held three or four men, if that's what they were for. They moved down from one of the larger ships kind of slow and hung above the ground a while. Then the next time we looked for them with the televisor, they were gone."

"How many were there?"

"Just two."

"They probably let out men and went back up to the ships for more men," offered Pedro. "We've seen more men on foot since then."

"They wouldn't land men in those things," argued Heilig. "I'm going to see what Desquines thinks about it when he wakes up. He'll know if they're bombs or what they are."

"How long ago did you see them?" asked Harry. There was a strange, introspective expression in his eyes which the others missed.

"Oh, it was nearly an hour ago—just before Carpy woke up."

Desquines made his appearance shortly, rubbing the sleep out of his eyes. Heilig related the incident of the two cylinders. Desquines sat bolt upright, wide awake and all attention.

"Did the ends taper to a blunt nose?"

"Yes—and they seemed of a different construction than the rest, a separate part."

"Were the ends rough and grooved?"

Heilig nodded. "Now that you bring it to mind, I think they were. I didn't see much of them—did we, Red?"

"The next time we looked, they'd moved somewhere else," said Red. "We couldn't find them again."

"Those were rock moles!" cried Desquines. "They know we're down here! They're coming down after us!"

"What? What's that?" Carpy turned in alarm from the televisor.

"They're boring down here in those two long cylinders!" Heilig exclaimed wildly.

Harry smiled to himself. He had known that they were C-D rock moles as soon as Heilig had commenced describing them. He had made himself well acquainted with them. The same principle of the C-D rock disintegrator rays which had hollowed out the city caverns was involved in the prow of the rock moles. The moles were a recent acquisition by the International Commission.

"We're trapped like rats!" Carpy swore in desperation. Beads of sweat stood out on his forehead.

"Take it easy, boss, there're only two of the things," said Red. "How many does one of them hold?" He turned to Desquines.

"Three—possibly four. No more than that."

"We outnumber 'em two to one, easy!"

"But they're in those things!" expostulated Heilig.

"There's not much they can do from inside of them—that I know of," added Desquines cautiously.

Carpy was seized with an inspiration. "How soon will they come through—if they don't miss the place?"

"They won't miss," was Desquine's pessimistic reply. "They have detectors with which they can locate our cavern. They'll be here soon, I should say, all depending on the bore and number of ejectors for the C-D rock disintegrator rays and the kind of rock they have to bore through between here and the surface. That front end, or screw point, rotates and draws the mole through the residue left by the C-D rays."

"Put your surface suits back on!" snapped Carpy. "The suits are insulated against electric pistol fire, if that's how they think they'll take us!"

There was a general scramble for the suits. The helmets were temporari-

ly left open. Those asleep were awakened and apprised of the imminent danger. Then they waited, straining their ears for a sound of the rock moles. Harry noticed that out of the entire lot, Rita was probably the calmest. She caught him looking at her and threw him a quick smile.

"Funny thing how close they're doggin' us all the way!" Carpy snarled. "How'd they know we were down here? They didn't find the elevator shaft!"

"Detectors of some kind," offered Heilig.

Carpy seemed dissatisfied to pass it off that easy.

It was a keen-eared member of the gang who heard the first C-D mole, and he urged silence. Then the rest heard it, a muttering which grew to a rumbling overhead, then a clashing and jarring which shook the ground perceptibly beneath their feet.

"Up there!" directed Red, pointing to an area of the ceiling near one end of the cavern.

Everyone quickly withdrew from the spot. Carpy urged them to pick strategic points and wait for the guardsmen to emerge from the rock mole when it came through. Harry moved to a position just within the threshold of one of the chambers close to the point where the rock mole was expected to penetrate the ceiling. Their wait was longer than they had expected. The noise of the approaching rock mole grew to a muffled roar which reverberated in the broad, subterranean chamber. Fragments of loose rock fell from the ceiling.

A rattling shower of stones drove Harry deeper into the chamber, and then he saw something sleek and glistening crash amid rock débris and dust to the floor of the cavern where it tottered and leaned against the wall near the doorway. He knew that the shock of landing had been absorbed by hydraulic shock absorbers within the mole. He drew further back into a corner of the unlit chamber where he could see the mole. He held an electric pistol, yet he knew that the occupants of the rock mole would be as safe against this sort of weapon as the members of Carpy's gang in their surface suits. Besides, he had no intentions of using the weapon, at least not effectively.

He saw the hatch of the C-D rock mole open up slowly. A head, a helmeted head, was thrust forth. More than a dozen nervous trigger fingers sent silent blue flashes at the projected head. The body followed the head. Two more guardsmen emerged. All three carried electric pistols. Harry recognized a stalemate. So did Carpy who also recognized the advantage of his numerical superiority and acted upon it to issue a general charge. One of the guardsmen jumped back into the mole but was quickly dragged out again as the guardsmen were overwhelmed in a wave of Carpy's men. Harry joined in order to keep up appearances.

"Take off their equipment!" Carpy ordered. "Put 'em in Number Eight! We can shoot 'em if the rest press us too close! That'll hold things up when they find it out! Get ready for that second mole!"

They resumed their positions. A guard was put over the prisoners who were no longer immune to electric pistol fire. Faint sounds of the second mole were becoming audible. Detectors were directing it unerringly to the cavity in the rock strata. Harry saw the open hatch in the mole and a thought rich with possibilities offered itself to him. Impulsively, he walked to the side of the gleaming cylinder and looked around. He knew how to operate the mole. He had studied these mechanics. The subterranean city of St. Louis lay about five miles beneath this cavern.

He was all ready to climb inside and close down the hatch when he felt a hand laid upon him. One of the gang had seen him from the next chamber. That was the thought which flashed

through his brain. His intentions had been anticipated and now he was in for it. He turned savagely and seized the gangster. It was Rita, and he relaxed his hold, although he felt little less secure than if it had been one of the men. He waited for her to call for help. She lifted back her helmet. It was plain that she wanted him to do the same, that only he might hear what she had to say. He tilted back his helmet.

"Wait until the second mole comes through," she told him above the rumbling roar of the approaching cylinder, "and we'll both make a run for it!"

What a strange girl she was, he thought. He couldn't fathom her. She knew that escape from the International Guard was almost hopeless, yet what escape could there be in the city of St. Louis below them? They were aware down there, by now, of what was going on overhead. He was willing to take her if she wanted to go, though he reflected on the trouble she had already brought upon him. Strangely, he felt no malice. They replaced their helmets and stood silently together. With a crash, the second rock mole burst through the ceiling, hitting the floor where it topped over and rolled a ways.

Rita was away like a shot, leaving Harry surprised at this sudden act. Had she held him up and walked out on him? Was she gone to betray him to Carpy and the gang? He had expected her to jump into the rock mole while the attention of the gang was taken with the arrival of the second mole. He stood dumbfounded as he watched Carpy's gang throng forward to the rock mole, ready to overpower the guardsmen when they opened the hatch. The hatch came open and was seized in several brawny arms against reclosing. A blast of electric power stabbed ineffectually from the interior of the mole. Carpy's men disregarded it and crowded into the close confines of the rock mole to grapple with the guardsmen hand to hand.

CHAPTER ▼

THE PLUNGE

THEN Harry saw Rita come running, and his jaw dropped in astonishment. She was lugging Carpy's heavy, black bag containing the two millions ransom. The audacious little idiot was trying to hijack Carpy and the gang. He felt suddenly afraid of her. What else might she do, especially if she found that he stood in her way? This feeling was only fleeting, especially when he saw Carpy in hot pursuit of her. The gang leader's eyes blazed hate. His fingers itched to choke the life from this girl he had loved and trusted. Harry could see it in the gangster's deadly intent. Carpy was the killer type, and he was thoroughly aroused. He was rapidly overtaking the girl.

Harry sprang forward between them and jolted a crashing right fist against the soft chin of Carpy's helmet. The fabric absorbed part of the blow, and Carpy staggered, holding his electric pistol reversed as a club to be brought down upon Harry's head. The sun operator seized the upflung arm, and they grappled. Then Harry tore loose, jarring the gang leader's grip with upraised knee into the other's chest. He followed with a swift uppercut which laid Carpy on his back slightly dazed. Then another figure loomed into Harry's vision. It was Red. He had watched Carpy running to overtake Rita.

Red was more alert than the gang leader had been, and Harry's quick blow whistled past his head. Red ducked and closed with him. They were down, and Red tried desperately to knock Harry's head against the rocky floor, and he succeeded, but a leather strap and several metal studs on Harry's helmet saved him from the damaging effects intended. Then a trick executed quickly reversed their positions, and Red found himself on the bottom with Harry's knees pressing his arms with numbing effect. Harry's helmet was closed, Rita's

open, or otherwise he might have heard her startled warning. Carpy's gun butt crashed upon his head.

When Harry recovered his senses, he found himself in cramped quarters, closely surrounded by mechanism and gadgets which held their stationary positions as a background for several faces which moved. He saw Carpy's grim, malign face close to his own. Red was there, too. Then he saw Rita, white and anxious. How crushed her spirits were. Then he realized where they were. This was the interior of the rock mole.

"Snap out of it!" rasped Carpy. "Get this thing going! Come on—hurry! You and Rita were planning to jump with the dough! Probably been plotting ever since she picked you up!"

Harry stirred sluggishly. His helmet had been peeled from him. The air was warm and stuffy. The hatch had been sealed. Mechanically, he reached up and set the small air reconditioner to working. He turned to Carpy and pointed to subterranean St. Louis.

"You want to go down there?"

"That's it! Get this thing going! Rita was right about you comin' in handy!"

"You can't make a getaway down there," said Harry, reaching for the controls and getting his bearings.

"No? That remains to be seen. There's a better chance down there than here—when they find that shaft of ours."

"We know places down there," Red interjected. We—"

The rock mole started forward with a rumble and a roar. Harry missed the venomous look which Carpy gave his garrulous companion. Carpy once more had the black bag beside him. Harry saw the wan look on Rita's face. If she had been less concerned over the ransom and more concerned for her safety, they would have been on their way without Carpy, without Red and without that fateful black bag. She would be the death of him yet. Had they left for St. Louis together and with the ransom, he would have made her give it up and try to clear herself.

"Where do I come in?" Harry demanded of Carpy above the grinding noise of the whirling screw.

"If you land us safe, you don't get what I said double-crossers always get," replied Carpy.

Harry felt the cold point of an electric pistol against the back of his neck.

"And her?"

Carpy laughed unpleasantly. "I've a score to settle with her. I'm taking Rita."

Harry saw the girl's face grow a shade more pale, and her eyes glinted dangerously. Three hours of boring lay between the rock mole and the rocky ceiling of the subterranean, midwest metropolis. He guessed what would happen to him despite Carpy's glib promises once they were landed safely. As for Rita, that was something he did not like to think about—especially with Carpy so temptingly close to him with an electric pistol.

The rock mole bored deeper. Harry knew that the moment they broke through the city ceiling the helicopters in the rear of the cylinder must be set whirling to set them down safely. He tested them and was satisfied. He also tested the view finder. The dull yellow of the C-D rays in the prow of the rock mole shone out of the tube he swung before his eyes.

Little was said as the time gradually passed, and this was spoken with difficulty above the roar of the grinding, grating screw. From time to time, Carpy nervously asked about the distance covered. Harry told him and referred him finally to the indicator dial coinciding with the cavity detector. They were boring downward on a sharp slant. Finally, less than a quarter mile lay between them and the mile high cavern of subsurface St. Louis. Carpy wanted to know what section of the city they would hit. Harry told him as near as he could figure from what Carpy knew of sub-

terranean St. Louis and from his own dial readings. Carpy seemed as satisfied as the circumstances would admit.

With bated breath, all four watched the remaining distance run out on the indicator. It was not entirely accurate. They had little time to realize this, however, for their arrival was sudden and unexpected. They were thrown back by an impetuous leap of the C-D rock mole as it broke the city ceiling and hurtled down into the upper air. Harry recovered himself in a mad scramble and set the helicopters going. They were less than a thousand feet above the city before the helicopters braked their destructive fall. Then Harry swung the observation tube to his eye. High buildings loomed below them. They were rapidly braking to an easy drop. Quiet reigned about them except for the accelerating, whistling screw which Harry had not turned off and which fought for a secure hold against the air in which it gyrated. He shut it off.

"Make ready for the landing!"

Three pairs of helpless eyes were turned his way. His instructions were rapid and brief.

"Carpy—you and Red each hold to those rods down front! Don't let them jerk back or we may turn over! Rita, hang on to that ring behind you—and don't let go! Put your feet on that metal square!"

Harry no longer gave them any heed. His eyes were glued to the observation tube. He saw the square roof of a large building loom broader and more vast as the C-D mole dropped slowly under his control. They were a good fifty feet above the roof and about to settle safely when Harry shut off the helicopters and they dropped rapidly, a free, falling body. He braced himself for the crash.

It came. Ripping, tearing noises filled the cylinder, and a sudden lurch relayed sluggishly by the hydraulic shock absorbers not built to absorb so much shock almost tore Harry loose from the cross bar he held. The rock mole tore through the roof and two floors before it came to a stop. A cloud of dust arose from the ragged cavity in the roof. Harry stirred, shook his head to clear the spots before his eyes and looked anxiously for Rita. She lay slumped across the bodies of Carpy and Red down in the prow. Harry climbed down to where she lay and picked her up. She was unconscious but seemed uninjured. He gave a quick glance at the two gangsters. Carpy's head was bent at an unnatural angle. Red's head had become truly red, a bright, growing crimson. His hands gripped at the air spasmodically. It was not a pleasant sight to look upon a dying man in his last throes, yet Harry felt no remorse. He had planned their deaths. The black bag lay beneath the broken neck of Carpy.

He gave them no further attention but set to reviving Rita. She did not respond at once and he grew alarmed. A swelling bump on her forehead told its story, and he became more relieved and patient. He held her head in his lap. She finally opened her eyes. She seemed startled as she collected her thoughts, and then she saw him, relaxed and smiled.

"Harry—what happened?"

"I let the mole down fast—right through the roof of a building. Carpy and Red are both dead."

