

STRANGE

ADVENTURES



H.W. PERL

QUEER-UNCANNY-SUPER NATURAL

1-

"Two weeks ago I bought a 'Joan the Wad' and to-day I have won £232 10s. Please send two more."

—B.C., Tredegar, S. Wales.

Extract From "Everybody's Fortune Book," 1931.



JOAN THE WAD

is the

LUCKY CORNISH PISKEY

who

SEES ALL, HEARS ALL, DOES ALL

JOAN THE WAD is Queen of the Lucky Cornish Piskeys. Thousands of persons all over the world claim that Joan the Wad has brought them Wonderful Luck in the way of Health, Wealth and Happiness.

HISTORY FREE FOR A STAMP

If you will send me your name and address and a 6d. stamp and a stamped addressed envelope for reply, I will send you a History of the Cornish Piskey Folk, and the marvellous miracles they accomplish. JOAN THE WAD is the Queen of the Lucky Cornish Piskeys, and with whom good luck and good health always attend.

AS HEALER

One lady writes: "My sister suffered very badly for years, but since I gave her a Joan the Wad to keep near her she is much easier. Do you think this is due to Joan or the Water from the Lucky well?"

AS LUCK BRINGER

Another writes: "Since the War my wife and I have been dogged by persistent ill-luck, and we seemed to be sinking lower and lower. One day someone sent us a Joan the Wad. We have never found out who it was, but, coincidence if you like, within a week I got a much better job and my wife had some money left her. Since then we have never looked back and, needless to say, swear by 'Queen Joan'."

AS MATCHMAKER

A young girl wrote and informed me that she had scores of boy friends, but it was not until she had visited Cornwall and taken Joan back with her that she met the boy of her dreams, and as they got better acquainted she discovered he also has "Joan the Wad."

AS PRIZEWINNER

A young man wrote us only last week: "For two years I entered competitions without luck, but since getting Joan the Wad I have frequently been successful, although I have not won a big prize, but I know that —, who won £2,000 in a competition, has one, because I gave it him. When he won his £2,000 he gave me £100 for myself, so you see I have cause to bless 'Queen Joan'."

AS SPECULATOR

A man writes: "I had some shares that for several years I couldn't give away. They were 1/- shares, and all of a sudden they went up in the market to 7/9. I happened to be staring at Joan the Wad. Pure imagination, you may say, but I thought I saw her wink approvingly. I sold out, reinvested the money at greater profit and have prospered ever since."

All you have to do is to send a 6d. stamp and a stamped addressed envelope for the history to:

102, JOAN'S COTTAGE, LANIVET, BODMIN

CONTENTS

FUGITIVE ON VENUS.—BY LESLIE HALWARD.

(Bourbon, a homicidal maniac, made a break from Grunton Pen., and in his madness he hurled himself through space to Venus, taking with him Professor Systrom's beautiful daughter, Lana . . .)

MARY HAD A LITTLE . . . ?—BY N. WESLEY FIRTH.

(A riotously funny story about the thing that followed Mary about, a thing from another dimension. A story with an unusual ending . . . by the author of "Lords of Zorm".)

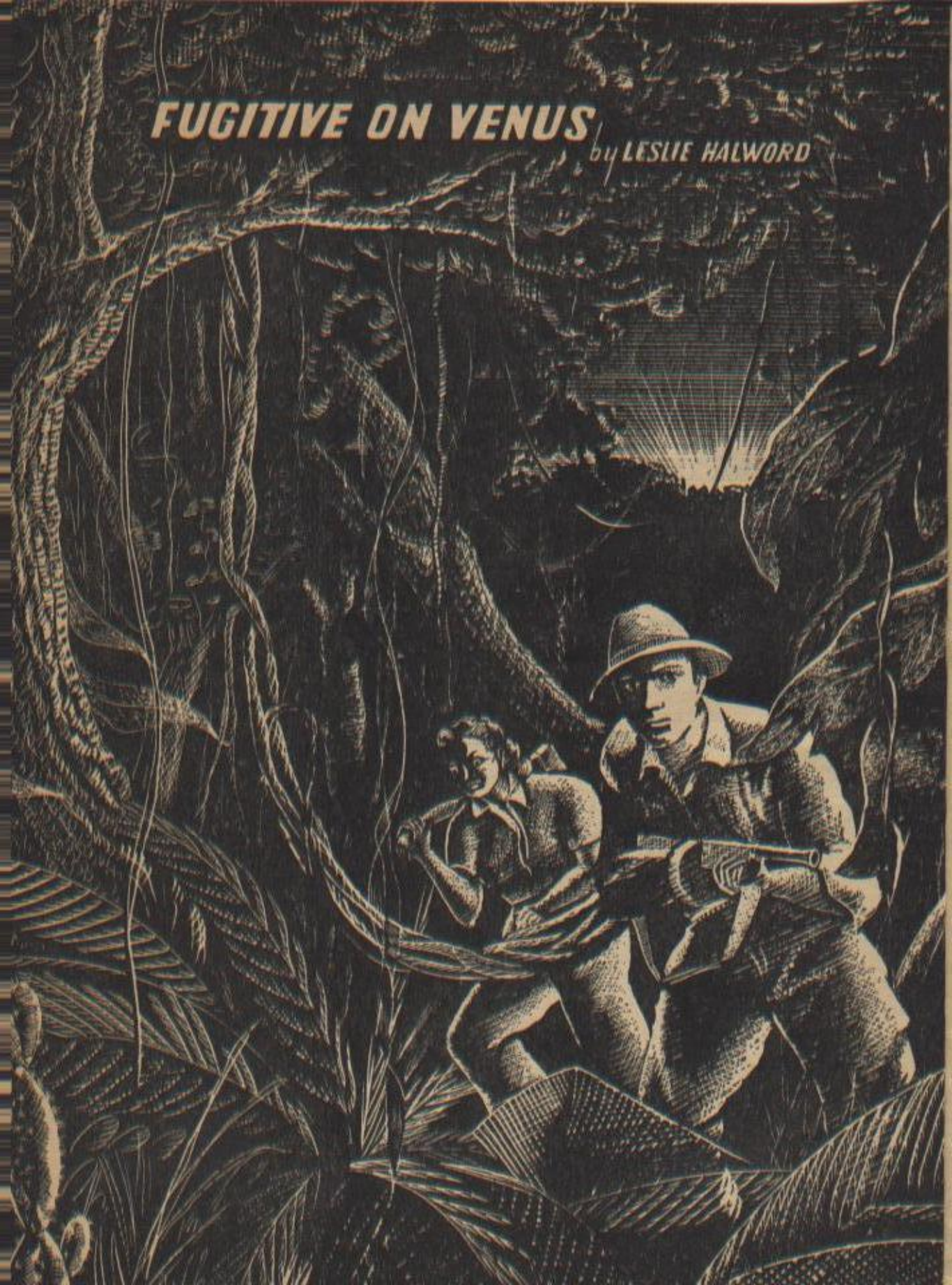
SPACE HOBO'S DIARY.—BY RICE ACKMAN.

(The space hobo had some strange stories to tell. And this is one of his strangest . . .)

If you have enjoyed reading "AMAZING ADVENTURES" you can obtain the companion magazine at most bookstalls. "FUTURISTIC STORIES" contains many gripping yarns from the pens of the above authors.

FUGITIVE ON VENUS

by **LESLIE HALWORD**



"FUGITIVE ON VENUS"

By Leslie Halward

The strident wailing siren over at Grunton Penitentiary sent a hideous prolonged signal into the foggy night. Armed guards manned the powerful searchlight mounted on the twenty foot wall, swivelled it expertly across the barren stretch of rocky ground leading to the hills. It revealed nothing—its brilliance was dimmed by the thickness of the fog before it.

The heavy iron gates clanged open and three pursuit cars loaded with guards roared out into the night. The siren continued to screech hideously, warning the solitary dwellers thereabouts that a dangerous man had escaped . . .

For Grunton Penitentiary contained only one kind of inmate—the homicidal maniac!

Bourbon's bid for freedom had been made with the reckless desperation and strength of the madman. He had feigned illness in his cell, and collapsed. He had been taken hastily to the room which served as hospital ward, and put to bed. Then, as the doctor had bent over him to administer a sedative, he had reached up and brutally strangled him.

The one guard at the door had been easy—he was dead now. From there it had been a simple matter to don his uniform, climb the steps to the observation tower on the wall, and knock the watcher there senseless. Armed with the man's gun he had risked the twenty foot leap—and had made it without injury.

At the prison they knew he must be still at hand. Hardly fifteen minutes had passed since he had been carried from his cell to the ward. So that his start could only have been a slight one.

Bourbon crouched by the foot of the thickly wooded hills, peering back and listening intently. Faintly muffled by the fog he could hear the whining of the escape siren, the higher tone of the car sirens, and the roar of the motors. A dim luminosity told him the searchlights were out too.

And then a new tone was added—one which sent chilling fingers coursing along his backbone.

The deep throated baying of a bloodhound! And not so far away from his present position!

He rose to his feet and turned, picking his way towards the steep path which led up the side of the hill. He plunged fearfully into the woods, staring before him with maniacal eyes,

shotgun tight in his hands.

The path led steeply upwards; he followed it, tripping now and then across tangled masses of long grass, and small irregular stones and rocks. Behind him the baying became more pronounced, nearer.

The light loomed up in the fog suddenly, startling him. He had not known there was a house high on that hill, but it certainly looked like it. The light came from a square aperture, possibly a window. It glowed against the grey swirling fog tendrils.

Bourbon paused and listened. His fingers twitched as he heard the sound of the hound again, behind. He knew the hound would be accompanied by grim, hard featured men with guns—men who knew the menace he constituted and would shoot him down without mercy rather than let him make good his escape.

Perhaps he could hide—the house . . .

He crept forward through the trees and approached the window.

The house itself was not impressive: it was a wooden building, following the style of a Mexican Haciendah. He fumbled for the steps which led to the verandah and found them. Wary of creaky boards he slunk along in the shadows of the overhanging boards, gained the window itself.

The window was slightly open at the bottom, and a gentle breeze stirred the net curtains so that he could see inside.

The room he saw was plain, without furniture of any kind. The walls were enamelled white, unrelieved by border or panel. The floor was covered with a clean piece of grey rubber.

Standing by the far wall, facing a shining metal contrivance, were two people—an aged, grey-haired man, and a pretty girl. The man was talking in low tones, but his words came quite clearly to Bourbon.

"It's finished, Lana—complete in every detail. It can't fail to work as I have planned."

"But dad," said the girl, "how can you prove it?"

"By trying it, my child. I shall advertise for a suitable man: one who would have the courage to face such an experiment. And there are many."

"But—are you sure it will work in reverse? Suppose it won't bring him back again?"

"It will—it must. Listen, Lana—I have already experimented with inanimate objects. They have returned . . . there is no earthly reason why a living subject should not do so if he follows my instructions carefully. Provided he does not move from the spot at which he reassembles, he will be perfectly safe. I would try it myself but—I am the only one who can operate the beam. You'll see, Lana. I've devoted twenty years of my life, living here away from life itself, constructing this beam. It can be directed to any planet; at the moment it is focussed upon Venus. When the subject steps upon the plate in that cage, and I reverse this lever, his body is split into its tiny elements. These are transmitted along the beam to their preordained destination, no matter how far it may be. When they reach that point, the work of the beam transmitter is done. The object, whatever it may be, forms again. The process is reversed and the atomic structure assembled. This is the final step—once this experiment is completed I am ready to commercialise the invention. It will entirely replace shipping, air-freight and rail-carriage upon Earth. The heaviest goods can be transported clear across the world, clear across the Universe even, in split seconds. You realise the value of it, my child?"

"I think I do, father. But the thought of this experiment unnerves me. Why is it needed? You have already proved that the beam transmitter works efficiently on Earth. Can you not wait . . . ?"

He shook his head: "No, Lana. Like every scientist I have that burning curiosity to know what the other planets hold. What forms of life, what mineral wealth, whether there are any great civilisations there."

Listening outside the window, Bourbon tensed. The idea which had entered his mind almost made him reel. It was fantastic, and yet—he was prepared to clutch at any straw to elude recapture. Yes, even voluntary exile from the world he knew and hated. Even a nightmare experiment with his living body as the guinea pig!

The baying of the hound closer still confirmed his decision. He walked quickly round to the door, hammered upon it.

Waited. The door opened, and he confronted the girl. He said:

"I wish to see your father. At once, please."

The girl tried hard to distinguish him, but the fog made it impossible to see more than a dark outline. She said: "Will you come in, Mister . . . ?"

He stepped inside without giving his name. And as he swung the door shut behind him her eyes fell upon the dreaded uniform of Grunton

Penitentiary for the Homicidally Insane. Her red lips went wide for a scream . . .

"NO!" snarled Bourbon, whipping his shotgun from beneath his grey tunic. "Be quiet!"

She read the threat in his eyes, cut the scream off short. He went on quickly: "I am a desperate man. I will not stop at murder to achieve my ends. Tonight, already, two men have died by my hand, and I would not be averse to adding a woman to the score. Take me to your father—immediately!"

For a second she hesitated. From the laboratory her father called:

"What is it, Lana?"

"A—a gentleman to see you, father." She gagged over the word gentleman, and Bourbon noted it and smiled evilly.

"What? Here—at this time, in this fog? Very well, show him in to me."

She walked towards the lab., followed closely by the gun and the madman. She entered, and her father turned round from his machine . . .

Bourbon snarled: "Make no outcry. Should you do so I will not hesitate to kill your daughter. You understand?"

The scientist betrayed no alarm. He nodded and said: "I heard the escape siren going at Grunton. You are that man?"

"I am that man," agreed Bourbon. My name is Bourbon—John Bourbon."

"I remember your case—you roamed Chicago slashing people with knives, did you not?"

"Not people—women," pointed out Bourbon. "I am rather proud of my record. They called me a worse peril than Jack the Ripper. But unfortunately they apprehended me . . ."

"And judged you guilty but insane, and detained you in Grunton."

"I see you read your paper," said Bourbon. "But there is no time for discussion of that topic now. I need your aid . . ."

The old scientist smiled and shook his head: "You may expect no help from me, Bourbon," he said. "I can give you none as it is, and even if I could I would not."

Bourbon said: "Listen . . . do you hear?"

The ghostly baying of the bloodhound crept out of the fog into the room. Bourbon went on: "They are on my trail. Soon they will find me, and take me back. If that happens, I will leave behind me two bodies in this house . . . I need not mention names . . ."

"You dare not!"

"Why not? They cannot harm me other than lock me up. I am insane—so they say. You see? It matters nothing to me how many people I murder now."

"And if I refuse?"

"Then your daughter dies first, and you after her. But you will not refuse; I have a proposition to put to you."

The old man adjusted his spectacles calmly and moved closer.

Bourbon rapped: "Stay where you are for the moment. This is my offer: you will tell the guards, if they come here, that you have not seen me, that you do not know where I am. You will send them away . . ."

"And in return?"

"In return I will be your human guinea pig. I will submit myself to your experiment. You understand?"

The girl said, quickly: "No—no, father."

But the scientist's eyes were gleaming with interest. He said:

"Suppose they insist on searching the house?"

"Permit them. They will find nothing, for I will be gone."

"You mean that you are willing to undergo the experiment now, without further preparation?" he gasped.

Bourbon nodded. Lana said again: "Dad, you can't. You can't turn a maniac loose, not on any world—of course you can't . . . Dad!"

Her father looked at her, smiled. "Don't be alarmed, child. Venus is a young planet—I feel sure there can be no human life on it. If our friend wishes to find out, why not . . . ?"

There was a shrewd look in his eyes. Bourbon didn't fail to see it there and wonder . . .

Naturally, he thought to himself, the old fool may know of some way of killing me, once he gets me on that plate! Perhaps that is his plan. Perhaps something will go wrong! Purposely . . .

The scientist said: "I agree, Bourbon."

He said it rather too quickly, in view of his daughter's protests. Bourbon was certain he meant to work some trick with his machine.

But he betrayed no sign of his knowledge. He moved towards the cage of platinum wire, stood upon the plate beneath him. He still held the girl by the shoulder, her back towards him.

There was a thunderous hammering upon the door: Bourbon rapped:

"How do I know you won't reverse this thing immediately the guards are here, and bring me back?"

"I wouldn't have time. The transmission is only the work of a few seconds. You will see me pull the lever, suffer a momentary blackout, and the next second you will find yourself on—Venus!"

Bourbon growled: "They're at the door. I'm ready . . ."

And he suddenly jerked the girl, Lana, roughly into the cage with him. Snapped: "So you won't try any funny tricks the girl goes with me, Professor. By all accounts she will be very useful on a planet which has no other women."

"You swine . . ." cried the scientist.

Bourbon grated: "Pull the lever! Pull it, or by God I'll shoot your daughter here and now . . . do you hear?"

His eyes blazed with savagery: he jammed the shotgun hard into the girl's spine so that she screamed with pain. He shouted: "PULL IT!"

And hopelessly the old man obeyed . . .

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Bourbon was floating in a vast, inky dark void. He no longer had a body—what body there was of him had resolved itself into a hundred trillion tiny motes . . .

His thoughts were disjointed, unreal . . . like his body.

He did not know how long he had been like this; it might have been a second or all eternity . . .

And then his consciousness was blotted out by a blinding white flash—everything became burning, nerve shattering pain . . .

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Professor Systrom walked hopelessly along the hall towards the front door. The imperative hammering had risen in volume, until the stout oak shook beneath its weight. The bloodhounds bayed now with a sharper note. A man called: "Professor—open the door."

Systrom opened it and stood back as a bronzed young man of sturdy build pushed in. Behind him were three guards, armed, and pulling back on the leashes of the gaunt, man-hunting dogs.

The young man swung his shotgun under his arm on seeing Systrom alone. He said: "Man called Bourbon's escaped from the Pen. Thought he might have broken in here when you didn't answer at once. You haven't seen or heard anything—unusual?"

Systrom said: "Alec, I'm half mad myself. I don't know how to tell you this . . . but Lana . . . that lunatic . . . he's . . ."

Alec Caxton, the young Governor of Grunton, grasped his arm. Lana was his fiancée: the Professor's ominous words had shaken him badly: "Professor—what happened? You don't mean to say something has happened to Lana . . . not . . ."

Systrom said: "Alec, you know the line of my experiments have been taking. Well, tonight Bourbon burst in and forced me to send him out through the beam transmitter. I intended to swing the machine off course and send him out into the void—but at the last second he pulled Lana into the cage with him, and it was either a question of sending her with him or seeing her murdered there and then. I sent her . . ."

"Then she's . . ." Caxton broke off short, afraid to put his thoughts into words. Systrom said: "Yes, Alec. She's alone on Venus, facing Heaven knows what horrible perils."

Alone except for the worst peril of them all—John Bourbon!"

Alec seemed stunned; slowly he turned to the guards, said: "You can go back—I'll take care of Bourbon now."

"But . . ." protested one.

Caxton repeated, dully; "Go back."

He shut the door in the astonished faces of his men. Then he followed Systrom into the lab., stood staring at the shining machine.

At last he muttered: "Isn't there any way of getting them back?"

Systrom shook his head: "Only if they remain in the precise spot at which they alighted," he groaned. "I could keep the beam located on that point and keep the reverse lever down. I have already obtained one or two loose pieces of Venusian mineral that way."

"Then if you reverse the lever *now*?"

"I reversed it immediately. It was too late. They must have moved from the place almost at once."

Alec reflected a moment. Then said suddenly: "Professor, I'm going *after* them. Not so much because it's my duty to get Bourbon, but—well, Lana . . . can you send me up there?"

Systrom nodded: "I was hoping you would say that, my boy. I can't go myself since only I can operate the beam. But you . . . you *can*. If you find Lana and Bourbon, return to the spot at which you landed on Venus. I, for my part, will stay by the beam night and day until you return or—I fall dead. Take this . . ."

He handed Caxton a queerly shaped rifle. Said: "It may be very useful—it fires explosive bullets, and God knows what forms of life you may encounter there . . ." Caxton nodded and gripped the old man's hand silently. Then took his position upon the plate, in the cage . . .

CHAPTER TWO

Bourbon shook his head dazedly as the white flare about him began to fade.

His eyes functioned again, and memory returned—Grunton—the escape—house on the hill—Venus—LANA . . .

At once he realised he was holding her tightly still, the gun jammed hard into her back. And then he felt a great exultation as he knew the Professor's gadget *did* work: that wherever he was he was free, no longer pursued!

With that thought came caution: it crossed his mind what the scientist had said about reversing the lever to bring back anyone in the radius of the beam. And quickly he stepped to one side, dragging the girl with him, until he fancied he had moved far enough away from the original point to be safe.

Lana was still staring blankly at the weird landscape about them, not able to realise they

really were on Venus. Although she had never said so to her father, she was secretly inclined to amusement at his insistence that his machine was capable of sending people and things through space to any given point. Now it seemed he had been right—and that the beam had no limits!

She was glad for him—but the knowledge of her own horrible position weighed down upon her. She stole a glance at Bourbon from wide terrified eyes.

Bourbon smiled: "Ah, my dear. Beginning to take notice again, eh? Your father was not quite as mad as I had thought—I scarcely dared to hope his wild statements were correct—but any chance was worth while to me. A pleasant afterthought, was it not, to bring you along?"

He regarded her, released her, and stroked his heavy jowls with his free hand. He chuckled: "Yes, very attractive. Far more attractive than any of the women I—er—disposed of in Chicago. So very attractive, in fact, that I may be tempted to spare you—who knows? It will depend, of course, upon your behaviour whilst under my—er—protection!"

She covered her face with her hands and said nothing. Her body shook with muffled sobs. He continued pleasantly: "It's wonderful here, is it not? Our little Garden of Eden, eh? Ha, ha! Adam and Eve, all over again, my dear. And if your father is correct no one else on this entire planet who is like we are. Therefore we must get better acquainted as soon as possible—much better acquainted . . ."

She removed her hands from her face, composed again. She said:

"I hate you!"

It was a dangerous remark to make to Bourbon, and men like him. But fortunately for her he was revelling in his freedom, and was not without curiosity concerning this new found world. Therefore, apart from a slight narrowing of the eyes, and a fondling of the gun trigger, he did not display his anger. He said:

"In that case it is even more essential that we should know each other better. In time I have no doubt, you will come to accept me as the inevitable. Unfortunately I am uncertain just how much time I am prepared to allow you . . . we will see . . ."

She made a sudden rush towards the point at which they had landed. She was almost there when Bourbon reached her, caught her arm and twisted it cruelly behind her back.

This time he dragged her across the warm, moist, brilliantly green grass, until a good distance was between them and the means of return to Earth. He warned her: "Make another attempt, my dear, and I will be compelled to kill you here and now."

She made no reply. Bourbon now glanced round to examine his surroundings more fully.

What he saw was impressive, even to his distorted mind.

A hundred yards from where they stood, the greensward ceased abruptly, and gave place to flaring crimson plants with poppy-like heads fully three feet across. These extended in a carpet, unbroken, as far as the eye could see. One flaming crimson mass, like a royal carpet of welcome.

To the right, about a mile distant, a mighty forest reared into the vapour ridden sky. To the left could be seen a gigantic swamp of brown viscous liquid, which boiled and bubbled and cast steam and mist into the burning Venusian air. The sky itself was invisible to his eyes; the steaming atmosphere of the young world hid it effectively from view. But the mist and steam were golden-tinted by the rays of the Sun above, the heat which beat down was clammy and oppressive.

Bourbon said: "A charming place, although rather hot. Still, it will doubtless enable me to practise endurance, for the time when I will undoubtedly be going somewhere much hotter. And now we had best find sanctuary of sorts—are you ready to march, my dear Lana?"

There was no other course open to her: silently she obeyed the menace of the shotgun and climbed wearily to her feet from the grass where she had been sitting. With Bourbon slightly behind her she began to trek in the direction he indicated.

The vast, mysterious forest gradually became plainer.

It was a wonderland. Even from the distance they could see gaudy plumed birds whirring about the trees, flitting from branch to branch, and setting up a shrill piping. The leaves of the giant trees themselves were like aeroplane wings, coloured vividly, in every shade conceivable, and some which weren't.

They entered the forest, Bourbon remarking: "Now at last we really know what an Enchanted Forest looks like."

The greensward continued underfoot here, and there was little tangled vegetation. Majestic flowers clustered round the boles of the trees, of every shape and colour. A faint, sweet odour came from them, more exquisite than any known to Terrestrials.

