

DEC.

10¢ Flash Gordon

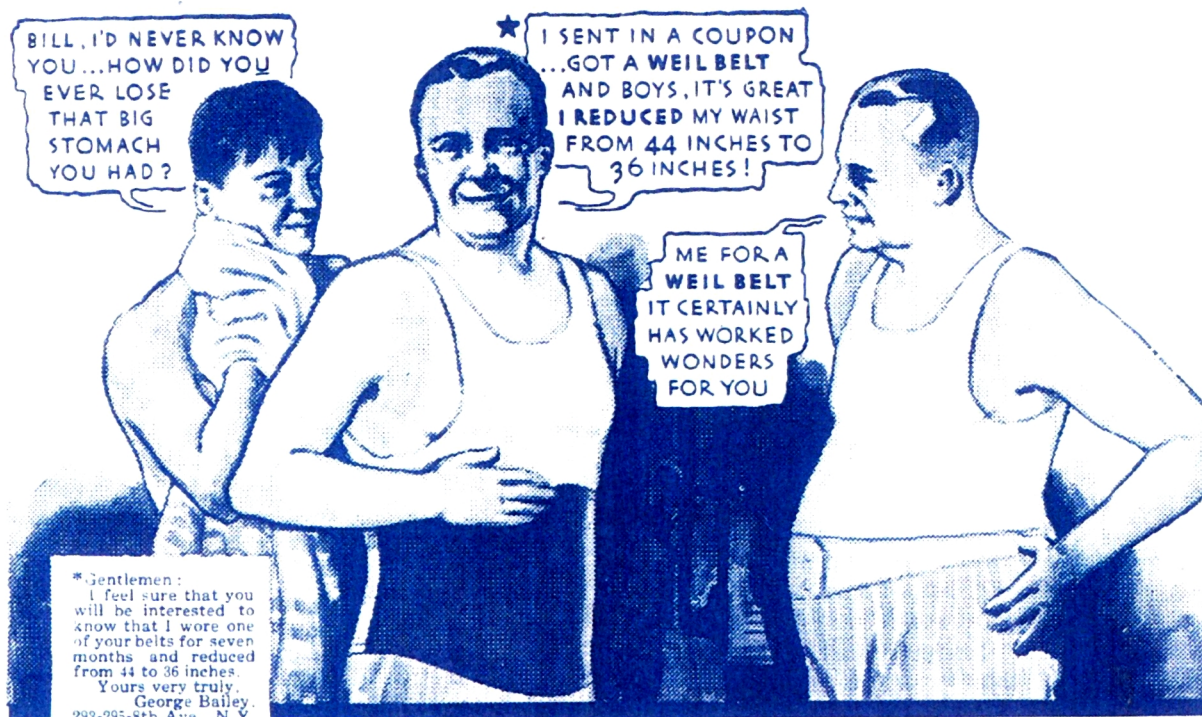
STRANGE ADVENTURE
MAGAZINE

ILLUSTRATIONS
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FULL COLOR



A FULL LENGTH NOVEL

"THE MASTER OF MARS"



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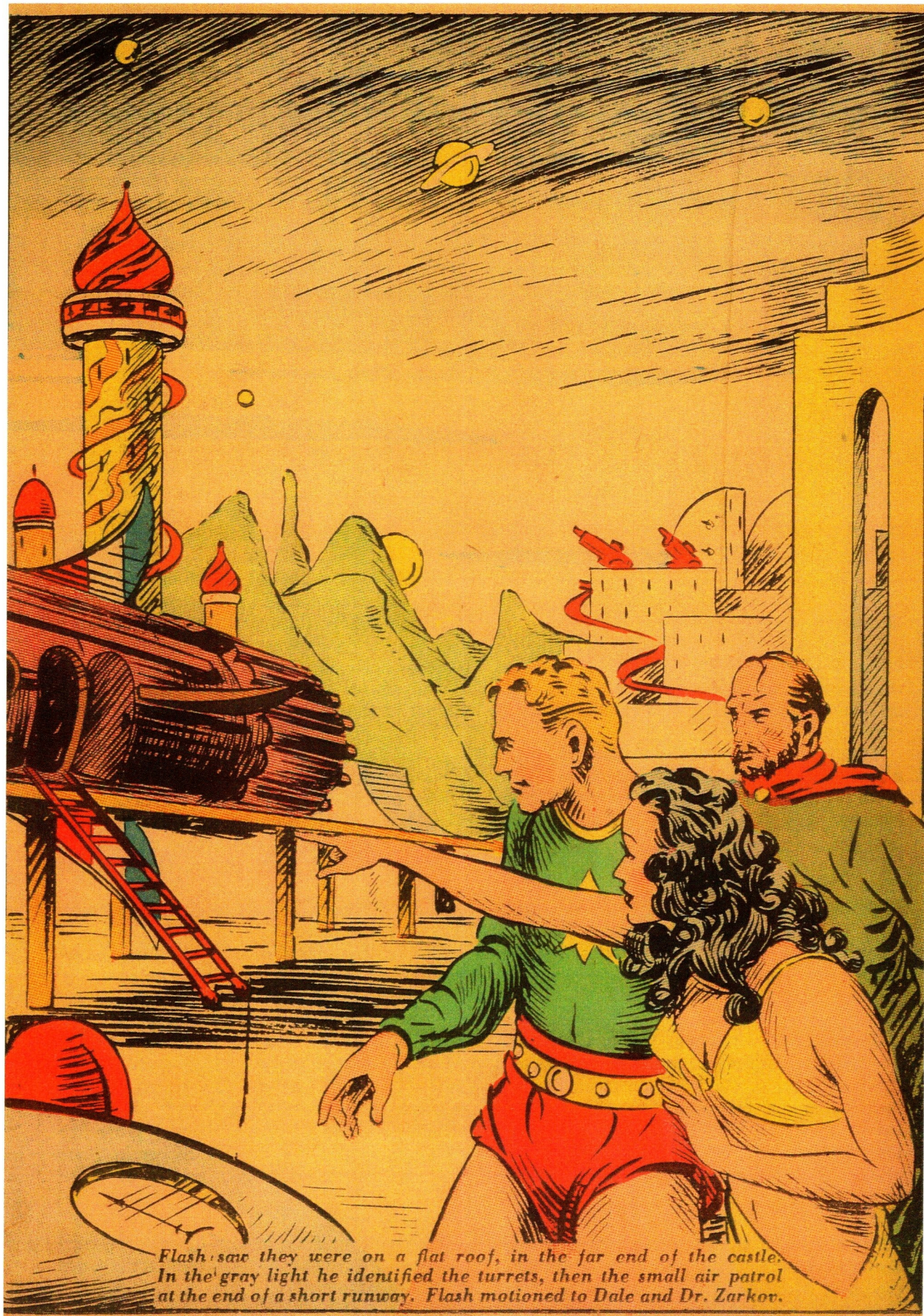
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Flash saw they were on a flat roof, in the far end of the castle. In the gray light he identified the turrets, then the small air patrol at the end of a short runway. Flash motioned to Dale and Dr. Zarkov.



"All right, Huzor, we're ready!" said Flash Gordon. "Straight to the spaceship, and not one false move —" Slowly, almost funereally, the cavalcade made its way out into the Cerec a night.



FLASH GORDON

Strange Adventure

MAGAZINE

Vol. I

DECEMBER, 1936

No. 1

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Yearly subscriptions: U.S. and Canada, \$1.00; in all other countries, \$1.20. Single copies, 10 cents.

Distributed by the Federal News Company, Inc., 330 West 42nd St., New York, N. Y.

HE THOUGHT HE WAS LICKED—THEN A TIP GOT BILL A GOOD JOB!

MY RAISE DIDN'T COME THROUGH MARY—I MIGHT AS WELL GIVE UP. IT ALL LOOKS SO HOPELESS.

IT ISN'T HOPELESS EITHER BILL. WHY DON'T YOU TRY A NEW FIELD LIKE RADIO?

TOM GREEN WENT INTO RADIO AND HE'S MAKING GOOD MONEY. TOO. I'LL SEE HIM RIGHT AWAY.

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SOON I CAN GET A JOB SERVICING SETS—OR INSTALLING LOUD SPEAKER SYSTEMS

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YOU SURE KNOW RADIO—MY SET NEVER SOUNDED BETTER

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N.R.I. TRAINING CERTAINLY PAYS. OUR MONEY WORRIES ARE OVER AND WE'VE A BRIGHT FUTURE AHEAD IN RADIO.

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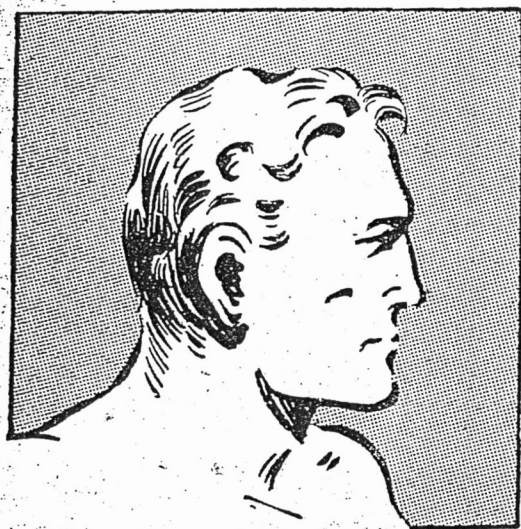
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Flash Gordon.

The MASTER

Sudden darkness was about to descend upon the Universe — Pwami's sinister designs to conquer all the Worlds, and

CHAPTER I.

Pwami—Tyrant!

TALL and lean was Pwami, Master of Mars. Tall and lean and austere. And in the royal blue Commander's uniform of the Martian Defenders he seemed taller, leaner—and even more austere. But, in addition, the uniform added to Pwami's bearing a resplendent regality of which he was consciously proud.

Though now, as he rose from his Radium metal throne and came slowly, deliberately down the steps of the dais to the floor of the council room, Pwami was conscious of but one thing—sudden disaster.

At the head of the council table he paused and stared, with blazing agate eyes, down its gleaming metal length to the man at the far end.

"Would you kindly repeat that, Droco."

It was not a request, for Pwami did not make requests. Rather it was a soft, subtle, velvet command. Twelve men sat about the table—each an appointed governor of one of the twelve geometrical states of Mars. As Pwami spoke eleven of these governors shifted restlessly in their chairs; and the twelfth—Droco—rose nervously to his feet.

An exceptionally tall man was this Droco, and muscularly built. In his own state he

ruled sternly, relentlessly, fearlessly. But now the very strength seemed to have drained from his body, and his rugged features were etched with a febrile dread.

"I said, your Excellency, that I have tried to get this earth man—this Dr. Zarkov—to come in with us. But I have failed."

He spoke hesitatingly, huskily. And all the while his eyes never left Pwami's face. He watched, fearfully, the slow change of the Dictator's expression. Pwami just stood there, one hand resting on his end of the council table, watching Droco, weighing the governor's reply. But it was barely noticeable that Pwami's hand shook slightly, that a tremor seemed to course through his body. Then abruptly he became again the stern, dominant man who had fought his way into supreme command of Mars.

"You failed—you failed to get him to come with us! You failed to coax him over! Droco, under our system you had but one alternative—force! Force—the driving power of our government." He paused for dramatic effect, then went on. "Droco, prepare immediately to bring this Earthling, Zarkov, to us. His intention of the atomic disintegrator *must* be ours!"

And how right Pwami was! How necessary to his future was this discovery of Zar-

By James Edison Northford

of MARS

bring them under his terrible domination . . . And an Earthling challenged this mad dream of the Dictator of Mars!

kov's! For without it he faced almost certain annihilation. And with it—untold power. Yes, it was as necessary to him as the very blood in his veins, the very breath in his body.

For this year of supreme command of the peoples of Mars had not been a happy one.

It had been a year, almost to the day, since Pwami had ousted Marcola, the former regent, from his throne and assumed the dictatorship of Mars. At that time there had been much rejoicing over the planet. For in glowing words the Dictator had promised a new order of things, had promised to transform their dream of a Utopia into a concrete reality. And the people, thoroughly dissatisfied with Marcola's selfish, haphazard rule, breathed what they believed was the vernal breath of a new life.

Thus was Pwami's Geometrical Government born.

His first act in office was to abolish all former territorial boundaries and to divide the planet into twelve equal, individual, numbered states; establishing at the head of each a sectional governor. Where before large cities such as Libya, Ajop-Aeria, Elvinium and Litora-Asalynus had controlled the surrounding territory, now their local governments were done away with and the cities fell under the direct rule of the numbered state in which they were located.

He even went so far as to abolish the old calendar and to divide the 687 day year into four equal seasons of 170 days each, in turn subdividing each season into thirty-four 5-day weeks. The seven days which remained over at the end of the year, Pwami proclaimed a legal holiday, a period of festivities to be enjoyed by all in allegiance with the new government.

Next he ordered erected for himself a huge, Radium steel castle, stronghold in the central part of Mars. Then, into this place, he called all men of science, all men of skill in every branch of learning and from these selected his Secretaries. This accomplished, his final move was to organize a huge army, bestowing upon it the impressive title—Martian Defenders.

For Pwami had dreams—dreams that went beyond the mere dictatorship of Mars.

But Pwami, in his state of driving excitement over his victory, had made one mistake—he had delayed the fulfillment of his promise to have the canals dredged so that the water from the ice caps would be increased. And so the drought which was upon the land grew serious.

This, in itself, might not have been so grave. But with the drought of water came a drought of money to add to the people's ills. For the expenses of Pwami's government had to be increased threefold, and, facing

ruin, the people revolted, and there was talk of a new government.

But for this Pwami was prepared, and as soon as the word reached his ears he acted. Into every state he sent his troops, with orders to smash every political uprising, to rule the revolutionists with steel and lead. And so, in the security of his castle, the real reign of Pwami began—the reign of terror and death.

The Dictator repeated his statement.

"Yes, Droco," he said softly, "the invention of Zarkov's must be ours. In the hands of our enemies it might prove disastrous. It is up to you to get it. And remember, Droco, our rule is not one of persuasion—but of demand!"

"Please, your Excellency," Droco replied. "I attempted confiscation of Zarkov's invention. I had him arrested, thrown into a concentration camp. I had his laboratory searched, but it was useless. He carries the secret in his head—in the safest place of concealment possible, and so he laughed at me."

"A hundred lashes failed to elicit the formula, and so I planned a strategic campaign. I had him released—and now he is under constant guard, is being watched carefully without his knowledge. Eventually he must either put his formula on record, or build from it. Then, your Excellency, we will have him."

Pwami considered this for a moment in silence.

"He has built nothing? Not since you first were aware of his discovery?"

"Nothing."

Again Pwami was silent, and into his small, agate eyes there came a distant look.

"I believe you did right, Droco. I believe that some day soon we will have the secret—the key to a door that might lead to the hall of everlasting power—to a Dictatorship of the Universe."

There was a slight buzzing sound by Pwami's side. He bent slightly, pressed his thumb against a button. Instantly a metal screen—the receiver of the latest phonoscope—lighted up, and a man's face appeared. Pwami stared down at the black, triangular box on the table; at the features of the brutal-faced man.

"Well?"

The man's voice came back, clipped, metallic.

"Three strangers approach."

"Three strangers? Which road?"

"From the south—from Zara," answered the guard.

Pwami clicked off the phonoscope and quickly crossed the room to a larger screen at the south end. He snapped a switch on the instrument board and immediately there appeared a scenic view of the south road.

Three figures rode slowly up the road astride Central Martian horses—the horned, red-maned creatures of the warmer climates. The leader of the trio was a broad-shouldered, muscular, waxen-haired person. He was bared to the waist, wearing only skin-tight trunks of red metal-cloth and red, calf-high boots. As he rode, erect in his saddle, the sun glistened on his bronzed body.

Behind him came a second man—older in years, with thinning dark hair and a cropped, curly beard. This second man wore a belted green jacket, open at the throat, orange tights and high, leather riding boots. The third figure, that of a young girl with flowing, wavy hair and a closely fitting, belted robe that swept loosely down about her ankles, completed the procession.

For a few moments Pwami watched their progress. Then he said, puzzled:

"What manner of cavalcade is this?"

The governors had risen from the table, and one by one drifted across the council room to gaze into the screen. But it was Droco who answered:

"By Phobos, it's Zarkov!"

"The Earthling? And who is the blond brute and the shapely female?"

Droco looked closer, waited until the pictures on the screen had become larger. Then he said:

"And the Earthling friends of Zarkov, Flash Gordon and Dale Arden."

"Flash Gordon!"

Pwami's voice rose. He wheeled abruptly and faced the awe-struck Droco.

"Flash Gordon—the Rebel of the Fourth State? I thought you had interned him."

Droco swallowed visibly. He ran his hand under the tight fitting collar of his M. D. uniform. Finally he spoke.

"I had, your Excellency. But in releasing Zarkov, the man refused to go until I had also freed his friend, Flash Gordon. It was a necessity."

"Enough." He snapped off the picture, strode austere back to the phonoscope on the table. He pressed a button and almost

immediately there appeared the picture of the brutal-faced guard.

"The three visitors," Pwami said slowly, quietly. "See that they are well received. Have them brought before me at once."

He turned back to the gathering of his governors, and now there was a thin, satisfied smile on his lean features. He held up his hand, said in a cold, soft voice:

"Gentlemen, the conference is adjourned for the present. I will summon you later in the day. At that time I expect to have some important news for you."

"News?" Cratyl, Governor of the Ninth State, asked. "Do you mean something about Zarkov's invention?"

"Are you going to force it from him?" Lasmorn, Governor of the Twelfth State, asked.

Pwami continued smiling. Now he walked slowly back up the steps of his dais to the metal throne. He turned again, and replied, looking directly at Droco.

"At that time," he said, "I expect to have in my possession the power I have long dreamed of. Zarkov is in my hands."

CHAPTER II.

The Conference.

RISING high above the township of Zarah on a large, flat-topped hill, Pwami's castle was a sight to behold. Constructed entirely of the new Radium steel, the product of his own scientific laboratories, and surrounded by a huge wall of the same material, it was safe against either a land or air invasion. For, though Pwami doubted that any of his subjects could summon sufficient courage or numbers to rebel against his tyrannical rule, he nevertheless, played safe.

Rounding a turn in the road on the outskirts of Zarah, Flash Gordon saw, for the first time, Pwami's castle. He drew his horned steed to a halt and for a few moments sat there, unmoving, as he stared at the burnished magnificence of the steel structure. Then his bronzed, muscular body became tense, his chiselled features grew suddenly stern, and into his cold gray eyes there came an odd flickering light. He turned slowly about, facing Dale and Doctor Zarkov.

"He fears revolt," he said. "Has feared it from the first. Else why the precautions?"

"Of course he fears revolt," Dr. Zarkov replied. "That should serve us as an effective

wedge. He should be willing to bargain. And once he does—"

"But a man who is afraid, Zarkov, is dangerous. I doubt very much whether we will succeed."

The doctor smiled.

"Was not the very basis of our plan formed on the concrete knowledge that he fears me—fears me more than the people of Mars fear him? Was it not because he wants the secret of my discovery that we were both released from prison?"

"You should learn," Flash Gordon said, "to look Pwami's gift horses in the mouth. We'd better be going. Dale, I wish you hadn't come."

Dale Arden smiled, and there was a defiant light in her soft brown eyes as she sat proudly in the saddle.

"Do you think," she replied lightly, "that I could have stayed back while you walked into the mouth of the lion? Flash, dear, you know better than that."

A rare smile drifted across Flash Gordon's lips.

"I suppose I should," he said. Turning again he stroked his horse's red mane, lifted slightly on the reins. The giant beast started forward at a slow trot, and Flash turned to look behind him once again. He finished softly:

"Well, darling, the mouth of this lion is large enough to hold us all."

At the gates of Pwami's castle they halted, and Flash dismounted to ring the bell for admittance. But hardly had his feet touched the ground when the huge steel doors swung open, and a quartet of guards stood in sight.

"Dr. Zarkov and party?"

Flash and the doctor exchanged glances, and finally Zarkov nodded.

"Yes. We want to see—"

"His Excellency, the Dictator of Mars, is expecting you. This way, please."

Once more Flash and Doctor Zarkov looked at each other. Slowly Zarkov shook his head.

"I said nothing."

Flash swung back to the guard.

"How did Pwami know of our arrival?"

The guard shrugged.

"His Excellency has ways of knowing many things. If you will please dismount I will lead you to his presence."

Flash helped Dale to the ground as Zarkov dismounted, and then, escorted by the huge Martian guard, they went through the outer

courtyard of Pwami's castle. At the inner door they found a second guard awaiting them, and they were then led through the maze of the castle's interior.

A beautiful place it was. Giant steel columns rose up to an arched roof, and all about them in the tremendous hallway, were various steel ornaments, and beautifully designed steel furniture.

At the far end of the hallway, the leader of the Martian guards—identified by a geometrical bronze badge, instead of a metal one—pressed a concealed button on the wall. Almost at once a small, rectangular window opened and the upper half of a man's face was visible.

"Dr. Zarkov and party," the leader said.

The window closed immediately and the huge steel door swung open. The guards who had escorted them there left, and two others ranged on either side of them. And it was then, for the first since Pwami had begun his reign, that Flash and Doctor Zarkov and Dale Arden finally saw the Martian Dictator.

Seated on his metal throne at one end of the room, Pwami made no move to rise as the three Earthlings were led before him. He motioned easily to the council table before him, and said, in dulcet tones:

"An honor, I'm sure, Doctor Zarkov. Please be comfortable."

As Flash helped Dale to one of the gleaming metal chairs, and Zarkov walked toward the head of the table nearest the throne, the two guards left. When the outer door had closed behind them, Pwami spoke again.

"May I ask, doctor, the purpose of your visit? And may I inquire into the identity of your two friends? Never has it been my pleasure to view a more lovely lady."

Undoubtedly Pwami meant the remarks about Dale to be construed as an innocent compliment. But he could not keep his inner feelings out of his tone, for in it there was something sinister—something that was unclean, that crawled.

Flash started abruptly to his feet, but Dale's hand closed about his wrist.

"Darling," she whispered. "The people of Mars—they depend on us."

Zarkov had turned, and become tense as Flash started up. They exchanged understanding glances and, as Flash settled again in his chair, he said quietly, simply:

"You are right, Dale."

Zarkov faced the Dictator again.

"My friends—Flash Gordon and Miss Dale Arden, who came with me from Earth. They accompany me to aid in my mission."

Pwami, his evil face clouded, seemed not to have heard. He was studying both Flash and Dale closely, a thoughtful distant expression lighting his agate eyes. It was a few moments before he said:

"Your mission? Yes, doctor, I'm waiting."

"Is simply this," Zarkov replied evenly. He took a stance before the throne and stared steadily into Pwami's eyes. "For two years, Pwami, you have oppressed the people of Mars. You have kept not one promise you made to lift them from the slough, instead you have increased their woes. The taxes you impose are breaking their backs, breaking their spirits. The drought, which was upon us when you took command, is worse. In all, you have ruled not as a leader, but as a tyrant."

A fierce expression drifted across Pwami's face. His voice became now a soft, subtle threat—a shaft of steel enclosed in a scabbard of silk.

"You are insulting, Earthling," he said. "I've half a notion to throw you to the Shark people."

"I doubt that you will," Zarkov replied quietly. "I doubt it because your very existence depends on me. For no one else but I hold the secret of releasing the powerful forces of radium."

"And—what good would this knowledge do me?"

"What good?" Zarkov echoed. "Let me sketch what I have discovered—and what I have done. First, there is a tremendous energy in an atom—that which we at one time thought to be a completely solid mass. I have struck upon the method of utilizing that energy—of putting to work such elements as Uranium, Thorium and Actinium. I have with me here a small bottle of Uranium oxide. In that bottle, or rather in the atoms in that bottle, there slumbers more energy than you could get by burning a hundred and fifty tons of coal."

"It is now within the powers of your present scientific laboratories to release that energy—but slowly. As it is released it changes into Radium; the Radium changes into a gas called Radium emanation; and that, in turn, changes into what we now call Radium A."

"And so on, according to the present knowledge of radio-activity. Gradually all this energy is released, at each stage of its

transition, until finally it reaches a state which we call lead. That we cannot change.

"But all this metamorphosis is gradual—too gradual to be of any great value. Only a minute fraction of the radium disintegrates at any given second. And so this decay in dribblets does but little good. Now, with my discovery, this is all changed.

"With the knowledge I now possess, I am able to release all this latent energy immediately. What does this accomplish? It allows us to use both Thorium and Uranium. It gives us a source of power so potent that you might carry in your hand enough energy to light half of Mars for a year, to drive your largest space ships to the farthest planet and back. But not only that, it gives us a clue to quicken the process of disintegration of all other elements, where decay is so slow that it escapes the measurements of our finest instruments.

"It means—that every scrap of solid matter becomes an available reservoir of concentrated force."

He paused to mop his perspiring forehead. Pwami, slouched back in his throne, was smiling distantly, thoughtfully. His Universal Empire was becoming closer. Finally he spoke.

"A remarkable discovery. You should be rewarded."

Zarkov straightened up.

"The people of Mars shall be rewarded," he said. "Because, Pwami, you are going to make a deal with me."

Pwami laughed, softly.

"A deal with you? Of my own choosing."

"No, Pwami, of my choosing," Zarkov replied. "Because, with this little bottle I carry with me, I have the power to blow you, and everything about you, to the tiniest of fragments at any given moment."

He held up the bottle, smiled as a shaft of pale sunlight glittered on the yellowish liquid.

"Do you see?"

CHAPTER III.

The Mouth of the Lion.

THERE was a moment of tense, electric silence. Pwami shifted slightly in his throne, and stared hard at the bearded scientist who stood so calmly before him. A flicker of fear lurked in the barest fraction of a second in the depths of his great eyes. Then

abruptly he smiled—a thin, satanic twist of his lipless mouth.

"Dr. Zarkov," he said softly, "for the moment I believe you have the advantage. What is your proposition?"

"I'm glad," Zarkov answered, "that you realize the relative weight of my argument. However, I am but a mere scientist. Having presented the possibilities of my discovery, I now retire. The proposition of which I spoke will be outlined by a man much more capable than I—Flash Gordon. It is to his brain that the plan for the restoration of Mars must be credited."

There was another short period of silence. Once again that vague light of fear cavorted in Pwami's eyes. He had heard much of this Flash Gordon—the uncontrollable rebel. Had heard much of his actions on behalf of the oppressed Martians. Under ordinary circumstances he would have called his strongest guards immediately, would have had the Earthman thrown into the pit of acid. But this was no ordinary circumstance. Zarkov had something that Pwami wanted—badly. And not being sure of his ground, Pwami had no alternative but delay.

The Dictator was shrewd, cunning. He knew when to use the cruel, crushing force of his mailed fist. But he knew, too, when it was to his advantage to strew roses along the path to the den of Martian lions. He smiled beguilingly.

"I have heard of you, Flash Gordon. While I do not agree with certain of your principles, I am forced to admire the courage you have displayed in fighting for them. Yes, even when you are fighting against me. For I have always carried the hope that you, as well as the people of Mars, would some day realize that I am not a tyrant, but am only a man who is struggling against great odds for the ultimate benefit of the Martian race."

He paused for a brief moment, fixing Flash Gordon with a penetrating stare. Quickly he went on:

"However, I understand you have a plan. I shall be pleased to hear what it is."

Flash rose slowly, rested a bronzed hand on the high back of the chair. He returned Pwami's gaze, then answered slowly:

"My plan is simple. You are to abdicate, Pwami."

"Abdicate?"

There was surprise as well as anger in Pwami's tones.

"Let me put it this way," Flash said. "You will immediately turn the government of Mars over to the people. All your present policies will be voided. Your army of Martian Defenders will be done away with, as will your territorial governors. And, instead of your dictatorship, there will be a democracy—a government by the people and for the people."

The slow, red flush of anger mounted Pwami's neck, suffused his features. It was only by the greatest of self control that he managed to keep his voice cool.

"And," he said softly, "is this the supposed 'deal' you were willing to make with me? I admire your colossal nerve. What, may I be so bold as to inquire, had you proposed to offer me in return?"

"Pwami," Flash answered, "you may be cruel, you may be a heartless tyrant, but you are not an utter idiot. Do you not know what it would mean to the inhabitants of Mars if you should suddenly announce an end to the dictatorship and the inception of a democracy? Don't you realize how popular you would become if you should admit that your rule by might was an error on your part and that the government rightly belonged to the people?"

"For over a year the people of your planet have been praying for a release from your tyranny. And if you—you Pwami—were to give it to them, you would be the most popular man on the globe. And, without a doubt, could easily become the first president of the new Martian democracy.

"That," Flash concluded, "is what we offer you."

There was another long moment of silence. Pwami drew a bordered handkerchief from the sleeve of his royal blue tunic and dabbed lightly at his high forehead. After a while he smiled.

"You offer me a plum—from my own orchard."

"Yes, Pwami," Flash said, "but a tasty plum. And I'd advise you to accept it, for soon your orchard is going to seed. And there is only one thing that can save it—atomic energy."

"Atomic energy. Ah, you mean—"

"Yes—Dr. Zarkov's discovery. That, too, will be yours, Pwami. Yours to use to the advantage of the people of Mars. With the people behind you, you can soon become the greatest leader of all times. A leader with all the glory you desire, and all the power you

have, together with that which you would most like to command—respect.

"It is a simple choice, Pwami. You must select between a peaceful abdication or—"

Flash shrugged his shoulders. Pwami, smiling, coaxed softly:

"Or?"

Flash Gordon's thin lips tightened; a spark of flickering yellow appeared in his gray eyes. His voice was cold, but calm.

"Destruction," he said.

As Flash sat down Zarkov leaned over and whispered lightly.

"You should have been an orator," he said, smiling. "I think you've convinced him."

"Don't be so sure," Flash returned. "He is clever."

"At least he's considering it," Dale Arden said softly. "Oh, Flash, wouldn't—"

Dale never finished her statement. At that moment Pwami rose from his Radium throne, walked slowly to the edge of the dais. He fixed Zarkov with his agate eyes.

"This—this discovery of yours, Zarkov. How am I to know of its efficacy? You say—you can blow everything about us to atoms by—"

"Only by preparing an atomic bomb," Zarkov said hastily. "And of course I have no intention of doing that. Unless—"

"Ah, I see," Pwami cut in. "But if I refused, of course you would make the bombs?"

"I insist."

Pwami paused a moment, staring intently at the gleaming metal floor. Finally he looked up.

"You have some way of convincing me of the power of your discovery? This proposition you offer me is extremely inviting, but after all, how am I to know that this claim of yours is nothing more than a scientific dream? Nightmare, rather."

"Give me two hours in your laboratory," Zarkov answered.

"Two hours? You shall have more—many more."

He stepped down from the dais, walked slowly, austere toward a door at the far end of the metal council room. As he reached it he turned, smiled wearily.

"Come along. I'll go with you."

Flash and Zarkov and Dale had risen as Pwami moved toward the door. And now Zarkov, with a quick glance toward Flash, started across the large, shining room.

"Don't fall under the illusion," he said.

"that a brief demonstration will do any more than prove my statements. Not for one moment will any of your scientists be able to analyze the product to discover its formula."

Pwami held open the huge, glistening door.

"Of course not," he said. "I have asked for merely that demonstration. Nothing more. You first, my dear doctor."

He stepped gracefully aside and motioned to the door.

Zarkov passed through, followed by Dale, Flash and finally the Dictator. As Pwami closed the door after him, Flash glanced with absorbed interest into the room they had just entered.

It was undoubtedly a reception chamber. Glistening walls of Radium steel rose like polished mirrors to the high ceiling. Each was decorated with a beautiful mural that had been etched directly into the gleaming metal by some powerful acid. And near the top of each wall was a half-concealed gutter through which ran a long tube of molybdenum filament that shed, indirectly, a bluish daylight about the windowless room.

As Pwami walked past the group and made for a second door in the far corner, Flash glanced once more about the chamber. But the only other detail that had escaped his first inspection was the tasteful arrangement of flexible metal chairs with their attached, automatic readophones.

Turning, he started to follow Dale to the second door. It was then that the sound of the strange voice smote his ears.

"What shall I inform the Governors, your Excellency?"

Flash spun about, searched the room for sight of the speaker. But no fifth person was apparent. The room, with the exception of Pwami, Dale, Zarkov and himself, was apparently unoccupied. Pwami, noticing the effect the words had created, laughed lightly.

"Startles you?" he asked. "That pleases me, because the idea was entirely mine. To see without being seen. To hear without disclosing your ear. More than one important secret I have learned to the secreter's amazement—and, shall I say, discomfort? Caris, adjust the lights."

There was a sudden clicking sound and almost immediately there appeared in an opposite corner a long, shining desk. On one end of it sat a smallish man, wearing an unadorned M. D. tunic. His face was expressionless.

"A trick of lights," Flash commented aloud.

"Precisely," Pwami replied. "A trick of lighting. He can sit there, seeing all that is going on in the chamber without being seen. And it would surprise even you what words have fallen on his hidden ears—words that would only have been uttered in the security of absolutely secrecy. More than one traitor has been unearthed in this manner, more than one plot against me foiled.

"I show you this because I know you as a—let us say protagonist, I dislike the word 'enemy'—and not as a *friend*. Then,"—he sighed softly—"things will soon be different. Yes, quite different. All right, Caris, switch your lights. And you may inform the impatient Governors that I soon will have news which will affect them deeply. Come, Zarkov, this way. The elevator will take us to the laboratory."

There was another click and once more the desk disappeared as if by magic. Then Pwami held open the thick steel door that led into a glistening elevator, and bowed as Dale stepped in.

Zarkov went next and Flash followed, stepping aside to allow Pwami to enter. But the Dictator, standing by the door, hesitated, as though in thought. Then he said:

"You'll pardon me for the moment? I've forgotten something of importance. However, go right up to the laboratory and I'll be along in a few minutes. Just press the button there, that will get you up. I'll notify my chief scientist of your arrival."

He was smiling softly as he closed the door, shutting Dale, Zarkov and Flash inside the large cage. There was a moment of restless silence, then lines formed on Flash Gordon's bronzed forehead.

"I've a feeling," he said, "that something is up."

Zarkov shrugged.

"Maybe, but we'll have to wait and see. Certainly if we were going to be held here Pwami could have called his guards."

"I've hated him for a year," Dale said fervently. "But never so much as I hate him right now. That oily smile of his—ugh! I'd rather he—he—"

She shivered, unable to express her thoughts further.

"Yes," Flash replied, "he's too-smooth. Too-smooth. You're not quite sure whether he's patting you on the back or searching for some vulnerable spot for a knife thrust. However,

"we'll get nowhere standing here. Is this the button?"

As he spoke he pressed a small, cylindrical bit of metal. Immediately there was a whirling sound, and the elevator began its ascent. For a moment no one spoke, nor moved. But as the elevator continued its climb, Flash felt an odd, tingling sensation grip his body. He raised his eyes quickly, saw Zarkov frowning darkly at the floor; saw, too, a hint of fear in Dale Arden's soft features.

Then the tingling sensation got worse, and his muscles began to ache. He tried to move and found that only after the greatest effort did his body obey the commands flashed by his brain.

Then a slow, torturing numbness began crawling over him, clutching at his physical being with sharp talons of fire. Once again he exerted himself, once again he did his mighty best to move so much as a finger, but now it was impossible.