"I'm glad. I knew you'd be a help to me when I took you along with us. I felt it."

"What—"

An imperative and metallic rapping on the hull broke the thread of Harry's speech. He sat silent. Then it came again, this time against the hatch. Harry opened it.

"Come on out!" ordered a gruff voice. "No funny business! You're well covered!"

Harry climbed out of the hatch and slid down the hull of the cylinder into the center of a circle of menacing weapons surrounded by determined men.

"Thought you'd get away, eh?" demanded the portly, middle-aged

spokesman in civilian clothing. The others were either dressed like him or were in the uniform of the International Guard. "We've been waiting and expecting you! The rest of your crowd have been taken! A rock mole full of gas fixed them! Got the ransom money in there, have you?" The allusion to the black bag and the money hinted vaguely of an anxious query rather than a statement of fact. "Come out of there—the rest of you!"

"There's only one in there—alive," Harry said. "She was knocked out. The other two are dead. I'm not one of the gang. I'm the sun operator in Toledo. They kidnapped me before they left. The girl—she turned against them to help me. She tried to reclaim the ransom."

Harry wondered how much of his mixture of the truth and exaggerated facts concerning Rita would be believed. He wondered how much of a score she already had to settle with the law. The eager attitude of the official caused him misgivings.

"So she is with you! We wondered if she hadn't made a getaway when the gang quit their place in the Taft Building!"

He motioned for one of his men to bring her out of the rock mole. But she had evidently heard the conversation, for she was climbing out of the hatch, haggard of face. She was helped down. The middle-aged individual regarded her keenly.

"Are you all right, Miss Royce? That was a nasty landing the mole took."

"Just tired, B. M. He's all right." She nodded at Harry. "He's all wool and a yard wide."

"It was a great job, Joan!" enthused the official. "We followed every move, every signal you gave us. Every last one of the gang is accounted for, now. You'll be advanced for this."

"B. M., I'm tired of all this jumping around the world. I don't want it."

"Come, now, you'll feel better after you've rested up."

Harry's brain whirled in the fog, seeking a substantial place to rest and focus.

"What—who is she?"

"One of the best woman operatives in the International Secret Service, Joan Royce!" B. M. exclaimed, a twinkle of amusement in his eyes at Harry's wonder.

Lights dawned in the mind of Harry Graves. He felt a sense of infinite relief. Rita—Joan was no criminal after all. She led him away in a dazed condition as the secret service men climbed into the rock mole to remove its grisly contents and the black bag.

"Can you forgive me?" she asked him.

"Why—yes—but why did—"

"Why did I bring you along?" she anticipated him. "Well, that's what comes of your kissing strange girls, for one thing. I was afraid, too, that they would kill you, like they told of killing a man in Agua Caliente and pitching his body out after they had cleared the gates. They didn't want to risk landing and were in a hurry to get away. Besides, there are times when a woman wants a man, one she can depend upon, near her, no matter who she is, times when she feels weak and afraid, though she doesn't show it. That was one of the times."

"Were you honest about your not wanting to continue this business—about wanting to settle down?" he asked her.

Harry suddenly found her in his arms, oblivious of the confusion of hurrying officers, civilians and newsmen just reaching the scene of the rock mole's crash. He found her lips against his for the third time. He could have asked for no better answer.

The SPACEAN

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EXTRA! EXTRA! EXTRA!
EXTRA! EXTRA! EXTRA!

First authentic report from the heavy battle fleet!

By Eddy Pratt, on board the flagship of Admiral Alan H. Smith of the heavy battle fleet by special invitation, covering the Binaries expedition.

"The trip was uneventful until after the halfway mark had been passed. Men were going through strenuous battle training, until they could jump to their posts at a moment's notice. Everyone on board looked forward with regret to the time when word to fire would be given, as they pictured the slaughter of thousands of men on the ships of the revolting planets.

Communication with the disintegrator patrol fleet was constant, and the officers knew every phase of the battle ahead almost as soon as it took place.

Suddenly the communications took on livelier form, as the fleet from one planet seemed to overcome their opponents completely. The commander of the patrol, excited at the sudden change in hostilities, talked directly to Admiral Smith for almost an hour, with all other receivers cut off.

When the admiral emerged from the communication room he was very grave, and passed me without answering any questions. A moment later the general communicators were turned on again.

There was no mention of the fall of one planet, except for our earlier news as the events were happening. Every man on board the heavy cruisers was burning up with curiosity.

Suddenly word came over the speakers that the victorious Binary fleet was approaching the disintegrator patrol. This was followed by an order for all men to battle stations as the commander opened communication with enemy fleet. A moment later Admiral Smith hurried to the communication room and the announcing system was shut down.

Hours passed while every man stood tense at his post. Then, as suddenly as the broadcast had stopped, it came on again, and the admiral came out looking like an old man. Before a single sentence could be understood a strange type of interference blanketed the waves. This lasted only a few minutes, then every sound died out. A strange feeling of doom crept over us and I could feel perspiration on my forehead.

Suddenly the voice of Smith came over the system. His words were pronounced slowly, as if with great effort. "Men, we are facing the enemy alone! The disintegrator fleet has been wiped from space. The enemy is employing some new type of weapon against which our ships were helpless. They went out fighting, although it appears to have been a hopeless battle from the beginning.

"Every man must be alert for any contingency, and I want every observer to examine any speck in space. It is up to us to repay the Binaries for this disaster to our forces."

Every man's expression changed and a look of grim determination replaced the good humor which had pre-

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vailed. Almost every man had a friend or acquaintance on the patrol ships, to drive home personally the terrible blow to the universe. Many had relations, and they handled the heavy disintegrators a little more determinedly as they looked forward to battle.

Everything remained quiet except for the changing crews. Training periods were increased until men stopped only to snatch a few hours' sleep.

When one of the ships developed trouble and it became apparent that it would have to drop out of the expedition, Admiral Smith ordered the officers and crew to board the other ships without delay. The finer instruments and equipment were removed, as well as supplies and belongings. Every man in the fleet that could be used assisted in the task and the ship was emptied within a few hours.

When this was done the admiral ordered all ships to a long range position. Then one after the other the crews fired practice shots at the abandoned ship from the disintegrators. The charges were kept low enough so that their effect was only just visible, but every gun was fired several times. This gave the men their first range practice, and also told how serious the situation had become, to destroy a first class ship as a target.

Many gunners were replaced by others of the crews who appeared to have more instinctive marksmanship. The situation was desperate, and every man felt it. There was no jealousy.

When the target had been completely destroyed by the small charges, the fleet headed on in the direction of the Binaries and life settled down to routine again.

Several of the disintegrators on each ship were dismantled, their mechanism was added to other guns in more strategic positions to increase their effective range.

Mechanics labored night and day to

condition the new assemblies, and make them foolproof in action. On completion each gun was tested at full charge, and discarded at the first sign of weakness.

Only the commanding officers knew what lay ahead of us, but the way they drove the men to greater effort told enough to make every man anticipate a terrific struggle.

All fighting equipment was kept at constant charge, and checked a dozen times during every shift. Every control was polished from constant fingering in practice, and every lens kept speckless.

Suddenly every man was electrified by the general announcement, "Ships ahead! Traveling toward us at high velocity. Will be within contact range within a few hours."

Every eye was glued to a visor plate except for the men whose duties required them in other parts of the ship. The sight controls on the weapons were turned up to full magnification, until our heads ached from the strain. Time slowly passed as nerves reached the breaking point and men jumped at the slightest sound or movement.

The reports of other ships in the fleet kept the communication system buzzing constantly. The admiral allowed all orders to be known by everyone, to try and ease the nerve tension. Every few minutes his voice would ring with some new order, and one of the ships would seek a designated location.

Slowly the flagship drew far above the remaining ships, where every movement could be seen, and for the first time I fully realized the size of the fleet.

I counted two hundred and seventy ships, although there may have been more. They were all heavy freighters, and I could not picture any ships standing up against their fighting power.

Only the control rooms had equipment capable of detecting the enemy

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at great distance, but as the time passed specks appeared on first one and then another of the visor plates.

The order came for the fleet to spread, and the distance between each ship was increased to two miles. It seemed as if they covered space to the end of time.

As the time of battle neared I could discern three distinct lines of ships. Admiral Smith evidently expected to lose many ships and wanted replacements ready to fill the gaps.

Strange words suddenly sounded over the speaker plates, and a moment later the admiral's angry voice answered in the same strange tongue and a man near me swore under his breath. The conversation continued for several minutes, while it became apparent that our commander was beside himself with rage.

"Men, the enemy demands our immediate surrender, or he threatens to annihilate our entire fleet. My answer has been to attack immediately. Prepare for action."

The communicators were switched off, and changed to carry individual ship orders only. I was allowed to stay in the observation room adjoining the control room, with full view of the fleet.

Battle speed was being built up, and the ship trembled slightly as the drives strained to the utmost. I had never traveled as fast before, and I doubt whether many of the other men had experienced the effect of the superchargers. The ships ahead seemed to leap toward us, and every officer was given permission to fire as soon as we came within range.

I slowly realized that we were outnumbered, possibly ten to one. With the passing of minutes the space ahead seemed to be black with enemy ships. Although they were much smaller, and probably carried much lighter equipment, we could hardly hope to overcome such terrific odds without losing many of our own ships. They could maneuver much faster than we, and that would partly offset any advantage we held.

For the first time in my life I knew fear—fear of being nonexistent within a few minutes. When I glanced at the men around me and saw only grim determination I felt ashamed, but was still afraid.

In a matter of moments things began to happen so fast that I did not have time to think of anything but the sight below us. We had dropped back slightly, but the other ships had begun to fire.

Our first wave dove straight at the ships ahead and I could see faint glows from the disintegrators. Ships in the ranks ahead disappeared as each flash came, but many more seemed to take their places. On and on our ships tore, and I thought nothing was harming them. Straight through the enemy ranks, and still on. They weren't stopping.

Suddenly I realized the truth. *Our ships were out of control!*

The enemy just moved to the side and let the ships pass within a short distance. There was no longer any flash from the disintegrators, and no longer any mist from the rockets behind. They appeared lifeless and I suddenly knew—*no one was alive on board!* When I glanced at the faces around me I knew that they realized the same thing. In ten minutes half of our fleet had been put out of commission by the enemy.

Every ship still appeared as if it had not been touched; but they were slowly disappearing in the distance, without sign of being under control of any kind.

Admiral Smith ordered an immediate retreat, to save as many ships as psosible. But instead of lessening speed he simply headed off at a slight angle, the fleet below following the same maneuver.

The enemy was slightly surprised by the sudden change, and we had

gained considerable distance before they could turn to follow. I overheard the official count of the ships that were still under control and received a worse shock. Only ninety of the total of two hundred and seventy were still usable. Eighteen of the ships that were traveling our course were derelicts.

The flagship drew close to the nearest ship, which did not respond to their call signal, and the admiral ordered the XV-ray machine employed to search the interior.

The projection plate was quite large, and I was able to glimpse the scene over the officer's shoulders. As the images on the plate cleared, and the interior became distinct, everyone stiffened.

As the red ray was increased, images became more distinct. Men lay in tumbled positions, some with their legs raised in the air as if they had been walking and were frozen with one foot forward. Every object appeared the same, yet there was a change that could not be placed. Every man on board the ships was dead. There could be no doubt of that.

The XV-ray brought out colors almost identical with the object pictured, yet the ship that was being examined had a riot of color that had never been there before. A hurried examination of the ray machine proved it to be in perfect condition, and we became more puzzled than ever. The calamity which had befallen the heavy fleet was of such magnitude that we no longer received a shock at the sight of death.

The enemy was following, and the admiral changed our course very suddenly. A few minutes later we were approaching the main body of our disabled ships.

"Scatter yourselves amongst the derelicts! Use them for protection from the enemy's rays. Use magnets if necessary to keep two ships close for protection. Our comrades can no longer be injured."

The commander's words were startling, yet every man who heard them realized it was the only chance of escaping the same fate that had befallen their companions.

Once more we approached a huge battleship, and the XV-ray revealed the same conditions on board that we had seen a few minutes before. Ray analysis was started, and as each result came through we were more mixed up than before. No single piece of material reacted properly. Where we should have found metal there was stone, and in every instance where water was stored some chemical had replaced it.

As yet we do not know what substances are on board the derelicts, but even the men have been changed to some foreign material. One of the ships has turned mainly into liquid, and is slowly dissolving.

One of our ships was only damaged in the rear portion, and we boarded it through the forward port to examine the result of the damage. It was a sober crew that we met, as if they had lived a lifetime to the space of a few minutes.

Stone men, metal where wood should have been, acid for water with some solid substance as well, was only part of the gruesome sight. Everything had been changed beyond a certain spot in the hull. Even the metal outside was swollen and warped out of shape as it petrified. Our examination was long and accurate, by experts from the entire fleet. By the time we returned to the control room certain conclusions were obvious.

The enemy was using an integrator ray!

Every weapon we carried was useless against their power. We could destroy a few ships, but it cost us ten for every one of their ships we put out of commission.

We need help desperately!

THE COMET and DENVER

A Silver Medal and Cash to Be Awardad

The third World Science-Fiction Devention will be held in Denver, Colorado, July 4-5-6, 1941. Its organization and conduct is significant of a growing interest which appeals to the imagination of an imaginative audience. This gathering of famous writers and serious editors with earnest supporters is a spontaneous reaction to the desire to foster an acquaintance which has been developed by lōng-distance correspondence.

COMET magazine believes that such a movement can result only in an advancement of mutual interest and understanding, believes that the attendance should be large.

Because attendance in some cases means sacrifices, we have, after careful consideration, decided to recognize this fact by awarding a silver medal and $25.00 in cash to the person who overcomes the greatest handicap in order to attend.

READ THE RULES CAREFULLY. Perhaps *you* may be the winner of this beautiful sterling silver medal with its award of cash to help you defray your expenses.

THE RULES

1. The 1941 COMET CONVENTION AWARD will be made at the last session of the Denver, Colorado, "Denvention" (July 4-5-6), to the person who, in the opinion of the award committee, honorably surmounted the greatest handicap in order to attend.