As yet, other than the birds, they had seen no form of life. But Lana sensed something evil, something alive, in the forest itself. The feeling persisted, even when they had been walking into it for more than an hour. Every now and then a musty, dead odour would intrude upon the delightful fragrance of the blooms . . . and this appeared to emanate from clumps of coarse, sinewy plants, with long, convoluted stalks of a grey hue.

Bourbon, despite his unpleasant personality, was truly entranced by the forest. His gun trailed from his hand, and his eyes darted to

and fro delightedly, taking in the structure of each different variety of growth and tree. Madman though he was there was much of the poet and idealist in him, as there is in so many insane people.

He showed no sign of stopping, and not wishing to draw his attention on to herself any sooner than could be helped, Lana walked on, without speaking.

At last Bourbon began to feel thirst.

They were passing a small, joyously bubbling stream when he spoke for the first time since they had entered the forest. He said:

"Hmm. The pangs of thirst begin to be annoying, my dear. I should hate to lose you, but I must ask you to be the first to partake of that water . . . do you mind?"

Numbly she obeyed. She didn't much care if the water poisoned her, brought her to a writhing agonised heap. Even that would be better than what she might expect from Bourbon!

Bourbon watched her drinking, then waited. waited until he was sure the crystal-like stream was having no ill effect upon her. Then he himself drank, deeply.

The water was no different to that found on Earth. It eased his parched throat and refreshed him for the journey again. He motioned to Lana to get to her feet, and she did so, although she was almost dropping from fatigue. The stress of events had told upon her, and her legs felt as if her weary mind could not propel them another step.

But darkness was creeping on them before Bourbon called a halt.

They were in a small glade, surrounded by trees, and the steamy air above was rapidly dulling as the Sun went down. Bourbon nodded to one of the trees: "We must attempt to find ourselves a cosy little nook aloft for tonight," he said. "Until we know more about the dangers we may expect to encounter on this planet. Later we can build ourselves a little home—won't that be delightful? A little love nest on the planet of love. Captivating isn't it?"

His good humour was so high that he cared little for the fact that she ignored his remarks pointedly. He told himself she would come round, women, any woman, needed the strength and help of a man on a strange world like this. In time she would grow to love him—or so he felt sure.

He would not have been very flattered had he been able to see into the girl's mind. For Lana welcomed his suggestion of taking sanctuary in the trees, mainly because it meant he would be unable to force his loathsome physical contact upon her. Wedged between the boughs they would hardly dare to stir, let alone struggle.

She watched him clamber agilely up the thick trunk of a nearby giant, taking his handholds

from the tiny sprouting branches which were plentiful. He gained the broad limbs on the lower terrace, and lodged himself into position.

For a moment she thought of running whilst he was unable to pursue . . . but the thought of being alone and helpless on Venus deterred her from that course; objectionable and dangerous as he was, Bourbon was at least preferable to the dreaded unknown.

She scrambled up after him, hoping her legs would hold out until she had reached security. Bourbon extended a hand and helped her to the branch beside him.

He talked as the Sun went altogether, and a sombre twilight crept over the forest. The twilight dulled into a purple dusk, and this remained. She could see him balanced in the crotch of the tree, gazing vaguely towards her in the dusk. He was a shadow, barely distinguishable against the dark trunk.

If she were to wait until he slept, then pushed him . . .

No, that would be as pointless as running from him. She would still be alone here. And so far he had not touched her, or tried to. Something might turn up . . . perhaps her father would contrive to follow them . . . she could, at least, hang on until the last moment. If the worst did come to the worst, she could always kill herself, or get Bourbon to do so by attacking him.

A sudden eerie noise in the darkness made her start. Then she relaxed, realising Bourbon was asleep and snoring. Her head dropped back along the bough she had wedged herself in and she too slept—her regular breathing denoted her sleep was untroubled by dreams.

And in the higher terraces of the trees above, three pairs of eyes peered down, watching, waiting . . .

Alec Caxton shook himself and stared round. It was difficult to believe that he was on Venus, so soon after leaving Earth. But he did not doubt it, strange as it was.

He was on another planet, armed with a peculiar weapon of the Professor's own invention, facing an exhausting search for a man and a girl.

The task seemed almost hopeless, but he refused to show any despair. At least Bourbon could not have gone far—he had not had the time. The first thing was to study the lie of the land.

He roamed round until he found a portion of high, rising land. He plodded up this, expending more energy than he had thought the climb would take. It sloped off about a hundred feet up, into flat tableland. He moved to each of the three sides in turn and stared.

The crimson plain—the boiling, bubbling swamp—the forest—the greensward—

The forest!

He did a double take and brought his eyes back to focus in that direction. Two mannikin-like figures were just vanishing into the leafy interior, and there could be no doubt that there went the two people he sought!

Even as he opened his mouth to call they had vanished.

He ran down the slope towards the forest, across the plain. He reached the edge of the trees panting with exertion and dripping with sweat. His heart was pumping furiously, his head was heavy. It was far too hot to run any great distance on Venus, he found. If he kept this up he would be in no condition to battle Bourbon when at last they did meet.

He slowed down, and entered the trees at a quick walking pace.

Several times he paused to listen, but there was no sound other than the piping of the gaudy little birds, and the humming of their rapidly moving bodies and wings.

Now he began to see how hopeless it would be to find anyone in that maze. Worse, in fact, than the plain, although he had seen the point at which they had entered, and had noted it. For the greensward was a moss-like substance, which sprang to its original position the second his feet had left it. That meant there were no trails left for him to follow. No clues to indicate the direction in which his fiancée and Bourbon had gone.

He tramped on gamely, however. Now he must trust to luck. Nothing else could serve him. Preoccupied as he was, he failed to detect the evil quality about the grey plants, which Lana had noticed earlier. He had not consciously noticed them at all.

Therefore he had no idea, when he leaned against one of these for rest, that there might be danger . . .

It was brought home to him suddenly; his hand, resting upon a bunch of slender grey stalks of a rubbery quality, was suddenly encircled!

He experienced an unpleasant sensation, a pricking and a drawing about the flesh round which the stems of the plant had coiled. He jerked the arm . . .

The arm came forward—and so did the tentacles!

The mass next to his body began to undulate slowly . . .

With a curse of alarm he started away—and the tentacular stems which had stealthily coiled about his legs, brought him down with a crash.

Genuinely afraid now, he fought desperately to break the grip of the stinging plant. The more he struggled, the more the stems twined over him, and he became aware of a warm tendril winding tightly about his throat . . .

Then his eyes caught the gun, lying at hand where he had dropped it. He reached out with

the hand which was yet free, dragged it to him, and fought to bring it into position, to level it at the weird botanical product of the young planet.

He levelled it at the centre of the thick grey mass from which the stems sprang . . . pulled the trigger, hastily.

The gun was noiseless, but effective.

A gaping hole was torn in the greyness—a pause of a half second, and then a small, muffled explosion.

The plant ripped asunder before his eyes, scattering slabs of fungus-like stuff over his hands and face. And he recoiled in sheer horror as they oozed red blood on to his clothing!

The tendrils about his body had suddenly become limp and lax. He tore them off in handfuls. Where they had gripped, the skin was marked red and raw, and tiny globules of his blood bore witness to the fact that the plant was a vegetable Vampire.

The Vampire Plant of Venus!

He shuddered again, and suddenly his eyes were drawn to a small bird which had settled upon a similar plant a short distance away. It perched there all unconscious of the impending danger, piping away and preening itself.

He gazed fascinated, as the thin stems stole up behind it from the parent body—as they formed above its head in an arch—

The bird suddenly piped a high note, flew upwards, straight into the waiting trap. As rapidly as a snake striking the tendrils clamped about it. More shot out, until the bird was covered with a grey mass of stalks, until its piping became feeble, and gradually died altogether in a last prolonged wail.

The plant undulated slowly. The tendrils clamped tighter. Then they opened again, and the bird, a mere empty shell, was thrown to the foot of the plant.

And Alec became conscious of the musty odour surrounding the Vampire plants, and wrinkled his nose in disgust, as he realised it was caused by the decomposing bodies of their drained victims—of which he would have been one, except for the foresight of Systrom in giving him the explosive gun.

He turned away and recommenced his trek into the forest. But now he had entirely lost his sense of direction. He had no idea whether he was coming or going.

The trees reared up either side of him, illimitably. The twilight descended suddenly, without warning, and was followed by the purple dusk. Still he tramped on.

At length he halted. What was the use of going further? Best to wait until daylight, until he could at least see about him. For all he knew he could have passed quite close to them in this darkness and not seen them save

as shadowy outlines which he could have put down as plants.

Had he but known it, he *had* passed the two—almost a mile back! He adopted Bourbon's idea, climbed a tree, and slept. From above eyes watched him also . . .

CHAPTER THREE

Bourbon yawned and blinked his eyes open slowly, then stared about, mystified. It was some minutes before full memory returned to him, and he remembered how and why he had come to be in the midst of this tropical forest, sleeping in a tree branch.

But as he remembered, he stared towards the branch on which the girl had lain the previous night—and then uttered a loud curse and started to his feet.

Lana was *gone*!

But where? And how?

And how was he to find her again on a planet with a diameter of 7,600 miles?

He raised his hand to shield his neck from the rays of the Sun which burned fiercely down through the heavy vapour which always seemed to overhang the planet. Its position of being second nearest the Sun meant that it received almost twice the amount of Solar heat as Earth. Furthermore it was constantly drying—the solar rays drew thick blankets of steam and cloud from swamps, rivers, lakes and moist bog ground.

And somewhere was the girl he had forced to accompany him. He hadn't thought she would have chanced running away, even from him, in a strange world. But apparently her fear of the known had at last mastered her dread of the unknown, and she had taken her chance whilst he slept.

And then—he noticed not only had the girl gone, but also the shotgun!

A feeling of alarm clutched at him. Admittedly so far there had been nothing to occasion any disturbance on Venus—but at any moment he was liable to come up against trouble, and entirely unarmed he was afraid to face the possibility.

But he realised that he could not spend the remainder of his life in his tree retreat, and at last he climbed to the ground and started forward slowly.

He tramped on and on, under the heavy canopy of heat, the trees and flowers and green-sward seemed to shimmer before him, as the settled moisture of the night was drawn up towards the sky. His rest had been little use to him, for he felt sluggish and heavy, without energy or purpose. What purpose *could* he have here? There was little he could do but endeavour to find some safe spot to stay.

The pangs of hunger began to assail him; his stomach felt empty and hollow, and his mouth

was hot and dry. No streams appeared from which he might drink, only occasional steaming pools covered with green scum and bubbling and eddying towards their centres.

On and on, his legs becoming tramping automata, his mind hardly functioning at all. The heat intensified, globules of sweat stood out upon his face and hands, made his shirt and tunic a soaking mass. He halted and tore the tunic and shirt from him, then attired solely in the grey prison trousers, tramped onwards. The coarse stuff clung about his legs, damp with perspiration. The light, nail-less pumps, which were issued at Grunton, became two soggy masses, so that he was forced to discard them also.

And then, unexpectedly, he burst into a clearing, and found a still, clear pool of water, probably fed from some underground source.

He threw himself thankfully into this, lay there, cupping his hands and drinking it. It was warm and brackish but it served to diminish his terrible raging thirst, which had made him forget even his hunger for the time.

Thirst allayed, the hunger returned in full force.

He examined the trees at hand carefully, found one upon which round, green fruits grew, similar to Terrestrial melons. He hesitated only a moment, then driven to recklessness by his hunger, plucked one and burst the tough skin open against a nearby rock.

The fruit within was soft and squashy, not unlike grapefruit. He ate heartily, and found it required only a little to make him feel full and strong again. Then he recommenced his endless tramp, his eyes searching for traces of the girl.

Time dragged on, and the heat became even more unbearable. Then in the distance, he heard—voices!

Human voices!

They were harsh and strident, shouting in some language not known to his ears. The modulation was toneless, a continuous flat pitch without cadence.

Bourbon stopped abruptly. What manner of beings were these? What could he expect from them? Would he be helped—or would he be killed or taken captive?

The sounds of pursuit became audible, heading towards him. He drew back behind the nearest clump of trees, remained tense and silent whilst he waited.

And from the path before him Lana suddenly raced into view!

Her clothing was almost ripped from her body, the shotgun was dangling limply from her fingers, her eyes were wild and frightened!

.....

Lana looked across towards Bourbon as he slept lodged in the great tree. It was early,

and he was sound asleep, snoring like a pig. The first faint traces of steam were filtering up from the surface of Venus, the Sun was rising.

Her mind was busy—busy with the possibilities of what the madman might do to her before that day was out. She felt it could not be long before the inevitable must happen, before Bourbon would demand something more than her company on the forced expedition.

Her fears of the previous night had gone now. In the daylight they seemed so groundless; she was certain now Venus could hold no worse horror than Bourbon himself. And if she had the shotgun she would stand a chance—a very slim one, but a chance nevertheless—of finding her way safely back to the spot at which she had landed. If her father had kept the beam positioned, she could return to Terra and forget all this horrible nightmare.

Her mind made up she edged silently along the bough she was on, past Bourbon. He slept on, deeply. Her hand gently seized the gun from his side, drew it towards her.

The climb down was simple, and she effected it without noise. At last the whole of Venus lay before her . . .

And she must determine in which direction they had come.

It was hopeless. There was no sign, no indication, of the route they had taken. Every tree, every flower, every open trail looked exactly alike. In desperation she took a trail leading to the right, praying it might be the right one. She plodded on and on; unwilling to rest and give Bourbon the opportunity to catch her up. She held the gun in a ready position, prepared to encounter any untold danger as calmly and bravely as possible. It would do no good to get upset.

Thirst began to torment her, and she paused at a small stream she reached, to drink the sweet water. She was hungry too, but not so ravenous that she would risk eating any of the strange fruits which grew in abundance.

Thirst quenched she started her march again.

It seemed to her that hours dragged by, and still she stumbled on, making her way ever deeper into the heart of that forest. A fear that she would never get out of it, that it ran on illimitably, crossed her mind. She drove the thought away, but it lingered in her subconscious, making her despair, making her steps lag more and more.

It was with a feeling of deep thankfulness that she finally came to the forest edge. She broke out on to a flat, sandy plain. Far off could be seen a shoreline, and beyond it a great stretch of water.

And halfway across this plain were a small group of mounted figures—MEN! About twenty of them, mounted upon some peculiar animals which to her eyes resembled ostriches.

She halted, paralysed. The discovery that there was life akin to human beings, took her aback. She had not expected it, had thought the world was too young to have evolved any higher orders of intelligence. Apparently not, for they were—from the distance—quite normal men.

Their sight must have been abnormal, however, for they spotted her even against the variegated background of the forest. She saw them wheel towards her, saw one of them fling out what looked like an arm in her direction, then, to her amazement, beheld the spectacle of the creatures upon which they were mounted, winging into the air like arrows, the men still seated astride them, and flying swiftly in her direction.

Still she stood petrified, unable to stir, until they were close enough for her to observe the sticks with which they goaded their mounts, and the peculiar clothing they wore.

She turned back then and ran into the forest. Suddenly she was afraid of them—their faces were evil, low, marking them as degenerates. She felt, if they were to capture her, that terrible things would happen to her.

She ran swiftly, panting, sobbing in spite of her decision to face perils bravely, the shotgun dangling unused by her side.

The Venut'ans goaded their flying steeds down to ground at the edge of the trees, with harsh toneless cries and jabbing sticks. They dismounted, raced into the forest after her, leaving their mounts standing docilely by grazing upon the green moss.

Their movements were swift and sure, unhampered by needless clothing, their only covering being a leather breast piece and a strip of leather running from it over their thighs in the shape of an apron. Slung in the woven grass belts about their waists were long, quaintly curved swords of coarse manufacture.

Lana was already tired, hot and heavy, feeling the greater gravitational pull of Venus, although it was only slight. Her knee length summer dress hampered her movements, catching against low branches and foliage, and ripping as she continued her headlong flight without daring to pause to disentangle it.

She burst into a clearing, and behind the sounds of pursuit grew nearer. Panting with fear she raced on . . .

Her foot caught in an upjutting root—she sprawled full length forward upon her face in the hot moist Venusian grass. And before she could scramble up again and reach the shotgun which had jerked from her hand, the pursuers burst from cover and surrounded her, knives and swords menacing her as she lay there.

Roughly she was jerked to her feet, subjected to a close examination. The men—for men they were—jabbered at each other in that monotonous tongue, prodded her body all over and pointed excitedly to her white skin.

They themselves were squat—no more than five feet in height, but very broad—and brown skinned. Their arms were short and muscular, reaching only to their waists. Their hands were heavily webbed, as if a great part of their lives were spent in water, and nature had equipped them for that purpose. Their legs too were stumpy, terminating in splay feet with three webbed toes.

Neither hands nor feet boasted more than three digits, each one of which was the same length. In spite of this they handled their swords in the manner of experts, only their method of gripping differing from a Terrestrial swordsman.

As she had previously noted, their features were ugly and ill-formed, their nostrils being flat and ending in gaping holes, caused by the process, down the generations, of breathing the heavier atmosphere of Venus. Their eyes were tiny and set far back in the slanted skull, to protect them in some degrees against the continual glare of the Sun there. Their mouths were wide gashes, a bony structure taking the place of teeth. Their ears were mere slits in the sides of their heads, without the usual ears themselves for amplification.

Lana shuddered as they examined her, touched her teeth, her ears, her white flesh, and the material of her dress.

One of them prodded her in the stomach and made some remark, whereupon his comrades smiled in amused fashion. Then, driven by their long swords, she was hustled from the forest back to where the flying birds waited.

As she had at first thought these were very like ostriches, but with a great wing-spread. They were controlled without reins, by the short pointed stick, and there was no saddle or harness upon them. She was hoisted on to one of these behind the man who seemed to be leader of the Venusians, and then the entire party whirled straight into the air at terrific speed. She hung on to the bird's feathers in terror, gazing down fascinatedly at the whizzing landscape beneath her. The Venusians themselves appeared to be quite at home on their tame mounts. Beyond an occasional prod with their goads, they did not bother to guide the creatures, or to even hold on to them. Their balance was perfect.

Across the sandy red plain they sped, towards the distant shore. The journey was accomplished in a matter of minutes, and the birds swooped down at the water's edge. Now Lana could see a vessel afloat near the shore.

It was a small, round, tub-shaped affair, seeming to be carved from some manner of bone—which, she was to learn later, was actually the case. It was flat bottomed, and as they alighted on the edge of the water, one of the men dived in and swam out to it, moving with the skill and speed of a fish. He returned

dragging the coracle with him, until it grounded upon the sand. She was pushed into it roughly and then it was pushed out once again. The Venusians next turned to the birds, prodded them into the air, riderless. The birds shot aloft, wheeled with raucous cries, and flew out across the water, bound for some definite destination like homing pigeons.

The fish-men plunged into the sea, swam towards the boat, gathered round it. Propelling it before them they moved out into the black-coloured liquid, preferring to swim rather than use their craft. Lana guessed that they had brought the boat for some such purpose—it was possible they had been on a hunting expedition, and the coracle was to ferry their captured quarry to wherever they were bound.

The water was still and placid, steaming slightly beneath the Solar heat. Lana lay back helplessly in the boat and tried to pull her torn dress into place as far as was possible.

And then, as she gazed back towards the shore they had left, she made out a small figure standing there at the water's edge, and very faintly, across the water itself, came an echoing cry:

"Lana!"

She stood up so that the coracle almost capsized. She cried:

"Alec! Oh, Alec!"

For the figure there was Alec, standing helplessly at the water's edge, unable to swim the distance to reach her. Beside him stood a tall, bronzed figure, another Venusian by his looks.

Gradually they receded from sight, and she sank back into the bottom of the boat, and gave way to heartbroken sobbing. Alec had come after her—but she was on her way into captivity, to face awful danger, even *death*, as far as she knew . . .

Bourbon crouched back behind the trees which concealed him from the view of the Venusians who were surrounding Lana. He watched with wide eyes as they probed and prodded, and heaved a sigh of relief when at length they hustled their captive away into the forest. He had no desire to follow them to attempt the girl's rescue.

He stayed where he was, afraid that they might have left some of their number about. They had taken the shotgun with them, and his hope that they would not notice it was banished.

Ten minutes passed, and Bourbon was about to take the risk and move into the open, when hurried movements approaching the clearing came to his ears. He remained where he was, peering towards the trail along which he had come, wondering what fresh danger was to be revealed to his eyes . . . and into the clearing stepped Alec Caxton, the Governor of Grunton!

It took Bourbon only a moment to realise Caxton had followed him to Venus . . . there could be no other explanation. And as Caxton paused in front of the tree which sheltered Bourbon, the maniac saw the gun in his hands . . . and began to move stealthily round the bole, his fingers made into claws to strangle the unsuspecting man!

Alec Caxton, tramping onward through the Venusian forest, paused and stiffened as he heard the far-off grating voices. Perhaps they indicated the presence of Bourbon and Lana, he thought . . . perhaps . . . at least it was worth a try, better than wandering aimlessly.

He quickened his pace. He had long since discarded all his clothing except his shorts. He found the smooth moss pleasant walking to the feet.

The shouting had stopped by the time he burst out into a small glade, and there was nothing to indicate which direction those responsible for it had taken—he halted beside a large tree and considered. *And at that moment a brutal pair of hands grasped his throat from behind in a cruel stranglehold . . . !*

CHAPTER FOUR

Alec struggled fiercely against the grip about his neck, but Bourbon's insanity lent him the strength to hold the athletic young Governor. The explosive gun had fallen to the ground and lay unheeded for the moment, whilst Bourbon exerted his tremendous pressure on the other man's neck, and heard, with satisfaction, the grim sounds which told him Caxton was choking rapidly.

But unknown to Bourbon other eyes were watching—and as Alec sagged forward, and fell, and Bourbon accompanied him intent on finishing his grim work, a lithe, bronzed figure dropped lightly from a high branch of the tree behind which Bourbon had hidden, wrenched a rough sword from its belt, and coolly ran Bourbon through on the heart line!

The maniac screamed shrilly; and then rolled over, lifeless. It had been a neat, practised stroke.

The bronzed Venusian gazed down upon Caxton who was writhing and gasping for air, sucking in gulps which seared his tortured throat. He slid the sword behind his belt again and squatted down to wait for the Terrestrial to return to full awareness.

Caxton regained his faculties slowly; he had been very close to death, and it was some time before the cloudy grey mists which had risen about him cleared from his vision. Then he sat up and felt his throat tenderly. His eyes fell first upon the dead Bourbon—and he gasped

his surprise. Then he allowed his gaze to travel to the young man squatting before him. The Venusian smiled at him, and Caxton could see the smile was Universal, common to this life on Venus as well as Earth. He smiled back and attempted to rise, and the Venusian assisted him.

"Thanks."

The Venusian said: "Sumbras?" in a flat, droning tone.

Caxton shook his head, smilingly. The Venusian said: "Sumbras?" once more. Again Caxton shook his head, but evidently the negative shake of the head was not used on Venus, for the Venusian appeared not to understand what was meant by it.

Caxton pointed to Bourbon, to the ugly wound in his back, said: "You did that?"

The Venusian smiled and patted his sword which was stained red. Caxton said: "Dead," stirring the body with his toe.

"Arras," agreed the Venusian, patting his sword again.

It was an extremely unprofitable conversation. Caxton wanted to know where Lana was if not with Bourbon, and he hoped the Venusian might tell him something. But that was not possible by speech.

He picked a short stick from the ground, found a flat piece of rock of a light hue, dipped the point of the stick in Bourbon's blood for want of anything better, and drew. He drew, as near as he could in that manner, a rough sketch of a girl wearing a dress. Then he pointed to Bourbon, then to the girl. The Venusian nodded eagerly.

Caxton dipped the stick again and drew himself behind the girl, chasing her with outstretched arms. The drawing was poor, but the man of Venus nodded again, excitedly, and pointed to the far trail.

Then, catching hold of Caxton's arm, he drew him towards it.

As they went forward Caxton studied him intently.

He was quite tall, taller even than Caxton himself. His arms were inclined to be long, his fingers hard-skinned but supple. His face was very little different to the face of any Earthman, but his ears were peculiarly shaped, being more pointed, like those of an animal.

His only garment was a leather apron.

They burst from the woods, on to a long, sandy plain leading to a distant shoreline. Far away, specks in the distance, were several flying birds of huge proportions, heading out across the water. The Venusian pointed to them, said: "Krikis."

