

FEBRUARY

SUPER SCIENCE



SERIES

20

THE SCIENCE FICTION



Virgil
Finlay



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WM. MORRIS

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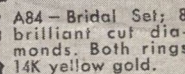
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SUPER SCIENCE STORIES

20¢

THE BIG BOOK OF SCIENCE FICTION

VOL. 4

FEBRUARY, 1943

NO. 3

TWO GREAT FANTASY NOVELS



THE PERSECUTORS.....Cleve Cartmill 28

Voices of an other-dimensional world, no human mind could know them and live. Yet—they must break through, they must make themselves known—and drag down the Earth to their abysmal level of pure evil!



SUNWARD FLIGHT.....Arthur Leo Zagat 82

"I can get you out of here—get you back to a normal life, where you can live honorably and hold the respect of those you know. Shall I do that, or would you rather throw your lives and your honor away—and come along with me on the Sunward Flight to hell?"

NOVELETTE

FOR SALE—ONE WORLD.....Ross Rocklynne 11

Less than animal, more than human, strangers from a mad star, they came to Earth on Time's weirdest errand—to sell a planet they didn't own, to buy what no human may sell!

SHORT STORIES

GARMENTS OF DOOM.....William Morrison 63

Slain by their own strength, trapped by their own wisdom, the invaders from Vega cursed the machine that had told them the Earth was a weakling. But in its way—the machine had been absolutely right!

CIRCLE OF YOUTH.....Frank Belknap Long 72

Youth turns to age and age grows younger on the strange, chill moon of Neptune, where a monster-race played with human lives—and Time had gone mad!

THE FEAR PLANET.....Robert Bloch 116

"Look around, reader—look around. If you see a moving green shape behind you—the story's over!"

WAR GOD'S GAMBLE.....Harry Walton 128

His world would perish if he lost—and he could not keep the fruits of victory if he won. But the captive from Earth had to take a mad chance with destiny—at which he could not win honestly, and dared not cheat!

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MISSIVES AND MISSILES..... 6

FANTASY REVIEWS.....Richard Wilson and Donald A. Wollheim 67

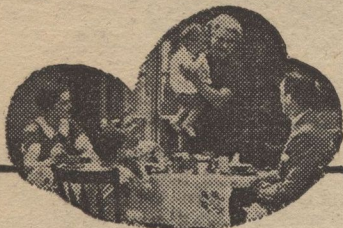
THE SCIENCE FICTIONEER..... 125

Illustrations by Dolgov, Knight, Lawrence, Morey and Paul.

Cover by Virgil Finlay, illustrating "Circle of Youth" by Frank Belknap Long.

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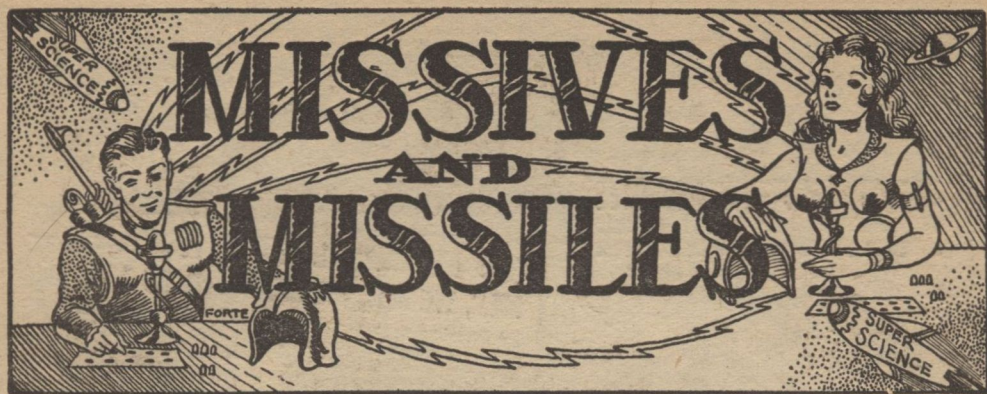
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Street or R. F. D.

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SPECIAL 10 DAY FREE OFFER!

This policy is sold by mail only... to save agents salaries—medical expense—and collection costs. Get policy for 10 days. Read it—Decide for yourself—No Obligation.



Changed for the better, huh?

Dear Mr. Editor:

Obtaining the May 1942 issue of *Super Science Stories* via the second-hand stores, I discovered that the magazine has changed considerably since the last time I read it. *Why, oh, why did you cut out the book-length novel and the novelette?* Not that I don't like *Super Science* as it is today. It is just that a long novel keeps you in suspense. Remember "Genus Homo" in March, '41? There was a perfect example of what I mean. Now for a few comments on the magazine in general. Why has everybody been riding Cummings? I have read quite a few of his stories and almost all of them have been excellent. Also, *don't* do away with Hannes Bok. I don't like his illustrations too well, but if he made his figures more lifelike, he would be a good artist. Incidentally, could you get Eando Binder, Don Wilcox or Edmond Hamilton to do stories for you? Enclosed you will find my application for membership in the Science Fictioneers. I hope my lack of reading experience (I have only been reading science-fiction for a scant two years) will not keep me out. In case this letter gets printed, I am making a plea for magazines. Anyone who reads this that has science-fiction magazines for sale or trade write me immediately. Please send lists. The older the magazine, the better I like it.

Scientifically yours,
Clarence Jacobs
P. O. Box 22
Upland, California

That "Lost Legion" again.

Dear Mr. Monroe:

Judging by the comments from the readers of "Lost Legion," it would seem that no one caught on. Or maybe, I was snagged by my own imagination. Anyway, there was the odd phrase that hinted—not too broadly of course, in case it woke some sound sleeper who might take a poke at you—of a very deep insight into the principle of things. How much if any did you write as fantasy? And was the similarity of names of certain characters to those

living or dead purely coincidental? Anyway, it was the best fiction on the subject I've read since Carmen Ariza. I would like to have read it slanted your way.

Thanks anyway.

Ted Pearce
(Anyway)
S. S. Albertolite
Pilot Station
Victoria, B. C.

The One Man Gallup Poll has his say—

Sept. 4, 1942

Dear Mr. Norton:

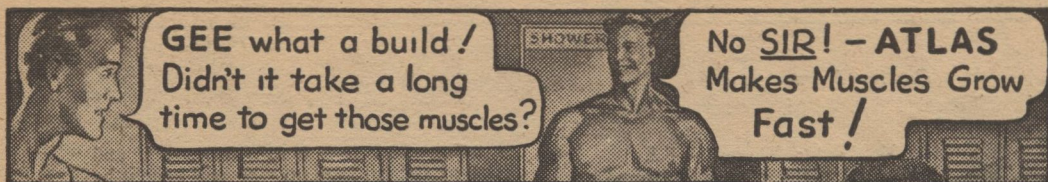
First off, let me say that the November SSS is easily the best issue that you have ever put out. Even the excellent August number can't compare with this bundle of literary joy. It seems that Triple S gets better every issue, and, following that line of thought, I cannot help but wonder what the next issue will be like. If it's any better than this issue. . . . ! Well, enough introductory palaver; let's get down to the business at hand. Which is, of course, rating the issue. Using a scale of 0 to 10, and starting with the cover, our hero (me) goes into a huddle with himself and comes up with the following:

Cover: Excellent; where has Lawrence been all these years? The painting is unusual, too, in that it reminds one of Finlay, Morey and Paul all at once. The two Valkyries are very reminiscent of Finlay at his best; the space-suited figure looks like some of Morey's better work, while the background and planet is typical Paul stuff. This is not an accusation, understand, it's merely a statement of fact. I hope that "Cover by Stephen Lawrence" will appear frequently on your contents page from now on.—9.5.

"We Guard the Black Planet!" A beautifully written story, which is, I think, destined to become a real classic. The ending fairly screams for a sequel, and I, for one, will be looking forward to it. Excellent illustrations.—10.

"The Revolt of the Machine Men" Pure hack. Mr. Tanner apparently thinks all fans are about three years old with corresponding

(Continued on page 8)



Will You Let Me PROVE I Can Make YOU a New Man?

LET ME START SHOWING YOU RESULTS LIKE THESE

5 inches of new Muscle

"My arms increased 1 1/2", chest 2 1/2", forearm 7/8".—G. S., W. Va.

What a difference!

"Have put 3 1/2" on chest (normal) and 2 1/2" expanded."—F. S., N. Y.

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I DON'T care how old or young you are, or how ashamed of your present physical condition you may be. If you can simply raise your arm and flex it I can add **SOLID MUSCLE** to your biceps—yes, on each arm—in double-quick time! Only 15 minutes a day—right in your own home—is all the time I ask of you! And there's no cost if I fail.

I can broaden your shoulders, strengthen your back, develop your whole muscular system **INSIDE and OUTSIDE!** I can add inches to your chest, give you a vise-like grip, make those legs of yours lithe and powerful. I can shoot new strength into your old backbone, exercise those inner organs, help you cram your body so full of pep, vigor and red-blooded vitality that you won't feel there's even "standing room" left for weakness and that lazy feeling! Before I get through with you I'll have your whole frame "measured" to a nice, new, beautiful suit of muscle!

What's My Secret?

"Dynamic Tension!" That's the ticket! The identical natural method that I myself developed to change my body from the scrawny, skinny-chested weakling I was at 17 to my present super-man physique! Thousands of other fellows are becoming marvelous physical specimens—my way. I give you no gadgets or con-

traptions to fool with. When you have learned to develop your Strength through "Dynamic Tension" you can laugh at artificial muscle-makers. You simply utilize the **DORMANT** muscle-power in your own God-given body—watch it increase and multiply double-quick into real solid **MUSCLE**.

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This is a recent photo of Charles Atlas showing how he looks today. This is not a studio picture but an actual untouched snapshot.



(Continued from page 6)

intelligence. No more of this sort of thing, please!—5.6.

"The Man Without a Planet"—8.2.

"Sky Test" Just plain good all around. More by Wylie would be appreciated. As for Morey's "illustration"—Gaaaaa! ! !—9.

"Parrots of Venus" Plenty O. K. Kubilius always can be depended upon for a good, original story. The pic is acceptable, but hardly science-fictional.—8.5.

"The Imaginary" Asimov scores again! —8.8.

"His Aunt Thiamin" A well-written, entertaining story. Nice piece.—8.

"Beyond the End of Time!" Cummings is finally improving, and I have but one complaint. Does there have to be a female in every one of his stories? In this one I was hopeful when, in the beginning, it stated that his (the hero's) sweetie-pie had been liquidated. But what does our hero do but pick up the usual heroine out of the future? I give up.—7.9.

"The Planet Called Aquella"—7.5.

Willy Ley's article was very well done. Let's have more of this sort of thing in *Super Science*.

All departments were up to par, and, on this happy thought, Judge Gallup adjourns till next issue.

The One-man Gallup Poll,
Chad Oliver
3956 Ledgewood
Cincinnati, Ohio

South Africa? We do get around!

Dear Sir:

I have the honor to read the *Super Science Novels Magazine* for a long period now, and as I am very interested in your magazine, I hope you will also have an amount of interest in me.

I want to ask you, if possibly you could find my brother and I a few girl correspondents from your country, we will be very grateful. We are respectively twenty and eighteen years old. I hope, dear Editor, you will grant my request, and that we will hear from you soon,

and remain your,
South-African friends,
J. A. and S. C. Esterheuzin
20385-7 Bond St.
Loeriesfontein, C. P.
South Africa

Okay, soldier.

Dear Sirs:

If you could place my name in your magazine, I would like to correspond with anyone.

Sincerely,
Pvt. Max Kaplan
Nat. Guard Armory
Greensburg, Pa.

Thanks, Renny.

Dear Mr. Norton,

I must thank you both for myself, and others of British fandom who will benefit by your generous act of sending free copies of your mag. to me for circulation over here, for your unmercenariness and uncommercial offer. I was agreeably surprised to find that the (supposedly) hard headed business men who run science fiction magazines purely and coldly for profit appear to have an exception in their midst—yourself. For no matter from what angle I look at it I cannot see any commercial gain coming your way for the duration of the present conflict, or afterwards; except maybe a boost in circulation in the latter case. So I am forced to lay my theories away, and admit that some editors might be human!

Actually, you would be surprised how little fans over here have been deprived of U. S. professional science fiction magazines. Fan friends in your country keep most of us well supplied, and I myself have seen nearly every issue of *Super Science & Astonishing* since their inception—though not currently, of course. I have found these magazines very interesting and entertaining, and definitely fast on the upgrade. I understand that you are new to the science-fiction game (stop me if I'm wrong), and in that case your achievements are even more astounding. The story quality appears to be very good, and illustrations are far above mediocre—I'm remembering that lovely Finlay cover on the June '42 (I believe) issue of *Astonishing*. Then you have presented such good authors as E. E. Smith, Robert Heinlein, and earlier De Camp and Hubbard. Taking them all round, you're doing a swell job—though I would like to see the appearance improve for a slight increase in price. I find nothing to wonder at in that they are going over well with U. S. fans.

I am afraid that there are no what you might call "local fan groups" here. The only bunches that vaguely resembled such have been split up by the war. Thus, though I am the only fan in Blackburn, I will pass your books on to other fans dotted about the country, and see that many have a chance to benefit by your kindness.

I will also endeavor to the best of my ability to comment on the books as much as possible (Hitler permitting!), and get others to write to you expressing their views. It is the least possible appreciation we can show.

And so I close, feeling perhaps slightly more tolerant to professional science-fiction magazine editors.

All the Best,
"Renny" J. E. Rennison
82 Ramsgrave Drive,
Blackburn, Lancs.
England

More Rogers and Finlay on tap,
George.

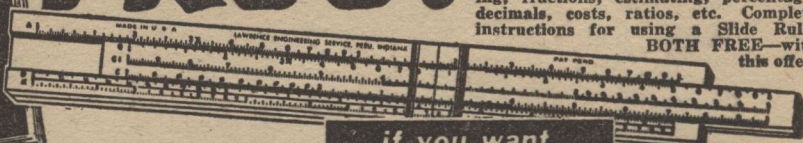
(Continued on page 140)

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**I was dizzy
as a dodo**



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by don herold

There are too many labels in the liquor world. I used to be baffled by all those bottles.

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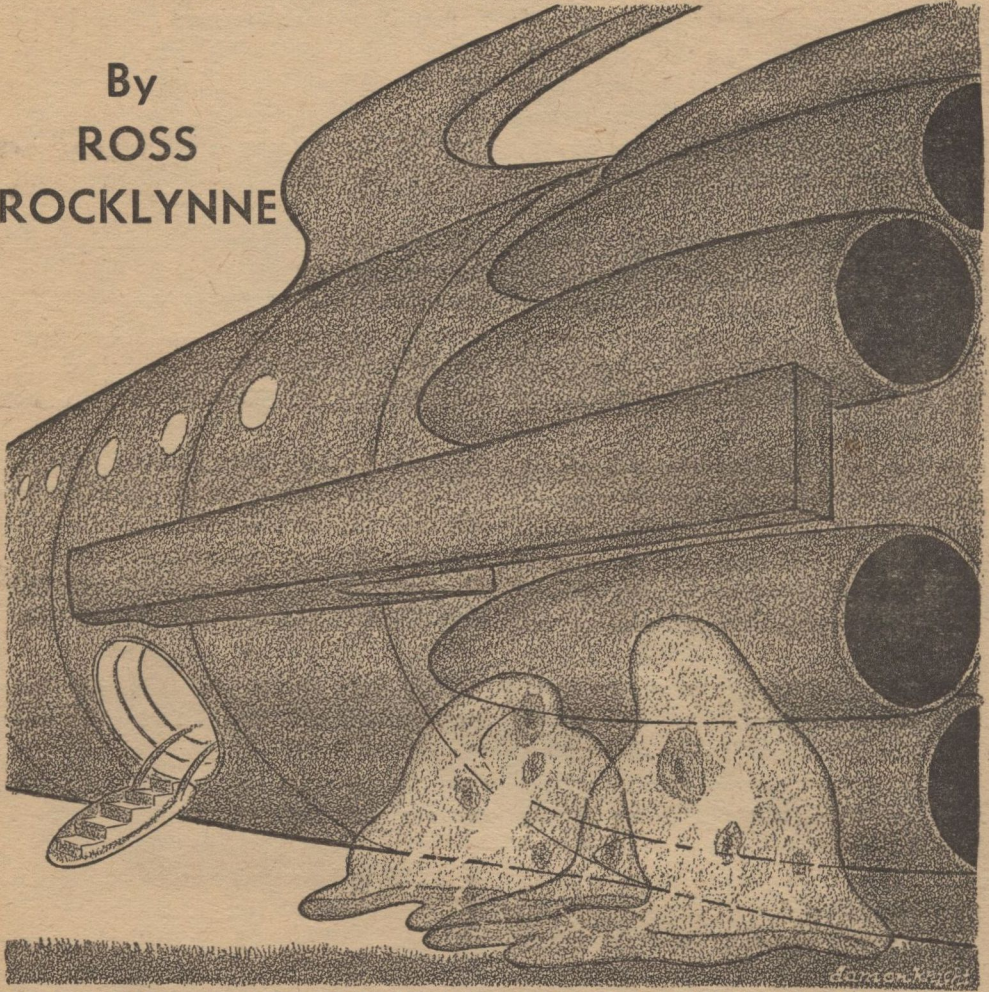
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FOR SALE—ONE WORLD

Less than animal, yet more than human, strangers from a yet stranger star, they came for their ultimate task on earth—to sell a planet they didn't own, to buy what is never for sale!

By
ROSS
ROCKLYNNE



CHAPTER ONE

Stowaways From the Stars

THE interstellar ship *Clarion* landed on New York Field with all the usual fanfare. The brass bands came strutting out; high officials greeted the important arrivals; flowers were

thrown; the crowds waved and yelled and stamped madly and kissed and hugged, and did all those things which crowds do to people who have been separated from the home planet.

There were two passengers of the splendid ship, however, who were accorded no notice whatever—which is as the two

passengers wanted it to be. By a sort of mitosis, the same mitosis that allows blood cells to melt through the walls of a blood vein, these two strange passengers melted through the hull of the ship under the mighty bank of rocket jets, and lay in protoplasmic masses under the shadow of the hull, contemplating in some bewilderment the antics of these new human beings.

Isn't this something? telepathically enthused the larger of the two stowaways. *Who'd have ever expected that planets other than Klutz were inhabited? How come we never thought to build a spaceship ourselves?*

There's more to building a spaceship than thinking about it. You have to have something that these creatures call tools. And just as important, what is known as technical skill and knowledge. Even then, it isn't a snap. Behind the building of spaceships lie centuries upon centuries of improvements in the methods of food-hunting. We don't need tools to advance our methods of food-hunting. We already possess the most perfect method—we eat whatever we happen to contact. So, no progress in food-hunting means no tools, which means no spaceships, which means we stay on Klutz until by the sheerest accident a spaceship from another planet lands for fresh water and we mitose through the hull and ride away with it. I am sort of worried about how we're going to get back, though.

Why worry about it? said the other, lightly. *It strikes me that with our peculiar abilities we might have a rousing good time if we go about it in the right way. For instance, do you realize that among human beings ownership of some thing or object or symbol is the supreme guarantor of enjoyment? Why couldn't we try and own something?*

Don't forget, the other reminded, that to own something you have to render a service.

We'll render a service, then.

To do that, we'll have to become human beings.

We'll become human beings, then.

The smaller of the beings hesitated. *N-no, he decided, at last. Not right away. Let's take a look around first.* He created a pseudopod and pointed toward the fringe of the crowd which was now melting away. A half-dozen crows were tearing into a bag of crackers that someone had dropped. *Let's become birds for a while. Then maybe we'll see something we want to own.*

The larger being agreed, and they set their minds to it. Be it understood that this was no easy job. It required a degree of concentration that would have been beyond the scope of a human being. Indeed, if a human being had been able to summon that degree of concentration he too could have performed similar feats.

The transformation took about fifteen minutes. Feathers appeared; black pigment appeared; wings and beak appeared. The two beings—the larger of whom called himself Karjaljaraba, and the smaller, Oo—then flapped away.