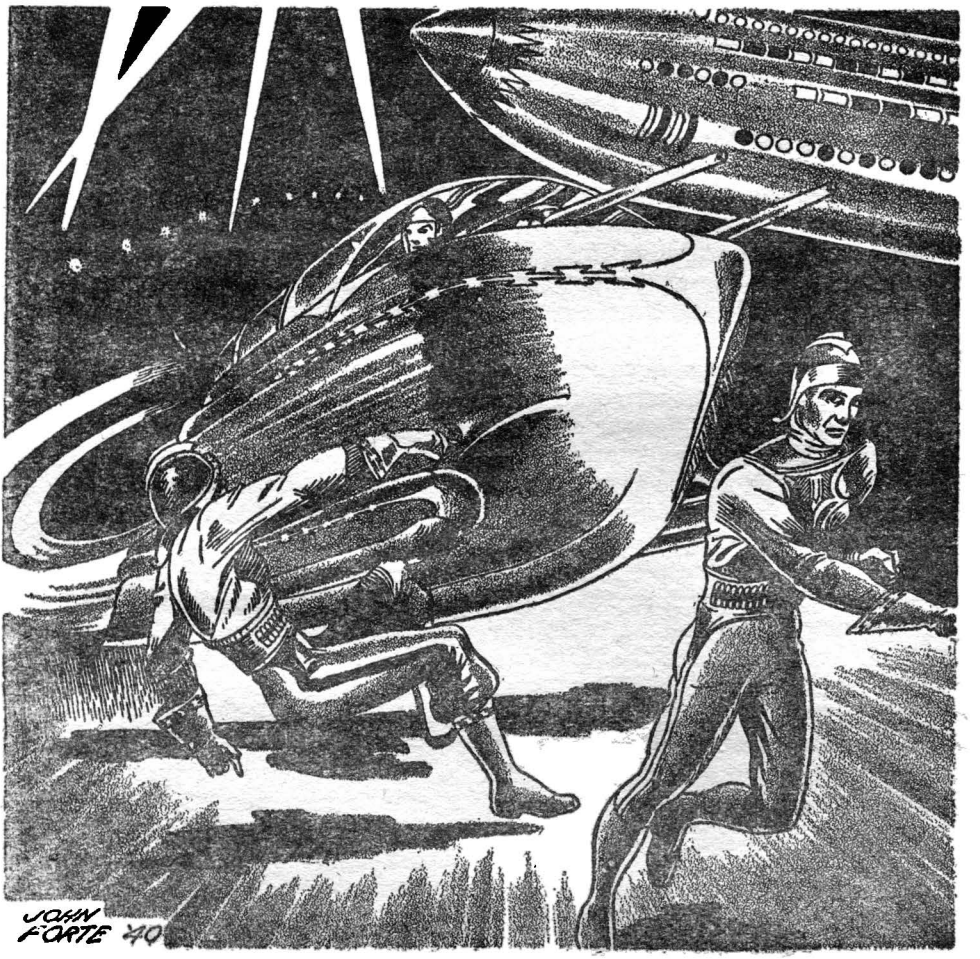
2. The award is comprised of a sterling silver medal, appropriately engraved, and twenty-five dollars ($25.00) in cash.

3. The award committee will accept written applications for the award during July 4th, 5th, and until 12:00 noon July 6th, 1941, at the Denvention hall. The applications must be handed to one of the judges by the applicant or by another who desires to press an application for the applicant. The applicant must be ready to verify the truth of the claim.

4. An application for the award will contain not more than 200 words written clearly on one side of the paper, explaining the handicap overcome by the applicant.

5. The award committee will be comprised of three judges, as follows:
   1. The Chairman of the executive committee of the Denvention or an alternate appointed by him.
   2. The editor of COMET or an alternate appointed by him.
   3. A prominent science-fiction writer chosen by the first two judges on the first day of the Denvention.

6. The decision of the judges will be final.



We went down blasting . . . . right and left . . . .

SPACE BLACKOUT

by SAM CARSON

I'VE seen a world die, and with it men who chose to remain and face the end because of love.

Love of their homes and the soil beneath them and the life they had achieved. It's a story I believe Earthmen could ponder, and benefit from. For we are the youngest of terrestial civilizations within the space orbit the Martians have shown us.

I'm Jerry Kos, master navigator, twenty-seven and entitled to three stripes on my jacket to prove I've completed that many six months voyages with the Cosmic Survey. I'm a specialist, holder of the solo record from Moon to Earth made in 2437, and enjoy spending all my leave in the government preserves, camping in the raw, hiking, fishing, anything I can

do by hand, so to speak. Otherwise I'm one of some fifty thousand young officers of the Commonwealth whose job is cut out for him. And I like it.

It was Jim Drake, skipper of the Pelios, Cosmic Survey ship, who persuaded me to take my leave on Mars, as a guest of Shadrak. Shadrak is one of our advisers, guardian of the Great Waterway, and a big shot among the hundred thousand odd Martians who rule their planet by robot control. The Martians watched us develop thousands of years, and let us go because they're peaceful, and like our energy, till Gregor, the Tartar dictator came along and messed up the world. Then Shadrak, and a half dozen others roused themselves, crossed the void to Earth and liquidated a wad of would be exponents of force. That put the United States on top with its ideals of democracy, and the Martians reorganized our form of living, gave us advanced tools, knowledge and created a technocracy. The Martians sit back, live well and give us ideas. We do the same for them and everybody's happy. They know how to contact all forms of life in the solar system, from Mercury to Neptune, and now, as you know, Earth is a beehive of industry.

Jib Drake's a thoughtful chap, quiet but a whip. Since he was a kid Shadrak has liked him. After a few days of fishing, boating, and general recreation, Shadrak called us in to his domed estate.

First he showed us his planetarium, and a dark nebula in beyond Orion, he calls the Noir, speaking with the throat disk because Martians can't manage our tongue otherwise. That dark, he had just explained, was a thousand light years beyond the nearer Orion cluster.

"Behind it," he added, "is a solar system, a sun with six planets. The third planet is Spor, of the same albedo as Earth, and identical atmosphere. I know, for my grandfather visited it, anc he chose it as a suitable refuge for ten thousand of your Earthmen."

I had to break in on that. Jim nudged me, but Shadrak smiled. "Small wonder you're surprised," he commented. "On Earth you have a legend, of the lost Atlantis. There was a general submerging of continents. Millions perished. And we were so moved on Mars that we sent our space ships. It was one of our few real invasions. Till we visited Gregor, we hadn't returned. But that time we removed ten thousand, products of an advanced civilization.

"We moved those ten thousand to Spor." Jim whistled. "Even that long ago you traveled ahead of light. I mean, with greater speed."

Shadrak nodded. "You two are Earthmen we trust. We keep many secrets because it is best. But in this case—" he paused, "I want you, Jerry Kos and Jim Drake, to journey to Spor."

"But it would take years," I put in. "Maybe longer."

"Twenty two days and six hours, with the new ship just delivered," Shadrak corrected. "It has a capacity of one thousand. If you return with a full load, we shall send more ships to Spor."

Jim looked bewildered. "Maybe it's too much," he said, "but such a speed is incredible."

"There is no limit to speed," Shadrack told us. "The problem is of acceleration, and deceleration. You have that problem in handling the Pelios, which rides energy beams at the speed of light. Frequencies, whether of sound or light, as instances, are constant. Therefore we employ this fact in accelerating. We superimpose frequencies against frequencies, repelling power, one from the other. The result is a constant, increasing ratio. In effect, Jim—and you, Jerry—will grasp it much easier in this manner. If you had a machine throwing a jet of water, and it touched an opposing jet of water, your propulsion would build up till the limits of the energy from the opposing jets were reached. Suppose those jets continued to reach

out. As light frequencies, till you built up your maximum. In a vacuum your speed would continue at that maximum velocity till you chose to decelerate. Now deceleration is effected by the same principle. We do it by hitching to our sun and reaching the maximum in building up speed. In like manner, another sun can be used to decelerate, by reversing the process.

"But enough of that," Shadrak resumed. "Your ship will be robot controlled. Our own master navigator will get telescreened charts of your course. Your job will begin when you land, I fear. The planet of Spor enters the Noir within eighteen months, and a sudden reaction in that hundred thousand light year wide mass could reduce the engulfing to eighteen weeks."

"What does this Noir mean, swallowing up Spor?" I fired that shot. And it was Jim who answered.

"Noir's the light absorbing element nobody has lived to analyze. We know it absorbs all organic life as it does light, electricity, even sound. It's the black scourge of space."

"And we're going to play around it, eh? To bring back the descendants of the lost Atlantis. And where do they go, providing we take 'em off?"

Shadrak waved a hand vaguely over the horizon. "Here, till we find a planet suitable. You see, we're responsible. We moved them to Spor. Now it's our duty to remove them again."

Jim spoke. "We're ready, whenever you are sir."

NOW a lot happened before we curved around the sinister prong of the Noir, the Milky Way lost behind, even Orion and his companions. We had ceased marveling at the repellor motors, operated within compact cases by the efficient robot machines. And I must put in a word for the way they lifted our big ship from Mars. You don't us rockets any more. They catapult you, shooting you ten thousand miles outward with rocket tubes sunk into the ground. You use inverted, concave affairs to catch the power. And too, we had our first acquaintance with the auxiliary repellors used inside the ship to offset inertia. This gave us the same gravity as Earth. And Shadrak called at regular periods on the relief screen, the new device that gives solidity to an image. He told us a lot about the transplanted sons and daughters of ancient Atlantis, and we had the mentameters to make immediate contact with their language and knowledge. Shadrak had thought of everything.

The solar system which Shadrak called Maj, crawled around the crescent of Noir, and we sighted the third planet, giving a ruddy glow. That gave us a kick, but I felt a shiver as I watched that ebon horn blotting out the sky, reaching hungrily toward Maj. Jim said the movement of Noir had been constant at 110 kilometers a second, but that the speed was building up. He called for a robot check on the tip of Noir and Spor. After careful study, Jim flashed the telescreen for Shadrak. "Noir tip at 60 plus 382," he reported.

Shadrak looked grave. "That gives you no more than four months," he said. "If the movement accelerates, it will be quite earlier. After you land, arrange for periodical checks."

It was time now to begin deceleration. We fixed on the sun of Maj. At first we couldn't feel a change. It was ten hours before the planets slowed down, and we curved to meet the pull of Maj. Two days elapsed by our chronometers before we entered the gravity pull of Spor and began our spiral descent, much as we would had it been the smaller Pelios. Our electroscopes found a city, towers and walls gilded by a rising sun. I worked out the course for Jim and we picked a plain nearby. We settled on a regular nest of repellor beams, to find an army gathered without, an army of men and women and children, not at

all frightened and apparently not hostile.

"Look," Jim cried. "They look like the museum pictures of 2000. The same kind of cars, and streets."

It was true. We checked on the atmosphere readings, found the temperature 76 fahrenheit, a mild spring day. We opened the locks and stepped out on the soil of Spor, Jim lugging the portable mentameter. I heard a buzzing sound. An airplane, of ancient vintage, judging by the museum films, circled overhead. Men in field gray, wearing leather leggings and caps, rode up on noisy, two wheeled machines.

"The Twentieth Century comes to life," Jim muttered. "It's like a dream."

A man with slightly gray hair stepped from one of the cars, approached us, flanked by the guards. He spoke, but the words were unintelligible. Jim smiled, pointed skyward and to the ship. The greeter nodded as if he understood. Then Jim put down the mentameter pack, adjusted earphones and the clamp about his temples. He gestured for the other to do likewise.

SOMEONE protested, and there was an argument, while we waited. Then the gray haired man spoke with curtness, and the guards fell back. Smiling, the Spor dweller put on the mentameter receiver. Jim began speaking slowly. "I am Jim Drake, of Earth, from which your ancestors were removed from Atlantis by Martians. We were sent here by other Martians."

The Spor governor, for that was what we learned he was, shouted to the throng. He spoke excitedly and people began to cheer, to gather more closely. Then he spoke to Jim. By then I had on the spare receiver.

"You are fulfilling a legend," the governor said. "From our early days the writings of our forefathers foretold the day when Earthmen would come from beyond the dark spaces. I, Tarquin of Spor and governor of the city of Osmand, welcome you. And if you will pardon my curiosity, what manner of machine is this, to interpret our thoughts?"

"Brother," I cut in, "it's as mysterious to me as it must be to you. The Martians perfected it and hold the secret."

"You think and talk like one of us," the governor chuckled. "Our astronomers sighted you yesterday and they predicted a landing at Osmand. So we are not exactly surprised."

We wound up with posting a guard about the ship and riding into the city with Tarquin. A radio in the car reported our progress, the announcer manifestly excited. We found thousands on streets and sidewalks and crowding office windows. Above all, we had the feeling we were among Earthmen, and yet it wasn't our technocratic manner of life either. There was nothing orderly. And I felt that I liked this way of living. I was in the same state of mind a week later, when Jim and I had already learned enough about the language of Spor to talk, and we'd been cramming on their history from the time the Martians left off so many centuries before. At Shadrak's suggestion, we'd kept quiet on our real mission. We found ourselves popular in Osmand as the days grew on, and we were guests of Governor Tarquin, on a swell estate bordering a small river. And then, as thousands lined the river for a water carnival, Tarquin told us all was not well on Spor. We were on a terrace and it reminded me somehow of Shadrak's place, without the dome, or eternal robots. "Take this city," he exclaimed. "We are a democracy, at peace with the world. But across the sea, in Plevia, there is a colony gathering strength, headed by Garok, a troublemaker we exiled ten years ago from Osmand."

"Why not take your planes, fly over and clean him out before he's strong enough to fight you?" I asked.

Tarquin gazed at me, and he looked bewildered. "Osmand makes no war.

We have our civil officers, but our army is small. We of Osmand, and of the other city states on this continent have lived in accord two thousand years without fighting. Garok will not invade us. But he does harbor criminals, and thereby makes trouble."