As if that meant something important he hurried Alec forward at a rapid trot, which developed into a run as they covered ground. The man from Earth was hard put to keep pace with the Venusian whose supple legs

carried him swiftly and easily across the loose sand.

But finally they drew near to the shore at the point where the birds had been seen, and the Venusian pointed to a little boat bobbing far out on the surface of the black waters, said: "Andas."

Caxton shaded his eyes and strove to peep through the mist in the atmosphere, to distinguish what was in that boat. And he saw, as the boat bobbed violently, a flutter of a coloured summer frock, and a young girl lying in the shell. He called desperately: "LANA!"

The tiny figure stood up, and he heard his own name shouted back. He failed to see the fishermen who propelled the craft, and assumed that Lana was adrift alone on that sea. There was less than one chance in five hundred that he could reach her, but he had to try. He started forward . . .

The Venusian laid a detaining arm upon his. He made pushing movements with his arms and pointed to the boat again. Caxton stared, and sure enough he could see that the boat was quickly fading from sight, obviously under some method of propulsion.

Even as they watched it merged with the blackness of the water, there was a last faint flash of colour, then it was invisible to him.

Despairingly he stood staring at the spot where it had vanished. He had no idea what his next move was to be—certainly he could not swim blindly out there hoping to find the boat, or Lana. He would perish long before he had gained the point where the craft had vanished.

He felt the Venusian tugging his arm, and he turned slowly. The man of Venus still held the drawing stick, and now he began to make a rough sketch of the boat in the water, and beneath it several squat figures, with webbed feet and hands, propelling it. He pointed to one of these figures with a vicious jab of the stick and said: "Krans!"

Then he sketched before the boat, a number of shapeless squares, surrounded by a circle. Caxton didn't get this one. The Venusian touched the drawing of the boat and the webbed men with his stick, drew a line from them to the circle. This time Caxton knew he meant the circle was the destination of the boat, possibly the city of the Krans.

Caxton took the stick from him again. He had to know if there was anything he could do to reach Lana, and what might happen to her. He touched the sketch of the boat, then pointed to his new friend. Then he drew a quick sketch of himself seated in such a craft.

The Venusian seemed to understand, spread out his hands wide in a negative gesture. Caxton groaned, then drew a quickie of the girl in the dress, and drove the pointed stick into the sand at the heart.

This puzzled the Venusian.

Caxton drew a further sketch of one of the fish-men with a sword which he was sinking into the girl. The Venusian smiled, took the stick, and commenced to draw in reply.

He drew the girl, whole and unharmed. He even decorated her with traced flowers. Then he went painstakingly along the sand, sketching in round globes. He did forty of these. Then a further sketch of the girl, naked this time. He went to the start of the drawing, pointed to the girl, smiled. Next he pointed to one of the globes, then looked into the sky where the glow of the Sun smote the vapours. Caxton realised the globes represented the Sun—that would mean each globe meant one day—forty days.

The Venusian went along pointing to each one.

Then, to make his meaning clearer still, he drew a line under each one, which Caxton took to be the horizon. Caxton nodded. Forty times the Sun would rise . . .

The Venusian went to the sketch of the girl, contorted his face in a ferocious grimace, and drove the stick sharply through the neck of the outline. Then he rubbed the figure out with his brown foot and turned to face Caxton.

Caxton had it now. Clearly. Forty days, and then Lana would be killed, brutally! He felt sick inside, but glad that he had at least a Venusian month and more, to do something about it.

For the present he would have to trust to his new found friend.

The young forest man pointed towards the trees and Caxton walked beside him over the reddish sands. As they walked Caxton was already taking his first lesson in the tongue of Venus.

He pointed to himself and said, clearly: "All—ekk—"

The Venusian repeated the word, pointing to Caxton. Caxton nodded. Then he pointed to the bronzed man. The Venusian said: "Gay—gel," and smiled when Alec repeated the name after him.

By the time they had reached the forest Alec had learned the words for sand, sea, Sun, mist and trees, and was progressing apace. They dropped the question of language whilst they walked through the forest, and Alec noted that Gaygel carefully avoided the grey Vampire plants, obviously well aware of the menace they constituted.

The time slipped away, and at length they reached a clearing in the forest. A number of huts constructed of tough sinewy wood had been erected here, and many more men similar in appearance to Gaygel were walking about.

They clustered round the two pleasantly enough, and betrayed no animosity towards the Earthman. Gaygel introduced Alec formally to a number of men Alec took to be the elders

of the tribe, then put a question to them. They nodded agreeably, and he led Alec towards a small hut, took him inside.

A woman bent beside a tiny bed of leaves straightened as they entered, smiled. On the leaves lay a tiny, brown-skinned baby.

The woman was dressed simply in an apron, like the menfolk. Her features were regular and pleasant, her skin a shade lighter than that of Gaygel. Her arms were not so long.

Gaygel said, gravely: "Manya . . ."

Alec shook hands, this proceeding causing the woman to look quite puzzled. He said to Gaygel: "Your wife?"

"Wife?" repeated Gaygel. "Wife?"

Alec pointed to the infant: "Baby—yours?" then to Gaygel and Manya. Gaygel nodded, pleased. He had quickly learned from Alec the implication of a nodded head, or a shaken one. Alec forbore to ask further questions, feeling that any attempt to delve into the matrimonial entanglements of this simple people would surely lead to utter chaos. The woman brought a large wooden bowl from the back of the hut and hurried outside. She returned soon carrying the bowl piled high with fruits and nutty objects. These she laid before Alec and Gaygel, then bowed and retired.

Alec ate hungrily. It was the first time he had touched food since he had left Grunton Penitentiary, he knew not how long ago. The fruit was pleasant to the taste, and eliminated the need for drink, containing a great quantity of water. The meal over, the lesson proceeded.

Alec rose and walked away from Gaygel. Said: "I go."

Gaygel walked away from Alec, said: "I go—kra mannas."

Alec walked towards Gaygel, said: "I come."

Gaygel repeated the action, saying: "I come—kra gannas."

And so it went on, and on . . .

Three weeks had slid away, and at last Alec was able to make himself understood in the tongue of Venus, and to understand what was said to him. Now he sat with Gaygel in the hut, talking the matter of Lana's disappearance over.

"My friend," said Gaygel, in his own tongue. "Since first you entered the forest, you were watched by our tribe. We feared you might be some new menace, to add to that already existing. We are a peace loving people, with little to do but hunt, fish, and laze in the Sun. We spend much of our time in the trees, therefore it was an easy matter for the three of you to be watched without being aware of the fact."

"I was detailed to watch the man you call Bourbon, the one I killed. I was in the tree above, and saw him remain in hiding whilst you came into the glade. When he crept up

behind you, on impulse, I dropped down and struck him with my sword, feeling that anyone who could kill without warning as he did, deserved himself to be killed without warning.

"The girl, whom you tell me is your mate, was taken by the Krans. They live far out on an island in the sea of much water, and no one has ever returned alive from their city. Periodically they make a journey to the mainland, seeking victims for their games. They come on their winged birds, and trap any unwary hunter, and carry him back to their island, which is partly submerged. This time they have trapped someone not of our kind.

"The games take place in eighteen Suns from now. Every sixty Suns there are games . . ."

"Of what nature are these—games?" queried Alec.

"Of a nature so horrible I dislike to talk about it," said Gaygel, frankly. "Of course, the Krans are mad. They are not like us. They are spawn of the seas, knowing a different way of life, without love or loyalty in their hearts. The games are their only form of amusement, if you could call it that. Every sixty Suns they stage a vast spectacle, in which a living victim is given to their God."

"Their God?"

"Their God resides on their island, in a central pool. He is the God of the Sea, all powerful. His body is large and lumpy, and ridged with sharp scales. His neck is long and thin, his head small and powerful, with sharp, savage teeth. At the time of the games the Krans fight before his pool, watched by hundreds of their kind, and at the end of the day a human victim from another tribe is thrown to the Sea God. He rends his sacrifice to pieces with his teeth. A horrible death."

Alec said: "This can be no God, but some prehistoric water reptile, like we had on Earth long ago."

"I know not where this Earth you speak of is," said Gaygel. "But you could have had nothing such as the Sea God there. Everyone, even the Krans themselves, are afraid of him. How old he is is unknown."

Alec said: "Gaygel, I have to get to that island. I have to stop them sacrificing Lana to that monster. I must have a boat and a map to guide me . . ."

Gaygel said: "You could never reach it. I know the way by the Sun, having heard of the island many times from various sources. But you would be lost. Besides, we have no boats of our own. The Krans make theirs of bone of sea creatures . . . we cannot capture such creatures, for they live too far out for us."

"We don't need sea creatures," Alec told him. "We can make a boat of wood."

"Wood?" stuttered Gaygel.

"Of these trees which you see here."

"It would not sail . . ."

"Will you help me? Then we shall see?"

Gaygel reflected, then replied: "If you can make a boat which will sail from these trees, I will not only help you, I will come with you!"

"But your woman and child? I cannot ask you to take the risk for my sake, Gaygel."

"I had a sister," explained Gaygel, darkly, his fists clenching. "She was taken by the Krans one day. The Sea God got her. Do you understand?"

Alec nodded. Held out his hand: "We'll make a boat and sail it," he enthused. "God knows, we may be committing suicide, but I'm determined to go anyway, and if you want to come along . . ."

Gaygel said simply: "I had a sister—and you are my friend. If I do not come back Manya will go to live in the chief's house until she finds another mate. If I do come back my sister will be avenged."

It was sufficient reason for his simple standards. He hated the Krans, and was therefore prepared to die working against them. He took Alec's hand firmly, and smiled as he shook it in the way Alec had taught him.

Suns came and went, and the two friends, together with four of the other men from the village, worked ceaselessly in the fringes of the forest, felling trees with their rough swords, straightening them as well as possible with the uncouth axes Alec had taught them to make.

Gradually the boat took shape—it was almost complete on the seventh day, and would sail in good time to reach the island before the games, Gaygel assured his friend from space.

And then, one morning, when they came from the village to work upon the craft, it lay splintered and shattered!

Alec was overcome by misery. All the work they had put into it, all the expectations they had had. And now . . .

Gaygel said gravely: "We have a number of large monsters in the forest. They are growing scarcer now, and are rarely seen, but often they charge a village and wreck it, as one must have trampled upon our boat. They are very terrifying, and our weapons are of no avail against them."

Within half an hour they had salvaged what they could of the old craft, and were hastily starting anew. Time was short, but Gaygel asserted the task could be completed within four Suns. He obtained more helpers from the village, and the boat grew by visible bounds.

Until at last, on the thirty-fifth day after Lana's capture, it was carried to the beach and floated!

CHAPTER FIVE

The boat was not very seaworthy, but Caxton would have taken any risks to rescue Lana. The tribesmen surveyed it proudly as it rested

on the placid surface of the dark waters. They were essentially tree and forest dwellers, and the mere idea of embarking on to the surface of the ocean in such a flimsy wooden shell, would have struck them with horror. But they were pleased, like children, with their accomplishment, and jabbered with delight as Caxton clambered aboard and steered the boat in a small circle with the aid of the rough poles they had constructed.

Then Alec invited Gaygel to step aboard and try the pole; he had to smile at the dolorous expression upon the Venusian's face, for the nearer the time of embarkation approached, the less sure of himself did the tribesman become.

Now he could visualise both he and Caxton ending up in watery graves, for the idea that the frail shell could carry them safely to the island of the Krans was, to him, fantastic. Therefore the foot he placed in the boat was very tentative, and as the boat sank deeper under his weight, he sprang hastily ashore again with a yell.

Regaining courage he tried once more: this time he steeled his nerves and stayed put until the boat stopped bobbing; finding that it remained afloat, he looked pleased, and gazed towards his fellows on the bank with a superior air. They jabbered excitedly.

Caxton showed him the manipulation of the poles, and drove the boat out a little. The sudden movement caused Gaygel to sit down rather abruptly on the hard woodwork. The Venusians on the shore made sounds which were the equivalent of Earthian laughter.

Flushing, Gaygel rose to his feet, took one of the poles from Caxton, and made a mighty drive at the sea bed to recover his lost prestige. The boat shot, the pole stuck, and Gaygel hung suspended betwixt Heaven and Venus like an alarmed spider, hanging on for dear life.

In spite of Caxton's haste to set matters right, the boat slowly drifted farther away in answer to the pressure of Gaygel's body on the pole, and Gaygel was faced with the alternative of either jumping out of the boat and trusting to the pole to hold him, or releasing the pole and taking his chances of scrambling back into the boat. He chose the latter course, and there was a loud and watery splash.

Grinning, Caxton helped him to clamber aboard again, and watched him spluttering and gasping.

The forest dwellers could not swim themselves, had never tried. They had hitherto considered webbed hands and feet indispensable to the art of remaining afloat in water, and had been content to leave it to the Krans. Their fishing was done from tree branches, in the streams and rivers which ran steaming through the forest. The sea failed to interest them in any way. They had all they needed here, and

therefore no reason for venturing away from their own territory.

Caxton, that night, could see that Gaygel was uneasy.

Accordingly he took him aside from the others and said: "Listen, Gaygel, there is no need for you to come with me, if you would prefer to stay here with your people. It seems to me the chances of rescuing Lana, and returning safely, are infinitesimal. Therefore I have no right to ask you to accompany me."

Gaygel looked surprised and hurt: "But, Allekk, I thought that was all arranged? It was agreed that I came with you. Because I do not yet trust the boat makes no difference to me. Besides, you will need me to guide you, will you not?"

He was quite determined, and Alec accepted his determination and made no further attempts to dissuade him. He spent that night seeing that the explosive gun was ready for action, and Gaygel spent it saying goodbye to his woman and baby.

They made an early start the following day. Gaygel understood the island to be fully three Suns' journey away, and this meant loading the boat with water and provisions for at least six days. If they did rescue Lana, that would suffice, eked out, for their rations on the return journey.

At last they embarked, watched by the entire village. Gaygel bore no weapon other than his long sword, and Alec carried the rifle. Whilst the craft was in sight of shore, Gaygel put a bold face on things, standing in the stern and waving, and handling the lines as Alec had taught him. But once the villagers were out of sight he sat down in the boat and began to looke very thoughtful and uncomfortable, as land faded from sight and nothing but black water surrounded them.

They had been going almost an hour before the water deepened sufficiently for the poles to be laid aside and the oars used. Alec bent to with a will—the oarsmanship must naturally fall on him since Gaygel hadn't the faintest notion of how to use them, and to teach him would have wasted too much time.

By the end of an hour's stiff rowing, Alec heartily wished there had been winds on Venus—but there was none sufficient to fill a small sail. Gaygel explained that the only great winds were those caused through atmospheric storms, and these were infrequent, but very dangerous.

They rested, then rowed on again. About them was the black waste of water, seeming endless. Since leaving the shore they had seen no sign of land, but Gaygel watched the ascent of the Sun carefully, and continued to steer the craft with an unerring hand.

Rest and row, rest again and row again, the day wore on. At long last the steam died away

from the sea, the shimmering mists and vapour lost the gold colour, and became dull.

"Here we must stop," stated Gaygel. "For the Sun is going. I can not steer our way without the Sun to guide."

"Suppose the boat drifts during the night?" suggested Alec.

"How can it? There is no tide and no wind."

Alec was apt to forget the absence of tide. The fact that Venus had no satellite to exert a tidal pull constantly escaped him.

They settled down for the night in the boat, not needing to cover themselves, for the surface of Venus never grew cold. The purple darkness fell over everything, a darkness whose purple effect was due to the chemically charged vapours which rose from the planet.

Both slept; Gaygel somewhat uneasily so far from land, Alec dog tired by his strenuous rowing.

The night wore on, and as the Sun charged the Heavens with the first flush of dawn, Gaygel was awake and jerking his companion.

All that day they rowed, with nothing untoward to disturb them. Gaygel had now grasped the essentials of oarsmanship, and took his turn with a will, his muscular arms sending the boat rapidly on its way, his eyes and mind ever alert as he followed the rising Sun. At last, far to the right, a low shoreline came into sight, and Gaygel paused to take fresh bearings.

"This is the first step of our journey," he explained. "The island of the Krans lies to the south of this land in the direction of the Sun."

"But surely we'll miss a mere island working simply on those directions?"

"No; the island is very large."

Alec decided that must mean it was a continent. Gaygel seemed quite certain of himself, and when asked where he had obtained his knowledge since none of the forest dwellers were sailors, could only say it had been handed down from generation to generation.

Once more they left land behind, and headed into the heart of the Venusian Sea.

And then, far away on the horizon, a large grey patch rising into the air became visible. Gaygel frowned and stared hard. Alec queried: "The island?"

Gaygel shook his head, and his face was troubled.

"No. This is such a storm as I have mentioned to you. We can but hope it will pass us by—if not—"

He left his remark unfinished, but Alec could guess the implication behind his words.

Steadily the greyness drew nearer, and now a roaring noise became audible. Alec thought of typhoons, monsoons, whirlwinds, cyclones and other raging Earthly storms, but this was unlike anything known to Earth. It bore down

swiftly, an evil grey shroud, and within a matter of minutes the boat was enveloped in it.

From placidity and calm, the entire sea was changed. A mighty, howling wind whipped the dark waters into torrential waves. Spray whirled and spanged against their faces, the boat was tossed violently from side to side.

There was nothing they could do in the face of Nature's upheaval. Nothing but huddle tightly together in the bottom of the boat as it flung recklessly about on the crest of the whirling waters.

Then boat, food and the two men overturned suddenly, and Alec had time only to grasp the rifle which he had encased in waterproof leaves, and catch Gaygel's shoulder before they were sucked under the seething surface of the waters.

They came up again, struggling. Gaygel was almost ashy grey despite his tan, and his legs and arms flailed feebly to keep himself above. The boat rolled and reared upside down, a few yards away. Above the savage voice of the wind Alec called:

"Quickly—get hold of the boat!"

He suited the action to the words, and Gaygel grasped his order and followed suit. Thus they were flung and buffeted, tossed and turned and drenched and half drowned until the grey storm went as suddenly as it had come, and they were beneath the golden sky again, half dead, but still afloat!

Only a tiny surging remained to show the storm had passed that way, and working together they quickly righted the boat and climbed into it. The oars were gone, as was the food. All that remained now were the two men, one long sword, one rifle, and the boat itself.

Gaygel sank his head despairingly into his hands and shrugged helplessly.

But Alec was already working on the seats of the boat, wrenching the short pieces of wood from their light anchorage, and noting that at least they would be better than no oars at all.

He handed one to Gaygel, who shook his head:

"It is no use, Allekk. The storm has thrown us off our course. I do not know now the angle at which we must travel."

"We must try," said Alec, driving away with his seat. "At least we cannot stay here to perish."

Gaygel saw the sense of that, and together they commenced to row swiftly, ignoring the extra exertion of wielding the heavy seats.

.

Lana paced restlessly up and down the chamber in which she was held captive.

How long she had now been in the city she could not reckon. Days had passed and she had lost count after the twenty-first. She knew only that many more had since dragged

by, whilst she had been confined in this place.

After her capture, the boat she had been in had swung on at a fast pace, propelled by the fish-men, for two days and nights. Then a shoreline had come to view. This had been left behind, and the boat had progressed a further night.

The land of the fish-men had been reached half way through that night. She had been able to distinguish very little as she was carried through the streets; the buildings were of bone and shell and exquisitely constructed. It was surprising to find the ugly degenerates were clever and artistic architects.

She had been carried for a period which she judged to be two hours, and had at length been taken into one of the buildings. This was larger than the others, and intricately worked outside and in, in tiny, vari-coloured sea shells.

Here she had been scrutinised by a man who was in no way different from the rest of her captors, but who appeared to be in authority.

Had she but known it the building was the Temple of the Sea God, the man the High Priest of the strange religion.

She had been taken up stairs, along a passage, and led into a large and spacious room, minus windows. Air and light was admitted through minute crevices in the walls.

Then, after supplying her with a dish of food which seemed to be composed of raw fish mashed with fruit, her captors left her. The shotgun had been left with her, the fish-men being unaware that it was a weapon, and taking it for some part of her personal equipment.

The day dawned, and through the largest of the cracks she gazed down upon the city of the Krans. In the sunglow the buildings of shell fastened together by some kind of cement, gleamed with a hundred different shades. Splay-footed men hurried about the streets, and their female counterparts, entirely naked, moved about from house to house and place to place. Here the men too were nude, their breast pieces obviously only being donned when hunting or bound on warfare.

The land itself lay partly under water. Water, judging by the depth to which the inhabitants sank into it, which was about two feet deep.

The main pursuits seemed to consist of fishing for smaller sea creatures, and gathering fruit from the trees which grew on higher ground slightly beyond the city.

Lana tried to puzzle out why she had been brought there, why she was being held captive, but the answer eluded her. Each day two dishes of food were brought to her, and one large fruit which was mainly water. This served to satisfy thirst, and was obviously intended for that purpose.

Her dress had long since given up the struggle, and had split and snapped, and simply

fallen from her; but even with nothing more than panties and brassiere for cover the atmosphere was too warm.

There was no drapery of any description in the room, from which she might have made herself a garment. The seats were of bone and very hard; a large shell, highly polished, was usable as a mirror. Her food was brought to her on tiny shells, similar to the shells of clam fish.

Nowhere was wood in use, and she considered this strange, for a people who were advanced enough to forge rough swords of steel. The explanation which struck her later was that there was a shortage of wood in this place, and that the trees which did grow were carefully cultivated for their fruits, being precious to the fish people.

So the time passed slowly, and always she thought of Alec and wondered where he was and what he was doing, and who the tall bronzed man with him at the shore had been.

She felt sure he would make an effort to find her.

And then, one day, she heard a mighty roaring from a high stone bank beyond the city!

She endeavoured to ascertain what was taking place from the crevices, but the bank was too far distant for her to be able to distinguish more than a mass of people grouped there. The city itself was quiet and still, and none of the fish people were visible in the streets.

The sound of squelching steps along the corridor outside told her someone was approaching the room. The door—which locked by some device from the outside—was opened, and two of the fish-men entered accompanied by the one in authority.

Mumbling to each other in their toneless language, they crossed to her, tied her hands, and led her out and down into the temple. Here the High Priest muttered something before a pool of water at the far end of the temple, then she was dragged outside.

Women were waiting here, with necklaces of sea shells threaded on to grass strings. These were draped about her neck, and she was led on towards the high bank.

The entire city was assembled, thousands of them, before a great lake, of which the flat stone was a bank. On the edge of the flat stone twenty of the fish-men, dressed in their breast pieces, were assembled. They stood in two lines of ten, facing each other.

The girl was led through the crowd by the priest, and a sudden hush descended upon the multitude. The priest jabbered off some words, the fish-men roared, and then the two lines of ten started fighting savagely upon the edge of the lake.

They fought with their longswords, thrusting, cutting, hacking, without any knowledge of swordplay. Their object appeared to be to

batter each other down as rapidly as possible, or be themselves battered down.

Lana sickened as the blood spurted from gaping wounds, and turned away. But her eyes were dragged back again—there was a horrible fascination about the way they fought, silently, without cries, even when they were mortally injured!

At last ten of them lay dead and dying in the bloody space, and the victors raised their swords towards the lake and shouted in chorus.

The priest produced a bone horn from a leathery pouch, blew upon it, producing a high pitched, summoning note.

The waters of the lake swirled, and a frightful head appeared!

Unable to control herself, Lana screamed shrilly . . .

CHAPTER SIX

The creature was a terrifying, prehistoric nightmare, from the dawn of life.

Only the neck and head were visible, but those were sufficient. The neck sheered from the water to an appalling height, and along the back ran a row of bony spurs, terminating in a horn on top of the head itself. The head was small in proportion to the neck, and was shaped similarly to the head of a snake. The eyes were tiny and sunk in swollen flesh, and the nostrils cavernous and gaping. The skin was wrinkled hideously, hanging in loose grey folds round the gaping, slavering jaws, with the sharp fangs.

A ridiculously high pitched hissing sound came from the blood-red maw of the nightmare, and the head poised for a brief instant, whilst the crowd dropped to their knees and sent up a wailing chorus.

Then the head darted forward at a lightning-like speed, one of the wounded fish-men was seized in cruel teeth and borne aloft. Head, victim and all disappeared beneath the surface, and there was a confused flurry of water.

An ominous red stain spread above the spot, and a torn and mutilated portion of flesh floated to the top.