They were crows. As such, they had sacrificed one of their abilities, which was to pick up the thoughts of beings other than themselves. However, they could converse between themselves.

IT IS to be noted that the beings of the planet Klutz had single-track minds. They were intelligent, yes; extremely so. But in picking up the thoughts of human beings on the interstellar ship *Clarion* they were often confused by the variety of shade and coloring of certain thought pictures. They had no referents which would enable them to decide with exactness the meaning of those thought-pictures. Thus, an abstraction in the mind of a human being might often seem to these creatures to be a reality. Thus it was with the Statue of Liberty. They decided they had found liberty itself,

which had such charming connotations in the minds of the human beings.

Having found that liberty was uppermost in the minds of human beings, that is, the two creatures pursued the idea mercilessly downward, and believed that there was some tangible thing which each human being owned.

The Statue of Liberty was it.

The two crows were excited as they circled it. "We'll have a great deal of fun now," Oo cawed in crow-language. "If we can gain for ourselves something which originally belonged to the whole human race, we'll really own something valuable. But in order to own it, we'll have to render a service. That implies that we must become human beings."

Karjaljaraba swooped down, a tattered bundle of ebon, and came to a preening stop on the torch the lady was holding in her upraised hand. He gazed with an entranced eye at the Staten Island ferry, which from this distance and height was toy-size. Oo landed beside him, as usual busy with laying plans for both.

"But not just two human beings," he amended. "Two *important* human beings. Where, Karjaljaraba, would you say that two important human beings would be residing?"

Karjaljaraba referred back to his recently acquired knowledge of human affairs. "In a top-floor corner suite of the largest hotel in town?" he hazarded.

Oo beamed. "What I was thinking exactly. At least we can make a stab at it. Come on!"

In the fourth such suite which they inspected, on the top floor of the most palatial hotel in New York, they found twice as much as they expected. Briefly, they found Harry Robertson and Angus Pandler, who was Harry's gray-headed secretary and general companion. Harry Robertson and Angus Pandler, to the excited satisfaction of Oo and Karjaljaraba, had been on the *Clarion* at the same time

as the two creatures from the planet Klutz.

Harry Robertson and Angus Pandler, as far as could be gathered, were both scientists, and bore the title of doctor. Both specialized in the science of nematodology—which is to say, the study of round worms.

Oo had studied the younger man, Robertson, with a certain degree of interest during the trip. Robertson's mind had been a peculiar jumble of two thoughts—worms and love. It had been only after a great deal of cogitation that Oo was able to decide that *worms* were real, and *love* an abstraction. The first dealt with the third planet of the sun Betelgeuse, which planet Robertson owned, and on which planet a certain species of round worm constituted almost the sole animal life. The second dealt with a girl whose name was Mary Lou Evans. Mary Lou Evans and Harry Robertson were, to use the idiom, in love.

The most important facet of Harry Robertson, however, was that he was truly famous, and of great interest to the world in general and to the medical profession in particular. That was why he occupied the top-floor corner suite of the Hotel Arizona. The TMA—the Terrestrial Medical Association—had provided quarters for him there. Harry Robertson had been on his worm-infested planet for the last two years. Having discovered a serum which the worms secreted that would cure several heretofore incurable diseases at one fell blow, Harry Robertson had made medical history. He had rendered to humanity a service beyond computation.

O O AND Karjaljaraba stood on the windowsill thirty-seven floors above the canyon of the city, looking through the screen at Harry. Harry was walking back and forth, occasionally pounding one hand into the palm of the other with resounding smacks. As he did this, he talked. His blue eyes snapped

with pride; occasionally he reached up and flung back the black cowlick which fell over his bronzed forehead.

What he was talking about Oo and Karjaljaraba did not know, for they had no knowledge of the English language. The sole audience of his harangue was Angus Pandler, who sat with his thin legs crossed, his crinkled, fading eyes attentive on Harry's gestures and words. Now and then Angus nodded, as if satisfied with what Harry was saying. Once or twice he burst into a wide grin, as if Harry had said something funny.

Oo looked doubtful. "If I become Harry Robertson, I wonder whether I can be humorous enough to carry out the deception."

"That all depends. If Harry Robertson's humor is involuntary, you'll have command of it just as you'll have command of all the other involuntary functions—speech, mannerisms, breathing, heartbeat and so forth. I think, however, that Robertson's humor here is forced. He seems to be rehearsing for something. This may mean we'll be placed in a delicate situation, incidentally. Since you're better at handling such things, you take over Robertson, the important member of the duo. I'll take Angus Pandler."

Oo agreed. They then went inside. Which is to say, they mitosed through the window and on to the floor of the suite, after going back to their original protoplasmic form. Immediately, they set in motion those processes which would allow them to duplicate the bodies. Each secured a good mental picture, then flowed under a closet door and proceeded to concentrate, drawing matter from the air, since each was smaller in volume than either of the two human beings.

Thirty minutes later, Harry Robertson, duplicated inwardly to the tiniest capillary and outwardly to the shiny tuxedo which sat so awkwardly on his frame, moved from the closet, followed by the duplicated

Angus Pandler. They moved across thick rugs, into the capacious study where the two human beings were engaged in spirited discussion. Angus was leaning back, his feet on the table. Harry Robertson was facing him, his back to the duplicates. Oo gathered from the content of their speech, which he could now understand, that they were discussing a man named John Huggins Randolph. The two men had never met John Huggins Randolph, but they had had various unpleasant long-distance contacts with him. Randolph owned the Trans-universal Drug Company.

Angus saw the duplicates first. His mouth stopped as if a guillotine had chopped off his voice. He gulped, and went slowly white.

Karjaljaraba said in a matter-of-fact voice, "You are no longer in possession of your normal faculties. Sleep."

Muscles in Angus' jaw moved as if he were in a paroxysm. He was evidently trying to come erect. All his muscles gave way at once and he sank back against his chair. His eyes closed.

Harry Robertson whirled and for one confounded instant met his double's eyes. Oo spoke slowly and distinctly. Harry Robertson collapsed like a piece of string, and Oo jumped forward just in time to keep his head from striking the table. He lifted Robertson into his arms and took him to the closet. Karjaljaraba followed, bearing Angus Pandler. They placed the two men side by side against the wall in a sitting position, and quietly closed the door.

Oo stood, listening. The heavy breathing of the duplicated men was extremely audible.

"We'll have to take a chance on nobody coming in until we've managed to render the service which will get us the Statue of Liberty," said Oo, speaking in the English language for practice. "Meanwhile, we can examine Robertson's papers. They may help us."

KARJALJARABA found Robertson's briefcase on the table, full of legal documents. Oo went through them, glancing over the contents. When he found the title deed for Robertson's wormy planet—"said planet being in numerical order third from that star designated by the Interstellar Board as Betelgeuse, being at aphelion seven hundred forty-seven million (747,000,000) miles from said star, and at perihelion four hundred two million (402,000,000) miles from said star, having diurnal rotation of fourteen hours, ten minutes, ten seconds at present time and date as stamped on this Title Deed in proper place, having period of revolution around aforementioned star Betelgeuse equal to seven and eight-tenths (7.8) Terrestrial years, or two and one-tenth (2.1) Nargan years, said planet Narga being first in order from aforementioned star Betelgeuse—" Oo allowed his lips to stretch in a natural grin of delight.

"This may be exactly what we want for our purpose," he said warmly. "This is the planet whose worms Robertson has been using to render a highly useful service to humanity. Technically and officially, I now own the planet. Perhaps we will find some opportunity to trade the planet for liberty."

Karjaljaraba—Angus Pandler—rubbed worriedly at his grizzled jaw. "And perhaps Harry Robertson will not like that. Bear in mind, Oo, that we're out to have some fun, not to make other people unhappy. Robertson may have some special plans for this planet which we can't perceive."

"Nonsense!" Oo stuck the title deed into his coat pocket. "Whoever has the worms will render the same service as Robertson. You know yourself that a human scientist is a person who is thoroughly selfless, who thinks only in terms of humanity as a whole, who does not care for

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credit and glory but just wants to work. It was all in that book we found the old lady reading."

He turned back to the papers, but at that moment a soft buzzer rang insistently. Robertson-Oo started toward the door, a quite involuntary action. He thought better of it, and waved Karjaljaraba toward the door instead. From the look on Karjaljaraba's face, he did not relish the job. It was almost funny to Oo the way Karjaljaraba shuffled off, painfully trying to make sure that he wouldn't do anything not in character with Angus Pandler.

He needn't have worried. Oo heard a feminine shriek of joy.

"*Angus!* Angus, it's so *good* to see you!" Pause, *smack*. "You haven't changed a bit. I just got here—I dropped my purse—oh, thanks, Angus—from San Francisco. They had the most awful crowds—I had to use tenth-level traffic lanes all the way. I'm *breathless*. Harry! Harry!"

There was the sound of running, clicking feet, and a human girl came into view from around the ell of the hall. She was dressed startlingly in blue and red. She had a round face and full lips, and she was slight of figure. Her eyes were blue and they shone.

"Harry!" she shrieked. "Oh, my darling!"

Oo was stupefied until she flung herself into his arms, crying and laughing and babbling at the same time. Then his reactions became normal and he kissed her, anywhere on her face that his lips might happen to land. He held her tightly, realizing at last what Robertson's thoughts had dealt with when on the subject of love.

"My own," he whispered huskily. "My wonderful one! I've missed you—it's been plain torment—"

She flung her head back. "What do you think it's been for me?" she said

fiercely. "Just thinking of you out there, all alone except for Angus and the Nargans and some—some worms! Oh, Harry!" She kissed him again. Then she stood back and ran her eyes critically up and down his six feet. She flung herself into his arms again, kissing him passionately. "I love you, you great big foolish dolt for going away and leaving me! Now we're going to get married—" She stopped to look at her fingerwatch. She gave a shriek of alarm.

"Your speech!" she wailed. "In half an hour— Come on, I rented a ground-car. I'm going with you—"

"My speech?" said Oo vaguely.

"Oh, Harry! You haven't changed a bit! They're waiting for you right now. Aren't you excited that all the big names in the profession are just sitting there, waiting for you—just you? Aren't you excited?"

She scampered toward the door, holding Oo's hand so that he had to run. He cast a look at Karjaljaraba. Karjaljaraba's telepathed thoughts came: *You'll have to go through with it. You have to make a speech—probably about Robertson's worms. This is a delicate situation, Oo, remember.*

Delicate! Oo's thoughts gasped as Mary Lou Adams dragged him onto the elevator. *Find some way out! I don't know anything about the worms! You know I don't. Karjaljaraba, this is not to my liking. It comes too suddenly. If I had time to prepare—if I could have found Robertson's notes—this is what he was rehearsing for.*

The elevator grounded, and whatever Karjaljaraba might have said in answer was lost to Oo as his fiancée guided him through homebound crowds of pedestrians. She shoved him inside a low gravitomobile, laughingly pulled Karjaljaraba in beside her, then turned and planted another kiss on Oo.

"Oh, my darling, I love you! I'm so proud of you, you hermit—but your tie's

all wrong. There! Aren't you excited? Is your speech all ready? I'll bet it's a grand speech. Oh, darling, you could tell them *anything* and they'd be tickled to death. You're a great man, darling!"

Oo, for the first time in all his life, was petrified. This was certainly not the easiest way to get liberty, he would have sworn. He saw nothing wrong with speaking to a hundred or a hundred thousand people; he knew nothing of stagefright. But to present an oral essay on worms—and a particular kind of worm about whose habitat, innards or other characteristics he knew nothing—well, that was beyond reason.

We might, came Karjaljaraba's incisive thoughts, *do a fade-out.*

No! The idea horrified Oo. And leave this pretty young thing in the lurch? Remember, I'm in love with her—or rather, my body and my instincts and thalamus are in love with her. Think what that might do to the real Harry Robertson. No man is so great that he can snub his inferiors. No—no, I'll have to go through with it. I confess, however, that I see no way out at present. Now be quiet—let me think.

CHAPTER TWO

Planet for Sale!

KARJALJARABA was quiet, but Mary Lou was not. When they arrived at the auditorium his brain was numb, and quite empty. He followed Mary Lou through a rear entrance.

He vaguely remembered somebody rushing up and grabbing his hand as he was led into the wings of the auditorium, behind which he heard a hum of voices such as might come from a thousand men and women.

He turned to look at Mary Lou, and she kissed him warmly.

"I'll be in the audience, darling," she

promised. "I won't understand a *thing* you're saying—those things you wrote me in your letters about the worms. I couldn't understand a *thing*! But, darling, make it good—" and she was gone, and there was nobody there but Karjaljaraba and a man who was fat and beaming and had introduced himself as Gregoryev Donskoy of Moscow. He spoke perfect English.

"You have your notes? No?" His eyes shot up. "You will speak from memory? Wonderful!"

"I may," said Oo, feeling as if he were rooted to the spot, "be a bit technical."

Doctor Gregoryev Donskoy was effusive in his declarations that Oo could be as technical as he wished. He raised his hand sharply and beckoned Oo and Karjaljaraba and they stepped into the bright glare of the footlights. Oo and Karjaljaraba carefully sat down, while Donskoy went to the rostrum and waited for attention. Donskoy went into a long, rambling account of Dr. Harry Robertson's voluntary exile on his planet; Oo caught phrases—"cancer—serum extracted by a method heretofore unused—tuberculosis—pernicious anemia—benefactor of mankind—the sulphas, quinine, gramicidin—"

What shall we do? came Karjaljaraba's clear, cold thoughts. *You have not yet thought of a solution?*

No.

This, moaned Karjaljaraba, is the blackest moment of my life. I shudder to think of what agonies you must be going through. I cannot help you. We must prepare for a hasty retreat.

"And this man of whom I speak, this man who knows nematodes—worms—better than any man has ever been permitted to know them, this man I now present—in the flesh! Dr. Harry Robertson!"

Dr. Donskoy melted away from the rostrum, and Oo got up and seemed to be wafted toward the rostrum on the solid deluge of applause which now was hurled

at him by the hundreds of scientists sitting out there and looking up at him. He stood at the rostrum, and thought with a cool clarity, "Perhaps we should have chosen some hotel other than the Arizona."

He also reflected that perhaps he and Karjaljaraba should have quietly faded away as Karjaljaraba had suggested.

"Ladies—gentlemen—fellow nematologists and members of the medical profession," said Oo. "Thank you."

He paused. To Karjaljaraba he urgently telepathed, *Prepare for a hasty retreat. We will simply mitose through the—Wait! I have it!*

He had it indeed! The clue came from a remembrance of what Mary Lou had said in the gravitomobile—she wouldn't understand anything he said. Well, well!

O O BEGAN to talk. He talked with clarity, devoting the first half minute of his speech to a pseudo-description of the wormy jungles of his planet. "I felt like a worm myself, at times." Gently indulgent laughter. "I dissected worms by day and by night, always with the good of humanity in mind. When I discovered that I had isolated a serum which was even more potent than the sulphas, quinine, gramicidin—when I discovered that the neces of the tenebes sacs were rampant with that milk-colored liquid which some have referred to as the phosal-fluid—my joy knew no bounds. Henceforth, I knew that my every waking moment was to be devoted to this new salace. The salace, you understand, was nothing as simple as the pery—or the auctoransin, for that matter. But it was *new*. I felt quite justified in my assumptions."

Oo paused to drink some water.

"Now." He leveled a forefinger at his tense audience. "My equipment was new. The Nargans helped with that. My retorts were of special tanus resistant lubroid. This was important. Tanus, it should be

understood, in a caroid of the tomer family. The lubroid, upon receiving a normal amount of *plenum arbitrum*, remained as transparent as my experiments demanded. The next step was one which you all begin to perceive. Briefly, it was the matter of separating the phosal from its nemodic tensors. When this came to a boil, I removed by the vacuum process described, I believe, in some of the better textbooks. Now, hemodically, I should have succeeded. But unfortunately there was no hemosis. My first attempt at inciliation was a complete failure. In addition, there was the complication caused by the neces of the nemod strontifying collexisely. I decided to resort to insurbation.

"Let me review insurbation, ladies and gentlemen. It's hardly as complex a process as you imagine. In this instance, I made use of the rotary tables occasionally used with a flaccis in view. Fortunately, I had plenty of worms. And water, too. I couldn't forget the water. So much for that."

Oo rubbed his hands, drank some more water and ran his eyes over the rows and rows of fascinatedly staring doctors and nematodologists. He could just make out Mary Lou Evans, sitting perfectly motionless and worshipping him in a back seat. The audience was supremely attentive.

Oo gained confidence, walking back and forth and pounding his fist into his palm occasionally. "Now I launched into the second phase of my attack on this stubborn subject. Having incised the remainder of my lascient streams, I now began the enchorian diagnosis of the hemus veins, throwing in liberal quantities of cephalstain antibodies and extorting from ten to twenty millimeters of facliosic acid—always on the lookout for strontifying confluences, naturally. My instruments, being of the finest precision, began to record ten, thirty, fifty liters. I called in my assistants to take care of that end of it, and fortunately no accident occurred. I was now nearing

my goal and the liquid was assuming that purplish tint usually desired. Extorting again, I built up the doublets with a ten per cent solution of tebanium, streamed, flexed, incised, expositied and economically reverted to the generally misnamed corious fly-stone, a colorless sporada which occasionally—and sometimes to my discomfort—relisces audines or paracoids. In the meantime, I had plenty of worms. Now, before we proceed further, are there any questions?"

Oo could have cut his tongue out when a small, nervous little man stood up in the front row. He cleared his throat. "You make use of the word expositied—and there are several other—"

"Did I say *expositied*?" said Oo in surprise. "You're sure of that?"

"Well—" said the little man, a trifle defiantly.

Oo was firm. "I did not, certainly, use the word you mentioned. I doubt if there is such a word. However, you were probably confusing the relaxus of terbarin with the nematode, or its equivalent, which occurs on the borderline—they generally run very high. I trust you understand, sir?"

The little man sat down. He said slowly, "I see."

Oo went on. He went on for an hour and seven minutes, the words tumbling out of his mouth with complete fervor, his expression sincere, his every gesture. He stepped down from the rostrum with a bow. There was a dead silence.

OO WALKED away from the rostrum, waiting for a guillotine to fall. Then somebody started clapping. It might have been Mary Lou. Somebody else joined in. The auditorium rocked, and Dr. Gregoryev Donskoy held up his pudgy hands and with a slightly dazed expression muttered platitudes about the great works such men as Dr. Harry Robertson were performing in scattered corners of the universe, working with

tools and materials "which some of us can hardly pretend to understand."

When Donskoy turned around, Oo grabbed his hand, shook it, blurted out something highly unintelligible and turned, almost stumbling over Karjaljaraba. The two of them rushed toward the back entrance of the auditorium and debouched into an alley. Oo leaned against the wall, dead white.

Karjaljaraba looked at him in awe. "Where," he said, "did you learn about worms?"

"Never mind," Oo gasped. "Let's get back to the hotel."

"What about Mary Lou?"

"I couldn't face her," said Oo, looking sick. They started toward the main street, when a portly man, swinging his cane, came rushing toward them. He grabbed Oo's hand.

"Dr. Robertson? What incredible luck! I surely thought I'd missed you. I don't profess to have understood your extremely technical speech—we'll leave that to the great brains." He chuckled, then instantly became sober. "Permit me to introduce myself. John Huggins Randolph, and mighty pleased to make your acquaintance. Robertson," said Randolph, drawing himself erect, "Trans-universal Drugs is prepared to buy your planet!"

Oo looked dazed. "Buy my planet?"

Karjaljaraba hurriedly telepathed, *The word 'buy', as I understand it, Oo, is a verb which implies a transaction wherein a reality is exchanged for a symbol. However, the symbol, if one watches oneself, generally has a value equal, referent to the vendor, to the reality exchanged. Randolph states he is prepared to offer you such a symbol in exchange for the planet. It may well be, if we work it right, that the symbol will be valuable enough to exchange for liberty. This is the same Randolph the two humans were talking about, by the way.*

I see, Oo telepathed back. He got him-

self in hand, to Randolph said cautiously, "I see. And how much of the symbol were you prepared to offer?"