AND that was that. War was simply out of mind. And why not. If ever there was a placid countryside, which we toured in the next two weeks, it was the continent upon which Osmand was built. There were farms, small factories, everywhere homes with large grounds, and men, women and children employed. Everybody greeted you with a smile, it seemed, and there was much singing. It got Jim like it did me, and I remember what a jerk Shadrak pulled us up with, when checking with him from the ship after a tour of the continent to the other cities—Nostran, Tula and Polis. Shadrak told us the invading horn of Noir had indeed accelerated its spread toward the system of Maj and would engulf it within no less than eight weeks.

Tarquin accepted our report from Shadrak, for in the legend that Earthmen would come, was a prophecy of destruction to Spor. "Yes," he said slowly, pacing his terrace, his family engaged in sports below, "we have been watching the dark cloud you call Noir. Our astronomers are uncertain of the result."

"We're not," Jim said. "Noir will blast every vestige of life from Spor. The Martians know. They offer refuge on their planet, till you find another Spor. We can remove the first thousand. The Martians will send other ships, if you agree."

"If we agree." Tarquin stood beside the terrace parapet, with the skyline of Osmand gilded in a low sun. A shaft of light struck a passenger plane bound for a landing field. Cries of children, picnicking across the river in a park, drifted to us. Tarquin twisted a bit of paper into a wad, tossed it to the lawn. Then he turned to Jim. "I'll radio the other governors," he said. "We must place this information before them all, and let the people vote."

"Elections," Jim cried. "That will take weeks. We've got to act now. Shadrak says the dark nebula has tripled its speed toward Maj in the last seven days."

"Yes," Tarquin agreed simply. "That has been noted too, from our observatory. Last night two stars were blotted out. I'm sorry, my friends, if we delay. But that is the way to act. Now, if you'll pardon me, I'll invite the governors for a conference."

To our surprise Tarquin summoned Garok with the others. He was unlike the others, a spare, square jawed man no older than Jim Drake, eyes tending to the shifty side and with the gift of an orator. He could hardly wait till Tarquin delivered his talk of our mission. I could see the other governors refused to be stirred as Tarquin. One, Dalin, a fat, amiable chap, laughed. "Nonsense," he exclaimed. "I'll grant you these young men may have come from Earth as they come, but they could be putting over a giant hoax," he added shrewdly.

"But the astronomers sighted them five thousand miles away," Tarquin interrupted impatiently. "These men have instruments beyond our knowledge."

"Probably stolen," Garok spoke for the first time. His manner was swaggering, contemptuous. "For all we know they're adventurers from another planet. And if not, why must we meet to be told fairy tales. What of a dark cloud? Going to destroy Spor! Bah. A story to frighten children with. Is this what you brought us here to discuss?" This to Tarquin.

The governor of Osmand flushed. I saw Jim's fists clench, but he remained silent. "We're not here to give opinions, when we don't know what we're talking about," he snapped. "All our astronomers agree the dark nebu-

la is sweeping in like a tidal wave. These men journeyed into our solar system to warn us. I believe them. The question is, do the people of Spor want to believe, and act. That is the question. I propose a referendum, the subject explained over our radio nets, to be held one week from today."

"That date may be too late," Jim warned. "I suggest—"

"Bah," Garok cut in. "You want a panic, so that you can loot us."

That was when Jim sprang to his feet and struck Garok. The leader of Plevia went down. But he was up and charging like a mad bull a moment later.

Tarquin cried out and guards rushed in, separating the men. And now the governor of Osmand frowned at Jim. "You struck first," he said gravely. "You struck a guest of mine."

"I'm sorry," Jim told him. "But it was in desperation, because I realize the danger to you. Governor, we must act more quickly. We must."

Tarquin nodded. "So be it. As senior governor of the continental cities, I set aside the third day from now, and each governor shall join our radio net, so that the people may hear, and vote as they choose."

"You fools," Garok snarled. His right eye was discolored and he glared at Jim. "I demand this man, to be punished for striking Garok."

"He is in my custody," Tarquin replied clamly. "For striking a guest of mine, he must be punished."

Garok swept the room. I noticed the fat governor, Dalin, cringed. "I choose to do my own punishing," he snapped and walked from the room. Dalin glanced about at the silent group. "Your guest will cause us untold trouble," he said. "I saw it in Garok's eyes. He is seeking a cause to do damage to us, and you've permitted that cause tonight."

"If I did, I take the responsibility, Dalin. Do you other gentlemen agree to put the question before your people and permit the referendum?"

IN the end they agreed, although it was plain they were more concerned over Garok than the threat of Noir's black flood. And I had a hunch Garok had placed doubt in their minds about us. We persuaded Tarquin to attend our conference with Shadrak. And to our surprise, Shadrak, from the relief screen, spoke to Tarquin in the latter's tongue. Tarquin left our ship a man who looked years older. "I must act, at once," he told us with a sigh. "Why didn't I have our meeting aboard your ship where they too could have heard, and seen the Martian? It was my mistake."

"You're starting at once?" Jim asked.

Tarquin nodded. "But I'm afraid—afraid there are few who would leave Osmond, or any of the other continental states.

"Look about you," he continued. "Here is contentment, peace, a form of collective security for all. Outside of Garok there is no discontent. We love Osmand, as the others do their cities."

"Shadrak called this a Utopia," Jim observed thoughtfully. "I understand. But we must get the message over, Governor. And quickly."

I remember how we stood by while Tarquin started at daylight, over the radio net, explaining it all, and the news agencies were waking up. Crowds gathered on streets. People stared at us, some without enthusiasm, and we weren't surprised when Tarquin assigned us guards. We were getting blamed for the scare, it appeared. By night we were directed to return to Tarquin's home. Garok, it seemed, was taking to the radio, making charges, promising to capture and punish us for trying to create a panic on Spor. Overnight crowds formed outside the grounds of the governor's home. A large detachment had to guard our ship, and we made arrangements to return to it. And during these three days the grim, dark threat of Noir came on, invincible, inevitable, overspreading one third of the

firmament, blotting out star after star. Shadrak offered no advice, strangely enough. But he kept us apprised of reports from Martian astronomers. And then, as citizens of the city states poured out to vote on the question Tarquin had put before them, Garok struck.

He came with wave after wave of planes, and he dropped bomb after bomb of outlawed explosives, not for destruction, but to send the city into a panic. Too late Jim and I realized we had been a blessing to Garok. In upsetting the placid lives of the city states, we had furnished motive and opportunity to strike. It wasn't an invasion such as they used to have on Earth. But it was onesided, Tarquin's police force pitifully inadequate. And so as the planes landed, disgorging squads of men, armed with peculiar flame throwers, Osmand was taken and the referendum forgotten.

IN our refuge, with no arms save our ray guns, Jim and I looked helplessly on. So far we had been unmolested. I thought of the little single seater planes used as Earth patrols, and the blasting charge in the nose, reserved for emergencies. Jim was pacing the control room like a caged tiger. Shadrak was away from his post and we had transcribed our report of Garok's coming, for his screen. Now he signaled us, somewhat excitedly. Evidently he hadn't seen the transcription, for he spoke rapidly. "You have ten hours left," he cried, "before the Noir invades Maj. Ten more hours and you cannot leave Spor. Act at once." Jim reported in crisp accents of events. Shadrak swore in fluent Martian. Then he told us to open an emergency locker. At once robot trucks wheeled out a dandy two seater patrol car, with 20 milimeter ray guns for armament. "Destroy Garok's force where necessary," Shadrak ordered. "That completed, proceed at once with loading. Remove Tarquin's family first. He must be saved at all cost."

We broke out the rear exit as a two motored plane dived at our space ship. Jim nosed our patrol car upward. I was at the ray gun controls. We blew the plane out of the sky. Then we went upstairs. Garok had a fleet of planes he surely must have taken over from transport lines. There were different markings on them. Anyway, we knocked down planes, plenty of them. But scores had landed, with soldiers scattering, to take over objectives. We went down, blasted groups right and left. On the landing field we could see police rallying. I worked the ray guns on ground and sky alike during the next twenty minutes, and Garok's invaders surviving turned tail, abandoning their comrades already landed.

Tarquin was in command as his guards rounded up sullen, but defeated groups of Garok's men. Sirens were wailing, and we counted a dozen big fires raging. "Thanks," he acknowledged, nodding at our patrol car. "Garok is attacking the other cities. They've all asked for help."

"We'll take his planes," Jim promised. "But you've got to hurry, Governor. Shadrak says it's a matter of hours."

Tarquin seemed not to hear Jim. He stared toward the great fires. "Destruction," he muttered. "The hell of war turned loose after all these centuries."

Mobs had poured onto the field. Guards battled with them. The foremost tried to reach the captured invaders, yelling curses at them. Others continued toward us. I saw Tarquin stiffen. He ordered a ring of guards about us. "But why?" Jim demanded.

"They blame you," Tarquin said bitterly. "For stirring up trouble. In fact, they're demanding your lives as forfeit."

"But can't they understand?" Jim cried. "Hasn't it been made plain enough? You talked with them, explained our coming—"

TARQUIN waved a hand toward the angry men and women. Some had

stones, bricks and these they were hurling our way. "You can see for yourselves," he told us. "Dalin went on the air and blamed you, opposing our referendum. Said it was idiotic, that departure from Spor was unthinkable. He argued that his scientists promised the dark gas would not enter our atmosphere and would be dissipated, permitting sunlight to enter. My own people of Osmand were in doubt, even before Garok came. Now—well, they think only of this destruction, and the factors they blame, including you two."

"We're going to tackle Garok's other fleets," Jim said briefly. "Meanwhile, we're expecting you to report our act, and to plead with the people of Osmand to come with us, as many as we can take. We'll be back, in a few hours."

We collided with Garok's air fleet above Dalin's city, while it was at the height of its raid. It took us exactly eighteen minutes to clean the air, leaving destroyed planes blazing on all sides. Then we went on. But we were to get a stiff shock. Garok's sky fleet had vanished elsewhere.

"Okay," Jim decided, after we had cruised the coast line, "we'd better get back to Osmand. If Garok's fled, our mission is completed."

We withheld reporting through to Shadrak. The sky was unusually black tonight. Overhead, there were no stars. We raised the flames in Osmand some fifty miles out. Jim let out an angry yell. "Garok's attacking again," he cried. "Those are new fires."

Rockets wide open we raced down toward Osmand. There were new fires. Jim circled toward the plain where our ship was located. We saw a cone of flame leap out of the thick night. Garok was bombing the space ship.

We tore at the invaders like mad swordfish. We knocked them apart, then went in for a landing. One bomb had landed within twenty feet of the ship. We got out of the patrol car, sprinted for the big ship. Jim used a torch, assured himself the craft was undamaged. And when we went inside, Garok himself was the bird who climbed into our patrol car.

Pistol bullets cut by our ears as both of us tried to rectify that damage. Garok didn't know beans about a rocket car. But a dumb, conceited punk like him could wreck it, so we ignored the soldiers who'd climbed out of Garok's plane after that noiseless glide of his and raced for the patrol car.

Garok yelled something at us and accidentally touched off the ray guns. His own plane literally went into gas, and his men went down, or turned into more gas. Then the patrol car streaked skyward, bowling us over. Twin tongues of angry flame marked his course, higher—higher, blast wide open. "The fool," Jim cried. He'll burn the car up, if he gains any more altitude. The thin atmosphere will fix him—"

"Maybe he didn't start it on purpose, and can't do anything about it," I suggested. Jim's face was visible in the glow of the fires. "Maybe you're right," he agreed. And as if in confirmation, there was a dull red blob high above. The blob widened, sent out a shower of sparks and vanished. "And that," Jim commented, "is the last of Garok."

Evidently Garok's wild scheme to take patrol car and then perhaps our space ship, was with his last survivors, for we heard no more planes. A police car arrived. Tarquin had sent them. "The governor advises you to leave Osmand at once," was the officer's message. "Anger is growing against you two."

"Okay by me," I said. "We clean up a mess for you and get the rap. You don't believe us, so what? We'd better save our own skins."

"I'm going to make one last appeal to Tarquin," Jim announced. "It's our duty. You stay here with the ship."

"Listen you," I sounded off, "if you go back into Osmand, I go with you. But how?"

"In the police car." To the surprised officer Jim said: "If Governor Tarquin guarantees no hope to remove anyone, we'll leave. But first, I bear him a final message. Will you take us?"

"I'll take you," the officer said. "But it is foolish. We've got to take the chance, here on Spor. It's our world, the one we love. Because you destroyed Garok's men, we'll give you safe conduct."

THEY bore us through darkened side streets. By radio we heard the damage, and of thousands massed in downtown parks, listening to speakers who demanded our punishment along with the captured invaders. Tarquin was in his office and had just completed orders to give our ship full protection. His eyes were sunken. Jim went to the point at once. "Governor Tarquin, the Martian Shadrak asked us to remove you and your family, by all means. We must clear Spor by daybreak. Or before noon. Couldn't you persuade others—people of Osmand you want to save, to go to the ship. If it's a mistake and Noir doesn't wipe everything out, we can return. You know that. It's not taking a chance. Please, we're offering life—to all Spor—through you and a thousand others of Osmand."

Tarquin led us to a wide window. There was light below, and we saw a triangular space packed with thousands. Loud speakers were blasting and we could see a tiny figure on a platform.

"I tell you the forces of evil envy our world of Spor and seek to destroy us," the speaker shouted. "What influenced Garok to erupt from Plevia and attempt to enslave us? I'll answer that question. The men who came out of the sky with the wild story the end of our universe is at hand. Bah. Nature sends a dark cloud of gas nearer, and we're expected to fly into a panic. Our own governor lost his sanity for that unlikely yarn.

"I tell you, citizens of Osmand, we have made a civilization of such prosperity and contentment that word has reached other planets of this solar system. They sent messengers in disguise, to throw us into panic. In the future let us arm, and repel any such future invasion as Garok gave us. Let us punish by death any who come among us and seek to undermine us by fantastic stories. Men and women of Osmand, we shall never be frightened out of Osmand, and most certainly not to desert Spor. . . ."

"You see," Tarquin spoke presently, with sadness in his voice. "My family is down there. They consider me mad, to entertain any belief in what you say."