The crowd wailed again, and Lana tried desperately not to be sick.

Minutes passed; and the sea serpent reappeared. The wounded men who lay at its mercy showed no fear—stoically they waited their time and turn, watching their comrades being dragged to death with unemotional eyes.

One by one the serpent reared towards them, seized them, and took them beneath the surface to finish its bloody work there. At last there remained nothing but the blood-stained bank and lake to show where ten men had perished frightfully.

The High Priest intoned some words, and turned to Lana. The sea serpent, apparently accustomed to the ritual, made no effort to

attack the rest of the throng. It remained with its head above water, gazing evilly towards the bank, and swaying from side to side.

Lana shrank from the priest as he touched her shoulder.

But her hands were still bound, and there was nothing she could do to avert the fate which she was sure awaited her. She knew now that she was a sacrifice—knew the reason for the dainty shell necklaces, for her long captivity. It had all been leading to this day, to this very moment, to this loathsome monster from some Venesian nightmare and its foul, blood-smeared jaws!

The priest motioned to the men who had brought her, and she felt rope being thrown about her legs and tightened. A tug and she fell helplessly to the bank.

The serpent sent out a red, questing tongue, like a whip, licking round its slimy mouth. Lana shuddered . . .

The priest began to chant again, standing over her with raised arms as the moment of sacrifice drew near.

The serpent swooped beneath the surface momentarily.

The two guards picked Lana up by her feet and shoulders, hurried her to the edge of the lake, laid her down upon the long, red-hued sacrificial platform.

She lay taut and tense, her mind a numbed mass, her eyes riveted to the spot from which the serpent was due to appear . . .

The chanting ceased; the priest brought out the horn again, blew a sharp note . . .

The waters swirled, and the serpent reared its head high into the air, and swooped towards her . . .

.

Alec Caxton stirred himself, licked dry lips with his tongue and pulled himself to the gunwale of the boat.

The storm had passed, but no sign of land had they encountered. For hours they had paddled with the seats, but at last fatigue, thirst and hunger, had taken their toll. Gaygel had been the first to collapse—now he lay in the bottom of the boat, semi-conscious. Alec had not been long after him, and he too had lain for hours whilst the Sun steamed the water about them, and blistered his Earth skin which was unused to such heat.

The sea water, Gaygel had given him to understand, was not drinkable. It was, like that of Terra, salty.

The boat had ceased to move, and with it had ceased the rescue mission of its occupants. All was still and calm, nothing could be heard or seen but the thick vapour rising from the water.

Gradually the Sun went down, bringing relief to the two wearied travellers. Alec found the

strength to drag himself to the side and to peer over, without much hope.

Yet what he saw made him seize Gaygel's arm and jerk it joyfully.

Gaygel stirred and groaned, then forced himself to a sitting position. His eyes blinked, then followed Alec's pointing hand.

"Land!" Alec gasped. "See!"

Some distance away a flattish series of humps rose from the water. It was low lying, so low lying that much of it was actually beneath the surface, and yet it was LAND!

And Gaygel croaked hoarsely: "Not only land, but the land we are seeking! The description fits perfectly. The Island of the Krans! We must go carefully now . . . we must wait for darkness."

They sank back into the boat, but now their hopes were high again, and they felt refreshed mentally. Where there was land there would be food, and the means of quenching their thirsts—and after that they could continue their self-imposed task.

And so, as the purple dusk enveloped them again, they began to paddle silently towards the low lying rocks which were the shoreline of the Kran's island.

Absolute caution was essential: as Gaygel said, it was hard to hear the fish-men when they moved in water, and for all they could tell they might already be surrounded.

But nothing occurred to alarm them, and with a feeling of thankfulness they at last gained a little harbour composed of rocks and drew their boat into the side. Alec climbed out and moored it to one of the jagged shards: then on foot they crept over the rise and on.

In the gloom Gaygel could see better than the Earthian. His eyes were adjusted to the purple dusk. He pointed suddenly to a portion of higher ground, said: "There we should find fruit trees. Come."

Together they continued, and as he had said, the ground did contain a number of fruit trees, of the watery, green fruit which fed and served as a thirst quencher also. They ate two each in total silence, then turned and attempted to get their bearings, some idea of how far they were from the nearest city.

Gaygel murmured: "We must not be here when it is dawn. They will kill us. We must find somewhere to hide."

"But the games . . ." began Caxton. "Time is short."

"There is yet tomorrow," pointed out Gaygel. "And we do not know in which direction to go. Let us wait until it is light, then we may obtain some indication."

It was the only course open to them. Senseless to blunder about the alien territory in the darkness. If they were apprehended and seized, far from saving Lana, they would probably suffer the same fate.

Creeping over jutting rocks, and through three-foot deep pools of water, they crossed further into the island. The water persisted, even after they had covered a good hundred yards, and Alec began to see that the entire island might be waterlogged in this way.

At length they located a rock of reasonable proportions, which was canted steeply over, forming a small cave. Into this they crept, and remained there shivering.

They were waist deep in the encroaching sea, and uncomfortable and miserable. If their task had seemed impossible before, it seemed more so now that they were actually at their destination and knew they were two lone men, surrounded by thousands of enemies.

Fortunately their stupor in the boat had helped to restore their tired bodies, and now they had eaten and quenched their thirsts they were able to face the hours ahead until daylight with more equanimity. The night dragged slowly on . . .

The dawn came, finding them hollow-eyed and weary, but ready for a fresh start. Alec had unwrapped the rifle from the waterproof leaves, and was inspecting it.

"Eleven cartridges," he told Gaygel. "I must make every one of those tell before we've finished. What do we do now?"

Gaygel was pointing towards a collection of shell buildings near at hand: "That is a village," he said. "If you strain your eyes you will be able to see the Krans pouring out at the opposite end to us—you see them? They go in a body."

Alec nodded.

"They go to the games," Gaygel informed him. "We must follow them somehow."

They crept from concealment and started to slink along, taking advantage of the shielding rocks and pools to the full. But such a method of progress was not quick enough. At last Gaygel said: "They are getting out of sight—we must take a chance and follow more rapidly or we shall lose them."

They rose to their feet and hurried after the party. As they progressed, they forgot caution altogether, and kept their eyes fixed upon the distant Krans, anxious to keep them in sight.

It was their undoing: for from a grove of fruit trees on a rise, a Kran suddenly appeared, flourishing his sword and jabbering wildly. Alec raised his rifle, but Gaygel smiled grimly and shook his head.

"Let me handle this dog," he murmured. "We cannot afford to waste your bullets."

The Kran bore down upon them swinging his sword about his head. Gaygel stepped coolly to meet him, whipping his own weapon from its resting place. The Kran slithered to a halt some three yards from him and growled: "What do you here?"

"We seek a female," retorted Gaygel. "One

whom your fellows captured and brought here. She is fair of skin and dressed in a strange fashion."

The man scowled: "She is for the sacrifice," he snarled. "You are mad to come here. You will be killed. I will kill you."

"You may try," stated Gaygel calmly.

The Kran argued no further, but rushed in, swinging his sword unscientifically. Gaygel backed a step and parried his reckless blows, smiling. Caxton marvelled at his dexterity with the unwieldy weapon, and watched admiringly as the sword circled and swung, stopping the wild blows of the Kran.

Gaygel, feeling that this had gone on long enough, stepped back three paces quickly. The Kran rushed forward, under the impression his enemy was retreating—and Gaygel stepped swiftly aside and drove his blade through the body of the other.

The Kran, struck through the heart, dropped instantly, and Gaygel wiped his blade on the man's thighs and slid his sword back into his belt.

"Now we have lost the party through this foul," he snapped.

As he said, the party was gone from sight. Alec said: "We can but follow the same direction and trust to luck—possibly we will see others."

But they saw no more of the Krans as they continued, and time was passing so quickly that Alec was beginning to get afraid—afraid they would, even now, be too late!

Gaygel also was looking miserable as he noticed his friend's downheartedness. And finally he said: "It is of no use walking on blindly. We must find a village, enter it, and question one of those too old to attend the games, at the sword point. Do you agree?"

Alec agreed readily, and they pushed on until they beheld the shimmering, multi-coloured pattern of a village in the distance. They exercised care in approaching, but it was silent and deserted. Presumably the Krans were convinced they had nothing to fear in their own stronghold, and all the able bodied had gone to the games, to see the strange white girl sacrificed, and to worship at the altar of their God.

Gaygel and Alec trod down the street silently, prepared to face any who might remain. The place was still, still and quiet, so that when they heard breathing in one of the buildings, it was loudly audible, being a wheezy, chesty breathing.

They flung open the door and rushed into the room. An old woman was seated upon a bone chair, withered and derelict. Her eyes were so far sunken into her head as to be invisible at a casual glance, and her withered breasts sagged against her wrinkled flesh.

Gaygel had no respect for the aged and infirm. Death on Venus lurked at every corner, and the average life span was incredibly short. From what Gaygel had told him, Alec had computed

it to be at most forty-five years. Anyone passing that age had lived longer than they were entitled to in Gaygel's opinion. Maturity was reached early, and old age crept on quickly.

Gaygel presented the point of his sword to the old woman's breast and snapped: "We wish you to reply to our questions. Do you hear us?"

The old woman whined: "Eeee." She was too old to be surprised, or afraid.

Gaygel continued: "How can we reach the place at which the games take place?"

She considered deeply. She said: "The altar of the Sea God?"

"Is there any other?"

"No."

"Then how may we reach the altar?"

She shook with cackling, ancient laughter.

"Answer, old woman, or I kill!" snapped Gaygel.

"Why should I answer?" she whined. "I am not afraid to die. Why do you want to know where the games take place?"

"That is none of your business. Answer or I will kill . . ."

"Kill, then. I have not much longer now to live."

Gaygel raised his sword savagely, drew it back. But Caxton laid a detaining hand upon his arm.

"Do not kill her, Gaygel."

"But why not? She refuses to answer!"

"That may be—but upon Earth we do not kill old women."

Gaygel looked nonplussed, said: "She is our enemy. They are all our enemies. Doubtless this very crone has begat some of those dogs who now prey upon our people all over Venus."

The old woman had been inspecting Caxton closely during this dialogue, and now she said: "You are not of *his* kind. What do you here?"

"I come from afar," stated Caxton, "seeking one who was taken from me. A girl, who is my mate."

The old crone nodded: "You are kind, and although I do not understand you, I will tell you that which you wish to know if you think you can prevail against my countrymen."

Caxton bent eagerly towards her.

"Help me to the door," she whiffled.

Gaygel on one side, Caxton the other, they got her as far as the door. Here she pointed along the road with a bony finger.

"It is straight on—you must not turn or slant. Continue from here in a straight line, and you will find the lake and the altar."

Then she took a fit of coughing, and they took her back and sat her down. As they moved hurriedly away up the street they could hear her, still at it.

"How do we know she was not lying?" questioned Gaygel.

"I don't think she was. Apparently she thinks that we are going to certain death any-

way, and is not averse to speeding our ends." "I'm not sure she isn't right," said Gaygel with a grim smile. "We shall see!"

After that they continued in silence, trotting along the brown rock, splashing in and out of underlying beds of water heedlessly.

Suddenly Gaygel halted, his sensitive ears almost twitching.

"Listen!"

Alec listened, and heard it too, faintly. A roaring and shouting in the distance. Then a sudden silence. A shrill note blown on a far off horn—and following it, the scream of a woman in dreadful fear—the scream of LANA!

He started running, so madly, that even Gaygel was strained to hold the pace. They tore on, into a clump of fruit trees as the horn sounded again, close at hand. And then they burst out near a stretch of water, and stared across. Over the other side, on a flat shelf of stone, a semi-naked, bound girl, lay with frightened face. Poised above her, ready to swoop, was a monstrous sea serpent! With a curse Alec threw the rifle to his shoulder and took quick aim . . .

CHAPTER SEVEN

Fascinated with horror at the idea of being seized in those cruel, gaping jaws and torn to pieces under water by the sharp teeth, Lana stared up, too numbed to scream. And then . . .

For no apparent reason, the ungainly neck of the monster was sheered off at the water line—it was as if the base of the neck had burst with a little puff of smoke, and the length above water splashed limply to the surface, writhing terribly, and sank!

There was a mighty threshing beneath the surface, as the serpent's body entered its death throes. A long, superstitious howl of fear rose from the natives.

As long as they could remember their Sea God had ruled the land from that pool. It was their religion, and had become as holy to them as the Church and Bible to Earthmen. And now . . . their false God was destroyed at one sweep, silently and gruesomely, and they were left staring at the spreading stains on the water and the tiny waves which rippled there from the contortions of the Sea God's final struggles.

They were too paralysed to do more than stare; they had not observed the two men on the opposite bank, nor would they have ascribed the trouble to them had they done so. It was inexplicable, seeming like an act from some higher power.

So they stood, and then from the High Priest who was foremost, came a sudden shriek, which was cut off half-way out as his entire body exploded and blew fragments over the mesmerised fish-men. There was a fresh outburst of wailing.

A puff of smoke suddenly appeared in the

front ranks of the spectators; three men fell, badly injured. Blood flowed and flesh flew—Systrom's explosive rifle was indeed an awe inspiring weapon, and at this final blow it inspired awe in the fish-men. Where the sudden death was coming from they did not know; to them it savoured of the supernatural; and the front ranks suddenly broke and tried to push their way back, screeching with dread.

Those at the rear had not seen what was happening properly; they were attempting to push their way nearer to the front. And whilst the mad struggle swayed and billowed backwards and forwards, Alec used his rifle to good effect, blasting death into the ranks of the serpent worshippers.

The struggling mass broke and ran. Every male and female there streamed away in full flight, leaving only the dead and dying and wounded behind them. They streamed down towards the village, raced for their houses, slammed the doors, and locked themselves in as best they could.

Lana was still lying where they had placed her, dazed herself by the suddenness of it all. Her heart leaped to her throat as she saw the two figures racing round the lake—and recognised one of them for Alec!

Within seconds they had reached her side, and ignoring the groans of the injured, knelt and untied her bonds. Lana gasped:

"Oh, Alec . . . I . . ."

"Save it, kid," he told her. "First we have to get out of this, then we can find time to talk."

He turned to Gaygel questioningly.

"The city is quiet," said Gaygel. "But how long their terror will hold them is uncertain. Our best plan would be to catch three of their flying birds, and escape on them."

"But could they take us back to the mainland?"

"Easily. They travel at terrific speed when goaded into it. I have never handled one myself, but I have watched the Krans riding them. It is all done by the stick. A jab to the right induces a left turn, and vice versa. A jab in the neck makes them rise, one in the side brings them down. They are very tame, and in no way vicious. The Krans have bred them themselves and long use has accustomed them to being beasts of burden. They fly long distances without food or water, and will accomplish the journey which took us days, in a matter of hours."

Alec glanced doubtfully at Lana: "Think you could hold one?"

"I think so, Alec. I have already been up on one."

"Right, Gaygel. We'll do as you say. But where will we find them?"

Gaygel pointed to the left: "As we were coming I heard them squalling from that direction. Possibly there is a pen of them."

They started out, moving as quickly as they could, and listening for the noises of the giant birds. As yet there was no sound of pursuit from the city, but how long that happy state of affairs would last could not be determined. At any second the Krans might come pouring out after them, having conquered their fears and seen their sacrifice escaping with two strangers.

Gaygel said: "I hear them—this way."

They cut round behind an isolated building which might have been a storehouse, and behind this they came upon a large piece of open ground where dozens of the mighty birds strutted and croaked.

Gaygel walked swiftly into the middle of them, seized one by its neck feathers and led it out to Alec. Two more were secured in the same way, and then, armed with tiny sticks which they had picked up, the three adventurers hoisted themselves clumsily on to the flying steeds, jabbed at them with sticks, and clung for life as they were whisked into the air.

They sped over the city of the Krans, out across the lowland until, in the distance, the shoreline came into view. The island was almost deserted, most of the Krans having been at the games, and the few who were about paid no attention to what they considered was a party of their fellows bound on some expedition.

At first the going was tricky, the birds being inclined to dive and swoop for no particular reason, and sometimes to glide with outspread wings until within inches of the water, then rise steeply again.

The three hung on to handfuls of neck feathers, only occasionally releasing their holds to jab with the sticks and keep the birds heading in the right direction.

After a while they became used to their living planes, and could manage to maintain balance without using both hands. They were out over the sea now, and Gaygel said:

"Provided we don't run into any storms, and aren't followed, we will be back within a few hours."

Alec was glad to hear it; it was still hard to believe that they had had the good fortune to pull the girl out of the fire without being hurt or injured, and to have escaped so easily. He could hardly think nothing more was to happen—and he was right!

The party were just over half-way across, when Gaygel glanced round and shouted: "Look!"

Alec followed his gaze: far behind them, but rapidly growing larger every second, were a number of specks in the sky. Alec said: "Hell! They're after us. Now what?"

For answer Gaygel turned again and jabbed his steed hard in the neck; the bird set up a squawking noise and increased its pace. Alec and Lana followed the example, and goaded their birds to the utmost.

But the specks behind grew and grew, and at last became large enough to be recognised as a party of twelve or thirteen Krans, goading their birds to the limit to overtake the fugitives.

Gaygel panted: "We have not the mastery of the creatures that they have. We cannot hope to reach the forest before them—but see, over there is the coastline, and if we make for that section we will touch down close to the Gunbaya Swampland. There is plenty of vegetation there, and many spots suitable for hiding. It is our only chance—otherwise we will be overtaken."

They changed direction and struck off on the new course. The Krans, only about five hundred yards to their rear, changed also. The coast loomed up, and sand whizzed underneath them. Gaygel called: "Bring your birds low ready for touching down when I give the order. Remember, a jab to the side brings them down."

They had left the sand behind, and were tearing across a vast steaming marshland, dotted with stunted trees and tangled vegetation. Pools of bubbling, boiling sulphur streaked beneath them every few seconds, and far to the front they could see distinct grey things moving clumsily.

They had approached a patch of mist which obscured them from their enemies behind, and Gaygel yelled: "Now!"

The birds scorched down as if they would crash into the swamp but at the last minute their pace slackened, and they touched the ground gently. The three slid from their backs and Gaygel said:

"Send the birds up again—they will go home, and the Krans will see them and think we have turned round in desperation."

The fluttering of the wings of the birds which the Krans rode could be heard above. Unaware that their quarry had touched down, they swept on past the patch of mist. Gaygel said: "Now, send the birds up, riderless. By the time the Krans spot them they will be too far away for them to make out whether they have riders or not."

The other two obeyed, jabbing their mounts in the neck, and watching them soar into the misty sky. The fluttering of their great wings died away, and all was silent but for the bubbling and hissing of the springs and geysers about them.

"I am sorry we had to land here," murmured Gaygel regretfully. "It is possibly the worst portion of Venus that I know. Here there are many wild, carnivorous animals, of massive proportions. Yet it is better that we should take our chances than be captured by the Krans. There would be no mercy from them."

Bunched together they moved off, out of the mist. Gaygel shaded his eyes and peered upwards, then pointed, with a smile, to a bunch of the flying birds in the distance.

"It is as I thought," he told Alec. "They have turned and are chasing nothing. Now we can safely make our way back to my people."

Following him they walked on, and Alec seized a moment to press his lips to Lana's and to squeeze her arm. She clung to him, and he hastily explained how he had followed her and Bourbon to Venus.

"But Alec, how are we to get back?" she said worriedly.

"Your father has promised to hold the position of the transmitter beam," he told her. "If he keeps the lever at reverse, and we step into the beam, we'll go back the way we came."

"But how *can* he keep the beam in position?" she insisted. "If he has so much *movement* to cope with. I mean the Earth revolves, moves round the Sun, and Venus does the same. How can he hope to maintain a line to one small, insignificant spot? What about when the other face of the Earth is turned to Venus, or when this side of Venus is turned away from Earth?"

Alec patted her shoulder: "Your father is an expert mathematician," he told her gently. "If he can scrape up enough brain to invent a thing like the transmitter beam, he'll be able to figure out what adjustments to make to the beam to keep it on the original point. He'll lose the point naturally enough when the corresponding sides of Earth and Venus don't face. But I'm willing to bet he can pick it up again, the first possible moment."

She nodded; although the task seemed impossible to her she knew Alec was a good judge of her father's potentialities, about which she knew little. If Alec said he could do it then he *could* do it. She let it go at that.

They were threading their way through steaming tracts of marshy land which came about their knees, plodding doggedly along in the wake of Gaygel. Clumps of giant fungus sprouted up from all sides, white prickly plants leaned towards them as they went, seeming gifted with an evil intelligence, which told them there were intruders about. Recalling the grey forest plant with the vampiric traits, Alec took care to steer both himself and Lana clear of these botanical nightmares.

Then, what had seemed a dead, withered mass lying on the ground, suddenly shot upright to a height of ten feet, and reaching out with moist green arms grasped Lana firmly about the waist and drew her in. She screamed, and Alec cursed as she was wrenched from his grasp. He threw his rifle up . . .

"Keep your bullets," said Gaygel quickly. "This matter is very easily handled, and we may need every cartridge you have left a little later on. I can handle this."

He drew his sword and stepped forward, drove it into the trunk of the green plant about half-way up. And the plant SCREAMED!

The green arms unwound from the girl and she jumped to safety. The arms flailed wildly at Gaygel, who stood just out of their reach. Two cavernous hollows in the top of the trunk stared in his direction, and the thing tried to sway away as he drove anew with his sword.

There was a further screech, shrill and terrifying. The plant spewed green sap from the wounds, the arms withered and drooped, and the trunk crashed limply groundwards.

Gaygel retrieved his sword and slid it into his belt. He gave the two a smile, said: "I should have warned you about the Gola Tree. Although we here do not count them a menace. They prey upon the smaller carnivorous animals . . . those unable to protect themselves, but unfortunately for them they haven't the intelligence to realise that men are their masters. They are a weak form of life, and even without the sword it is comparatively easy to strangle them."

"They digest the captives, like the grey plants of the forest?" shuddered Alec.

"No, no. They eat, as you and I."

"And they have intelligence?"

"Very little. They lie like a mass of dead vegetation until their victim is unwary enough to step into reach. Then they attack. They *do* have the power of movement—but it is a tedious job, for they are compelled to move root by root, finding fresh ground to bed into at every foot. They can cover, perhaps, a yard in an hour."

"I think that's the strangest form of life I've yet seen," Alec commented. "How about reproduction?"

"They are bi-sexual," Gaygel told him. "They are actually closer to animal life than plant life. They lay eggs, spawn, like masses of jelly, all about the swamp. Doubtless in time they will advance far enough to be able to walk correctly, and to reason."

"It seems strange that they have not already done so, when evolution has already progressed far enough to produce men such as yourself?"

"I think the swamp district has retarded their progress. They do not exist anywhere else on Venus as far as I know, except in swampland and marsh. They are unable to take root in any harder ground."

"I'll be glad when we get out of this swamp," grunted Alec. "It gives me the screaming meemies!"

Lana shivered in agreement. Gaygel smiled and pressed forward.

"We have some way yet to go," he told them. "This swamp stretches for miles, and although the way is better nearer to the forest, the life forms are even more dangerous than any we may encounter here. There the prehistoric monsters still reign!"

The Sun had begun to set, and obviously Gaygel was troubled by this. He turned to them, said: "It is essential that we should find

somewhere reasonably safe to rest until the sunlight returns. In the darkness I would lose my way and would wander into the quicksands which abound."

Alec said: "We're in your hands, Gaygel. You know best."

Gaygel nodded and cast about him. At length he decided on a raised lump of rock which stood some fifteen feet above the marshland itself. He indicated this and the three tired adventurers walked over, squelching through mud and water, and made themselves as comfortable on it as conditions would permit.

The purple dusk stole across the land, and gradually they fell into a sleep, only Gaygel remaining awake and watchful. He smiled, a kindly smile, as he noticed Lana huddled in Alec's arms, and wondered if his friend would ever get back to Earth. If not, thought Gaygel, they could live with him in the forest.

Hours had passed, and his nostrils wrinkled suddenly as a queer odour assailed them. Then he jumped excitedly to his feet . . .

CHAPTER EIGHT

It was a ghastly, sickly, sweet smell that Gaygel became conscious of, and he at once shook his two companions by the shoulders.

Alec rubbed sleepy eyes and yawned. Lana, a lighter sleeper, was awake almost at the first touch.

"Quickly," breathed Gaygel. "We must move on—at once."

Alec grunted and stirred himself, then peered at the purple darkness.