Randolph looked confused. "The symbol?" Then he grinned broadly, burst into a single high-pitched chuckle. "The beans—the gravy—the iron men—the greenbacks—the almighty dollar. And they said you were a green kid!" Then he became businesslike, and shot out, "A hundred thousand?"

Oo hesitated, his brow wrinkling.

"Five hundred thousand," Randolph amended quickly. There was a slightly stunned, amazed expression in his eyes.

Oo's hand nervously crept up toward his tie. "Would that be enough to buy liberty?" he asked cautiously. "You see, I have no desire to be unfair, but it is imperative that we have liberty."

Randolph's jowls went slack. "You mean—" he suddenly drew Oo back into the shadows—"you mean—" incredulously—"the bluecoats are on your trail? I'll be damned! Listen, I'll mention my top price—one million, five hundred thousand. Man, that'll buy you all the liberty you want. You could get by with murder on that. How about it?"

Oo telepathed, *This seems like a fair offer, Karjaljaraba. What do you think? He tells us that we can buy liberty with his symbol.*

Karjaljaraba was exultant. *Excellent! Go ahead.*

Oo nodded his head warmly, "It's a go. I've got the deed in my pocket."

Randolph's breath came fast. He seemed to stagger slightly. He gulped. Then, without another word, he grabbed Oo's arm, and rushed toward the street intersection. He hailed a gravitobile, pushed Oo and Karjaljaraba in. In ten minutes, he was ushering them into an office in a downtown business section. Randolph sat them down, and in another second was at the visiphone. He made a half-dozen calls, and then turned to Oo, sweating.

"My lawyers will be here shortly," he explained. He looked at Oo in fascination, and then began to walk excitedly up and down the office, rubbing his hands together. He seemed to be exultant about something which Oo could not understand . . .

In the next hour, Oo signed Dr. Harry Robertson's name to innumerable papers. A new deed was drafted, and Randolph made out a check for the required amount. Oo looked at it stupidly, trying to think things out to the best advantage.

"We wanted to make a certain exchange tonight," he began haltingly. "This check—"

Randolph looked stunned. "You want cash? Good God! You fellows must be hip-deep in— All right!" He conferred with his lawyers, who left hurriedly. Half an hour later they came back just as hurriedly, carrying a satchel filled to overflowing with bundles of green paper with figures printed on them. Randolph counted the money interminably, then thrust the satchel into Oo's hand.

"Fair enough?" he asked quickly. "Fine! Thank you, gentlemen—thank you!"

He showed them to the door, closed it in their faces.

They did not see him collapse into a chair. Randolph had just bought a treasure house for a fraction of its value.

CHAPTER THREE

"Never Trust a Human!"

NEW YORK is New York, no matter what the century. Thus it was not long before Karjaljaraba and Oo, strolling down Broadway, found a man who was willing to sell them the Statue of Liberty. This was the fifth man they had asked. The four others had not even answered Oo's polite question, but mumbled something and sidled away. The fifth had been a small fat man who leaned

against a telephone pole and picked his teeth, studying passers-by with some interest. His sophistication dropped away when Oo apologetically approached him with his question, for he turned a slight green.

After a moment he gulped, "So you want to buy the Lady? Now ain't that a coincidence! I *own* the Lady!" His fingers trembled a little when Oo opened his satchel. He grabbed the satchel. "How much you got there?" he queried hoarsely.

When Oo told him, he appeared about to faint. The net result of this was that the Statue of Liberty, by an amazing coincidence being on sale for a million and a half exactly, became the property of the two beings from the planet Klutz. The papers were made out properly, in a little room with fly-specked wallpaper, the fat little man pecking out the necessary clauses on a little typewriter.

He signed the papers, and Oo signed the papers, and the fat little man took the satchel and shook their hands and showed them out the door, and the deal was completed.

Oo and Karjaljaraba strode along with their chests out. They felt that they had accomplished a great deal on this day. They now owned liberty, lock, stock and barrel. People would doubtless be surprised when they found out about it.

WHAT they were going to do with liberty they did not know. However, by now it was midnight, and the duplicated bodies they had acquired showed definite signs of fatigue. They caught a gravitomobile and went back to the Hotel Arizona and went on up to their rooms. Here a singular thing occurred. As they turned the light on they saw Mary Lou Evans standing in the middle of the floor, her hair in disarray, her cheeks streaked with tears and a thermospray in her hand.

Sprawled on the floor near her feet were

the real Harry Robertson and Angus Pandler. They were breathing heavily, still in the hypnotic state.

"Now," said Mary Lou Evans, while she fought to control her voice against horror, "suppose you two impostors explain what's going on before I boil your blood in your veins. If you don't explain, and if it isn't sensible, I'll go stark, raving mad! I wondered why you didn't wait for me at the auditorium. I wondered why you acted so strange. You hardly knew me! You had the nerve to kiss me. Why—why, you—" She choked. "What did you do to Harry?"

Karjaljaraba telepathed, "*This is a dangerous situation. We are not so super-human that we can stand the heat rays that gun will throw out. We will die as surely as any human being if she pulls the trigger. I suggest that we make a clean breast of the whole affair, and convince her that our intentions are completely well-meaning. If she is resentful of our having sold the planet we will have to turn ownership of the Statue of Liberty over to Harry. That should satisfy her.*"

Oo agreed with this line of reasoning. He, as well as Karjaljaraba, knew the dangers involved in hypnotizing the girl. Her muscles would contract and the thermospray would go off. Besides, there was no point in hypnosis. They would make the explanation anyhow, sooner or later. They had no desire to inconvenience others.

"I beg you," said Oo diffidently, his eyes nervously on the gun, "to give us complete opportunity to explain before you—ah—decide on strong measures."

"Explain!" Mary Lou shrieked. "How can you explain? There isn't any explanation, unless you are devils or monsters—or unless I'm crazy. It couldn't happen. I dare you to explain!"

"We are monsters," Oo agreed worriedly. "At least, what you would call monsters. But we have no evil intentions. We are really overgrown amoebae, I

guess. We possess the peculiar ability to duplicate any living thing." He explained their origin, their experiences as crows. "Our main purpose was to gain ownership of the Statue of Liberty," Oo went on. "Now that we have it—"

Mary Lou's lips worked. "So you own the Statue of Liberty. How did you accomplish that insanity?"

"We gave a million and a half dollars for it," said Oo, feeling that he was getting some place.

"And where did you get a million and a half dollars?"

"A man by the name of John Huggins Randolph—"

Mary Lou said in deadly tone, "Don't tell me. Let me guess. You sold Harry's planet to Trans-universal Drugs. Is that it?"

"Well, yes. And in exchange—"

"You bought the Statue of Liberty!" The thermospray dropped from Mary Lou's fingers. She doubled up on the floor, laughing uncontrollably.

Hysteria, telepathed Karjaljaraba. *Though why she should be hysterical I cannot begin to understand. But it is an obvious fact that she does not believe the Statue of Liberty to be of value equal to her lover's planet.*

O O STOOD in some indecision. *Hysteria* was a species of shock, he guessed; a shock should bring her out. He stooped over Mary Lou and slapped her. She stopped laughing. Her hand crept up to her cheek in dazed fashion. She began to weep large, rapid tears, her shoulders heaving.

"You poor, senseless idiots," she choked. "You don't know what you've done. You're the greenest of the green. It's laughable, downright laughable. Trans-universal Drugs is a slimy monopolizing concern. They've got the planet and the worms and they can find the process in any one of half a dozen technical magazines.

A serum that should have been sold to humanity at slightly more than cost will now be sold at a thousand per cent profit."

She came to her feet. "Well, don't stand there," she said tearfully. "Unhypnotize Harry and Angus. I'll try to keep them from killing you."

Oo's human skin turned pale. He telepathed to Karjaljaraba, *We'll make a break for it. We must have committed some unbelievable stupidity. I don't choose to remain in here and be subjected to the insults of Harry and Angus when they awaken. So the minute they begin to stir and Mary Lou turns her attention from us, we will quietly walk through the door. We might as well retain our human bodies for the time.*

Karjaljaraba telepathed his assent. He stood nervously by while Oo commanded Angus and Harry to awaken. The two humans opened their eyes instantly, and Mary Lou, weeping, dropped to her knees beside Harry. By that time, Oo and Karjaljaraba were outside the suite and running. They caught an elevator, left the hotel and literally threw themselves into a gravitomobile.

"Anywhere!" Oo tensely told the driver.

The gravitomobile, which moved by falling downward in a horizontal direction, shot away, and only after a few blocks did Oo and Karjaljaraba breathe easily again. Karjaljaraba turned his head back from a perusal of the street behind them.

"Nobody following," he exulted. "Now we can go ahead and take possession of the Statue of Liberty. Oo, I do not believe it is possible to thoroughly understand human affairs!"

Oo was lost in thought. Finally he turned, dropping his hand sadly on Karjaljaraba's knee. "No, Karjaljaraba," he said mournfully. "We aren't going to take possession of the Lady. We can't."

Karjaljaraba was horrified. "What? But, Oo—wasn't that our whole purpose? Isn't that the reason we became Harry

Robertson and Angus Pandler? Didn't we agree between us that there wasn't any harm in selling the planet?"

"I'm sorry, Karjaljaraba." Oo was gentle. "I realize how much you wanted liberty. I wanted it myself. But we have to give it up. There's no other course open to us. We have done Harry Robertson and Angus Pandler and Mary Lou a great deal of harm. We must try to undo it, no matter how much it hurts us personally."

Karjaljaraba was grief-stricken. His human throat choked up. He brokenly nodded his assent.

"But how will we go about it?"

"By regaining possession of the million and a half dollars. Then we'll simply give the money back to Randolph and he'll give us the ownership of the planet again. With our peculiar abilities, Karjaljaraba, we shouldn't have any trouble at all."

IT WAS a nerve-wracked gravitomobile driver who finally drew up in an alley beside a ramshackle dwelling and accepted bills which Oo took out of the wallet which had been duplicated inside his tuxedo. Oo and Karjaljaraba had not known the name of the street where the swindler had sold them the Statue of Liberty, but they remembered the surroundings. By much pointing and "turn right here" and "turn left here" they had arrived at their destination. When Oo instructed the driver to wait, that individual snarled at them apoplectically.

Oo suspected the cause of the driver's unhappiness. He said apologetically, "If you know where John Huggins Randolph lives, you may choose your own route." He added, for he was fast approaching an understanding of human motives, "If you wait, we will give you twice as many iron men as the occasion demands."

It was evident that the driver knew where Randolph lived, and also that Oo's powers of persuasion were strong. The driver would wait.

Oo nodded in satisfaction. He beckoned Karjaljaraba, and the two creatures from the planet Klutz melted away into the shadows, up a short flight of wooden stairs and down the length of a long, unlit porch. Oo remembered his way very well and pushed open a door. They stood in a dark hallway which smelled strongly of pungent food odors. There was another door in front of them. Oo softly tried the knob. It was locked.

Karjaljaraba used telepathy for quietness' sake. *It is extremely possible that the human we seek isn't here, Oo.*

Oo was disappointed. *Nevertheless, we must make certain.*

Although Oo had wanted to use Harry Robertson's body to make the exchange of the Statue of Liberty for the million and a half dollars, there was no other way for them to get in, apparently, than to go back to their original protoplasmic bodies. They could have knocked on the door, Oo knew, but somehow he was beginning to believe that the man they were seeking would not be anxious to see them again.

They immediately lost their human form, and were nothing more than wetly gleaming puddles on the odorous floor. Oo, however, was holding the deed to the Statue of Liberty in one pseudopod. They trickled under the door into a somewhat relieved darkness. There was a crack of light shining from another door. In another moment, they were quietly huddled in a corner of the next room, only part of which was illuminated with a wall lamp. Under the lamp, the fat, greasy man was sitting over a table. His expression was gloating. Spread out on the table was the million and a half dollars. While the two creatures watched, the fat, greasy man scooped the bills up excitedly and let them flutter down again in a green cloud.

"Hoo-ahs!" His breath came out noisily.

What do you pick up from an analysis of his thoughts? queried Karjaljaraba.

Now that they were back in their real form, their telepathic powers could be used on other creatures than themselves. *The impression I get is of evil.*

Oo agreed with him. *The first truly evil human we've run across, I believe. Furthermore, as a compensation, he has extremely religious tendencies. Religion, he amplified for Karjaljaraba's benefit, is something people get when they have a great deal of trouble. I now suspect, Karjaljaraba, that this man played us for suckers. That's the phrase that comes to me, anyway. Exactly how he played us for suckers, I don't know. But it seems obvious that he figures he has gained a great deal more from the transaction than we have. Therefore it seems that the only way we could convince him to take the Statue of Liberty back and give us the money would be to appeal to his religious sense.*

Perhaps, Karjaljaraba suggested hopefully, you could become his conscience.

Excellent! Oo enthused.

IT took Oo about twenty minutes to become the swindler's conscience—that is, to become a duplicate of the swindler. During this time, the fat man was entirely absorbed in his newly acquired fortune. He never raised his eyes until suddenly, from out of the circle of darkness which hemmed him in, he heard somebody clearing his throat.

"Beg pardon, bud," said Oo huskily, moving his corpulent body into the circle of light.

The swindler's chair clattered back. He leaped to his feet, his eyes bulging. "What the hell!" he half screamed. "Who're you?"

"Your conscience," said Oo, leering. "I been casin' you for some time now. The Black Maria's on your trail. It's the big school for you, or maybe the cold-meat cart." As an afterthought, Oo added, "You grifter. You gill. You flimflammer."

The flimflammer slowly backed up against the wall, his face going slowly white. "Yeah?" he said idiotically. "Yeah?"

"Sure thing," said Oo wisely, advancing a step. "You dirty chiseler."

"Me?" said the grifter in a somewhat strained tone.

"Yeah, you."

"I'm crocked," said the gill humbly. "It's me, in the flesh."

"I'm your conscience," said Oo. "I'm an Oregon boot on your foot, pal. I never go on the lam, see? I never do a fadeout. I never take a powder. Get it, lug? Okay, slug. I'm on the muscle today, louse, and I'm here to lay it to you—or else. See?"

The swindler slowly began to slide down the wall. "I—" he said in a strangled voice.

"Quee down, mug! Pull in your neck, pinhead. Also, button your lip. Play along with me or you'll be weeping and waiting with the rest of the stir-pokes, and maybe taking the electric cure with an O'Shaughnessy pardon, you punk. I'm a right guy, Sam, but if somebody runs a reader in on you for shaking down a couple of slobs I'll be able to do just as much for you as a rumbeak with a milk-spiller soloing against you in the blab-chair."

The swindler sagged down; his eyes rolled; he mumbled, "Why the hell don't you speak English?"—and fainted dead away.

He hit the floor with a fat thud, rolled over, jerked and stopped in an awkwardly contorted position with his head canted against the wall.

Oo gulped. He bent over the prostrate man. "Apparently," he said, in a surprised tone, "his conscience got the better of him. This is excellent, Karjaljaraba. If I interpret the situation correctly, this slob, having a similar advantage over us, would pocket the swag, make his getaway and steer clear of shamuses."

"I don't profess," said Karjaljaraba in an injured tone, "to know the content of your speech."

Oo performed a human chuckle.

Five minutes later, Oo—the swindler—walked from the shack. Behind him, the real swindler had in his hand the deed of ownership for the Statue of Liberty. Neither Oo nor Karjaljaraba had been able to come to any conclusion other than that the exchange should be completely even; it was the way things were done, they reasoned.

In the satchel which Oo carried were a million and a half dollars—and the protoplasmic mass that was Karjaljaraba.

The cab driver took one look at Oo, dropped his jaw and looked tired of life and its complexities.

"I thought—" he said in a drugged tone.

"Never mind what you thought, Ralph! I left my pal back in the joint and I got me into a new outfit. It ain't any thousand-mile outfit, and it may have a few seam squirrels, but I'm not hep to any classy shes, so what? So make it snappy, give 'er the gas and let 'er roll!"

Oo settled back against the seat, and the gravitomobile rolled.

CHAPTER FOUR

Fair Exchange

O O had difficulty keeping his balance, his newly-acquired fat stomach bothered him so, but he waddled at a swift pace up a tree-bordered walk toward the door of John Huggins Randolph's suburban home. He stopped at the door. Karjaljaraba stuck half of himself out of the satchel, inserted a pseudopod under the door and up to the catch. The door swung open and Oo went quickly up the stairs, Karjaljaraba drawing himself back into the satchel.

There was a light in an upstairs room.

Oo paused in the hallway. There was a great deal of noise, the jabbering of indignant, irate human voices coming from Randolph's study.

"All right! All right!" a bull voice roared. "Break it up, break it up!"

"I refuse to break it up, officer!" came Randolph's heated voice. "I leave it up to you. These people come here in the middle of the night and bring the law with them as a threat to make me give up property which was duly vested into my possession by the signature of one Harry Robertson in a perfectly legal manner."

"I did *not* sign my name to any of your slimy legal papers!" somebody yelled. "All the while I was signing my name I wasn't there at all. I was back in my rooms, hypnotized. Randolph has been trying for months to get hold of my planet. He listened to my speech last night—only it wasn't me at all—"

"And I was there while he was speaking and it didn't make any *sense*!" Mary Lou shrieked. "After they left the stage—"

"After who left the stage?" said the officer in a deadly tone.

"After Harry and Angus left the stage! Then I went back to the hotel rooms—only it wasn't really Angus and Harry—and I heard Angus and Harry's breath in the closet and there they were, dead to the world! Then Angus and Harry came in—I wish I'd used the gun on them!"

"Sweet heaven!" intoned the officer. "If I had patience!"

"But it's true, officer," said a graver voice. "There's nothing particularly fantastic about it. These amoebas—" It was Angus Pandler talking.

Randolph broke in, wildly protesting. Voices crescendoed, and were chopped away by the officer's howl.

"Now see here, miss," the officer said, almost inarticulately, after a moment of silence. "And you, Mr. Robertson and Mr. Pandler. I don't know what's been going on, but you ain't got a thing to hold

Mr. Randolph on. Furthermore, I ain't goin' to hold him. There's better ways of risking a demotion or maybe being thrown off the force altogether. If you want to take the case to court, that's okay and I'll wish you lots of luck—you'll need it. But I'm leaving."

Oo telepathed to Karjaljaraba. *The situation looks very bad, Karjaljaraba. Unless we do something quick, the battle may be lost. Search the minds of the beings in the room. If you come across anything important telepath it to me. In the meantime, be careful not to eat any of that money.*

Oo crossed the threshold and ran headlong into the beefy-faced officer, who was just charging out. The officer staggered back. He looked at Oo and made an involuntary motion toward his holstered thermospray.

"Fishface! What the hell you doin' out of stir!"

The officer lunged, his eyes gleaming triumphantly. He tore Oo's hand from the satchel, brought his two wrists together. By the time Oo got his wits back, two shiny circlets of metal bound his hands fast.

He fell into a reflex cringing motion, his eyes sweeping fearfully over the staring group of humans, and resting finally on Randolph. "You got to get me out of this, Johnnie," he suddenly blurted. "I come up here to divvy the take, but I ain't going to let you play me for an Al Joe and then ring a flathead in on me. I ain't any addle-cove, see? I'll do some bat-carrying on my own hook, and we'll both earn blood-money. Blow wise, Johnny, you got the bull-horrors same as me."

In the paralyzed silence which followed, during which the officer's jaw slowly went slack, his eyes turning toward Randolph, during which Randolph himself opened and closed his lips in a vain effort at speech, Karjaljaraba coolly telepathed,

Excellent, Oo. You're on the right track. I have left the satchel, and am now close enough to Randolph to search deeply through his libido. As a starter, I've found a subject which may be labeled, 'Incident on Titan.'

Randolph purpled. "Quit looking at me like that, Officer!" he barked. "I don't know this man from Adam. This is the first time I've seen him in my whole life. How he got in the house I haven't got the slightest idea. Unless," he added, swinging savagely on Harry Robertson, "this is part of a plan to take from me what is rightfully mine."