A quick glance toward Dale and Zarkov showed him that they, too, were suffering the same fate. But there was nothing he could do but stand there, speechless, motionless, like some immobile bronze statue, and stare helplessly at the flickerings of perplexed fear that danced in their eyes.

And then, with an abruptness that startled him, the elevator reached the end of his journey. And a huge door—a door made of thick layers of Radium steel—swung slowly, silently open.

CHAPTER IV.

The Den Of The Lion.

PWAMI stood there, in all his tall, majestic splendor. A hard, humorless smile wreathed his thin, satanic features; his small agate eyes glittered with avid anticipation.

"Ah, my friends," he said softly, "I see you have experienced my electric petrifier. Another of my own pet brain-children."

Flash Gordon could hear clearly Pwami's voice, and could see the long, gleaming hallway that stretched out behind the dictator. But not one muscle in his body could he move. Pwami continued speaking.

"However, you need fear nothing, for once I have released the electric bonds which grip your nerves you will return to a perfectly normal state. The voltage of the current that holds you is not high, as the power of the

petrifier is not in the strength of the current, but in the clever use of the magnetic power of crossed currents.

"Rather ingenious?" Pwami went on. "I think so. A simple method of subduing someone without the use of brute force. But let us get down to business. All right, guard!"

A huge man, clad entirely in a metal suit and carrying a number of glittering chains in his mailed hand, came into sight. Without a word he passed into the electrically charged elevator.

As the crossed beams of magnetic current crashed into the guard's metal suit, there was a showering confusion of small electric sparks.

"A repulsing suit," Pwami explained proudly. "The metal itself is charged, and effectively turns back the magnetic rays."

The man snapped a pair of handcuffs about Flash Gordon's wrists—handcuffs held together by a long steel chain. Then, as soon as he had bound both Dale and Zarkov in the same manner, he stepped back out of the elevator. And abruptly Flash felt the gripping numbness leave his body.

And, limited of course by the chains, he was one more able to move. He chafed his wrists, his legs, turned immediately to Dale.

"Are you all right, dear?"

Dale Arden was panting lightly. She nodded.

"Yes, Flash. I—"

But Flash didn't hear the rest of her statement. He whirled toward Pwami.

"What is the meaning of this? We came to you in good faith, with an honest proposition. There is no need for—"

"Ah, but there is," Pwami interrupted. "True, your proposition would have sounded intriguing to an ordinary man—to a man who would be satisfied with all you offered. But, Flash Gordon, I am not an ordinary man. I want more, much more, than you would give me. I want the dictatorship of the Universe."

"You're mad," Zarkov cut in.

"Mad?" Pwami repeated. "Perhaps. But all great men were mad, Doctor. That, however, is aside from the point. I knew of your discovery, Zarkov, long before you came to me today. And I knew that with it I could satisfy my ambition for a Universal Dictatorship. So now, Doctor, you will give me your secret."

"I called you mad?" Zarkov replied. "I was in error. You are insane—a lunatic. The formula you want, the secret of the disintegration of the atom, is locked up in my brain. And

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there it is safe against you, against your brutal army, and you can't force it from me."

"No?" Pwami smiled thinly, arched his eyebrows. He turned his head slightly and motioned to some unseen person. "We shall see."

Four men appeared—huge, blond members of the castle guard. Minus their royal blue M. D. tunics, and stripped to the waist of any clothing, the enormous breadth of their shoulders was greatly enhanced. They paused, arms folded, waiting Pwami's order. The Dictator continued staring at Zarkov.

"In what you Earthmen know as the Middle Ages you had numberless methods of forcing a recalcitrant to obey a command. Torture chambers, fire pits, iron maidens—all have been fully described in certain of your Earth histories. I have read much of your planet, but nothing more avidly than the story of your Medieval times.

"The various methods of torture intrigued me greatly. I have borrowed certain of your methods, and have added to them some of my own pet innovations. Perhaps you would like to study one of them at first hand?"

Zarkov stiffened; a steely glitter came into his eyes.

"Torture and be damned!"

Pwami sighed.

"How appropriate, doctor. The name of the particular device I had in mind was 'The Pit of the Damned'. However, I rather thought you would react as you have, and so I feel that it would be quite useless to subject you to any physical pain. But there is another way—a better way. Guards! To the Pit with the blond one!"

Flash saw the four brutes step into the elevator, come toward him. Sadistic light glowed in their eyes as they grabbed at him. Flash struggled, but, shackled as he was, he saw it was a senseless waste of energy—energy he might soon need badly. Then he heard Zarkov's voice, shouting.

"Wait! Wait!"

Flash spun about quickly, faced the bearded scientist. Hard lines formed about the corners of his thin mouth; his gray eyes flashed fire. He shook his head, then spun and glared at Pwami.

"If you think it will help, lead on."

As he was shoved roughly from the elevator, he avoided Dale's eyes, avoided seeing the pained expression he knew would be there. He went slowly, obediently down the long metal corridor to the second elevator. As he went in,

he could hear the footsteps of the others outside. In a moment they followed.

The cage shot quickly to the bottom of the shaft, and they came out into a cool, highwalled chamber. Along the walls of the room were various instruments of ancient, barbaric torture—a branding rack; the iron maiden of which Pwami had spoken; a small, barred cage to which was attached a number of wires that led to a switchboard; and various other devices which Flash could not identify. Off one side of the large room ran a dark hallway, closed by a steel gate.

Pwami walked directly to the center of the room and pressed a concealed button. In a moment the large sheet of glass began sliding along the floor. There was a smile on Pwami's lean features as the guards brought Flash across the room. A smile on his features and a look of ugly victory in his beady eyes.

"Now, Zarkov," he said. "You have one last chance to speak—one last chance to turn over the formula before endangering the life of your valued compatriot."

Once more Zarkov was on the point of speaking, but Flash shouted quickly.

"No, Zarkov. Never."

Dale broke suddenly away from the group and rushed to Flash Gordon's side. Pain was etched deeply in her lovely features; her large brown eyes were moist.

"Flash—Flash, darling. You can't—"

Flash raised his manacled hands, pressed Dale's head to his bronzed chest.

"Have faith, dear."

"I got you into this," Zarkov said abruptly. "Let me—"

"Courage, Zarkov," Flash interrupted.

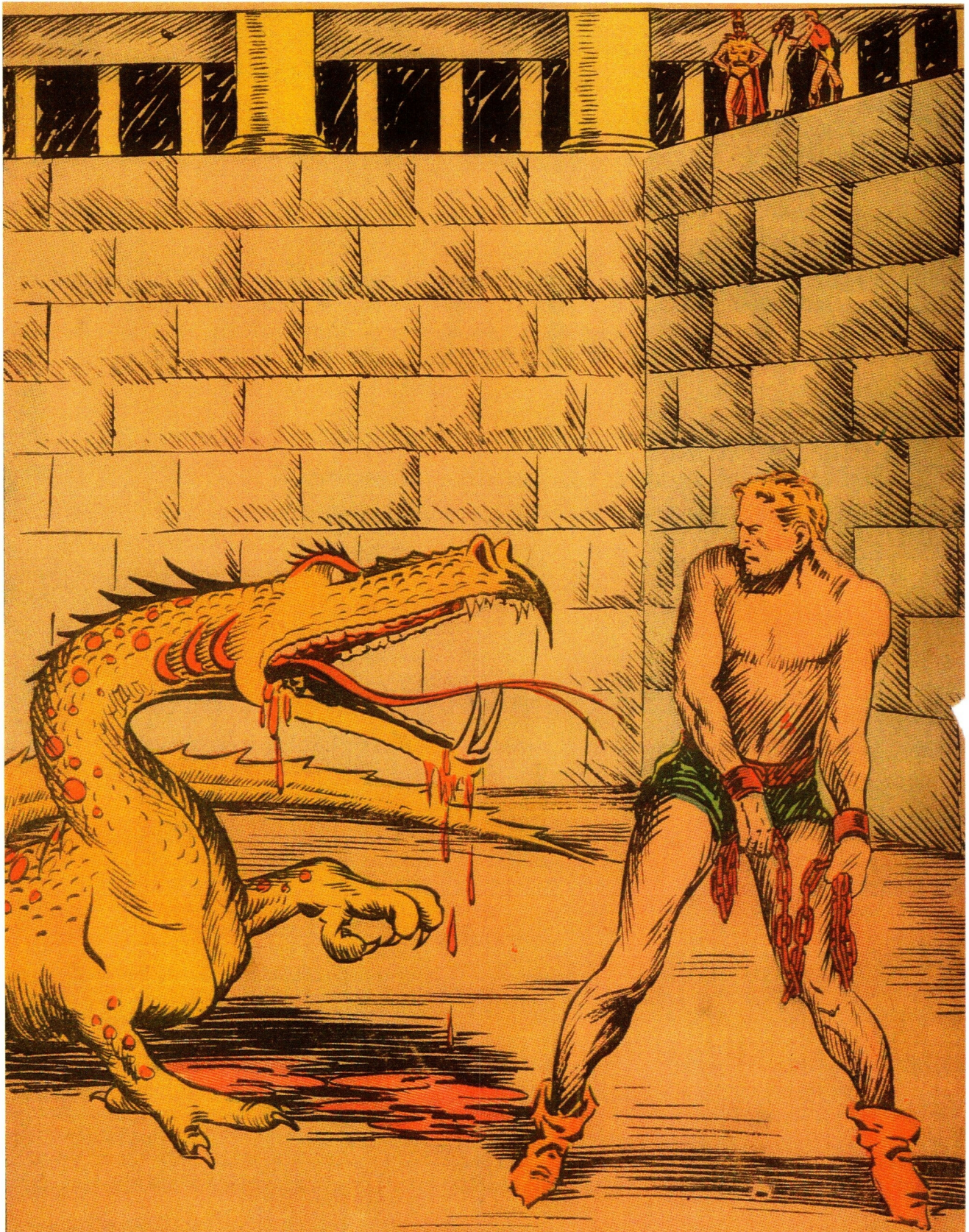
Pwami walked over, pulled Dale away from Flash. He stroked her wrist—and smiled as she shuddered.

"I'm sorry, lovely one," he said lightly, "but it is the blond idiot's fault. He prefers pain to reason, and he shall have it. Right, men—into the pit with him."

The four guards grasped Flash again, hauled him to the edge of the large tank. Then, with a rough shove, they hurtled him into space. And Dale's scream trailed after him.

Flash twisted in midair, managed to land on the balls of his feet on the lead-covered bottom of the pit. He caught his breath, backed to one of the walls—also covered with lead—and glanced about him.

The tank was much like an ordinary swimming pool. From the end at which Flash stood



Like a gigantic spring suddenly released, the deadly Pythocra flung itself across the lead room, its thick slimy body ready to wrap itself around Flash's helpless form.



The silvery, slimy body of the Shark Man flashed in the darkness of the swirling waters, rushed toward Flash. Reaching out, Flash caught his arm about the fish-man's neck . . .

the bottom of the tank sloped sharply to the opposite wall, and, at its deepest point, was not much more than twenty feet from the floor above.

He looked quickly up. The glass cover was slowly rolling back into place over the top of the tank. He could see Dale, and Zarkov staring helplessly down at him; then he heard Pwami's soft, silken voice.

"I think," Pwami was saying, "this way is much the best. It is much easier to endure pain than to watch a loved one endure it. There is no torture so great as mental torture—especially when one has the power to help. Yes, I—"

The words died away as the glass cover shut off the opening above. Then, abruptly, another sound smote Flash Gordon's ears—a soft, rising, hissing sound.

He whirled quickly, backed to the wall of the tank as he saw the long, sinuous form of the serpent emerge from a door at the far side. A Martian Pythocra—the most dreaded of the planet's constrictors. The snake whose very breath was an exhalation of poisonous vapor.

The snake moved slowly out of the door and the portal closed tightly behind him. Flash stepped quickly to a corner of the tank, watched as the thirty-foot Pythocra wrapped itself in a huge coil.

So far the serpent hadn't noticed Flash. But once he did there would be the quick rustle of his slimy body, the frenzied lashing of its hissing head, and the the fast, whip-like motion of his hind quarters as it twined its foot-thick body about Flash.

Death would follow—slow, torturous; crushing death.

Once more Flash moved, striving to keep out of the snake's sight as he sought desperately for a way out of his predicament. But now the Pythocra had seen Flash—had seen the sudden movement in the pit. And, even as it swung its beady eyes about, a harsh, hissing spray spewed out from its widening mouth.

For perhaps five seconds the tableau held. The snake, waving its huge, hissing head back and forth in a rough oval; and Flash standing near the corner, waiting for the serpent's initial move.

And then it came.

With a speed that even Flash did not anticipate the Pythocra lashed itself across the lead floor of the tank. Flash sidestepped, just managing to avoid the snake's first charge. A

shudder coursed through him as the slimy body of the tail brushed across his chest.

Then quickly Flash went into action. He whirled about, dropped on the snake's writhing back and pressed down with his knee just below the Pythocra's head, and caught the crook of his arm about the serpent's throat. Exerting his great strength, he drew the snake's head backwards.

Abruptly the Pythocra lashed about, striving to release itself from the throttling grip about its throat. It twisted its head, showered Flash with a spray of venomous fluid. The terrible odor, the choking, nauseous effect of that spray turned the tide back in the snake's favor.

Fighting desperately for the air that his tortured lungs now demanded, Flash had to release his hold. With a quick twisting motion, he threw himself off the serpent's back, and rolled across the pit.

But the Pythocra, with victory in sight, whirled rapidly about and made for Flash. There was gleaming menace now in its small, shining eyes as it writhed across the room. And its jaws, opened wide, disclosing the two brownish fangs, were dripping with foam.

Flash lay there, gulping down the welcome air, fighting off the suffocating sickening odor of the venom. He saw the Pythocra approach and struggled to one knee, bracing himself with his manacled hands. The reptile moved closer, its ugly head rocking back and forth like some large, inverted pendulum.

Flash had got to both knees now and was waiting, hands held before him, for the Pythocra to strike—waiting for the huge serpent to lash its writhing body about him in a grip of death. Flash had one remaining hope, one last card to play in this game for his life. If that failed—

The Pythocra struck.

It was a lightning-like move. Like some gigantic spring that had suddenly been released, the huge reptile flung itself across the room. Its jaws gaped wide; its thick, slimy body seemed to tense as it made ready to wrap itself about Flash Gordon's helpless form.

But Flash was ready.

Bracing his feet against the wall, resting now on one knee, he met the giant serpent in charge. With his hand spread as wide as the chains of his handcuffs would permit, he lunged forward to meet the hunched serpent just as it was upon him. And drawing on every last ounce of driving strength, he re-

maintained in his powerful body, he rammed the Radium steel handcuff chain deep into the gaping depths of the Pythocra's mouth.

They met in mid-air, giant serpent and muscular man—and it was the man who won. The momentum of the snake's charge crashed against Flash, threatening to hurl him back to the wall. But it was the Pythocra who gave ground. The heavy chain snapped off its fangs, rammed deep into its throat, and hurled its venomous head back against its neck.

There was a sudden, cracking sound and the snake dropped to the floor of the pit, its neck broken.

Flash backed against the wall, and massaged as best he could the raw bleeding flesh on his wrists. Then, with one brief glance at the Pythocra, now lashing about in its last struggle, Flash stared up toward the ceiling above.

Dale, Zarkov and Pwami were standing there, looking down into the pit. There was a surprised happiness on both Dale's and Zarkov's features, and an angry bewilderment on Pwami's. Now Flash saw the Dictator turn suddenly, call out an order. Then once more he looked down into the pit and now he was again his calm, suave self.

And almost immediately Flash knew the reason.

There was a sudden, sibilant hissing sound to his rear—a sound much more deadly than that of the Pythocra. He spun about and saw a bubbling, brownish liquid gushing out of a pipe in the wall. As the liquid started filling the lower end of the tank, a bluish vapor rose from it—a smoky, insidious vapor that told Flash the horrible truth.

The liquid was acid—nitro-sulphide. The most deadly, corrosive acid known to science.

And then Flash recalled Pwami's mention of the "Acid pit".

He glanced quickly up to the floor again. Dale had covered her face with her hands, was leaning on Zarkov's shoulder. Zarkov was pleading with Pwami, gesticulating. Pwami, smiling confidently, was still staring down into the lead-lined tank.

Then again the hissing of the inflowing acid attracted Flash Gordon's attention. The lower end of the tank was now filling rapidly, and the brownish, smoking acid was bubbling fiercely as it rose steadily up the incline toward Flash.

Flash quickly maneuvered to the highest point of the pit. By now the acid had reached the one end of the lifeless Pythocra, and there

was a sudden, smoky hissing sound as the deadly chemical ate its way slowly through the snake's body. He saw then what would happen to him. The acid would burn off his feet, would eat its way through his legs, and, lastly, through his very heart. And, searing as it did, Flash would not die until the corrosive fluid burned its way through the walls of his body.

A slow, torturous, agonizing death.

He looked up again quickly, but now there was no one there. Dale and Zarkov and Pwami had gone, and he was left to his fate.

The tide of bubbling acid had crawled up to him by now, and was lapping greedily at his boot toes. He stared about desperately, searching for some higher shelf on the lead wall. But the sides of the pit were as smooth as glass.

And, though it was true that with the reduced gravitational pull on Mars, Flash could leap no more than double the distance he could on Earth, the shortest wall on the pit was still about eighteen feet high.

Abruptly something burned his foot. He spun about, drawing his leg above the level of smoking acid, and looked quickly around. And then, even as he felt the corrosive liquid burn through his other shoe, Flash resigned himself to his fate.

There was no way out, no way to offset the inexorable flow of burning acid. He could but stand there, gritting his teeth against the ever increasing pain, and die like a man. Die, with only one comforting thought to ease the torture: the knowledge that he had gone to his death in fighting for a just cause, and that he had not turned traitor to that cause for the sake of his own life.

He closed his eyes against a sudden twinge of pain, and turned his thoughts to Dale. And in the darkness of his memory he could see the soft loveliness of her smiling face.

CHAPTER V.

Dungeon Of The Doomed.

FLASH was shaken from his reverie by the sudden sound of wheels. He glanced quickly upwards and saw the edge of a heavy lead ladder being lowered through the opening made as the glass cover of the pit had been rolled back.

Once again came a shock of pain in his feet. He leaped upward, keeping them out of the rising tide of acid as much as possible, until finally the bottom of the ladder touched

the floor of the pit. He bounded across the tank, sprang to the ladder and clambered up, still half believing that he was the victim of some cruel dream. But the firmly held heat gun in the hand of the guard up above was no hallucination.

"Careful, Earthman," the guard warned. "I have orders to shoot at will."

"Where's Dale?" Flash asked quickly.

"And Zarkoy, and Pwami?"

"His Excellency, blond fool!" the guard retorted.

Flash saw the man's finger tighten about the trigger of the gun. A hard smile flickered across his thin lips.

"His Excellency," he repeated. "Yes, where are they all? And why have I—"

"I know nothing, Earthman," the guard answered. "I have orders only to take you to the dungeons. And further orders to shoot you if you offer the slightest resistance."

Flash could read the burning truth of the man's statement in his every motion. It was apparent that the guard would release the rays of the deadly heat gun at the first evidence of opposition. And, deeply thankful for being saved from one horrible death, Flash had no desire to court further disaster—at least not at the moment.

He must first find Dale, and Zarkov and lastly, a way out of this living hell.

He sighed, glanced at his paining feet.

"All right. I'll go peacefully."

At the guard's direction, Flash walked toward the barred door at the far end of the basement room. There he paused as the man rang a bell. Deep in the recesses of darkness behind the door, Flash heard the faint tinkle of the summons. In a short while a huge brute of a man, bared to the waist and carrying a short, master light key, appeared at the door.

"Political prisoner," Flash Gordon's guard said. "Normal rations until further orders. But you're to attach the electric chairs."

"Right," grumbled the huge guard.

He clicked on his light, directed its peculiar greenish beam to the triangular lock on the barred door. Instantly the portal swung wide on oiled hinges. Flash felt the heat gun dig into the small of his back, heard the owner's thin voice.

"All right, Earthman. Go ahead."

For just an instant Flash considered resistance. Ahead of him lay almost absolute imprisonment—and probably death. Yet his chances of fighting his way free now appeared

impossible by comparison. It would be infinitely better to wait, even with the handicap he would soon face.

He passed through the door.

Immediately the huge gate moved back into place and the burly guard locked it with his master light. Then, pointing his own heat gun at Flash, he motioned down the dark, dank passageway.

"Go ahead. I'll tell you when to stop."

Flash obeyed. Down the long, musty corridor they went. On one side were a long line of small cells, more like cages, that could be entered only through a small, barred door. As he passed one after another he was aware of white, fear-ridden faces peering out at him. But no one spoke. Undoubtedly the fear of punishment was too great.

Occasional lights, set high in the arched ceiling of the passageway, shed an eerie, insufficient glow along the corridor. It was as though he were walking through the bowels of some ancient prison ship, where the cold, penetrating dampness killed off those that managed to repulse the ever increasing hordes of starving rats. And then Flash remembered Pwami's reference to Medieval history; and he understood how such a place came to be built in the enlightened Age of Science.

And then he remembered reading of the dreaded Bastille of the Gate of Saint Antoine, and wondered if there would be straw on the floor of his cell such as had been used in that French prison of horror. Straw and a stone bench and blackness. Misery and death. And that was precisely what there was.

The guard's deep voice crashed against his ears.

"All right, blond one. This is your hovel."

Flash halted, glanced at the small barred door that led into the darkness of the cell. The guard flicked his light on the lock and the door swung open. Again came the guard's voice:

"Go ahead in, and lie flat on the bench."

With the point of the heat gun directly behind him, Flash could only obey. He bent, crawled through the small opening and felt about the straw covered floor for the bench the man spoke of. He finally found it when his fingers touched one of the stone legs and stretched out full length on its cold surface. He heard the guard force his way through the opening, and then heard the clatter of chains. There was an abrupt snapping sound and Flash felt the heavy steel bands of a set



Illana.

of leg irons clamp tightly about his ankles.

The guard flashed a small light to inspect his work, turned the light on Flash Gordon's wrists to see that the handcuffs were still securely locked, then said:

"Stay inside the cell an' you'll be all right. But don't touch the steel door. If you do—poof! Those chains on your ankles will be charged with a thousand volts as soon as I throw the switch, an' all they need is a ground to burn you to a crisp."

He flashed his light once more about the small, cold cell, then backed out through the door, closing it after him with his master light key. And then he was gone, undoubtedly to turn on the current that would charge the leg bands with a deadly electric voltage—a voltage that would need only the slightest excuse to crash through his body.

How long Flash lay there, deep in thought, he never knew. It seemed hours, but it may have been minutes. In the darkness of his cell, lit only by the faint light of the corridor, he went back mentally over all that had happened in the short time since he and Dale and Zarkov had entered Pwami's domain.

It seemed incredible that so much had taken place, but any other action of Pwami's would have been more incredible. Flash saw that now, as he had felt it before. Yet he had doubted that Zarkov's plan would work—had doubted because its success would have prevented a revolution. And now—

A hundred questions hammered through his tortured brain. Where was Dale—Zarkov?

How were they faring? What did Pwami intend doing next? Was there no way to get out of here, to find Dale and Zarkov? To flee the castle?

It was then that Flash Gordon's thoughts were abruptly interrupted. A man stood just outside the cell door, in a half kneeling position, and he was carrying a tray. Food! Behind him was the bulky guard, already turning his master light on the lock.

The door swung open, the man entered, stooping, and set the tray on the bench. Flash saw the bulky guard walk away, then peered through the semi-gloom of his cell toward the whitish face of the man who was just rising.

"What time is it?"

The man crossed to the door, bent and examined his chromium watch in the pale light. He came back, replied softly:

"Six twenty-three past Zenith."

Flash made a hasty calculation. Accustomed as he was to Earth time, it generally took him a moment to interpret the Martian clock. For on Mars, where the day was slightly over twenty-four and a half hours long, the clocks were run exactly to the sun. So when the sun had reached its peak during the day it was known as Zenith time—the equivalent of the Earth's noon. Thereafter, until what would be equivalent of an Earthian midnight, the time progressed by hours and minutes.

But once the clocks reached the twelve hour period—known on Mars as Phobos, because of the rise of that moon—the hands came to a halt. And for exactly thirty-seven minutes, twenty-two and sixty-seven hundredths seconds they remained motionless. Then, starting one again on their trip down the other side of the clock's face. And then the definition changed from "past Zenith" to "toward Zenith".

So, while six twenty-three toward Zenith would mean that it still lacked six hours and twenty three minutes of high noon, or thirty-seven past five in the morning on an Earth clock; six twenty-three past Zenith meant exactly what it inferred—twenty-three minutes past six in the afternoon.

The actual passage of time startled Flash. It had been but a few minutes past Zenith when they had arrived at the castle. It hadn't taken them long to lay their proposition before Pwami. So that meant he had been lying here in the dampness of his cell much longer than he had supposed.

He started up quickly, only to discover that

the chains gripped him in an embrace of restraining steel. As they rattled he was abruptly surprised to hear the man caution him to be quiet. Briefly the man glanced about the corner of the cell door, then came quickly over to Flash's side.

"You've got to get me out of here," he whispered. "I'll try to help."

The effect of the statement stunned Flash. The man evidently anticipated this, for he explained rapidly.

"Don't question me. I'm only working for Pwani because I hate him. Have hated him ever since he took my Elaine from me and established her in his harem. I took this job so that I could be near, so that I could kill him if he ever harmed her.

"She told me about you. It was she who was instructed to take your Earth woman to the feminine apartments in the sky gallery. She is in sympathy with your friend and you because she went through the damnation that now threatens *your* girl.

"Go to her—but go quickly! The guard will be back at any moment."

"These chains," Flash whispered. "Have you a key?"

"No." The man inhaled sharply. "I hadn't thought of that. I intended merely to let you overpower me, to let you get out of this cell. Your feat in the 'Pit of the Damned' has traveled over the castle. The guard should be easy to overcome for one of your ability."

Flash thought quickly. The opportunity he had been praying for had come. There must be some way out. There was.

"Listen," he said quietly. "Call out the guard's name. That's all. Tell him to come quickly. I'll do the rest."

Fear crawled through the man's wide eyes.

"But—but if it's known that I helped you, I'll go through hell. And Elaine will be—"

Flash balled his bronzed right hand.

"Don't worry," he said. "It will never be known. You call the guard's name—and someday you will get your reward. I'll never forget this."

The youth—for that's all he really was—stilled the tremor of his voice, shouted loudly:

"Hanko. Quick. Come here."

For a dread moment there was a silence; then the deep voice of the guard boomed down the corridor.

"Yeah. Comin'."

Flash became tense on the stone couch. He lowered his voice.

"What's your name, lad?"

"Walter," the boy answered. "Walter Thory."

"All right, Walter. Look at me."

The boy turned his head, stared up at Flash. At that precise moment Flash leaned forward, whipped his manacled hands about in a short, sweeping arc. The hard knuckles of his balled right fist cracked hard against Thory's jaw. Without a murmur the boy slumped back into the darkness of the cell, unconscious.

"I'm sorry," Flash breathed. "But it had to be that way, Walter. Your life was at stake, and you would have been a rotten actor."

Then, abruptly, he heard the guard's hurrying footsteps outside the cell door, and he lay back out of sight. In a moment the man's heavy voice boomed out:

"What's up, Thory?"

"Sick," he said thinly. "Better get a doctor."

"Huh?"

The guard bent, squeezed his way through the door, and stepped over to the cot on which Flash was lying. He bent, clicked on his light and turned it down. And it was then, as the light fell full on Flash Gordon's tense figure, that the bronzed Earthman sprang forward.

CHAPTER VI.

The Gallery of Eros.

WITH the speed of light itself, Flash struck. His arms, raised high, dropped catching the chains of his handcuffs about the guard's neck, Flash hurled him forward off balance.

The surprising abruptness of the move caught the guard entirely unaware, and for the moment he could offer no resistance. And it was that moment which gave Flash—bound hand and foot—an equal chance with his muscular opponent.

Twisting suddenly about on his stone cot, Flash closed his bronzed arm about the man's neck. Then, with every last ounce of power in his weary body, he shut off the guard's rasping attempts to breathe.

The huge Hanko fought back suddenly convulsively. He clawed at Flash's arm, struggled to free himself from the crushing grasp. But Flash's powerful arm resisted the guard's strongest efforts, and he

arm pressed tighter and tighter, like some relentless vice, about Hanko's neck.

Then abruptly, with one last violent shudder, the man relaxed; and Flash let him drop limply, unconsciously to the straw covered floor.

Flash wasted no time, no movement then. He bent over the inert guard, searched until he found the master light key. In an instant he had removed the charged bands about his ankles, had released the handcuffs from his sore and bleeding wrists. Now, with a painstaking care, he moved the chains and leg bands to which they were connected to a far corner of the cell—out of harm's way.

Then, searching the unconscious guard once more for the heat gun, Flash crawled out of the cell.

In the corridor he paused, glanced up and down, then turned and swung the cell door closed, locking it with his light. And he had just straightened, was just on the point of hurrying down the dimly-lit passageway when the sound of a bell crashed against his ears.

Someone was at the outer gate!

Flash tensed, hesitated a moment, then made his way quickly down the corridor, ignoring the startled, peering faces that were pressed against the small cell doors. He hoped he would not be recognized immediately, hoped the dim light of the corridor would conceal his identity. At least until he could prevent the spreading of an alarm.

A man was standing at the dungeon door. A man of the height and breadth of Flash. He was peering through the bars of the door, and nervously toying with one of the glittering buttons on his uniform. He spoke quickly, sharply as Flash became discernible in the gloom.

"What took you so long, Hanko? I want to see this new prisoner—this Earthman. I've heard much of him."

The tone of the man's voice revealed to Flash an important item: The man, undoubtedly an officer in the Martian Defender ranks, was one accustomed to giving orders—and having them obeyed. And abruptly Flash saw a way to put that information to use.

He turned the master light on the door's lock, and the heavy portal swung silently open. As the man stepped inside he was on the point of speaking again, but paused. Through narrow slits he peered at Flash through the door.

"You're not Hanko," he said suddenly. "Who—"

"Hanko," Flash said, "was taken suddenly ill. I am relieving him."

For a brief instant the man stood there, surveying Flash. Then, with an abruptness that was surprising, he whipped out a heat gun.

"You lie, dog! No jailer in this castle ever resembled you. You're Flash—"

The words died on his thin lips. A startled expression crawled across his lean, shaven features. Fear marched through his widening eyes. And a small wisp of smoke curled lazily up from a smouldering hole in his left breast pocket. With an expiring sigh he slumped, like some half filled bag of wheat, on the cold, damp floor of the corridor.

Flash shook his head slowly, slid his heat gun in the waistband of his red metal tights, and bent by the man's side. He had not wanted to do this, but it was either the man's life or his.

He removed the gun from the officer's lifeless hand—the gun that would have spelled Flash Gordon's doom—and slid it next to the other in the waistband of his trunks. Then, lifting the inert body by its shoulders, Flash dragged it down the length of the corridor to the cell where he had recently been confined.

It took but a few moments to strip the man's uniform from his back, and don it himself; and but a few moments more to throw the lifeless officer into the cell to keep the unconscious Thory and Hanko company. Then, locking the door once again, he hurried back down the passageway to the outer gate.

Halfway down a thin, reedy, desperate voice called out to him. A voice fraught with terror.

"Please," it said. "Release me, too."

Flash paused, saw the peering face at the small cell door. He shook his head slowly.

"Not now, friend. It is not time. But soon. Soon you will all be free. Have courage."

Without waiting for an answer, he continued on to the barred dungeon door, passed through, and locked it behind him.

Out in the basement once more—the torture room of the castle—Flash hesitated, considering his next move. Where were the sky galleries in which Dale was being held? Walter Thory had not told him, and in the excitement of the moment Flash had failed to ask. But Flash was not given to regretting anything he had ever done, or had failed to do.

for he realized that under like circumstances, he would be motivated by the same emotions. And so, relegating all that was past to a limbo of forgotten things, he concentrated solely on the future.

The sky galleries! Their very name implied their location. And across the room, with its door yawning invitingly, was the elevator—left there, without a doubt, by the man whose uniform he now wore.

In a dozen strides Flash had crossed to the elevator. Inside its gleaming metal exterior he saw a row of buttons. He pressed the top one, the door slid shut and the elevator started on its rapid journey to the top of the castle.

As the cage slid through the oiled shaft, Flash turned to inspect his appearance in the mirror. He brushed away a wisp of straw that was clinging to his hair, adjusted the stiff-visored military cap, and brushed the dust from the shoulders of the uniform.

Once he frowned as he saw the hole made by the heat gun, but saw that it could be fairly well concealed by hunching his left shoulder forward.

Abruptly the elevator came to a stop, and a gleaming metal door swung open. Without a moment's hesitation, Flash stepped out into a long, shining hallway—brightened by the golden rays of a setting sun. He walked quickly to one of the sterolic glass windows, looked down on the courtyard and walls and outer grounds of Pwami's retreat.

Then, glancing up he saw, projecting high above the center of the castle, a tall, wide tower, the upper part of which was lined with glass.

The sky gallery!

He started hurriedly down the hallway in search of another elevator—or some means of reaching the tower above. As he passed an intersecting corridor, a door opened and a man, attired in the royal blue of the Martian Defenders, stepped out into the hallway. He turned quickly at the sound of Flash Gordon's footsteps, stared for a startled moment, then saluted.

"Good afternoon, colonel."

Flash saluted quickly, passed on. He had seen the look of surprise in the man's eyes. Surprise undoubtedly engendered by the appearance of an officer he did not recognize. And, if the man should suddenly get curious and decide to inquire the name of the strange colonel, his escape would be discovered.

He came to the end of the long, gleaming corridor without further incident, and turned right down a short hallway. Then, abruptly, he saw the fat, perspiring man slouched in a flexible metal chair; and saw, too, the open door of a small elevator. And from its location, Flash had not the slightest doubt that it was the elevator to the sky galleries.

The man saw him, and stared curiously. Without hesitation Flash walked toward the open door, went to step in.

"I beg pardon, colonel," the fat one said, rising and barring the way. "But His Excellency's orders are strict."

"Orders?" Flash echoed, assuming a cold, supercilious attitude. "I am not aware of any orders. Take me to the galleries. Quickly."

"But, colonel," the man persisted, perspiration streaming down his fat face, "I can't. His Excellency forbids anyone admittance to the galleries unless on his direct authorization. I should be liable to court martial." He paused, stared pleadingly into Flash Gordon's eyes. "You are undoubtedly just newly acquainted, sir, or you would know that."

Flash saw immediately that no official command other than the Dictator's would be of any avail. He tried another tack.

"Perhaps," he said, smiling slightly, "I would rather not have His Excellency know of my visit." He put his hand in the inner pocket of his tunic, was gratified to find the wallet he hoped would be there. He drew it out, thumbed through the wad of paper money, added. "So much so, in fact, that I am willing to pay high for service—and silence."

The fat M. D. gulped as he saw the sheaf of money, but was slowly shaking his head. Flash went on quickly:

"Yes, even so much as two hundred crona."

The crona—almost the equivalent of the International Dollar of Earth—made a fat, tempting package. The eunuch licked his thick lips, stared greedily at the money, then at the deserted corridor. Flash, pressing his advantage, said purringly.

"A short visit—very short. A secret message to my beloved, and I'll be back. Two hundred crona."

"Quick," said the man. "If I'm caught it will mean my neck."

He stepped into the car, and Flash followed, pressing the bills into his fat hand. The door slid shut, and the elevator started upward. As the eunuch stuffed the crona into his large pocket, he turned to Flash.