"But it is true," Jim cried. "It is true. They must be convinced. Spor is doomed, in hours. I tell you I am speaking the truth. And surely you will go with us. You believe us, don't you?"

"I believe you, Jim Drake. I know Shadrak, and his fellow Martians feel their responsibility. They saved us once, when they believed Earth was doomed entirely. It wasn't. And the Martians could be wrong again," he added hopefully.

An hour later we were taken by police back to our guarded ship. So many were on duty that the crowds had drifted back to Osmand. Fires were out now, and only the street lights were visible. Osmand, to all outward appearances, was peacefully going to bed. Shadrak, summoned at our call, came to the telescreen. "I was afraid," he said after Jim reported. "You have done your best. You have my permission to depart Spor immediately. The Noir is within twelve hours of Maj."

"Let's go," I cried. Maybe Tarquin and the others had some hope, but I was ready to go. Jim's next words sent cold chills down my spine. "May we stay, till sunrise sir. We should have at least four hours after the sun of

Maj is blotted out, before Spor is reached. Maybe, after they see the sun eclipsed, some will come to us."

"There is a chance," Shadrak conceded. "But do not delay. If none come, be prepared to take the course already transcribed on the robot screen."

It was midnight. I noted the absence of all stars ahead of Jim. "It's spreading," I told him. All at once I felt chilled. It was like a thick, cloudy night on Earth, only more eerie. Like being in a cave. The darkness seemed to bear down on the lights of Osmand and make them dimmer. Neither of us slept. We couldn't. We worked on our course plot, inspected the entire hull and paced every deck till the hour for daylight.

ONLY, there was no daylight. The chronometers aboard the ship checked Martian time, which we still kept. And yet Osmand's lights glowed, and the rest of Spor was in the darkness of a grotto. Then the city's lights went out.

We went outside, staring, conscious of abrupt coldness. Suddenly there were sirens screaming, then bells. All at once the lights flashed back on again. "The sun—the sun of Maj," Jim exclaimed, "it's blotted out. Forever, maybe."

Panic gripped me. "Let's scram," I told him. Jim shook his head. He ran into the ship, switched on all lights. The landing lights put the entire plain in a warm glow. Jim said the people could see us. So we waited.

Lights of a fast moving car sped along the highway from Osmand. It came on, to a quick stop. We saw Tarquin, and a group of men his age. "They're c o m i n g," I told Jim. "They've changed their minds."

"Tell the others to hurry," Jim shouted, as he ran forward to meet them. "We haven't more than an hour. The Noir is racing toward Spor from the sun."

Tarquin looked like a man already at the door of the beyond. He walked to us, slowly, head lifted. Then he stopped, and we saw he wore the robes of his office. So did the others. Slowly Tarquin spoke. "We are not going with you, Jim Drake."

"Not going! But man, you know the end. It's death, in less than two hours. We're risking our own lives and we thought—"

"None of my family wishes to leave Osmand," the governor said quietly. "Therefore, I have no desire to survive, without them."

"But all of you can live, if you come with us."

"You forget our neighbors, and our kinsmen." Tarquin pointed out gravely. "I think you do not understand.

"Life, anywhere else has no attraction for the citizens of Spor. I know that now, plainly. The referendum would not have registered a thousand votes of those choosing to abandon the planet, had I sufficient time to explain, and Garok had not run amuck." Tarquin sighed. "There still is hope, that this black fog will be dissipated, as our scientists contend. If not—then it is farewell, men of our parent Earth."

"What about going to Earth," Jim cried, suddenly inspired. "That would be different. We'll take you there."

Tarquin turned and walked to the long, official car. The others followed, silent, like men sentenced and yet hopeful of reprieve. As he stood beside the door, Tarquin lifted a hand. But he spoke no more. The motor roared. Twin lights flashed on the turf. . . .

We stood there for minutes. I heard a dry sob. Maybe it was from Jim Drake's throat. Or again, maybe it was from my own. I don't know. We stood there, till the car's rear light merged with the glow of Osmand's illumination.

Jim said, "we've got to start." As he spoke I saw a pup, a dirty, black and white pooch, tail working, trotting up. I scooped it up. Something from Spor was going to survive. Then I went to the ship.

Shadrak's voice was imperative as

he called us. "Leaving," Jim shouted into the transmitter.

"Waste no time, not even seconds," Shadrak cried. "Hurry."

The pup whimpered, snuggling against my shins as we lifted the empty ship.

Because the robots had the course, I ran to the visual screen and looked down on Osmand. There were lights everywhere. A searchlight leaped after us.

Somebody tapped my shoulder. Jim Drake had joined me. "Living now," he muttered. "See the pinpoints of light out there—the other cities. In a few minutes—"

The words choked off. You see, we had no sun of Maj to fix our beams upon. We had a distance to go before we could let up on the reserve engines Shadrak had installed. We had to flee from Noir's engulfing crescent, and find another star to build up our incredible speed. Till then, we could only approximate the speed of light. "Look. Building after building is lighting up. They're going to their shops and their factories and offices. Just as if the sun were shining."

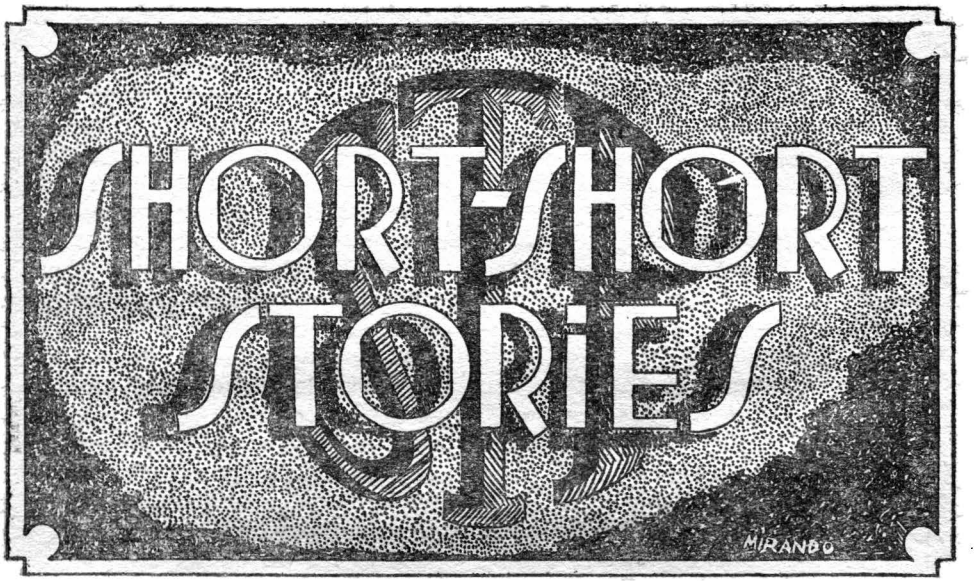
WE were gazing intently now. There was a clicking sound that told of Shadrak on the relief screen. He was taking our relay and the scene was visible to the Martian as well. Only he didn't speak. I think, in those last moments, we almost held our breaths, Jim and I a few thousand miles away already—or maybe a few hundred thousand—time had no bearing. It seemed an awfully long time. Then a dark finger rubbed out Osmand.

One moment and we could see the moving lines of traffic, the glowing windows even. Then there just wasn't anything at all on the screen. Jim scanned for the other cities. But there was just darkness, impenetrable darkness. We did see a searchlight break through, a moving finger, raking through for a split second. Then it, too, vanished.

From the relief Shadrak spoke. His voice was strangely gentle. "Look no more, Jim Drake and Jerry Kos. Turn back to your charts. Spor is gone. You did your best. We know that. It was not your fault. Look forward. Within thirty minutes you will find the first star to give you speed."

It wasn't real, that flight from Maj, with Noir flowing beyond the sixth planet, its crescent outrider seeking new stars to black out, and leave dry, lifeless masses in a black universe. On schedule we picked up our star, and at sight of it we felt the first return of sanity. We sped back by Orion's family, and into a familiar bit of space, with Shadrak coming to the screen at intervals, and at other times sending us transcribed news events from Earth. And thus we crossed the sky, thrilled by the sight of Neptune, Saturn and his rings, and at last the disks of Mars and Earth, beneath our own sun, so free of the black menace. We made a routine landing, settling a short distance from Shadrak's place. He was there to welcome us, with other Martians. And Jim walked up to him slowly, holding the tiny, wriggling pup we had brought along. "The last survivor of Spor," he said. Martians dislike dogs, although they admire any member of the cat family. But Shadrak reached out, studied the tiny specimen from Spor. The pup licked his hand and Shadrak smiled. "Take him back to Earth," he said. "They will appreciate the animal, better than we." Shadrak tapped each of us in the Martian way of showing deep affection. "Never reproach yourselves, because you took a ship to Spor large enough to return a thousand persons, and returned with this poor animal.

"I think," he added with a sigh, "we forget too often we are instruments of a divine power none of us, Earthmen or Martians, or any other world, can ever understand. It was granted us the privilege of rescuing men and women of Atlantis and removing them to Spor. It was denied us, the chance to save them a second time."



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.

INTO THE SUN

by JOHN L. CHAPMAN

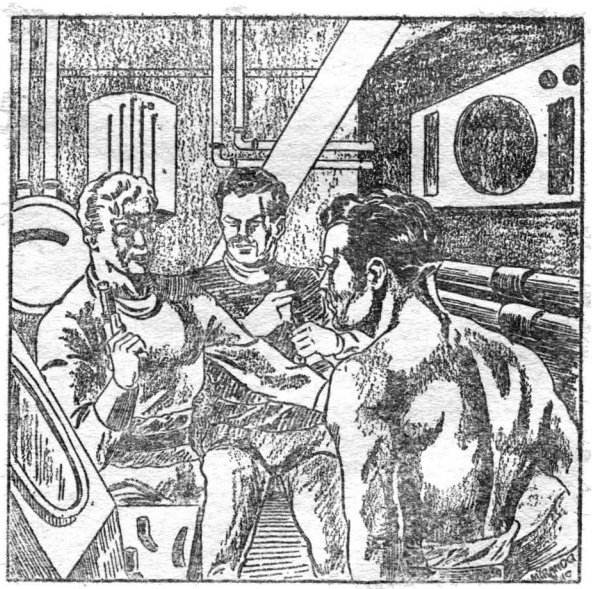
"THERE'S nothing like having a good quart of scotch with you when you're falling into the sun," said Lejeune. "Won't you join me, gentlemen?"

"Listen to him," sputtered Geitz. "He's enjoying this. He likes being cooked in a cubby-holed space ship; he likes to sit here day after day while the floor beneath him is burning his shoes."

Lejeune, the wiry French biologist, lowered the half-empty bottle from his lips and scowled at the ship's doctor. "But not for long, my dear Geitz, not for long. Our fate lies within a few hours. The ship will be drawn closer and closer to the sun. The heat will become unbearable. Then— pfffffft! —the ship will be a little spark — "

"You're a pain," growled Captain Rogers.

Lejeune raised his eye-



Lane plucked a gun from his locker. "This'll make it easier," he gasped, lifting the weapon to his head.

brows quizzically and grinned. He said nothing, walked to a bunk, and sat down beside Lane, the pilot.

The silence continued for some time, broken only by the footfalls of Captain Rogers in his nervous pacing. There was nothing to do but wait. The four of them knew that. The ship couldn't hold out much longer; it would burst under the terrific strain, would be reduced instantly to a cinder by the sun's blistering heat.

They were trapped, falling into the sun inevitably.

"One meteorite," said Lejeune casually, "one hurtling fragment of some interstellar gadabout which chose to cross our path at the wrong time. That's all it took to smash our jets and send the four of us toward that fiery mass."

"Shut up!" snapped Rogers. "It's bad enough without your moaning!"

Oblivious to the captain's words, Lejeune patted his bottle affectionately.

"In the name of heaven!" growled Geitz, leaping to his feet. "Why do we sit here like a lot of mummies? There's a rocket capsule aboard, you say, with sufficient power to carry one of us to Mercury. Why don't we use it? I ask you, Rogers."

"You answered that yourself," the captain said bluntly. "True, that rocket capsule can carry one of us to Mercury. Just one, understand—there's room for but one person in a capsule. I ask you—which one of us would that be?"

"That's beside the point," muttered Geitz, as he wiped beads of perspiration from his forehead. "You don't seem to realize what valuable information we possess. Think of that cylinder in the supply room. It contains all the photographs we took of Mercurian plant and animal life, and the photos of Vulcan. To say nothing of the data concerning the sun's corona—why, our analysis would be of infinite value to earth scientists!"

"Quite so," Rogers said crisply. "But while you're thinking about that, don't forget the three men who would be left aboard this ship—think of what would happen to them." He stopped his pacing and shook a finger under the doctor's imposing Van Dyke. "Do you know what would happen to them, Geitz? They'd burn alive—they'd cook—while on earth your scientists would hop around in glee over a few photographs of Mercury!"

Geitz sat down heavily, exhausted.

"The doc's right, Rogers," Lane interposed. "There's no reason for all four of us dying when it's possible for one to gain freedom. And for God's sake if you're going to do something do it in a hurry! We'll burn before you make up your mind!"

"My mind's made up," Rogers retorted. "I'm staying. In case you've forgotten, a captain is the last man to leave his ship. As for you three, fight it out among yourselves. Draw straws—anything. The consequences will be your worry."

"I'll stay," murmured Lejeune, lifting his bottle to his lips.

"You don't mean that," said the youthful Lane. "You want to go—we all want to go—but it can only be one of us."

He fell silent, placing his head in his hands. Rogers resumed his pacing.

The ship drifted on, slowly it seemed, ever nearing the solar furnace, falling toward the flames that were eager to dissolve the tiny cruiser locked in an unyielding gravitational pull.

"Soon," mused Lejeune. "Soon we'll be too close for the rocket capsule to break free of the sun's drag. Then there will be no doubt as to what will be done. Ha!"

"Damnation!" yelled Lane, jerking erect. "How can you be so confounded happy about it all? We're falling into the sun, man—doesn't that have any effect upon you?"