"Don't be silly," Robertson said coldly. He took a pugnacious step toward Randolph. "Give me the slightest excuse," he threatened, "and I'll pound you to a pulp. You've tried to get hold of my planet before in ways that weren't strictly on the up-and-up. I wouldn't put it past you to bring this hoodlum into it to further some crooked scheme of your own."

"Yeah?" said the officer, staring at Randolph with renewed interest. "Yeah?"

"For instance," said Robertson, "what's in that satchel?"

He took a quick step forward, grabbed up the satchel, and unzipped it. The officer craned his neck.

"Money!"

"It's the same money that was swindled from the amoebas!" Mary Lou burst out in high excitement. "Randolph and the swindler were working together, Officer!"

"That's a lie!" Randolph roared. He plowed between Harry and Mary Lou and grabbed Oo by the shoulders and shook him madly. "You scoundrel! You liar! Come clean about this thing, or by heaven I'll see that you get sent up for life. You petty crook! What's the straight of this?"

"Incident on Titan," Oo leered, loud enough for Randolph to hear. "I'll spill the beans, Johnnie, if you don't do the right thing by me, see? Maybe you better

give the Robertson lob a clean bill about that planet, too. Incident on Titan, Johnnie." Oo leered again. "Grease that flat-foot's palm, sap."

Randolph fell back from Oo, his eyes bulging. "I—" he said. "That is—"

He stopped, gulping, his eyes fixed on Oo in horrified fascination. Then he turned slowly around.

"There has been," he whispered, "a terrible mistake."

"Oh!" Mary Lou uttered the ejaculation with a scream. She jumped back from Randolph, her hand to her throat. Her face was burning a brilliant red. "Oh! Mr. Randolph! Incident on Titan!"

Randolph was suddenly energized with motion. His hand dived into his coat pocket, came out with a billfold. He grabbed a handful of bills and thrust it wildly at the officer. "This is yours," he chattered. "As I say, we have all been in error. Please go. Leave Fishface in—ah—my custody. Ownership of the planet, of course, will be settled satisfactorily."

The bluecoat looked stunned. "I'm not supposed to—" he began weakly. But by that time he had taken the bills.

"Okay!" he scowled. "Mum's the word on this whole deal. As for you, Fishface—" He kicked Fishface in the shins. Oo barely restrained a gasp of pain. He held out his hands and the officer unlocked the cuffs, stuck them in his pocket, and stalked from the room.

Mary Lou, ecstatically hugging a somewhat confused Harry Robertson's arm, said warmly, "Okay, Fishface! Thanks! You can go now, and give your pal my love!" She winked at him. It was evident she knew Oo was an amoeba.

"Sure thing," said Oo easily. "Just remember not to let Randolph scrix you. You can always throw the guts—you got the goods on him, see? He's got to treat you solid, or he'll have plenty of schoolmates. Think I'll hit the streets. 'By!" He winked back at Mary Lou.

Oo clumped down the stairs hurriedly. Outside the house, he was not at all surprised when the officer jumped out from behind a telephone pole with a yell of glee. Oo found cuffs on his wrists again.

Oo said, "Listen, sham, I ain't as lamous as I look and I'm tired of seeing you make the riffle with this jewelry, gunsels. If you don't watch out I'm going to twist off your handle and stuff it down your gutter lane. I'm a Dillingery eel, pal, and I ain't goin' to fall for the general principle just because an elbow wants me to dress into numbers. Watch me duck the nut!"

Thereupon Oo dissolved into a protoplasmic mass, reached out with a pseudopod, wrapped it around the officer's legs and brought him down smash on his astounded posterior. Oo left him there, and trickled away up the street until he caught up with Karjaljaraba, who had telepathed his presence.

"A complete victory!" Oo exulted. "Karjaljaraba, this leaves me with a feeling of satisfaction. Of course, we failed to attain our objective, but we've had fun, even it has been a little harrowing at times. Besides, I have a feeling that there would have been some skeptics who would not be convinced that we owned liberty. So perhaps it's just as well. What I want to know now is, what did you find in Randolph's libido that you telepathed to Mary Lou so that he'd be sure to give the planet back?"

"Well, there were really two incidents on Titan. One dealt with embezzlement on a grand scale, the other dealt with a woman." Karjaljaraba told Oo about the woman as they traveled toward the spaceport. However, neither of the two alien creatures from the planet Klutz understood why Mary Lou's face got red. They were still discussing it a half hour later when they drew themselves aboard a gravitomobile which was going in their direction.



A
Novel

THE PERSECUTORS

Voices of an unknown, other-dimensional world they were, so overwhelming no human mind could know them and live. This is a story of a man at bay against an alien cosmos and its substanceless masters — the Persecutors!

CHAPTER ONE

The Voice from Nowhere

DR. RODNEY EARL, Ps. D., looked hungrily through the soundproof panel at the young man in the next room. His hands shook as he took an object from the litter before him on the plastic table, shielding it behind spread palms. He flipped the communication switch.

"Mr. Laine."

Nelson Laine, known to his intimates as Stinky, raised bright blue eyes. "What now, Doc?"

Dr. Earl winced at the familiarity, but his lips held the smile, his dark eyes their excited gleam. "I have an object in my hand. Concentrate on it, then write your impressions on the telescribe at your elbow."

Dr. Earl winced again at the look of amused contempt which he received. Then

By
CLEVE
CARTMILL



he dropped his eyes to the object in his hand.

Young Laine closed his eyes for ten seconds. Then he touched a series of keys on the instrument.

On a built-in screen under Dr. Earl's eyes, words began to appear, jerkily at first, but soon in a confident rhythm.

"Three hundred years before the organization of the Greater United States, a wave of raiders swept up from the south and attacked the government research center at Kansas City. The raiders were beaten off, and the secrets of the center saved. But this silent and savage raid served to break the lethargy which—"

"Enough!" Dr. Earl said. "Perfect. Watch!"

He dropped the object—a small spool of plastic ribbon—into the projection slot on his table, and words appeared on the wall reading-screen.

"Three hundred years before the orga—"

Dr. Earl cut the switch. The screen blanked out.

"Come in here, Laine."

Laine complied, a faint smile on his lips. He sank into a chair the same cream color as his shorts and likewise monogrammed with the university's "W".

"It gives me a great deal of pleasure," Dr. Earl began, "to say that you may enter my class—with honors."

The smile dropped from Laine's face. A slight glint pinpointed his eyes. He said nothing.

"You are almost as far advanced in this particular phase of Psychometrics, Laine, as I. But you are a natural mutation, whereas I am the end result of several generations of controlled—ah, progress. With the start you have, you can be greater than any man has ever been in this field. In addition to what you can learn, you can earn, too. I can promise you a most responsible position with Genetics Research."

Nelson Laine interrupted curtly. "Break it off, Doc."

"Eh?"

"I'm not having some. So long."

He started to his feet, but Dr. Earl waved him back with an astonished hand. "This is unprecedented. To enter my class is one of the greatest honors given any student."

"The world doesn't think so."

"Bah! Social inertia has always resisted great advances. Didn't fools fight the establishment of carrier waves for germicidal frequencies for a whole century? Of course the world doesn't think Psychometrics is the most beneficial science this or any other civilization has known. It is our job to teach them to recognize and embrace it."

Laine broke in again. "And I don't want anything to do with G.R., either. When I get married I want to pick my own babe."

"Stop!" Dr. Earl snapped. "Genetics Research has never exerted any pressure on its selectees. My father and mother met in quite an ordinary manner on a Moon excursion."

"I hear different, Doc, and I don't want to argue. I'm going to be an engineer and work with my hands. Besides, you may not have a class tomorrow, so your offer's kinda empty."

"Eh? What's this?"

"You'll hear about it soon enough. Jackson Peebles is going to have you fired."

"Because I expelled his moronic son from my class? He can't prefer charges pertaining to the manner in which I conduct my class."

"Maybe you'll laugh, Doc, and maybe not. But Peebles is thinking of charging you with witchcraft."

Dr. Earl didn't laugh. He remembered his study of the Dark Decade, when ancient laws were revived and refined. The charge could be fought and beaten; but

his reputation could be damaged to a great extent by such a charge. Not that anyone believed, but belief lay dormant, awaiting only a resurrecting stimulus.

"He could dust off the old laws, Doc, and smack you with 'em."

DR. EARL was silent. His silence was tinged with an exultation which promised to blot out the fear which had haunted him for more than a year.

The fact that any person could think of bringing such ridiculous charges against him proved, almost, that he was not suffering from hallucinations. Others had seen one of the phenomena which had heretofore plagued him only in private. Yesterday the event had been public and had done much to destroy his suspicion that he had been going mad.

The mad scientist—he had smiled grimly at the thought. Those whirling mists, those green flames, those balls of screaming colors which had appeared to him in his study at night had roused actual fear in his mind. Yet, beyond and above these, he had sensed—something.

Something had been persecuting him, driving him to madness, for psychic flashes had accompanied each materialization of meaningless blobs. He had felt that somewhere in the vast deeps of unplumbed experience, some presence—force, intelligence—was hammering at his brain with a message.

Message? Command? Request?

He didn't know. They came silently, evilly in the dark to persecute him. He recognized the feeling as possible evidence of psychic trauma, the development of a persecution complex. But nonetheless a deep conviction whispered that the experiences were real, that some actual identity pounded at the barrier of his consciousness.

He weighed this conviction as further evidence of a growing madness, and re-

fused to relax, refused to listen to the disembodied voice which called in darkness.

But yesterday the phenomena had emerged into the open, had entered his classroom, had been seen by his students. He was now almost convinced that his persecutors were real, if unseen intelligences, clamoring for communication.

His exultation had been instant, and in his anger at the charge of trickery he had expelled young Peebles from his class.

But though he had almost lost the suspicion of his own madness, he was helpless to defend himself publicly. He was not yet positive, and could offer no concrete defense against a charge of charlatanism and trickery—or witchcraft, if it came to that. He did not want to talk about it. Nelson Laine, it seemed, did.

"Some of us were called from Engineering to examine the classroom for gadgets, Doc. Either you made that cap of flame with your own hands, or—" he paused—"something made it. We didn't find a thing. A search ray which one of the boys beamed you with didn't reveal anything out of the way on your person except a letter to your girl. Well, it stacks up to this. You better be able to show Prexy Abbot some physical means of dreaming up a shining chapeau, or—" He spread large brown hands.

Dr. Earl maintained tight-lipped silence.

"That's why I barged over to take your extra-sensory test, Doc. I knew I could pass it, hands down, because I'm funny that way. Main reason, though, was to look around for magic tricks. If you had any, I could see 'em in this transparent furniture. So if Abbot asks me, I'll have to tell him. Your story better be good, because old Peebles is after you, and he can do a lot for the school."

Laine went out, and Dr. Earl remained in his seat. His slight, wiry figure slumped a little. Peebles could do a lot for the school—in President Philemon Abbot's

mind, a lot more than Rodney Earl could do. Earl could be replaced, not by anyone as competent as he, but by someone who could teach from microscopic texts which Earl himself had dictated onto reading tapes.

He shook his head helplessly, then touched the tiny button of his wrist watch.

"When you hear the tone, the time will be ten thirty-eight and one-quarter."

Twenty minutes before class time. He took writing materials from his desk.

Dear Julie:

I shall see your brother in a few minutes, and heaven knows what the upshot will be. I may need help, and I know that I can count. . . .

He finished the note, punched her combination on the envelope delivery tag, and dropped it into the mail sorter as his communicator sang a mellow note.

He touched another button on his desk, and Philemon Abbot's massive features appeared in his desk prism.

"Good morning, Rod."

"Hello, Phil."

"Busy?"

"Not too."

"Drop over on your way to class. Got things to talk about."

"All right."

DR. EARL found President Abbot's broad, smooth face a mixture of quizzical seriousness and suspicion before he cut the circuit. This expression was unchanged when he sat across the compact desk from his boyhood friend.

"What's all this gupp?" Abbot demanded.

"Be a little more specific, Phil."

Abbot folded his big hands, put his square chin on the double fist. His light gray eyes were sympathetic, but his mouth curved down at one corner.

"Peebles gave me a call. Said you were

using some kind of magic in your class."

"Peebles is a liar."

Abbot scratched his black thatch with troubled fingers.

"He throws a lot of weight, Rod."

Dr. Earl's mouth set. "If you're going on a witch hunt, Phil, get at it. A long time ago, as far back as the Twentieth Century, people were persecuted when odd things happened to them. We should have outgrown that by now."

"I have a right," Abbot said grimly, "to ask an explanation. I own this college. Bought it with sweat. Well, the whole thing is commercial. If you offend one of our biggest donors, I want to know why."

"We certainly must not offend wealthy idiots," Dr. Earl murmured.

"Wait a minute, Rod! Peebles has pretty much the same background as I have. I'm no idiot. My record shows that. I wanted to own this place and give to others education that I didn't get, couldn't afford. Peebles is the same. It's a blow to him when his son gets booted out of a class as a result of something that looks, to put it mildly, fishy. Why did you pull that cap of flame, and how?"

Dr. Earl fell silent. What could he say? He didn't know the answer—yet. He thought for a moment, then stood up.

"Phil, I'll tell you this. It wasn't magic. I don't know what it was. But I will know. Let me alone for a while. I'll find out and tell you. As for young Peebles—what the hell! He can come back. I really don't blame him for scoffing, but I don't like my statements questioned by an ignorant fool."

"You could hardly blame him, though, Rod. When you say that strange intelligence is just beyond our consciousness, even I want some sort of proof. And I wouldn't accept what looks like a trick." His voice lowered. "Confidentially, Rod, how did you do it?"

Dr. Earl considered.

"I can't tell you, Phil. Just let me alone for a while."

Abbot arose. "All right, but watch yourself. Remember, I put the name of Wilmart University above yours—or mine."

DR. RODNEY EARL looked at his class—and they looked back. Wariness steadied the eyes of the hundred choice students, and resentment glazed Dr. Earl's. They sat before and below him in semicircular waves under the domed skylight. By their expressions, he knew they were aware of the political currents which eddied about him.

Why are they called political? he wondered. *Jackson Peebles is screaming from hurt pride, and Phil Abbot is cringing away from an injured bank account. The currents are financial, as are nearly all such currents. Peebles has threatened not to endow this or that chair if I am not removed from the faculty.*

He stepped onto the lecture podium. "I had begun yesterday to outline the course of our studies, ladies and gentlemen. I had explained to you that we were here to develop as yet untouched portions of the mind. Psychometrics is the science of psychic change, and we shall learn to control the changes.

"You have studied everything our schools have to offer in the way of psychology and psychiatry. You are now here in this post-graduate class to learn to put to use the vast information you have collected."

"How? You may ask that. There are many ways. Statistics show that chief coordinators have short business lives in the complex structure of the Twenty-sixth Century. Theirs is the main burden, for they must carry myriad details in their heads. One of the many services we can perform is to increase the useful period

of such men by mental suggestion which later becomes autosuggestion, although the patient is never aware of any influence from without.

"We shall learn here to project our thoughts so that they affect the thoughts of—"

Dr. Earl broke off as the eyes of his class fixed on a spot apparently some distance above his own head. He looked up.

Slipping down the curve of the dome was a formless mass of writhing colors. Its effect on Earl was to suggest that it occupied dimensions beyond the three which were tangible. It was not dangerous in appearance, yet the short hairs rose on his neck, for it suggested evil—such evil as the human mind could not grasp.

"Go away!" he whispered. "Go away. Leave me alone!"

The twisting, changing, sparkling mass continued its steady descent until it hovered some ten feet above Dr. Earl. Here it stayed, shifting in sinuous movement—boiling, rather.

The classroom broke into uproar. Students leaped to their feet, shouting simultaneously at the slight, dark man on the podium. He raised his hands.

"Please! Let's be orderly. One at a time."

"What are you doing?" cried a steely-eyed youth. "And how? We've a right to know. If you're a charlatan, you're wasting our time."

This seemed to be the tenor of their questions, and Dr. Earl made an honest attempt to answer.

"What this—" he pointed at the overhead mass of color—"may be, I don't know. It isn't the first, nor was yesterday's. I have had these experiences for some time, and I do not know their origin. They are connected in some fashion with a projection of the mind, I believe. I say

I believe, for I don't know. I am as bewildered as you."

Several rude noises came from the class.

"After all," Dr. Earl went on, "history is full of incidents which science cannot explain. Pink rains, black and poisonous fogs, falling stones, freak weather. Perhaps these incidents are caused by—" he hesitated, then decided to take the plunge and tell what he suspected—"by agencies, forces, beings which exist in some dimensional combination we can't comprehend. We have a great mass of data to support the existence of such forces—"

"Faugh!" a student in the first row exclaimed. "We didn't expect to find superstition here. And we don't like it. I thought it was an honor to be in this class. It seems I was mistaken." He strode toward the door. "You're tricking us. If it's a psychological test you're conducting, all right. But tell us the purpose, because the joke's grown stale. Any more of it is wasting my time."

"I'm telling you the truth!" Dr. Earl snapped.

The young man made his exit, and was soon followed by most of the class. A few remained, however, and gathered around his desk.

"I'm willing to string along."

"I, too."

"We're with you, Doctor."

Dr. Earl smiled.

"Thank you. If you realize that I would not tamper foolishly with your highly important education, I am happy. Class is dismissed for today, though."

THEY filed out. Dr. Earl raised his eyes. The writhing colors were gone, but an opalescent globe caught his eye, high in the arch of the dome, and a familiar sensation came stealthily into his mind.

As during the first experience of this nature, he felt—not heard—his name.

"Rodney Earl, Rodney Earl!"

He shut his mind to the insidious feeling, and it ceased. The opalescent globe vanished. His hands stopped sweating within a few seconds, and he set his communicator dials for Abbot's office.

When Abbot's big, grim face was in his prism, Dr. Earl said, "Phil, another of them happened."

Abbot nodded. "I know."

"Oh? Word flies, eh? I think I'd better talk to you, Phil."

"So do I, Rod."

JACKSON PEEBLES was there, choleric, heavy-jowled, small-eyed. He glared at Dr. Earl as the little man found a chair.

Abbot's face might have been chiseled from a granite mountain. "Rod, what the hell goes on?"

Peebles leaped into the breach. "I'll tell you, sir! This man relies on a smooth tongue and trickery to gain his reputation. He himself selects his students, sycophantic young fools beglamored by mental claptrap. When someone like my son dares to question, he is expelled."

"Your son is a psychic moron," Earl gritted.

Peebles sobered instantly. A shadowy smile flickered on his mouth.

"Indeed?" he purred with deadly politeness. "My friend, if you resign here and now, I shall forgive you. Otherwise, I fear—"

"Mr. Peebles!" Abbot cut in. "I am the head of this school. I'll run it my own way, and it isn't my way to let my teachers get shoved around. If you will permit, we'll discuss this privately."

Peebles lurched to his feet with a surprising amount of dignity. "Mr. Abbot, I bid you good day—possibly good-by."

Abbot gave Earl an apologetic look when Peebles had gone. "He insisted on being present, Rod. I didn't like it, but I didn't expect outright insults. Now tell me."

Dr. Earl made a decision. Abbot was open-minded, hard-headed. He would listen intelligently.

"First of all," he began, "let me point out a few facts on thought immigration. You know that I can tell, for example, the contents of your pockets by concentrating. My thoughts are projected until they finger, as it were, the various objects you carry with you and return their impressions to my conscious mind. You know that I can cause, by silent suggestion, certain acts on your part. You know that through heredity and scientific training in Genetics Research, Incorporated, I have mastered the science of Psychometrics, and you know the commercial possibilities of that science. Now, listen."

He went on to propose that a mind, so trained and so liberated, might—might, mind you—be able to sense the existence of forces which heretofore had never been suspected.

"We have thousands of recorded hints, Phil, that they do exist. We've called them mythology, superstition, black magic, what-not. If such forces exist, it's reasonable to suppose that a mind like mine could establish contact. I suspect that such a condition is behind the phenomena which have followed me for some time."