"Whose apartment will you be in, so that if His Excellency comes I might be prepared—might warn you?"

"Elaine's," Flash said quickly. "That's the—the one next to—next to—"

"Number 27," the man replied quickly.

Flash smiled inwardly.

"Yes," he said. "27. She told me but I had forgotten."

The car came to a smooth halt, and the door opened. For just a moment Flash paused on the threshold, glancing down to the right along the thickly carpeted, scented hallway. Tall, beautifully decorated steel doors opened off the corridor on the opposite side, giving admittance to the apartments of Pwami's wives. Then the eunuch's voice, edged with fear, came to Flash.

"To the left, colonel, the last door. And I beg of you, be careful!"

Flash smiled, patted the shaking man's shoulder, and strode cat-like down the hallway. At the end door he paused, listened. Inside he could hear a soft, condoling feminine voice; and then the sounds of someone sobbing softly.

He tapped on the door. There was an instant of silence, then the light padding of slippers. A woman's voice filtered through the panels.

"Yes?"

"Elaine," Flash called. "I've come with a message."

He dared not admit his identity. The eunuch might be listening; or someone in the next room. But it was not necessary. He heard Dale Arden's startled gasp; the door opened, and he stepped in.

"Flash! Flash!"

He raised his finger quickly to his lips, closed the door after him. With a quick glance at Elaine, he stepped across the room.

Dale ran to meet him and he closed her sobbing, trembling body in his arms.

"Are you all right, darling?" he asked softly. "Has that beast harmed you?"

"No. No. Oh, Flash! I thought maybe I'd—I'd never see you again."

Flash ran his bronzed hand through Dale's soft, silken hair. Pressed her close to him. He glanced toward Elaine.

"Walter is all right," he said quietly. "He'll never be suspected of having helped me. I'll not forget your kindness, Elaine. Ever."

He turned back, put his finger under Dale's chin and raised her eyes to his.

"Zarkov, darling—where is he?"

"Oh—you don't know? Of course. He's—he's in the laboratory, dear."

"Laboratory! Dale!" Flash gripped her shoulders, looked straight into her eyes. "He hasn't—he's not giving Pwami the formula?"

For a moment Dale didn't reply. Then, biting her lip, she nodded slightly.

"We couldn't stand it, Flash. You meant too much to us. To stand there and see you suffer—"

She shuddered again, burying her head on Flash Gordon's broad chest. For five electric seconds no one moved, not a sound was made. Then a hard, steely glitter came into Flash's eyes.

"There may still be time. Come, Dale. We've got to save that."

He took her arm, whirled toward the door. But before he had taken three steps there was a sudden, measured knocking, and a voice called out:

"Elaine. Let me in. Why have you locked the door?"

Pwami!

Flash glanced quickly about the room, strode to the window. Far below lay the courtyard of the castle. They were trapped in the room, in this aerie of love, with no hope of escape. Once more Flash glanced desperately about the room, but there was no place of concealment. And then again came the knocking, louder, more insistent.

"Elaine! Let me in, I tell you. At once."

CHAPTER VII.

The Tunnel of Death.

ELAINE turned from the door and stared steadily, fearfully at Flash, mute appeal in the velvet softness of her eyes. Flash, beset by a score of conflicting answers to the problems that confronted him, glanced first at Elaine and then at Dale. And he noticed, for the first time, that they were attired exactly alike.

An idea crystallized in his mind. Aside from the necessity of getting free, and of finding Zarkov, he must protect Elaine. If Pwami learned that she was involved in his escape, her death would be slow and torturous.

Now Flash studied quickly the appearances of Elaine and Dale. They were of about the same height, and their hair was a close match.

Dressed as they were in the costume worn by Pwami's wives, they might have been sisters. In the long voile skirt, and matching halters it would take anyone a moment to distinguish between the two in the gray dusk of the room.

And that moment might mean the difference between success and disaster.

"Dale," he said quickly, "we've got to work fast. Pwami must never know Elaine helped us. Get one of those curtains from the window and tie her up—hand and foot. Over there in the corner out of sight. Hurry!"

As Dale ran across the room and ripped one of the long silken curtains from the window, Flash took up a position behind the door, and out of sight should Pwami suddenly gain entrance. And then, as he clasped one of the heat guns he had acquired in the dungeon, Pwami hammered on the steel portal for the third time. His voice was loud, shrill.

"Elaine! What is wrong? Let me in!"

Flash tensed. If the racket Pwami made continued, someone would surely investigate. And investigation would bring help. He glanced quickly toward Dale, and saw that she had finished her task. As she came over he took advantage of the noise to whisper last second instructions.

"You're Elaine," he said. "You've been sleeping. He won't notice for the moment that you're not Elaine. We've got to get him in here and stop that rumpus. Get him in and get the door closed before he suspects. Quickly!"

He stepped back, gripped the heat gun tightly, and nodded. Elaine swung the door partially open. Pwami's voice boomed out.

"What was the matter? Why didn't you—"

He was speaking as he pressed his way in. But he stopped abruptly as Flash slammed the door. And, even as he noticed that it was Dale and not Elaine who admitted him, Flash said crisply.

"Put up your hands."

Pwami whirled, surprise alight in his small agate eyes. He stared incredulously for a moment at the uniformed figure that confronted him. Then the surprise changed to anger, and the anger to amusement. He smiled slightly, said in a soft voice:

"Ah. Our good friend, Flash Gordon. I didn't recognize you for the moment. You do our uniform credit. Pity you could not wear one—legally."

"Enough, Pwami," Flash broke in. "I'm

not interested in your glib speeches now. Where is Zarkov?"

As he spoke he moved forward, training the heat gun directly on Pwami's heart. Pwami continued smiling, looking first at the gun and then directly into Flash's eyes.

"Zarkov? Very thoughtfully working on his formula, I'd say. Now, Flash Gordon, you've forfeited your last rights to live. No longer am I bound to spare you."

As he spoke his small, artistic hand darted to the holster that was strapped about his waist. As if by magic a long, capable ray gun appeared. Flash, with no choice, curled his finger about the trigger of his heat gun.

"I warn you," he said quickly, "I'll fire."

Pwami laughingly raised the ray gun and pointed it toward him and Flash grimly pulled the trigger.

There was a soft hissing sound as the heat gun's burning shaft lanced through the air. A small, smouldering spot appeared directly in the center of Pwami's uniform pocket. But Pwami only continued laughing. And it was this feature of the Dictator's character that saved Flash's life.

For the moment Flash could but stand there in dumbfounded amazement. Then Pwami, his ego appealed to, could not resist the explanation.

"Fool," he said. "Do you not think I have anticipated assassination? Your heat gun is powerless against my thin vest of Radium steel. And now—"

He levelled the ray gun as he spoke, and now a hard, cruel light flashed in his eyes. Then, even as Flash tensed to leap, even as he waited for the bolt that would crash him into eternity, Dale acted.

She had seen it all, and was ready to move to Flash's aid as Pwami raised his gun. And before Pwami had finished speaking, she had hurled her lithe, alluring body through the air.

A flare of white flame darted from the end of Pwami's gun, spent itself on the steel wall. He spun about, attempting to fight off the tigress that had landed on him, and to bring his gun to bear again on Flash. But at that moment Flash had come to Dale's aid.

In two short, easy, panther-like strides he had reached Pwami's side. His bronzed, steel-like fingers closed about the Dictator's wrist, twisted until the ray gun dropped harmlessly to the floor. And he continued to twist Pwami's wrist until he had brought the Dictator about, facing him.

Then pivoting, Flash hurled his iron-like fist full into Pwami's face.

It was a crushing blow, delivered with every ounce of Flash Gordon's mighty power. Without a whimper Pwami slumped forward to the floor, and lay there, still as death itself.

For an instant Flash stood over him, staring down at the huddled, unconscious figure. Then he said softly:

"Perhaps I should have killed him. But I couldn't. Dale—you saved my life."

Dale ran to his arms, repressed a shudder as she glanced down at Pwami, then rested her head against Flash's broad chest.

"Oh, Flash. To think—to think I almost lost you."

But time was growing short. Already the shadows of the evening were creeping through the room. And they had much to do.

He released Dale, tore a second curtain from the window, and bound Pwami tightly. Then, crossing to Elaine, he bent and whispered.

"Keep up your courage. For the time you're safer here than on the outside. We're still in the fight." She nodded mutely.

Silently he led Dale from the room.

In the hallway, with the door closed behind them, they paused. Flash glanced up and down, breathed with relief when he saw it was deserted, then said softly:

"You know where the laboratory is?"

Dale nodded.

"Good. Now to avoid complications, you go down in the elevator first. Say—if you are questioned—that Pwami sent you on an errand. Undoubtedly the operator believes that Pwami was visiting you or we would have been warned some way.

"Wait downstairs for me—somewhere near the elevator. I'll be along soon."

Without a word, Dale left.

Flash waited in the shadows. He saw the elevator door open, heard the car as it started down. Then, when he felt he had let enough time pass, he padded down the hallway and rang the elevator button.

In a few moments the car arrived. Flash nodded, got in and the door closed behind him. As the man started the elevator on its downward journey, he turned.

"I was scared for a while," he said. "His Excellency came up, but I found out he was lookin' for a new girl—an Earthling. He didn't see you, did he?"

Flash laughed.

"Would I be here, in this car, if he had?" he asked lightly.

The man answered Flash's laugh as the car reached the bottom of the shaft. He opened the door, stepped aside to let Flash out.

"No," he said. "I guess not. But it was a close shave. I don't think I'll take any more chances."

Flash passed into the hallway, turned.

"No," he said quietly, "I don't think you will."

He paced lithely down the corridor.

At the corner Flash paused, searched about. Dale was not in sight. He stared down the length of the long hallway that stretched before him, but in the gathering gloom he could not see her. In long, cat-like strides he moved down the hall.

He had almost reached the end when she came suddenly into view, stepping from an alcove in which she had been waiting. She caught Flash's arm, said in a low, vibrant undertone:

"The laboratory is down there—at the end of this next hallway."

Still holding onto Flash's arm, she led him down the sound-absorbing Doralium tile-floored corridor to a large double steel door. Then, pausing there, she looked inquiringly up at Flash.

Flash stared about. There was another of the numerous alcoves nearby. He nodded toward it.

"You wait in there. I'll not be suspected in this uniform—I hope. I'll be right out."

He went quickly to the double doors, swung them open and walked in.

Pwami's laboratory was a beautiful thing to behold. Of glass and steel construction, it included all that the modern experimentist might need in the way of equipment. Many varied and massive triturators were in evidence, as was a profusion of hanging phials and glass cases. In one corner of the large room there was a row of graduated, glass retorts; and in the other a huge microstope.

At first sight the room appeared deserted. But Flash soon saw the low, hanging molybdenum light at the far end; and reflected in its white glow he saw Zarkov's bowed head. The scientist was seated at a table, going over his notes.

Flash paced softly across the room, stood by Zarkov's side a moment, and then touched him on the shoulder. Zarkov, intent on work, had not been aware of Flash's pres-



Jane Arden

until then. He whirled, started to speak, and suddenly recognized Flash.

"Flash! What—"

"I'll explain later," Flash cut in. "I managed to escape. Daye is waiting in the hallway. Hurry."

Zarkov nodded, picked up the sheet of metalized paper on which he had been inscribing his formula, and rolled it up into a long, thin tube. He dropped this into his jacket pouch, rose from the table.

"How do we get out?" he asked softly.

"That," Flash said quietly, "we will soon discover."

But they didn't. After wandering about the corridors for ten minutes or more, they paused to consider their best move. It was self-evident that they could never run the gauntlet of guards that were strewn about the castle's grounds. And yet on the face of it, that appeared the only solution. Until Flash suddenly gripped Zarkov's arm.

"Back," he said hoarsely, "into the alcove."

Zarkov, Dale and Flash stepped out of the corridor into the concealment of the large alcove, and waited. Then, abruptly, a uniformed man appeared in the shadows, walking quickly. He passed within five feet of them; but his preoccupation and hurry served them in good stead. He went on by, walking quickly, and became soon a mere splotch of black in the darkness. Then Flash turned, speaking rapidly.

"He came out of a door in the hallway. A set door. And the uniform he wore was

the uniform of the M. D. Air Patrol. Does that mean anything?"

Zarkov was silent for a moment. He suddenly snapped his fingers.

"Of course. There must be a landing field up on top of the castle somewhere."

"Precisely," Flash said. "And if we can once find it, there ought to be a ship handy."

He stepped swiftly into the hallway, paced down toward the spot where the man had first appeared. Then he smiled thinly, turned to Zarkov.

"Here it is—a door, all right. You'd never notice it if you weren't looking. There must be a way of opening it."

He felt about, but found no button. Then, remembering the master key light he had taken from the dungeon guard, he flashed its beam about the edges of the door. Slowly, on silent hinges, it swung open. And the blackness of a tunnel gaped at them.

Flash stepped aside, nodded.

"Go ahead, Zarkov. I'll wait here and watch this end while you see where this tunnel leads. You go, too, Dale. But be careful."

Zarkov and Dale passed into the darkness, with Zarkov leading, and they soon disappeared from sight. Then Flash felt a cool breeze waft across his face, and heard Zarkov's voice.

"Okay, Flash. All clear."

Flash glanced about, saw a figure emerge from the darkness down the hallway, and stepped quickly into the tunnel. Was it the M. D. coming back? He closed the door carefully behind him, listened a moment, and then heard footsteps pad quietly by outside.

With a sigh of relief, he started toward the opposite end of the tunnel.

But Flash had not taken a dozen steps when he knew something was wrong. It was nothing he could see, nothing he could feel. There was no strange odor assailing his nostrils, nor was there any suspicious sound. Then he analyzed it—it was a queer sensation of taste!

He was tasting something, swallowing something.

A dozen more steps he took, puzzling over the strange phenomenon, before a choking sensation clawed at his throat. He swallowed desperately, increased his pace. No longer could he feel the coolness of the evening breezes; he felt now only the heaviness of some damp, wet fog. A fog that was slowly throttling him with clammy fingers.

He broke into a run, began staggering. The fog was getting thicker and thicker, cramming its viscosity down his throat. Ahead was the door. If he could only reach it.

Suddenly he reeled against the side of the tunnel, and fought desperately to keep his balance. His senses wavered, and it felt as though he were running through a muddy, clinging swampland. Gasping, he staggered on.

Then he reached the door, hurled himself weakly against it, but it was locked. And even as he hammered feebly on its steel panels, Flash began slumping to the floor. One more effort he made. With his last ounce of rapidly departing strength, he secured the master key light from his pocket, and tried to swing its beam on the door. But before he could, the black waters of oblivion flowed over him.

CHAPTER VIII

Death Bait His Trap.

THE rush of cold air struck Flash's face, washed away some of the black fog that cloaked his brain. He opened his eyes and looked up, looked up, to see mistily the outlines of Zarkov's face. The scientist's voice came to him as though from a great distance:

"He's all right, Dale. Coming out of it now. Jehovah, but that was close. His light key must have struck that lock just before he passed out."

Flash shook his head, tried to get up. With Zarkov's aid he finally struggled weakly to his feet. Dale helped support him. "What-What—" he started to say.

"The door closed behind us as soon as we got out," Zarkov said. "The next thing we knew you were pounding against it. Then it opened, and we dragged you right out. That was a powerful thoracynic gas. Another minute and you would have been gone."

Flash shook his head again, and opened his eyes wide. He saw they were on a long, flat roof at the far end of the castle. In the gray light of evening he identified the turrets in the distance that surrounded the castle proper. Then another moment of investigation disclosed the small air patrol ship standing at the end of a short runway.

"Quick," he said, "that gas must have been started by the man I saw back in the hallway. He'll be—"



Pwami.

But Flash never finished. The door at the roof end of the tunnel swung suddenly open, and a man stood there. A man wearing an odd helmet and holding an unwavering heat gun in his gloved hand. It was the airman.

"Raise your hands," he said brittly.

Flash acted immediately, acted even as did Zarkov. He tensed his weakened muscles, hurled himself against Dale. And as they crashed to the ground out of range, Dr. Zarkov leapt at the helmeted man.

Flash felt the intensity of the lethal heat stream brush against his leg, searing it, burning a smouldering path through the upper fold of his boot. Then Zarkov crashed into the man, and they rolled together to the floor of the roof.

Flash staggered weakly to his feet, looked about. Zarkov was quickly subduing the airman, so his help, weak as it might be, would not be needed. With Dale's arm about him, Flash crossed to the airship. He could at least get it going, get it ready.

But before Flash started the ship's powerful, high-speed motor, there was one thing more he could do—and which he did. With savage fingers he ripped off the M. D. uniform he had been wearing—ripped it off and threw it in a heap near one of the parapet guns. Then, freed of the detested uniform's weight, he flexed his bronzed muscles, breathed deep, and climbed into the ship.

It was a small ship, this. Pwami had never intended that his air patrol use its ships for Sunday joy rides. But Flash saw, that by squeezing in, the three of them could manage fairly well.

And he had just got the motor going, had just helped Dale into the seat, when Zarkov came running up.

"Hurry," he said. "That fellow was a tough nut to crack, and he'll be around in a minute."

They jammed into their places, Flash at the flight director, Dale next to him, and Zarkov on the outside. The evening dusk had changed now to the darkness of night. And as they roared along the ramp that rose over the parapet, the first Martian moon of the night—Phobos—was rising over the horizon.

Flash felt the ship lift under them as they soared out into the night. For the first time since entering the castle he knew a sense of freedom. It was as though some great weight had been lifted from his shoulders.

Then it happened.

Flash felt the ship suddenly dip, and looked quickly out to ascertain the cause. One of the short wings had been sheared off, as if by a huge scythe. And, then, as he fought to retain the ship's equilibrium, the second wing crumpled before his eyes. He twisted about, stared behind him, and saw the flash of light in the darkness about the castle.

"It's a ray gun," he said. "A ray gun on the parapet."

And helplessly Flash and Zarkov locked gazes. There was nothing they could do, no way to check the airship as it plummeted toward the ground. Dale, catching her breath, laid her head on Flash's broad shoulder, and a shiver traveled over her soft, yielding body.

Flash put his arm about her, drew her close. Through the rush of wind that roared past them, he spoke.

"And it had to happen—now," he said.

Zarkov, grimly erect in his seat, nodded slowly, then stiffened.

"Look!" he cried. "It's a—" But he never finished.

With a loud, resounding roar, they crashed. And the cold, black waters of a Martian canal closed over them.

Flash, thrown free of the ship, fought his way to the surface, struggled to keep his head above the rushing, turbulent waters of the canal. He searched through the darkness for some sight of Dale and Zarkov, and then saw Dale clinging desperately to the side of the

wrecked airship and floating swiftly downstream. Striking out, Flash soon caught up to her, grabbed for support on part of the ship.

"Zarkov?" he asked, panting.

Dale shook her head, and Flash looked about. But nowhere did he see any sign of the missing scientist. Then, abruptly, his thoughts were switched to another subject. Something had brushed by him, snapping at his leg.

He looked down beneath the foamy surface of the canal, and saw something long and silvery flash by. Then again that slimy thing brushed by him, and now his leg was caught in a cruel, sharp grasp. Instantly Flash realized their peril. Realized what had happened. They had been plunged into a canal on Pwami's grounds—a canal inhabited by those dreaded human cannibals—

The Shark Men of Mars!

He wrenched his leg from the man's teeth, whirled and dived. The silvery, slimy body of the cannibal flashed in the darkness of the swirling waters, rushed toward him. Flash reached out, caught his arm about the fish man's neck, and flexed his powerful biceps.

The plunge into the cold waters of the canal had helped Flash regain most of his strength; but even so, he knew he faced a strenuous battle—a battle with a creature in the latter's element.

Once his arm slipped on the man's slimy skin, and in that instant the Shark Man wrenched free, and clutched him in his grasp. Flash fought off those powerful arms, fought for the air his bursting lungs demanded, and rose to the surface.

Breathing deeply, he was just able to fill his lungs before the Shark Man dragged him roughly under again. Flash turned once more to the attack, burying his steel-like fingers about the man's slippery throat. And treading water, fighting against the rushing current, he closed his hands tighter and tighter about the fish person's neck.

Once the Shark Man snapped at him, closing his long, shark-like teeth viciously near Flash's arm. But his strength was quickly ebbing, and he soon became no more harmless than a limp, flaccid, mass of blubber.

But Flash Gordon was not destined to achieve success so easily. Hardly had he reached the surface again, gasping in great draughts of welcome air, when the water about them began seething. Quickly Flash glanced

at Dale, then at the half dozen or more slimy heads that were flashing above the surface—shark-like heads that coruscated like scaly silver in the light of the moon.

And no time did he have to shout a warning, no time to turn to the attack, before he felt the grasp of numberless, slippery arms.

Flash struck back, lashed out again and again at the ugly faces of the shark-like creatures. But there was no denying the force of their numbers, no denying the resoluteness of their attack. And, though still fighting desperately to free Dale and himself from their clutches, it was a losing battle.

With his lungs screaming for air, with one last glimpse of the frozen horror on Dale's face as she was dragged beneath the surface with him, Flash felt himself being pulled deeper and deeper into the rushing waters of the canal. He resisted frantically, but in vain.

Down, down, down they went, dragged into the black depths of that turbulent, Stygian stream—where the light of Phobos never shone, and where Death only could abide.

CHAPTER IX.

The Feast of Death.

FLASH was conscious enough to realize that they had at last struck bottom, and knew that they were brought to one of the canal's tiled walls. Then, mysteriously, they passed through an opening in the wall, and started rising again. In a few minutes a flood of welcome air flowed over him, rushed into his paining lungs.

With the return of full perceptivity he saw that they were being hauled out of the water onto level ground—ground that constituted the floor of some cold, subterranean chamber. In the pale lights of a dozen odd, calithium lamps, they were forced to walk forward down a long tunnel to a large, square room.

On the way Flash turned to Dale, and spoke softly, anxious to learn her condition. But as Dale replied, the Shark Men closed about them, and in their odd tongue, imparted a clear warning to be silent.

The rest of the trip to the square room; Flash gave over to thought. He had heard of the Shark Men before, had heard they lived underground by the canal that skirted Pwami's castle, but he had given little credence to the stories.

Now he saw, and realized.

The men themselves, descendants of some strange, fish-like race, were not water breathers. Flash knew that, knew it from their lack of fins, and from the way they breathed in air after coming up out of the water. Yet, through countless centuries, they had trained their lungs to retain the precious breath of life while they explored the depths of the Marian canal.

It had been reported by many sources that the Shark Men were cannabilistic, yet they could never have survived this long by depending on human fare. Undoubtedly then, they were a definite fish-eating race of queer humanity—and as such, would consider a human being a much desired morsel.

Flash glanced at them covertly, studied their features. They were exceedingly tall, and slim. Their bodies were covered by a peculiar scaly substance—an aid to their aquatic travel. And their heads were long and flat, minus any semblance of a chin, with a mouth that seemed to be in the very middle of their neck. Short, sharp teeth protruded from the upper lip, giving them a decided resemblance to a normal shark.

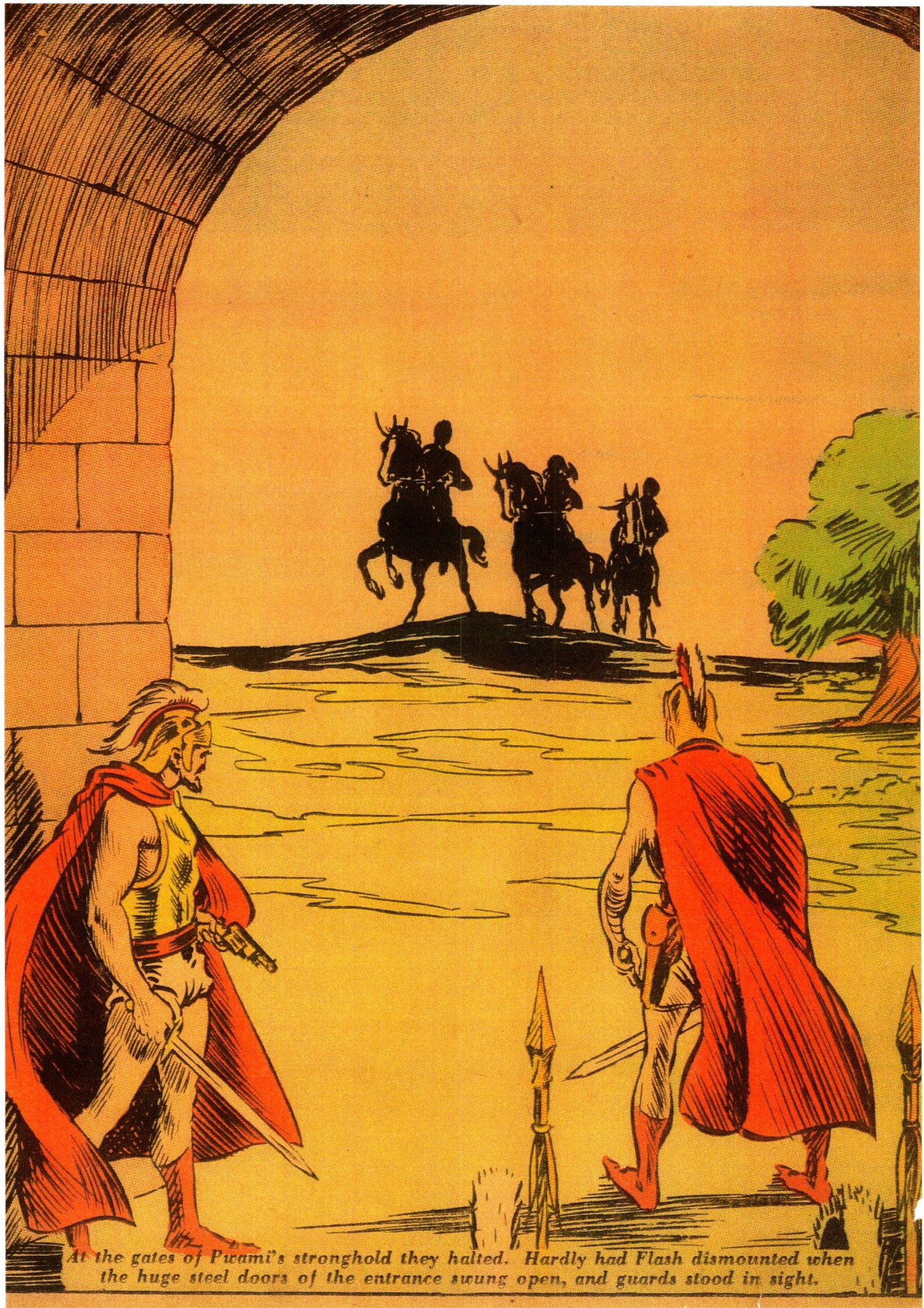
Flash then saw how they lived, down beneath the surface of Mars. Their subterranean city was higher than the surface of the canal, and the wall of the canal formed a barrier against outside invasion. For, to reach the Shark people's town, one would have to dive to the bottom of the canal, swim through one of the small doors in the wall, and come up on the opposite side of the wall to the surface of the channel that had been built there for that purpose.

Then, abruptly, they reached the square chamber. And Flash Gordon's thoughts, which were concerned now with the method of oxygen supply, were dashed immediately from his mind.

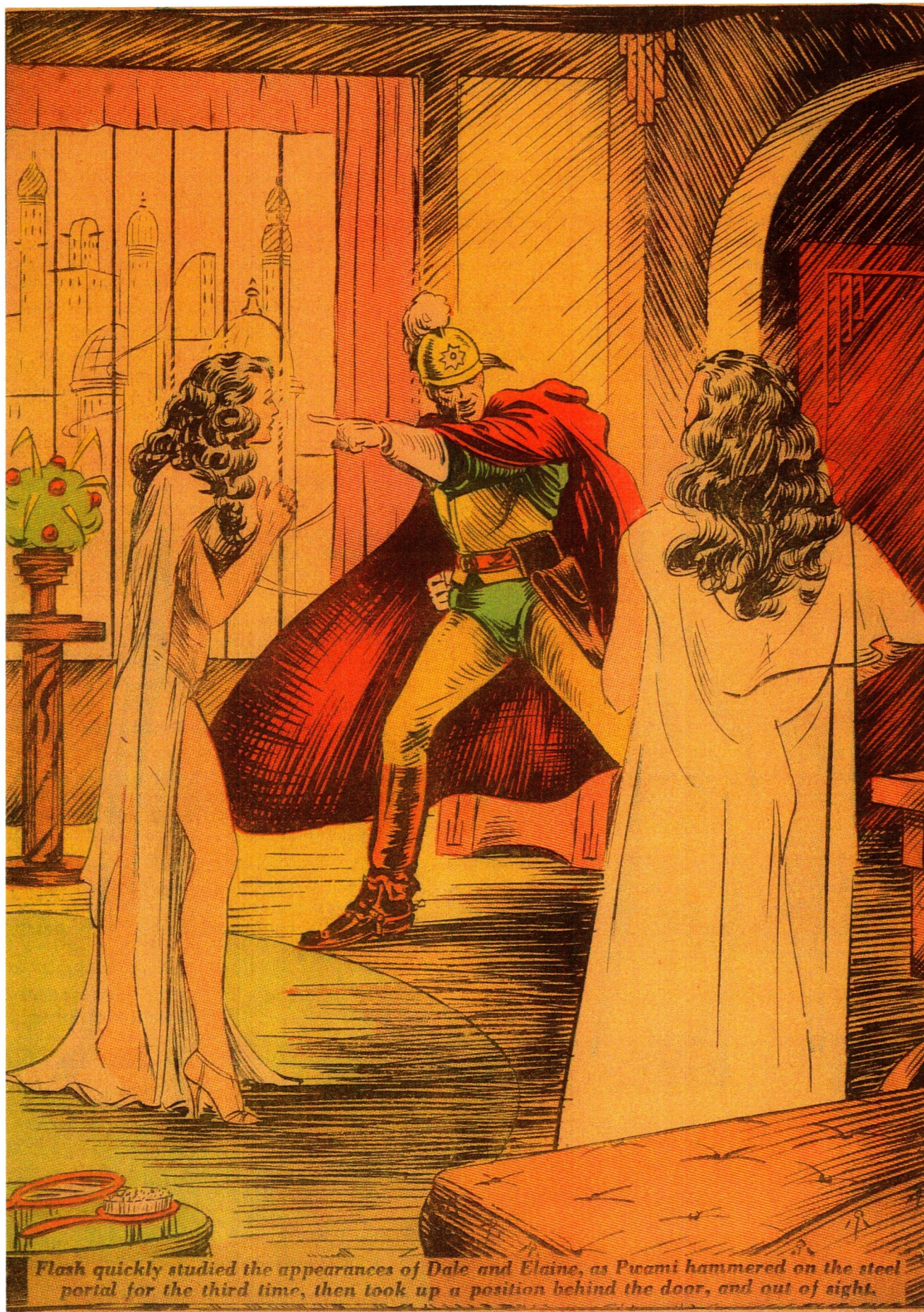
They were standing before a high, crudely-built brick throne. And on the throne, attired in a faded, worn Martian suit, sat the ugly ruler of the Shark Men.

Flash glanced at the suit, thought of the fate of its former owner, and shuddered. Then, in a peculiar, incomprehensible jargon, the ruler was speaking.

Flash listened, glancing occasionally at Dale, trying once to free himself from the grasp of the half-dozen hands that held him, and then subsided. Finally the ruler ceased speaking and he and Dale were led forcibly away.



At the gates of Pwami's stronghold they halted. Hardly had Flash dismounted when the huge steel doors of the entrance swung open, and guards stood in sight.



Flash quickly studied the appearances of Dale and Elaine, as Picami hammered on the steel portal for the third time, then took up a position behind the door, and out of sight.

Down another cold, chilling hall they were taken, and into a small room—a room barren of any furniture, but on whose wall was a number of iron links. Without comment, the Shark captors led them to the wall and prepared to find them there.

Desperately Flash fought against the shackling, but his condition was too weak, and the numbers he opposed, too great. With a cruel snap, he heard the bands close about his wrists; and a sharp pain lanced through his heart as he saw Dale locked to the wall in the same manner.

And so they stood there, arms stretched out, bound by each wrist to the coldness of the brick wall; helpless to move more than an inch or two. With a last, cold, implacable look, the Shark Men turned and left the room.

Dale turned quickly to Flash.

Flash shook his head slowly. Tortured by the thoughts of almost certain death, in agony over Dale's probable fate, Flash could not even conjecture. He knew only that he would sell his life, gladly, to free Dale, and to find Zarkov alive.

But though Flash did not know then what was destined for them, he was soon to find out.

How long they were chained there, Flash never knew. Occasionally a Shark Man would come in with food, and give it to them, watching greedily. More occasionally they dozed, leaning against the wall so as not to fall suddenly forward to hang by their wrists. Centuries seemed to pass—centuries filled with grinning, chinless fish-like people, and much queer, discordant talk. More than once during the time they were held captive, Flash tried to trick one of the Shark Men into opening the cuffs that supported his wrists. But either they were too wary or didn't understand what Flash meant, for at no time did they fall into the trap.

And so four days passed—four Martian days; and though Flash had lost all conception of time, he had not lost his ability to reason. He knew, if once they got free of their bonds, that there would be a way out of this subterranean hell—a way far less dangerous than the rushing, infested waters of the canal.

It was on the fifth day that they were released.

A short time before the two Shark Men came in to free them. Flash heard the rising commotion in the large room down the hall-

way—the royal chamber. He heard the rattle of an iron pot, the rush of sudden, blazing fire, the splashing of water. He suspected the reason; and when the men entered, long sharp staffs gripped tightly, Flash knew that his suspicions were correct.

There was to be a feast—a human feast. And Dale and he were to be the *pièce de résistance*! The human sacrifice on the altar of their gods!

He tensed as the men drew near. One of them, holding his staff-like spear poised, stood in front of Dale as the other unlocked the bands that circled her wrists. It was a tactical error on the man's part; he should have released Flash first. For with the man guarding Dale, Flash was given the opportunity he had been praying for. The moment he was released, he sprang.

Though four days of his confining position had been no help to Flash Gordon's physical self, he had been fed well and, to a certain extent, had rested. And now, driven by the overpowering urge to escape, he crashed into his jailer with a terrific, overwhelming force.

In the water the Shark Man might have been a more equal opponent; but on Flash's own ground he was as ineffectual as a babe. Flash grabbed him roughly by his slippery body, raised him high into the air. And as the second man, with lance held forward, charged to the rescue, Flash hurled the screaming Shark Man directly at him.

They crashed together; and the jailer's screams rose as his friend's spear bit into his slimy, scaly flesh. Flash paused not a second. Rushing forward he scooped up the spear the first Shark Man had dropped, and caught Dale by the wrist.

Then, with the strident screams of the wounded man echoing through the barrenness of the room, Flash raced quickly into the corridor.

Abruptly a new menace appeared. The screams of the Shark Man had been heard, and now the hall was filled with a horde of the puzzled fish people. They spotted Flash, and, with a cacophonous babble of excited shouting, charged after him.

Flash, his staff held rigidly, whirled up the hallway toward the far end. Passing at least four intersecting corridors before slowing, he had gained ground on his pursuers. And now, with Dale panting at his side, he halted and searched about

What he sought was an exit—an exit created by the most demanding need of mankind—oxygen. Flash knew, had so reasoned during his imprisonment that there must be some method by which the Shark Men got it from above. And as it could never be brought in through the canal entrances, then there must be some sort of shaft or shafts that drew in the fresh air and expelled the foul.