Lejeune shrugged. "Perhaps. We are falling into the sun, yes. We'll die, no doubt, so my future is definite. I know what is coming. Soon I shall be but a tiny spark, drifting nowhere in

a big sun. Do I regret being a tiny spark? Not when I have my scotch with me."

"You're a smart guy," Lane thrust at him. "Maybe you can tell us how to choose the rocket capsule's passenger."

"Simple, my friend. The captain won't go—he must stay with the ship. I have no relatives, only my scotch, so I am satisfied. The doctor must stay—he's too fat to get in the capsule. M'sieu Lane, the honor is yours. Au revoir."

"Don't be crazy—"

"Do not worry about us, my friend. We will find something to do. Perhaps I can interest the doctor and the captain in three-handed bridge. If not, we'll wait. We'll go soon—sssss! Like that."

Lane buried his face in his hands again.

For a few moments there was an unbroken silence. From the double-insulated hulls emanated a dry hotness that scorched the already blistered air. The hotness increased, rising to a fierce, intolerable degree. It grew, inexorably, pressing against their lungs—

Lane floundered crazily, leaped across the control room and plucked a gun from his locker. "This'll make it easier," he gasped, lifting the weapon to his head. "Somebody's got to fly that capsule—"

FOR ten minutes no one spoke. It was hard to speak—each breath was a torture to the lungs.

"Lejeune," said Geitz finally, in short gasps, "in God's name will you get into the capsule and take that cylinder to Mercury? One of us has got to go—for Lane's sake!"

Lejeune, sprawled out on the pilot's bunk, made no reply. The captain stood before the dull gray view-screen, watched him a moment, thoughtfully. "Can't you reverse the field?" he asked at length. "I'd like to see the System just once more."

Rogers had already made a few deft motions on the instrument panel. Presently, the screen came to life. Its scope possessed a bright halo—the sun's glow. In the center of the screen Mercury was visible, a faint, receding globe. Rogers moved the scope slowly until he found the feeble point of light that designated the earth. He watched it grimly. "Satisfied, Geitz?"

"Dr. Geitz is dead," came Lejeune's monotone.

Rogers turned. The doctor lay on his face, immobile and silent.

"The heat," said Rogers, "and his age."

They carried him to the supply room, laid him beside the inert form of Lane.

The two men stood watching earth's dull glimmer on the screen. The heat pressed them relentlessly, always increasing—

"Take the capsule, Lejeune. You've no reason to remain."

"I prefer to stay, Captain Rogers. You have relatives—it is only proper that you should fly the capsule."

"Under any circumstances, Lejeune, the captain does not leave his ship in distress. Should I return to earth without the rest of you, I would lose my rank unquestionably. Now, before we draw too close, take the cylinder to Mercury! You're a fool not to!"

"M'sieu Rogers, I possess magnificent renown as a fool. I shall remain."

"But the cylinder—"

"The cylinder, Captain Rogers, be damned."

They looked at each other a long minute. Rogers, stripped to the waist, perspiring, his thick black hair hanging in his eyes; Lejeune, small, wiry, faint traces of a smile lurking on his lips.

Suddenly the floor shook beneath them. A violent shudder passed through the ship from stem to stern. The momentum of the sunward fall increased.

Regaining his balance, Rogers gasped, "Good God—the capsule!"

They saw a flash of light on the screen, saw the tiny rocket streak for

Mercury in a flare of brilliance. It dwindled rapidly to a receding speck that was swallowed in the depths of space.

Speechless, Rogers and Lejeune raced to the supply room. They found Lane there, but no Geitz and no cylinder. Needles on the face of the capsule compartment jutting out from the wall registered zero.

"He was faking," said Rogers. "He wasn't dead—he merely pretended, the coward!"

Lejeune took a quick drink, threw a sidelong glance at Lane's bloody form, and walked slowly back to the control room. Rogers followed. The clicking of their heels made a sullen echo upon the blistered walls.

On the screen, something dim and remote was moving, growing in size. Rogers hastened forward in amazement.

"It's Geitz!" he breathed. "Lord—he was too late—he's falling back!"

"A pity," said Lejeune. "He has so much longer to wait now. It must be horrible."

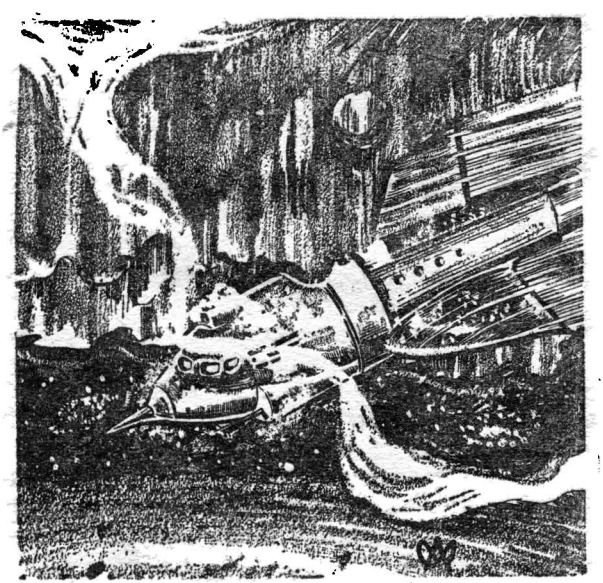
"And the cylinder," Rogers sighed. "All that information will be lost." His tired, bloodshot eyes followed the little capsule's course across the screen, back toward the flaming sun.

"Perhaps," remarked Lejeune, "there will be another expedition to Mercury some day, another group of scientists, with a better ship and better equipment. And no meteorite will prevent their safe return to earth." He hesitated, took two tumblers from a nearby cabinet and filled them with the remaining contents of his bottle. He handed one of them to Rogers, took the other himself. "A final toast, Captain?"

Rogers accepted. "To the next Mercurian expedition, Lejeune."

"The next expedition, Captain Rogers."

They drank, and Lejeune sucked in a breath. "I say—it's getting a bit warm in here, isn't it?"



EARTH'S MAGINOT LINE

by ROY PAETZKE

Lurid sheets of flame danced outside the portholes as the surging ions sought to break the shield.

JIMMY LORRE saw the Earth spinning away from under him. It was odd, this sensation of having nothing under you, nothing to keep you from falling back upon the world from which the sleek grey space ship had lifted you. Lorre felt uneasy. He had traveled in rockets hundreds of times, of course; but this was his first flight into space.

Rockets had already been in use for nearly a century; but none had ever before ventured into outer space since the first one had met a horrible end in the Heaviside Layer. As a result of that incident, small rockets had been developed for flight between cities, and, unhappily, for war.

Finally a large space cruiser, equipped with the Lorre polari-neutralizer, set out in a second attempt to pierce the H-layer. Appropriately named the *New Hope*, it had just left Earth on its way to the Moon.

Lorre felt that some weird, alien menace confronted them. The details of the outcome of the first attempted flight to the moon lingered in his mind. He had looked forward to this day with eagerness; yet now he wished that he hadn't come along. Crushed down into the pneumatic cushions by the acceleration, his vision was so restricted that he could see nothing but the Earth falling away from the ship, down, down.

The Lorre polari-neutralizer had been designed to send out a powerful field of polarized force that neutralized the energy charge of the Layer, and so shield the ship from the raging storm of ions that compose the ionosphere. James "Jimmy" Lorre, the inventor, had made sure of that. But the ionoscreen, which was to keep cosmic rays and other harmful radiations from the vessel's occupants beyond the Layer, had been impossible to test. Math, however, had proved that it would function correctly.

"Dr. Lorre!"

The ship had stopped accelerating, so that the pilot might have the fullest co-operation from his reflexes while passing the ionosphere.

"Call me Jimmy," Lorre said succinctly. "Everybody does. What is it?"

The pilot motioned toward the complex mechanism that stood between them and annihilation in the turbulent ionic sea they were swiftly approaching. "I wanted you to be on hand in case anything goes wrong. Even without the polari-neutralizer, the hull will stand up a few minutes, in case a wire comes loose in your machine, or something."

Lorre nodded. The pilot, always a thorough man, was taking no chances.

Hammond, at the controls of the *New Hope*, watched the chronometer like a hawk. If the shield were applied too soon, the power would not last; if too late, the ship would be destroyed.

He signaled the physicist. Lorre flipped the switch, gaining satisfaction from the humming drone that came from the generators. An instant later, they hit the Layer.

Livid sheets of flame danced outside the portholes as the surging ions fought to break the shield that enveloped the ship with the intrepid band of spacefarers aboard. Could they cheat nature with their science? The hull began to grow hot. Lorre increased the power.

Then they were though! The tremendous velocity gained before cutting the acceleration had carried them through! They were now in the star-specked blackness of outer space, their ionoscreen, which duplicated conditions in the H-layer, surrounding the craft at a safe distance. Apparently it was keeping the cosmic rays out as predicted.

It had been done at last! Space travel was an accomplished thing. Mars, Venus, the Major Planets, all were within man's reach. It was the dawn of a new era!

Hammond, the pilot, turned to congratulate the physicist who had made all this possible. But his grin faded, he raised his eyebrows in astonishment at what he saw. Lorre, having experienced the successful culmination of years of effort, lay on the floor of the control room, apparently fast asleep!

That the polari-neutralizer would be a success, Lorre had felt certain. But he could not control the elation he felt as they passed the outer edge of the Layer. *He* had made it possible!

Someone whispered. The physicist

looked at Hammond. The pilot was staring out the port. Then he heard it again. But this time it was—commanding! Commanding him to lie down!

Lorre did so. He seemed unable to summon the will power to resist. The whisper went on. It seemed to be communicating directly with his mind, without the use of the indirect route through sense organs. When Lorre realized that the whisper began to form coherent words. He became oblivious to all else.

Thus it was that when Hammond tore his gaze from the port, he found the physicist in a comatose condition. Rapidly, he summoned the rest of the crew.

It consisted of—a doctor, a bio-chemist, a metallurgist, and a mechanic. They had been picked out of hundreds of volunteers. Able men, they were ready for any emergency that might arise.

The doctor immediately tried to bring the seemingly unconscious man around. Lorre came to sudddenly.

"What's wrong?" he inquired of the doctor, who explained as much as he knew, which was little.

"Of course," said Lorre. "I might have known.' Then, "Hammond!"

"Yes?"

"Decelerate immediately. We must return to Earth as soon as possible."

"But the moon?"

"The moon is comparatively unimportant now. Besides, I can tell you exactly what we would find there. I'll explain everything as we go back. Start the generators. We must accumulate power to penetrate the H-layer on our return."

Lorre being the leader, the pilot adjusted the jets to turn.

"Now, would you explain this rather—er—abrupt alteration in our plans, Dr. Lorre?"

"Certainly. Call the rest of the men back."

Hammond did so. The mechanic appeared undisturbed; he wasn't even curious. The bio-chemist and the metallurgist were greatly interested; the doctor wondered whether the success of the polari-neutralizer had shaken the sanity of its inventor.

"The universe," began Dr. Lorre, "is full of mysteries as yet unsolved. One of these is the cosmic rays.

"We know little of their origin or their properties. It seems, however, that they have a marked effect on evolution.

"The Kennelly-Heaviside Layer screens out most of these rays. It is as a result of this that evolution can go slowly forward toward its goal. For should all the cosmic rays reach Earth, life would devolve back into protoplasm!

"In the back of the so-called Horse's Head dark nebula is a dying star. The nebula shields us from the cosmic rays it gives off. But in only a few years our sun will carry us directly in the path of a deluge of these rays against which our ionosphere will be too weak! Man will go back to the caveman days from which he emerged. But he will not stop there. He will go back to primal protoplasm. Then, because the ray barrage will be too strong for it, it will die. All life will go the same way. In less than one million years, the world will be devoid of life!

"There is a way out. We can build a machine to strengthen the Heaviside Layer. It will be merely an iono-screen around the entire world, to hold back the rays that pass the natural ionosphere. I have been given the details of the machine, and by the time we arrive on Earth I will have them down on paper—"

"But how do you know all this?" the doctor interrupted. He was still in doubt about Lorre's sanity.

"On Mars there is an age old civilization that faces the same peril," was the reply. "For years they have been trying to warn us of what they knew would come. Their telepathy, however, was unable to pierce our H-layer. When we emerged from it, they i m m e d i a t e l y detected our

thought vibrations, which are not stopped by the ionoscreen, and began communication with the most receptive mind aboard. It happened to be mine."

"So when I found you lying in a comatose condition, you were talking to the Martians?" asked Hammond, dazedly.

"That's right. The sooner we can start building the ionoscreen machine as the Martians have already done, the better we'll be off.

"It is likely that you are wondering as to whether I am in full possession of all my mental faculties, doctor. You will find that I am quite sane when the first Earth-Mars trip is made. The Martians are even now preparing to receive visitors from Earth. They have no space ships; their science of mechanics is not as highly developed as ours."

Rocket tubes flaring silently in the void, the *New Hope* turned its nose Earthward, bearing the timely warning that would save mankind from a terrible fate.

The COMET Short Short Story Award Is

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Read this announcement carefully. It means recognition for some beginner each year, and will represent real achievement for the winner.