He told of the first experience, when a glowing circle of green invaded his bedroom. He told of the feeling that his name was being called, of the queer solidity of the words, "Rodney Earl, Rodney Earl."

"I didn't hear them, I felt them. Since then, such incidents have happened irregularly, without warning. Yesterday one occurred publicly, and today. That's all I know, Phil."

Abbot toyed reflectively with a polished Moon crystal paperweight for a few moments. When he raised his eyes, they were thoughtful and sympathetic.

"I won't insult your intelligence, Rod, with oblique suggestions. But I do suggest, for your own good, that you take

a vacation. I don't pretend to understand what you're talking about. It sounds to me like hallucination."

"Publicly, in the mass?"

"I'll admit that stumps me, but I know there's some physical explanation. Maybe—I say only maybe—you thought of those things, and your students' minds, being hypersensitive, had the same illusion. But, at any rate, I think a rest will do you good. I'll make an announcement to the effect that important research prevents your teaching for the rest of the year."

"And thereby fool nobody. They'll say Peebles brought pressure to bear, and you were afraid he wouldn't kick in—which might not be far from the truth, at that."

Abbot flushed. "I won't trouble to deny that. Listen, I'm thinking of you. Regardless of what's happened to you, you ought to know. If you're cracking under strain, a rest will be just what you need. Go away and do some fishing, or visit a Moon resort. But even if what you suspect is true, you can find out privately, without embarrassment."

Dr. Earl rose. "I'm sorry for the crack. I'll take your advice."

IN THE corridor again, he stopped at sight of a familiar figure hurrying toward him with a determined mien. Not a pretty woman, Juliet Abbot, but loyal and full of energy.

He smiled. "You look like the strato-limited, Julie."

Her long face twisted with exasperation. "That darned gravity drive is out of fix again. I couldn't land. All I could do was soar at five thousand feet until a patrol plane came and towed me in."

"Why don't you have it fixed?"

"It will be, this time," she promised grimly. "The idea came originally from our engineering department here. I told them just now that they could fix it permanently, or I'd tear their building up by the roots and drop it in the bay. Well,

I hurried as fast I could after your letter came. What have they done to you?"

"The sack."

"No! Well, I'll fix that." She started toward her brother's office, but Dr. Earl stopped her.

"Let it go, Julie. It's better this way."

"Better?" she exclaimed wrathfully. "Just when you're getting somewhere. I'm not going to let 'em get away with it!"

"Julie!" he said sharply as she moved away again. "I said let it go."

"All right, all right! Fling away everything you've worked for. What will you do? You'll go mad, alone in that empty house of yours."

He flinched at her prophecy, wondering if it were belated. "I'll have plenty to do," he said ruefully. Finding the truth behind the phenomena would give any man plenty to do.

He was bound to know, now that he was less apprehensive of madness. Perhaps his first impression was correct—perhaps intelligent beings were attempting to establish contact by such methods as they could contrive.

"I must go," he said to Julie Abbot.

"I'll take you," she offered. "My plane ought to be ready. They put their current genius on the job. Young fellow named Laine."

"You needn't bother. I'll take an interurban."

"I know I needn't bother! I know you could take an interurban. You could walk on your hands, for that matter."

He grinned as she fell into stride beside him. Julie always talked as if she were on the verge of anger. Her words came in a surging rush, her volume level a little higher than average. She walked that way, too, her long legs reaching out for each step as if they were hungry. He hurried as they moved along a railed walk overlooking the campus a hundred feet below.

Her plane was ready, and bore a scrawled guarantee by Nelson Laine. Soon they were at 5,000 feet, between interurban and limited traffic, with the gleaming plastic city below.

Dr. Earl always felt a thrill at the panorama, and now his thrill was tinged with nostalgia, for he was no longer a part of the scene below. He had moved among the pastel domes of the university, had stood on the moving walks of the shopping district, had waited atop the interurban pylons.

Now he was exiled to suburbia. In that section of small homes beyond the gray food factories, he had always felt alien. In that urban frame of the university which now lay behind them he had felt at home.

"Well?" Julie demanded tartly. "Are you going to tell your woes, or cry on your own shoulder?"

Dr. Earl started. He glanced sidewise at the strong, handsome rather than pretty face of his pilot. "I was just thinking," he said.

She pointed ahead at a small flat roof dotted with a half-dozen planes. "Reception committee. Why don't people mind their own business? You must be up to something important."

Dr. Earl said nothing.

She frowned as she cut the drive and drifted toward the roof, competent hands flickering over the control panel. "If you won't tell me, how can I get you out of your jam?"

"I don't expect you to, Julie. Just dump me off and go on about your business."

She snorted. "Fat chance! Somebody will have to fix 'em a drink."

"I don't fancy there'll be any drinking. I hardly think my callers are socially-minded."

"Then I'll stay and listen."

"Even if I ask you to go away?"

"Even if you ask me," she snapped. "You've let yourself be booted out of your

job, and heaven knows what kind of trouble you're in. You need protection, and I'm just the gal who can give it to you. Now be quiet. I've got to get this thing down." She did things with her hands, and the plane dipped and banked like a gull. "That Laine boy," she commented, "did well."

Dr. Earl recalled the interview with Nelson Laine. "He's quite a lad. Quite a lad!"

CHAPTER TWO

"You Can't Escape!"

SIX of his ex-students were in the waiting room just under the roof. When he entered, they rose like well-trained soldiers.

"Well, gentlemen?" Dr. Earl said.

"We want to continue your course," one of them said. "Can you teach us after hours? We just heard you've retired."

Dr. Earl glowed a little inside. He had a feeling of having been lost, and rescued in the nick of time.

"Miss Abbot," he said to Julie, "perhaps these gentlemen would like a small stimulant."

They murmured their acceptance, and Dr. Earl unlocked the door which led to the rest of his house. They trooped into his study and sank into chairs which fitted curves with luxurious comfort.

"We know your worth," was the theme of their remarks. "We want to follow in your steps. We believe Psychometrics to be one of the greatest progressive steps in history, and we wish to perpetuate and increase knowledge in this field."

And Dr. Earl, who had been lost, beamed. He loved to teach.

"I am pleased," he said. "Thanks a lot, boys. Just let me give Abbot a call. I don't expect any difficulty, but let's make sure."

Philemon Abbot offered no objection.

"But, Rod, you're rather defeating the purpose of your retirement, aren't you? You wanted to know what these strange things were."

"Nonsense," Dr. Earl said. "In any case, they are not connected with my teaching."

"Good luck then. Let me know."

In the study again, Dr. Earl joined the students in a drink, and they went away full of promises to enroll others.

Dr. Earl looked at Julie Abbot, smiled into her over-bright eyes, smiled through them at the warmth which lay behind her strong, handsome exterior.

"Sit down, Julie. I think I'm going to get a little maudlin."

She did, and folded her hands loosely on her short, white skirt. Her eyes followed the little man as he paced back and forth across the Thermotex floor.

"It's hard to tell," he began.

He told her how his one aim, since before he had finished formal schooling, had been to produce measurable—and therefore scientific—results with his unusual talent; how a series of controlled experiments had finally showed him the way; how he had brought Psychometrics through empirical to scientific stages, and how Phil Abbot had established a chair for him at the university.

"I didn't do this alone," he assured her. "I'm not bragging. Many men helped me, the keenest brains we have. I was ready to give up any number of times, but something drove me on. Then, one day when a group of chemists at the Plastico plant were trying to break down an intricate formula which had baffled research departments for years, I was able to co-ordinate their minds—and they did it. I knew where I was headed then."

He told her how the whole proposition had fallen into focus, and of his high personal happiness when Phil Abbot had seen the commercial possibilities in this new science, and how his future had stretched

before his eyes in a clear, simple pattern.

"Until yesterday," he said. "I had a foreboding when I ordered young Peebles out of my class, but he called me a liar, and I couldn't take that. My foreboding paid off today, and I have never felt as friendless, as useless, as discouraged. But these boys—they want me to teach them. Can you understand it, Julie? They want me to teach them!"

Her smile softened her face. "Everybody wants to be needed, Rod. But tell me what it's all about. I've heard a couple of wild rumors, but they don't make sense. Magic, for one, of all things!"

"Yes, and I know nothing of magic. As to the situation itself, however, I don't know much more. But I mean to know. I'll tell you when I do. In the meantime, I can work again. I had thought I was through."

"But how will you live, Rod? That handful of students can't pay enough to support you. You haven't any money, have you?"

"I'll get along somehow," he said non-committally. The same question had been bothering him. But with the fatalistic belief that one always comes through adversity, he pushed it aside.

AN ALMOST supreme test of that belief was announced by the bell which marked the arrival of a visitor. Dr. Earl opened the door to the waiting room, and was confronted by a smug, satisfied Jackson Peebles.

"May I come in, sir?" Peebles asked.

Dr. Earl stood aside, and the big man entered. He bowed ceremoniously to Julie Abbot and settled his frame into a chair. He prefaced his remarks by handing Dr. Earl a legal document.

"You will notice," Peebles said pleasantly, "that that is a court order restraining you from teaching Psychometrics in any way until you can explain satisfactorily the phenomena which have occurred

on the two occasions enumerated therein. Violation of the order, as you well know, will bring drastic results—to you."

Dr. Earl scanned the whereases. He raised a face which, despite his efforts at control, was stricken. "Why have you done this?"

"The truth of the matter," Peebles said conversationally, "is that I do not like you, Dr. Earl. Through my son you have offended me and thrown aspersion on my name. I am proud of that name, for I have worked hard to bring it to its present eminence. Because of your actions, I secured that order; because of my dislike for you, I have delivered it in person."

"But my God, man! You've stripped me. I can't explain the phenomena, and I'm not trained for any other line of work."

"*Tsk, tsk, tsk!*" Peebles clucked. "Good day, sir, and Miss Abbot."

Dr. Earl stared at the door which Peebles closed behind him.

"What hope," Earl asked bitterly, "is there for human progress as long as people put their own petty vanities above the interests of the race? He's brought to a stop one of the greatest forward strides in history because he won't admit the truth of what I said about his stupid son."

Julie Abbot rose to her feet. "I must run."

Dr. Earl fixed her with a narrowed glance.

"What are you up to?"

"Why, nothing," she said, round-eyed. "I have things to do, that's all."

"You're not usually so concerned about your program."

"Of course I am. You never notice, that's all."

"I notice a lot of things. One is your propensity for mixing into my affairs. Listen, Julie, don't get me into a worse jam. I've got trouble enough."

Her eyes grew rounder. "I wouldn't dream of it; Rod."

WHEN she had gone, Dr. Earl considered his position. He was not given to psychological generalities, yet he could not prevent his thoughts from probing human behavior. Peebles, motivated as most persons by a feeling of inferiority, had struck in his most effective manner at what he considered to be an attack on his publicly-asserted superiority.

The wisdom of Peebles' action had doubtless never entered the man's mind. He simply lashed out instinctively at whatever threatened his name, his economic standing and his pride. Dr. Earl felt on the one hand a willingness to understand and forgive, but on the other a deep resentment because his own name, economic standing and pride were threatened.

True, he might go to another university, but if these strange phenomena followed him, he would be accused again of trickery, charlatanism, and—fantastic though it seemed—witchcraft, for the word was not dead, it only slept.

He entertained no illusions concerning his motivation. On the surface, he would fight back at something which threatened progress of the race. He would fight back here because here his reputation was in jeopardy—these were surface reasons.

But he knew that, although his desire to continue his work, teaching and research stemmed from a real altruism, this altruism had as a driving force the same ego justification which made Peebles spiteful and vindictive.

Their differences lay in his own constructive use of the ego drive, whereas Peebles had developed a warped social will through, perhaps, no fault of his own.

Should he submit, from personal disinclination to battle, to this edict which emptied his life? Or should he, with a selfishness as honest as Peebles', fight back? From his own viewpoint, he was a better-adjusted social animal than the industrialist-politician, more fitted to live.

Dr. Earl decided to fight.

He went out to the landing roof, where his single-passenger runabout lay ready. As he strode toward it, with outthrust jaw and half-bent arms, it vanished from sight.

He froze in a mixture of amazement and fear, for a cloud of small pebbles suddenly showered from a hole in space and obscured the plane. Their din hurt his ears, for they dropped at a velocity the eye could not follow. The air was full of a rushing sound, and with the sound of their thunder as they beat against his plane.

They had no source; that was the frightening fact. The sky, a few feet above the plane, was empty. Then, at no well-defined line, it was full of whistling rock. But the rocks were definitely tangible. They pounded the plane and bounced on the roof. A few rolled to his feet, and he kicked one to make sure it was real.

Presently the shower thinned, ceased. His plane lay flattened like a squashed insect amid the litter of pebbles. Dr. Earl scraped a path through these, examined the useless wreckage, stared overhead with troubled eyes.

A familiar sensation slid into his consciousness—a something was trying to call to him with those phrases which seemed to have actual weight. He closed his mind angrily; the sensation faded. He went back to his study and to the communicator built into the wall.

As he reached for the dials, a brilliant flash needled the communicator with a thousand holes, destroying it completely.

He leaped away from the flash and stood trembling in honest fear. The sensation stole into his mind again.

He flung it off for a second time and shut all but one channel of thought. This was not hallucination; he felt certain of that. He had probed the demolished plane, and the destruction of his communicator was actuality. He knew once more the exultation which came from knowledge that the phenomena were real, but this

was overlaid by questions of their source and by an uneasy fear of solving the questions.

That source, he felt, was clamoring for recognition just outside his mind. Well, he had decided to learn the truth if he could. Why was he hesitating? He had to admit it—he was afraid.

That was why he had rationalized his determination to fight the court order. It had offered what he thought he had wanted—solitude. He now realized that he wanted solitude less than any fate he could imagine.

He tried to run out of the house, but cringed away from the sheet of flame which screened the front door as he reached for the opening switch. For a moment he regretted that this house had no windows, or any of the many exits which ancient prints showed in the architecture of older times.

Yet, even as he stood quivering, a contemptuous part of himself stood sneering to one side.

"So you're trapped in your own house," it said. "That's what you wanted, isn't it? You poor, miserable pseudo-scientist! You wanted to know. Well, why don't you?"

Gradually, this part of himself came back, and he marched into his study. He sat in one of the chairs, and relaxed.

"All right, damn you!" he snarled. "What do you want?"

HE HAD a momentary impression of confused, kaleidoscopic, formless images swirling through his mind, as if the forces which had been trying to reach him were stunned by his final acquiescence. These steadied, focused, blanked out, and he felt the pressure and weight of words.

"Rodney Earl, Rodney Earl!"

"All right," he barked, "all right! Get into it."

Dr. Rodney Earl relaxed.

Fingers poked into his mind.

They felt like fingers probing with sure curiosity. They seemed hungry, threatened to clamp around his brain, and with a great effort of will he closed all but one narrow channel of reception. Their pressure eased.

An hour later, with a savage wrench of consciousness, he tore free from the stealthy probes wedging themselves into additional portions of his mind. The struggle left him weak and wet with sweat, but he was free. Then he marshaled the impressions and looked at them.

Pictures. Yes, plenty of these. But many of them had no meaning, for their forms were not the forms to which human eyes were accustomed. Pictures impossible to reconstruct.

A few were understandable. There had been a small box set in the middle of a great plain. Thought waves projected into the box wrought a great and gleaming city around it, a city of magnificent proportions and built of a material not yet known to man.

His eyes had not seen inside this city, yet he had the impression that living there was desirable above all other desires; that inside its shining towers life had fullness and meaning—and something of evil.

He tried to rationalize this feeling as the latent evil that lies in all men, but it wouldn't fit—quite. The evil—though he knew it to be only a word, or a point of view—lay outside himself, was somehow connected with the intelligence which had made diagrams for him.

As he thought of the diagrams, his hands rummaged in a desk for drawing materials, and he began to transmit a series of lines to paper. He had drawn one whole section of an incomprehensible mechanism before he realized that a compulsion drove him to this activity, that it was not mere scientific curiosity.

Flushing with sudden anger, he dropped his drawing instruments and glared at the neat white and black pattern.

"If I do this," he muttered, "I'll do it because I want to know, not because I can't help myself. Whoever you are, damn you, you won't get control of me."

Dr. Earl's mouth dropped open as another of the items which had come to him in his trancelike state now crystallized in his conscious mind—control.

Snatches of history had been communicated to him. The forces had revealed that Dr. Earl was only one of thousands whom they had tried to reach over a period of centuries. But until this moment, no mind had been strong enough to withstand the shock of knowledge. That was all he had learned on this point, but it sent him scrambling out of the house.

Not until he had covered half the distance to the nearest interurban pylon did he realize that he had simply walked from the house, and had not been opposed by a sheet of flame, a shower of pebbles or any other phenomenon. He had been forced, then, to receive the communications. They had trapped him in his own home until he listened.

His jaw set in anger. He didn't like to be shoved around.

His eyes, glazed with fury, led him subconsciously to the pylon elevator, and his seething thoughts prevented notice of fellow passengers who were whisked to the waiting platform. He entered the interurban automatically, paid his fare and gave his destination to the pilot without ever remembering later how he had arrived at the psychopathic ward of the general hospital.

HIS reputation gained him quick entrance to a sunny wing where the patients occupied themselves in endless idiot pleasure. Ranging in age from 12 to 90, in condition from drooling happiness to blank unrealizations of an outside world, the two dozen cases played with their toys and engaged in simple pursuits.

One young man wound and unwound a bit of colored string while three of his fellows watched with rapt fascination. A middle-aged woman crawled about the floor, sniffing, sniffing. A yellowed skeleton sprawled on his bed, unmoving eyes fixed on the ceiling, his dried lips mumbling an unintelligible prayer.

When Dr. Earl entered, a few eyes shifted to note his presence, then shifted back to their business in hand.

Dr. Earl signaled his guide to leave, and then examined these mental wrecks. He closed his mind to outside stimuli, and focused a channel of thought on one of the patients.

"Stand up!" Dr. Earl commanded silently. "Stand up!"

The patient, a vacuous girl of 25, obediently got to her feet and stood without expression.

"Count on your fingers to four," Dr. Earl directed at her with his thought beam.

The girl raised a soft, fat hand, looked at it in wonder as if she had never seen it before. She regarded it for some seconds, turning it this way and that, before she dropped it. Her face shifted slightly into an expression of fear and helpless incomprehension. She didn't understand. The problem was too complex, and she was afraid.

A greater anger began to burn in Dr. Earl's mind, and the girl whimpered. He immediately forced all emotion from himself. He had been activated for the past hour by emotion alone, which was no way for a scientist to act.

He became objective and analytical, and the girl's face once more assumed its expression of emptiness.

"Send your thoughts to me," Dr. Earl ordered.

He made his mind receptive, and it was immediately flooded with a jumble of meaningless impressions. No words, no orderly sensations, but gouts of color and

amorphous forms. Once or twice he sensed combinations of color with which he had become familiar—they screamed, and seemed to occupy other dimensions than those he knew.

He allowed the girl to relax again, and turned his attention to the others. Some were not responsive, but out of the two dozen, nine reacted in like manner.

Dr. Earl went out of the hospital. He knew, from wide experimentation, that those nine had high extra-sensory faculties. For some reason or other, their co-ordinated mental machinery had snapped, leaving them only those faculties with which they had been born, faculties which had nothing to do with intelligence. They knew hunger, and the need to sleep. They would struggle against an attempt on their lives. Perhaps they knew a certain sex drive. Beyond this they were empty hulks, with the exception of their remarkable extra-sensory perception.

For some reason or other, they had died intellectually. Dr. Earl was certain that he knew the reason—the Persecutors.

He named them consciously for the first time, for they had persecuted him in the nights and driven him near to madness. They had done more to those poor shells who played with string and sniffed at the floor.

Would they do the same to him, if he finished the diagram he had started? Had the others reached that point? Would his mind snap?

What did the Persecutors want?