And if he could once find it, there was a good chance that the shaft might afford an exit. Behind him rose again the increasing volume of sound from the approaching Shark Men. A spear, hurtled through the air, crashed against the wall by Flash's side. He drew Dale to safety behind him, looked frantically about. A corridor stretched out to his right, and faded into blackness—unlit by the pale light of the calithium lamps.

He gripped Dale firmly, sped quickly down the darkness of the corridor. And at the end, after making a short, sharp turn, Flash came upon a pale glow of strange light. Daylight.

His heart hammered excitedly as he raced to the bottom of the shaft, then it almost stopped. For the little square of daylight that showed at the top of the brick shaft was almost forty feet away. And those forty feet constituted a sheer vertical climb. An impossible climb.

But was it?

Flash glanced quickly at the shaft. It was less than four feet wide and it had been poorly erected, for the bricks protruded in many spots. By straddling it, there was a chance—a slight chance—of ascending. He turned quickly to Dale.

"Hurry, dear. You might make it. Stretch your legs and arms across the shaft, and work your way up. I'll follow."

He pressed Dale into the shaft, started her up. And with a sigh of relief he saw that she could just manage to rest a foot on the brick walls opposite each other. Then the loud shouts of the approaching Shark people crashed against his ears.

He whirled about, saw the van of the rushing horde in the darkness of the tunnel. Poising his long lance, he waited; and as the first man came into sight, Flash whipped his arm forward.

The thin spear whistled through the air, sank deep into the nearest cannibal's body. With a loud screech he pitched forward, dragging at the lance. But Flash's strategy had served its purpose. The following horde

paused for the moment to help their brother, confident of Flash's inability to escape.

And, with his face drawn grimly, Flash started up the tall, rough-walled shaft.

Progress was slow, and appeared doubly so, by the necessity for speed. Inch by tedious inch Flash worked his way upwards, tensing himself at each step lest Dale should lose her grip and come plunging down.

Fifteen feet he had progressed before the Shark people appeared below. He heard the excited babble and looked down. They were standing at the foot of the shaft, staring helplessly up, gesticulating wildly. Then one of them gripped his spear and hurled it up at Flash, but its force was soon spent by the pull of gravity.

When Flash had climbed over half the distance, two of the Shark Men started up. They had seen Flash's method, and were copying it. But, though they were less hampered than Flash in their climb, they lost their advantage in fear.

And so, as Flash finally reached the top and drew himself out onto solid ground, the nearest of the pursuing Shark Men was still less than halfway up; but more were following.

Flash gripped Dale's arm, looked about. Nearby he could see the high wall that skirted Pwami's grounds and grouped in front of it, a quartet of M. D.'s. They were still on dangerous soil, still within the cruel Dictator's realm. Then Flash saw something else—a space ship. Standing less than a hundred yards away, it appeared deserted.

"Dale," he said, "there's our answer. If we can reach that before being seen we can get out."

He looked once more down the shaft. The Shark Men were nearing the top now, and any moment they would be on them. Then Dale's voice hammered against his consciousness.

"The guards—they're coming!"

Flash whirled. The four armed M. D.'s were headed their way. The soldiers hadn't seen them as yet, but it would be only a matter of seconds before they did. Without waiting for further thought, Flash grasped Dale's wrists and hurried toward the safety of the ship.

But they failed to reach it unobserved. One of the guards saw them, shouted a warning. Flash, putting himself between Dale and their guns, started sprinting. Then, as the guards,

their guns drawn, raced across to intercept them, Flash grabbed Dale and forced her into the ship. And, as he reached to slam the door that connected with the compression lock, the guards surrounded him.

Flash whirled, met the charge. His bronzed fist crashed out, caught one of the M. D.'s full on the chin. Another raised his heat gun, but a third knocked it aside, shouting:

"No! No! Pwami's order! Alive!"

Twice more Flash smashed his fist out, and each time its crushing force landed. Then a sixth sense warned him of a new danger, and he whirled. But not quickly enough. There was a swishing sound, and something hard, unyielding, crashed down brutally on his flaxen head. Slammed again and again.

With an expiring sigh, Flash sagged limply to the ground, and a star-studded darkness flowed mercifully over him.

CHAPTER X.

The Purple Fog.

THE roar in Flash Gordon's ears rose to a crashing crescendo, then died slowly away. He opened his eyes, blinked away a stabbing pain that coursed through his aching head, and stared about him.

He was lying on a cot, in a small, white metal compartment. There were tow handles on either side of the cot. From the outer handles dangled two leather straps. But it was not until he placed the throbbing compression that hammered against his ears that his befuddled mind cleared enough to supply the answer to his question.

He was on the space ship. And the ship was in motion.

Gingerly he sat up, fought off the wave of dizziness that surged over him, and stared about the room. A door directly opposite the cot attracted his attention. But without rising to investigate he knew it would be locked.

He shook his head once, sharply, to banish the remaining cobwebs, and forced himself to concentrate. How had he got here? Where was he going? What had happened? Grimly he strove to answer those questions. Then abruptly he thought of Dale, and of the fight, the sudden crushing blow, and the darkness.

Where was she now?

He rose shakily, gripped one of the looped metal straps that hung from the ceiling, and started across the room. But before he got

there, footsteps sounded in the outer corridor and the door swung slowly open.

A woman stood on the threshold. A tall, sinuously beautiful woman. A long, silken cape was draped loosely from sculptured shoulders, and parted to reveal the short, orange military tights, the calf-high orange boots and matching halter. A jewel-studded orange band held in place a wealth of flowing raven hair. She leaned languidly against the door and stared at Flash through lidded, glittering, ebony eyes.

"Ah. My patient is better."

Flash blinked, backed slowly to the cot, and sat down.

"Well—I hardly expected—you."

The woman twisted her full carmine lips into a tempting smile.

"The ability to amaze," she said huskily, "gives one a decided advantage. How are you feeling?"

Unconsciously Flash fingered the tender spot on the back of his head.

"Not bad," he answered, "considering the wallop I got. Don't tell me *you* handled that club."

The woman laughed, throatily. She came into the room, closed the door, and put a cup of high caloric broth on the table.

"Hardly. I'm not *that* amazing. But I'm glad you feel better. You've been delirious for almost three full days!"

"Three days!" Flash tasted the broth, then drank some.

"Almost to the hour," the woman answered. "However, I suppose now that you're back to normal you are curious about a number of things. Maybe I can enlighten you."

"Naturally," Flash replied, "when one is Shanghaied one would like to know the reason. Where are we bound? And precisely who are you?" He finished the broth, relaxed in its welcome warmth.

Once again the woman laughed. She crossed slowly to the cot and sat down beside Flash. For a moment she stared thoughtfully at the opposite wall: then she arched her trim eyebrows, and turned soft, appealing eyes toward him.

"I," she said quickly, "am Princess Illana, daughter of Grotta, King of Jupiter. And that is where we are now headed."

"Jupiter!"

Flash rose abruptly, stared down at Illana's smiling features. She leaned casually back against the wall, raised her eyes to his.

"Yes, Flash Gordon, we are on our way to Jupiter. It's all a part of a bargain I made with Pwami—a bargain that, incidentally, saved your life."

"For which," Flash replied, "I am naturally grateful. But exactly where do I fit in the bargain?"

He watched her closely as she answered. Lines of confused doubt appeared on his broad forehead. There was a moment of silence, then she said:

"Jovien men bore me. They are too subservient. Martians, Neptunians, Saturnians—all would grovel on the ground before me. There is nothing they would hesitate to do to gain my favors."

Her voice had lowered now, was soft, pleading.

"And so it has been ever since I can remember, Flash. Until I've been going slowly mad—mad with the desire to meet a real man. A man with courage, with character, with strength. A man whose will I could not bend by the slightest wave of my hand."

She paused briefly again, seemed to be looking into space. Slowly she went on:

"Then a year ago I heard of you, and of your exploits; and I knew that someday—someday I'd met you, and my dream would come true."

She rose now, crossed to Flash and put her arms about his neck.

"Flash, darling. You're mine."

Gently Flash removed her arms, held her away. He knew he was facing a woman on the verge of insanity—a woman possessed of a ruling obsession, and one who had the power to satisfy it. She was beautiful—as beautiful as a cobra—and as deadly.

"And," he asked quietly, "now that you've met me?"

"Now that I've met you?" She backed to the wall, leaned lazily, alluringly against it, and looked evenly at him. "Flash Gordon—Prince consort of Illana, the future Queen of Jupiter."

Flash tensed.

"And suppose I object?"

Illana arched her brows, then laughed throatily.

"I want you to—expect you to. You would not be Flash Gordon if you didn't. But there's nothing you can do about it."

"Perhaps not," Flash replied carefully.

"However, how is Dale?"

"Dale?" Once again Illana laughed. "In the

best of hands, I would say. Pwami is very fond of her."

A curious chill ran along Flash Gordon's spine.

"Pwami! You mean—"

"Of course," Illana interrupted. "That was part of the bargain. He wanted Dale and I wanted you."

Flash paced quickly across the small room, stood directly in front of the princess. There was a flicker of angry yellow in the depths of his cold grey eyes. Gone now was all thought of humoring Illana.

"Do you mean to tell me you let that dirty scum take Dale? Do you—"

"Naturally." Illana was still smiling, triumphantly now. "Would I want her along? Do you think I'm a fool?" She raised her arms again. "Oh, Flash—"

"Go away from me!" Flash clenched his fists, controlled the hot rage that pounded through his veins. "No. I don't think you're a fool. I think you're the lowest, foulest, most despicable form of human being that has ever begged for an excuse to exist! And you may thank the black devils that protect you that you're not a man, for if you were I'd tear you apart, bit by bit! Now order this ship around before I forget my ethics!"

A look of terrible calmness came over Illana's features. She drew to her fullest height, breathing quickly, deeply; black eyes flashing hellish fire. Her hand appeared from the folds of her cape, clutching tightly a small, deadly ray gun.

"I'll make you eat those words, Flash Gordon. I'll make you get down on your hands and knees and kiss the ground I walk on. Make you come crawling to me on your belly, begging the crumbs of my kindness. Oh, you have spirit, Flash Gordon; but I'll break it—smash it into atoms. Now get back!"

Flash hesitated then took one step backwards. He was conscious that the first false move he made would be his last; but conscious, too, that he must somehow get back to Mars—and quickly. He paused now, stared steadily into Illana's glittering eyes. His voice was deadly calm.

"Put that gun down!"

There was a moment of deadly silence; a moment when two wills clashed, when two minds, each controlled by an unswerving purpose, fought for domination. Once the gun in Illana's hand wavered, but quickly became steady again. Then, with a suddenness that

caught them both entirely unaware; the space ship gave a violent lurch.

Flash staggered sideways, crashed against the wall, and was pitched forward as the ship took an abrupt dive. The first unexpected side-slip had thrown Illana across the room, too; and as she slammed into the wall the ray gun was knocked from her grasp. Then, as the space ship pitched forward, the princess was hurled backwards, head first, into the forward wall of the cabin.

With a soft, expiring sigh she slumped to the floor.

Flash staggered quickly to his feet, started to go to her side. But once again the ship twisted crazily about, throwing him back across the room to the cot.

For a brief moment he sat there, gripping the strap handle on the side, trying desperately to steady his reeling head. Striving, too, to explain to his scientific satisfaction the strange phenomenon of gravitational behavior in what he supposed to be space. For, though the ship was equipped with gravita-flooring—a mechanical gravity that served conveniently when a space ship once passed into the ether—that did not account for the additional gravitation.

Then a swift calculation of time served to enlighten him a bit. Illana had said he had been unconscious almost three days. If they had been traveling that long then they should be somewhere in the vicinity of the Planetoids—that string of small planets that had its orbit between Mars and Jupiter. Still, that failed to answer for the ship's strange behavior.

And yet again the space ship dipped violently forward, twisted about and performed a complete inside loop. Flash gripped the handles on the cot, swung by his hands as the ship turned over, and braced himself until they were on an even keel. Then leaping across the room he picked up Illana's inert form and carried her to the cot.

A moment it took to strap her on, another moment to lift her limp wrist and learn that life still throbbed weakly through her veins. Then he lurched across the swaying room to the door and got into the hall.

At the end of the short passageway he could see the door of the control room swinging open, slamming back and forth as the ship cavorted through space. Bracing himself, Flash gauged the ship's motion, then stag-

gered down the hallway. He reached the door of the control room, swung in and gripped one of the dangling, swaying metal straps, and turned toward the operator.

The man was there, strapped into his seat, staring straight ahead through the magnascope, holding the wheel of the ship in a death grip.

"What's wrong?"

The operator turned a white, drained face toward Flash. If he was surprised at seeing him there it was lost in the overwhelming fear that held him in icy claws.

"The purple fog," he said. "Look."

Flash staggered across the room, stared into the magnascope. The face of the large screen was splashed with a swirling, impenetrable veil of purple.

"Can't you drive straight through? You've got a space compass."

The man shook his head, gripped the wheel in a sudden, convulsive movement.

"No. I can't. I'm caught in the pull of a magnetic mountain on one of the Planetoids. I can't— Look out! We're going!"

The ship dipped abruptly forward, rushed madly on a straight course toward the terrific magnetic attraction. Flash was pitched off balance, but managed to grab the back of the operator's chair.

"Swing it up," he shouted. "Give it all your rockets!"

The man didn't answer. Desperately he fought to get the nose of the ship pointed away from the mountain. Then, with a shaking hand, he fired the emergency rockets.

For a brief instant the ship trembled there, torn between the two forces. Then it shuddered, hung still for the space of a heartbeat, and plunged madly backwards toward the mountain.

There was a moment of intense calm—a moment when life itself seemed to have been suspended. Then there was a rending, tearing crash.

Flash felt himself being hurled across the room, was aware for the moment of a series of roaring explosions, and of the flashing, star-studded blackness that cloaked his vision. And finally the explosions died away, and the stars faded from the blackness before Flash's eyes, and all that remained within the ship was silence. A heavy, smoking silence.

A deathly silence.

CHAPTER XI.

Death Inhabits Tyrant.

FLASH got slowly to his feet, steadied himself for a moment against the wall, and glanced across the control cabin of the space ship. Though his legs were shaky from the shock of the crash, he was uninjured. The powerful compression chamber in which the quarters of the space ship were suspended, had reduced considerably the force of the collision.

The operator, strapped to his seat, was still unconscious; and the sun, which was now shining through the lens of the magnascope, dappled the whiteness of his face.

Flash got a cup of water from the tall vacuum container, and with its aid finally succeeded in bringing the man back to a semi-conscious state. Then he went down the passage to the cabin where he had left Illana, carrying another cup of water.

She was conscious, though obviously considerably weakened from the experience. She sat up as Flash unbuckled the straps; and, resting back against the wall, sipped the water as Flash held the cup. Then she turned dazed eyes up to his.

"What happened?"

Flash told her briefly. It took her a moment to grasp the full significance of the situation. Finally she nodded.

"There's a spacephone on board. Have Madara get help."

It was not a command, but rather a faint, pleading request. Gone now was Illana's arrogance. No longer was she the dominant, ego-centric daughter of a powerful ruler; but instead, a tired, helpless, dependent woman. And as such Flash felt sorry for her.

He returned to the control cabin, and saw that Madara was fully conscious and already working the locational beam of the space phone. Flash repeated Illana's request. The man turned, shook his head slowly.

"Can't do it. I've been trying to communicate with both Mars and Jupiter but the magnetic attraction of the mountains throws off the beam. Looks like we're stuck."

"Stuck! And I suppose even if we could repair the ship we'd never get it up."

"How could we?" Madara replied. "The magnetic pull of these mountains is too great."

The sudden realization of the truth bolted through Flash Gordon's dazed brain. Maroon-

ed! Isolated on a tiny Planetoid whirling madly through space! They might never be found.

Flash strode quickly across the control room, spun the wheel that opened the door into the compression lock, and stepped through. A second wheel opened the hull door, and pale sunlight streamed into the ship.

Before him stretched the rough terrain of the planet, its horizon seemingly less than a few miles away. Rough, uneven crags rose about them on all sides—miniature tors on a miniature globe. He dropped lightly to the ground.

Madara followed close behind, and they turned first to inspect the space ship. A moments examination told them all that was necessary. The ship, crashing backwards into the mountainous country before settling on its base, had smashed the rockets. The assembly was a total wreck. And, even though they might succeed in overcoming the effects of the magnetic power about them, they never could repair the damage that had been done.

Flash rose from his examination, glanced speculatively about him, then to Madara.

"We've got to set up a signal somehow," he said. "There's not much chance of it doing any good, but it's about all we can do. What have you we can use?"

The operator thought for a moment, then shrugged.

"There's a night flare in the emergency kit with the ship's identification," he said. "But maybe you'd better look with me. There might be something."

Back in the control cabin, Madara opened the large, metal lid of the emergency box and Flash started rummaging through. He suddenly straightened, holding a large, wire-wrapped cylinder in each hand.

"Here's a space coil assembly," he said. "Have you got an ether tube? We might rig up a sending set if you have. It won't be powerful but it will be able to pick up a passing ship without much trouble."

"Yes, there's an ether tube with the space phone," Madara said. "And I can unwrap some wire from our own receiving set. But won't you need a double-wave condenser? You couldn't attach our power tube assembly to that."

"Naturally," Flash said. "But I can hook up your single condensers in a reverse series. That will work as well. You get the tube, wire, power mike and energy generator and detach

your compass—we'll have to locate a spot that is unaffected by the magnetic waves of the mountains. In the meantime I'll start assembling the condensers."

Flash worked rapidly, and the infection spread to Madara. Illana, in the meantime, had come out of the cabin and was standing in the doorway, watching. In less than an hour Flash had completed his home-made space radio, and rose.

"Okay, Madara. Let's go."

He crossed to the open compression lock, was about to step through, when Illana caught his arm.

"May I come along?"

Flash turned, slightly puzzled at the continued quiescence of the princess, but could see no reason for refusing her request.

"If you wish," he said quietly.

He dropped lightly to the ground, helped Illana down, and looked about him as Madara left the ship. Then, with a definite location in mind, Flash started off.

Winding through the maze of crags, Flash worked his way slowly out into what appeared to be a path. He hesitated, frowned as he examined it, then continued on. Two hundred yards down the path they came to a large, open plateau—a plateau dotted with an assortment of stunted, scraggly trees.

Flash sighted two of the higher trees, close enough together to provide adequate poles for the aerial, and headed directly for them. Reaching there he paused, stared at the heavy, scraggly woods that bordered one edge of the plateau, but saw no better location. He glanced at the compass, and saw that the magnetic influence of the mountain no longer affected it.

"This spot will do," he said. "I'll put an end of the aerial up here, you attach the other, Madara. Use that tree over there near the edge of the woods."

As Madara started off, Flash coiled one end of the wire about his waist and climbed slowly to the top of the rough-barked tree. He fastened the wire to the tip of a high limb, adjusted the insulator, and started attaching the connecting terminals.

But he never finished.

A sudden, fierce, terror-ridden shriek rose in the silence. Flash twisted quickly about and saw Illana, frozen to immobility, staring towards the woods. And then he saw Madara, stricken with a blind fear, racing madly back toward the ship. Then, as Illana screamed

again, Flash felt a cold chill course up his spine.

For emerging from the stunted, leafless forest, was a horde of huge, hairy, animal-like creatures—creatures with small, bullet heads; with twisted, wrinkled, white faces; and with long gangling arms. And he knew then, for the first time, the name of the Planetoid on which they had crashed. For the ape-like things he saw advancing were the dreaded Gorillamen of Tyron.

He dropped hurriedly to the ground, grimly aware that they had brought no weapons with them. But even as he landed, even as he started sprinting across the rocky soil, one of the human beasts had grabbed Illana—and two others were close upon the fleeing operator.

One of the huge, white-faced brutes spotted Flash as he raced to Illana's rescue. With a deep bellow, the Gorilla man lumbered toward him, arms outstretched, his large fists opening and closing convulsively.

Flash checked his speed, fenced for an opening. The big beast emitted a guttural roar and charged. Flash waited until the Gorilla man was upon him, then dodged aside, pivoted quickly and hurled his bronzed fist full into the brute's mouth.

The Gorilla man roared with pain, and jerked himself about to face his smaller antagonist. This time Flash didn't wait for the beast to charge. With the speed of a panther, he hurled himself at the Gorilla man's throat.

His bronzed hands buried themselves deep into the hairy neck of the brute; his steel-like fingers closed about its throat in a vice-like grip, grew tighter and tighter. Soon he felt the huge body of the human beast become limp in his grasp; he released his hold and the Gorilla man slumped to the ground.

Whirling suddenly toward the beast who was clutching Illana, Flash saw the second Gorilla man bearing down on him. But this time he had no opportunity to prepare himself for the attack. With a snarling fury the hirsute brute crashed into him, and two hairy arms reached out to encircle Flash in a crushing grip of iron.

Summoning all his remaining strength, Flash fought partially free of the deadly hold, slammed the heel of his hand up hard under the Gorilla man's chin.

The brute's head snapped violently back, and Flash, taking immediate advantage of the

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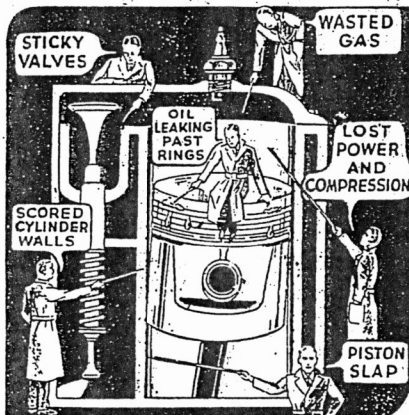
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lessening pressure about his body, fought his way free of the crushing force of those powerful arms. Then, pacing quickly to the attack, hammered his fist again and again into the Gorilla man's face.

For a brief moment the huge bestial man just stood there staring dazedly into space. Then, as Flash pivoted quickly and shot in one final, crashing right, the brute sagged limply to the ground.

Turning, Flash saw the Gorilla man who had Illana making quickly for the woods. And without pausing to take a deep breath, he charged off in pursuit. At the fringe of the scraggly, leafless forest he got within range of the hairy beast. And, tensing his powerful muscles, he hurled his body through the air.

He landed full on the Gorilla man's broad back, bore him to the ground. With a guttural roar, the brute dropped Illana's limp form, whirled about to repulse the sudden attack. Flash, waiting cat-like, legs bent, paused until the beast had turned. Then, seeing the opening, he dropped quickly astraddle the Gorilla man's hirsute chest.

Once again his fingers sought the hairy throat of a half-human monster; and once again his steel-like fingers clamped tightly about a hairy neck; and for the second time he found his hold gradually sapping the strength from the beast's heavily-muscled body.

But it was not in the cards for Flash to repeat his former success.

He was barely conscious of the sudden soft, padding footfalls behind him; was hardly aware of the swift intake of fetid breath. The first intimation he had of disaster was when four hairy arms abruptly grasped him, pulled him bodily into the air. Then, as he lashed out desperately with his one free fist, he was hurled violently to the ground.

The shock of the collision stunned him momentarily; and before he could rise, before he could even raise his arm for protection, three hundred and fifty pounds of solid, hairy weight crashed down on him.

He looked up, saw a Gorilla man raising Illana's unconscious form to his breast, saw the face of the second beast directly over him. Then with a violence that precluded any opposition, two hairy hands clamped about his throat, and he was dragged, only half-conscious, into the dense interior of the woods.

CHAPTER XII.

Illana Repents.

THE Planetoid Tyron is only twenty miles in diameter. It takes four hours for it to make a complete revolution on its own axis. Hence day and night are each but two hours long. So, though they had crashed just before daybreak, most of the Tyronian day had been spent in examining the ship and preparing the radio; and now, as Flash felt himself being dragged over the rocky trail, dusk was already creeping over the horizon.

After a while he managed to struggle to his feet. But almost immediately a third Gorilla man—undoubtedly the one whom he had been fighting at the end—came alongside. And, with one of the beasts gripping each arm, the march continued.

Once, as a stray shaft of light filtered through the density of the forest, Flash saw that Illana was conscious; though the Gorilla man who carried her, and who led the procession, made no effort to put her down.

It may have been an hour, or it may have been only ten minutes that the march continued before coming to a stop. Flash, weakened from the effects of his recent experiences, and tortured by thoughts of both Dale and Zarkov, had no conception of the passage of time.

He was weary, weary in mind and body and soul, and the dreaded reaction that comes to one so exhausted was beginning to set in. That overwhelming desire to cease struggling, the desire that Flash had fought so undauntedly time and again, was at last coming to claim him.

He was hardly conscious that they were led finally to the center of a square of cleared forest. Hardly conscious of the score of gibbering creatures that formed about them. He knew that both he and Illana were being tied firmly to the bole of a large, fat tree, but exhibited little interest—and less resistance.

As the purple shades of night fell over the small planetoid, Flash watched casually the black shapes of the human apes as they passed by, listened indifferently to the low, guttural sounds that they uttered, and calmly pondered his fate.

It was immediately after two huge beasts passed them closely and headed back down the path over which they had been brought, that Illana spoke for the first time.

"I wonder," she said quietly, "where they are going."

Flash glanced toward her, then after the retreating Gorilla men.

"Probably after Madara," he said.

"Madara's dead," Illana replied. "The coward!"

There was a moment of silence. When Flash failed to speak, Illana said:

"What is to happen to us?"

"I don't know," Flash answered dispassionately. "Probably be burned as an offering to their gods."

Another silence. Finally Illana twisted about as much as her bonds would permit.

"Flash," she said shortly. "I'm thankful for—for what you did. Saving me, I mean. You could have escaped. Why didn't you—you hate me so. Was I worth it?"

"Perhaps you aren't," Flash said stiffly. "However, I owed you a debt, and I merely tried to repay it. Let it stand at that."

They were silent again as a pair of Gorilla women came over and examined them at close range, touching them curiously, chattering excitedly. When the beasts were gone, Illana spoke again:

"Oh, Flash. I'm sorry, about Dale, I mean."

Flash turned quickly, replied in bitter tones:

"Your ability to amaze hasn't deserted you."

"I know I deserve it, Flash. But please don't be so cruel. I don't want to die knowing you despise me as you do. I was mad—insanely mad about you. You were my dream—my life. I didn't realize what a horrible thing I had done. Didn't realize it until you told me what a low person I really was."

"I was angry then—angry because I knew it was the truth. Angry because I knew that the very thing I had done to get you, would turn you forever against me. I can never ask you to like me, Flash. But couldn't you forgive me?"

Flash understood her. Understood her now as he had before. He could see how a woman, brought up as a spoiled child under the guiding hand of the dominating Grotta, might not hesitate at anything to gain her ends—and never consider the wrong. He nodded slowly.

"Yes, Illana," he said.

There was another short period of silence. He heard the Princess sobbing softly, but banished her quickly from his mind. Then his thoughts turned suddenly towards Dale and it

seemed as though a heavy hand had suddenly taken hold of his heart and was squeezing out its last drop of blood. Gone! Lost to him forever! Lost to him as completely as was Zarkov when the turbulent waters of Mars had drawn him to their bosom.

And it was then that Flash became abruptly aware of his own defeatist attitude. It was then that he was first conscious of the lack of resistance that was flowing through his veins. He became suddenly tense, raised his head and looked about. There was still a chance. There was always a chance as long as there was a breath of air in his body. And he still lived.

He was becoming acutely interested now in the peculiar actions of the Gorilla men. What did they intend doing? Why had they gone off and left them tied up this way?

For the first time since being bound to the rough tree, Flash strained at the ropes. They had been tied tightly, but not too well. There was a slight chance that—

"Flash!"

Flash turned quickly, stared through the darkness toward the pale oval that marked Illana's face. His voice again carried that vibrant resilience that normally characterized it.

"Yes?"

"You have an Earthman friend, haven't you?"

"Zarkov?"

"I think that's the name. I heard Pwami mention it when we were—we were—"

"What about him?" Flash cut in quickly.

"He's alive!"

A sudden chill coursed through Flash Gordon's veins. Unconsciously his voice raised above its normal pitch. He strained against his bonds, faced about.

"Alive?"

"Yes. I forgot to tell you before. I overheard Pwami saying you probably thought he had died in the canal. But he was saved, caught in the sluice gates. Some of Pwami's guards found him there."

Flash pressed harder at his bonds. He was breathing rapidly, excitedly.

"Where is he? What happened to him?"

Illana hesitated, as though reluctant to answer Flash's question. Finally she said:

"He was sent to Ceres."

Flash sucked air harshly through his clenched teeth.

"Ceres! The prison planetoid! That means—we're not far from him right now!"

Illana nodded. There was a moment of silence, a moment when she appeared absorbed in thought. Then she said:

"There was something else, too. Something about a formula. I didn't hear all Pwami said, but—"

"A formula. That's—think hard, Illana! Can't you remember?"

A moment more Illana was silent. Finally she shook her head.

"No. It was just about some formula that Pwami had. But he seemed quite pleased."

An involuntary groan escaped through Flash Gordon's drawn lips. Zarkov's discovery! The formula that would alter the Universe! And Pwami had it!

If Flash had needed any further incentive to continue living, it would have been supplied by Illana's information then. But as the incentive was no longer needed, what she told him only added hot fuel to the blazing fire already flowing through his veins.

Now a plan began taking shape in his brain. A plan based on what he had just learned, and what he hoped to accomplish. He turned quickly to the Princess.

"Illana—if we can get out of this mess, will you do me one favor?"

"Of course—or a hundred."

"Just one," Flash replied. "That's all I'll need."

He was silent again for a period, seeking some method of severing their bonds; and listening, too, to the faint, gibbering sounds of the Gorilla people off in the shadows that surrounded the clearing. He leaned back against the bole of the tree, experimentally, then tensed. The bark was rough—in places almost razor sharp. It was just possible—

Even before the complete thought had flashed through his mind, he had strained against the ropes and was rubbing them back and forth against the jagged bark of the tree.

The work was slow, tedious, and made even slower and more tedious by his own desire for speed. But finally his pains brought results, for he felt one of the strands of the crudely made rope snap apart.

Working feverishly now, Flash rubbed the rope faster and faster against the bark. Another strand broke, then another. And finally, under the intense heat of the friction, the rope snapped apart. He was free.

Quickly shedding the loose bonds, Flash turned to Illana. The gibbering of the Gorilla people was becoming louder now, and seem-

ingly nearer. He heard distinctly, the soft padding of their leathery feet; and now, as he fought hurriedly to untie crudely drawn knots that held Illana captive, he could see the vague outlines of their swaying shapes—black against the darkness of the night.

They were coming!

Then, even as the huge shapes closed in toward them, Flash got the ropes free. One brief glance told him that the path over which they had been brought seemed the best method of escape; and a second glance revealed to him that they could just about make it before the Gorilla horde closed in.

He gripped Illana's arm, whispered hoarsely in her ear.

"Quick, this way."

To add emphasis to his order, he pushed her toward the path. Then, with a quick glance over his shoulder, started after her.

Two steps he had taken when his foot struck the obstruction—a rock. Hurriedly he bent, enclosed the large stone in his steel-like grasp. Then, hearing the excited gibbering of the Ape people as they moved in toward the tree where they had been tied, he raced after Illana.

And, even as he heard the sudden squeals of frustrated rage as the Gorilla horde discovered the escape, Illana halted, turned quickly and ran back toward him, a stifled scream throbbing in her throat. Through the darkness ahead, and bearing down on them from the opposite direction, Flash saw the huge black outlines of a lumbering beast, its white fangs gleaming evilly in the darkness.

He tensed, gripped firmly the rock in his hand, and leaped forward. And as he sprang, the Gorilla man halted, a throaty growl rumbling in the depths of his hairy throat.

CHAPTER XIII.

Death Takes a Holiday.

FLASH GORDON'S lithe, muscular body crashed into the huge brute, hurling him back down the path. The Gorilla man let out a squeal of rage, caught his balance, and lunged forward. But Flash had prepared himself; and now, as the beast's giant arms reached out to grasp him, Flash whipped about, hurled the rock straight toward the Gorilla man's small, hard skull.

The frenzy of the attack, the driving desire to get free of this new menace before the rest

of the horde discovered them, hurried Flash's aim, made him too eager. His missile overshot its mark, scraped harmlessly along the side of the brute's skull, and went bouncing down the path.

But as the Gorilla man staggered under the surprise of the blow, Flash saw the rock had missed, and sprang forward.

Like the jaws of a steel trap, his bronzed hands closed about the brute's neck. Almost immediately he felt the crushing force of the Gorilla man's arms as they wrapped around his body, felt the rough hair of the beast's chest; felt the hot, fetid breath brush against his face.

Exerting the last ounce of his power in his leonine body, Flash fought off the pressure of the Cyclopean brute's crushing hold, and buried his iron thumbs into the Gorilla man's hairy throat.

It became then a contest of the beast's smashing grip against Flash Gordon's throttling fingers. Tighter and tighter grew the hair vise about Flash's body. The air was from his lungs, his ribs threatened to collapse under the pressure. But gasping, fighting off the numbness that was creeping slowly over him, he resisted the Gorilla man's efforts. And now his own, choking grasp was having its effect.

The pressure about his body began to lessen; he could feel the rush of blood through his tortured veins. And instinctively, even before the huge beast began to slump, Flash knew that the worst was over, knew that victory was his. And, drawing on the sudden flow of new strength that swept through him, he tightened his grip about the brute's throat.

The Gorilla man suddenly released his hold, clawed frantically at Flash's grip. But inexorably those steel-like fingers of the Earthman pressed to their objective. Then, with an abruptness that startled Flash, the huge beast went limp.

Stepping back quickly, he let the Gorilla man sag to the ground. And it was then that he saw the reason for the brute's abrupt surrender. For Illana was standing in front of him, and gripped in her small hand was the rock Flash had originally thrown.

"Hurry," she whispered huskily. "The rest will . . ."

Pausing only a moment, just long enough to draw welcome air into his tortured lungs, Flash leaped over the fallen Gorilla man and started down the path after Illana. Behind him he could hear the steady, lumbering tread of

the horde of Ape men. And, though they could not know yet which way Illana and Flash had gone, they would soon come across the body of their fallen brother.

Then, as Flash reached the fleeing Princess, he heard the sudden bedlam that rose through the night behind him. From the frantic squealing, Flash knew that the unconscious Gorilla man had been found.

Taking quick advantage of the confusion that had fallen on the ranks of the beasts, Flash swung off the path into the density of the scrubby jungle. Illana, panting by his side, managed to gasp out a startled question.

"Where—are we going?"

Flash gripped her tightly by the arm, cut past a small thicket of stunted trees, swung in a short circle to the right. Finally he paused.

"The space ship," he said, "is over this way. That path circles back later on. I remember that much."

He listened a moment then, ears attuned for the slightest indication of pursuit. But not a sound did he hear.

No more words were wasted then. Illana, blindly confident, followed as Flash plunged once more in the thick growth of scraggly, leafless trees. Then, abruptly, they came out into a small clearing at the base of a number of short crags.

Once more Flash paused, getting his bearings, and listening for the dreaded sounds of the Gorilla men's approach. But only silence—a silence comparable with nothing but the silence of death—crashed against his ears.

"We're safe—for the moment," he whispered hoarsely. "They'll follow the path and come out near the plains. Now, if I'm right, our ship should be just over this hill—at the top of a second rise."