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4. No award will be granted or announced until a sworn statement from the winner attests that the winning story is his or her first professionally published story.
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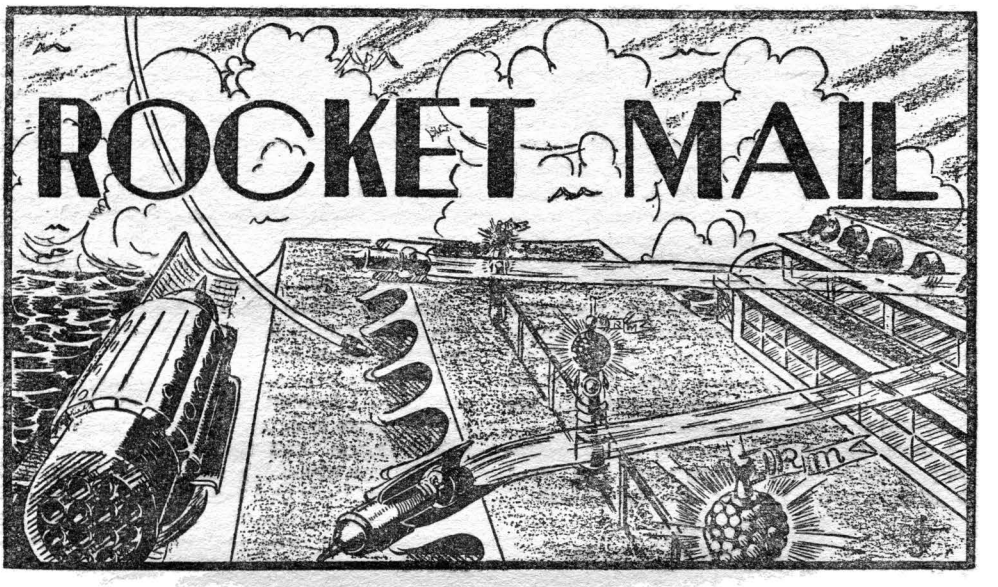


H-K Publications, Inc.,
New York City.

Gentlemen:

Having purchased your January issue of COMET I cannot help but take time to tell you what a rotten magazine it is. I have had any number of magazines that I thought were poor but this is the worst. Not one yarn even half interesting enough to finish. I certainly begrudge the mere twenty cents it cost, but won't get hooked twice.

P. W. BOYD,
Saugus, California

Dear Mr. Tremaine:

Sky. Lark? I always thought it was Skylark. Nevertheless . . .

No. 1. Started out fine with a good cover by Morey (tho' I prefer Pauls for No. 2) —but then; Oh Goooddd! where did you dig up that "artist"? And William's story lived up to the illustration, too; he can write excellent material if he puts his mind to it; but that hack . . . altho' I will admit the idea was OK.

You were down for the count then; but you struggled to your knees with The Ultimate Image; got up on your feet with Equation for Time; and went on to score a knockout over ol' man failure with Momus Moon, your editorial, and Rocket Mail. A note on your eds.; all three have been unusually absorbing. Keep it up. SM's letter was extremely interesting as were your comments.

Issue No. 2 boasted an excellent cover by Paul. Although I didn't get a chance to read any of the stories printed in this issue, the paper was whiter, hence better; and the illustrations were a decided improvement. The Spacean, which I would gladly have seen in the Interplanetary Ashcan, did an about face in my mind and I now add my humble plea for its continuance.

No. 3. Cover: good, although I still prefer Paul—with machines. The Immortal; I rated it a B+; a very good story with an excellent plot, but please, Mr. Tremaine, it didn't deserve the build-up you gave it—and it certainly wasn't any classic. The ill., although not a good reproduction due to the mediocrity of the paper (hint for better you know what, huh, please, huh?) was very good. Jackie Williamson's tale was a gem itself and I gave it an A–. I think the word is Venerian not Venusian. SAC can always be depended on to come through with a good satire; hence, a B to his short. Spacean—GOOD. Cosmic Tragedy: Ohhhhh! I think I'm going to faint; what LOUZEEE super-science: D+ Now Planet of Illusion had some reason to be in COMET, the super-science being slightly more digestible. But how can you photograph an illusion? B. The Rocket Mail is excellent; a good-sized type and what's even more important no ads! I see the omnipresent Hidley has "crashed" COMET, too. I liked Isaac Asenion's (are Asimov's ears red!) letter in No. 2—better than some of his stories.

Don't worry, here they come. You didn't think I'd let you down without asking the inevitable improvements, did you now?

About answering readers' questions: if there is some major issue, such as smooth edges, more pages, etc., answer it and don't ignore it. And also don't print letters that ask reams and reams (one or two is per-

fectly all right—my letter has one or two) of questions and not answer a single one of them. That, to me, seems rather silly.

Longer stories; they are always, or nearly always, the best. Nail Rogers for some covers; is he being monopolized for a reason? I note from Louis Chauvenet's Detours that you are subscribing to all the important fanmags. Very commendable. Got Fanfare yet? But I also agree with Louis in that 128 pages isn't enough for 20c. Remember how many you used to publish? Remember also what happened when you adopted smooth edges? Need I say more? The paper is at best only mediocre, but I should gladly sweep that improvement into the vasty deeps if you had any idea of adopting the aforesaid two improvements.

I guess that will do for the nonce. Naturally, I want my letter printed. You want to print it, now don't you, Mr. Tremaine?

Sincerely yours,

SYLVESTER BROWN, JR.,
7 Arlington Street,
Cambridge, Massachusetts

1. Right. It is "Skylark." 2. The question of the right name for the inhabitants of Venus. VENUTIAN is correct, according to Webster's New Unabridged Dictionary, and from now on COMET will use that spelling. There is no such word as Venerian. The word Venerean refers to devotee of the goddess of love and has the same root meaning as Venereal. So, you correct our spelling but not our word. 3. Time alone, combined with increasing support, will enable us to provide trimmed edges, more pages, different paper. —F. O. T.

Dear Mr. Tremaine:

Since I purchased a copy of the January issue of COMET somewhat late, I had intended to wait until the February issue came out before writing you. However, the February issue appears to be late, so here I am again. Paul's cover for the January issue was very attractive, but it had the same gaudy sky that most of his paintings have. While I'm on the subject of covers I might as well make a few suggestions; two, to be exact. Let H. V. Brown do a few covers, but for heaven's sake don't start one of those awful cover monopolies. And now to the rest of the magazine. I'll take the illustrations first, because they're what I look at first. Forte's work was not as good as what he did for the first issue, and he shows indications of adopting a comic strip style. Kelly's work has greatly improved. Giunta's work, except those illustrations for the short-shorts, were the best in the magazine. In other words, none of them were very good. Boy, I can just see you gnashing your teeth! Rocket Mail comes next, and the only thing I can say is that I would like to see more letters printed. I notice that Martin Alger thinks the short-short story idea is going to make it a lot easier for first timers. In a way it is, but has he considered the fact that a true short-short story is one of the hardest, if not *the* hardest, kind of story to write? In the true short-short, yours, by the way, weren't, nothing, *absolutely* nothing, can be added which does not develop the plot. It doesn't make any difference how interesting or nice sounding it is.

The two "short-shorts" were good, but I was disappointed in Lowndes' story. I really expected much better from him.

As to the best story in the issue, I really can't say. I haven't read them all, but right now it seems to be a tie between "The Lightning's Course" and "And Return." The former was an absorbing tale. Almost real, and the best of its type I have yet read. The latter was very interesting, and reminded me of the Binder who seemed to have disappeared.

I've looked the "Editor's Note Book" over again, and wish to suggest that you leave the cover just as it is. Also that you have covers which illustrate scenes from some story. On answering the readers' letters, I would say yes. However, you should cut down on the space this takes up as much as possible; except, of course, in the case of letters which are of great interest to most of the readers.

I am very glad to see the announcement of stories by Ross Rocklynne and Jack Williamson, as they are two of the best. I hope, though that Williamson's will be better than his recent stories, which haven't been much to brag about. Well, that just about washes things up. Here's hoping the Feb. issue will be as good as it ought to be.

I *still* don't like the Spacean!

Cordially,

LEONARD MARLOW,
5809 Beechwood Avenue,
Indianapolis, Indiana

Dear Editor:

After I finished reading the January issue of COMET, I immediately sat down to type this letter and tell you that never in all my reading experience of science fiction have I enjoyed reading a magazine as I have yours.

No kidding, either. Every story in this issue was swell! And what a variety of plots. Simply swell!

"The Way Back" and "And Return" take first place and all the other stories take second.

Your feature "The Spacean" is very original and is off to a good start. Just don't let it die off, as so many new features do.

Your Short-Short Stories dept. is a good

idea and like you say a swell chance for newcomers to show their stuff. But I couldn't for the life of me get the idea in back of the story "A Green Cloud Came" (probably due to my very thick cranium).

Just keep up your magazine in the future like you are now and I will be a most satisfied soul.

Sincerely,

KAY DUVAL,
Wellsboro,
Pennsylvania

Dear Editor Tremaine:

It was certainly a pleasure to find that the bi-monthly wait was not to be a permanent institution. This reassuring discovery was overshadowed, though, by a troop of mediocre illustrations and an unbelievably putrid cover.

Through bitter experience I've found it the proper thing to praise the tales in a stf mag that the editor extols beforehand and that the fans will most assuredly claim to be super-thisa-and-thata; in a sense it is like it—or else! With this threat in mind I should proceed and hand the laurels of victory to Williamson and Rocklynne, whereas I find it more suitable to laud them with numbers 3 and 4, and in their place give 1 and 2 to: a really fine novelet from a newcomer and an equally good novelet from an old-timer whose work in other mags does not compare with that of the rankest amateur. Arthur Cooke has combined the three leading despotic governmental groups—savage anarchy, insane totalitarianism and insipid lifeless Utopia—and manufactured a thrilling yarn, a happy ending and a little common sense. For a while I certainly thought the "reconditioned" Stevens would win in his idiotic and barbarous plan; I also thought that the dictatorial Alfreed (his growing egotistic "self" was brilliantly laid to view with words) would perhaps be victorious; if anything, I hoped the Utopian slothfulness would succeed—the least harmful of the evils. But whatever the climax was to be, I informed myself while reading, the story would be 'way down near the end of my list. Now that goes to show you just what good literary ability can do—it "ended" up first. Oddly enough, you seem to feature the worst kind of illustrations—spreads.

A fair pic and in the style most appreciated—full paged and framed—is Forte's for Williams' grand slam "Dark Reality." The main idea here, too, was suspense—but a much different kind; in this engrossing yarn the reader realized the uncertainty of the plot because of the "groping" characteristics in the telling. In "Psychological Regulator," the suspense is not revealed until the smashing climax; thereby hangs the comparison—and still *both* yarns were excellent.

Also shining examples of literary craftsmanship were "Star of Dreams" and "The Immortal," but mainly that—literary. The underlying plots of both were time-worn before I ever saw a Paul thriller, but the beauty of the words and phrases and the utter vividness and pathos—in both cases—of characterization made them winners.

Now that the refreshing novelty of Forte's art has peeled away, a rather scorched talent is brought to view. He is decidedly good, but like most of the newcomers, he has slipped into two-dimensionism. Glantz looks pretty good, and Kyle seems better than in the other mags; Giunta and Mirando are fair-ish, and Taurasi seems to have perked up a bit. But on the whole there is room for improvement. I suggest Wesso—for covers only, Finley, Bok, Thompson, Streeter, and, of course, the regulars, Paul, Morey and Binder; and kindly don't forget those full-page pics.

The Coblentz short was "kinda klever" and fifth. Peterson's "Lie on the Beam" was most confusing—but perhaps it was merely the atmosphere at the time. I didn't care a bit for "Healing Rays of Space"; it almost lost seventh place to a very clever short, "Planet of Illusion." M. V. Gordon is a name I'm beginning to look for. "Cosmic Tragedy" is last and pretty good, too.

So here's the score:

Four excellent stories (features and novelets).
Two good ones (short and ss).
Three so-so (two shorts, and one ss).
One good pic (Glantz).
Three fair pics (Forte).
Five bad ones.
Out-of-this-world—and I don't mean heaven—cover.
Three swell depts.
. . . Oh yes, and a nice editor who answers the readers.

Very sincerely,

C. HIDLEY,
New York, N. Y.

P.S. How about sending me that Tremaine catalog. The two books I already have look good and interesting.

Dear Mr. Tremaine:

Well, well! Thought the COMET had deserted the field. Finished reading it last night. Would you like to hear my opinions? No? However, having fastened my tentacles upon you, I will not relinquish my hold.

The much-toted "immortal." A study in human emotions, that is all. Is this the stuff classics are made of? Nevertehless, I liked it. Rocklynne is one of my favorites.

I see you have beguiled Coblentz, per in-

structions. The satire of "Headhunters of Nuamerica" was entertaining and delightful, although he started off in a somewhat stereotyped fashion. The illustration for this was terrible. It's fascinating how the wires that bind the girl are parted so that the breasts become apparent. Was the artist afraid that her sex couldn't be determined otherwise? I enjoyed "The Star of Dreams" by Jack Williamson. The humanness and realism of this tale is what made it click. The plot was nothing new. But how can I forget the hellstones. So vividly they were pictured in my mind.

The "Psychological Regulator" left me groping about for a light. Can't say I cared much for it. I didn't like either of the Short-Short Stories, and the "Spacean" has begun to pall upon me, definitely. The other stories were fair. I liked the style of writing in "Dark Reality."

The picture on the cover wasn't bad and the illustration for "The Immortal" was fair. The rest of the illustrations were puerile, inaccurate, and amateurish. I like the letters from the readers best of all. The stories are merely subjective to the letter department and I consider them a necessary evil. I'd rather read the stories after absorbing someone else's opinion of them and then compare my mental reactions, likes and dislikes, etc., with theirs. Is this heresy?

To tell you the truth, I don't think you are improving very fast.

I suppose you weary of my unconstructive critical letters. After all, am I God, that I should judge? Perhaps I am too hasty in my criticism.

Well, as I see you are struggling with my penmanship (could you call it that?), I will close.

Sincerely,
ALLEN CLASS,
518 Tremont Ave., S. W.,
Massillon, Ohio

No Good Illustrations!

Dear Mr. Tremaine:

Congratulations on your first issue of COMET. Usually the first issue of any magazine is the worst but I hardly think that you will get a more interesting collection of SF stories under one cover. MOMUS MOON, though I was disappointed at its brevity, was very interesting and novel. If, over in Europe, people died so pleasantly! I believe I can say that no story in the magazine was bad or poor. BRATTON'S IDEA made me shiver all the night I read it. PRIMAL CITY was kind of vague but very enjoyable. There is only one complaint I can register against the stories. Some of the stories were too much inclined toward the detective type of fiction.

Now we come to the cover and the illustrations, which is an entirely different matter. I do not share your enthusiasm over Morey's cover. Just what is the fishy-looking bird doing in the middle? If conditions were supposed to approximate earth's I can assure you we have no such monsters in the sky. Morey's illustration on the inside was very good.