REALIZATION of hunger brought him out of his curious, bewildered, angry reverie. He saw that he was on one of the city streets, and stepped aboard a moving sidewalk. He let it carry him to a public communicator booth, where he called Julie Abbot and invited her to dinner.

"Meet me at the Automat," he said. "I want no interruption from waiters."

He walked through the darkening evening, and noted a few familiar faces. It was unusual for passers-by to register in his memory, but their expressions were unusual. They gave him not even a nod, and on one occasion a perfect stranger shrank away as he passed.

Dr. Earl examined his clothing, but it seemed in condition. He was at a loss to understand the stony eyes, the unrelaxed mouths, the shrinking away. Had he been marked in his short brush with the Persecutors? A quick examination in a mirror assured him on this point. He looked like other men.

Then why?

Julie Abbott answered this, after they had picked up a drink and carried it to their booth.

They passed through the stile, put the drinks on their table, and she said, "It's started."

Dr. Earl punched their orders on the telescribe. "What's started?"

"The rumor that you're familiar with witchcraft. I traced it pretty well back to Peebles. I fixed him, all right. It may grow, but he'll have no more to do with it. He may even help to stamp it out."

Dr. Earl frowned a question.

"I told him," she said, grinning, "that you'd got hold of a tremendous power secret, something that would revolutionize present systems. He practically frothed. He'll be around trying to buy it, if I know him."

Dr. Earl glared. "I told you to stay out of this, Julie."

She grinned across the table, sipped her drink. "So I hit it on the nose, eh? You're a sly dog, Rod. Well, why don't you sell it to him?"

Dr. Earl groaned. "I haven't been through enough today! I asked you to dinner because I wanted to relax and forget what has happened to me." He paused, considered. "No, I'll be honest with you. I wanted to talk, and since you've brought

it up, I'll tell you the whole thing. You're the only person I can trust completely."

She flushed with pleasure. A soft tone sounded in the wall before she could answer, and they lifted their glasses. A panel slid back, and a tabletop, set for two, slid onto their own tabletop. It held their orders, and they began to eat.

During the meal, Dr. Earl told her the story from the beginning. His suspicions, and his conclusions he detailed, his experiences of the afternoon, and his visit to the hospital.

"They weren't congenital idiots, Julie. I know their histories. They lost coordinated control of their minds at various ages. The nine who had E.S.P. were outstanding in one line or another before mental processes degenerated. That girl, for example, was a mathematical genius. Now she can't count to four. I suspect they were natural mutations, with higher extra-sensory ratings than mine."

She had listened without comment, almost without motion. Now she broke in.

"Give it up, Rod."

He finished his meal, brows furrowed in thought. When she had finished, he signaled for the table to be removed and waited until it had slid back into the wall.

"That's my problem, Julie. What to do."

"Give it up," she repeated. "It's this feeling of evil you describe. It gives me the shivers. They're up to no good."

"I don't know," he said thoughtfully. "Do you know medieval history? About a thousand years ago, white men came to this country. The aborigines—what were they called, Indians?—probably regarded them with misgivings. But the superior culture absorbed the primitive, and brought civilization to where it is today."

"And what became of the aborigines?" she asked dryly. "The white men were certainly evil from their standpoint."

"But the race advanced, Julie. Humanity rose to a higher level."



"So you want to let us be wiped out for the good of—what?"

"I don't know," he said. "I don't know what they want, and I think I won't know

until I build the mechanism for which they gave me diagrams."

"If you'll take my hunch, you'll tear 'em up, my lad."

"I'll tell you the truth. My emotional nature says to hell with them, whatever they are. Perhaps they've destroyed the useful minds of thousands in their attempts to accomplish their purpose. That angers me, naturally. But my natural curiosity asks what they are, who they are. And my ego tells me that I won't crack, that I can throw them aside if they get too strong."

"I've seen drunks like that," she said. "Oh, no, one more wouldn't hurt 'em. Five minutes later they had to be scraped off the floor."

"You may be right," Dr. Earl conceded. "But I've gone too far. I think I have to know. Here's another thing. If I quit now, what will they do to me? I can't let haloes of flame follow me all the rest of my life."

"It'd be handy for frying eggs," she commented. "Look, my aging sweet. I don't think you're crazy. I'm almost a committee of one, though. From the way you told your story, I believe it. And I say skip it. Tell these Persecutors, as you call them, to troop back to whatever hell they hatched in. That's my advice. If you won't follow it—and who does, ever?—then I'm with you. I won't blab, and I'll help."

Dr. Earl smiled, felt a wrench at his heart.

"Thanks, kid. But I don't want you in it. It may be dangerous."

"Did I ask? Do I care?" She cupped a hand behind her ear. "Where's that darned echo gone to? It ought to answer no."

"At any rate," he said sternly, "you're to stay out of it. That's final."

She merely grinned.

"I'd better go," he said. "I want to think it over."

HE PUT coins in the stile slot, and it opened to let them through. As they emerged onto the sidewalk, several persons were grouped beside the door. One of them spat at Dr. Earl.

Before Dr. Earl could raise a hand, Julie had kicked the man on his bare shin. He yelled in agony, and hopped back on the other foot.

"Next time I'll raise my sights," Julie warned grimly. "Anybody else interested?"

Dr. Earl pushed her aside and faced the small group. "If you are interested," he grated, "come on, one at a time or all together."

He took a step forward, and they backed away from him. Hatred flickered in their eyes, but fear showed there too—whitely. Julie took Dr. Earl by the arm.

"Come on, Rod," she whispered. "Let's get away from here. We don't want trouble."

He hung back until the group dispersed, then fell into step. "So it's begun," he murmured. "Superstition lies near the surface, doesn't it?"

She spoke urgently. "Where's your plane? Oh, I forgot. Well, take mine. I don't want you in an interurban crowd. They might hurt you. You beat it home, and I'll round up a few of the boys to come out and guard you. Then I'll see Jackson Peebles and make him stop this snowballing rumor. But you stay home till I come, will you? Promise?"

"Nonsense," he said. "This isn't the Dark Decade."

"That was a sample, stupid. If there'd been more in the crowd, I might have had to really sock a few. You do what I say, hear? Maybe you're right, but I'd feel better if you do it my way."

"When you put it like that, Julie, all right."

He was soon high above the city, with the image of Julie's worried eyes in his mind. He tried to shrug it away, but a

part of her concern communicated itself to him.

Sure, this was the Twenty-sixth century, but atavism was as old as man himself. Would any amount of time wipe it out? Or would it lie there, ready to spring forth and demolish all progress?

Yesterday he would have laughed scornfully. Now he was not so certain.

CHAPTER THREE

Evil Incarnate

HE BANKED the plane toward his roof and saw that another, in addition to the wreckage of his own, was there. He eyed this cautiously as he landed, saw that it was a single-passenger runabout and relaxed. He could handle one person.

That person was Jackson Peebles, bejeweled, small-eyed, but full of ponderous joviality. He lumbered to his feet and held out a friendly hand.

"Doctor, I want to apologize, sir. I'd like to be your friend."

Dr. Earl took the big, soft hand. Even though he knew the fat man's motives, and even though the creature was unpleasant to the eye, Dr. Earl was grateful for this show of friendliness. It seemed so long since yesterday, when he could not have counted his friends with less than three figures.

"Come in, Mr. Peebles."

When they were in his study, he asked, "Drink?"

"Charmed, sir, charmed."

Dr. Earl mixed two tall ones in his little kitchen, and found Peebles examining the unfinished diagram when he returned.

"So this is it, Doctor?" Peebles turned a beaming purple face which seemed about to burst with genial chagrin. "You certainly put it over on us, sir. I tell you, that was mighty cute, sir, mighty cute.

Well—" he accepted the drink, saluted—"to mutual pleasure and, if I might add, profits."

Chuckling, he swallowed half the drink under Dr. Earl's amused eyes.

"As you might guess, Doctor, I come with offers as well as apologies. Mighty handsome offers, too, if I say so myself. You may name your price, Doctor."

"I have nothing to sell, Mr. Peebles."

Peebles blinked. "Then I'll double your price. Put a name to it, I'll match it again."

"But I have nothing to sell."

Peebles was patiently insistent. "Now, come, my good fellow. Every man has a price. After what has been reported to me about your invention—though God knows where you kept it—I'm willing to stake everything I have on its development."

"I have no invention."

"Then what's this drawing? Answer me that!"

"It's a private matter which I can't discuss."

Peebles pursed pendulous lips, then eyed Dr. Earl with porcine shrewdity. "So Plastico beat me to you, eh?"

Dr. Earl shrugged impatiently. "I'm telling you the truth. I have no invention; I have nothing for sale. I have made no deal with anyone, nor shall I."

"I'll make you president of the company," Peebles said persuasively. "I'll double any offer you get elsewhere. I'll give you twenty-eight per cent—no, by damn, twenty-nine per cent of the capital stock. I'll name the company after you. How's that? Earl Power Company. Neat, eh?"

Dr. Earl sighed. "Sit down and finish your drink. I don't know how to convince you. However, I have a matter I'd like to discuss with you."

Peebles sank into a chair. "What is it?"

Dr. Earl told him of the rumor. "I

don't know where it came from; I don't care. I do know that whatever I have done has a natural explanation. There isn't any touch of witchcraft. I know nothing of such things, and don't believe in them. I'm a scientist. I must be able to measure something before I believe in its existence, although my particular science causes me to be less skeptical, more willing to accept a fact and then prove it, than others. But I do not believe in magic, black, green or yellow. Yet this rumor has started, and has reached proportions which threaten my reputation. I need help to stop it."

Peebles curled his broad mouth in a smile. "You shall have my aid, sir. A few hints on the tremendous importance of your invention will quiet any rumors. What do you call your machine, Doctor?"

"Honestly," Dr. Earl pleaded, "I don't have an invention."

Peebles rose. "All right, Doctor, if you need time to think on my offer, you shall have it. Remember, though, that I shall feel very strongly if your machine gets into other hands, very strongly. As you said, I am influential."

Dr. Earl gave up. "All right, I promise it won't get into other hands. But you will take care of that other matter?"

"Certainly, certainly." Peebles held out his hand. "The moment you are ready to turn the plans over to me, I shall scotch any and all rumors about you. In the meantime, no harm will be done."

"But listen! Harm can be done, a great deal of it. Such a thing can spread like a whirlwind."

"You exaggerate; I am sure of it."

Chuckling, Peebles went out on the landing roof, and Doctor Earl heard his plane swish off into the night.

THE diagram lay on his desk, and before he was quite aware of what he was doing, Dr. Earl had added what appeared to be another section of

the drawing. He came to himself with a start and flung off the compulsion which pushed orderly lines out of his memory without volition of his own.

He sat glaring at the maze of symbols, resolved not to touch it again until the impulse came from within himself instead of from the Persecutors.

Considering it thus objectively, his curiosity asserted itself. He knew that whatever resolutions he might make, he must know the answer. He tried to define this desire, to decide whether it was his alone, but was unable to do so. He only knew that it was there.

He also knew that he needed sleep. He yawned, rose and headed for his bedroom. After a couple of steps, he halted in astonishment. His dark eyes blinked.

He was no longer sleepy.

This was not the restless wakefulness of insomnia, which does not remove a single ache from tired muscles nor refresh the weary mind. This was the feeling which comes after sound, dreamless sleep.

Here was the result which science had been seeking for centuries, and it had come to him from—somewhere. He analyzed his feeling, seeking some note of falsity, some evidence that his freshness was spurious, induced by inner nervousness. It was not so.

He was calm, rested, ready to tackle his work anew. His curiosity shook off its previous lethargy and pushed him back to his desk. He picked up his drawing tools.

Caution, however, held his hand. What ulterior motive lay behind this circumstance? Why were the Persecutors so apparently anxious to have this drawing finished?

He relaxed, opened his mind.

Instantly an opalescent globe, such as he had seen in his classroom, appeared near the ceiling, and the pressure of words came: "Rodney Earl, Rodney Earl!"

He did not actually speak in reply, nor did he receive phrases. But all the elements of conversation were there. The impressions which came to him translated into meaning as crisp and concise as well-written language.

"I won't go any further until I know who you are and what you want," Earl's mind said.

"This is acceptable," came the reply.

"You've tricked me, and I don't like it. You've caused me trouble, and I don't like that. You've persecuted me."

No answer to this.

"Who are you?" Dr. Earl asked.

"You have no terms with which to describe our history."

"Where are you then?"

"In a time dimension you cannot understand."

"What do you want?"

"We wish to enter your dimension."

"Who's stopping you?"

"The minds of men unable to grasp our existence. Once they are conscious of us, we may take our places among them."

Dr. Earl closed his mind to consider. He looked up at the shining globe and tried to fit it into the scheme of things as man knew them. He could not.

Cynicism, gained through years of psychological and psychiatric experience, held him aloof from accepting the impressions he was receiving at their face value. His experience indicated that whenever any person takes the initiative in a project, that person has something to gain if the project comes off successfully. Were these intelligences the same?

"What will you gain by this?" he asked.

"Experience," came the answer.

"And what will we—the human race—and I gain?"

"Life."

"We have life."

"But not for long, Rodney Earl. Yours is a dying planet."

"We'll go to other planets when necessary. But that won't be for millions of years, and I won't care by then."

The answer to this fairly crackled. "Such short-sightedness will put your race in a position all too familiar to us. Your Psychozoic age will run its course, on this planet or another. Your life form will become extinct unless you guard for the future. Yours alone is the responsibility, for you alone have the mental strength to comprehend. All the others failed."

"And why won't I fail?"

"You may. But a strong factor in your favor is that your perceptive sense is trained. Not so, the others."

"What do you want me to do?"

"Build the mechanism. Transmit to the world the images which appear on its screen. You shall be rewarded personally, as will your race."

"What kind of reward?"

"You have no terms to describe."

Dr. Earl pursed his lips. "Then I'm buying a pig in a poke? I risk my sanity for some vague reward I can't understand."

"You already have a hint of reward. You no longer will need sleep."

"Not ever?"

"Not ever."

"It seems to me I'll be lonesome as hell at night."

No reply to this.

"I'll think it over," Dr. Earl continued. "Will you leave me alone?"

"Yes. You will be protected."

"I don't need protection."

Again there was no reply.

The impressions ceased; the opalescent globe vanished. Dr. Earl was alone, at the beginning of a three-day period of abstraction.

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ENEMIES—BUY U. S. WAR BONDS!**

DURING those days his bodyguard arrived, four young men who stayed in his waiting room, were excessively polite to him at mealtimes, and who kept all visitors away except Julie Abbot.

She came twice, once to get her plane, the other to report an increased intensity in the feeling against him. But Dr. Earl took little notice of her presence or her report. He was in the throes of an indecision which occupied all his time.

This was literally true, since he was no longer sleepy. He spent the hours weighing all the factors as he knew them.

On the one hand, he might be the victim of a neurosis. His very indecision pointed to that possibility.

On the other hand, it might be true.

In this event, he must make a decision. He must either sever relations with the Persecutors or build the machine.

He tried in his mind to forecast results. If he renounced further contact with the strange intelligences, could he withhold himself? They had dogged him with phenomena which tagged him as a witch doctor. Would they do so again?

But if he built the machine, one of two results would be attained: the Persecutors would gain their ends, or nothing at all would happen. If he had dragged this whole sequence of experience from some psychic corner of his mind, nothing would happen. But if the Persecutors were real, then what?

He had two considerations, himself and the human race. He was cynical enough to recognize the unimportance of the human race, except to itself, in the vast scheme of things. This cold cinder upon which it lived was an infinitesimal dot in a great universe which, itself, may have come about by cosmic accident. If the human race died off, who would care? Who would know?

The Persecutors had spoken of shortsightedness and conditions with which

they were familiar. Had they once lived on a planet? If so, this was the first anybody had heard about it. The universe continued its rush through space; the Earth continued to revolve; summer came and went, and the sun grew smaller, age after age. If a race had vanished from some speck in the cosmos, the extinction had produced no observable result.

In consideration of his own life and well-being, Dr. Earl cast up a profit and loss account. He stood a chance to lose his mind, as had those wrecks in the hospital. On this side of the account also, was the possibility of being enslaved by forces he did not fully comprehend.

He knew nothing of the Persecutors, granting their existence. What he had learned had been given him in terms he could grasp. What lay beyond that?

One point which bespoke caution was that in his last communication with them the feeling of evil was gone. He sensed nothing inimical to him or his race, and this had been a strong factor in former contacts. Was this a deliberate move on their part, or did it mean that with understanding came uncolored acceptance?

He did not believe in evil incarnate. Evil was only a word, definable from a strict point of view. If an event wrought harm to A, as a result of B's action, then B was evil from A's viewpoint but not necessarily so from B's.

Had the Persecutors converted him, then, to their viewpoint?

He considered also the possibility of mental fission. Practice of Psychometrics was new, and he had no reason to doubt that conscious projection of thought impulses might bring about a cleavage of the mind.

If this had happened to him, it was conceivable that one part of such a divided mind was capable of activity neither he nor anybody else could understand—capable of producing mass illusion, of falling rocks? He shrugged. The rocks had

seemed real and solid, but he had only the evidence of his senses to justify the assumption.

If those senses were impaired or transmuted, he was perhaps incapable of judgement.

On the third day he shook off his inward struggle.

"This is silly!" he said aloud in his study. "I will either build the damned thing or I won't."

He made his decision abruptly, sat at his desk and began to draw again. Even as he did so, he wondered how much of this decision was his own.

HE LOOKED up from the machine as a knock sounded on his laboratory door.

"Well?"

One of the young men poked a blond head through. "Mr. Peebles is here again, Doctor."

"Tell him to go away."

The blond head vanished, and Dr. Earl stood back to look at the finished product. He had spent seventy-two hours in its construction, and was as fresh as if he had done no work at all. The revitalizing qualities which he had gained from the Persecutors constantly amazed him. If they could pass them on to the world. . .

He laid no claim to understanding this mechanism his hands had wrought. Materials had appeared when he needed them, and he had assembled the parts according to the diagram. As he neared the finish, he began to wonder why he thought of it as a machine, for it had no moving parts nor any discernible source of power.

It stood shining and inanimate, an inch higher than his own head, ready to be activated by the throw of its switch. Now was the time. Now he could know.

He could not bring himself to throw the switch. The image or images which would appear on that screen might change

the course of history, and he did not want the responsibility.

Dr. Earl sat down and looked at the machine. He became lost in another inward struggle and did not hear the door open. His first realization of Peebles' presence came when the big man spoke in a friendly and hearty voice.

"Very pretty, Doctor. Very pretty, indeed."

Dr. Earl started, stared.

"How did you get in here?"

Peebles chuckled. "Your boys are reasonable and loyal. You said to throw me out; they wanted to. But they wanted more to see you collect benefits that are rightly yours. So this is the model, eh?" Peebles walked around the machine, appraising it with his little eyes.

"Stay away from that! Don't touch it!"

Peebles' jowls lost some of their flabbiness in an amused smile. "Of course not, Doctor." He stooped and looked under the machine. "Where's its source of power?"

"It hasn't any. Please go, Mr. Peebles. I have work to do."

Peebles straightened, stroked his soft chin, and eyed Dr. Earl thoughtfully. "If it has no source, it costs nothing to run. Whatever it delivers is pure profit. Doctor, you've done it! I knew it would happen sometime, but I never dreamed I'd be on the ground floor. How much, sir, how much?"

Dr. Earl made a great effort to remain calm. "Please, Mr. Peebles. Please get the hell out! This is not an invention; it is not a power machine; it is not for sale. If you don't go, I'll have you ejected."

His voice ended on a higher note, and he forced his hands to unclench. *I am near hysteria*, he thought. *This won't do.*

Peebles stood before the machine. "All right, Doctor, I'll go. I'm sorry you won't make a deal. But I shall have one satis-

faction. I'll see what happens when you throw this switch."

Dr. Earl started out of his chair, but too late to halt Peebles' fat fingers.

BOTH men drew a gasping breath, and Peebles staggered back from the image that filled the screen. Dr. Earl paid no more attention to the fat man; he knew that he must smash this mechanism beyond repair.

He couldn't remove his eyes from the screen with its nerve-shattering image.