Without waiting for Illana's comment, Flash gripped her wrist again, and helped her up the sharp incline. At the top he paused again, staring through the veil of darkness. Then, in the pale reflection of light from nearby Olera, he saw the glint of the space ship's metal hull.

Illana gave a gasp of relief, clung tightly to Flash's arm as they hurried up through the forest of stone crags toward the cleared spot where the space ship had landed. Reaching the open door, Flash stopped again to listen. But as before, only the heavy silence of the Tyronian night surrounded them.

They were safe—for the moment.

Inside, Flash closed the compression lock.



Dr. Zarkov.

door behind him, turned toward the operator's chair and sank into it. Illana had lit the bright, molybdenum lights and was now slumped, exhausted, in a soft veloriam couch. Finally she turned tired, pleading eyes on Flash.

"Now what?"

Flash stared at her a moment, blankly, thoughtfully. Then he rose.

"There's only one thing to do."

As he spoke he started across the room, disappeared down the corridor. In the cabin where he had been held he searched for, and found, the ray gun Illana had threatened him with. With it clutched firmly in his hand he returned to the control room.

"This ship," he said tightly, "is safe. They won't be able to get in. I'll call to you when I get back."

Illana jumped to her feet.

"Flash! Where are you going?"

Flash paused by the compression lock.

"To the radio."

"Oh, but Flash! You can't go out there! Those—those horrid beasts. . . . We're safe here."

Grimly Flash walked Illana back to the couch, pressed her into it.

"For how long? Until we die of starvation—or until we went mad?"

"But Flash—can't you wait a while?"

"No. If we're going to get off Tyron we must try as soon as possible. If our radio set is discovered, there's no telling what will hap-

pen to it. As long as we have that there's a slim chance we can be rescued. Without it—"

He swung the wheel that opened the door into the compression lock, stepped in. Illana was at his side again.

"Flash, I'm going too."

Flash shook his head, swung open the outer door.

"No—you stay here. I'll be back soon. And don't forget, lock the doors after me. I'll call to you when I arrive."

Then, without waiting for her reply, he leaped out and slammed the hull door shut.

The thick silence pressed down on him as Flash made his slow, careful way toward the spot where they had first been attacked. Occasionally he paused, straining to catch the slightest sounds of the Gorilla men. More frequently he hesitated in the shadows of some ghostly crag, scanning the darkness ahead for the black outlines of one of the beasts. And so finally, his ray gun gripped firmly in his bronzed hand, Flash reached the edge of the tree-dotted plain.

Already the first faint flushes of a new Tyronian day were beginning to climb over the near horizon. He knew that he must work fast, for darkness was one of his chief assets. Once the sable cloak of night had been discarded for bright finery of the day, his chances of discovery by the Gorilla men increased a hundred-fold.

Acutely aware of the necessity, for speed, Flash raced across the plain, taking rare shelter behind one of the inadequate trees. He reached the spot where he had started to assemble the radio a few hours ago, and breathed a sigh of intense relief to see that it had not been disturbed.

Then, with his ears attuned to detect the slightest sound foreign to the silence, Flash continued his assembly of the space set.

In the gray light of coming day, Flash completed the adjustment of the terminals on the aerial, and the connections on the coils. Then, setting up the power mike, and attaching the space tube with the non-filterable wire that led from the energy bottle, he threw the switch.

For perhaps ten seconds—ten long, agonizing seconds, Flash watched the tube for some sign of life. And it came, slowly at first, but with increasing rapidity. The corradium-filled tube glowed first a pale pink; then, as the filament grew hot with the concentrated electrical

energy, it turned to a red, and from a red to a blazing whitish blue.

His space set worked!

Flash wasted no time after that. Turning the key wide open he breathed his plea for help into the microphone. Called it again and again.

"Help. Jupiter Imperial Ship, wrecked on Tyron with the Princess Illana. Help! Jupiter Imperial Ship wrecked on Tyron with the Princess Illana. Help! Jupiter—"

On and on and on his voice droned, sending his call for aid out into the vastness of space. Would it be heard? Would some ship passing within the range of his single space tube pick up the message? Would the reversed condensers have the power to hurl his importunate words through the ether to Olympian ears of some Neith of space?

Flash did not know, could not even guess. There was an excellent possibility that one of the Universal Space Patrol would pick up his message; and an almost equal chance that the prison ship from Mars, on its regular run to Ceres, would hear his call for aid.

But as he sat there, intoning again and again that same desperate plea, Flash began to doubt that it would ever be heard. And so on, through the short day, Flash continued at his task. The sun—a pale, distant glow of orange—rose high in its arc, and hurtled downward. And in the limitless vastness of the saffron colored sky, there appeared no sight of response.

CHAPTER XIV

The Planet of the Doomed.

THE dark fingers of night were already crossing the horizon, when that whirling speck appeared abruptly in the heavens. At first Flash paid little attention to it. Then, as the speck grew larger and larger, like some toy balloon being inflated with air, he knew his message had been heard.

For that whirling, swelling speck was a space ship. And from its direction of flight, Flash saw that it was headed directly for Tyron.

His heart picked up a beat, hammered a tattoo of hope within his chest. There was no question about it now. It was coming straight toward the small planetoid. And it would be but a matter of minutes before it arrived.

Flash frowned. A matter of minutes! And Illana had not yet been told of his plans.

He sprang to his feet, glanced once more up into the vastness of the darkening sky, and hurried back toward the Jovian Imperial ship.

He saw Illana's white face in the window port as he wound his way through the maze of crags that skirted the small plateau on which they had landed. And by the time he arrived at the ship's side she had already opened the doors. Flash leapt in, crossed to the emergency kit and got out one of the red night flares—a rocket-like gun that ejected a series of non-polarized duranium balls which, upon reaching the cold night air, burst open and formed into an identifying call for help. The rocket which Flash now attached to the bracket in the ejector tube, would spell out a short, red message:

S.O.S. J.I.S. 4.

He snapped the switch, heard the soft hiss of the gases within the rocket as they became heated, then heard the first of the duranium balls being fired. He turned to Illana, answered the mute question in her eyes.

"There's a ship landing. I'm just making sure they find us."

"Oh—we're being saved?"

"Yes," Flash said. "Now—about that favor, Illana. You'll be taking a chance, a chance you may regret. Are you still game?"

"Certainly."

Illana's voice was proudly defiant. Flash nodded, was silent for a moment, then said:

"Good. Here's what I want: When we are picked up, you request that we be set down on Ceres. If they should be curious, you can say that it's the nearest place from which you can spacephone Jupiter. You're a Princess, Illana—they'll never question your desires. They won't dare."

"But," Illana cut in, "is that all?"

"Not quite. You will vouch for me. If my identity is questioned I'll say that I'm your ship's operator. Also that I'm a captain in the Jovian Guards. That's all—except when we land on Ceres, get in touch with your father and have a ship sent for you at once. If anything should happen—well, you are a resourceful girl, Illana; and you have the advantage of Interplanetary immunity."

"Something may happen? You mean, you're going to release—"

Flash nodded.

"Yes. I'm going to free Zarkov if it's the last thing I do. What I ask, Illana, carries

some risk—if I'm exposed. Are you with me?"

Illana rose, stared steadily at Flash.

"It is little enough that you ask."

She crossed slowly to the port, peered through it. For a moment there was silence, then Flash heard her speaking to herself in a low voice:

"Must go to Ceres—phone father for ship. And who, my good man, are you to question the motives of Illana, daughter of Grotto? Very well, I accept your apologies. See that it doesn't happen in the future. Oh!"

Flash whirled suddenly, saw Illana standing by the port, tall and stiff. Then she turned.

"We won't have to worry about an excuse to go to Ceres. It's the prison ship from Mars that has landed."

Flash got quickly to his feet, hurried to her side. He stared through the port at the two men who were walking slowly toward them from the open door of an old, decrepit space ship. Then he sighed, said softly:

"I don't know either of them. I can only hope they don't recognize me. Remember, Illana—I am no longer Flash Gordon, but Madala, Captain of the Jovian Guards."

She turned, nodded slowly.

"Yes, Captain Madala," she said.

Flash opened the door.

The two men entered the Imperial ship boldly, looked around. Both were attired in the trim royal blue uniforms of the Martian Defenders. The first, a tall, lean, arrogant man with a short cropped, reddish moustache, bowed mockingly.

"Princess Illana—at your service."

A red flush rose up the white column of Illana's neck. She drew herself erect, replied stiffly:

"It was good of you to come."

The second man, snooping about the glittering interior of the control room, turned to Flash.

"Haven't I seen you somewhere before?"

"No doubt," Flash said. "The Princess and I have been to Mars. You are Martians, I take it—from your uniforms. Permit me to introduce myself: I am Captain Dreigh Madala of the Jovian Guards."

Flash's tone had its effect. Had there been even the slightest suspicion in the man's mind, it was immediately banished. Too, the reference to the uniforms—the pride of the M. D.'s—helped considerably. The man swelled up, smiled patronizingly.

"You sent that message? It came in pretty weak. We picked it up less than twenty minutes ago. What happened—the mountains get you?"

"Yes," Flash answered. "The rocket assembly was smashed. Now, if you'll be kind enough to get us off here—The King will be worried about the Princess' absence."

"Sure," the moustached man replied. "But we can't take you to Jupiter. Best we can do is put you down on Ceres—that's the prison planet, you know. You can spacephone from there. You see, we've got a few prisoners to deliver."

Flash smiled.

"Ceres? I'm sure that would be fine. Would it not, Princess?"

Illana's features were as calm as an unruffled pool. She looked coldly at the two Martians, then turned to Flash.

"Perfectly, Captain Madala," she said.

The ride from Tyron to Ceres was short, and passed without incident. Flash observed as much as he could of the prison ship—an ancient Interplanetary Transport that had long since been relegated to the graveyard, only to be dug out again and pressed into this new prison service.

The control room contained two cots, one for each of the guards, and the entire rear of the ship was undoubtedly given over to the prisoners' quarters, for it was well locked.

Then, abruptly, they arrived.

The prison asteroid—Ceres—is perhaps the largest of that small belt of planetoids that lie between Jupiter and Mars, measuring over four hundred miles in diameter. Long before Pwami's ascendancy to the throne of Mars it had been used by the Kings of Jupiter and Regents of Mars and Saturn as a dumping ground for incurables, morons, and political prisoners. A man once sentenced to Ceres was doomed. Never could he return to the land of his birth.

And so it had been called, "The Planet of the Doomed".

But during Marcola's early reign on Mars, the prison planet had been abolished. A number of reasons lay behind this, but chief of all was the universal distaste that Ceres had created. The people of the various planets—and especially those of Earth—fought against the barbaric cruelties that were practiced there. And too, with incurable diseases and moronic influences well under control throughout the



Both Illana and Flash had been tied firmly to the bole of large trees by the Man Gorillas. As the purple shades of night fell over the small planetoid, Flash watched the black shapes.



Flash smiled, drew Dale close to him, and for a moment, stood there, a silent, immobile figure of golden bronze in the warm light of the sun's rays —

Universe, the prisoners were at that time mostly political agitators.

So, under the pressure of public opinion, Ceres became a forgotten nightmare.

Then Pwami rose to the command of Mars.

The wily Dictator saw immediately the advantages of the planet. He had the buildings repaired—to an extent—and immediately announced that it would be the last resting place of all who were violent enough—or foolish enough—to be twice convicted of treasonable activities. And as there were many who were, in the first flush of anger at Pwami's rule of might, the planet was now well populated.

When the prison ship with its new load of unfortunates arrived on the planet, the main prison buildings were on the side farthest from the sun. But another planetoid nearby—Damii—supplied Ceres with a reflection that was almost as bright as daylight. Whirling on an independent orbit, Damii crossed the heavens over the prison planet much as the two moons of Mars whirled about that globe.

One of the prison ship's guards led Illana and Flash into the Ceres warden's office. The warden, as most Martians, was tall; but to his height was added a breadth of shoulder that made him look belligerently imposing in his M. D. uniform. He glared through small, piggish, sadistic eyes at Illana and Flash, and then whirled toward the guard.

"You bring prisoners in to my office like this? I'll—"

The guard stood at attention, saluting.

"But Captain Hoxor," he said, "these are not prisoners. We picked up a space S. O. S. from Tyron. This is the Princess Illana of Jupiter and Captain Madala of the Jovian Guards. They were wrecked on Tyron by the magnetic mountains."

Captain Hoxor changed like a chameleon. His thick lips twisted into an apologetic grin. He bowed low before Illana, nodded to Flash.

"I am sorry, Princess."

Illana brushed aside the apology.

"Would you please get me a connection with my father's palace?"

"Of course, Princess," Hoxor replied. "And I'll have rooms prepared for you immediately. Any food you wish—"

His words trailed off as he snapped the button on the phonoscope Pwami had caused to be installed, and gave the order to the man

whose face appeared on the small screen. As he sat back, Illana said:

"We shall dine in our rooms—on whatever your chef finds most convenient to prepare."

Hoxor nodded, was about to speak, when a buzzer sounded on his desk. He snapped the button, and the man's face appeared again on the screen. Metallic words filled the room.

"I'm sorry, Captain, but communication with Jupiter will be impossible for at least fifteen minutes. There are disturbing elements creating a vacuum just under the stratospheric band."

Hoxor glanced toward Illana, then back to the phonoscope.

"All right, call me when you have them."

Illana had slumped into a chair and Flash, thinking quickly, was walking about the room, glancing at the graphothyn pictures that lined the wall. Finally he turned.

"Captain Hoxor," he said lightly, "I've heard much of Ceres—the old Ceres, I mean. I'd like very much to see through your prison—with the permission of my Princess, of course."

"You may, Captain," Illana said coldly.

"Thank you. Is that agreeable, Captain?"

A flicker of curiosity danced in Hoxor's eyes. He looked toward Illana, saw her staring sternly ahead, and smiled.

"Gladly, Captain—Madala. Would you care to accompany us, Princess?"

"No, thanks," Illana replied. "I'll remain here waiting for the call."

"Certainly. When the buzzer rings merely snap it up, and our operator will make you a connection through the phonoscope. While of course it does not relay televitic photos from such a long distance, it serves perfectly as an oral medium. Come along, Captain."

He rose grudgingly from his chair, and led Flash out of the office.

They entered first a large, white-walled corridor. To its left there stood a huge door, barred with Radium steel. As Flash glanced in and saw that it was empty, Hoxor explained:

"That is the temporary cell for new prisoners. It is ready for a load now. You see, they are put there before being assigned to their permanent cells."

Flash nodded, saw that the door was equipped with the new Martian beam lock, and followed Hoxor out of the room.

They came next to a second door.

longer.

"Captain—ah—"

"Madala," Flash said quietly.

heavily barred. Hoxor opened this with his master light beam, and stepped back for Flash to enter.

A long corridor, fairly well lighted, stretched out before him. On either side was a row of cells, closed in by steel doors. The corridor, over a hundred feet long, must have contained at least fifty cells, twenty-five on each side.

Slowly they walked along.

The lights in the corridor were bright enough for Flash to see the interior of each cell, and he peered closely through the foot-square barred windows that were set high in each door. Once or twice he thought Hoxor was on the point of speaking about his curiosity, but apparently thought better of it.

At the end of the hundred foot walk, Hoxor turned into a shorter connecting corridor to a second long hallway. And here, as before, Flash scrutinized each cell as they passed it. Finally Hoxor could contain himself no

"Yes, Madala, of course. Do you mind if I ask why you are so curious about the occupants of each cell?"

Flash tensed, then laughed shortly.

"Not at all, Captain Hoxor. You see, when we were visiting Pwami just before the crack-up, he told me he had sentenced an Earthman to Ceres. And frankly, I was just anxious to see what he looked like. I heard he was quite an inventor."

"Earthman?"

"Yes," Flash said. "Of course, I could have asked you, but then I was rather ashamed of my curiosity. Thought I could pick him out by myself."

For a few seconds Hoxor stared straight at Flash, an odd suspicion in the depths of his piggy brown eyes. Then, as Flash met his gaze squarely, he forced a smile.

"Yes, yes. Of course. But I'm afraid you are a little too late."

Flash Gordon's gray eyes narrowed; his firm jaw became as hard as granite.

"Too late?"

Hoxor shrugged, continued walking down the passageway toward the barred exit door.

"Yes. We had an Earthman here—a man by the name of Zarkov. But he's gone—well, dead."

CHAPTER XV.

Famine in Erebus.

DEAD!"

The word escaped involuntarily through Flash Gordon's thin lips. He glanced quickly toward Hoxor, saw the sudden flicker of suspicion in the warden's eyes, saw the lines of doubt on his forehead.

"You don't say," he added quickly. "How did he die?"

Flash made his question as casual as possible under the circumstances. Hoxor's features returned their bland normalcy, and he answered:

"Why, by starvation," he said. "You see, when we get an especially unruly visitor here that we can't handle, we toss him down into our starvation pits—small cells down in the basement—and just leave them there until they show a willingness to obey orders. And until they do they're not given any food."

Tense fingers of steel gripped at Flash's muscles. It was difficult to keep his tones casual.

"Then, this Earthman refused to obey orders, right? Must have got nasty pretty quickly, didn't he? Hasn't been up there very long."

Once more Hoxor glanced curiously towards Flash, but apparently was not moved again to suspicion.

"He was thrown into the pits a week ago—that is, one of our weeks. He was one of the most incorrigible prisoners we ever had."

"But—don't the prisoners thrown to your—starvation pits usually come around? The desire for food must eventually compel them to—"

"No," Hoxor cut in, "they don't. Strangely enough only a few have finally agreed to our conditions. Generally they die."

A shudder coursed through Flash. No wonder! By the time they would be ready to sell their birthright, they must be so insane with hunger that they could never rationally agree to anything. If, of course, Hoxor ever released anyone under any conditions.

They had reached the large, barred entrance door by now, and Flash dropped the subject from the conversation. But, as the warden went on, explaining glibly about the advantageous life in prison, Flash's thoughts were all of Zarkov.

The scientist had been in the pit for a week

—a Ceres week. And, if Flash's memory was correct, a Ceres week was only about half as long as an earth week. Which meant, under even fair circumstances, there was a good chance that Zarkov still lived. But he doubted that the circumstances were even fair.

And Flash was pondering this, and considering the double problem that confronted him, when they finally arrived at the warden's offices.

Illana glanced up as they entered, raised her eyebrows in her best supercilious manner, and said coldly:

"I've been in communication with Jupiter, Captain Madala. They will send a ship for us immediately. In the meantime they are trying to reach a Jovian transport that they believe is somewhere in the vicinity of Ceres right now. If they can communicate with her we will be taken aboard at once and returned to Jupiter."

Flash made a hasty calculation. It would take a fast space ship almost eleven days to make the trip from Jupiter to Ceres. But, if a transport were somewhere nearby, then his double problem became but one—that of freeing Zarkov. *If Zarkov lived!*

Flash's face was drawn in grim lines. He would soon find out.

Illana turned coldly to Hoxor.

"In the meantime, I presume our quarters are comfortable—and prepared?"

"Certainly," Hoxor answered. "Shall I show them to you?"

"Please," Illana said. "I am tired."

Hoxor led the way through a second door in his office, into a remodeled section of the prison where there were a half dozen separate apartments. At the end of a short, carpeted hallway, he paused before a large double door. He opened the door, bowed Illana in.

"This," he said pompously, "is our royal suite. Pwami himself occupies it on his visits to Ceres. I'm sure you'll find everything comfortable."

"You'll let me know as soon as there's word about the transport?"

"Immediately," Hoxor said.

He bowed low as Princess Illana closed the door, then turned to Flash. "Your room is just around the corner."

At the door of the room designated for Flash, he said:

"There'll be food sent to you very shortly. If there's anything you wish—"

Flash stepped into the room, shook his head.

"No," he replied. "There's nothing, thank you."

He closed the door.

Flash heard Hoxor's soft, padding footsteps retreating down the carpeted hallway. He waited patiently, waited until he was sure the warden had gone, then opened the door, stepped out. The hallway was deserted. In a half dozen long, cat-like strides he was at Illana's door. A discreet knock brought the Princess.

He stepped inside, closed the door after him, and faced her, a drawn expression on his lean, bronzed face. In a few brief sentences he told what had happened to Zarkov. He finished:

"At first I had intended waiting until I was sure that you would be in no danger—waiting until your ship came. But I can't wait now. Every minute is precious. If he still lives I've got to get him out of there—quickly."

"And you hesitate?" Illana said calmly.

"Only long enough to warn you," he said. "If anything happens you can demand Interplanetary Immunity. Hoxor may hesitate to harm you, especially now that your father knows where you are; but there is no guarantee that he will. If you are involved you can say that I forced you to—Or, better yet, you can plead ignorance of my motives. You can assume that I, Captain Madala, must have been a friend of Zarkov—and as such took it upon his shoulders to accomplish his release."

A soft light crept into Illana's eyes. She stared at Flash without fear. There was adoration in her voice.

"I will be thinking of you," she said. "Thinking of you and praying for your safety. It gives me courage to know that you have requested my aid—that I am helping you, Flash. Even though what I do is a mere trifle. I've faced situations before and have won out; and I can do it again."

"Good. I'll not forget it, Illana."

Flash stepped into the hallway again, and hurried to his room. Then, with the very blood in his veins boiling for activity, he paced up and down the length of his small cubicle waiting for the waiter to appear with the food.

There were two reasons Flash waited. The first concerned the necessity of being present when the waiter came, so as not to have him

report such a suspicious circumstance as his absence to the warden; and the second was the hope that through him, Flash might learn the way to the starvation pits.

Time passed with a slow, leaden tread. It seemed hours, though it may have been minutes before the waiter finally tapped on the door. Flash composed himself quickly, opened the door and let the man in. As soon as the food had been set out on the table he engaged him in conversation.

It was a light, normal curiosity that Flash exhibited as he ate. He asked the man a number of innocent questions about the prison. Discovered soon that the waiter, himself, was a prisoner; and that he had been on Ceres for almost the length of Pwami's regime. Then he brought the talk about to the starvation pits.

"Oh, them!" the man said, shuddering. "I can thank my stars I ain't down there—with the rest of them poor devils."

"I don't suppose," Flash said, "that there is a guard over them. A man couldn't stand to hear the pitiful pleas for food they must make. No normal man, at least."

"Oh, sure, they have a guard," the man replied. "Yeah, but he don't hear them moan. He sits outside the corridor behind a sound-proof door. He's just there to see that no one takes down any food."

"Could some one really take down food?" Flash asked casually. "I thought the entrance would be barred."

"Oh, it is downstairs where the guard sits," the waiter answered. "But the upstairs door here is open. Sure, even I could go down to the guard's room."

"From here?"

"Sure. It's just the stairway to the basement, that's all. Right at the end of the hall. But you wasn't thinking—"

Flash laughed.

"Not on your life. I couldn't stand to see such a thing."

"Me neither, mister," the man said. "Well, if you don't mind, I gotta be gettin' back."

"Not at all," Flash said softly. "Not at all."

He turned back to the table, picked up the glass of water that stood next to his half eaten meal, and drank it as the waiter opened the door and left. But hardly had the door closed behind the man, when Flash sprang from his seat and hurried across the room.

He waited then, ears glued to the panels

of the door, listening to the waiter's footsteps along the hallway. Then, adjusting the ray gun in his belt, he stepped out into the corridor once more, looked about.

Not a soul was in sight.

Pacing quickly down the short hallway, Flash came at last to the stairway that undoubtedly led to the basement. He paused here a moment, ears attuned for the slightest sound, the slightest warning. But no noise broke the tense silence that hung over the prison.

Hesitating to expose his ray gun yet, Flash went hurriedly, but softly, down the steel stairs. On the next landing he stopped again, listening. But nothing met his gaze, and no warning noise met his ears.

Passing below that landing, Flash drew out the gun. The starvation cells were undoubtedly on the next floor—for already he could feel the cold fingers of subterranean air brush his face. Then abruptly he heard a familiar voice jar his ears.

"I just thought I'd tell you, though."

It was Hoxor! Before Flash could formulate an opinion, a second voice came to him. Undoubtedly, the voice of the guard.

"Well, he ain't been down here yet. No one ain't been down. And they'd better not come."

"Perhaps he won't," Hoxor replied. "It was just that I thought his curiosity was overdone. How is everything else?"

"All right. That new mug you sent down the other day is screamin' for food, but the rest is all silent. Guess there ain't many left as can scream any more. I ain't counted the stiff's yet today, but there was only three alive last night. Includin' the new one."

"You mean Parriton?"

"Yeah. An' I guess he won't last long the way he's bellerin' You'd think he'd been hungry for a week."

For a moment a tense chill of hope had coursed through Flash Gordon's veins. He had thought they were speaking of Zarkov when the guard mentioned Parriton. But they weren't, and with only two others living the chances of Zarkov being one of them were slim.

Then all thoughts of the scientist were momentarily dashed from Flash Gordon's mind. He must hide—somewhere.

He whirled about, searching frantically for some spot of concealment, and saw the door. In two strides he had crossed the basement landing out of sight of the hallway, and tried

the knob. The lock, operated by the now extinct key, was not set. The door opened on oiled hinges. It was a closet.

Inside were a number of pails, old brooms and dirty cloths. A dark corner attracted him. Quickly he stepped into the closet, over the pails, and pulled the door closed behind him. And none too soon. For hardly had the blackness flowed over him, hardly had he got the door shut, when he heard Hoxor's footsteps outside.

For fifteen tense seconds Flash Gordon waited there, listening to the warden slowly climb the stairs. Then, when silence had descended once more, Flash stepped out.

The cold air of the basement was welcome after the stuffiness of the closet. He breathed deeply, crossed to the hallway, and peered about the corner.

The guard, in blissful ignorance of another presence, was leaning back in a chair in the open office at the end of the short passageway. For a moment Flash thought he must have dropped off to sleep, but presently he saw the man shift his huge bulk about to a more comfortable position, and continue to stare vacantly at a spot on the ceiling.

On the balls of his feet, Flash padded down the hallway. Like a panther he stalked, ready to pounce on his unsuspecting prey. And like a panther he struck.

The guard never knew what hit him. Not a sound did Flash make as he cat-footed into the office; not a breath of air did he draw into his lungs as he poised in back of the guard.

And then, even as the man, suddenly aware of his danger, spun about, Flash Gordon's bronzed arm swept through the air. There was a dull cracking sound as the butt of Flash's ray gun crashed against the side of the man's head; and a duller, heavier sound as the guard pitched to the floor. And that was all.

In a moment Flash had located the beam key, and had opened the heavy steel door that led into the subterranean chambers of horror. And then, leaving the door open to admit light from the hallway, he started slowly down the dark, dank, musty corridor.

On each side of the corridor there were a number of small cells—cells large enough to hold a man if he bent forward. More like a double row of dog houses they were, but for the horrible, sickening odor of death.

Once Flash halted as someone confined there began a heart-tearing plea for food—a

soft, gasping, feeble lamentation. Then the man's voice died away in an anaemic groan. Again Flash stopped abruptly, and what he saw caused a wave of sudden nausea to sweep over him.

A huge rat, its fangs tainted red with blood, its furry belly bulging, crept out between the bars of one of the small cell doors. It paused a moment, half frightened by Flash's presence, then scurried down the corridor.

Running close beside the wall, the rat had not traversed half the length of the passageway when a man's gnarled, yellowed hand swept through one of the doors. And, as an insensate laugh sounded from the depths of the cell, the fat, sated rodent was made a sudden captive.

Emitting a series of squeals, the rat twisted about and snapped ferociously at the man's hand. Snapped again and again. But the grip about the animal never loosened, and now both rat and hand disappeared into the darkness of the cell.

For a moment more the agonized squeals of the rat emanated from the grim blackness. Then there was a sudden snapping sound, and a heavy silence fell—a silence broken only by the steady, voracious crunching of a hundred tiny bones. . . .

Flash drew himself quickly together. Fighting back the revolt of his senses, he continued down the corridor, stopping before each small door, searching the darkness within each cell for his friend.

Eight cells on each side of the passageway he searched. Sixteen doors he peered through, seeking even the lifeless body of the scientist. And each time the horrible stench of decaying flesh billowed over him.

But he did not find Zarkov.

Finally he reached a spot in the corridor where the dull glow of light from the outer hallway failed to penetrate. No longer could he distinguish the lifeless bodies that lay in the dark, damp cells. He glanced about, then raised his cupped hands to his mouth. In a hoarse whisper he called:

"Zarkov!"

For a moment there was no sound—no sound but the receding echoes of his own voice. Then an answer came—a weak, gasping answer:

"Flash!"

A surge of boundless joy pounded through Flash's veins. Forgotten for the moment were the pleas of the hungry man; forgotten was

the incident of the rat. But one thought hammered through his senses:

"Zarkov! Zarkov! You're alive!"

He hurried down the corridor.

CHAPTER XVI.

The Toils of Circumstance.

NEAR the end of the corridor, before one of the miserably small barred doors, Flash halted. In the dim reflection from the distant hallway he could make out the pale oval that was Zarkov's face. Dropping hurriedly to his knees, Flash peered through the darkness. A single, hushed word escaped his lean lips:

"Zarkov!"

"Flash!"

The scientist gripped the bars of the cell door with a strained intensity. There were deep lines of pain etched on his drawn, haggard features. There was pain in his eyes—eyes that seemed set in hollow, bony cavities. His voice was no more than a hoarse whisper.

"Jehovah," he said, "but it's good to see you."

Flash was already fingering the light key which he had taken from the guard. Now he played its thin, intense beam over the door—probing for the lock. Hardly had the small iron-barred portal swung open, before Flash was helping Zarkov from the cell.

"I haven't time to explain a thing," he said tightly. "First we've got to get back to my room. Do you think you can manage with my help?"

"I think so," Zarkov answered. "The physical suffering down here was not quite as bad as the mental torture. And I rather imagine I'm still sane."

Flash assisted Zarkov to his feet. Then he hesitated. What about the man who had been crying for food—whose screams were again filling the damp darkness of the corridor? Could he be helped too?

But Flash immediately saw the danger in releasing him now. Not only would it be extremely difficult to help both Zarkov and the man at the same time, but there was no assurance that the man, crazed as he was, would not cry out suddenly, revealing the escape. No, it would be better—far better—to free him later.

So, with one arm flung about Zarkov's body

as support, Flash made his way down the corridor. But the going was tedious. The scientist was weaker than he professed, and his heavy, dragging weight and halting step slowed Flash's progress.

They came to the lighted hallway without being discovered. The guard was still unconscious and Flash paused long enough to feel the man's wrist for signs of life. The faint throbbing of a pulse warned him that it would not be long before the guard came to. Not long before he spread the alarm. . . .

Grimly, Flash half-carried the weakened Zarkov up the steel stairs to the second landing. And along the corridor to the safety of his room.

As he helped Zarkov to the bed, and returned to close the door, Flash breathed a sigh of relief. So far his plan was working. But the greatest dangers lay ahead. Dangers which appeared insuperable, which would crush the spirit of the ordinary man with the black shadows of their approaching presence.

But Flash Gordon was no ordinary man.

Grim lipped, with a flickering light of determined purpose lurking in the depths of his narrowed eyes, Flash knelt by Zarkov's side. The scientist was lying quietly on the couch, his eyes closed, his chest rising and falling weakly, almost imperceptibly. Flash glanced once toward the uneaten portion of his recent meal, then shook his head thoughtfully. He bent close to Zarkov's ear, whispered:

"Is there anything I can get for you? Any food?"

Zarkov's eyes flickered open. He stared for a moment at Flash.

"No," he answered finally. "Food would be bad—now. But if I had some Trapholyn."

Trapholyn! A powerful stimulant. A drug almost prohibitive in cost, in availability. Where could he get it?

Deep lines of thought crossed Flash Gordon's brows. There should be an infirmary here on Ceres—a prison infirmary. The chances of there being any Trapholyn there were remote. But . . . With resolution he crossed the room to the bell that was provided for summoning the servant. He pressed this, then waited, one eye constantly on Zarkov.

It seemed no time at all until the soft padding of footsteps outside warned of the man's approach. Flash opened the door, stepped quickly into the hallway, and shut off any sight of the recent prisoner. The man appeared at the intersection of the hallways, and

Flash saw that it was the same one that had served him the meal.

"You wanted me, sir?" he asked. "I meant to clear away the dishes, but—"

"No," Flash said quickly. "not that. I called you for another reason. You have an infirmary here, haven't you?"

"Well," the man said, "I suppose you might call it that. It's pretty small."

"But," Flash persisted, "you must have some means of making drugs."

The man nodded.

"Oh, sure, sir. There's a sort of drug store here. Like a laboratory. Lieutenant Durek is the man what is in charge. Was there something I—"

"Yes," Flash said. "I'm not feeling very well. You might tell me where it is so that I might talk to this Durek. He might mix me up a powder or something."

"Well, I don't know. Lieutenant Durek is off duty right now. But maybe I could get—"

"No, never mind," Flash cut in. "Just tell me how to get to the laboratory and I'll do it myself. I'm a Ph. C. and a member of the Jovian Masters Chemical Society."

The words slipped off Flash Gordon's tongue with an ease of long familiarity. Truthfully, Flash had no knowledge of any such organization. However, he wanted to create an effect—and he did.

"Oh, sure, sir," the man said quickly. "I didn't know that. I'll show you to the laboratory, and you can see Captain Hoxor and he'll—"

"Hoxor?"

"Yes, sir. You see, it's against the rules for anyone to go in there when the Lieutenant isn't in charge—unless with Captain Hoxor's authority. Besides, you couldn't get in anyway. There's a special lock on the door, and only Captain Hoxor and Lieutenant Durek has the light key that will work."

There was a brief moment of silence on Flash Gordon's part. He hadn't wanted to confess any supposed ailment to the warden. The man was just on the verge of suspecting that something was stirring, and the least wrong move would make his suspicions a concrete certainty. However, there seemed to be no alternative. Unless . . .

"Fine," Flash said. "I'll see Hoxor right away. And where did you say this chemical laboratory was?"

The man walked to the intersecting hallway, pointed down.

"Right past Captain Hoxor's office, sir. You go through the admittance hall and turn to the right. It's at the end of the next hallway. Now, sir, shall I take away the dishes?"

"Not yet," Flash said quickly. "I'm not quite finished. Come back after awhile. And thanks for the information."

He waited until the man started away, then stepped inside once again and closed the door.

A glance at Zarkov showed Flash that the scientist was sleeping—taking what was undoubtedly his first real rest in days. Then, pausing by the door only until he was assured the servant was out of sight, Flash went into the hallway once again.

He reached Hoxor's office without encountering anyone, and knocked lightly on the door. There was no answer. Flash's heart picked up a beat. It was the one hope he had of getting into the lab without admitting the necessity to the warden. If only the key was somewhere inside. . . .

He tried the knob, breathed with relief as the door swung open. The office was deserted, but the large key rack was in plain sight of anyone who entered.

Hurriedly removing it from its holder, Flash left the office. Three steps brought him to the large, square hallway outside the admittance cell. To the right, down the short corridor the man had described, Flash turned; and at the end he found the laboratory door.

The key worked.

On tiptoe, Flash entered.

An automatic beam controlled the lights. As soon as Flash stepped across the sill the laboratory was flooded with the whitish glare of molybdenum illumination. Closing the door behind him, Flash went quickly to the long row of shelves on which stood an array of various hued bottles, of labelled tins, of jars colored liquids. And inside of two minutes he had found the medicine he sought. From the first shelf, in a tall, rectangular bottle he took the Trapholyn.