The list of authors under the heading of STF could have been left out and that space also devoted to the picture. The best inside illustrations were Binder's and Morey's. Holmdale and Forte are all right but I don't care for the other artists. It would be nice if you could get some illustrations by Paul and (not too hopefully) some pictures by Virgil Finlay.

Too bad Weinbaum is not alive so he could contribute to you. A novel by Merritt would be appreciated (or has he sailed down the river Styx, too?)

The feature THE SPACEAN was very interesting. The advertisements were the highspots in the paper. The Editorial and the EDITOR'S NOTEBOOK were duly appreciated by me. Mr. Sam Moskowitz's letter was very interesting and triple cursed be the editor who buys SF stories, sight unseen. I hope your magazine will continue with stories like those contained in the first issue.

Yours sincerely,
FRANK ROBERSON,
844 Ferdinand
Forest Park, Illinois

About Cosmic Tales

Dear Mr. Tremaine:

I've just finished reading your latest issue (3rd) of COMET, and my opinion on the whole is that your magazine is advancing by leaps and bounds. Your stories have increased 100% since the first issue. Though none have been classics they have been a darn sight better than most of the yarns published today. "The Immortal" was a very good yarn, though slightly spoiled by crude handling in the beginning. Second place I give to Williamson with his "Star of Dreams" and Johnny Peterson's "Lie on the Beam." By the way, Mr. Tremaine, Gardner's name is not spelled with an "i," also I place his little yarn as the best yet printed in the short-short story column. "The Spacean" is the best department. The readers' department following close behind it. I'd like to see you write those good old pep editorials as in the old astounding days. Getting a yarn by E. E. Smith is going some, I'm waiting to read it.

I'd like to inform your readers that I'm again publishing "Cosmic Tales" and that my first issue since taking it over will be dated April-May-June and will appear by

March 30. The cover is by Frank R. Paul and contents by Lovecraft, Gardner and Moskowitz, plus a page for the Cometeers. The magazine will contain 16 pages and be completely mimeographed. Sells for only 10c.

Your best interior artist is Forte, with Mirado and Guinta second. Kyle is lousy, worse than when he used to illustrate for my amateur magazine "Cosmic Tales" in 1937. Giantz is so-so.

Your best cover artist to date is Paul. Morey is not so good, though his first cover was OK except for the flying fish. I'd like to see you use Forte on the cover. I think he's got it in him.

Your best discovery of the year is Sam Moskowitz. I'd say that before the year is out you'll be proud to point to him as your "great discovery of the year."

One objection, sir editor, bimonthly publication I do not like.

Sincerely,

JAMES V. TAURASI,
Cometeer,
137-07 32 Ave.,
Flushing, N. Y.

Advice for R. M. Williams

Dear Mr. Tremaine:

A full spectrum of praise for Mr. Robert Moore Williams for his story, "Dark Reality." Only once in a blue moon does such a vivid, unusual portrayal find its way into a magazine, science-fiction or otherwise. In his off-the-beaten-path and highly satisfactory style, Mr. Williams has succeeded in depicting to the full the rugged courage and spirit and stamina of true man.

Taking a mere orange plot he succeeded in building it up to ultraviolet in characterization and narration. Give us more, much more, of Mr. Williams.

And you, Mr. Williams, you have a narrative technic that would be hard to better, but it is fragile. Nurse it, sir, pamper and baby it. Don't exploit it with every idea that comes along. Think twice or a dozen times before tying it down to a plot.

Not enough said, but a justification of the original purpose of breaking my since-birth silence.

To log further impressions of your mag:

I, being an STF reader of not many months' regular standing, have developed to the point where that is the only type pulp I buy, and though I have not yet developed a technical knowledge I have very good literary taste (from my own standpoint at least).

I bought your first edition because of its 1-1 value, read, and moderately enjoyed it. The cover was far below spectrum, vibrating in the heat waves. The "innards," including "The Oversight," "Bratton's Idea," and "Momus Moon," merited my purchasing the second edition, on which the cover vastly improved, although rather out of kilter with any story contained therein.

In the second edition "Lightning's Course," "The Twilight People," and "The Way Back" rated a fair blue, while "The Green Cloud Game," rated green on the grounds of its human appeal.

Which brings us to the current number.

I am not able to judge the full issue properly, having just read, and still being in the grip of "Dark Reality," but on the whole I am very pleased with it. *With* the exception of "Headhunters of Nuamerica," which I would only rate red, but one can't expect everything.

A word about "The Spacean." A feature of many possibilities which can be consistently ultraviolet. With planning and thought it can be made to tell a factual and imaginative story of space-travel from its birth. In its gossip columns can be built characters that will live for the readers, and the lives as portrayed can contain much good humor as well as an interesting month to month story. Handled properly it is a feature of unusual possibilities. Hang on to it.

Having blasted enough on my initial voyage I'll cut my jets and head for the nearest planetarium to wish star-bright for future COMETS.

KERMIT E. SUMMERS,
215 N. 28th Street,
Louisville, Kentucky

P.S. A glad hand to fellow-Louisvillian Henry Buchtal and congrats on an unusual letter—K. E. S.

The Denvention

Science-Fiction Fans:

Have you heard that a S-F Convention will be held in the Mile Hi city of Denver, Colorado on the 4th, 5th and 6th of July, 1941? It is sponsored by the Colorado Fantasy Society, with business offices in Denver, at the following addresses: Olon F. Wiggins, General Delivery, and Lewis Martin, 1258 Race Street. Please contact either one for any information which you don't find in this letter.

It is hoped that every S-F enthusiast who reads this will put in an appearance here on the above dates. Dues in the CFS are very nominal, 50c, which entitles you to a beautiful silver and blue membership card, a generous supply of booster stickers, and a subscription to the official CFS mouthpiece, "CFS Review." Your support is most urgently needed if we are to hold a successful convention. It is the duty of every lover of S-F to support us all the way. By that, I mean: Sending your 50c immediately, and by being here for this gala affair. I, personally, guarantee that this will be the biggest and best

convention yet held, and you can hold me to that statement, and will say that you will really have missed "the" convention of them all if you are not on hand here for this convention, which, for the sake of the records, will be called "Denvention."

One of the features of this convention, which has never been worked at previous such affairs, will be a S-F playlet, written by Willard E. Hawkins, one of the ranking S-F authors of the day, and will be staged by a local group of actors. Also, and this should interest all of you, the publishers of COMET are offering $25 in cash and a beautiful silver medal, to the fan who overcomes the greatest obstacles to get to this convention. This alone should be worth the effort of being here. The silver medal will have the name of the winner engraved thereon. The winner will be picked during the afternoon session of the last day of the convention. Better make arrangements "now" to be here—and, above all, don't put off another day sending along your 50c CFS dues. We need it, and will appreciate your cooperation to the fullest.

Denventionally yours,

OLON F. WIGGINS,
Chairman,
"Denvention"

Dear Mr. Tremaine:

Rocklynne, for the first time, is disappointing. It isn't his fault, for he wrote an excellent, quietly beautiful tale when he wrote "The Immortal." He did not, however, write a classic, and that was what I was expecting. The tale did not compare with his splendid "Into The Darkness," printed early last year by another publication. That Rocklynne's unstrained, gently poetic style made a fine and outstanding story of "The Immortal" cannot be denied; that it made a masterpiece can. Not that it matters, save to explain why the able and consistently good Mr. Rocklynne was, for me at least, a disappointment. And that doesn't matter either.

Anyway, more of Rocklynne.

W. B. McQueen, one of the small and intimate group of Columbia fans who make up the "Columbia Camp" has a theory, a sound and plausible theory, why Burrough's wild-eyed and utterly impossible yarns are so popular with all of us. It's simply because Burroughs is so utterly sincere. His stories are quite humorless for the most part, and told with a dead-sound-fact; this-is-the-truth-take-it-or-leave-it air, that fairly oozes reality. The same thing goes for Williamson, who writes the silliest melodrama on earth, but somehow manages to give such an impression of believing it himself, that he has his readers believing it, too. Thus "The Star of Dreams." Good stuff, if you like Williamson, and I do.

Cooke quite okay; Coblentz lousy. Obviously one of those things he sat down to bang off in his spare time, not giving a damn for anything but writing just well enuf to get his one cent a word. Stuff like "Headhunters of Nuamerica" explains my violent opposition to the "big name" policy of most stf mags on the stand.

Liked "The Spacean" but wonder if I will much longer. "Healing Rays in Space" hackneyed, but surprisingly good for Haggard.

"Dark Reality." Chef-d'œuvre! Beau ideal! *C'est magnifique!* Or as we say in the vernacular, *swell!* You were, Mr. Tremaine, as most of us well remember, the first editor with the courage to use Stuart's superb atmosphere tales; now, it seems, you're the only modern editor with guts enuf to follow the same procedure with Williams' brilliant little classics. Please—more of them, all you can obtain. Here, at last, is a writer with what it takes. A remarkable style, beautiful phrasing, and a very fine originality. Here is a writer who writes because he has to; because something down inside him cries, and scratches, and wails in a small, sad voice for expression. I'm raving; the story and the writer speak eloquently for themselves.

"Dark Reality," not "The Immortal," is the classic.

Peterson is like Kipling—hard to follow, but always good.

The short-shorts were fair.

The letter section is becoming one of the best in the field. I heartily second Mr. Bridges' request for a combination of the old and the new—"characterized thought-variants" in a way of speaking. I am very happy, too, to see you supporting the Denver Convention. It will be a really worthwhile and enjoyable affair which I, in common with every other stfan in the U. S., hope fervently to attend. Am eagerly awaiting the "Denvention" announcement in your next issue.

The COMET, incidentally, is one great reflection of the Tremaine personality, with generous gestures such as your support of the Denvention. The Tremaine personality being a quite pleasant thing, the reflection is more than welcome.

I don't like your illustrations.

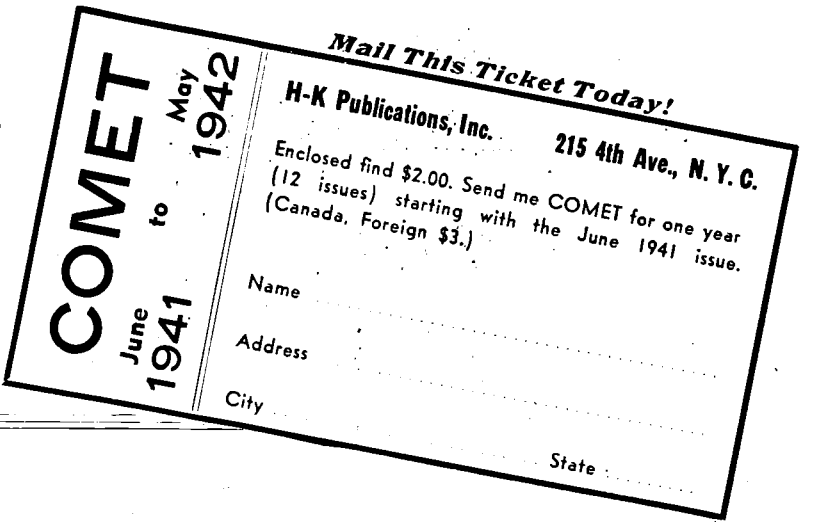
I don't like your paper.

But I do like the magazine, itself, and it *is* improving measurably. May that improvement continue, and may the COMET realize soon the future I, and the rest of your readers, anticipate for it. I believe it will.

Most sincerely,

JOSEPH GILBERT,
3911 Park St.,
Columbia, S. C.

Here's Your Ticket For A Year Of Superior S.T.F.



Coming Attractions

The next issue of COMET will be sensational—its contents will be described from coast to coast by elated scientifiction fans in words of many syllables that will outdo the vocabulary of the most rabid Hollywood press agent, words like "Colossal", "Stupendous", "Overwhelming", etc. will become just as much relics of early 1941 as horse buggies are relics of days gone by! Why? Well, here's the biggest news of 1941—the next issue of COMET will feature:

The first complete story of a series by

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Absolutely new to science fiction. New characters—new conceptions—fast-moving, challenging adventure by the No. 1 Master of Science Fiction Stories!

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Startling, daring, different—your head will buzz with its sound, satirical logic!

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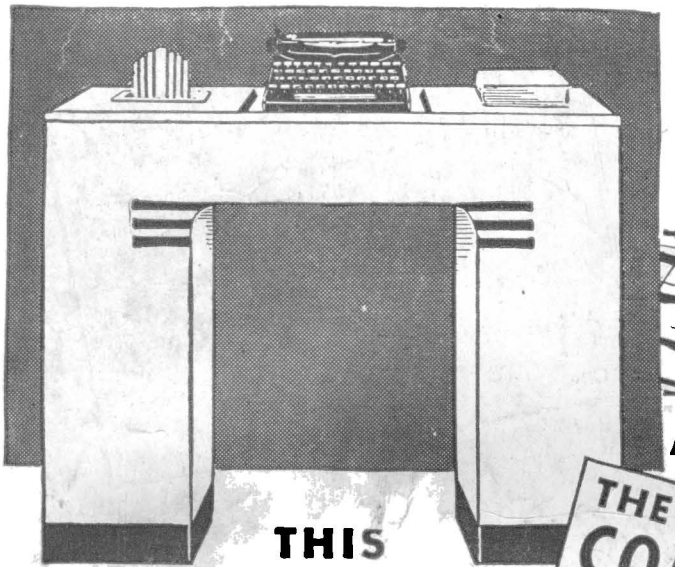
by R. R. WINTERBOTHAM

In which life spans from steel and feeds on the electricity which is life—a menace so real, so terrifying, that men fight it with FEAR!

And there'll be many other dramatic stories in this greatest science fiction magazine ever—the next issue of your favorite COMET. You'll find stories by Manly Wade Wellman—Robert Arthur—Leight Brackett—and many others—ably illustrated by outstanding artists! Make sure you get this number—as soon as it comes off the press—by placing an annual subscription today. Use the convenient ticket above—it will bring you hour after hour of thrilling, educational, worth-while stories all during the next twelve months. Act now!



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