"What the heck—it isn't dawn yet."

"We cannot wait for dawn. We must take our chance in the swamp, at least until we get clear of this."

"This? What?"

"Can you not smell it?" questioned Gaygel.

Alec sniffed: "Why, yes, now you mention it I can. A sickly kind of smell . . . what is it?"

"The red Mengas," explained Gaygel, and Alec shook his head and smiled: "What's that? Something to eat?"

"No. Something which means death for all of us if we do not escape from its radius of influence at once."

"What is it, Alec?" asked Lana as they climbed to their feet.

"Just another little Venusian pleasantry, darling," grunted Alec. "Don't worry about a thing. Gaygel has everything under control—I hope!"

Gaygel looked at him enquiringly. Alec said: "Lana wants to know what we're up against exactly, Gaygel."

Gaygel nodded: "It is perhaps the worst peril of all. On one side of this marsh there is a

vast forest of red Mengas. They are a very large, and very beautiful flower . . ."

Alec said: "I think I saw them when I arrived. Stretch for miles, don't they?"

Gaygel nodded: "They do not bloom properly until it is night," he explained. "But then, when they open fully, they release a fatal gas—many of my tribesmen have perished under it. No man can survive it for more than fifteen minutes, and even ten minutes of exposure seriously affects him, making him quite insane. We punish our thieves and murderers by driving them into it at night—if they can cross safely they are pardoned. But as yet no one has ever been pardoned. No one has crossed."

"But there isn't any forest of Mengas here," expostulated Alec. "Not in the marsh."

"No. But somewhere about there must be an odd plant growing, and this is now in bloom and giving off poisonous vapours. Even one plant is sufficient to do a great deal of damage if inhaled long enough. Fortunately I detected the odour the moment it arose. That is why we must make haste."

Alec helped Lana slide off the rock, said: "Heck, Gaygel, what other botanical monstrosities have you got on Venus?"

"There are many," replied the Venusian.

"In the heart of this swamp there are plants which, were I to describe their qualities to you, would make you shudder."

"I'm shuddering already," Alec retorted.

They started walking again, following Gaygel. By the time they got out of range of the deadly plant, their heads were swimming a little, and they halted to rest. Gaygel said: "It is well that I remained awake. Another fifteen minutes of exposure and none of us would have been capable of moving."

They found a fresh anchorage shortly, but Alec and Lana also remained awake this time. Their appetite for sleep had been entirely taken away. The three sat round in a group, talking, with Alec acting as interpreter, for Gaygel could not understand the English words he had been taught when they were spoken by the high voice of a woman. Indeed, it appeared to grate on his nerves when Lana spoke at all, and Alec said: "Can't you stand the sound of a female voice, Gaygel?"

Gaygel shook his head: "I can stand it, Allekk, but it jars upon my nerves. It is the clear, high tone I think. Here we all speak in exactly the same tone."

"You're lucky you aren't on Earth," Alec grinned. "There the women do all the talking. Never give it a rest from morning to night."

Gaygel looked surprised: "And do the men allow it?"

"They can't help it. Can't get a word in edgewise."

"Then," pointed out Gaygel, reasonably.

"They should cut off the tongues of the women!"

Lana said: "What on Earth are you two looking at me for?"

"Gaygel was just expounding a solution of mankind's biggest problem, honey," said Alec. "How to prevent the eternal female from continually opening her mouth and contracting her vocal cords."

"Oh, was he? And what's his solution?"

"He suggests we employ surgery and amputate the tongues of all women."

Lana glared at Gaygel, and Gaygel, guessing that his views had been put to her, smiled. For the three of them, engaged in talking about each other's worlds, the night passed swiftly. There were no further alarms, and gradually the mistiness lightened and a golden tint crept into the air.

Gaygel said: "We can move on, now."

Together they started along the trail back again. The vegetation was slowly changing here, as they drew on to the firmer ground. The plants were taller and more colourful, and trees grew in clumps of varying shades. Tropical flowers waved gaily with an animation entirely their own.

But Gaygel was more cautious than ever. He said: "Here we may encounter all manner of animals—have your rifle ready, Alekk."

Alec nodded: "We aren't out of the wood yet, eh?"

"We are not even in the wood," said Gaygel puzzledly. "That is much farther on."

Alec smiled: "It's a figure of speech, Gaygel."

Gaygel said: "I do not understand that. Do you mean that on your world speech has a figure?"

"Skip it. Maybe I'll explain it some other time."

Gaygel shrugged and they broke out into a small glade—and confronted a monster the sight of which made their blood turn to ice, despite all they had been through!

To Alec it dimly resembled a prehistoric dinosaur with wings. It was huge, towering above them, staring at them with unwinking, lidless eyes. Its savage jaws hang open, its bowed, stumpy legs were planted in a position which could launch it at them at any moment.

A terrible roaring issued from its throat as it faced them, and Gaygel paled under his tan and said: "Keep absolutely still! It may not attack..."

But Alec had been already swinging his rifle into position, and the movement seemed to irritate the beast. It gave one prolonged roar, tensed... and Gaygel yelled: "Run—it's going to charge!"

He flung himself hastily to one side as he spoke, and Lana turned also, but tripped over a protruding root. She scrambled to her feet again, white with terror.

Alec had seen her plight, and now he raced back and stood in front of her, as the monster, with amazing speed, started its mad charge.

Its feet thundered on the ground, its head was viciously forward, snaked tongue shooting out and in, pig-like eyes gleaming with fury. Like an express train running amok it trampled towards them.

Calm and possessed in moments of crisis, Alec stood sturdily where he was to meet its rush. And when it was within a matter of five yards, he pulled the trigger of the rifle, aiming for the nightmare's small skull.

The thing reared at that instant, and the bullet buried in its chest wall, exploded. Frightful screams tore from its throat, but the charge was halted. Alec raised the rifle again, pulled the trigger—and found, with a shock of horror, that it was empty!

He turned; Lana was scrambling behind a large rock near at hand. Gaygel was shrieking from the branch of a high tree, shrieking to him to run. Alec started running...

Behind him the wounded, enraged animal thundered in pursuit, its eyes flaming with wickedness. For its size it travelled fast, and Alec knew his chances of outpacing it were slight.

He turned... the thing was scarcely twenty yards away now, bearing straight down upon him bellowing its pain and fury. Another few seconds and...

He raced into a clump of small trees, and he could hear them smashing aside as the beast tore after him. Then he was through, and had seized the only chance which presented itself.

There was a small pool of limpid water to one side. He threw himself full length into it, ducked below the surface, and remained quiet, holding his breath.

Even with his ears flooded he could hear the racket the thing made as it charged past...

He brought his head above again, watched the tail end of it fast vanishing into the riotous vegetation. He heaved a long sigh of relief and thankfulness, picked himself out wearily and returned to his comrades in adventure.

In her emotion Lana threw herself into his arms, and the look of relief in Gaygel's eyes was patent.

When the excitement had died down, and nerves were once more restored, Alec said: "Well, whatever crops up now will have to be faced with fists and sword, Gaygel. The rifle is empty."

There was no reason for delaying further, there. They went forward again eagerly, Gaygel having explained that they were almost at the edge of the marshland.

Once they halted whilst Gaygel plucked the fruits which were safe to eat, then they went on, eating as they went.

At last Gaygel pointed ahead; rising above the level of the watery ground they were now on,

was a long, green-covered plain. Far to one side could be seen the tops of tall trees. To the other a sea of red Mengas.

"The forest is over there," pointed Gaygel. "Soon we will be with my people again."

They hurried towards the greensward, broke on to it jubilantly.

And suddenly Alec paused and said: "Good gosh! Isn't this the spot we landed at?"

Lana stared round her, said: "It certainly looks like it."

"It is! There's the knoll of ground I climbed to look for you and Bourbon—at that rate we must be standing pretty near the exact place at which the beam touches down!"

He walked round in a circle excitedly, and at last called to Lana and Gaygel: "Here—I've found the spot!"

They went over, found him pointing to a small dip in the ground.

He said: "This is it—I'm sure of it." Without a word Lana stepped out to the place at which he was pointing. Nothing happened.

She walked round slowly, hoping the beam would be somewhere at hand. Still nothing happened.

Alec sighed: "That's that. I know that's the right place. It seems the beam isn't there any more. What do we do *now*?"

Gaygel said: "You can live in the forest with my people." He seemed quite pleased at the prospect.

Alec stared round despairingly; and his eyes fell upon a scrap of paper . . . he hastened forward and retrieved it. It was written on, in pencil. It read:

"To whoever may be able to read this—Alec or Lana or Bourbon,

I am sending this message up by the beam. I am still waiting. But it is not as simple as I had thought to maintain the position of the beam in one point. Therefore, read this carefully, and act upon the instructions under:

I have obtained some signal rockets. During the hours when the beam is focussed upon, or near, the point at which you found yourselves, I will set one of these rockets in the apparatus each hour, and set a time fuse. If you find one of these notes which I have sent intermittently, look for signs of a rocket. Nearby you will find the reddish tinge which marks the radius of the beam.

I shall continue this scheme until I run out of rockets, then I will send fresh directions.

Reverton Systrom."

Lana listened as Alec read the note. Said: "How long do you think that has been here?"

"Not long," he told her. "It isn't damp from the atmosphere as yet. In fact, I should say it wasn't sent more than a day or two ago . . ."

He explained to Gaygel what had happened. Gaygel said he would collect some of his fellows and help the search. He sped off in the direction of the forest, leaving Alec and Lana to start looking for the rocket bursts.

They watched all that day, and slept in the open. The next morning Gaygel's tribe joined them, and the search widened. And Gaygel himself was the first to meet with luck.

The first rocket was more than five miles away, but it was without doubt, one of Professor Systrom's landmarks. From that first they saw others . . . one, two, three of them. Alec had penned a note on the reverse of the Professor's, and had wrapped it about a lump of stone. The moment the reddish tinge was located under the point at which the last rocket had appeared, he threw the stone into the faintly tinged circle of grass and had the satisfaction of seeing it vanish, in a matter of seconds—into nothingness.

They had located the beam!

And all being well at the other end, the road back was *open*!

Alec gripped Gaygel's hand firmly, shook it hard. Gaygel was unhappy—a great comradeship had sprung up between the man of Venus and the man from Earth. The idea of parting made the young Venusian sad.

"We'll be back," Alec told him, slapping his shoulder. "Until we are, thanks for everything—a million. Without you I'd never have got anywhere—and certainly wouldn't have accomplished the impossible."

Gaygel nodded simply: "I do not like you to go," he said. "But of course you wish for your own kind."

"Why not come back with us?" Alec suggested.

Gaygel shook his head gravely: "I too wish for my own home and people. I should not be happy. But I will remember you . . . and you will remember Gaygel . . ."

"I will remember you, Gaygel," nodded Alec. "And some day I will come back again—your people and mine must be friends, and we must lend you weapons to fight the fish-men. Until then . . ."

He placed his arm about Lana, waved for the last time, and stepped with her into the radius of the beam.

Rapidly the two Earth beings vanished from sight.

And long after his kinsmen had returned to their haunts, Gaygel, the man of Venus, stood gazing towards the spot at which his Terrestrial friends had vanished . . .

At length he turned with a sigh, and tramped slowly back to the forest . . .

THE END.

"MARY HAD A LITTLE ?"

By N. Wesley Firth

(And everywhere that Mary went the . . . ? was sure to go. It was exactly like the old nursery rhyme—only it wasn't a *lamb* that Mary had! In fact, it wasn't quite certain what it was!)

CHAPTER ONE

NOW I'VE SEEN EVERYTHING!

I was prepared to see something screwy up at Doc Chester's place. There always was something screwy there, even if it was only the Doc himself. Trouble with Doc Chester was his obsession for inventing things, any kind of things from patent mouse traps which cost about a dollar for each mouse they caught, to ingenious devices for cutting bread, which took about as long to operate as if you'd cut the loaf with a buzz saw.

They used to call him the Mad Magician of Mississippi, and though he might not have been precisely nuts, he certainly *was* a little screwy!

Times he'd used me to test some of his more diabolical inventions were beyond count. I'd allowed myself to be subjected to buffetings, poundings and punchings in order to see if one of his patent burglar catchers worked right; I'd submitted to stepping into an icy bath of water to determine if a lotion he'd mixed would maintain body heat in the next thing to zero; and amongst other things I'd also permitted a mad dog to bite me, on his assuring me I wouldn't get hydrophobia because the new ointment he'd thought up would take care of that! The result was I HAD got hydrophobia, and bad too.

You may wonder why I stood for all this, and that being so I suppose I'd better tell you. It was because of Mary!

I guess you guys would have stood for plenty if you'd had a girl like Mary crazy about you too. She was Doc Chester's daughter, and she worshipped the old boy, in spite of his screwball inventions, or maybe perhaps because of them.

Yep, Mary was sure a peach as peaches go, and they don't go any better than Mary.

I had used to object when the Doc asked me to co-operate in his experiments, but Mary had used to look at me as if I was something which just crawled out of the damp woodpile, and say: "Joe! Don't you WANT to help the progress of civilisation?", and when she looked at me in that way, and started opening her pretty mouth to say I needn't bother to call again, brother, I was sunk!

Well, as I was saying, this time I'd just got over the bite and was going along to see Mary, the first time in two weeks. I was pretty sure some new invention would be waiting for me to step

in as a guinea pig, but this time I was set on having it out and refusing point blank to have anything to do with it.

I turned in at the gates of the isolated joint the Doc used. It was a big four-story place, white marble, and fashioned in the architecture of the old South. It was planted around with magnolias, and the perfume on a summer night was very exclusive—if you go for that kind of thing. I don't—it always gives me a pain in the nose!

I'd got half way up the path when a voice said:

"Well, well, Joseph, my dear boy! How nice to see you back. Are you quite well again?"

I knew the voice, but I'm darned if I could see the owner about. I had a look in the magnolias on either side, and behind a handy tree. He wasn't there. I looked towards the house, saw the front door was shut. No one was on the porch either!

"Hey, Doc," I called. "Come out wherever you are . . . where are you?"

"Here, Joseph," he said quite plainly. "Here, my boy. Have you come along to see Mary?"

I thought I was going nuts myself. The voice was close at hand, but the Doc wasn't. Not a sign of him. I got a crazy notion that maybe he'd discovered the secret of invisibility.

"Use your eyes, Joseph," he told me. I used them. The voice wasn't far away, couldn't be. It sounded like it was almost on top of me . . . ON TOP OF ME! IT WAS!

I looked up, and there, about twenty feet in the air, sitting in a cross-legged position on NOTHING was Doc Chester!

I had to have time to take this in. I stood and goggled at him as if I was seeing things, and he sat there calmly smoking a cigarette and flicking ash down on to me with an airy finger. At last I said: "Listen, are you trying to drive me crazy? What is this gag? Come down offa that, whatever it is you're on, and stop playing tricks on a guy who's a friend of the family. I know you're suspended on wires, so don't say you aren't."

He chuckled and passed his hand over his head and turned and swept his hand all round him. He said: "It's no trick. There aren't any wires here, Joseph. I'm just sitting . . . and I can't get down unless I go back through the door."

"You are nuts," I told him decidedly. "What's the door to do with it?"

"Everything," he replied. "It's my most significant discovery to date. You'll agree when you hear the full facts of the case."

"One of us is mad, and it isn't me," I grunted. "This is some sort of hypnotic stunt, isn't it? Like the Indian rope trick?"

"Not at all, not at all. Perhaps you'll believe Mary if *she* tells you it isn't any trick? Will you?"

I said: "Yes . . . maybe I will. Where is she?"

"I'll call her out . . . Mary—Mary, Joseph's *here!*"

Well, I was sure he was loco now, sitting there twenty feet in the air and hollering for Mary when the door was closed and she was probably somewhere at the back of the house out of hearing. But the next minute a dainty leg was inserted through the third floor window, followed by a cute hunk of girlish body, and then a face.

"Mary," I yelped. "Are you nuts too? Get back in there—you'll fall and break your neck!"

I heard her laugh, rippling laughter, then she started walking **OVER THE AIR** towards her father!"

"Don't be silly, Joe," she cooed. "It's perfectly solid up here—we're on solid ground!"

I groaned and turned round, started to walk towards the gate. She shouted: "Joe—where are you going, dear?"

"Back to the hospital," I told her. "To see a good psychiatrist! That's where. And I'll unbutton and tell him about my old uncle Ben who thought he was a coffee percolator, and maybe he'll be able to save me before it's too late. So long."

The Doc chuckled: "You aren't seeing things, Joseph."

"The hell I'm not?"

"Not at all. We really are on solid ground up here—but it's invisible to our eyes as well as yours . . . I'm not quite sure which dimension we've stumbled into, so I've called it Chester's Dimension for want of a better name. Now do you understand?"

But with one groan I'd sunk down on to the pathway and buried my head in my hands . . .

The Doc and Mary walked back towards the window, went inside the house, and a few minutes later came out the front door and helped me into the library. Doc gave me a drink while Mary soothed my brow with her hand, and twisted my hair with her fingers.

When I'd gulped down some of the Doc's best brandy he sat down opposite to me and started talking:

"Sorry you had such a shock, Joseph. We

should have told you first—but I wanted to surprise you."

"You did *that*," I told him.

He smiled: "Yes, we did that. It happened this way . . . I was devising a window frame which would act as a preventive for pests like mosquitoes and flies. The idea was that I had an electric current playing across the window from one side to the other, so that to pass through it spelled death to any insects. That way they couldn't get into the place.

"Well, I got my contacts set, fixed my electromagnets, and switched on. Now I don't know exactly what I'd done in the construction, but it didn't kill flies or mosquitoes. I left the window open and they poured in. I thought the current wasn't working, so I put my hand through the frame and . . . believe it or not but I touched something **SOLID** right outside the window where there wasn't anything!"

I moaned and passed my hand over my brow. He went on with a pleased smile: "Yes, Joseph, that really happened. Of course I investigated farther then, and found I could actually get out of that window and **WALK** on **EMPTY AIR**! There was something there, an invisible, smooth surface, like a tarmacadam roadway, only it goes on and on for Heaven knows how far. I realised then that I'd stumbled on to the secret of some dimension. The current which charged my body when stepping from the window must have so effected changes as to make it possible for me to enter this dimension. But my eyes weren't attuned to it, therefore, although I could walk on it, I couldn't see. My eyes stayed in my own dimension, as did my three dimensional body.

"I thought perhaps I was mad until I got Mary to try it, and then when she walked on air as well, I knew I'd hit the greatest scientific discovery of the age!"

I shook my head and took more brandy: "I don't believe it!"

He stood up and took my arm: "In that case you must try it for yourself. Don't be afraid—it won't *bite* you!"

"Your last experiment did," I pointed out, rubbing my leg.

"Pah, a mere bagatelle," he grunted. "Compared to this my past experiments have been merely fool's work . . ."

"Sure, with me as the fool," I snorted. "Nope, Doc, I don't think I care to risk my neck again . . . I may wind up . . ."

"**JOE!**" said Mary in shocked accents. "Joe! Don't you *want* to help progress? Don't you *care* about the advance of science?"

"Sure I do—but I don't see why it should advance over my dead body!"

She sniffed, and her blue eyes looked at me scornfully. "Very well, Joe. If you're such a coward it might be as well if we didn't see . . ."

"Okay, okay," I muttered. "I'm your

monkey. Let's go and see—or maybe I should say let's go and FEEL—this other dimension of yours. At least I guess I can't get bitten twenty feet high!"

And that was kidding myself if you like!

Anyway we went up to the Doc's lab., on the third floor, and he took me right over to a long open window. There was a queer kind of frame arrangement hooked round the woodwork, and from the sides of this came a glow, like the glow you get from Neon tubes.

Doc said: "Step right up, Joseph, and plant your feet firmly on to Chester's Dimension."

"Yeah? You sure I won't fall twenty feet and break my neck?"

"No, no, no, my boy . . . here, I'll go first if you like."

So I let him go first. After all, I figured if somebody had to break their neck it might as well be Doc Chester. It was *his* dimension!

Mary followed him out, then standing there they beckoned to me.

I slid one leg through the window. Seemingly the surface level of this dimension started about two feet under the window ledge. I found a footing, then cautiously shoved my other leg out. I stood upright, not liking to let go of the window frame right away. But I needn't have worried! There was a smooth, solid surface under my feet. I let go and started to walk.

First off it was tough keeping balance on something that was invisible. You couldn't see where to put your dogs. But when I'd walked a few steps I got the hang of it, and sauntered over to Mary and the Doc.

"Say, this is wonderful . . . I can't believe it yet. There's a fortune in it somewhere."

"There is," agreed the Doc. "But first of all I want to experiment further. Before I make the knowledge public property I must try and fix it so that walking through the frame gives vision as well as feeling."

We wandered along to the front of the garden, then sat down over the deserted roadway. In the distance a cloud of dust came flying up, and turned out to be the district messenger on his bicycle. As he whizzed towards us I yelled: "Hiya, Dokey."

He looked up; his handle bars wobbled, his bike bucked, and he went shooting into the hedge as if he was jet propelled. He picked himself up, gave us one scared look, jumped on his iron, and pedalled away down the road fast. I grinned.

Then I noticed Mary; she was sitting beside me, moving the palm of her hand up and down on a level with her waist, and murmuring in a pre-occupied way: "Ooochie, koochie, poochie—"

"Hey," I said. "What's eating you?"

"What do you mean, Joe?" she said in surprise.

"You're acting funny—stroking nothing, and

talking pet talk to empty space. What gives?"

She looked down in amazement at her hand, then stroked some more and said: "It—it *isn't* empty space! Something—something furry's here!"

"What?" I gasped, and Doc peered at her hand.

"It is. Feel for yourself. It has fur like a cat, only it's smaller and rounder, like a round ball. It's got a mouth and eyes and nose too. Feel."

I stuck my hand out to feel—I always was a chump. There was a funny kind of squeaking noise, then I let out a howl and jumped to my feet. I stared at the blood oozing out of my index finger. I gulped: "Hell, can you beat that? It tried to *eat* me!"

"Nonsense," Mary said sternly. "It wouldn't. Whatever it is it's as gentle as a lamb . . . you *prodded* it, that's what."

"I'd like to prod it with the business end of a carving knife," I growled, wrapping my handkerchief round my finger.

The Doc said: "Here, let me feel it . . ." and stuck out his hand . . . then said: "Ouch! It *bit* me . . . why the . . ."

I laughed out loud, and felt a bit better myself. I said: "You aren't scared of a little nip, are you Doc? It's all in the name of science you know. Progress and all that! How does it feel to be a martyr?"

CHAPTER TWO

EVERYWHERE THAT MARY WENT . . .

When the Doc had gotten over his bite, and cussed a bit at the invisible animal—if it *was* an animal—we went back into the house through the window frame.

Mary seemed a bit reluctant to leave her new pet, but when I pointed out I had tickets for a show in town and we could hardly allow an umpteenth dimensional tyke or whatever it was, to rule our lives, she seemed to see the point. So we went in.

Well, Mary had to go and get changed and washed up, so the Doc and I sat round talking about his discovery and trying to work out some practical use for it. Far as I could see there wasn't any at all except maybe as an illusion for stage magicians, but Doc said he felt sure the thing could be put to some *practical* use: "How about holidays in the new dimension," he said.

I told him I wouldn't holiday in *THAT* dimension for all the gold in King Solomon's Mines, and in that irritating way he has he launched into a sermon about the improbability of any such mines existing, and we lost track of the subject.

Mary came down at length and we had a light tea, and then said so long to the Doc, who

said he'd stay at home and work on his new gadget.

"Don't get into any trouble, Dad, will you?" Mary pleaded, for she knew the old coot of old. He promised he wouldn't, said all he meant to do was to add something to his dimensional doorway which should make vision possible as well.

So then we got going, and it was a pleasant walk into town, with a soft breeze playing through the trees and the sun just sinking behind the gasworks, and the smell of new mown hay about. It would have been perfect but for one thing—

I could hear, over Mary talking of this and that, a tiny patter of feet or paws alongside of us, and after a while it began to rile me.

"Hey, there's a dog about," I said, staring all round. "I can hear it."

"Silly boy," Mary smiled. "There isn't any dog and there isn't a sound . . ."

"You wouldn't have heard it anyway above the sound of your own voice," I told her, "but if you stay silent for about ten seconds and keep walking, you can't miss it."

She shot me a look that should have shrivelled me up and would have done if I hadn't been so thick-skinned. We walked on in dead silence, and then—pat-a pat-a pat-a pat—

"See," I said. "There it is again. There's a dog around."