On a long, gleaming metal table underneath the shelves, Flash found a phial. Into this he poured some of the powerful stimulant—poured enough to revive a half dozen enervated men. Then, replacing the Trapholyn on the shelf, he secreted the phial in his waistband, turned about. And it was at that moment that the strangely familiar voice crashed against his ears.

"How do you do, Captain?"

Captain Hoxor was standing just inside the



*In a hoarse whisper
Flash called "Zarkov!"
Then the weak answer "Flash!"*

doorway. There was an amused light in the warden's eyes. His manner was that of a spider who has just webbed a fly.

"The beam light," he said quietly, "also works a signal. I know when anyone enters the laboratory. Would I be presumptuous if I inquired your presence here?"

Flash, whose mind had been working with the rapidity of electrical impulses, knew even as he saw Hoxor that he must find a logical explanation for his actions at the table. What the powders were, of course he did not know. But it was a straw and he grasped it.

When Hoxor's eyes had become riveted on his own, Flash's hand crept across the table, concealed by his body, and enclosed the tin. Now, as Hoxor finished speaking, Flash smiled.

"Not at all," he said. "I wasn't feeling very well and came for some powders. You weren't in your office and so, as I saw the key to the laboratory on the rack, I took it

upon myself to mix them without disturbing you. I'm a chemist, you see, aside from being a member of Grotta's Guards. I hope I haven't overstepped my bounds."

He held the tin of powders lightly in his hands as he started across the room. Held them so that they would be in evidence to bear out his explanation.

"No—I suppose not," Hoxor said slowly. "A bit unusual, perhaps, and certainly against our orders here. But you'd hardly know that."

Flash hesitated by Hoxor's side.

"Sorry," he said. "I didn't know. Perhaps I should have looked you up."

"What seems to be wrong with you?"

"Just run down," Flash answered. "These ought to fix me up. Mixture of—"

Flash's voice trailed off as they passed from the laboratory. He noticed that the warden was peculiarly silent—as though thinking deeply. But as they neared the admittance cell, Hoxor came suddenly to life.

"What," he said sharply, "did you say the mixture was?"

Flash was caught off guard for an instant; but his reply was ready enough.

"Why—a combination of Sodium Thoricate and Albuna-duessium. Was there—"

"You," Hoxor said abruptly, staring evenly at Flash, "are a liar. That is Durek's own compound. I remember—"

But what Hoxor remembered was drowned suddenly in a cry that sounded suddenly in that small hallway. As the warden reached for his gun, as Flash whirled about, the words hammered against their ears.

"Flash! Flash Gordon!"

CHAPTER XVII.

Bells of Destiny

FLASH acted instantly. It was immediately evident that somehow the powder had betrayed him; and it was equally obvious that if the powder hadn't, the sudden shouting of his own name by that unknown voice would be enough. And so, called upon to play his hand, Flash did not hesitate.

His tall, lithe body tensed. He paced quickly forward, pivoted, and hurled his bronzed fist viciously toward Hoxor's chin. And the warden, who had paused momentarily at the sudden shouting, had not yet touched the butt of his ray gun as the full force of Flash's crushing blow landed.

Like a huge, grotesque balloon that had been suddenly deflated, he slumped to the floor.

Flash hesitated, staring down at the unconscious Hoxor for a moment, then whirled toward the sound of the voice—the door of the admittance cell. A man's face was peering out through the bars—the face of a new prisoner. A single word escaped Flash's lips:

"Thory!"

There was pain on Thory's features—a pain caused equally by his own worries, and by the realization of the blunder he had just made.

"Flash—I'm sorry. I didn't think. When I saw you I—"

"It's done, Walter," Flash said softly. "Forget it. But I haven't a moment to lose. Any minute some one may find me here. Quickly, how is Dale?"

Walter Thory bit his lips, stared fearfully about. The danger Flash pointed out brought back to him the stories of the horror he had heard connected with Ceres. His voice was shaky when he answered.

"All right—when I last saw Elaine. Pwami is arranging for a wedding ceremony that will take place as soon as he conquers Earth."

"What!"

"Oh—you didn't know. He has built a huge atom gun—one that will destroy any building, any ship—in fact everything it's fired at. It was made from your friend's plans. That's how I came to be sent here—I was doing some spy work and got caught."

Flash Gordon's lips thinned out into a tight, grim line. A flickering, angry-yellow light danced in his gray eyes. He must act—and act quickly.

Where before Flash had realized the desirability of getting back to Mars in the quickest possible manner, he had deliberately cast aside speed for caution. Two reasons motivated this: Illana's safety and Zarkov's condition. But, though he had been moving slowly, steadily toward his goal, most of his plans had taken definite shape.

"Thory," he said, "I've got to get back to Mars as quickly as possible. That gun must be destroyed. I believe I can get back all right, but the chances are excellent that I won't be alive two minutes after I land. However, if you want to come, you're welcome. You can stay here and hope, or—"

"Want to come?" Thory echoed. "There's nothing I want more. I'd much rather die fighting than rot up here."

For the first time Flash saw in Thory's eyes a new light—a light of eager anticipation. Then there was a movement in the cell behind Thory and another new prisoner appeared. He was a tall, muscularly built, pleasant-faced Martian; and there was a certain expression of determination in his eyes that Flash liked instantly. Thory turned, then faced Flash again.

"This is Caldor," he said. "He was leader of the rebels in the Seventh State until—"

Caldor ignored the introduction. He looked evenly at Flash, and Flash remembered the name. Remembered with respect.

"I've heard much of you, Gordon," Caldor said softly. "And have admired you. Would I be too much in the way if I came along? I can help a little, perhaps."

"Glad to have you," Flash said quickly.

"But we've got to hurry. Any moment we may be caught here."

He tried the light key he had taken from the guard in the starvation pits, but it failed to open the large barred door. But on Hoxor's belt there was a master key, and Flash got this and the ray gun, and in a moment had the door open. He glanced only briefly at the remaining prisoners in the cell—a small, thin man who clung hungrily to the shadows, fear imbedded in his soul—then handed the gun to Caldor.

"Get Hoxor into his office—it's right down there—and keep him covered. I'll be back in a moment."

As Thory and Caldor bent and lifted the unconscious warden and carried him away, Flash hurried back into the prison apartments. He found Illana still awake.

"The bubble," he said tersely, "has burst. Hoxor found out who I was, and at any moment all hell will explode. But I think I can get us out safely—with your help."

"Then—of course—but Flash, you don't need to ask."

"Good. Zarkov is now in my room, and near death. This phial of Trapholyn ought to help, if given carefully. Will you nurse him for me? Until—"

"Quick," she said, "give me the phial."

Flash watched her hurry down the corridor, then went quickly back to the warden's office. Hoxor was in his chair, and already coming back to consciousness. Flash strode resolutely across the room, took the ray gun from his belt, gripped the warden by the collar and shook him roughly. In a few moments the warden blinked his eyes, stared dully up at Flash.

"Hoxor," Flash said sharply, "listen to me."

The warden blinked again, peered vacantly at the gun which Flash held tightly, then looked about the room. After a moment he turned back to Flash, said thickly:

"What're you trying to get away with?"

Flash pressed the muzzle of the ray gun against Hoxor's temple.

"This: You're going to get us off Ceres."

Hoxor made a peculiar noise in his throat, blinked his eyes again, shook his head, then glared back at Flash. His voice had lost its blurred quality.

"Flash Gordon! You had me fooled for a while. So you want me to help you escape? And if I don't?"

Flash's hands grew taut about the butt of the long-muzzled gun. His eyes narrowed; his voice was edged with ice.

"You enjoy living, Hoxor. If you want to keep that little enjoyment, you'll do as I say."

There was a quality in Flash's tones that attested to the sincerity of his statement. A flicker of fear came to light in Hoxor's eyes.

"What do I do?" he asked heavily.

"Get in touch with your space pilot. Tell him to have the prison ship serviced immediately—rocket loads, water, and air chambers all taken care of. If there's any question you can say simply that there is a load of passengers going back to Mars—under Pwami's orders. But, Hoxor, you won't be questioned. Your authority here is supreme."

For a while Hoxor remained thoughtful, then he started reaching for the phonoscope. But at that moment his eyes became riveted on something behind Flash. And a slow smile crawled over his heavy, coarse features.

Flash whirled, saw a sudden flash of bluish light, felt an electric, jolting sensation caress his arm, burning with its intensity. Then, above the flaring ray gun, he saw the ugly, grinning features of the starvation-pit guard.

Once more that deadly gun in the guard's hand flared, but Flash had moved, panther-like, out of range. And now his hand grew tight about his own gun, and a blue bolt of jolting death lanced across the room.

For a hesitant moment the guard stood there, incredulity limned on his grizzled features. Then the gun dropped from his hand, the incredulity on his face changed slowly to a flat blankness, and he pitched forward.

And at that moment, as Flash whirled once again to confront the warden, he heard the sudden jangling of a bell, and felt the full force of the warden's sudden charge.

The abruptness of the move surprised Flash—and was an equal surprise to both Caldor and Thory. Before Caldor could bring his gun to bear on Hoxor, the latter acted; and now, in the fear of hitting Flash with the bolt from his ray gun, Caldor held his fire.

Catching him temporarily off guard, the warden's weight bore Flash back across the room. The man may have lacked courage, but he did not lack strength—and he was fighting for his life.

With a terror-inspired savagery he clawed at Flash's hand, fought to get control of the gun. But though Hoxor had made his move

swiftly and forcefully, and though his very life depended on its success, he was outclassed.

He pitted heavy, creaking muscles against Flash Gordon's lithe, cat-like speed. He matched a dulled, single-tracked mind against one that moved with split second rapidity. And he staked a muscular ability that was loggy and uncertain against the deadly precision of the Earthman's action.

And he lost.

Stepping swiftly aside, Flash wound steel-like fingers about the warden's wrist, pivoted, and hurled Hoxor over his shoulder to the floor. Then, without a wasted motion, lifted him bodily into the air, and hurled him back into his seat by the desk.

And, as Flash picked up his gun and waved it once more in Hoxor's startled features, Caldor had just crossed the room to help.

Flash did not hear the exclamation of surprise that dropped from Caldor's lips. His attention was attracted solely by the jangling noise that was hammering through the corridors of the prison.

"What's that?" he asked sharply.

Hoxor looked up, his face drawn and white, and wet his lips.

"That—that's the escape bell."

"The escape bell?"

The warden nodded, fear alight in his eyes. His hand was trembling as he brushed back his disordered hair.

"Yes. I rang it. To call the guards."

A moment Flash stood there, staring evenly at Hoxor. Then into his eyes came a look of terrible determination. For out in the hall he could hear the sounds of running feet that heralded the arrival of the guards.

Quickly now Flash glanced about the room. He noted carefully the position of the furniture, the position of the guard's lifeless body, the doors. Then he turned back once more to face Hoxor. And even as he started to speak, the first of the prison assistants was banging on the door.

CHAPTER XVIII.

Doomed To Destruction.

FLASH GORDON'S voice was razor-sharp. His words sliced through the tense atmosphere.

"This gun," he said, "will be pointing directly at you, Hoxor. Its muzzle will never leave your heart. Your first false move will be

your last. This is what you say—under pain of death:

"You killed the guard on the floor. Killed him because he went suddenly crazy. Understand? And don't forget—the gun."

Hoxor nodded dumbly, sat back. Flash motioned to Thory to open the door, and took a seat himself to the right of the warden's desk. He kept the ray gun concealed from the half dozen guards that swarmed in, but ever in sight of Hoxor's fear-ridden eyes.

The warden settled back in his chair, swallowed once, then spoke rapidly—as though anxious to get it over with. His story was accepted without comment, and two of the guards bent over and picked the lifeless man off the floor. And with only a casual glance about the room, they left and closed the door.

Flash moved quickly then. He crossed to the door, heard the tramp of guards' feet retreating down the hallway, then faced Hoxor again.

"Now—about that call to your space pilot at the hanger. Hurry!"

And Hoxor hurried. He had tried once to thwart the plans of the Earthman and he saw the futility of it. Grateful that he was still alive after Flash had overpowered him, the warden had no desire to toss his life again into the laps of the gods.

He had just finished giving instructions to the spaceship pilot, when the door opened and Illana came in, helping support Zarkov. There was a hint of color now in the scientist's drawn cheeks; and a light of confidence again in his eyes.

"He insisted," Illana said. "We heard the bells and thought you might be in trouble. I tried to make him stay put, Flash, but he wouldn't."

A rare smile tugged at Flash Gordon's lips. He crossed the room, gripped Zarkov's arm firmly.

"You," he said, "are a fine patient. Sit down there."

Zarkov smiled back, glanced about, then sat down.

"I just thought," he said slowly, "you might need me."

"Not yet," Flash answered. He told Zarkov his plans, and he had not quite finished when there was a knock on the door. Flash frowned, levelled his gun again at Hoxor, in spite of the fact that Caldor had been covering the warden all along.

"Answer it," he said, "and be careful."

The warden sighed, crossed to the door, flung it open. A guard stood there, out of sight of all but Flash and Hoxor, but made no attempt to pass Hoxor's imposing figure.

"There is a Jovian transport out on the field, Captain Hoxor," he said. "They have received instructions to pick up Her Highness, Princess Illana."

"The Princess," Flash said quickly, "will be out soon."

As the warden once more resumed his seat, Flash glanced at Illana.

"Well, that cleans up almost everything. Almost." He rose abruptly, stared at Caldor. "Keep your gun on him every moment. Don't let him touch a thing—except the phonoscope, and only then if the space pilot is calling. I'll be back in a moment."

Quickly Flash left the room, went down again into the cold dampness of the starvation pits. He took the light key from his waistband, and opened door after door of the small cells, searching for anyone who had a breath of life remaining in his withered body. But only one man did he find who still lived—the one who was still crying for food. The other of the two survivors who had been alive when he had been down before, was now dead. His body was still warm.

By clever cajolery, Flash brought the raving man up to the warden's office. Driven mad with hunger, the man was suspicious of everyone, of everything. Finally, as Flash forced him into a chair in Hoxor's room, he seemed to submit. Flash turned quickly to Zarkov.

"The least we can do," he said softly, "is try to save him. We couldn't possibly get the rest of the prisoners out anyway. It would take too many trips. And even so, they'll be better off here until—Well, we may fail, you know. But this fellow is almost gone anyhow."

Zarkov was shaking his head slowly.

"He's in a bad way. His mind is shot, Flash. A little Trapholyn might until he is strong enough to stand food, but I don't know—maybe a drug of some sort."

"Drug?" The word brought back to Flash's mind the tin of powder he had picked up in the laboratory. He handed it to Zarkov, explaining where he had got it. "I was just curious," he concluded, "as to what it was."

Zarkov examined the flaky white powder closely, held the box to his nose, then touched

a portion to his lips. He nodded slowly as he finished.

"A combination of three drugs," he said. "Murcil, Drogol and Potash Theron. Makes a powerful hypnotic."

"Yes, that's what it was for," Hoxor cut in. "Lieutenant Durek was mixing it up for use here on recalcitrants. We—"

But what Hoxor was going to add was cut short as the signal on the phonoscope sounded. There was a frown on the warden's face as he snapped the button. Flash, standing now to one side of the warden, his gun trained unerringly on him, expected to see the features of the spaceship pilot. But it wasn't the pilot. Instead a face long forgotten but remembered, stared out of the small screen. And a voice which Flash would never forget filled the room.

It was Pwami.

"Hello, Hoxor," the Dictator said coldly. "What's wrong? You look frightened."

Flash stepped back even further, to make sure Pwami couldn't see him. Hoxor, his eyes wide with sudden fright, stared at the screen a moment, then forced a smile.

"Why—why nothing," he said finally. "I'm not feeling very well."

"You must learn," the Dictator said slowly, "to take better care of your health. That is an order—if you wish to remain in charge of Ceres. For from now on you are going to have a much harder task."

Flash tensed as he heard the Dictator's soft, yet amazingly brittle tones. He could sense the undercurrent of feverish excitement that lay beneath Pwami's suave exterior.

"You are ready—to start?" Hoxor asked.

"Yes," Pwami said. "That is why I called. We are off—off to Earth, Hoxor. Inside of ten minutes we shall be on our way. Inside of ten days I, Pwami, shall be not only Dictator of Mars, but Dictator of Earth as well. And then . . ."

He let his voice trail off, but continued with sudden asperity, as though regretting his soft, dreamy reverie.

"That is all. Everything is in readiness, and I'm leaving immediately. You have no reports for me?"

"None, your Excellency," Hoxor said slowly. "Good luck."

"Then," Pwami concluded, "I will communicate with you later."

There was a click; then black, swirling silence.

For almost a full minute no one spoke. Finally it was Zarkov who gave voice to the thoughts that were hammering through Flash Gordon's brain.

"Jehovah!" he said. "He is nearer to Earth than us by three full days. And we have nothing to pursue him with but a slow, ancient prison-ship only half as fast as the slowest in Pwami's fleet." He paused, glanced at Flash; and there was a hard, bitter smile on his lips as he finished: "Flash, my lad, *this* is the end."

Another silence followed. Flash, bent forward now, his head resting in his hands, looked up suddenly. His bronzed forehead was lined with thought.

"Zarkov—there may be a way. Weren't you working on a polarity attraction a short while ago?"

Zarkov frowned.

"Yes—sort of."

"Can you offset the polarizing qualities of magnetic mountains? Could you move a space ship out of their influence?"

"Why, yes. Quite simple. By creating electrically a dynamic polarization you can draw the attraction—"

"Never mind how, Zarkov. Can you, without any special equipment, get a ship away from the mountains on Tyron—if I get the in working order."

"Absolutely," Zarkov replied. "As long as ship in working order."

Flash rose abruptly, walked toward the desk.

"Then," he said, "this is *not* the end."

"Oh," Illana said, suddenly, "you mean—"

"Just a minute, Flash," Zarkov cut in. "I don't quite understand. Granted that you might in some way get a fast ship, you are overlooking the fact that Mars is only two days to Earth, three days closer than we are. You would need a ship three times as fast as any ever built. And even if you had that, you have still to contend with Pwami's atom gun."

Flash, busy at the desk, working desperately over half a dozen algebraic equations, didn't answer for over ten minutes. But finally, when he looked up, there was a vibrant light in his gray eyes.

"Zarkov," he said slowly, "putting aside the threat of the atom gun for the moment, you are wrong. We can overtake Pwami. My figures show that—"

"The phonoscope buzzer sounded again, cutting Flash's explanation short. There was

a silence for a moment, then Hoxor once again snapped on the switch. This time it was the pilot of the prison transport. And his words crackled electrically through the tense atmosphere.

"All set, Captain," he said. "The ship's ready."

Hoxor clicked the button off, and looked up to see Flash's gun trained unwaveringly on him. Flash's brittle voice cracked against his ears.

"Hoxor," he said, "so far you have done well. You have only one further task. We are going to take that ship, without your pilot. I don't care how you explain the circumstance to the man, but your order should be sufficient. It had better be. If you fail . . ."

Hoxor inhaled deeply, rose slowly from his seat.

"Just a moment," Flash said. "We're not quite finished here. Get me a connection with Earth right away."

Hoxor hesitated a second, then shrugged. He clicked the button open, pressed the buzzer. The features of the spacephone operator came onto the screen and the warden gave the order. In less than five minutes Flash had his connection.

It took Flash only a few moments to impart the details to the head of the Interplanetary Zone Patrol, then cut off. As he turned from the phone, Caldor asked:

"Won't Pwami hear that?"

"It's a different wave belt," Flash answered. "He wouldn't get it unless he was deliberately searching for it. And I doubt that he is."

"Well, what's to prevent Hoxor from phoning Pwami as soon as we're gone?" Thory asked.

"Nothing," Flash said. "Except that he'll be with us. And there's not another person in the prison knows anything about what we're doing. So—that's all. We're off."

Illana jumped up.

"Oh, Flash. I'm afraid. Let me go with you."

"No, Illana," Flash said sternly. "You've helped a lot, but this is too dangerous. As soon as we get outside, go straight to your transport. And if at any time you need me, don't hesitate to send the word."

There was a flicker of disappointment in Illana's dark eyes. She nodded slowly, walked over and helped Zarkov to his feet. Flash glanced about, then trained his gun steadily on Hoxor's back.

"All right, Hoxor, we're ready. Straight to the spaceship, and not one false move. One mistake, and—"

Hoxor nodded, opened the door, and stepped out. And, with his gun held close to his body to conceal it from prying eyes, Flash followed. And slowly, almost funereally, the cavalcade made its way out into the cold, dark air of the Cerean night.

Hoxor made no mistake

CHAPTER XIX.

Couriers Of Death.

THE rescue of the Jovian spaceship from the magnetic mountains of Tyron was made easily. Zarkov set up a dynamic polarity inside the hull which was of sufficient strength to resist the magnetic pull of the mountains; and, while Thory stood guard against any attack by the Gorilla men with a ray gun, Flash and Caldor repaired the ship itself.

The rockets from the prison transport were placed in the Jovian assembly, and with parts of the transport's space radio, they repaired the dismantled set in the larger, swifter ship. Then, installing the prison ship compass, and transferring the water containers, they were ready.

And so, carrying one prisoner, one madman, a sick scientist and Flash, Caldor and Thory, the Jovian Imperial Ship No. 4 roared out into space, headed for its ethereal battleground.

Flash took the wheel at first, studying intently the huge directional finder that was set on the large, panelled instrument on an angle above him. He sent out a half dozen exploratory radio beams, seeking the Earthian lane; then, finding it, he settled back grimly and kept his eyes glued on the large magnascope.

They had not been on the way more than half an hour, when Zarkov took a seat next to Flash, deep lines on his forehead.

"Tell me," he said. "How are you so certain that we can catch up with Pwami's fleet? This ship is no faster—"

"It isn't a matter of catching up, Zarkov," Flash said, smiling, "it's a matter of heading off. Like all scientists your astronomy is creaky."

"My astronomy!" Zarkov said. "Why, don't tell me that Mars isn't closer to Earth than the Planetoids."

"It is—and it isn't. It all depends on the respective positions of the planets in the orbits. As it so happens, right now Mars should be at least six days from Earth instead of two, because the Earth has already swung past it on the circuit. But Ceres and that batch of asteroids grouped nearby are exactly over the Earth's position. Which means, that Mars is sort of an apex to the triangle which has Earth and Ceres as its base."

Zarkov's eyes had widened.

"Why—it seemed only a few days ago that Earth was directly beneath Mars."

"It was more than that, Zarkov. Which accounts for the advanced position."

"Then—then that means we can cut across and head them off before they reach there."

"Yes—with a bit of luck. We've a little less than a day's advantage. Say a half day, with our stop on Tyron."

Zarkov shook his head slowly. There was a smile on his parched lips.

"I think," he said, "I'll have to brush up on my astro studies. But, Flash. Once we meet them, how do you plan to stop the attack? That atom gun Thory told about can blast us right out of space. It's a disintegrator. I've been aware of the possibilities of such a weapon ever since I stumbled over the secret of atomic disintegration, and if it has been made from the plans Pwami got, then there's nothing I know of that will stand up before it."

"You know of no defense at all?"

"Not one. If that is once turned on us, we'll be nothing but a million tiny particles floating around in the ether!"

"Then," Flash said, "we'll have to find a way of putting it out of commission."

"Putting it out of commission? How?"

Flash turned to Zarkov. His lips were drawn out into a thin line. The fires of determination burned in the depths of his eyes.

"By getting on Pwami's ship," he said.

And so the days passed—slowly, agonizingly. Flash and Thory and Caldor, and sometimes Zarkov, took turns at the wheel. The warden was kept locked in the same chamber Flash had formerly occupied, and the insane passenger was slowly being nursed back into physical health.

But, though his condition improved with the passing of each day, the man Flash had rescued from the starvation pits was still mentally ill. And, in an effort to ease the draining hysteria that controlled him when awake,

they kept him well dosed with the powdered hypnotic.

All through the time Flash was awake, he pondered the problem of getting aboard the Pwami ship without risking being blasted into eternity. The possible way seemed to be through a space radio distress signal. But there was a flaw there, an obvious flaw. He would have to identify the Jovian ship in his plea for help, as the identification numbers of the outside hull would be visible for miles through the powerful magnascope on Pwami's ship. And to attempt using some other ship's signal would be sheer suicide.

But it was suicide, too, to gamble on the truth. For through the necessity of using someone to send out the call who might not be recognized over the space televitic radio, Flash would have only one choice—the madman. Hoxor, Thory, Caldor, Zarkov and himself were all known to Pwami. And it was highly possible the madman was, too.

Yet, even granting Flash could possibly coach the madman into radioing, and that he would not be recognized, there was always the chance that Pwami, being suspicious, would demand to see Illana on the screen. For it was Illana's ship.

And that would be the end . . .

But on the fourth day Flash got the solution. And its very simplicity startled him. And then on the next day, during one of Flash's few rest periods, Zarkov hurried to his side.

"Flash! Flash! We've sighted them. They're on the way."

Flash roused with a start.

"Where?"

"Directly ahead, on the Mars-Earthian beam."

Flash hurried out into the control room, peered into the large magnascope. Like small specks on a huge, cloudless mirror he could see the approaching Martain fleet. Larger and larger they grew, until the specks changed to dots, and the dots into small, egg-shaped figures.

Flash whirled from the magnascope, and strode lithely to the large emergency kit. From this he brought forth a half dozen identifying rockets—rockets such as he had used on Tyron when the prison transport landed to rescue them. Now he crossed to the cylindrical ejector tube, and jammed a rocket into place.

For a moment Zarkov watched silently, then he said:

"But will it stop them?"

"It should," Flash answered. "We can't use the radio, and this is our only hope. Unless we crash."

"Then," Flash said grimly, "we crash."

A light of fear danced for a moment in Walter Thory's eyes. But as he saw Caldor sitting calmly at the wheel, and as he saw Zarkov nod evenly at Flash's remark, a flush of shame appeared at the base of his neck. Far better it would be to sacrifice their lives, than the lives of thousands upon thousands of innocent people on earth.

And, in the serenity on his face as Flash fired the first of the rockets, Thory borrowed some courage. He was a young man; he didn't want to die. But to ride the blazing trail of death with such men as these would be an honor.

With a steady hand, Flash fired the second rocket.

Ages seemed to pass. Eternities rolled to fade into utter oblivion. Nearer and nearer came that racing horde of death-ridden space ships. But still no answer. Then, as Flash pressed the last rocket into the ejector tube and fired it into the ether where it would spell out its identifying call for help, there came a humming sound on the radio.

The silence in the room became tense. They were waiting now for the sudden shock that would hurl them into nothingness. But instead came only a repetition of the buzzing sound. They were being called. Their signal had been seen, and had been believed. If only the ships would stop.

And they did.

Through the magnascope Flash saw the largest of the Martian fleet draw slowly to a halt. Before he had fired the frozen signals out into space, Flash had felt certain that Pwami himself would be the one to come to the rescue of the distressed princess of Jupiter. And he was right; for as the ship eased over to rub sides with the Jovian ship, and as the telescoping blinds with their magnetic attachments appeared out of the side of the rescuer Flash recognized the identifying numbers on its side.

It was Pwami's ship.

Flash crossed hurriedly to the wheel that controlled the compression lock door, and whirled it. Then, drawing down on the hydraulic brake that released the blinds of the Jovian ship, Flash waited for the signal of completed connection. And as he waited, he

fondled the cold steel of the ray gun in his bronzed hand.

And once, just once, he felt the bulge of the battle at his waist, and smiled grimly. Then came the signal of connection.

Flash glanced about quickly, saw that Zarkov and Caldor stood directly behind, each gripping a gun. Thory was last, and seemed calmly assured of the invincibility of the three ahead.

Then, with a suddenness that was startling, the door was flung open and Flash stepped into the tunnel between the two ships.

And directly into the paralyzing grip of a meshed crossed-current of electricity.

CHAPTER XX.

A Toast To Disaster.

ONCE before Flash Gordon had been the victim of those paralyzing rays. Once before he had felt his body grow suddenly numb in their grasp. Once before he had become helpless captive in their thrall. But this time their intensity seemed increased a hundredfold.

He raged inwardly now at walking into the trap. He should have known that Pwami's suspicious nature would never allow him to be caught unawares. And it was a simple, ingenious trap, too: For if Pwami guessed wrong, and it had been Illana, then an explanation and an apology would have sufficed. And if not—then, well—this was the result.

Now, as Flash was held there, like some frozen image, he saw the Dictator's face appear at the other end of the short, telescopic tunnel. And when he saw Flash a slow, amused smile flitted with his lean features. He bowed low, mockingly.

"Ah—we meet again. How fortunate. Won't you come into my parlor, said the spider to the fly? How do you like my electric attachment this time, my friend? An improvement, isn't it?"

Flash could only stand there, like a graven image, while Pwami amused himself. He knew that those behind him, too, were caught. For he remembered having distinctly heard Zarkov and Caldor follow close behind. Then Pwami made a gesture, and a man, clad as before in a plated armor, stepped into the tunnel. And bathed in a shower of hissing sparks, he removed the guns from them, and attached a leading chain to their wrists. Then, with a

signal to Pwami, Flash felt the gripping numbness flee from his body. And slowly, at the Dictator's order, they were led into the Martian ship.

For a moment Pwami seemed considering the next move. Finally he spoke.

"Attach them to that center pole," he said. "I've an idea they will enjoy the show they're about to see. Yes, I think they will."

Shackled together, Flash and Zarkov and Caldor were chained to the steel shaft that rose up in the exact center of the Martian ship's control room. Then, again at Pwami's order, two M. D.'s went through the tunnel into the Jovian ship and brought back the remaining three occupants.

"Well, Hoxor!" Pwami said with surprise, as the Ceres warden appeared. "And my good friend, Thory. And that insipid fool of an assassin, Bjoyda. This seems to be old timer's week. All my friends, not forgetting either you or Caldor, Zarkov. I'm beginning to see what brought this about. That little idiot, Illana, was too fond of you, Flash. But I'll take care of that—real soon. Won't that fat fool, Grotta, be surprised when we pay *him* our visit."

He paused, made a motion, and the connecting blinds between the ships were drawn in.

"Sorry I can't bring it with me, Flash," he continued. "But we've important work to do, and it would be a hindrance. However, it's well out of the gravitation belt, and will be there when we come back."

While Pwami had been talking, Flash had been intent on the huge gun that stood in the bow. A large, cylindrical affair, with a protecting metal shield, it looked easily capable of all Zarkov claimed. Directly in front of it was a magnifying finder that served to sight it accurately on any object miles away.

"You like my toy, eh?" Pwami asked, as he noticed Flash's attention. "Well, you shall see it work—any minute now. Ready, Proso, give the signal to proceed."

The lock door closed, Proso went to the switchboard that controlled communication between the ships of the fleet, and pressed a number of buttons. Then, as the large flagship of the Martian fleet roared away, Pwami turned once more to Flash.

"Yes," he said, "and I shall even give you a chance to work it yourself. It should be interesting, eh? You could have a choice of targets that you know well."

Not one word had any of the captives spoken since being taken. Now Flash broke the silence.

"Perhaps," he said lightly, "it would."

Zarkov glanced toward him, but Flash stared straight ahead, keeping his attention riveted on the gun. Pwami was watching closely, a puzzled frown on his forehead. But almost immediately all conjecture was dashed aside with the sudden statement of one of the lookouts.

"The Earth Fleet! It's coming!"

Pwami cursed, stepped to the magnascope and peered through. But he soon became again his smiling, confident self:

"I might have expected that. But it doesn't matter. Their ships will give us a few targets to practice on before doing the important work. And what have they to hurt us?"

One of the men, at the Dictator's command, stepped to the rear of the gun, turned the wheel. Then, peering intently into the magnifying sights, he adjusted the gun until he was satisfied. At Pwami's nod, he pulled out a small handle.

Not a sound was made, not the least evidence of a huge atom gun being fired. But the smile on the gunner's face told the story.

"One," he said, "disappeared into smoke."

Pwami nodded, crossed to the fleet switchboard, and studied a series of small red lights. Then he pressed some buttons, watched the lights change formation, and turned again to the gunner.

"All right," he said, "mow them down."

The man peered again through the magnifying sights, turned the wheel to adjust the gun, then once more pulled the handle. And as he continued his firing, one hand on the wheel, the other on the handle, his voice droned out monotonously:

"Two . . . three . . . four . . ."

Horror crept across Zarkov's face—horror blended with impotent fury. But Flash remained calm; and his face was passive when Pwami glanced again in his direction. For a brief instant that same puzzled expression appeared in his eyes. Then he said:

"You'd like to try—now?"

"Yes," Flash said. "I would."

He felt, rather than saw, Zarkov's quick glance in his direction. Pwami remained thoughtful for a moment, then said:

"You'll be watched closely."

"I expect to be."

Pwami finally shook his head.

"You've got iron in your blood, all right. But I think you'll crack when you've killed a few of your countrymen."

Flash was unchained, taken to the gun. He studiously kept his eyes from Zarkov, and managed with difficulty to retain a certain calmness. Briefly, he was instructed in the rudiments of firing; and then, under the half dozen ray guns that were levelled at him, was told to proceed.

A pain burned through Flash Gordon's heart. To carry through this scheme he might be forced to kill one or more of his countrymen—to sacrifice their lives to a just cause. He knew that what happened now would have a direct bearing on his success later. And, with Pwami's suspicious eyes on him, there seemed no way of dodging the issue.

But wasn't there?

Flash stared evenly at the small magnifying sight. If only he could manage to keep anyone from looking through it over his shoulder, he might get away with a hoax. And so, steeling himself, he bent over the sights, adjusted the gun carefully so as to miss the Earth ships, and pulled the handle.

"What happened?" Pwami asked as he stepped back.

Flash turned toward the Dictator, said slowly:

"They just vanished. Vanished in a sudden puff of whitish smoke." It was only by the greatest effort that he forced a smile to his taut lips.

"It's marvelous, Zarkov. This gun is even greater than you anticipated."

Pwami, the frown on his forehead deepening, was watching intently. Flash turned to him now, a feigned look of amusement in his eyes.

"They just disappear before you," he said. "I wish now I'd taken your hint a while back, Pwami. This is real warfare."

He turned again to the atom gun, conscious of Pwami's intent scrutiny. For the longest while he adjusted his gun back and forth, stalling for time, waiting for Pwami to speak. But the Dictator didn't; and when it was becoming evident that he must act immediately, he trained the sights. Then, with Pwami standing behind him, Flash again pulled the handle.

The most difficult task he had then was to retain the look of satisfaction on his face. Had Pwami noticed the deception? But before Flash could judge, Pwami spoke.

"You—enjoy my gun—my warfare."

Flash was silent a moment, deliberately stifling any appearance of over-anxiousness. Then he smiled thinly.

"I might as well admit it," he said finally. "I've chosen my profession for what it is. The excitement—the thrills. Death is only part of the game. But what's the use discussing it, Pwami. I gambled against you—and lost. I'm a good loser. And I am also the first to acknowledge when I've met a better man than I."

That compliment, coming from such a person as Flash Gordon in the presence of so many witnesses, pleased Pwami's ego. In the light of the praise, a flow of generosity, sired too by his ego, surged through him. And he spoke the words Flash prayed for; the words that might save the Earth.

"The hint," he said, "might still go. When I told you I'd rather have you with me than against me, I meant it. You are a worthy opponent, Flash; and you would make a better ally. I think we could come to an agreement."

"Do you mean it, Pwami?"

The burst of enthusiasm from Flash was the clinching argument. Pwami allowed a soft smile to spread over his features.