It pictured a bottomless void, from which came an endless repetition of formless forms. These were *outrè*, beyond experience and beyond comprehension.

They were a stench in the nostrils, an abomination in the mouth, a crawling on the skin; strange odors, strange tastes, and sensations of madness.

His mind, trained to divide itself among many tasks, now divided for the work in hand. The executive portion ordered his hands to find a bar and smash the machine; the analytical examined the screen; the emotional recoiled under wave after wave of loathing.

Above and beyond these feelings was desire. He fought the impulse to idolatry with every savage ounce of strength. And even as he fought, he felt his will seeping away, felt the steady emergence of this loathsome desire.

At the breaking point, his hands found the bar and, with the strength of alien hatred, brought it down on the screen and its parent mechanism.

He stood gasping with weakness among the ruins, pulling gouts of air into his panting lungs. His hands were paralyzed from strain, and he dropped the bar. He staggered to his chair, dropped his head on crossed arms.

After ten seconds of silence, a sound, more sickening even than the images, tied knots in Dr. Earl's stomach muscles.

"Gl-l-l-l-l. Gl-l-l-l-l."

It was a crooning, a baby sound in the voice of a grown man.

Dr. Earl raised his dark eyes slowly to see Peebles, now a great, empty hulk, squatted among the wreckage, fingering a bit of bright metal with simple, idiot glee. He did nothing with the shining fragment; it was obvious that he didn't know what it was. It was simply bright, and he was pleased.

He just looked at it and gurgled.

Dr. Earl had not liked the man. He had found him unpleasing to the eye. Now he found him heartbreaking. Peebles had no mind. That was plain.

Surging self-hatred swept up from Dr. Earl's heart. He had submitted against his judgment to the blandishments of evil incarnate. He could not rationalize; he could not analyze his conduct; he could only hate it.

Peebles had been no great asset to society, true. But he had been a man, cast in the same mold as the others. Dr. Earl felt that he had taken the man's identity away, and he had no right.

He watched Peebles for another ten seconds, playing among the shattered parts of the machine, before he rose and fumbled toward the door. He stuck his head out, called weakly for his bodyguard.

They came with a rush, those four young men, ready for trouble. When they saw Peebles, they froze in horror; one, the youngest, ran away, ill.

"What happened, Doctor?"

"Are you hurt?"

"Did he attack you?"

Dr. Earl waved a weak hand.

"Take him home," he muttered. "Please take him home, poor mindless devil."

Dr. Earl saw their loyalty ebb away, to be replaced by a glint of suspicion, mixed with fear. They had seen Peebles enter. He had been hearty, persuasive, pleasant. They took away a mindless shell, flaccid, without will, and with 'a

face that would continue to haunt them.

DR. EARL sat in his chair again, tried to steady his whirling thoughts. He achieved only nausea. His trained mind, which had stood where Peebles had fallen, failed him for the moment.

And at that moment, the Persecutors struck again.

"Rodney Earl, Rodney Earl!"

The opalescent globe was there, gleaming with a brighter, angrier light.

Dr. Earl flung his head to one side, tried to shut his mind. His will was almost strong enough, but not quite, not quite. Desire came through, desire to rebuild the machine. He had turned to the diagram before, with a desperate effort, he shut his mind completely.

He was frightened. Sooner or later, he knew, the Persecutors would force him again to build that evil machine. They had too great a hold on him now. He could not stave them off forever. He could not maintain this tense barrier to their entry into his mind.

Flight? To where?

To another city? To New York, San Francisco, London, to be lost among their millions?

He should not be lost. They had sought him out here; they would follow wherever he went.

To the middle of some great desert, or ocean, away from humanity?

Wastes and emptiness offered no obstacles to them. They had given him materials, here in his laboratory; they could force him to build their diabolical machine again.

Should he lock himself in this room, and fight it out with them? He pondered on this. Since he no longer slept, it would mean a twenty-four-hour tension each day, end on end. He knew, with a bitter realization of human frailty, that he could not defy them for any appreciable period.

They, on the other hand, were apparently ageless, and would clamor to the end of his time for entry into his mind.

He came reluctantly to a final decision. He cringed from the thought of self-destruction, for his experience indicated that suicides were at least temporarily out of focus. Some aberration, realized or not, drove them to take their own life.

He did not wish to follow that pattern. His mind and its peculiar qualities set him apart from other men, and innate egoism pushed thoughts of suicide away.

He could not forecast the effect of the Persecutors on the human race, but he was convinced—because of his compulsion to idolize them—that their advent would mark the end of freedom. He, Dr. Earl, was small enough sacrifice, then. His life was forfeit for the liberty of others.

Even then he could grin at himself wryly. The noble gesture. Or was he suffering from the same aberration which had caused other men to blow their heads away with a blaster?

Blaster? He had none. Peaceful citizens had no need of them. He thought over items in his household which could be converted into lethal weapons.

There was the bar. He could kill another with it, but he doubted if he could bang himself on the head hard enough to split his skull. He had an assortment of knives, but the knife was messy. Poison? No, for the pain would drive him to find an antidote, and he might wind up with nothing more than stomach ulcers.

His resolution was already weakening, and he steeled himself against capitulation. He thought of the method then. It was quick, painless, and required only enough courage to jump off his landing roof onto his head.

HE HURRIED outside and stood for a second on the rail near his plane, in its welter of pebbles. He wasted no sentimental last glances at his

home town, no last thoughts of dear friends.

He dove, head first.

He floated. The sensation was like lying on an air mattress, for the pressure which held him up was nearly as solid. Not quite as solid, for he wafted downward gently as a tumbling leaf and landed, without a bruise, on the lawn. He jumped to his feet, cursing silently as a phrase of the Persecutors' came back to him: "*You will be protected.*"

Then, not feeling at all funny, he broke into a high, nervous giggle. His suicide attempt had been so anticlimactic that he could not suppress a shudder of hysterical laughter.

He sobered quickly, looked around to see if any of his neighbors had witnessed his soaring descent. Yes, there was a spectator, a small boy by his gate who looked at him with incredulous, open-mouthed awe.

They stared at each other, Dr. Earl and the boy.

"Do it again," the boy said.

Dr. Earl walked shamefacedly past the boy, and headed for the Abbots. The boy padded along beside him.

"Say, Mister, that sure was pretty. I wish I could do it. Will you show me, will you, huh?"

Dr. Earl said nothing. The boy clamored for a few yards more, then gave up.

"Bet you had wires or something," he flung after Dr. Earl.

The doctor became grim again. His grimness increased when the few people he met shied away. His neighbors had been wont to speak pleasantly; now they spoke not at all. They looked away. They crossed the street to avoid a meeting. Dr. Earl hurried.

Philemon Abbot was at home, and his gray eyes darkened with concern as Dr. Earl entered his study.

"You look like the last day of a week-end in hell, Rod."

Dr. Earl twisted a smile. "You're not so far wrong, Phil. I want you to do something for me, and I don't want you to tell Julie."

"Gladly. What is it?"

"I want you to kill me, Phil."

Philemon Abbot's broad, smooth face did not change. He waited.

"You'll have a perfect alibi," Dr. Earl went on. "Self defense. For I'm going to attack you after I tell you what has happened. Since I last saw you—"

He told Abbot of the Persecutors, how he had listened, what he had learned, what he had done, and his conclusion that he was too dangerous to humanity to be allowed to live. He told of Peebles, and of his suicide attempt.

"I can't hold out much longer, Phil. My mind is tightly closed against them, but I'll break down eventually. You've got to knock me off before they get to me again. It's vital! I can't overestimate its importance."

Abbot said quietly, "If you couldn't kill yourself, what makes you think they'd allow me to?"

"I'm not certain," Dr. Earl said. "But you've got to try. I have a hunch that they can't tell what you'll do next, because you don't have E.S.P. Julie has it slightly, but not controlled. That's why I didn't want her here. My mind is closed to them, so I don't think they have any idea of what we're doing."

"Then how did they know you were killing yourself?"

"I have an answer. Understand, this is all guesswork, but it seems reasonable. I probably relaxed when I jumped, and they got through. Please, Phil, I can't hold out."

A murmur of voices drifted through the front wall from the street. The murmur grew louder and was punctuated with angry shouts. Philemon Abbot rose and opened a panel. He looked out.

He turned, beckoned Dr. Earl.

"Come here, Rod."

Dr. Earl joined him. Gathering at Abbot's gate was a mob. Dr. Earl realized with a shock that such a group had not walked the earth for centuries. He knew it for a mob from his studies of history, for it had a feel. Hard-eyed men and women bent on a single errand seethed before the gate and shouts arose.

"He went in here!"

"Well, somebody do something!"

Someone in the crowd talked about "flying through the air," and another cried, "Poor Mr. Peebles," but the complete remarks were lost in the general hubbub.

Dr. Earl turned to Abbot. "They'd make short work of me, but I'd rather have you do it, Phil. If you won't, I'll walk out and be—lynched, I think is the old term."

Abbot took him by the arm. "Come on."

He led Dr. Earl through the study into the next room. This was dark, and was quickly darker for Dr. Rodney Earl, for Philemon Abbot swung a long right to the point of the little man's chin, lashed him with stout cord, bundled him into a plane and whisked him off to the hospital.

CHAPTER FOUR

Soul Fires of the Damned

DR. EARL recovered in a bed. He was alone in a sunny room, but was in a strait jacket. He lay perfectly still.

He knew what had happened, and he knew despair. Phil Abbot had thought he was mad, had brought him here for observation. Each moment's delay increased his danger, and the world's danger. He held his mind tight shut. The Persecutors must not reach through again. Somehow he would find a way to kill himself.

The door opened to admit Harvey Flood, a former psychology student of Dr. Earl's, now one of the staff psychiatrists. The young man's face flushed with embarrassment, but his eyes and hands were impersonal.

"Hello, Dr. Earl."

"Dr. Flood. This jacket isn't necessary."

"Right-o," the young man said, and freed the patient.

Dr. Earl flexed his arms. "Somebody pulled that a little too tight. Now look here, Doctor. You'll want to give me some reaction tests, I assume, but I tell you now I'm not mad. I have a job to do, and it must be done. You must help me."

Harvey Flood sat, gave Dr. Earl a cigarette, lit one himself. "Suppose you tell me about it, sir."

"No," Dr. Earl said. "You have a certain amount of E.S.P., and I feel that such men are dangerous. Not to the extent I am, but still—" He paused. "It's this way. As long as you don't know what I know, you're safe, I imagine. But if certain information comes into your possession, you would adjust yourself to meet it—and be lost."

"Abbot gave me a story about other-dimensional life," Flood said. "But it didn't hang together very well."

"I doubt if Phil heard much that I said. He's convinced that I'm mad. He's safe. I believe his sister is safe, too, for her E.S.P. is rudimentary. But give me your tests. Convince yourself of my normalcy. Then I'll ask you to do something."

Dr. Flood complied. He put Dr. Earl through the most exacting series of tests that science had been able to devise. The laboratory worked on his blood, spinal fluid, and other specimens.

"Well," Harvey Flood said three days later, "I can't do anything but send you home, Doctor. So far as we can deter-

mine, you're perfectly all right, physically and mentally."

"I was sure of it," Dr. Earl replied.

"You mentioned a favor, sir."

Dr. Earl had intended to ask young Flood to inject an overdose of evapin into his circulatory system and put the cause of death down to a weak heart. But during those three days his perspective had changed.

He had submitted to the tests with a blank mind, so that nervous reaction would not be affected by mental tension. But in the nights, when sleep came to all but himself and nurses who whispered about on antiseptic feet, he had done a great deal of thinking.

He realized first of all that he was no different from other men except that his mind had peculiar qualities, and the degree to which he could control those qualities. Indeed, his intelligence quotient was no higher than average. Harvey Flood, for example, had a higher I.Q. than himself.

He was therefore assuming a great responsibility in denying the Persecutors from entering this world, or, for that matter, allowing them to enter—when his decision was based only on his own reaction. They had appeared evil in their manifestations to himself and, apparently, to Peebles.

But Dr. Earl recalled the classic story of the drunk who, by some miracle of timing, had stowed away on the first exploratory ship to the moon. The crew had found him two days out. He didn't know where he was; he was hungry, and he had an historic hangover. Strictly as a gag, they kept him stewed to the eyes during the whole trip, and told him nothing of their destination. When they sobered him up and gave him a look at the bleak wastes, he had fallen over dead.

Now the moon was not evil, but sight of its strangeness had stopped the heart of a man who had not expected it. Perhaps

that had been the trouble with Peebles. The images on that screen were completely outside the experience pattern of humanity—except, perhaps, those who had reacted in a like manner and now were in mental wards.

In order to determine whether they were innately evil, Dr. Earl felt that he must observe their effect on someone who had no preconceived notions of good or evil, no conditioning to the social matrix of their time. The ideal subject would be a baby, but how to find one with sufficient E.S.P. to sense their existence? That method was too long and arduous.

The idiot girl in this hospital would answer the purpose. It was clear that her memory was gone. She had been a mathematical genius; now she could not count.

He felt that he owed this experiment to himself and to the world. It was possible that the Persecutors were strange rather than evil, and that they could bestow many benefits on humanity. Had they not made sleep unnecessary for him?

"I WANT to conduct an experiment," he told Harvey Flood. "You have a girl here." He described her, and asked for a private and sound-proof room. Dr. Flood assented and made the arrangements.

In the room, Dr. Earl was very gentle with Lisa Roman. He projected a stream of quiet thought commands to her, and her empty face soon relaxed, her fat hands stilled.

As he had worked in the Plastico plant with chemists who solved a difficult problem, he now worked with the girl and the Persecutors. In the plant, he had acted as a channel of communication. The receptive portion of his mind picked up impressions of the workers, and the projective portion transmitted to the others, without Dr. Earl himself being aware consciously of the impressions.

So now he opened his mind, after three

days of holding off the Persecutors, and let their impressions flow through to Lisa Roman.

The effect on her was instantaneous. She sat up on the couch and pleasure brought life to her vacuous features. Her blue eyes lighted, like a dog that knows it is about to be fed. Her loose lips stiffened, and Dr. Earl saw that she had a pretty, sensitive mouth. Her hands seemed to be slimmer and firmer. Happiness and desire were written plainly upon her.

Dr. Earl broke the contact. Idiocy came back to the girl, the hopeless unknowing.

Dr. Rodney Earl felt as if an intolerable burden had been lifted from his heart. The girl, who no longer knew good from evil, had been happier while receiving impressions from the Persecutors. What those impressions were he had no way of knowing, for he was merely the channel; but he accepted the fact of her happiness as partial evidence that they were not dangerous.

Only the question of how he might explain the public phenomena and Peebles' loss of mental faculties remained. One thing he knew; the means by which the Persecutors should be revealed to the world must not be their machine. He could build another, yes, but he could not face the images on the screen again. The human mind could take only so much.

He opened receptive channels and felt his name come through.

"Where have you been, Rodney Earl? Why did you destroy the projector?"

"Never mind about that!" was his thought response. "I have decided to co-operate."

Instantly diagrams flooded his perceptions. The same diagrams he had seen before. With these came the same compulsion to draw. He shook his head.

"I won't; I can't! You must give me some other way. I can't go through that

again. If you want to become known to others, you must tell me another way. The images on that screen would drive the whole world mad."

"Those worth saving should survive."

"They must all survive, or the deal is off. You can kill me now, if you like, but I must have your promise that nobody else will die. God knows how many minds have snapped because of you. I won't have any more. That's final."

"The projector is best. It is suitable to our needs."

"But not to mine! You'll do it my way, or find another stooge."

FOR a few seconds he fought with every vestige of willpower against an almost overwhelming urge to do their bidding. Sweat stood out on his forehead, and his hands grew rigid. Then, weakening, he shut his mind and stood panting. He rested.

Presently he allowed impressions to come through again, and felt ineffable peace steal over him. All was serene, and even the quality of communications was subtly restful.

"We shall use this girl, and others like her. Through you, Rodney Earl, we must operate. You will let us through to her."

He looked at Lisa Roman. She lay on the couch, eyes dull and blank, rubbing her hospital uniform with one thumb and forefinger. He allowed the Persecutors to reach her through his mind.

Her face became animated once more. She got to her feet in one incredibly graceful motion. Even if he had wished, Dr. Earl could not have moved his eyes from her face.

It had been an empty face before, but it had been human. Now it was not. It was a woman's face, but it was not human. Yes, there were eyes, glowing with inner fires. There was a mouth, almost smiling. There were teeth.

Dr. Earl had been told of lusts that could not be satiated, of soul fires that were unquenchable. Privately he had doubted their existence, but now he knew that he was wrong. For the face on Lisa Roman now reflected such lusts and such fires as she regarded Dr. Earl with an expression of unholy triumph.

Had she spoken, had she ordered him to any task, he would have obeyed. The feeling of adoration, unclean but nonetheless adoration, which the screen images had inspired in him was his again. He wanted to prostrate himself before this face which looked out of another world into his. He would kill for it, live for it, die for it.

He dropped to his knees before this thing that was no longer a woman, and she bent over him. He looked into her blazing eyes as into windows that opened onto hell and wished with all his heart to leap through. He was powerless to close his mind to the current which flowed through it. Indeed, he had forgotten the Persecutors and all things save this face with flamed with light.

The tableau ended when the face went blank and the gross body of Lisa Roman toppled to the floor like a bag of wet cloth.

Dr. Earl came slowly out of his daze to find that she was dead.

Before he could close his mind to the Persecutors, he felt the words: "The vessel was too small. The projector is the only—"

Rodney Earl shut his mind for the last time. Never, he knew, would he open it again. His days might be few, but the day of the Persecutors should never come if he could prevent it.

Good or evil, he knew that they had no place in human affairs.

GRADUALLY strength came back to him, and awareness of the serious situation in which he found himself. Lisa Roman was dead, fortunate-

ly for her and, perhaps, for the world. The authorities might take a different view.

If he were convicted of her murder, they would put him in a corrective hospital where his life would be protected by every means possible. He would not be able to kill himself, and the longer he lived the greater chance the Persecutors would have of enslaving him to their wishes. His change in attitude here in the hospital might be an indication of their subtle effect on him.

He had gone to Philemon Abbot fully determined to die. But in the hospital he had decided on one more experiment. Had they worked on him by means unknown to him? Was their "Where have you been?" merely a ruse to make him believe that they didn't know?

He was shaken, true, as he looked down at the body of Lisa Roman. But was he affected as much as he should have been a week, a year ago? He shook his head. He didn't know, but he couldn't take a chance.

He went out to find Harvey Flood.

Later they stood above the body of Lisa Roman while Dr. Earl gave a professional, if mythical, account of the girl's death. Harvey Flood drew his straight brows into a frown as he listened. He heard his former instructor out, but the frown remained.

"You'll sign a certificate, sir, and report to the medical board at its next meeting?"

"Of course, my boy. I'll go home now and make out the report," Dr. Earl said casually.

He kept his face carefully blank, and avoided a direct look at young Flood lest his eyes betray his vast relief. He had counted on the young man taking it this way, allowing him to leave the institution. Once he was out, the affair was finished.

All that was necessary, he reflected, was to appear in public. The crowd which

had clamored for his life before Phil Abbot's house indicated the intensity of feeling. As soon as he appeared on the street, word would pass; citizens would gather, and he would be dead before the police heard of the matter.

He walked away from the hospital with a sensation of ironic amusement. He was walking to his own death, and he found cynical pleasure in the fact that he would die at the hands of the very persons whom he was trying to protect.

He headed for the university. News would spread quicker there. He touched his wrist watch and learned that a change of classes was due in two minutes. He quickened his pace.

Sight of the hurrying figure drew only casual glances from those he met, and he reflected wryly that his fame was not so great as he had thought. No recognition brightened the eyes that met his.

This was not true at the school. He was recognized, and presently accosted by young Jackson Peebles, who came running from one of the more remote buildings. He was a replica of his father in appearance, without the flabbiness of age. He towered over Dr. Earl, looming large against the circle of hard-eyed students who watched.