Mary was looking peculiar and I gave her an alarmed stare.

"What's the matter?" I asked her. "You look as if you'd seen something horrible."

"The trouble is that I haven't *seen* anything," she said. "But I can *feel* something! Rubbing against my legs now we've stopped!"

I listened. There was a purring sound. I said: "Heck. It sounds like a cat . . ."

"I know what it is," Mary said slowly. "It's that—that thing—you know, from Dad's dimension. IT'S COME BACK THROUGH THE FRAME WITH US."

"Not with *us* it hasn't," I said hurriedly. "I don't want any part of it. IT'S yours—and you're welcome."

"But Joe, what can I do? It seems to be following me . . ."

"Just like the nursery rhyme," I grunted. "Mary had a little . . . ? What?"

"Oh, well," she exclaimed. "I'll see if it'll go home." She turned round and stared at the empty roadway and said: "Go home, bad dog—I mean . . . well . . . oh, I'd better give it a name. I'll call it Chester after father."

"He will be pleased," I grunted. She snapped: "Go home Chester. There's a good dog—there's a good Chester."

There was a whiffling squeak from beside us. I said: "Here, let me try . . ." I bent down and picked up a stick. I heard an ominous

growl from near my ankles as I raised it. I hesitated.

I gave the stick to Mary, said: "You'd better throw it. The runt must think I'm going to beat it off. Go ahead, throw it."

She took the stick, raised and threw it, shouting: "Go get it, Chester—go get it! Good dog—oh, well, good Chester."

We waited. I said: "Has it gone?"

She shrugged: "How should I know."

Then the stick, which had travelled about fifty feet, suddenly became agitated, picked itself up, and came racing back towards us. It dropped at Mary's feet and there was a panting sound! She picked it up again and threw it. I said: "Run like hell."

We ran like hell; we ran right down the road and raced into the outskirts of the town. We slowed to a walk and I grinned: "See? Just leave it to your Uncle Joseph—he knows the way. The thing is probably back out on the road looking for us now."

"Is it?" Mary said peculiarly. Then what's that piece of stick doing travelling along at the back of your left leg?"

We stopped again and I said: "I'll take a firm stand with it. Show the damned thing who's boss round here. Watch this . . . Go home, Chester . . . at once. Do you hear me? Home, boy!" and I flung an imperative arm in the direction of the Chester home. Mary tugged at my sleeve and said: "Stop it, Joe. People are looking!"

They *were* looking at that. Three or four rubbernecks gaping at me and grinning all over their silly faces. I snorted and walked on with a red face. Chester still pattered behind us.

We got to the theatre, and joined the mob struggling to go inside with their booked tickets. There was a jam in the foyer, and a sudden squeal of agony. A fat guy in front turned round and said: "Did I tread on somebody's toe?"

Then he let out one yell of pain and jumped high in the air. Without stopping to tell him it was just Chester, we hurried in.

The show had started and we jostled past dozens of folks who had just settled down to enjoy themselves. I was saying prayers under my breath that Chester had beat it. If it took it into its little furry head to bite a few legs round here there'd be a riot.

Nothing happened until well towards the intermission. Then Mary said, suddenly: "Stop it, Chester! Chester, *stop* it!"

"What's wrong now?" I whispered.

"It's rubbing itself against my leg again . . . it's tickling. If it doesn't stop I'll go mad! Chester—don't *do* it!"

For a moment there was silence. Then: "Chester—oh, oh! Stop rubbing my leg, Chester, PLEASE!"

A thick set guy behind suddenly leaned over

and grabbed hold of my clean collar. He lifted me half out of my seat, growled: "Is this punk annoyin' youse, lady?"

"Oh, no, thank you."

"You said he was rubbing your leg, din' you?"

"That's Chester," gulped Mary, flummoxed.

"I don't care what his name is, I know his kind, and if he don't quit it I'll pin his ears back! You hear, Mister?"

"Er, yeah, okay, okay, Samson," I mumbled.

"I hear you."

"We come here," pointed out the burly character, "to hear the show, not your lady friend yelping out 'cos you're getting cute. So quit it!"

He let go and I hissed: "For Heaven's sake don't yawp any more, Mary, or I'll be a hospital case before you know it."

"But I can't help it, Joe, honestly. It's driving me silly tickling . . . I, oh . . . OH! . . . Chester . . ."

There was a rumble from the tough baby behind. I grabbed Mary's hand and said: "C'mon. This is where we head out before I get my new set of uppers knocked in the dust. C'mon . . . quick."

"You'll just have to get rid of it some way," I told her. "Why, if it sticks to you all the time, just think what it'll mean. Fancy having that on our honeymoon . . ."

She glanced at me sideways. "That's the first time you've mentioned honeymoon, Joe."

"I've been thinking we could get married sooner than I planned on," I told her. "I got a raise at the office, and . . . well, how about two weeks next Sunday?"

"Oh, Joe, darling . . ."

She moved in closer and I made to put my arm round her. There was a low growl and a snapping of jaws from just below. I hastily jumped away. I said: "See? See what I mean? We couldn't possibly have it on our honeymoon, could we?"

"Nun-no—I guess not. I was getting kind of fond of it though. But I know what you mean—it wouldn't do at all on a honeymoon, would it?"

We walked on in silence, and we didn't see the tough egg until he stepped right out in front of us from a roadside bush. He had a nasty looking blackjack in his hand, and his face might have been taken straight from the make up script of a Boris Karloff movie. In addition to this he was as high as a house and about twice as broad, and dressed in as choice a selection of cast off garments as I had ever seen. He wagged the blackjack at us and said: "Hold yer hosses, palsy."

I held 'em. He continued: "Youse as got a nice kind face—an' the lady. Youse'll lend

a helping hand to a poor, downtrodden, starvin' poet, won't youse?"

I looked at him: I said: "A pleasure. What is it you want?"

He reflected: "I reckon about ten bucks or so would be enough to keep me while I get my last sonnet accepted. It's by way of bein' a masterpiece—you'll be patrons of the arts."

"If you think I'm good for a handout of ten bucks . . ." I began, and then broke off and looked at the blackjack which he was stroking meditatively. He said: "You ain't?" in a pained kind of way. "Ain't you got no soul, Mister? Ain't you?"

He made a tentative swish with the blackjack in the direction of my nose. I said hastily: "Sure ten'll be enough, friend?"

"You can make it twenty, palsy, if you insist," he said with gratification. "And maybe the lady'd be good enough to lend me ten also?"

Mary said indignantly: "I will not. I don't believe for one moment you're a poet! Hit him, Joe!"

"I would as soon hit Joe Louis," I muttered.

She glared at me: "You aren't afraid of this dirty hobo, are you?" she yapped. "Joe—hit him."

The tough egg made a threatening step towards her and reached out. I had to do something then of course. So I swung at him, then sank down to my knees in answer to the crack on the crust he gave me with the blackjack. I counted stars, and behind them I could see the tough egg grabbing hold of Mary—and then—

He gave a sudden shriek of surprise and pain, let go of her, and glared downwards. He scratched his head and looked mystified. He reached for Mary again—and gave a further yell and clutched frantically at the seat of his pants. A large patch of nothingness was suddenly where he had been, and looking up I saw him making good time down the road, yelling loudly.

I picked myself up, and Mary said: "Good old Chester. Leave it to him. Wasn't it marvelous the way he chased that bully while you lay down there too frightened to do anything?"

I said: "Why in heck did he wait until I'd been knocked down?"

"Every girl should have one," said Mary admiringly, ignoring my remarks. "Think what wonderful house dogs they'd make."

"No thanks," I grunted. "One Chester's enough in this world. And if you value me and my attentions, you'll get your Dad to send him right back through the window the minute we get home."

"Oh, but Joe . . ."

"Either you do that or I'm saying goodbye right now."

She looked as if she'd cry. I said: "Can't you see honey? It wouldn't be possible to always tote a critter like that round with you. It'd cause *more* trouble . . ."

"But who's going to protect me if Chester doesn't?" she said meaningly.

"I will, of course. I may say . . ."

"I won't be getting much protection on your current showing, will I?" she said in a nasty tone of voice. Then she softened almost at once: "I'm sorry I said that, Joe. Forgive me. All right, if you say so, Chester goes back. We'll think of some way to trap him and put him into his proper world."

Satisfied we walked on. Until just as we were getting near to her home, and I was going to steal a kiss before we went in, a large square of ragged trouser seat came gambolling up the road towards us, and Mary said: "Oh, look, Joe. Good Chester, good boy. You chased him, didn't you? You'll look after your Auntie Mary and your Uncle Joe, won't you, darling."

I gnashed my teeth together and we went in, the trouser seat coming right along with us. We went upstairs and found Doc in his lab. He was sitting amidst a pile of junk, old valves, tubes, coils, and other odds and ends. He seemed upset.

Without wasting any time I started telling what was what round the place, and about Chester. Chester bore out my story by putting the portion of the hobo's trouser seat down at Mary's feet and wuffling a bit.

The Doc looked interested and asked questions. Then said: "Well, that's very intriguing, Joseph. I'd wondered if the creatures of that other dimension could adapt themselves to our world. Seems they can, doesn't it?"

"Doc," I told him. "We've decided, Mary and me. He has to go back. But fast. We have to trap him and shove him out and shut the window on him, pronto."

The Doc shook his head and looked sorrowful. "I'm afraid we can't, Joseph," he observed sadly. "He'll just have to stay where he is—Mary must put up with him until we think of something."

"But why can't he go back?" I yelped. "He came that way, didn't he? Okay, then let him go back by the same route."

The Doc stood up and pointed down to the litter round his feet. He seemed uncertain of himself, as if he wasn't quite sure what he would tell me. There was something on what he called his mind.

At last he said: "We can't send him back, Joseph, because tonight, whilst I was experimenting with the frame, I blew the whole thing up—and the worst of it is that I haven't the faintest idea of how to put it together again!"

CHAPTER THREE

THE . . . ? WAS SURE TO GO

Well neither Mary nor I could think of a thing to say for some moments, but at last I said: "But—do you mean you won't *ever* be able to fix it so the thing can go back to its own dimension?"

Doc shook his head. "I'm sorry, but I never keep a plan or formula. I just throw the things I invent together on the spur of the moment, using whatever comes to hand. I've stripped the apparatus down now, and I've been trying all night to get it to work again without any luck. But Chester can't be so great a burden. Might be quite useful."

"Not to me," I told him, reproachfully. "Best thing to do is send to the pound and have him destroyed."

"You'll do no such thing," snapped Mary indignantly. "If that's how grateful you are after Chester's saved us from a bad beating up . . ."

"Not *us*," I pointed out. "I had *mine*—he just saved you."

"Don't quibble," she snapped. "If Chester can't get back to where he belongs then I'll let him stay with me. I'm going to get something for the poor dear to eat!" She flounced from the room, and I began to think that after all she didn't really want the damned thing to go and was glad about the Doc having queered the apparatus.

The Doc and I sat down to talk it over calmly, but we couldn't think of any way out. If Mary said Chester had to stay, then Chester had to stay, and that was that. The point now was would I stay also?

I did stay. And if you think I'm as crazy as the Doc, well, that's because you haven't seen Mary. I don't mind telling you I'd put up with plenty to keep her, and the act about walking out that I put up back on the road home was an act, and nothing more. What's more I guess Mary knew that.

"Cheer up, Joseph," said Doc. "Perhaps familiarity will breed contempt—"

"The same may go for Chester," I told him. "He may get round to biting me as a matter of course, sort of daily routine. Doc, you must help me. You know I can't do a walk out on Mary, I'd sooner part with my right hand . . ."

His eyes gleamed: "Joseph, do you *mean* that?"

"Cross my left vest pocket," I told him.

"If I help you to get rid of the thing, and see that you still keep Mary, would you let me have your right hand for an experiment I propose?"

"Nix," I said suddenly. "When I said my

right hand I was just using a figure of speech . . ."

"Your left will suffice, my boy . . ."

I eyed him closely. He was quite serious about it. I sighed:

"Heck, why did I have to fall for the daughter of anyone as whacky as you, Doc? Couldn't I just have picked a nice, homely dame with a father who wasn't overdue for a strait waistcoat?"

He smiled. I said: "I consider you ought to help me anyway. You got me into this—now get me out. And I mean without me forfeiting either of my arms . . . and that goes for legs and feet and other parts of the body as well," I added hurriedly.

He looked depressed and murmured: "A pity. I had a great idea for a fluid which would preserve full life in the human hand after it had been severed. It would be invaluable in surgery."

"Why not use one of your own?" I suggested.

Without much enthusiasm he said: "I'll think it over."

"Do that. And while you're at it think over what we're going to do with Chester!"

The door opened then and Mary came back in. She was carrying a tray loaded down with small saucers. She started setting them down in a line, ten of them. She called: "Here Chester, nice Chester. Come and get it."

Then she stood back and watched, saying to us: "I've brought him a good selection so he should be able to find something he likes. There's cheese, nuts, meat, chicken, crackers and greens. To drink I've brought milk, water, coffee and whisky."

Chester evidently was no piker. He plumped right off for the chicken and the whisky, and in short order packed them away. Then he went on to the rest of the stuff, and inside ten minutes only ten empty saucers testified to the fact that they grew big appetites in Chester's Dimension. I said, hopefully: "Maybe he'll burst!"

But he didn't. Soon there was a grunting noise, then a snoring sound. I touched Mary lightly on the arm prepared to jump for it if Chester gave tongue. He didn't. He was asleep.

Mary said goodnight, kissed me, and went off to bed. Doc and I remained standing there gazing wordlessly at nothing, and listening to Chester's gratified whistling snores from the corner.

Then Doc turned and crossing silently to a wall case took out a small revolver fitted with silencer. He handed this to me, said: "I'm sorry for you, my boy. And sorry for Chester. But it's plain something has to be done. So—you do it, and then we'll bury him and tell Mary he just vanished."

I looked at the gun then at the Doc. I said: "I don't feel quite right about it, shooting the

defenceless little tyke. Isn't there another way . . . ?"

Doc pointed to my finger without speaking, and I realised how stiff and sore I felt where Chester had bitten me. Doc said:

"You see? He's dangerous to life and limb—isn't he?"

I nodded and went over to the corner. I felt cautiously with my hand—touched Chester's sleek fur—levelled the gun, and pulled the trigger!

Two things happened: one, the slug whistled right through where Chester was, hit the floor and bedded there, and two, Chester came to life and sank a neat set of snappers into the fleshy part of my leg. I raced hastily across the room and climbed on top of the Doc's bookcase. I looked down.

Chester was growling away somewhere, and I hoped he wasn't able to fly, or else . . .

"So you missed him?" ventured Doc, backing warily to the door.

"I did *not* miss him," I expostulated. "I popped that bullet right through the middle of his body—but it just didn't work. It isn't fair," I added bitterly. "He can eat three dimensional food and bite three dimensional flesh, but a three dimensional bullet just passes him by . . ."

The Doc nodded: "I expect it has something to do with organic and inorganic matter," he said. "Metal, being inorganic, doesn't affect the structure of his body."

"Maybe poison will?" I said hopefully.

Doc said: "We can try it—but don't be too hopeful, Joseph. Remember he's an entirely different composition to anything on this world."

He took a phial from a shelf and poured some of the stuff into one of the empty saucers. He said: "Here Chester, Chester. Come on boy."

There was a snuffling round the saucer, and we watched with bated breaths. Doc whispered: "I poured him enough to kill a mammoth. Hydro-cyanic acid."

There was a lapping sound. We stared—gaped!

The saucer full of acid was rapidly parked away with the rest of the stuff Chester had taken that night. There was then a sound of smacking lips, and a wuffle of pleasure. Doc said: "Hmmm. He seems to like it. Let's try something else . . ."

We started trying everything Doc had then. We went through all the convulsant poisons, and Chester took them in his stride. We dosed him to the eyebrows with strychnine, prussic acid, cyanide and everything else we could lay hands on. Then we shot him a swift arsenic mickey, and he finished that off too. At last the Doc laid the bottles aside and said: "I'm tired, Joseph. Can't go on any longer. This isn't doing any good, is it?"

"Tell you what," I said eagerly. "Shoot him some chloroform and while he's out we can strangle him. How's that?"

The Doc nodded and made a swab of cotton wool which he doused with chloroform. He then laid it in the saucer and called to Chester. There was a grunt, and the next you know Chester was calmly tackling the cotton wool swab, and it was disappearing in thin air. Doc said: "That's that."

I wouldn't have admitted it, but I was developing a kind of high admiration for Chester. Any man or beast who can hold his poison like Chester did, has my esteem. But it didn't alter the fact that I couldn't let him come between myself and Mary.

Doc said: "I'm sorry, Joseph, but there's nothing we can do. Mary won't agree to let him go, and if she finds us constantly tampering with him she'll get good and mad. May even look on us as murderers, and you know Mary when she gets het up. Tell you what though—let's put up with him for the time being, and maybe he'll go of his own accord?"

And that was all there was to do. But I wasn't feeling very happy as I walked home. My leg hurt, my finger stung, and where I'd had the crack on the head I felt as if half my brains were making their escape . . .

I met Mary at lunch the following day. We bumped into each other in the automat, and I saw right away there was something on her mind. I said: "Hello, Mary," and hearing a loud grunt by my feet, added: "Hiya, Chester."

Mary nodded, and walked over to a table for two with her tray. I sat down and looked at her; sure enough there were one or two lines of thought in her brow, and her face was a little pale. She said: "Er—Joe . . ."

"Yes, Mary?"

"I've been thinking, Joe—about—about Chester."

"Okay, if you want to keep him really," I said. "Why shouldn't I learn to love him in time. Maybe you should get a dog licence?"

She shook her head: "No, Joe, I don't want to—to keep him. I've decided to turn him over to you and father so you can get rid of him . . ."

I said: "Wait a minute—how do you figure we'll do that?"

"I don't want to know how you do it—poison, or shoot him or something—don't tell me how."

"Then you may as well know," I told her. "We tried all that last night after you beat it. Chester's here to stay—and how. You can't kill him."

She stared at me open mouthed: "But Joe, surely . . .?"

"No. You can't. He's invulnerable. But what made you change your mind, Mary?"

"Oh, Joe," she exclaimed, clutching my arm. "I've had a really terrible time—all this morning. It started when I went to the hair-dressers to keep an appointment; Chester kept rubbing round my legs whilst I was under the dryer, nearly driving me silly. The girl thought I was peculiar at first, and then she must have kicked Chester accidentally or something, because he bit her good and hard—and she fainted and was carried out. Another girl took over while half the staff searched for a mad dog. The second she touched me to set my hair, Chester simply leaped at her and tore all her overalls, and the girl had hysterics and ran screaming into the main saloon. Then the manager came, and he looked at me very suspiciously, and said that he was sorry but there was no one available to finish my hair now the two girls were indisposed, so I had to put a turban on and came out looking a positive freak."

"After that I went shopping, and the same thing happened whilst I was at the shoe shop, being fitted. Chester actually upset the salesman and attacked him whilst he was on the floor."

"As if that wasn't enough he's gone for every policeman we've passed on the way here; I think he dislikes the uniforms. Anyway it's a sure thing the psychiatrists' will be full tonight, and the saloons empty."

"I was afraid something like this would happen," I told her. "But I can't suggest what to do—there isn't anything to do at all far as I can see."

Her face suddenly lit up. She said: "Listen Joe. Why don't you take him to the dog pound and have him gassed?"

"What? ME?" I gulped.

"Yes, you. Why not? You wouldn't refuse to do a little thing like that, would you?"

"Well," I said. "You see, he bites . . . I don't think . . . and what do I say to the dog catcher?"

"You can think of something. But, of course, if *you* don't care to do me a little favour, there's always Jimmy Rostam . . . he'd be glad . . ."

"Okay, okay. I'll do it. Just wait here until I get back will you? I won't be long."

"You'd better not be," said Mary.

I went around to a sports outfitters just round the block. I ambled in and got hold of the assistant behind the counter. I said: "You got any football pads?"

"Certainly, sir. A complete outfit?"

"Nope, just the shin and leg guards."

He nodded pleasantly, and brought them for me. He got a piece of paper and started to wrap them up. I said: "Er—don't bother wrapping them. I'll—er—put them on."

He stopped and gazed at me. He said: "You'll—hem—put them on, sir? Here? Now?"

"Sure," I growled. "Why not? They're my pads, aren't they? I paid for them, didn't I? I can do as I please with them, can't I?"

"Why—yes—I—well, yes."

"Okay then. I'll put them on!"

I rolled my pants legs up and did just that whilst he gaped at me. Then slowly a look of understanding dawned on his face. A look I didn't quite like. I said: "What's the cute look for, bub? A guy can wear football pads under his pants if he wants, eh?"

"But of course, sir. A very excellent idea. Perhaps you'd like to wear a catcher's glove, too? That would be *really* stylish, sir."

"You're nuts," I grunted, and he said politely: "Of course, sir. I am, as you say, nuts. Anything more?"

"I guess so. Got a small dog collar with a long lead?"

He brought out a metal collar, and I shook my head: "That won't hold him. Nothing metal will. It'll go right through his neck . . ."

"But it's the strongest we have, sir," he gulped.

"Is it? You got a leather one?"

"But that isn't as strong as this. I'm sure you'll find this will hold him. Just try it, to please me. Will you, sir?"

He looked at me almost pleadingly. I snapped: "Are you crazy or am I?"

"You are, sir," he told me promptly. "Do try this metal one."

"Either you bring me a leather one or I call the manager of this dump," I scowled. "And don't ask questions. I want the leather one because it has to be organic. See?"

He shrank behind the counter nervously. When he came up there were large beads of sweat on his face. He flopped down a strong leather collar. I paid for the collar and lead and walked out, leaving him mopping his brow with a handkerchief and leaning weakly against a set of golf clubs. I took the lead back to the automat and gave it Mary. I said:

"Okay, put your lion inside of that but quick. Let's get it over with before they yank me away to the madhouse."

She bent down, fumbled for Chester, and started fixing the collar around his neck. I tried to ignore the curious stares and grins.

CHAPTER FOUR

...? ...? ...? ...?

I never felt so big a sap as I did walking out of that automat hawking along a lead attached to a collar, attached to a big circle of empty air. But I was feeling too thankful that the thing had turned out to have neck to worry about how I felt. Mary said it was in some respects like a hedgehog with soft fur, but that it did have

a sizeable neck, and a really terrific mouth with a row of large and vicious teeth.

Mary knew of course; the thing didn't mind her pawing over it.

"Take it right down to the pound," said Mary, "and for Heaven's sakes don't come back until it's been done away with."

I said: "Don't worry about a thing. I'll see it goes the way of all flesh this time."

Mary said: "Thank you, Joe—Joe, what on earth's the matter with your *legs*? They look so *funny*!"

"Eh? Oh, that's due to a set of football pads I've got on."

She looked funny at that: "You aren't going to play football, are you?"

I groaned: "Quit it Mary. I've had about all I can stand of that from the salesman. I bought these pads so that I wouldn't get bit, see. That and that alone. I am very far from nuts."

She said: "Well, goodbye Joe. But I do think you look silly."

"I'd look sillier galloping down the street with something folks couldn't see biting the hell out of my legs, wouldn't I?"

On that cheerful note we parted, Mary to go home and recuperate from her hectic day, and me to yank the pooch—as I now thought of it—down to the city pound.

Well, I am not going to dwell upon the trials and tribulations of that journey. It was a sheer nightmare. I walked along with the lead held close to my side, but as soon as Chester saw we weren't going with Mary, he gave one almighty tug, caught me off balance, tore the lead from my hand, and ran. Mary had just hopped a street car, and Chester chased along, after it, the flying lead marking its position.

I chased along after Chester. Chester, seemingly, had one small defect—he couldn't move as fast as I could. And I jammed my foot hard on the end of the flying lead, got the loop caught round my ankle, and turned a double somersault in the roadway. But I had the lead again, and Chester with it. Before I could scramble to my dogs, Chester turned and bit a couple of square inches out of my left arm, and then, when I was standing again, had a go at my ankles and shins. I was mighty glad I'd bought those guards after all, and I thought wistfully that if I'd bought the catcher's glove I'd have been able to give Chester a few hearty swipes for makeweight.

A large Irish cop wandered over and stood looking at me. I was in the centre of a small traffic jam which I had caused, and was jerking Chester along, saying: "Come on you tyke. Get moving or I'll put a foot behind you! You hear me?"