"Yes," he said. "I am a man of my word."

"Then," Flash replied, pulling the small bottle of brownish liquid from his pocket, "here is to the greatest man in the Universe today—Pwami!"

He raised the bottle to his lips, and drank.

But no more than a quarter ounce trickled down Flash's throat. Zarkov's voice, trembling with rage, vibrated through the room.

"You dirty swine! I've always felt you might do that! You traitor! You contemptible, low—"

He got no further. Flash, with an easy, lithe stride, crossed the room and slapped Zarkov's face. Slapped it again and again.

"You don't appreciate a brain, Zarkov. I once thought you were intelligent. But though you are the greatest scientist in the world, you are still only a servant to real intelligence. Still only the tool of the mighty."

He strode back, stopped by the gun. Pwami's face was expressionless; but Flash thought he saw a pleased light in the Dictator's eyes. He lifted the bottle of wine again, said:

"A toast—to disaster."

Without hesitancy he poured the liquid down his throat.

As Flash felt the warm rush of wine in his mouth, he saw that the other five drinkers had drained their glasses, too; and now, fighting to keep as much of the liquid as possible from passing down his throat, Flash lowered his glass. And at that instant he saw Pwami, staring steadily at him, take his gun from its holster.

"To this great occasion. Who'll drink with me to success? To your world dominance, Pwami?"

Pwami hesitated the fraction of a second, then smiled.

"Personally I never drink," he said. "But my crew—"

He motioned for glasses and Flash fought to keep concealed the disappointment that was in his heart. Six small glasses were set out on the small metal table, and Flash poured out a half dozen even drinks. And was the first to raise his metal glass.

"Swallow that!"

There was no alternative. Pwami was too far away to reach in a stride. And the slightest show of resistance now would wreck his whole plan. He swallowed the liquid, smiled slowly.

"What's wrong?"

Pwami stared at him, stared at the other five men, then shrugged. He put his gun away.

"I thought maybe," he said, "you were up to some trick."

And it was at that moment that the powerful drug took effect.

Flash felt its clutching fingers—felt it first because he knew what to expect. And at the first sign of lassitude, Flash leaped forward.

The move was so sudden, so utterly unexpected at the moment, that Pwami was caught entirely off guard. And though it was with difficulty that Flash concentrated on his objective, he was aware of two of the five other drinkers dropping suddenly to the floor. And the other three were swooning about drunkenly.

Then, with an abruptness that startled him into a semblance of reality, he crashed into Pwami; and they rolled to the floor.

Pwami fought back, fought back viciously, and it was with difficulty that Flash managed to get his steel-like fingers about the Dictator's throat. But it was with more difficulty that he forced himself to dig his thumbs into Pwami's tough skin. For now there was a fog swirling about his brain. A wet fog—wet and clammy.

And no longer was he able to concentrate on his objective.

He was aware that the man under him—whoever it was—was squirming about, trying to get up. He knew that for some reason, now obscure, he was trying to prevent that. Now the fog was getting thicker, damper, and for a moment he saw nothing but a black velvet drape, heard nothing but the steady roar of a distant surf. Then he no longer cared about anything, and when the man under him heaved suddenly upward he saw no reason why he should keep choking him.

And so, his mind still a dull blur of grayness, he rose slowly to his feet.

Then, as he saw the other man rise, as he saw him reach for his gun, Flash felt something sharp, staccato slice through the veil that surrounded him.

They were words.

"Flash! Flash! Fight!"

A peculiar sensation moved him. He had been told to do something, told to fight. It seemed the most natural thing in his existence to obey that command. And, though it was impossible for him to reason why, he paced quickly in and struck out at the man in front.

Pwami had drawn his gun, and was raising it even as Flash moved. There was a sudden flare in front of the curtain that obscured Flash's sight, and he felt an odd tingling sensation in his left shoulder. But in no way did he ascribe it to the ray gun.

Once, twice, three times, he hurled his knotted fist out at the man before him. He felt no sensation at all as the blows crashed into Pwami's face. He knew only that the man in front of him had suddenly fallen down, and was now still. And for a moment more he stood there, an absolute mental blank, until the sharp edge of Zarkov's words knifed through his brain.

"Flash. Come here, release these chains."

And, like an obedient dog who acts without reason, Flash went to Zarkov's side, and obeyed the command.

Then, even as he straightened up, the fog that had been swirling about his brain, thickened; and once more the black curtain returned to cloak his vision. Then, unable any longer to resist the powerful influences of the hypnotic, he slumped slowly to the floor.

And he was lying there, in total oblivion, as Zarkov freed Caldor and Thory and took command of the ship; and when Dale and Elaine were found locked in their quarters and

released; and when Dale, sobbing softly, hurried to Flash's side and pressed his limp head against the softness of her bosom.

And finally, after the short battle was over, they settled into the arms of an hysterical welcome Earth.

In a week most of the excitement had died down. Pwami and those of his space corps who still lived, were held for the Interplanetary Tribunal. Caldor, and Walter Thory and Elaine, after a few days, returned in state to Mars. Bjoyda, whose mind was still affected, was committed to an institution for treatment, and there was a good chance of finally curing him. And Flash, after spending four days in a hospital, was once more in perfect health—in spite of the swarms of people who came to see him, and who drove the hospital staff to the verge of insanity.

And so it was exactly a week later that Flash and Dale and Zarkov were sitting in the west sun room of the White House, guests of the President. The President, his rugged face turned to Dale, was speaking in a low, sonorous voice.

"And to think," he said slowly, "that you might now have been sitting out there, the wedded mate of that swine. It's too horrible to contemplate. But he'll be punished—punished by the only effective method for one of his sort—death! His trial is scheduled for next week."

The golden sun, dropping swiftly toward the horizon, shed its warm glow over the occupants of the sunroom, bathed them in a soft, mellow light. After a moment of silence, Zarkov's deep voice filled the room.

"Horrible is no word for it. But it seems that we knew only horror in those last few weeks. Thank heaven that atom gun will be destroyed soon. And thank heaven, too, that the Martian fleet surrendered after losing only three of their ships. It made me ill at the time, knowing they were so defenseless against the atom gun. I felt like a murderer."

"There was nothing else you could do, Zarkov," Flash said sympathetically. "They must have been surprised to suddenly see the flagship of their fleet turn against them."

"You've no apologies to make, Dr. Zarkov," the President added quickly. "They were murderers—cold blooded murderers. If it had not been for you—"

The President's words trailed off into a

contemplative silence. Finally Zarkov changed the subject.

"Flash," he said, "what ever made you bring that bottle of wine with you?"

Flash smiled.

"Well, it gave the hypnotic powder a nice flavor. And knowing Pwami, I thought it might be a good idea to be prepared for any eventuality. He is a shrewd man. Shrewd and clever."

Zarkov shook his head slowly. A flicker of amusement danced in the depths of his brown eyes.

"You should have been an actor, Flash. You had me completely buffaloed. For a moment I actually thought you had shot down two Earthian ships. And I didn't realize, until I saw the hypnotic begin to take effect, what you had done."

"Only in the name of Jehovah, don't slap me so realistically the next time. You don't have to put your heart in that sort of thing."

A rare smile drifted across Flash Gordon's lips.

"I won't," he said softly, "until you scrape that beard of yours off. It was like slapping a bramble bush."

There was a light tapping at the door, and the President's personal secretary came in. He handed the President a thin sheet of metalized paper on which all official documents are transcribed.

"This was just delivered, sir, from the Martian Legation."

The President glanced at the note, nodded to his secretary, and, when the man had left, smiled broadly.

"Well, Flash," he said, "you seem to have made quite a hit with the Martians. This is from Caldor, who is now head of their temporary diplomatic service. It's sent in code, so

He glanced again at the paper, studying it, then looked up.

"It seems," he continued, "that you and Miss Arden and Dr. Zarkov are invited to attend the emergency council meetings that are going to be held to determine the future political state of the planet. It seems further, that the people up there are quite anxious to thank you for what you've done. I might even go further. Might make an unofficial guess that a presidency could be yours for the asking."

Flash cocked his eye at the President, then turned in mock seriousness to Dale.

"Would I make a good president, dear?"

Dale shook her head emphatically.

"No!"

Flash smiled again, turned to the President.

"Then you can tell Caldor that I'll be up for a visit after the elections."

"And send Walter and Elaine our regards."

As the President nodded, and rang the bell for his secretary, Flash rose and walked to the huge, intra-florium glass window and stared out across the expanse of green toward the westering sun. Dale came and stood by his side, and put her arm through his. They heard the secretary came, receive the President's message, and leave. Then Dale said:

"Darling—are you going to stay put for a while? Where I can have you near me?"

Flash smiled, drew Dale close to him, and for a moment stood there, a silent, immobile figure of golden bronze in the warm light of the sun's rays. Finally he nodded slowly.

"Yes, dear. For a long, long while."

Zarkov, resting quietly in the comfortable depths of a reclining chair, opened his eyes and stared across the room. Then he winked slowly at the President.

"A long, long while," he echoed. "At least a week."

DON'T MISS

The Sun Men of Saturn

in the next issue of this magazine.

ON THE NEWSSTANDS ABOUT

NOVEMBER 25TH.

The SAGA of the "SMOKEPOT"

By R. R. WINTERBOTHAM

THE rocket tubes, at least those that worked, were blasting a symphony of speed through space. Captain David Olney of the ill fated cruiser glanced at the chronometer. Never had time been so precious and it was flying on. Two years had passed.

For two years the space cruiser, Z-10457, known both to Olney and his whiskered crew as *The Smokepot*, had flown in its aimless journey through the skyways. It was a blind flight, drifting goodness knew where; hoping, goodness knew what—a groping in the darkness between systems, combing the sky for a place to land.

Errors, which crept insidiously into the calculations of human experts, were responsible for the plight. On a projected trip from Earth to Venus, a navigator's calculation put the craft a few seconds wide of its mark. Then, as Olney attempted to swing his ship to the proper parabola, a steering jet fused, leaving the craft powerless to turn.

The Smokepot flung itself past Venus, zoomed across the path of the Earth again; past Mars, Jupiter, Saturn it roared. At length it crossed Pluto's lonely orbit and entered the Stygian darkness of outer space.

The sun's rays dimmed. Gloom settled on the crew. In vain did Olney try to check the speed. But it was useless to try to turn without steering jets. The stores of the rocket were sufficient for a several years' voyage, but they were not unlimited. Fuel was not a problem. Olney had only to draw from the trail of meteors, which swarmed after the smoking rocket, to stoke the engines. The meteors, attracted by the gravitational field of the ship, were largely metal and suitable for atomic reduction.

But the supplies of chemicals from which food and water were manufactured were exhaustible. For this reason Olney had given the ship her nose.

Loneliness, too, was an enemy. Turner already was mad. Turner, usually cheerful as he alternated with the captain at the useless controls, searching the path of the derelict for an uncharted planet, grew morose. With whites showing in his eyes, Turner worked on a small electrical device in his spare time.

"What is it?" asked the captain, looking up from the chronometer.

"It's a rain machine," Turner whispered hoarsely, rolling his eyes. "I'll revolutionize agriculture."

"Bah!" snorted Olney. "We'll never see agriculture again. The nearest star in this direction is fifteen light years. Even if we drove into its gravitational field, we might become a satellite without ever reaching a planet. What good is a rain machine in a cloudless vacuum?"

"We'll come back home—some day!" gurgled Turner.

The captain became silent. He rang for more fuel. The rocket tubes were blasting at top speed. The captain had banked everything on his plan to reach the next star. The quicker the trip was made, the better. Of his hopes to land when he got there, Olney saw only the barest possibility.

The ship roared on into the blackness of everlasting night. Olney, like every man of his crew of twelve, haunted portholes, hoping each second to glimpse the shadow of an uncharted planet against the background of glimmering stars. Even a large meteor would do—anything that might become an isle of refuge

for repairs to the steering mechanism would do. But time ticked on and on and the night of space deepened.

Olney turned away, leaving Turner to babble in his idiocy. Touching the buzzer again, he summoned the second watch to its stations. Turner fussed and put aside his invention as Olney took one last glance through the porthole before retiring.

His eyes swept the heavens as they had done futilely for the past two years. A few stars ahead faded and vanished. The captain gasped. His lips moved and then his voice gave an exaltant hoot.

"Planet, ho!"

Olney's voice rang clear and vibrant through the control tower. Microphones carried the words throughout the craft. An answering thunder of shouts boomed back through the loudspeaker. Cheers, cries, yells and prayers mixed in one great explosion of relief.

The Smokepot had found an olive branch in the flood waters of space.

THERE WAS NO SLEEP that watch. Each man, on duty or off, watched the mighty shadow loom larger dead ahead.

"A planet of night, probably colder than Pluto," Olney speculated huskily.

Turner, his eyes were less wild now, watched the shadow with his mouth agape.

"'Tis solid," muttered the space madman.

"And it has an atmosphere. See, sir, the stars near the rim are dimmed!"

The captain's forehead wrinkled perplexedly. "By gad, it's true! There's something funny there, Turner. By all rights the atmosphere should be frozen!"

Turner grinned simply. "I can test my rain machine," he whispered.

Then all hands were busy. Olney put every energy into keeping the craft headed toward the planet. It was a last chance.

The shadow became large. Fully twice as large as Earth was Olney's computation of its size. The outside thermometers on the *Smokepot* registered a slight increase in temperature, indicating a radiation of heat from the wandering planet.

"Where does it come from?" mused the captain. "Probably heat from internal sources, but what sources? Can it be rotting vegetation, radioactivity, or something we can never understand?"

The crew became a gay, jubilant crowd.

The men whistled, sang and laughed. Each knew the danger that lay ahead, for landing even without a broken jet was a dangerous business. But what danger was there, the men asked, more fearful than the dreadful monotony of an everlasting trip through space?

Olney and Turner both stood at the controls. The captain bellowed orders to cut the blasts. Forward jets were charged to decelerate the speed. The captain exercised every caution to keep the craft from veering from its dead-on course toward the planet.

For hours the speed slackened, then a screaming whine trembled through the craft, signalling that *The Smokepot* had touched the atmosphere of a new world.

The meteor train, following the ship, broke away and flashed past the ship in a rain of sparks toward the ground below. Air within the craft grew warm and moist as friction and deceleration heated the ship's metal sides.

Then actual landing maneuvers began with every man straining at his post. Olney fought the winds of the upper atmosphere and plunged his ship toward the ground. Rockets roared with deafening thunder as the ship floated down to bump gently on the ground. With a sigh, Olney cut the blasts. The men, silent in the tense landing maneuvers, sent up a thundering cheer. *The Smokepot* rested on solid ground for the first time in two years!

"Stand by!" roared Olney as the shouting ceased. "Not a man is to go through the airlocks until the atmosphere is tested and examinations of the surface have been completed. Rigby," he turned to one of the scientists, "take charge of a chemical detail. Start examination of the air, temperature and gravity."

"Aye, sir!"

"Plenck, draw samples of the soil through the bottom locks. Test it for organic life of any sort. See if there are deadly poisons present in the soil. Be careful!"

"Aye, captain!"

"Turner, use the telescope and see if you can pierce this darkness. Watch for anything that moves, you idiot. Find out, if you are able, if this planet is inhabited."

"Aye, sir," replied Turner. He added something in a whisper. Olney caught the words "rain machine".

"None of that, now!" roared the captain. "Obey my orders. The rest of you, get rocket tube repair equipment ready!"

A check of the motors by the captain as

the men fell to their tasks revealed the craft to be in first class condition, in spite of its long voyage. As soon as the tube was repaired, the return trip could be started.

With a navigator's telescope, Olney now searched the heavens for the solar system. At last he found it. The sun, dimmed to the second magnitude, blinked almost directly overhead. Rigby interrupted the observation.

"The atmosphere is only slightly more dense than the Earth's, non-poisonous and breathable," reported the scientist. "It has a higher percentage of carbon dioxide than the Earth's air, but the gas is not present in dangerous quantities."

"What about gravity?"

"The pull is about the same as the Earth's, although the planet's size is larger. I'd say a 100-pound object on Earth, would weigh 105 pounds here."

"So far, so good," decided the captain.

"Anything else?"

"Yes. Take a detail of men, arm yourselves, and go outside and start repairs on the steering jet. Keep one man on guard all the time—you'd better do that yourself, it's the most important job. We don't know what is on this planet."

As RIGBY LEFT, Plenck entered the control room. He was puzzled.

"That internal heat comes from electricity, sir," he reported. "The ground is a regular heating pad and it has an electrical current running through it."

"Is it dangerous?"

"No. The current is of low voltage, but it's there. And in spite of the lack of a sun the outside temperature is about sixty degrees Fahrenheit as a result."

"What of the soil?"

"Traces of volcanic origin, but for the most part it is loamy, organic soil—resembling river bottom land. It's rich enough to support any kind of vegetation as we know it."

"What of life?"

Plenck shook his head. "It's rather queer, sir. While the top soil is undoubtedly organic in makeup and it goes down quite a distance, it is all dead. I couldn't find microbes even. There must have been life on this planet sometime—perhaps now—but it is just about as dead a place as I'd want to see around here."

Turner, who had been working silently at the telescopes, turned on the searchlight in the prow.

"I think I see something moving, captain!" he called. "Looks like a huge jellyfish."

Captain Olney glued his eyes to the lens. At first glance he thought it was water. It looked like an angry surf billowing about a mile away.

But it was not water. It did not sparkle beneath the rays of the searchlight. The mass was dark and it seemed to be creeping forward. It was large and as the captain watched it seemed to extend for miles beyond its ragged shore.

"Come with me, Plenck," ordered the captain. "Turner, keep in touch with the men outside and keep your eyes on us. We're going to find out about that business. At the slightest sign that anything is wrong, order the men inside the ship."

Turner touched his cap. The captain caught a glint in the man's eye. Seeming to read what Turner was thinking, the captain swept up the electrical apparatus in the corner, stowed it away in a trunk and padlocked it.

"Just so you'll obey orders, Turner. Later on, perhaps, you can work on your rain machine."

Turner touched his cap.

Olney strapped a flame pistol to his hips and a few moments later, followed by Plenck, he entered the airlock.

They walked from the locks toward the waves. A flashlight showed the strange, pulsating motion ahead of the two men. It seemed to pitch like breakers on a beach. At the edge Olney saw that it was not a solid mass, but millions of small, round bodies, connected with a network of roots that throbbed with muscular activity. The entire mass seemed to be flowing across the ground toward the ship.

Carefully protecting his hands with leather gloves, Olney grasped one of the small bodies and tore it free from its connecting roots. It was about the size of a walnut, black in color, soft, leathery and *alive*.

As the captain examined the creature or organism, a wave-like process, consisting of about a bushel of the little spheres lashed out from the mass and enveloped his gloved hand. It seemed to stick to the glove. With a brush of his other hand, Olney attempted to remove the mass. But some of the walnut shaped bodies stuck to the other glove.

More lumpy waves licked at Olney's feet. The space navigator pulled away. Another sticky process caught at the captain's leather

trousers and dragged him closer to the surging, liquid mass.

Plenck cried a warning, seized Olney's arm and dragged him back. It took the strength of both men to evade that muscular tug of the wave creatures.

"Run!" Plenck panted as the captain was extricated. "Run back to the ship!"

They retreated, leaving behind the sticky squash of living waves. The captain's glove, still clutching the one nuclear object he had torn from the mass, felt warm.

Rigby met the two at the airlock, now open for ventilation.

"What is it, sir?" the scientist asked Olney.

The captain shook his head. "Something not very pleasant," he speculated. "I brought one in for analysis. How soon can your men finish the repairs?"

"It will take two days at least, captain."

"Could you do some of the work inside the ship?"

Rigby nodded. "We can reline the tube inside, after we remove the section that is fused. But we'll have to go outside again to fasten the parts in place."

"Bring the broken parts inside, Rigby," ordered Olney. "I don't know what these things are, but they're alive and they tried to do something to me. We can't take unnecessary risks."

The captain stopped speaking. His face contorted with pain. Seizing the glove, which still held the pulsating kernel, he tore it from his hand. He turned his flashlight on the hand. The palm was red with a burn.

"Hm-m-m!" ejaculated Plenck. "It's corrosive. It's eaten clear through your glove."

Plenck took a rubber tobacco pouch from his pocket and after dumping the contents on the ground he gingerly picked up the glove and stuffed the living substance into the container.

TURNER KEPT the searchlight playing on the flowing mass of organisms as it surged toward the ship. The broken jet was brought into the engine room and the airlocks were closed, ready to withstand a siege from this unusual type of life found on the derelict planet.

The burns on Olney's hand were not severe and after a treatment he joined Plenck in the laboratory. Plenck was examining the small creature, which apparently was capable of living even after being disconnected from the

muscular vines that joined it with others of its species.

Once more the captain repeated the question which was on the lips of every man of the crew: "What is it?"

"It is different from anything I have seen before and it has no parallels in our universe," replied Plenck. "There is an organism called the Starnut which is found on Venus that has a similar corrosive quality, however. The Starnut digests its food with an acid secreted by its skin. The food is digested, then swallowed through pores. This creature feeds in a similar fashion. It just got through devouring a match and a piece of paper."

"Does the Starnut live in huge connected communities?" asked Olney.

"No, that is one point of difference. Another is that this is not wholly vegetable, as the Venusian Starnut is, nor is it entirely animal. Still, this creature hardly seems to have suffered as a result of its disconnection from the colony."

Plenck took a scalpel from a case and probed the creature. The skin contracted as if in pain where the metal touched. A faint blue electric spark was visible. Suddenly the wave creature started swelling. It increased to fully twice its original size, then it contracted in the center.

"Marvelous," breathed Plenck. "It is dividing, making two individuals, just as a unicellular creature on Earth."

The contracted part did not break, however. It slowly grew long, fibrous and hard. It became one of the connecting roots, such as both men had observed in the original colony.

"This thing needs food to do that, Plenck. Where does it get it?"

The scientist brushed the creatures away from their positions on the wooden table. Two small cavities were disclosed. The creatures had been absorbing the wood.

"They seem to feed on anything organic: Wood, paper, leather, even flesh, such as your hand. I wouldn't advise you to go wading in a colony of those things."

"Great Jupiter!" cried Olney. "How are we going to put the steering rocket in place if we are surrounded by a colony of those things?"

"Turner speaking—"

The loud speaker in the laboratory, connected with the control cabin, carried the voice of the relief pilot.

"Turner speaking," repeated the speaker. "I would like to report, sir, that the inhabitants of this place, whatever they are, have surrounded the ship and are piling on the sides."

The captain looked fearfully at Plenck. "Can they damage the ship?"

Plenck shook his head. "I tried to get our specimen to digest a nail. The acid it secretes apparently is too weak to work on metal."

The speaker cackled again. "The ground is alive with those things, captain! There are thousands—no, millions—ugly, crawling—ugh!"

Olney and Plenck could see them now, splashing against the portholes of the laboratory. Soon the craft would be covered with a living sea of wave creatures.

"Captain! Look!" Plenck cried. He pointed to his laboratory. The captive wave creature had fissioned again. There were others, now dissolving the wooden table.

"Find a way to kill them, Plenck."

THE TABLE LOOKED like a map of the moon within fifteen minutes. It was cratered throughout by the creatures rapidly piling on its top.

Plenck seized a gallon bottle of ether from a shelf and poured it over the pulsating mass. Then to protect themselves from asphyxiation, the two men stepped outside and closed the door.

"These creatures—Starnuts, wave creatures, whatever they are—how can they exist in such huge colonies?"

"On the soul perhaps," Plenck observed. "You remember, I found it to be largely organic matter, probably refuse from vegetation. It could feed quite a large colony of the wave creatures."

"They're outlandish!"

"Just a difference in development. Evolution took a different course here than on the Earth. The Starnuts or wave creatures are a social type of evolution. They live in connected groups and the entire colony, through muscular and perhaps nervous connections, acts as one being."

Plenck peeped in the door. "This colony is dead at least. Ether killed them as I thought it would. Many poisons which kill animal life have no effect on plant life. Ether is fatal to both in the right quantity. Fruits, such as apples, have been killed by ether."

"But we haven't enough ether for that mountain outside," the captain said with a shake of the head.

After the captain returned to his cabin, Plenck continued his dissection of the lifeless creatures. He found one curious fact: Each kernel seemed to be charged with a small amount of electricity. Plenck recalled the views of scientists of the Earth, who translated all life into terms of physics and who claimed that all matter is electrical in nature and that life has its basis in radiant or electrical energy.

THE CHRONOMETER ticked slowly the minutes and hours as Rigby and the mechanics of *The Smokepot* repaired the damaged steering jet. But with each tick of the clock, the space craft became more deeply buried in the ocean of life that rolled across the vast plains of the derelict planet.

At every porthole the sinister, round masses and fibrous black roots pressed tightly against the panes.

"Tons of them!" Olney exclaimed. "We're under a mountain. We'll be crushed by their weight."

Plenck was quite certain that the creatures somehow sensed the presence of organic life beneath the metal walls and that the appearance of the wandering ocean was no accident. Perhaps the brief contact of Olney with the mass when he obtained the sample organism set off a reflex that caused the pursuit and the inundation. It might have been something akin to the sense of smell in terrestrial animals, or it might be something mysteriously connected with the electrical charges Plenck had found stored within those living balls of animo-vegetable substance.

"How are we going to get outside to put the steering rocket in place?" asked Rigby when his work was finished.

"We'll do it somehow!" Olney raged. "We'll be headed for home in a few days."

Plenck overheard. "Do you have a plan?" he asked.

"By Jupiter, we'll starve 'em! They have to eat."

Plenck laughed. "The very ground of the planet is their food. Do you forget that?"

"They aren't eating it now. They're waiting for us to come out."

Plenck lifted his bushy eyebrows. "Would

you live on bread and water with beefsteak on the menu?"

Thus was the captain and crew of *The Smokepot*—besieged, helpless. Olney tried firing the propulsion tubes, the landing jets. While flames killed vast numbers, the waves stood back out of the destroying fire and those of the wave creatures not touched by the blast lived on when the tubes ceased firing. The living creatures flowed back into the places of the dead, feasted on the charred remains and multiplied.

Turner grew more mad with each hour's delay. In a fit of despair he threw open a porthole in his cabin and sat singing in a corner as the wave creatures poured into his quarters. Only the timely arrival of Plenck with the ether bottle saved Turner. As it was, both Turner and Plenck received severe burns from the acid secretion of the kernels.

"Next time I fight 'em, I'll wear a rubber space suit," muttered Plenck as Rigby treated the wounds. "Remember, captain, how I kept one in my rubber tobacco pouch? They don't seem to act on rubber."

Olney's jaw dropped. He slapped his thigh.

"You've got it, by Jupiter! Rubber! That's the answer! I'll wear a rubber space suit outside. With my flame pistol I can hew a passage through those devils, repair the jet mechanism and then return!"

"Better not try it," advised Plenck. "They didn't seem to attack rubber. But we don't know. The action on rubber might be more slow than on other substances. But the action might be just as sure."

"I'm captain on this ship!" Olney spoke firmly. "I'll decide what to do."

THERE WAS NO TURNING the captain from his plan. Preparations began. Rigby brought out the repaired parts and tied them into a neat bundle which a strong man, such as Olney might carry. All that was left to be done was the fastening of the parts to the outside of the craft. It would be a simple task, barring accident.

Olney tested a space suit, found no leaks and put it on. Within a few minutes, shouldering the repaired mechanism, the captain stepped into the airlocks. Plenck closed the inside door as the captain swung open the door to the outside.

A flood of wave creatures crushed against Olney as he opened the door. He sent the

first blast of his flame pistol into the midst of the wave. He heard the sizzle of the frying creatures. A pathway appeared before him. His plan was working.

His gun turned thousands of the creatures into steam. Slowly he made his way into the melting mass. It was hard going, but he was making it. Even as Olney passed, the flood closed in behind him, thrusting him toward the rear of the ship.

He made the broken tube without a mishap. Unstrapping the repaired section he set to work, pausing at intervals to blast away the wave creatures that pressed upon him from all sides. As he worked these creatures flowed about his feet, covered his knees, his thighs. Then he would sweep them clear for a few moments. Again they came to him, undaunted, never seeming to diminish in numbers.

At last the jet was in place. The ship was ready to soar. With a deep sigh of relief, he turned back toward the airlock. It was then that he felt a tug at his leg and heard the sound of ripping rubber.

A sharp burn touched his leg. He glanced down. His heart sank. The trousers of the suit were flapping among ripples of the wave creatures. Nothing organic was immune to the acid secreted by these creatures. Rubber is an organic compound. It was food for the Starnuts. Rubber was more resistive than paper or wood, perhaps, but just as vulnerable. Other parts of the suit were giving away as Olney blasted unavailingly at the creatures.

"Varmints!" he shouted. His suit was being torn to pieces by hundreds of the feasting organisms.

The hopelessness of his situation dawned on Olney. Without the protecting rubber armor, Olney could never reach the locks alive. Even the flame pistol could not save him from those corrosive organisms. He might beat them off for a while, but ultimately—

Desperately he blasted again and again at the flowing horde. Through rips in the suit, creatures already were greedily bathing his clothing in acid. Leather of Olney's jacket was becoming thin as paper, shredded at the edges.

With his gloved fist he scraped the sticky nuggets from his clothing. His pistol kept its roaring destruction. But relentlessly the creatures surged over the charred bodies of those slain in the blasts. Defying death, the wave pressed closer, ready to engulf the captain.

His flesh began to feel stinging burns as his clothing slowly dissolved. Olney screamed. He had faced death a thousand times, but nothing of such terror had he met. The end could not be far distant.

EVEN AS OLNEY saw death at his side, he became aware of a retreat of the enemy. The wall of wave creatures was dissolving before his eyes. He felt the surging pressure lift and he saw the globules flow away. The sting of the acid left his skin. Suddenly Olney was alone, the ocean of the wave creatures washed back toward the place where it had first been seen.

Captain Olney stood weakly alone resting against the sides of *The Smokepot*. Ashes of flame pistoled organisms lay at his feet.

Overhead flashed the lightning of an approached thundershower.

Olney heard a cry as the airlock door swung open. Plenck, Rigby and others ran to the captain's side.

"We saw the battle. Lord, captain, what a fight!" Rigby muttered, as he helped the captain through the airlocks.

Turner, looking sane and sheepish, stood inside the ship.

"That retreat, sir," began Plenck. "Turner turned the trick!"

"What?"

"While the rest of us stood at portholes watching you fight the Starnuts, he went through your belongings, found the key to the place you hid his rainmaker and started it working," went on the scientist. "What an invention he has, sir!"

"It seemed to clear my mind a little, too, captain. I think I've been a bit mad. But, sir, I'm glad you're safe."

"Thanks, Turner. All hands to their posts!"

The craft shook as the rocket motors gathered speed. There was a gentle lurch at the takeoff. Then the craft soared above the accursed planet. Olney touched the steering controls. She answered perfectly. The ship was homeward bound.

Plenck entered the control cabin.

"Remember the day we first experimented with the wave creatures, 'captain?'" asked the scientist.

Olney nodded. He recalled, plainly.

"I discovered then that there was some electrical element in the life processes of these creatures. That is not unusual. All life has electrical energy. Life depends on it.

"I did not realize then that these acid creatures relied on electrical energy for life, because there is no sun and therefore no radiant energy. They absorb electricity from the ground currents and magnetic forces of the planet. But Turner's rain machine caused a thunderstorm. The forces upon which these Starnuts depended were thrown off balance by a thunderstorm. The creatures retreated to shelter to avoid what might be compared with a sunstroke on Earth."

The captain listened to the explanation. Then he rang for Turner. The relief pilot appeared in the control room and saluted.

"Do you feel all right, Turner?" asked Olney.

The relief pilot's face blossomed into a grin. "Yes, sir. Now that we're headed for home, I think I've lost my space madness."

"Then, by Jupiter, go crazy again!" roared Olney. "You're a darned site more valuable mad!"

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The LAST WAR

By R. R. BOTHAM

IT was a calm, still night. A light snow, barely covering the ground in spots, glittered in the full moon's rays.

The Earth, however, had lost much of her beauty. Nations of the world were at war. Entire races had been wiped out, mountains had been leveled with powerful weapons. Artificial earthquakes had shaken down cities and sank lowlands into the sea.

Even vegetation had been destroyed by powerful gases, corrosive chemicals and artificially introduced parasites. Plague, horror, cruel death had trampled civilization. Man lived only to kill.

Rai Ymra, one of the survivors of the North American Federation forces, and Tula, one of the thousands of young, medically trained women who had joined the nation's defenses, stood alone in their "spark coil", as the small electrified fortress was called in army slang. The two were survivors of fifty who had been stationed in the fortress.

The place had been thought perfect protection against electrical thunderbolts, chemicals, gas, earthquake and disease. It was amply protected for primitive bombardment with high explosive bombs. The fifty soldiers and scientists who remained of the millions in North America had felt reasonably safe. They had not known of the approaching disaster, nor who the enemy might be.

There was only one attacker—they were sure of that. Each nation had been warring on all other nations. It was a war to extinction. Opponents had diminished until only one remained.

Warning of the attack each knew would be

the last came with the appearance of a robot plane on the horizon. It was nothing unusual. It was easily brought down by automatic finders and firers. A recording device at Ymra's headquarters announced the destruction with a series of clicks. Robot planes were brought down regularly in this war. In fact, planes were so easily destroyed that the possibility of being spotted by one was the least of the worries of those in the fortress. There were other more dangerous devices used by the enemy which were more dangerous: such as utilizing the absorption components of certain types of light in the atmosphere as reflected above the fortress.

The robot plane which appeared late in the afternoon, created no surprise. How were those in the fortress to know that a radio beam had utilized the fraction of a second between the finding of the plane and its destruction to register the angle of the shot from the fortress. The destruction of the plane betrayed the fortress.

Soon after the plane melted and tumbled to earth, the horizon was lighted by two long blades of light which converged and crept slowly along the ground toward the place where the survivors of Ymra's band were making their last stand. The very soil was melted into bubbling lava by the ray.

Rai Ymra ordered his men to seek cover in heat resisting turrets as the rays began to eat into the protecting shield of the fortress. But even the turrets melted like candles beneath a flame. The resources of the spark coil were useless. Even powerful magnetic forces were incapable of bending those rays from their

path into the heart of the outpost.

Iron and steel melted and boiled in the tremendous heat. Men suffocated long before their bodies were turned to steam in the heat.

The billion dollar fortress, equipped with every possible means of destruction and defense, crumbled. Tula and Ymra, standing at their posts, saw the floors melt at their feet. Suddenly the hissing stopped. The flame disappeared. Silence came.

For minutes they stood, waiting for the destruction to be resumed. The moon climbed higher into the sky. The white patches of snow, far enough away to have survived the terrific heat of the melting ray, glistened in the light.

"We're alone!" whispered Tula softly.

Ymra jumped across a red hot puddle of melted metal, into the open. His feet walked on Earth. For the first time in months there had been no metal floors beneath them.

Behind him ran Tula. They walked to the East, toward the source of that ray. What did it matter if they met the enemy now?—they were only two of them. Two left of the millions who once lived in North America! The entire population had been wiped out. The same things had happened in other parts of the world, possibly were happening at that instant.

For hours they walked, pausing only to eat concentrated food and thirst quenching snow, then on a hilltop a metal framework loomed.

They drew closer. The place appeared deserted. The moon, now low in the west, reflected its light from a huge searchlight—the ray machine.

Tula caught the sleeve of Ymra's coat and held him back. Otherwise he would have plunged into a deep pit at the foot of the hill. Carefully he threaded his way around the pit. The soil became warm. It began to burn through the lead soles of his boots. Another mile and they could go no further.

"No one could live near the machine because of the heat," he said. "It was robot operated and the machine's own heat melted its operating mechanism."

Slowly they circled the hill and went on

eastward. Still there was no sign of the enemy.

A robot plane circled overhead. Ymra and Tula ducked down into a shell pit, waiting for a finder and firer to pick off the craft. Still the robot soared. The explosion did not come.

The plane spluttered, wobbled in the air, and then tumbled earthward. It fell not four hundred yards from where they stood.

Ymra ran to the spot, with Tula at his heels. There would be devices in the plane that would tell him the location of those who sent the ship aloft. With them he hoped to find an enemy to throw himself against—the last of the North American Federation would die on his feet, fighting to his dying breath.

The plane was only slightly damaged. Ymra picked up the radiophone receivers. He listened intently.

"The control station is dead—probably wiped out after the plane went aloft," he decided.

Tula said nothing. She was busy rummaging in the cockpit.

Ymra inspected the damage. "If we had fuel we could operate the plane," he announced. "It ran out of fuel. That's why it crashed. Imagine, a robot plane sailing so long that it ran out of fuel. Lord! There must be only a handful of people left on Earth!"

"If any!" said Tula. "Look, Ymra, at the second tape. This plane has been flying five days! It has circled over four continents and it has not spotted a living thing, until it reached here! It means—"

Tula looked oddly at Ymra.

The army man's hardened face slowly began to relax. The mask of hatred and cruelty seemed to fall away as an avalanche crumbles from the side of a mountain. His mouth dropped open.

"It means we—think of it, Tula! War is over! Mankind is dead!"

Tula bowed her head. "All but us."

In the East the red of dawn began to climb in the sky. The sun rose to look down on a desolate world, lifeless, save for two human beings and widely scattered patches of vegetation. But the Earth was at peace.

The Man WITHOUT A BRAIN

By R. C. Vance and F. K. Young

"BAH! You general practitioners!" Our host paused and spat contemptuously into the blaze on the hearth. His narrow head, white with baldness, shook from side to side, causing his rodent-like features to be alternately black with shadow and red with the reflected flames. I shivered, and cast a sly glance at my companion, who nodded in silent agreement.

"You would venture theories to a scientist!" continued our host, still scoffing. "Because you find me in this isolated cabin in the mountains, you believe me to be a demented hermit? Perhaps you even believe me to be a madman!"

"Nothing of the kind, Dr. Nesbit," I assured him, regretting my unwitting rudeness. "Doctor Lampert and I are simple men of medicine and our opinions are of little consequence to a man who has specialized in psychiatry for over twenty years. We would appreciate hearing something of your theories."

My apology evidently appeased him. He shrugged his shoulders and lapsed back into his former cordiality.

"You will forgive me, Doctor Shagruel," he grunted. "My nerves are far from what they should be, even now, after months of this enforced isolation. Of late, my labors have claimed the greater part of my time, and I am again on the verge of a collapse." He held out his hands suggestively. "But what of it? I have accomplished the impossible! If I die now, it will not matter; my name will be honored by posterity!"

I leaned back in my chair. The name of Everett Nesbit was unfamiliar to me as a leader in the field of psychiatry. I realized, then, that he had misrepresented himself when he had boasted of his eminence.

I felt relieved, too, that neither Lampert nor myself had betrayed our reasons for wandering about the hills all day before seeking shelter at his cabin. I felt, of course, that it was ridiculous to connect Dr. Nesbit in any manner with Morris Allen, but his peculiar mental condition was beginning to make me feel uneasy.

Morris Allen had escaped from the Con-saugaville Hospital for the criminally insane three weeks before. And despite the relentless search of Dr. Lampert and myself, we had not been able to find a single clue to his hide-out. Of course, it was possible that the sinister Doctor Nesbit might have sheltered him, but I could not reconcile myself to such a condition. Nesbit was not the type of man to whom a criminal like Morris Allen would have appealed for assistance.

But our host was speaking again, and I could not form a definite opinion.

"The human mind," he said, with a rasping leisureliness, "is not in any sense the weird apparatus your great psychiatrists would have you believe. As an expert, I would question your own impression of the brain: Do you believe that the absence of a brain would completely destroy the entire structure that housed it?"

Doctor Lampert looked at him with furrowed brows.

"I do," he admitted. "Furthermore, I place no credence in the theory that the mind of man can exist independently of its physical shell. Until I get indisputable evidence to the contrary, I shall remain skeptical."

Nesbitt chuckled, as if vastly amused, then flung himself into the chair across from us.

"You'd probably be interested in a little experiment of mine," he said, quietly. "Would you care to hear of a man who lives an almost normal life . . . *without a brain?*"

The question startled me. That Doctor Nesbit was a maniac could no longer be doubted. But whether he might at any moment develop homicidal tendencies, I could not tell. I slid my hand in my pocket and caressed the butt of my revolver.

"Let's hear the story, Doctor," I said, calm again. "Despite Doctor Lampert's incredulity, he is bound to be interested professionally."

"Of course," Lampert agreed, promptly. "Out with it."

Doctor Nesbit rubbed his hands together with satisfaction.

"We will see," he promised. "My story begins on September fourth, Nineteen-Thirty-Five, because it was on that date that James Montgomery, my personal secretary, brutally decapitated his sweetheart with an axe during a fit of insane jealousy. Do you recollect the case?"

"No!"

I lied quickly, although I remembered only too well the events following the crime of passion, which had taken place within ten miles of our institution. James Montgomery, like Morris Allen, should have been in one of our padded cells!

"Nor I," Lampert denied, blindly following the precedent I had established.

"Then I shall explain," went on Doctor Nesbit. "Fearing mob violence, the authorities rushed Montgomery's trial, and within three weeks of the murder, he was convicted and sentenced to death in the lethal chamber."

"At that time, I was engaged in an extensive study of the nerve centers, and desiring to further my knowledge by actual experimentation, I made a most unusual application to the governor: I requested that the prisoner be turned over to me as a subject for my researches."

"Impossible! Lampert objected. He would

have protested further, but a quick motion of my hand silenced him.

"The governor yielded to my request," Doctor Nesbit continued, ignoring Lampert's outburst. "Undoubtedly, my great prestige in the fields of psychiatry and neurology had influenced him to surrender Montgomery to me. He knew that my experiments would prove fatal to the condemned man, but they would prove valuable to medical science. Governor Rankin was a wise and just man. Montgomery was delivered at me at midnight, two days before his scheduled execution, and a report was given out that he had been privately put to death on the ninth of January, Nineteen-Thirty-Six."

He hesitated for a moment to apply a fresh light to his pipe, and I utilized the pause to seek the eyes of my companion. Steven Lampert was as fully aware of the fact as I that the murderer, James Montgomery, had never been surrendered into the custody of Doctor Nesbit, nor indeed had he met death in the lethal chamber! I wondered if Lampert would ascribe the meanderings of our garrulous host to a diseased mind, or to some sinister motive as yet unrevealed. There was nothing on earth I so much desired as five minute's private consultation with my friend.

As Nesbit seemed inclined to remain silent, I prodded him along.

"And what of your experiments with the condemned man?" I asked. "I cannot understand how James Montgomery would remain submissive, knowing that he would meet a far less mericiful fate than that allotted to him by justice?"

Doctor Nesbit laughed outright.

"You forget that I am, primarily, a psychiatrist," he reminded. "Circumstances had provided me with an ideal subject; nature, with a magnificent intelligence. I stood now on the threshold of *New Knowledge!* . . . Through the medium of James Montgomery, I would determine once and for all whether a man could exist without a brain. Furthermore, I would learn whether or not it would be possible for a skilled surgeon to remove a human brain by degrees . . . *over a period of time!*"

I felt my scalp prickle and crawl, and experienced some difficulty in maintaining an impassive countenance. I had diagnosed the case of Everett Nesbit correctly; he was a dangerous, homicidal maniac, in thought, if not in actual commission!

Doctor Nesbit laid aside his pipe.

"I presume you have realized that my experiments would legitimately test the often-mocked science of phrenology?" he asked. "That alone would be a great achievement!"

"An invaluable addition to medical knowledge," I granted. "New fields would be thrown open, and theories would crash against a wall of fact."

"At least, you understand," grunted Doctor Nesbit. "I had previously experimented on the lower animals in that respect. But even the removal of the cerebral hemispheres of a dog did not satisfy me. I discovered, in certain instances, that the animal operated upon—mutilated, if you will—retained general sensibility and the power of voluntary movement, but that it was no longer able to enjoy the advantages of the senses of sight, hearing, taste, and smell. To further complicate matters, operations on other animals, involving the removal of one or part of both hemispheres, were followed by no marked effect, insofar as the intelligence of the animals was concerned, but by an incapacity of spontaneous, voluntary movement."

"The human brain was to me still an unexplored vista. Heretofore, all my experiments had been made post-mortem, and had resulted only in showing the possible cause of an effect previously visible. Now, after years of labor and patience, I stood on the verge of gratification! Soon, I would test the accepted theory that certain parts of the brain, bound together as they are by fibers of association, have in reality separate and peculiar properties or functions! Soon, I would discover the result of the extirpation of one or more of the brain's convolutions, leaving the others intact as far as possible!"

"I determined to carry this remarkable work to an extent that no other scientist had ever considered. In other words, I would continue until I had proved by actual results whether the pulpy mass we call the brain was really the sound-strings that set the world to vibrating, or only an admirably constructed, and purely mechanical, system of leverage!"

He stopped and stared at Dr. Lampert triumphantly. His abnormally pale cheeks were suffused with color. His eyes glowed feverishly, as if his mental excitement and animation were growing with the expounding of his favorite theories.

"To return to my story," he resumed;

"James Montgomery was brought to me in a drugged state. As soon as I had him on my dissecting table, I began to study his head under the merciless light of my brilliant arc."

"He was a large, powerful man, of about forty, with a countenance essentially brutal, and I trembled when I thought of what he might do, should he regain consciousness during one of my experiments and try to free himself by adding a second victim to his score. Clearly, I would be obliged to keep him continually under an opiate, or operate at once. I chose the latter course; it was the more logical one, especially in view of his physical and nervous condition."

"His hair was close cropped, and a few strokes of a razor served to clear the blue-black space behind the left ear, at the base of the occiput. I would make my first vital move by destroying, according to the science of phrenology, his bump of combativeness. The majority of surgeons would have immediately annihilated the cerebellum, destroying at one stroke the seat of voluntary movement; but, as you shall see, I preferred to work by careful degrees."

"Close at hand on the operating table were my silver plates and a specially constructed trepan of large size. I administered an anæsthetic, then made a cross incision in the scalp overlaying the protuberance that is the best evidence of phrenology's correctness."

"Laying back the skin, I set my crown-saw to work. The skull was of unusual thickness, but I worked vigorously, and the round piece of bone was soon lifted from its position. Very carefully, I severed the tough, pearly-white durameter, removed the weblike arachnoid, and then hesitated, as the soft pia-mater allowed me to see the brain underneath."

"I soon determined the particular convolution of which I was in search, and keeping my knife from the larger blood vessels, I deprived James Montgomery of the first portion of his brain."

"I applied a styptic, set in the silver plate, and bandaged his head, then awaited the return of my subject to consciousness."

"Nine hours later, he stirred gently. His eyes opened, and his hand moved slowly to his head. I came over to the bedside and motioned him to be quiet, explaining that his condition was grave, and that the success of my operation depended upon his ability to obey my orders. I was also prepared for his hav-

ing emerged from the ether possessed of the faculty of comprehension. I told him that his release had been attempted by friends on the preceding night, and that, in the ensuing struggle, he had received a severe blow on the head. The prison doctors had pronounced him dead, and he had been taken to me as a cadaver, in accordance with an arrangement I had with the prison officials.

"There was a dog-like appeal in his eyes, so I assured him that I would not send him back to prison and the lethal chamber. I insisted, however, that he remain with me until I considered it safe for him to leave. He agreed, and from the day I allowed him to leave the bed, he became the most docile of servitors.

"But subservient as he had become, he displayed an almost infantile irritation toward inanimate objects. Time and again, he would break, rend, or completely destroy, any object within reach of his hands. When I reasoned with him, he would express both sorrow and surprise, and swear to me that he had never been so clumsy before. Only once did he come close to understanding his condition; he destroyed one of my most valuable instruments, and told me that his action had followed an unaccountable, ungovernable impulse to do so. He seemed puzzled, and I knew then that the removal of the convolution of combativeness had resulted in an irritation, or inflammation, of its neighbor, the convolution of destructiveness.

"But as suddenly as this condition had developed, it disappeared, and in its stead emerged a new freak complication. Montgomery became a veritable magpie; whereas he had previously broken things, now he concealed them!

"This sudden evolution assured me that I had been correct in my surmise, and I reasoned that the irritation had spread to his organ of secretiveness. I felt especially sure of this when I noticed Montgomery's efforts to conceal his intentions from my knowledge, and I grew fearful of what might happen should such a novel trait be allowed to develop unrestrained. That ended the first cycle of my experiment; the second had to be commenced without further delay!"

Doctor Nesbit leaned forward and heaped a few pine knots on the flames. The lamp had not been lit, and the flickering glare cast by the fire played over his features, making them more odious and repulsive than ever. Al-

though chafing with impatience, we waited silently for him to continue,

"It was not a difficult matter to deceive Montgomery into permitting me to operate again," he said, when the condition of the blaze satisfied him. "Again I administered the ether, and for the second time, exposed the interior of his skull. This time, to insure success, I trepanned both sides, and removed from the right and left the brain convolutions of destructiveness and secretiveness.

"Montgomery's recovery was astonishingly rapid. The fever abated in forty-eight hours, and in another week, he was able to get about, as hale and hearty as ever. I explained to him that the new smarting places on his head were due to a necessary treatment of the old wound, which had become slightly infected. But my explanation failed to satisfy him. Often, I surprised him in the act of staring at me furtively, and a perpetual scowl clouded his features. It was evident that his suspicions had been aroused.

"He would not allow me to replace the bandages on his head, and, consequently, I was obliged to drug his coffee.

"Removing the last silver plate I had fastened into position, I inspected the lessened brain, and discovered, just as I had surmised, that the convolution of cautiousness, which lies directly above that of secretiveness, was in a highly inflamed state. I would have remedied the matter at once, but I feared the consequences of further vivisection, for Montgomery had suddenly grown weak on the table before me.

"Several weeks elapsed before I dared to continue my experiments. Montgomery continued to weaken slowly, and for a while, he hovered on the brink of dissolution. But he finally rallied, and when he became convalescent, I decided to stake everything on a single turn of the wheel.

"Continual trepanning was too confining in its results; it did not allow me sufficient liberty of action. I needed complete access to the very seat of my researches! I knew, too, that the settling of the brain to fill up the vacancies caused by partial removal would impede me from proceeding further on a phrenological basis.

"With the expenditure of much effort, I fashioned an ivory dome to replace the crown of Montgomery's skull. Reducing him again to insensibility, I plied my instruments to such good advantage that, in less than an hour, the

entire upper part of the parietal bones was removed, leaving an oval space of about four by six inches. The portion of the brain that remained seemed to be surprisingly active and healthy; so, one by one, I removed those convolutions that I believed controlled self-esteem, cautiousness, and firmness.

"I shall not weary you by relating in detail the events that attended the succession of experiments. Let it suffice that, through means of the ivory dome, I was able to gain entrance to Montgomery's skull whenever I wished. As the weeks slipped by, I removed organ after organ of mentality, until now, my subject has disintegrated into a being who knows neither love nor hate, hope nor despair, veneration nor irreverence. He has no imagination and is incapable of conceiving an idea. In other words, I have reduced him to a brainless creature, an animal lacking animal tastes, a man without a thought, a living horror without a single sense . . . *a heap of pulp without a soul!*"

Lampert's jaw hardened, and I could see tiny beads of perspiration dotting his forehead as he leaned forward in his chair.

"You speak of the existence of your subject in the present tense, Doctor!" he gasped, with indignation and fear.

"And why shouldn't I?" demanded Nesbit. "Would you care to see . . . *the finished product?*"

He arose to his feet and applied a match to the lamp on the table. The tiny flame circled the wick, illuminating a part of the room and throwing our distorted shadows on the wall with a weird effect.

"Come," he invited, opening a door that led into another room. "You will wonder how I succeeded in getting my creature here from the city, but that does not matter. He is here; that is enough."

He moved across the room to a makeshift bunk piled high with blankets. Still smiling, he drew aside several of the heavy coverlets and lowered the lamp.

"Allow me, gentlemen," he announced, triumphantly. "My masterpiece!"

I stared down at the heap on the bed. A gasp of astonishment welled to my lips, but I stifled it quickly. Regardless of my sentiments, I felt that I must conceal them from Nesbit.

But a vast sense of pity almost overpowered me. The unfortunate victim had been handsome once; even his closed eyes, and drawn,

waxen features, were still pleasant to look upon. It hurt to remember the last words of the fanatical doctor: *a heap of pulp without a soul!*

"He is asleep, but there is no perceptible motion of his breast," Lampert spoke his thoughts aloud.

"He is not asleep," corrected Nesbit. "This is his normal condition." Reaching forward, he drew back the blankets that covered the lower part of the young man's body, disclosing well-fleshed limbs. "Although he is now an inanimate hulk, it is gratifying to know that he is not a skeleton!"

He pulled the covers back into position. The body did not stir, not did the features alter one whit in their awful vacuity.

Doctor Nesbit returned his attention to us.

"You have witnessed the evidence of the consummation of a surgical miracle!" he exulted. "The impossible has been accomplished! Soon, very soon, I shall emerge from this seclusion and take my place at the head of the profession!" He paused, perhaps conscious that his boasting was not making the proper impression. "Any questions, gentlemen?"

"A few," I said, fixing my eyes on him. "Do you know if your subject is able to hear our voices?"

He considered a moment before he replied.

"I am not positive," he said finally. "Nor can I say, with any degree of certainty, that he possesses any sensibility at all. My encroachments on his personality—on his very soul, if you prefer the expression—have gone so far that, not only are the paths of association wiped out, but even the centers of ideas."

"I supply him with nourishment by injecting extracts hypodermically; but other than the fact that life is thereby sustained, I might just as well feed him with spirits of ammonia! . . . I shout in his ear, or discharge a revolver close to it, but he does not seem to be conscious of the sound, for he makes no motion. Yet, he may hear, and still be unable to reconcile cause and effect. The question of the relation between sense and sensibility remains unsolved."

"Why the covering?" I asked.

"I have found it practical to keep him covered with a number of blankets, as a thermometer applied to his body registers a temperature of only fifty degrees. The blankets,

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Man Without a Brain

(Continued from page 83)

however, raise that temperature to sixty-five degrees. Whether the additional heat is beneficial, I cannot say; but I prefer it so.

"At times, to experiment, I place *eau de cologne* under one of his nostrils and *asa-fetida* under the other; neither affects him to any extent. I lift him to his feet; he stands stiffly erect for a brief instant, then falls backward or forward. I have made him into a *Supreme Nothingness!*"

"Good God!" I murmured, softly.

The horror of Nesbit's mad achievements had impressed me deeply, and I had served for years on the staff of a hospital for the criminally insane! And Dr. Lampert seemed to be likewise affected; his usually ruddy face was wan.

"The skull, now," Nesbit went on, in low, caressing tones. "Your attention, please."

He snatched off the velvet cap from the head of his creature, revealing a glistening ivory cover in oval form, which fitted into the top of the skull. Lifting it out, he laid it aside. Then, with the aid of a small pair of forceps, he took from the interior of the skull a quantity of sterile cotton, which, he explained, he employed to keep out the cold. That operation concluded, he invited our inspection.

I stared into the yawning cavity. The skull was empty!

"Need I say more!" Nesbit's whisper was as sharp as a blow. "By means of my surgical genius, I have been able to scoop out a man's brains as a monkey might scoop out a cocoanut! What was once the seat of good or bad fancies, faculties, aspirations and passions, is now only an empty sphere! I have lined the bottom with a silver plate to protect the Medulla Oblongata, but with this sole exception, the skull of James Montgomery is very much like the scooped-out cocoanut to which I compared it!"

His utter callousness congealed my blood. Not only had I witnessed a surgical miracle, but I had seen evidence of scientific fanaticism raised to the highest degree!

Lampert had apparently vanquished the wave of horror that had also gripped him, for he began to speak in a conventional tone.

"I feel," he said, with remarkable clarity, "that your man without a brain is as great

a mystery as he was with a brain."

Doctor Nesbit pursed his lips.

"I agree with you," he said. "I have learned much, but there is so much more that I might have learned." He turned and faced Lampert squarely. "If I were granted another opportunity, I would reverse the order in which the convolutions were removed. I wonder," he paused again, as if an inspiration had exploded in his mind, "I wonder if one of you gentlemen would volunteer to make the supreme sacrifice for the benefit of mankind? Could anything be more heroic, or more noble?"

Lampert's lips quivered, and his hands doubled into fists. The doctor's invitation had stricken him temporarily dumb.

Nesbit noticed his agitation, and hastened to apologize.

"A thousand pardons, my friend!" he smiled, showing all his white teeth. "I had no intention of startling you; I merely meant to offer what I considered a fair suggestion to one interested in the future of medical history—of phrenology, too, eh?"

"I'd make a poor subject," Lampert said. "Even a live practitioner is a little better than a dead martyr."

"Dead." Nesbit did not seem to like the sound of the word. "Dead. Sensible and insensible. . . . Dead! . . ."

"Is there any difference between the condition of your brainless man and one who is really dead?" Lampert asked. "He lives . . . but he does not live."

Nesbit nodded gravely.

"That is a thought that torments me," he confessed. "I do not understand the ever-deepening mystery of the condition of James Montgomery. Despite my encroachments on the very brain itself, there should be some remaining relation between sense and sensibility. Without it, the man might as well be dead!"

I cleared my throat of a sudden obstruction.

"Doctor," I asked quietly, "has it never occurred to you that your subject might be dead?"

"Impossible!" he snorted in disgust. "Would I not have discovered the total absence of life? Have I not examined him scrupulously each time I administered a hypodermic . . . ?"

"I am sorry, but you are mistaken," I insisted. "If you will make a thorough exam-

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(Continued from page 85)

ination at this moment, you will discover that life in that body is now extinct." I turned to Lampert: "What is your opinion?" I asked.

"The same as it was when I first examined him," said Lampert. "In my opinion, this man has been dead at least two weeks."

Doctor Nesbit strove to remain calm, but a snarl sounded low in his throat.

"You are very poor medical men," he accused, in a harsh voice. "Or you are spies and liars. . . . I feared that others might seek me out and attempt to belittle my discovery. But I will publicly denounce you when I return to civilization! . . . Frauds! Liars! . . ."

I shrugged my shoulders.

"I have given you my own disinterested opinion. . . ." I began.

He cut me short.

"Then you are a fool!" he almost shouted. "My man without a brain is alive! He lives, and will continue to live! What if he remains motionless, speechless, and cold? That is his natural condition; a mystery even I have not as yet been able to solve!" His face suddenly flushed red. "Why, if your allegations were true, it would mean that I have been guilty of premeditated murder!"

His narrowed eyes and flushed cheeks warned me of an impending crisis. My fingers closed about the butt of the revolver in my pocket.

"Calm yourself, Doctor," I said, as authoritatively as I could. "The death of a patient does not indict a medical man for murder. I feel very strongly that the man succumbed to natural causes, and I would willingly sign a certificate to that effect."

Dr. Nesbit had passed the stage where reasoning might have exerted itself. He stretched out his hands and grasped the shoulders of his experiment.

"You must exhibit some signs of life!" he screamed. "Prove to them that you are not dead! . . . Open your lips and tell them! . . . Tell them, James Montgomery . . . tell them how you cheated the lethal chamber; tell them how you were adjudged insane by clever alienists whom you found remarkably easy to deceive; tell them how you were committed to a hospital for the criminally insane; how you later managed to escape; how you successfully buried your identity in the character of . . ."

"Of Doctor Nesbit!" Lampert accused, his

(Continued on page 90)

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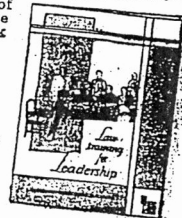
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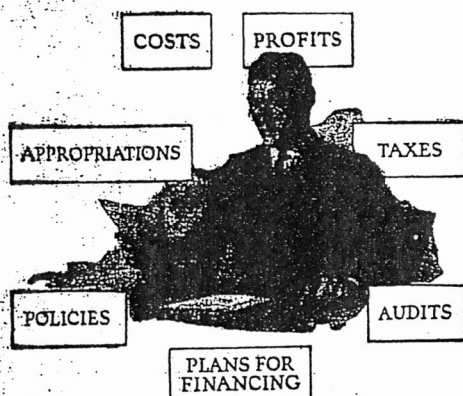
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Name

Present Position

Address

(Continued from page 87)

voice crackling like a whip. "James Montgomery, you're coming back . . . coming back with us!"

Doctor Nesbit flinched, as though Lampert had struck at him. His eyes blazed, and his mouth twitched spasmodically.

"My mind is clearer now," he said, looking oddly at us. "I am James Montgomery. But who . . ." he paused and pointed to the body on the bed, "who is this man?"

"An escaped maniac by the name of Morris Allen," I enlightened him; "the man for whom Dr. Lampert and I have been searching."

"I understand," he said, like a child reciting a lesson. "I am James Montgomery, and not Dr. Nesbit. And that corpse there, whom I have been calling James Montgomery, is Morris Allen, an escaped lunatic." His hands went up to his head, and he pressed against his temples with a savagery that seemed to reflect the curse which had overtaken him. "I have heard alienists say . . . say that a moment of sanity returned . . . returned with death . . ." He gasped, and tottered forward. "So this must be . . . death . . ."

I caught him as he fell and lowered him to the floor, where he remained in a strangely contorted position. It was very quiet now in the cabin.

"Cerebral hemorrhage; most common in such cases," I pronounced, after a lapse of a full minute, during which I could not bring myself to speak.

Lampert stroked his chin thoughtfully.

"Two cases closed with a single entry," he said.

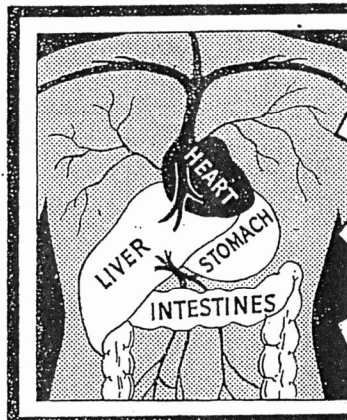
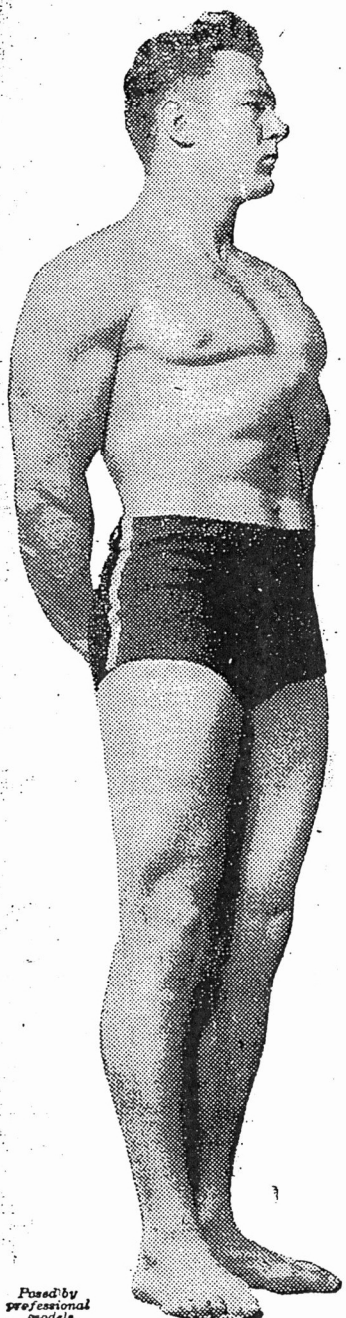
"And a single suspicious move on your part or mine might have resulted in the opening of two more," I reminded him. "It's strange that I did not recognize Montgomery in the very beginning; the man was a master of disguise. . . . Even when I detected his lie concerning the application to the governor, I failed to gain an inkling of the real truth."

"Nor I," Lampert admitted. "But I did recognize Allen the minute we entered the room. It is odd that some quirk of Montgomery's erratic mentality should have caused him to see in Allen a likeness to himself!"

"Dementia is a horror that will never be thoroughly understood," I managed to say. "I wish that Montgomery might have lived long enough to enlighten us as to the mystery

(Continued on page 92)

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(Continued from page 90)

of Allen's presence, and the methods which he employed to gain his confidence."

"I think I can reason that part out," Lampert said. "In his efforts to elude pursuit, Allen stumbled on this cabin, where James Montgomery had already established himself as the pseudo Doctor Nesbit. It is even possible that Allen collapsed in the near vicinity. At any rate, Montgomery overpowered him and his fiendish experiments began shortly afterward."

"That is a logical explanation," I agreed. "But Allen has been at large only twenty-two days. Could Montgomery have performed all those operations within that length of time?"

"I doubt it," said Lampert with finality. "In his demented condition, he lived weeks, maybe months, in a few hours! He still believed his subject alive. But Allen probably succumbed at the first slash of the scalpel, and Montgomery never knew the difference!"

"Again," I pointed out, "Allen might have lived a long time. Who knows at what stage the experiment actually succeeded? He might, if only for a few hours, have been a brainless man! . . ."

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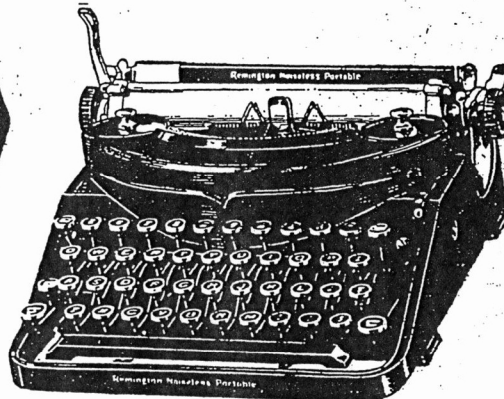
New planets, comets, and space bodies are being discovered yearly. Only a short while back as time goes, a comet was discovered by a Japanese amateur astronomer Sigura Kaho—a northwestern sky tiny point visible for a short time after sundown. Only a few months ago, another amateur astronomer by name of Leslie C. Peltier found a comet, which was named after him, the Peltier comet.

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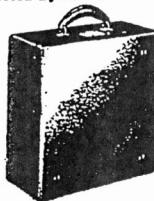
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The Editorial Mail Bag

DEAR EDITOR:

Congratulations. I've just been told by a friend that you are soon to publish a Flash Gordon magazine. It is high time. Have you any conception, I wonder, of the thousands and thousands of people who enjoy "fantastic" stories of adventure on other worlds than ours? And we don't think it is at all impossible that within a century or so it will be just as commonplace to take a rocket train to Mars as it is to hop an airplane in New York bound for San Francisco nowadays. A rocket ship capable of reaching the moon, for instance, is scientifically plausible. It would be geared to travel at thirty thousand miles per hour, and it would take approximately eight or nine days to make the trip. I've heard tell of an engine being seriously discussed by those who know, that can kick itself along through space. If this ever comes about, what is to prevent us from junketing here and there through the ether? I grant that all this is far off; so was the electric light a hundred years ago; the automobile and the radio. I, for one, am not inclined to shut my eyes or close my ears to any mechanical possibility now or in the future.

Flash Gordon is the type of individual who is making us all infinity conscious. He broadens our visions and lifts us out of ourselves.

Did you know that The American Rocket Society has already made a rocket that reached a speed of seven hundred miles an hour? There was a time when the man who drove a car fifteen miles an hour was considered reckless—now we think nothing of racing down the road at sixty. It is entirely possible that, as rockets are experimented with more and more, their speed will be stepped up and their practicality so assured that some morning we will make the headline news in our papers that some intrepid pioneer has made the first journey to the moon.

Again, let me congratulate you on getting out a magazine about Flash Gordon. I'm a rooter for anything written that has to do with adventures on other worlds.

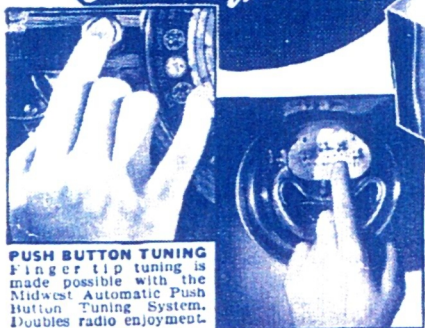
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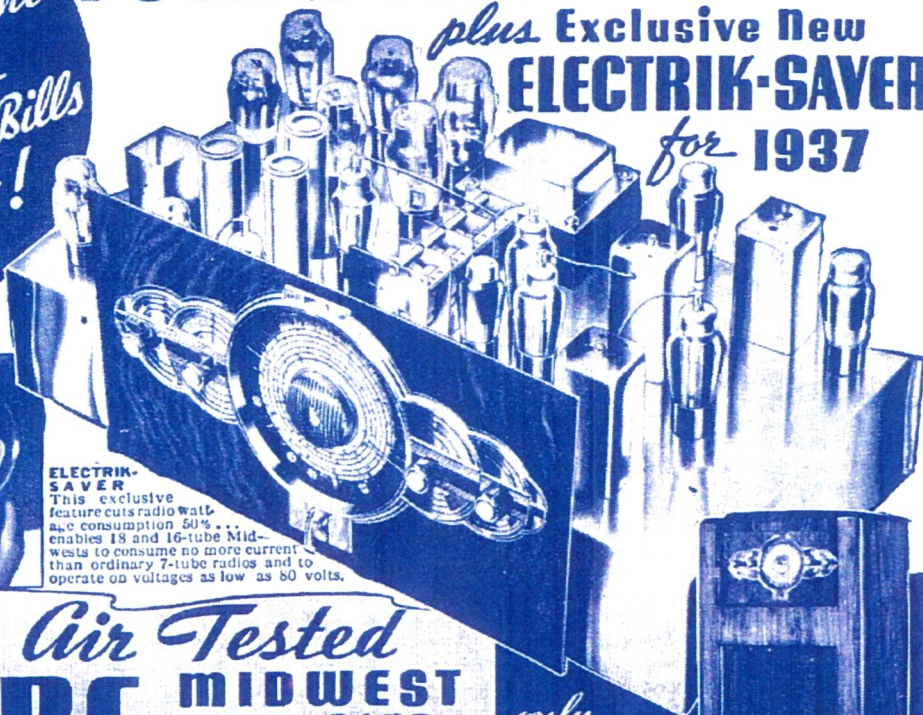
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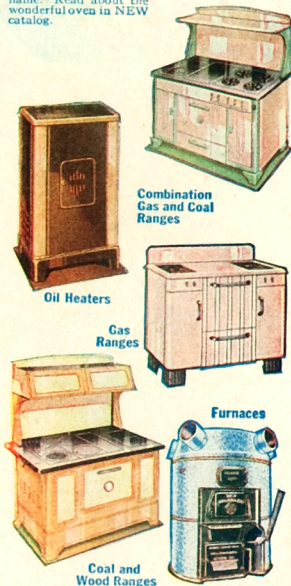
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