The cop said: "Whatsa matter, Mister?"
"Nothing officer," I muttered. "Just a little personal thing. I can handle it . . . it'll be all right . . ."

"Yeah? It ain't all right to go and cause a traffic holdup for no reason," grunted the cop. "Get going before I run ya in."

"Quit snapping at me, you dirty rat," I yelled at Chester, who was jumping up now to get a grip of my hand. The cop turned eight shades of vermilion and produced a night stick.

"What was that you said, buddy?"

"I—sorry officer. I was talking to my . . . er—that is . . . well . . ."

But he was staring in amazement at the loose lead now. "Say, what's the idea? If you're taking home a new dog chain why don't you roll it round and shove it in your pocket? It's a menace to the public dangling around—here—"

He bent to pick it up, and Chester helped himself. The cop dropped his night stick and howled, Chester set up a tugging, and I thought I'd better go along with him for the time being.

We vanished from sight of the enraged cop, heading down the road fast.

That tyke might not have been able to move very fast, but it sure had some strength behind it. I couldn't get my balance once I was on the run, and I just had to gallop on behind the lead which was stretched out stiff and taut in front of me. I cussed in seven or eight different languages, but it kept right on going, across a red light, through streaking automobiles and trolley cars and buses and trucks.

Then at last it turned into a blank end and came up against the wall at the bottom. There was a corrugated iron door on the right, and before I knew what was what it changed direction, went clear through the door, and I came to rest against the iron with my nose in a groove. But I held the lead which was crumpled up on the door, and hauled backwards.

And then—I could have cheered! For the wording on the door read: "CITY DOG POUND."

We'd gotten there, thanks to Chester's help.

I hammered on the door and it opened and a guy with two eyes and a nose looked out and said: "What's yours?"

Then he spotted the empty collar and said: "You wanta claim a pooch?"

"Not a chance. I want you to destroy one for me. Ask no questions and it's worth ten bucks to you. Okay?"

"Sure. Where is it?"

I said: "Here," and pointed to the end of the collar.

"Look here . . ."

"Ten bucks," I told him showing him them.

"And no questions."

He looked at me queerly for a moment; then he took the dough and the end of the lead. He seemed to get quite a shock when something tugged on it. He whispered hoarsely: "What—what is it?"

"I'm a stage magician," I said. "It's my

famous invisible dog. But it's got distemper, so . . ."

"Sure," he said. "I know. I'm President Truman. Glad to know you!"

"Cut the cracks and make tracks," I snapped.

He pulled Chester to a steel chamber at one side. I said: "No, that won't do . . . you'll have to put him in something . . . I know . . . that wooden crate there'll do. He'd get out of the steel chamber right away. Put him in the crate."

He looked at me but did as I asked. Then we yanked the crate into the gas chamber and dumped it down. The pound keeper said:

"You want the lead and collar back?"

"Nope, you can keep those. Let's get this over with."

We went outside, closed up, and he switched on the gas. He said: "Say, I can't understand . . ."

I waved two more bucks at him, said: "No questions, buddy."

He shrugged and took the money, then cut the gas. He said:

"He oughtta be done by now. Let's go see."

We went back in. The wooden crate was silent, and we weaved over to it wearing the nose and mouth masks the keeper had handed out. He unsnapped the top bolt, lifted the lid . . . something shot out through our legs and beat it.

We searched high and low, and then low and high, but we didn't get Chester again. Maybe he'd got wise to what was afoot, and decided that if we went on trying to kill him maybe he'd come up against something he couldn't handle before long. Anyway, whether he was in the joint or not, we couldn't find him.

It was more than an hour later when I left the pound. And as I walked down the street I could hear the feet pattering after me . . . following me . . .

I purposely took a turn by the river. I waited until I felt Chester round my legs, then I grabbed him quick and heaved him out before he could get his teeth into me. There was a splash . . .

I waited; nothing happened. No Chester!

After ten minutes I started to walk quickly towards the Chester home . . .

I breezed in confidently, all aglow with the good deed I'd done. Mary and Doc were in the lab., and I went right on up and walked in airily.

"Well, folks, I told you to leave it to Uncle Joe, didn't I?"

"You did," agreed Mary. "What happened?"

"I got rid of him, in the river," I explained.

"Did you? Easily?" said Mary, in a sweet tone of voice.

"Sure. Just slung him out . . ."

I broke off. Doc was pointing to one corner of the lab. Over there was a saucer of fried chicken, fast disappearing. Doc said:

"He's been back for a half hour, Joseph."

I groaned, sat down with my head between my hands. At length I looked up and said: "Mary, you'll have to nerve yourself to give that tyke a good thrashing! It's the only way. You won't cure him of his liking for you unless you ill treat him."

Mary said: "No, Joe, I couldn't . . ."

"You'll have to. Don't you see what having him all the time with you will mean . . . ?"

Doc murmured: "Joseph's right, dear. You'll have to thrash the thing. Break his domination. Steel yourself, child. Take my belt and just give him a blow or two."

I could see Mary didn't like the idea—hated it, in fact. But at last she took the belt without a word. I yapped: "Hold it one minute! Here."

I whipped off my shin guards and fastened them on to her slim legs. Then I said: "Go ahead—feel round until you find him then beat him."

Mary did. She hit Chester three times, and he squealed and whimpered, and there were actually tears in Mary's eyes when she threw the belt down and said: "I can't do any more to him. It's cruelty."

The Doc said: "Here goes—we'll see if it worked," and put his arms round Mary's neck!

There was no sound, no movement. Minutes passed. Then Mary cried: "Oh, Joe, it DID work! Joe darling . . ."

She rushed for me and flung herself on to my lap. Then she gave a sudden little scream and jumped up. She backed away with a most peculiar look on her face: "Joe—Joe, it BIT me! ME! When I touched YOU!"

And right at that moment while I gawked at her, I became aware of something rubbing round my legs . . . ! ! !

And making a contented, purring noise!

Doc grinned suddenly. I could have slaughtered him. He said:

"Too bad, my boy. It seems to have adopted you!"

I said: "Gimme that belt . . . I'll . . ."

But Chester wasn't going to be taken in by that again. Though I hunted high and low I couldn't find him. Every time I swished out, he'd be someplace else. And when I walked home later, he was still pattering along by my side, ducking every now and then when I tried to swipe him!

And then Chester simply *vanished*, just like that. It was two days after he'd adopted me, and he went just in time to stop my hair going pure white. Soon as I knew he really had gone I ran up to Mary's and told her, and we fell into each other's arms and made up on the kissing we'd been missing.

With Chester gone, there was nothing to hold back the happy day. And a week and three days later we were married in one of those little churches around the corner, by a parson with a nose you could have lit a cigar on.

But we didn't worry about that. We were mighty happy.

We'd decided not to go away for a honeymoon. I already had a cosy apartment in town, and it was roomy enough for the both of us.

After the guests had left us alone that night, Mary said: "I'll rush along to bed now then, dear."

"I'll be with you in ten minutes, *sweetheart*," I cooed back. She simpered and went.

Ten minutes later I staggered into the bedroom like a guy who is to be shot at dawn for something he didn't do. Mary was draped in a fetching *négligé*, but it didn't fetch *me*. I had other things on my mind right then. I said: "Mary, now I *know* why Chester went. I know what he went for . . . only Chester isn't a HE! Chester is a SHE!"

Mary stared at me in perplexity. I said: "Chester went to have some *little Chesters*! She's just come back from wherever she's been—and *there's five smaller editions of herself with her*! I counted them all, every one. They're in the living room, and they're ruining my finest Persian carpet . . . they aren't house trained. Mary, I'm going quietly nuts . . . Mary . . ."

"Oh, Joe, darling," she cried. "How terrible!"

She got up, looking awfully cute. She came over and put her arms round my neck, kissed me . . .

Then let out the most awful shriek.

"Joe," she screamed, backing off. "They bit me! All *five* of them!"

"Honey . . ."

She started slinging stuff into her case. She said: "I'm sorry Joe, but I'm going home to father until you've got rid of them some way. They frighten me."

And she went!

As for me—well, I'm still here, and now I've got fifteen little Chesters, and more expected. You see, some of that first litter turned out to be males, and some females—and they haven't heard about the law against inter-marriage.

The joint is jumping with them, the rooms are alive.

I'm going bughouse.

Ha, ha, ha, ha, ha!

Nuts! Ho, ho, ho, ho, ho!

Mary had a little lamb—like hell she had! Lamb! That's a laugh! They're devils, that's what they are. Haw, haw, haw!

Joseph had fifteen little . . . ?'s.

Ha, ha, ha, ha. . . .

THE END.

"SPACE HOBO'S DIARY"

By Rice Ackman

CHAPTER ONE

Carter was sitting talking to a metal man from Neptune when the fuss started. They were on Interplanetary landing platform number 12X, midway between Earth and Neptune, and they were chatting in the informal manner of space voyagers.

Interplanetary landing platforms—of which there were ten about the Solar System—were actually man made asteroids thrown out by man for the benefit of weary space travellers. Here ships touched down and passengers rested and ate and drank and found entertainment in the space bars where dancing was permitted.

12X, in addition, was a junction for three space lines—Venusian Packet, Terrestrial Lines Ltd., and Martian Skyways. Here men from Earth picked up the ships which ferried them from 12X to Mars and Venus.

The trouble was in the shape of two space patrol guards, who rode with the mighty liners from planet to planet, and whose jobs were to see that no one smuggled cotrelin from Jupiter, or Marga drugs from Telluria into the rest of the System. If the folks on Jupiter and Telluria wanted to convert themselves into wild and insane savages by using the drugs, that was okay by the civilised planets. But the Solar Councils had, with the two exceptions above, outlawed the drugs.

Another of the space guards' jobs was to make sure no one travelled without a passport, or smuggled his way over on the ship. Stowaways were all too frequent, and had to be put down at all costs. The laws affecting entry to another planet had been tightened up a great deal when it was found that dozens of Green Martians were attempting to enter Earth by stowing away.

Green Martians, those strange, perverted, yet cruelly intelligent natives of the dying planet, whom all right thinking men detested for their strange way of life. Let other planets suffer them if they would—Earth would have none of them.

Not even in the days when most of the System had been buying them from slave traders, and setting them to work in the plutonium laboratories, where the death rate was high. Strangely enough, although it had been the ships and soldiers of Earth who had emancipated the Green Martians, they had never overcome the hatred Mars had always had for the father planet of the System.

But it was no Green Martian the two space guards had caught this time—it was an Earth-

man, white-haired and gnarled from the cosmic rays. He might have been a typical twentieth century farmer as far as his wrinkled eyes and cheeks were concerned. But the ghastly living scar across his forehead told where the purple lianas of Saturn had taken their grip on him, and only brave and reckless men dared to land on Saturn, that malignant planet of death and decay.

Carter watched the guards drag the struggling man in, with a curious stare, in which there was something of perplexity. He felt he had seen the man before—somewhere, sometime, in his increased life span of two hundred years.

But the meeting was so far lost in the veils of the passing years that he could not bring it to mind.

He said: "Hmm. Seem to know that chap, somehow . . . can't think where I met him though . . ."

The metal man from Neptune said: "I know him well. He's been a space hobo for almost a hundred and fifty years now. There are many legends about his deeds of daring on the planets . . ."

And Carter suddenly yelped: "Of course! That's it! He's Griffon, the space hobo . . . used to be an interplanetary spy in the Galactic Patrol until some Martians dropped him on Saturn without weapons, and he contracted the wasting disease of the purple lianas. Good man . . ."

He stood up and went over to the guards. He said: "What's the trouble?"

The sergeant growled: "Mind your business, stranger."

Carter dug into his silken suit and produced a small slip of green metal which read: "Mills Carter, Special Agent, Universal Space Guard."

The guard flushed and muttered: "Sorry, sir. I didn't know any of our agents were up here."

"Forget it, Sergeant. No apologies necessary."

The Sergeant nodded, said: "We caught this bum hopping down just outside the landing strip. He came from liner Eight, Earth to 12X. He was riding the tubes."

"And what are you going to do with him now?"

The Sergeant shrugged: "You know the law, sir. He'll be sent back to Earth on the next ship, then exiled to Luna. What else?"

Carter said: "Sergeant, will you release this man into my custody?"

"If you say so sir, and you'll guarantee to take the responsibility."

"I'll do that. The Universal Commissioner is a friend of mine. I think I can arrange to have Griffon's little lapse overlooked."

"It isn't as if it was his first lapse," said the guard. "We catch this guy regular, every time he gets the wander urge. He's been on Luna for more years than Eternity. Every time he gets off he starts space roving again."

Carter said: "I've heard about him. It'll be all right. He did a lot for his country before he sustained that disease . . . I'll take care of him, Sergeant."

The guards saluted and left, and the hobo adjusted his tattered space suit as best he could and inclined his white head: "Thanks, Mister. I'll do the same for you someday."

Carter led him back to his table without speaking and ordered a round of Clag water from Jupiter. Then he said: "Griffon, this is Zilgos, the scientist from Neptune." The metal man smiled and nodded. Carter went on: "Zilgos has been useful to me . . . he's perfected a remedy for the brain disease you're suffering from. But it's rather rare, and so far there isn't enough to go round. Griffon, you're pretty far gone with that disease—that purple scar on your head is eating way back into your brain . . . it won't be long before madness overtakes you and you die off."

Griffon said: "I know that. This was going to be my last trip out . . . only it's been stopped now. They'll send me back to Luna."

Carter said: "I can stop that . . . I'll get Zilgos to apply his remedy to you and cure you, and I'll get you a job in my branch of the space guards . . ."

Griffon said: "Why?"

"Mainly because you used to be a useful man . . . and cured of that disease you will be again. But also, because, for some time, we've been puzzled . . . puzzled about Manley. You were with Manley once . . . remember . . . ? And you were with him when we found him again . . . I want to know what happened out there!"

Griffon said: "Of course I don't remember what you're talking about. This disease saps the brain, leaving no past, only a present. I can't remember anything that happened fifteen minutes back."

Carter said: "But this drug of Zilgos will fix you up—and should restore your memory . . . are you game to try it?"

The hobo looked blank for a time. Then nodded.

Carter said: "You have a mental diary—we all have. Everything that happens to us from birth to death is recorded in some obscure corner of the brain. Some people have the power to tap this resource, and are known as mental marvels. They are few. But under Zilgos' drug you will be able to tap the hidden diary in your brain . . ."

Griffon said: "Book a room, and I'll try it."

Griffon lay stretched full length upon a metal table. Zilgos had just administered a syringe of his drug. Griffon lay quiet and still. But already the purple scar was lightening in shade. Then Griffon began to mumble, meaningless phrases. Words jostled from his lips . . .

Carter leaned forward and said, sharply: "Remember, Griffon. Remember Manley . . . remember Mars . . . remember Doctor Rekab!"

Griffon muttered: "Re—kab—Rek—ab—REKAB! The Green Martian scientist! The . . ."

Carter said tensely: "That's right! Now tell me—tell me from the beginning!"

Griffon's face twitched in his efforts at remembrance. There was a tense silence over the room. Zilgos kept an alert watch on his patient's pulse and breathing.

And Griffon began to mumble, mumble a strange account, which Carter listened to with taut face, and clenched hands . . .

It was fifty years ago. I'd had the purple disease for some eighty years, and I'd been exiled to Luna for five of them. But I couldn't stay out of trouble. The minute I was repatriated to Earth I started looking round for a likely sky-going liner. I had no money, so it meant I had to ride the tubes.

It's easy enough to ride the tubes once you know the layout of the standard ship. And having worked in the space patrol as a spy, there wasn't very much I didn't know. It's risky of course, but you have to take a few risks to get what you want even these days.

As long as you manage to slide in the front portion of the emergency tube you're all set. It isn't one in a thousand ships that has to use the spare tubes, so you've got a thousand to one chance. Of course, if something does go wrong and the tube is fired, then you've only yourself to blame when you're thrown out into the void on the end of a fork of flame and gas.

Well, this time I grabbed a ship leaving for Asteroid 6B. I carried iron rations with me, and an anti-gravity belt I'd stolen. The second the ship entered 6B's atmosphere, I opened the end of the sealed tube and jumped. I was used to this part of it. I've ridden the tubes for the last hundred years.

Naturally the gravity belt, turned to one per cent., set me down gently just outside the spaceport. I hung around until dark then slid into the tube of a ship bound for Mars.

I didn't care much where I went, just as long as I kept moving. It was the only way to combat my fear of the disease I had.

I got down on Mars safely enough, and trekked across the Larta Desert to the town of Zin. I was heading for a little café there, where they have the Zinian dancing girls—you know the rest of it. A private room and then a few hours with a woman who really knew how to love. There isn't any race in the entire Infinitive who produce women as well versed in the art of passion as those Zinian dancing girls. You may think I'm a tramp for bothering with Green Martians, but this disease has to have some antidote, and that's the finest way to forgetfulness.

So I got to the town and went to the café.

The place was jumping with Green Martians when I got there. They were rioting in the streets, because the Earth Council had just refused them permission to send students to the Earth Universities. Had in fact, refused entirely to allow any of them to enter the planet. They resented that.

They couldn't see that if they infiltrated to Earth, their loose morality—in fact their absolute lack of any morals whatsoever—would seriously disrupt the normal relations on Earth. You know how quickly those Green Martians breed, and if any of the women had once obtained passports, we'd have been over-run with half castes in no time. And you know there isn't any lower form of life in the System than the product of a union between an Earthman and a Martian woman, or vice versa.

But up on Mars they didn't see that point, didn't want to see it. They only knew that Earth had fought for their freedom, and now were refusing them permission to attend Earth's scientific centres and universities. How could they progress if they weren't allowed to further their education like the other planets? They were the only civilised race banned from Earth!

But though they were annoyed and excited and full of threats, they didn't make any attempt to attack me. Mainly because there were double reinforcements of space guards in the streets, ready for any uprising.

I got to the café, and went inside, and sat drinking Martian Sitch until I was as high as a space ariel. In *that* café they didn't care where you came from if you had money to pay for fun. I had a little tucked away—it wouldn't have bought me a night's sleep back on Earth, but with the altered values it bought me a night's wakefulness in that café.

I drank myself and entertained two cute tricks with it. I got blind drunk.

They were nice girls, if any Green Martian can be nice in other than a purely sexy way. The one I fancied myself had glossy black hair, and once I'd packed away that Sitch I clean forgot her face was as green as a cucumber, and only noticed her cute little nose and smiling voluptuous lips.

Later we went upstairs to her rooms, and later still we came down to drink some more.

That was when I bumped into Manley.

He was leaning on the bar watching one of the girls strip-dancing, and he wasn't drinking. I took him to be another space bum with something on his mind—maybe he was lying low down here in this quarter. You get a whole lot of dope peddlers hanging fire there until the next shipment is due.

But he came from Earth, so I went over with my girl hanging to my neck and said: "Hello, there. Join me in a drink?"

He looked me up and down after his first start of surprise.

We were the only two white men in there, and he seemed amazed that someone else from his own planet was around. At last, after he'd looked at me from all sides, he said: "Who're you?"

"Names don't matter here . . ."

"You're right. Yes, okay, I'll drink. Make it a double Sitch with ice."

I gave the order, then noticed that the second girl I had with me was making a play for him. He wasn't so stand offish either. He was loaded with dough, of all denominations and planets, and he didn't mind spending some of it on me. In fact, we made it a real night, a regular space dogs' rowdy.

Later again we went with the girls upstairs. And I guess I should have known better than that, but I was too drunk.

Anyhow, when I woke up we were out on the desert someplace, with heads as heavy as hell, and pockets as light.

I felt the biggest sucker of the two, because I'd been before to these Martian clip-joints, and knew what happened if you forgot yourself too much. But it was done now, we'd both been cleaned out and thrown out, and we were in one of the Martian deserts without water or dough, and only our space suits to protect us!

It wasn't any use sitting there and wailing, so we finally started marching back to what the Martians call civilisation . . .

CHAPTER TWO

Griffon still lay senseless on the table in the little room with the frosted dernalite walls, the concealed lighting. But now he tossed and turned from side to side, and his face betrayed the haggard lines of remembered suffering.

Gazing at him the two men were able to realise how terrible had been that forced march across desolation to the nearest city. For they knew *too* well the awful drought of the Martian deserts, the constant stumbling runs to the banks of each canal hoping that it still held water, and was not one of the dry, disused ones, put out of use by the rapidly lessening snow caps at the poles.

Griffon was muttering in his delirium now: his voice had died to a hoarse croaking sound; they had to lean forward to catch his words at all.

"Water—look, water over there—it—it—yes, you can, you can make it . . . try, man, try! TRY!"

"No use—no use! Curse these mirages—curse this desert—curse all of Mars and these green swine! Curse them . . . no, we have to go on . . . we daren't stop . . . keep moving, that's the only way—keep moving . . ."

And then, after minutes of this terrible reliving, he said: "It is! It is, I tell you—the main canal running to Zin. It's water . . . WATER . . ."

His voice died away altogether and the lines faded from his face. He lay still, breathing deeply. Carter said: "Wake up—go on, Griffon."

Griffon started talking once more . . .

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What a nightmare march that was across that desert. No wonder the Martians coveted other worlds; no longer they cared whether Mars lived or died as long as they didn't die with it. All the trouble could have been settled if they had been given one of the planets which held only wild life . . . but those planets were too valuable to the World Councils who owned them; too rich in raw materials to give away. And the Martians owned nothing of their own, not having had a fair deal from the Universe.

Their world itself was useless; that is the only reason they were never invaded. Its paucity of mineral wealth was astonishing, and its great civilisation had degenerated with its slow death, until only retrogrades remained.

So we lunged and staggered onward across the wild white waste, struggling ever and again to the high banks of walled canals only to discover that they were no longer used, but were bone dry and coated with the shifting white sands.

Past ruined, lifeless cities we journeyed, through desert villages which were rotten and crumbled, across the great stretch of land which had once been verdant and peaceful, occupied by a wise and level-headed race.

At times we would collapse from sheer weakness, but always we found the strength to struggle on, and on, hoping against hope that soon we would locate one of the grand canals which still fed water from the poles to a thirsty people.

And at last we did find one; we stayed by it for hours, bathed in it, drank it, splashed it over each other, and felt both refreshed and strengthened.

We knew if we followed it we must sooner or later arrive at a city or town; and so we

pushed on along its banks. Come what may we were determined we should not lack water again.

And still it was three days before we arrived at the first inhabited town.

I knew the place, I had been there before.

It was the next town along the main canal, to Zin; a place called Ganthia. Here had assembled most of the intellectuals left on Mars, and they kept strictly to themselves, ruling the town with an iron hand, and ousting any undesirable characters. The town was under the chief scientist, as is customary with Martian towns. He was a man named Rekab, and reputedly the most brilliant scientist upon the face of Mars. He inhabited a large sandstone mansion sitting in the centre of the city.

Here, as in Zin, the place was strongly patrolled by armed space guards of all planets. Evidently not only Earth was afraid of a Martian uprising. Other worlds could also become the target for a mass invasion by the creatures of that dying world.

And Ganthia, containing the most intelligent men and women of Mars, and rich with the wealth of the old Kings of Mars, was the logical spot for such an uprising to commence. Therefore it was patrolled night and day by guards armed with atom rifles. Their job was to see that no mutiny, no atrocity was committed against the planetary Ambassadors who occupied Ganthia. Apart from this they made no attempt to interfere with administration of the town.

We rolled into Ganthia by dark roads, one night whilst the two Martian Moons chased each other across the skies.

We came stealthily, for our presence here might be questioned. We were no longer in Zin, the town of revelry and riotry. We were now in a decent class district, inhabited by the influential lords of the people, and the remaining scientists.

Had we known what was to befall us in that place we should have turned and run back into the desert rather than have faced it!

But we were blissfully ignorant, and we went forward; we at last reached the house I remembered, in a narrow side road, unlit by the blue Runtha street pipes of Mars. I knocked upon the door and it was opened to us by an ancient crone of a green woman, whose face was lined with vice and dissipation.

She peered at me long and hard, then said: "Enter. I recall you well, Griffon. What do you here?"

"We seek food and shelter, Malthea," I told her urgently. "My friend and I . . . we are travelling without passports, and we dare not be apprehended by the guards."

She scratched her chin dubiously, said: "But this is a house of pleasure . . . we cannot . . ."

"Have I not spent much money with you when I was younger?"

"That is so, Griffon. But . . ."

"And now you refuse me hospitality? Maltha . . ."

She said: "You have been a good customer, it is true. Can you afford to pay for your shelter here?"

I unhooked the fibroid belt from my space suit and split the clips at one side. Inside the material were several long, thin threads . . . I had been saving them against such an emergency.

"Kovalt!" said Maltha, greedily, reaching out for them.

"Exactly. Kovalt from Ganymede," I told her. "Worth three thousand money units . . . give me two thousand units and shelter and they are yours."

She said: "It is done. You are hungry? Come with me?"

She led us into the rear room.

The house itself was as I remembered it from the time I had been there when attached to the space guard. I had used it often, not so much on account of the girls there, but because most of the Martian bigwigs patronised it when they felt need of a woman. I was a spy then, and was able to pick up many items of valuable news from the girls, items the bigwigs had let slip in the delights of their love-making.

Many of the same girls were still there; but there were a great many new ones, for the average span of Martian life in the desert towns is less than ours by fifty years.

We ate roast kroll and stewed venbattens, and drank Sitch to finish the meal, and then went to bed.

The following few days we remained under cover. Maltha told us of riots in the streets following Earth's dictum concerning Martian immigration, and mentioned the cases of five space guards who had been found mysteriously slaughtered by the dread poison which the Martians kept a close secret. She told us it was too risky to continue our wandering, and I was content to stay, and so was my companion, apparently.

The hardships endured had brought us closer together, and by now he had told me his name was Manley. Where he was going, where he had been, he seemed strangely reluctant to say, but since he seemed to have no definite objective in view I assumed he was a space bum like myself, wandering round seeking adventure.

We grew careless as we were not caught, and took to wandering about the place without due caution. It was thus that we ran into the Green Martian, Rekab!

I had rushed into one of the girls' rooms without knocking, and he was seated there with her taking Sitch. He looked up as I entered and although I backed hastily from the room I was

too late. He did not speak as I shut the door, but after a moment I bent to the floor where there was a slight gap, and listened.

He was questioning the girl.

"The gentleman who was here a moment ago," he was saying. "He was from Earth?"

"Yes, my lord."

"Interesting—very—and what is he doing in this hall of ill fame, my child?"

"I do not know, my lord," replied the girl nervously. "Madam Maltha does not tell us her business, and he is here with her knowledge."

"And has been here—how long?"

"For four day and nights, my lord. They came in the middle of the night, and have not ventured from this house since."

"They? There is another—more than one?"

"There are two, my lord. The man you saw and one other."

"Interesting," murmured the Martian again. "Very. That is all you can tell me?"

"It is all, my lord."

"I see. Then you will forget my questions for the time being. We have other things . . ."

.

I told Manley about the Martian and he seemed upset and said that we should leave at once, without further delay. But I felt it was not as serious as all that. I felt, in fact, that had the Martian intended to expose us he could have done so there and then, or immediately upon leaving the place, and by sunrise we should have been aboard a felon ship heading for Luna.

But day came and went, and still we remained unexposed, so that I began to feel sure the Green Martian had decided it was none of his business if two Terrestrians chose to inhabit a house of ill repute in a dirty side street in the select town.

I questioned the girl as to his identity, and was amazed to learn he was none other than Rekab, the chief scientist and head of the town.

Then, three nights later, Maltha called us into her own private room. There was a conference in progress between herself and her male assistant. She was in the frosted bath, scrubbing herself vigorously with a Venusian sea sponge, and with the usual lack of modesty inherent in Martians invited us to be seated on the bath sides and to wash our feet.

To refuse would have been an insult, so we complied, mentally thanking the fates that she had not extended to us the ultimate honour of sharing her ablutions. We sat and dangled our toes whilst she informed us of the purpose of sending for us.

"You, Griffon," she said. "You saw a green man here some nights ago, eh?"

"A man I am told was Rekab, the scientist and leader."

"That is so. You did not tell me of this . . ."

"No. He seemed to take no action in the matter and I did not wish to alarm you by telling you we had been seen."

"That was very gracious of you, but . . . it would have been much better had you told me. Rekab has visited me here today. He desires to know how long you are to stay here . . . when you plan to leave again?"

"We have no definite plans. But we will leave as soon as possible if he desires it," I told her.

"He does *not* desire it. Far from it. He desires you to stay. In fact, HE FORBIDS YOU TO LEAVE THIS PLACE! He informs me he has his guards posted unobtrusively round the house, that you will be captured and tortured if you attempt to leave. You are to stay until he sends for you. He tells me he then has a proposition to put to you which may interest you."

Manley snarled: "I don't listen to any propositions from any stinking Green Martians . . ."

Maltha raised her attenuated eyebrows, said: "Are you overlooking the fact that you are in the company of one of those Green Martians, Manley?"

Manley mumbled: "I forgot myself . . ."

"You did indeed. One more remark like that and—but you will be more careful in future, eh?"

Manley nodded silently.

"Good. He—to return to Rekab—would not tell me what the proposition was, but I feel you should give him a hearing. He is the richest man in Ganthia, and he can put money into your pockets."

"He is also the most powerful man in Ganthia, and can kill us without trouble should we refuse to obey his orders?" I queried.

"He can. Therefore you will be wise to remain here until such time as he has need of you. That is all . . ."

So we took our feet out of the water, walked across the drying plate, and went back to our own quarters. Manley seemed very thoughtful as we played a hand of Sky Rummy, and muttered: "What do you imagine this Rekab wants with us?"

"I don't know. I can't imagine. Unless he wishes to enlist our aid as spies—send us back to Earth to find out what is happening regarding the Martians."

"I won't go if it's that," snapped Manley fiercely. "Damned if I will. I'd sooner die and have my coffin shot into the Sun."

I said: "You aren't very likely to get a funeral with full Spatial honours. What did you ever do for the System?"

He snapped: "What did the System ever do for me? It isn't that I mind spying on Terra, it's simply that—well, I just won't go."

I grinned at him. I said: "My wandering boy, if Rekab says you will, you WILL! Have

you never heard of the hypnotic drug these chaps manufacture? Under the influence of that you'll go all right."

He was very thoughtful after that for the rest of the night. And during the next few days we heard nothing more from Rekab. Yet we knew we were being watched closely . . .

And then I heard something which alarmed me greatly! I heard it from one of the girls with whom I had made friends, and who seemed to think a great deal of me, space tramp though I was.

In a halting, half frightened whisper, she told me one night what she had overheard Rekab and Maltha discussing together.

Rekab had been saying: "And you are certain they are here without passports? No one even knows they are here? They stowed away aboard one of the liners?"

"I am sure of that."

"And that no enquiries will be made for them?"

"None. Certainly none for the one by the name of Griffon. He used to work against us as a spy for the Galactic Patrol. But some of our countrymen caught him at work, took him out on a small ship and made him a castaway upon Saturn. There he contracted the dreaded disease from the purple liana—"

"Then he is useless for my purpose," observed Rekab. "It must be his companion. But Griffon must die . . ."

That was all she had heard; but it was sufficient. I saw the idea now—Rekab required our bodies for some purpose, or at least required Manley's sound body. Because I suffered from the purple disease I must die—probably because they could not allow me to remain alive knowing they had taken Manley!

I communicated my fears to Manley that same night. He was as terrified as I, having heard many stories about the Martians and their cold, inhuman cruelty. And we planned our escape.

We left by the back entrance early one morning, whilst the two Moons still chased across the paling sky. We went unarmed, with rations enough to see us back to Zin where we could sink into the obscurity of the lower quarters there.

But long before we had left the outskirts of the city we knew we were followed. Slinking shadows dogged our steps, skulked in doorways, and hung upon our trail. We hurried, casting aside caution and the risk of being spotted by a late patrolman. And towards the edge of the town we felt sure we had eluded pursuit and were at last on our way to escape.

We started across the desert again. Hugging the canals.

But in the darkness we must have wandered off our course, for as dawn broke we were able to

see we were not, after all, treading the path of the grand canal. We seemed to have wandered off on to a smaller tributary in the gloom and excitement, and were out of sight of Ganthia, and also out of sight of the Grand Canal which would have marked our route to Zin.

It was an unnerving thought!

Already, hardly a week ago, we had tramped across that arid waste, in danger of perishing from thirst. Now we must face another dangerous expedition. For the canals were so interlaced that one might follow them in maddening circles, until he dropped in weary submittance to the white, dry sands, there to be bleached into a mass of bones, and later to become a part of those same sands.

However, there was no other way but to march, and march we did.

It was midday when we reached the city. And we saw with joy that there was water in the canal running into it, so that there must be life about!

But there wasn't—against all the precepts of Martian cities there was no life, and there was water going to waste!

We walked slowly and carefully into the city itself.

There was much that was strange about it. For from every sign it had been lived in, recently, by a great number of people. These people, some of them, lay sprawled in grotesque attitudes in the streets, or crumpled up on chairs in buildings, in their baths, at their tables, in their runabout planes.

We had counted fully a hundred by the time we reached the centre of the city, and still I failed to realise the implication. There is some excuse for me—for although I had heard of such things, I had never actually seen a city stricken in this way.

The truth did not come to me until we were staring round the main square. And then it came in a strange way.

Manley suddenly said: "Great Space Buzards, what was that?"

I had seen nothing, so I said: "What?"

He looked at me strangely. He put a hand over his shoulder, felt his back. He said: "There's—there's something here. My hand won't go any further—something like a jelly..."

I stared fascinatedly at his back, and then I knew!

The dreaded Martian plague! The Parasites of the Canals!

That explained why the city was so silent and deserted. Why the canal had not been sealed off before the place had been deserted. The people—those who had not succumbed first—had fled in terror, not even staying long enough to bury their dead or to collect their most treasured possessions.

I found it hard to tell Manley what it was that clung to his back. He felt no pain, as was usual, but he was worried by his efforts to dislodge the thing. At length I took him to one of the corpses and we turned it over with our feet, and I pointed to its back.

In silent horror he stared at it. At first he saw nothing, but on continued scrutiny he picked out the faint outlines of a blue shaded mass, the size of a space haversack, clinging to the back from the shoulder blades to the waistline.

"My God, what is it?" he stammered.

"The Martian plague," I told him soberly. "It comes from the poles, following the routes of the canals. It is a form of life which is almost invisible, and once it attacks a city it fastens itself on to the backs of men and women, and sinks feelers into them. From there it simply sends a thin tube along the neckline into the brain, and..."

His face blanched. He gasped: "I remember now. I've heard of it—it EATS THE BRAIN!"

I nodded. I said: "That is what has happened to this city. Some have succumbed, others have fled, doubtless carrying some of the brain eaters with them. For only scientists and doctors can effect a cure, and there is a deficiency of them on Mars. In the main, anyone who is attacked by the plague is a doomed man."

His eyes almost thrust from his skull; he clutched at my arm. "Is there *nothing*..."

"Nothing, unless we can find a scientist..."

"But you... one may attack you too?"

I shook my head: "No. The creatures have intelligence. They acquire only healthy brains. My own brain is already infected with the purple disease from Saturn. They will be able to read the scar correctly and will leave me alone."

He sat down abruptly, with the thing still clinging to his back. Sweat stood out upon his brow. At last he looked up at me and said: "How long have I got?"

"It is hard to judge. Perhaps only a few hours—perhaps a few days. Certainly no more than four days."

He suddenly laughed bitterly: "Four days! I risk my neck a thousand times, I stow away aboard a liner, I come to Mars where I can hope for the most security, and what happens? Four days!"

I said: "What do you mean by security? Mars is far from secure. Except for Saturn it's the most dangerous planet in the entire System."

But he wasn't listening; he was staring in the direction we had come, staring at some tiny specks in the sky. They drew nearer, circling aimlessly, low to ground. I said: "Runabout planes."

They were runabout planes coming rapidly closer, heading in our direction now, as fast as bullets. They zoomed above the city, swooped, touched down before we could even make the nearest building. Manley seemed to think it didn't matter what happened to him now, sat there listlessly his shoulders humped under the pressure of the brain eater. I ran for the nearest building, but a fine paralytic ray shot out from the lead ship and touched my legs. I toppled and smashed to the roadway.

Two Green Martians emerged with their ray pistols. They spoke to Manley in sharp accents. I saw him point to his back, and they looked alarmed. They shepherd him into the lead plane, then came for me. They picked me up and carried me rapidly towards the second plane, pushed me roughly inside. The planes soared up and set their noses in the direction of Ganthia.

Within ten minutes the town was in sight, and the ships braked by means of their frontal jets and set down slowly on top of the tallest house in the centre of the town.

We were forced out and made to walk into the elevator. My legs were coming from under the paralysis now, and my mind was busy with schemes for escape. I thought I knew who had captured us. If I was right we were in the hands of Rekab!

I was right, as was proved a few moments later. The elevator stopped and the greenmen jabbed us out at the point of their ray pistols. We were in a luxuriously furnished living room, in the traditional style of the masters of Mars. Rekab was seated before a large cabinet, drinking the international alcohol, Sitch.

He indicated two seats opposite him, and we sat down under the forceful jabbing of the pistols. He poured two drinks and handed them to us. I left mine untouched, but Manley didn't seem to mind since he was to die anyway.

Rekab said: "You have been unfortunate enough to contract an illness, Manley?"

"What of it?"

"Not very pleasant, is it?" said Rekab. "Brain eaters are a painful affliction towards the end."

Manley muttered: "I don't wish to talk about it."

Rekab smiled: "Suppose I offer you a cure—I am a scientist, it would not take me long to dislodge the parasite from your back."

Manley seemed full of renewed hope. He said: "In exchange for what?"

Rekab stood up calmly and walked to the one way window, stared out. He said: "In exchange for your body!"

Manley seemed too numbed to speak at once. But at last he grunted: "Are you a fool? Of what use would my brain be to me without my body?"

Rekab said: "You misunderstand. You would HAVE a body. Mine!"

Manley said: "Yours?"

"Exactly. Not only would you have my body, but also my wealth and my power. Allow me to explain . . . I must have an Earthman's body. It is imperative. I must shelve this carcass which is scorned and despised. I must be free to move and do as I will upon your world."

"For what purpose?" queried Manley.

"It is not your concern," Rekab answered slowly. "But I will tell you. I will be frank with you. All my life I have hated the bar which makes me an outcast from your world. There is a woman—a woman I love, who is my intellectual equal. But she is one of your kind and she is on Earth. Marriage between us is out of the question—unless I can obtain an Earth body!"

"I have explained this to her when she was last here. She is agreeable to my procuring such a body in the prime of health, and journeying to Earth to marry her by your laws. That is why I must have your body—and why your friend, with his purple diseased brain, is useless to me. It must be yours. And in return I offer you half my wealth, and all my position."

Manley looked thoughtful. Said: "It is a tempting offer, but I must refuse it . . ."

"Why?"

"How am I to know you will not kill me when you have my body? What is to stop you ending my life altogether as you plan to end the life of my companion?"

Rekab said: "You must trust me. If you do not consent I shall take your body by force. I am not purchasing it at a bargain sale. I refuse to quibble. Either you are agreeable to effecting the transaction, or you refuse. You may make your choice."

Manley said: "Exactly how do you plan to make the exchange?"

Rekab thumbed a button, and a wall slid aside. Within the room revealed, was a complete, modern laboratory, with shining steel instruments arrayed about the trestles. Rekab pointed to an old Martian in a white smock beside an operating table. He said:

"Doctor Parlet will perform the operation. It will be a quick transposition of brains. My brain to your body, yours to mine. It is that simple."

"But the nerve endings, and the . . ."

"Doctor Parlet is an eminent man on Mars. If I do not doubt his ability to rejoin the severed portions, why should you?"

Manley sat silent for a moment. Then he looked up: "And you give me your word that I will be allowed to remain alive here, as you?"

"And your friend if you wish it. He suffers from the purple disease, and will remember

nothing of the change within a few more days. You agree?"

Manley nodded: "I agree."

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No time was wasted. The operation to remove the brain eater from Manley's back was performed instantly. I was left in the other room with the two guards, who were drinking at Rekab's invitation. They grew somewhat rowdy as no signs of returning authority came from the lab. The wall was closed again; the scientists were engrossed in the removal of the brain eater.

The Martian guards engaged in a game of Sky Rummy in one corner whilst I wandered about the room inspecting the appointments. It was in this way that I came to the desk—and sat down, ostensibly to read a book, but actually to pen, under cover of the book, a last appeal for help. It was brief, to the point:

"To the space patrol guards, Ganthia, Mars,

Myself and a friend, Manley, are held prisoners in the home of the scientist Rekab. It is Rekab's intention to perform an experiment upon Manley, and later to kill us both. I cannot believe that he has any intention of permitting us to live, either of us.

If you receive this send help at once.

Griffon. X2X3X8.

Space Patrol Agent."

I added fictitious number and the Space Patrol Agent in the hope it would speed them up a little. They were not to know that I had long ago been thrown out of the service because of my brain disease.

Having completed the note I took it casually in my hand and made my way towards the rear window. I looked through the one way glass and into the street, and my eyes rested upon two space guards almost immediately beneath where I now stood. I glanced back at the Martians. They were both engrossed in their game. I pressed the operative button for the window and watched the glass slide gradually upwards. I stopped it at one inch, slid the note out and watched it flutter down to Mars. One of the guards picked it up with a surprised glance upwards, opened it out, and read.

I saw the excitement grow on his features, saw him hand it to his companion, and reach for the small portable microphone which would put him in touch with others of the patrol.

Then I moved hastily away from the window as the sliding panel opened and three men stepped from the interior of the laboratory. The old doctor, Rekab, and Manley!

Manley walked right over to the cabinet with an air of long familiarity and poured a drink for himself. His head was the least bit blood-stained at the nape of the neck, where a small amount of the blood had not been cleaned off.

He finished the Sitch, smacked his lips. Rekab said:

"So the operation was a complete success?"

"Apparently, yes," agreed the new Manley.

"My brain feels quite at ease inside your skull, Manley . . ."

"For the present," smiled the new Rekab, and there was something peculiar in the way he smiled. There was also something peculiar in the way Manley, the new Manley, answered his smile. For he answered it with a pistol—a disintegration ray pistol!

He snapped: "It is well that you are all on that side. For you must all die, now my purpose is accomplished. I cannot afford to permit you to live, any of you. Not even you, my esteemed Doctor. I regret the necessity, but it is there . . ."

The Doctor betrayed no emotion at this sudden traitorous move; his features remained calm and impassive, in the manner of the Green Martians. He spoke no word of surprise, nor made any gesture.

Rekab turned the ray upon him: "Nobody will move . . ."

The beam shot out, touched the doctor, swivelled quickly to the two Martian guards who were still seated in the corner staring at their betrayer. All three crumbled in a split second; nothing now remained except three minute piles of ash on the floor.

Rekab turned to us. His eyes smiled cruelly: "As for you two, I fear you must go the same way. I can take no risk of my changed identity being discovered. I would be exiled from Earth. And although you have been valuable to me, Manley, you can no longer be of service."

Manley murmured: "I had expected no less from a man such as you, Rekab."

"Are you not becoming confused?" questioned the man in Manley's body. "I am MANLEY—and you are REKAB. The positions are reversed. It is I, Manley, who intends to dispose of you. It was you, Rekab, who promised me my life."

"If you mean to kill us have done with it," suggested the Green Martian. "The sooner I get my brain, or call it my soul, out of this filthy green carcass of yours, the better."

The gun was raised. Levelled . . .

And the door behind the gunman opened silently . . . a paralytic ray shot from the pistol in the hands of a space guard . . . and the new Manley screamed and dropped his own ray.

The space guards had answered the call for help in time!

.

And then Rekab's brain, in Manley's body, knew at last why Manley had wandered space, an outcast and hobo. Knew why Manley had made no strenuous objection to the change of

bodies . . . knew the reason for the peculiar smile upon the *new* Rekab's face.

The space guards gripped him by the shoulder, said: "A good night's work, Manley, I arrest you in the name of the Universal Council, for the murder, two years ago, of Valerin Vutin the First, Grand Duke of Jupiter."

And then, how strenuously Manley swore he was *Rekab's* brain in *Manley's* body. And how coolly Rekab denied it, said that Manley was raving mad, that he was and always had been Rekab, and that how could anyone possibly believe a brain could be transplanted from one skull to another, and if it were so who had done it?

No; he, Rekab, had captured Manley. He, Rekab, had brought him here to question him. Yes, he had performed a simple operation upon him, to force the truth of who he was from him. He knew he had no right lurking about the city of Ganthia. And at last Manley was dragged away—or rather, Rekab's protesting mind in Manley's body, was dragged away.

And it was ended.

Griffon had been fully revived. He sat now between Zilgos and Carter. Carter was speaking: "And so, Manley, or rather Rekab's brain in Manley's body, tried to escape from his captors and was blasted down by disintegration guns, thereby making it impossible to verify his story. And Manley, in Rekab's body, died recently from a dangerous growth which Rekab had contracted before he evolved the scheme whereby he might change bodies. I have al-

ways been curious about the events surrounding that capture of Manley and his furious pleas that he was really Rekab in Manley's body. Perhaps we might have got the truth had he not tried to escape his guards. Of course, when we came to question you, Griffon, your memory had already let slip the events of the night. But now . . . it won't ever let slip again . . ." He handed Griffon a sleek mirror. Griffon studied his scarred head in it. The purple was already gone—the scar was sealing rapidly.

Carter went on: "If you're ready I have your first assignment *now*—the reason Manley murdered Grand Duke Vutin of Jupiter, was for the Jovian Kellerveit, a priceless gem. The killing took place in the Grand Duke's home, and Manley then hopped a space craft to Mars. Somewhere on Mars he disposed of that gem. That was where he obtained the money he had when you met him. Your first assignment will be to discover where that gem is now!"

Griffon said: "I'm ready."

Carter handed him a card of authority, and a picture of the gem. He shook hands silently.

Griffon, tall and straight once more, cured of the terrible disease, walked out of the room.

Carter watched him go: Zilgos said: "Do you think he can find the gem?"

And Carter smiled: "If anyone can, he can. What's more he doesn't need any disguise . . . everyone knows him as the space hobo . . . and that's the finest disguise he could have."

And Griffon, spinning from Asteroid 12X on liner thirteen, thought so too . . .

THE END.

*All characters in this book are fictitious.
If the names of actual persons appear it
is a matter of coincidence.*

CHAD SAYS

WOT NO LUCK!



SILLY

SHE HAS THE SECRET

Send 6d. for the History and a S.A.E. to H. H. Joan The Wad, Joan's Cottage, Lanivet, Cornwall.
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LOST HIS JOAN—LOST HIS LUCK

"Please let me know how much to send for Joan the Wad and Jack O'Lantern. I had them both in 1931, but somehow lost them in hospital two years ago. I can honestly say that since losing them nothing has seemed to go right with me. I know what good luck Joan can bring by honest facts I have really experienced ... I certainly know that Joan the Wad is more than a lucky charm. Mr. E. E. S. Liphook, Hants. 10.11.45."

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LOOKED FOR A HOUSE FOR FOUR YEARS—Got Joan, Got a House, Got a job as well.

"Believe it or not, things have taken an astonishing change for the better since the day I received Joan—more than I have dared hope for before. I am being discharged from Services, Oct. 22nd. My family are homeless and I couldn't take a job. But now I have offered me a job with a cottage and good wages, one of my favourite jobs, tractor driving. Please note I have been after a house for just on four years. G. S., Army Fire Service, Slough. 10.10.45."

MARRIED A MILLIONAIRE

"... two of my friends have won £500 each since receiving your mascots, and another has married an American millionaire. ... Please forward me one Joan the Wad and one Jack O'Lantern. C. E. Levenshulme. 11.11.45."

BETTER JOB, MORE MONEY, LESS HOURS, IMPROVED HEALTH

"My dear Joan ... She has brought me continual good luck and her influence spreads to every sphere ... I have got a much better job ... greater wages ... less working hours ... and my health has greatly improved. I have always been a lonely kind of person, but ... a friend of the opposite sex, she is also lonely ... great opportunity for comradeship offered. So you see how the influence of Joan works. My pockets have always been full and I have had many wishes and desires fulfilled ... I would not part with Joan for her weight in gold, she is much too valuable in every way. Her powers extend all over the world, and she works unceasingly for the full benefit of her friends and adherents. She rides in my pocket day and night and never leaves me. ... D. H., Leeds, 9. 2.11.45."

All you have to do is to send a 6d. stamp and a stamped addressed envelope for the history to:

102, JOAN'S COTTAGE, LANIVET, BODMIN

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