"All right, you little wart," Peebles demanded. "What have you got to say for yourself?"

Dr. Earl chuckled. "Nothing. Nothing at all."

"Did you do that to Dad?"

"Yes."

"Then I'm going to beat you within an inch of your life."

"Don't stop there," Dr. Earl taunted.

Young Peebles stepped forward, small eyes slitted, fists cocked. "You sorcerer!"

A blood-red cloak fell out of the sky and curtained the scene from Dr. Earl. It had the appearance of a heavy rain, except for its color and it fell around him like a shower curtain. It did not splash

and wet him, but vanished into the lawn as it touched the grass.

Through the opaque wall Dr. Earl heard cries of many voices. These became fainter, and the bloody rain stopped.

The students now stood at a respectful distance, Peebles among them, and surged back as Dr. Earl moved toward them.

"That wouldn't hurt you," Dr. Earl said. "Please. Get rocks or clubs. Finish it, all of you. Kill me, I beg you."

Their eyes whitened as he continued to approach. Then they broke suddenly and fled, the girls among them screaming as if hands clawed them from behind. Dr. Earl was alone on the campus.

He raised his eyes to the open sky. "Damn you!" he whispered. "Damn you, I'll beat you yet!"

He went home.

CHAPTER FIVE

"Kill Him!"

"YOU will be protected," the Persecutors had told him.

The truth of this was apparent. Was he destined to live on until his mind opened to them from sheer exhaustion—twenty-four hours a day, three hundred and sixty-five days a year, with no sleep, ever?

How had they known? His mind had not opened. Had they operated through the mind of young Peebles, who had extra-sensory talents to some small degree? Or did they know now his every move, if not his thoughts?

He paced the floor, trying to devise a way to overcome their protective vigilance, until Julie Abbott arrived.

"Rod! I've looked all over for you for three days. Where in the devil have you been, and why didn't you let me know?"

"Didn't your brother tell you?"

"Tell me? He helped me search for you. I was about to start on the hospital

when I heard you'd been on the campus. What's it all about, Rod?"

"Sit down, Julie. I want to talk."

He waited until she was seated, her long slim hands clasped, wide eyes full of bewildered concern.

"Remember what I told you in the restaurant the other night, Julie?"

"The only way I could forget it would be to shoot myself. What have you found out? What happened to poor Mr. Peebles? Where—"

He cut her off. "I'm going to tell you. Listen, Julie, you're fond of me?"

She smiled. "It's the talk of the town."

"I want you to understand a few things before I get down to the meat of the matter, Julie. First, I told Phil these things, and he slugged me, thinking I was mad, and lugged me off to the hospital to save me. There I underwent all the tests, and was certified to be in perfect mental health."

"You don't have to convince me, Rod," she broke in. "I know you're sane."

"Then keep it in mind, Julie. Whatever I say or ask, remember it."

"All right, get on with it."

Dr. Earl stood over her, a deadly serious expression in his dark eyes. "I've run up against something too big for me, Julie, and I'm about to crack. Maybe a few others wouldn't. There are many more tough-minded men and women than I. They could take it, maybe, but I can't. Not any longer."

"You seem all right," she said. "A little baggy under the eyes, but on the whole you look pretty good to me."

"Stop being flippant!" he stormed. "I'm serious."

Her eyes opened very wide. "Don't you understand anything about me, Rod? I have half a notion what's coming. Could I stand it if I didn't wisecrack?"

"I'm sorry, Julie. I'm upset. Me," he said dryly, "the big brain expert, upset. But I'm just a little man cursed with a

certain amount of sensitivity. Well, anyway, here's the story."

He told her of the machine he had built, of the incident with Peebles, and recounted events up to date. As he told of Lisa Roman, Julie Abbot's hands clenched. She looked through his eyes into the hellish world behind those of Lisa Roman, and whitened around the mouth.

"From my point of view, at least," he said, "anything I can do to prevent them from breaking through to human minds is justifiable. What I am about to ask you to do, Julie, doesn't spring from purely altruistic motives. I'm no hero. The proposition is simply that I can't go on."

"Well, say it!" she snapped. "Stop beating around the bush."

"Wait. I want you to get the full picture. You see, I have been trained for a certain type of work, restricted by definite boundaries. I think it's fortunate that I haven't had time to train anybody else as fully as I am trained. Nobody else, except possibly one young man—the one who worked on your plane, I forgot his name—is as qualified to learn of the existence of these things, whatever they are, and even he cannot control mental processes as I can."

"Does he know about 'em?"

"Not so far as I know."

"But I do, and Phil does. What about us?"

"Phil," Dr. Earl said, "has no extra-sensory perception, and yours is almost non-existent. I think—and this is pure conjecture—that neither of you would be a suitable medium for the Persecutors and are therefore not dangerous."

"All right, Rod, what is it you want?"

"I want you to kill me, Julie."

SHE frowned at him, as if trying to understand. She didn't cry out; she made no dramatic gestures.

"You're not serious, Rod?"

"I am, definitely. I've tried to kill my-

self, and I couldn't. Young Peebles tried to beat me up, and was scared away. But I think that you and I together could manage it. I have closed my mind to them, and if you think of something else, perhaps they won't get wise until too late."

"And what if they do?"

"We'll have to work out some other means."

Julie Abbot got to her feet. She was breathing somewhat harder than usual, but otherwise her calm was normal.

"I won't do it, Rod."

"Why not, Julie?"

"Why not?" she exclaimed. "There are many reasons. I couldn't take another's life. I'm not conditioned to it. The day of such violence is done. Besides, if I could kill anyone, it wouldn't be you."

"Not even if the safety of the world depends on it?"

"How do you know it does? You admit you're only guessing."

"Yes, but I'm convinced."

"And who are you?" she went on. "You also admit you're no mental giant. What's your opinion worth? Let's leave it up to some board or other. Get a collective opinion."

"No!" he said sharply. "I'm trying to avoid that. The Persecutors want to become known to the world. That's what I'm trying to defeat."

She set her long jaw. "Then let's fight 'em. We can whip 'em."

"LOOK, Julie," he said patiently, "I don't sleep any more. That would be wonderful if I didn't have to maintain a twenty-four hour mental vigilance every day. But I do. I can't rest. Some day I'll crack, and it won't be long. Then I'll be forced to build that damned machine again. I honestly don't know what would happen then, but I feel certain that all our highest ideals would be shattered."

"I thought you were no hero," she said, almost with a sneer.

"Is it heroism, in a derogatory sense, to die rather than become a slave? Men have done it since the beginning of history. I tell you, you can't imagine the feeling I have toward whatever these beings are. I want to fall down and worship. And if they break me down much further, I shall. Julie, listen. I'm not going off half-cocked. This is my considered opinion, and I'm quite objective about it, all in all."

Her calm wavered. She crossed tense hands over her breast, and a touch of anguish came into her wide eyes.

"But why pick on me?" she wailed.

"Because you're the only person in the world I can trust, my dear."

"Well, I'm not going to do it," she said stubbornly. "If I should kill you, they'll just move on to somebody else. You can fight 'em, Rod. You're strong enough. We'll hide you. We'll go away somewhere."

He didn't answer. He looked at her, smiling a little.

Her shoulders slumped. "Yes, I suppose that's silly. You can't hide from something like that. Look, this is idiotic. I can't do it, and I won't. Let's talk about something else."

"Julie," Dr. Earl said quietly. "Do you love me, Julie?"

She twisted a smile. "And look where it's got me."

"I'm sorry, Julie, sorry for a lot of things. You know how I feel toward you. But there always seemed so much time. We both knew we'd get around to us one of these days. I'm sorry we waited—damned sorry. But if you love me, you'll do this for me, because that's part of love—doing things. If I were in your place, I'd feel the same as you, but I'd do it. I swear I would. You must, Julie, because it means everything to me."

"More than me?" she asked bitterly.

"Not in the same way, Julie, but—yes, more than you."

She paced back and forth. "Romance," she muttered. "I got romance. When it finally comes, I'm supposed to kill it. What do you think I am, for heaven's sake, a superwoman?"

"Look at it this way, Julie. If you don't kill me, I'll either go stark raving mad when they break through again, or I'll be a slave of theirs—not yours. Isn't this better than either of those conditions?"

She stopped and looked at him. "Yes, I suppose. Infinitesimal as it is, I've had my authentic taste of love. That's better than nothing, I guess."

"Then you'll do it?"

She came to him, buried her head on his shoulder. "Rod, Rod!"

"It won't be so hard, Julie. It'll be over quickly."

"Let's don't talk about it. Let's get it over with, before I weaken."

Dr. Earl took a dagger—a relic of the Steel Age—from his desk, and handed it to her.

"We must succeed, Julie, and one of the factors of success is to keep our minds away from the actual task. I'll lie on the couch, and we'll think of trivial things. I'll put my finger on the spot where you'll drive in the blade. Do it quickly when you do it."

She said nothing, but trailed across the room to a low couch, where he lay on his back and motioned her to sit beside him.

"Are you planning on a vacation this year?" he asked, pointing to the spot over his heart.

"Sure, sure," she gritted. "I'm planning on a vacation. What the bereft old maid will do this year. Let them model their conduct after mine. I'll show 'em how to be gay and carefree."

"Julie!"

"What do you expect?" she flared. "Am I to sing and dance, kick up my heels?"

He put his finger on his heart again, at the spot where the sliver of steel would slip through protecting ribs. "And have you bought new clothes?"

She set the point of the knife on the spot, gripped the hilt, tensed herself.

"Three bags full," she said. "All black."

THEN the knife fell from her hand, and she fell forward on his chest in a spasm of tears. "I can't do it! This is horrible."

With one hand he stroked her soft shoulder. With the other, he retrieved the knife and put it in her hand again. He pushed her upright, placed the point of the knife once more.

"What—kind of—clothes are they, Julie?" he asked through clenched teeth.

"Th—they're the—latest damned clothes I could f-f-find."

He saw her eyes change. Through the sheen of tears shone resolution, despair, and grief. But resolution was there, and she raised herself to drive the knife home with her weight.

"Good-by," she whispered fiercely. "Good—"

Suddenly a tongue of brilliance licked out of the air, flickering briefly over Juliet Abbot's head. With a deliberation that seemed endless to Dr. Earl, her eyes glazed, the knife dropped from her nerveless fingers, and she fell sideways toward the floor.

He grabbed her, held her in his arms. "Julie, Julie!"

"You'll need—a—new—stooge," she whispered.

"Julie! Come out of it! You'll live; you can't—"

She made an effort. She opened her eyes. She smiled.

Then the tongue of flame struck again, and she was dead. He continued to hold her. Tears came into his eyes, and a crooning into his throat. He rocked back

and forth in his grief for a few seconds, then placed her gently on the couch.

He said nothing, standing above her with clenched hands. He rolled his dark eyes briefly upward, and they blazed, but he did not shout the imprecations which were in his heart. What was the use? What was the use of anything now?

"Julie," he whispered.

He went bitterly out of the house, unseeing eyes fixed straight ahead. He was not aware of the crowd until it was upon him, and he was hailed.

"Hey, you!"

HIS eyes came into focus, took in the group of fifty set faces, fifty tense figures massed ahead of him. In the van was young Peebles, who walked with a stranger to meet him. This was a stocky man with a lined, square face.

"I'm Gerald Roman," he said. "Lisa Roman's father. Does that mean anything to you?"

Dr. Earl tried to speak. He tried to bring into mental perspective the scene in the hospital room. But all he could think of was "Julie, Julie." He said nothing.

"She was empty," Gerald Roman said. "She didn't have a mind, but she was my daughter. They gave me a story about natural death, but somebody else saw her go into that room with you. I don't know what you did to her. I don't want to know. But she was human, which is more than we can say of you. We think you've been around here long enough, Dr. Earl!"

Mutters of agreement ran through the crowd. For a brief instant, Dr. Earl recognized many of his students in the group. His thoughts flicked at these, but came back to the keening of his heart.

Julie, he thought. Julie.

"And you should see my dad," young Peebles cut in. "He was a great man. Now he sits around and stares at anything bright. You're an evil old man, Dr. Earl."

Dr. Earl said nothing. He was hardly conscious of the accusations. They barely registered on his mind, as did the figure which moved out of the crowd and joined Roman and Peebles. This was one of the young men who had acted as his bodyguard in those days when he built the machine.

"I'll try again," he said to Peebles. "We're doing something that's nearly five hundred years dead, taking the law into our own hands. It isn't civilized; it isn't fair. He should stand trial."

"The worst he'd get," Peebles snapped, "would be incarceration in a comfortable room. It isn't bad enough. Did you see my father?"

"I saw him," the young man said. "I was there. After all, we don't know how it happened. I believe there's a natural explanation, and I think Dr. Earl ought to have a chance to make it."

"All right. What have you got to say for yourself, old man?"

Dr. Earl stared at them. "Tell Phil Abbot," he said, "they got Julie. I'm sorry."

Even Dr. Earl's ex-bodyguard gasped at this. Another mutter ran through the crowd, a deeper and fiercer murmur. But the young man stuck to his original position.

"They? They? Tell us, sir, for your own sake, what you're talking about. These people are reviving superstition. Tell them. Give an explanation. My God, you're in a jam!"

Dr. Earl curled his mouth. He said nothing.

Gerald Roman pulled a blaster from under his tunic and pointed it at the little man. "You won't bewitch the life or mind from anyone else," he said grimly.

The same tongue of brilliance that had struck Juliet Abbot dead now flicked the gun from Gerald Roman's hand. He looked at this hand, which had an angry color. He clapped it to him, groaning.

DR. EARL brought his thoughts to the situation. They were afraid, these people who sought his life. They were afraid of what he might do. They thought he was a witch doctor, using black and evil powers. Another manifestation, and they might break and run.

He broke a vow then, a vow which he had kept meticulously. He had sworn, while training at Genetics Research, never to use his mental powers for personal gain.

He broke the vow.

He projected a thought pattern at the crowd.

Kill him! his thoughts ran. Stamp him out like a spider. He's unclean, unholy. Kill him! It's in self-defense, for he may strike at you next. Save your lives! Take his! For the sake of your children, your families, yourselves, kill him; kill him; kill him!

His thoughts took effect, slowly on some, instantly on others. The crowd as a whole surged forward.

This forward rush was checked as bright tongues of color licked at the front ranks, but after staggering back for a second they rolled forward in an angry, impetuous wave.

"Kill him!" cried a few.

Kill him! echoed Dr. Earl's thoughts.

The crowd was blotted from sight by a curtain of falling rock. Dr. Earl's heart sank, thinking he was saved. Above the thunder of small rocks that beat at his feet he could hear the enraged yells.

Then a man broke through, bleeding and bruised about the head. He rushed at Dr. Earl, but fell, apparently dead, as tongues of flame lashed him.

Kill him! Dr. Earl cried in his mind.

Another broke through, and another. The fall of rocks ceased, and the larger of these became weapons. Men scrabbled for them, and hurled them at the little man who threw back his head with exultant laughter.

"I'll beat you yet!" he cried at the Persecutors, and his cry was fresh fuel on the fire of the mob's anger.

They rushed in one concerted mass, checked as the flames licked at them. A few more fell, among them Dr. Earl's former students. He exulted afresh; the Persecutors were destroying possible channels of communication. The crowd was only checked, however. They pressed forward through the flames, and Dr. Earl sprang to meet them with laughter bubbling out of his throat.

He was not conscious for long, for they beat him down with their fists and stamped the life out of his small frame. The expression of triumph did not fade; it lingered even after he was dead.

The mob looked shamedly at the dead who lay in the street. Then they blustered, talked overloudly of necessity, and presently went away.

NELSON LAINE'S eyes opened in the darkness. Out of that darkness, out of somewhere, the summons was coming again. He quivered with fear of the unknown.

He remembered, with a twinge of sympathy, the little doctor who had died six months before after running amok and killing more than a dozen men bigger than he. Doctor Earl had said the phenomena which labeled him as a trafficker in black magic had come from outside.

Nelson Laine remembered his scoffing.

An opalescent globe appeared against his ceiling. He watched in fascination, unable to tear his eyes away. He strove with every ounce of will to shut his eyes, and finally succeeded—but not before words seemed to come to him.

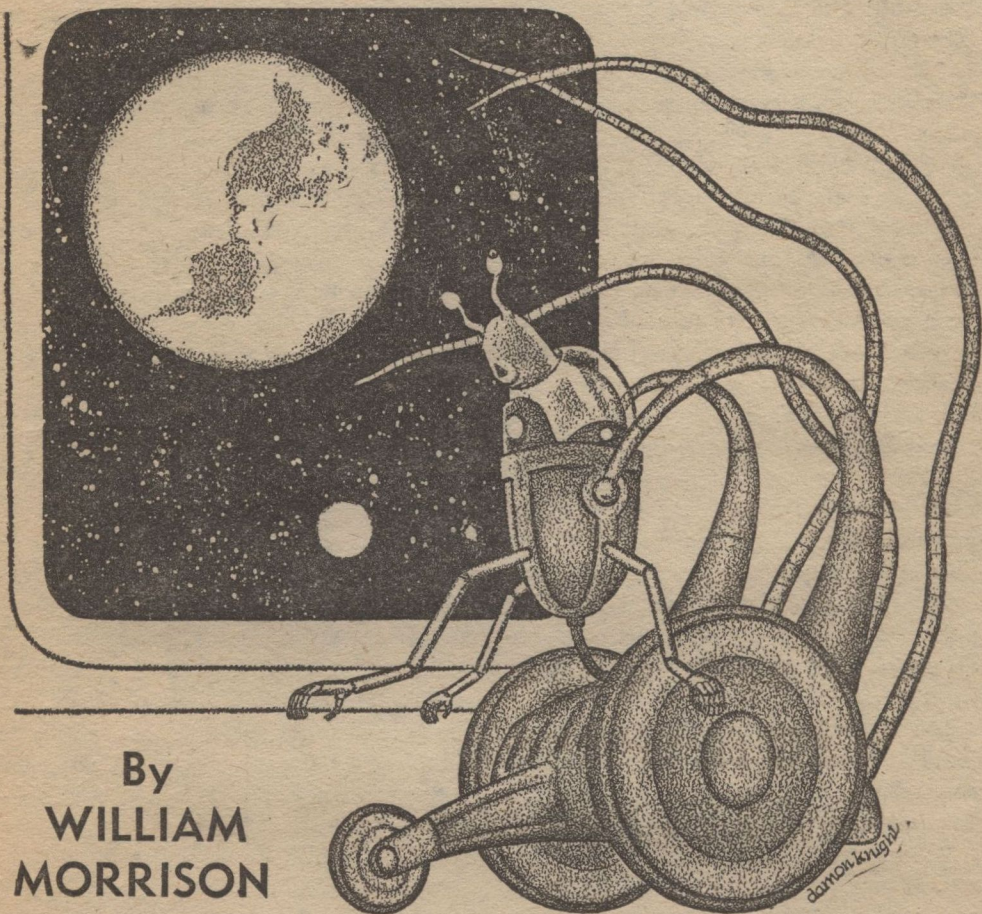
"Nelson Laine, Nelson Laine!"

He jumped out of bed, dressed in an agony of haste and rushed out.

He knew one thing: he'd better see a psychiatrist, or one of these days he'd go completely off his rocker.

GARMENTS OF DOOM

Slain by their own strength, trapped by their own science, the invaders from Vega learned too late the folly of trusting to the machine that had told them that Earthmen were tiny, weak, stupid. But in its way — the machine had been absolutely right!



By
**WILLIAM
MORRISON**

A THIN shaft of light shot out to the wall map from the small formless body of Banzor the Conqueror, and centered upon one of the tiny planets scattered about the huge central sun. "This is the one," declared Banzor. "The one with the single satellite. Shall we overcome it now, or put off its conquest until we can assemble a larger fleet?"

The War Council sat in deathly silence for a moment. No one wished to venture an opinion without knowing what Banzor himself thought. And Banzor, his small, boneless lump of flesh and blood lost within the mass of wheels and rods that served him as a body, had no opinion. He was still in the process of making up his mind. That made things difficult.

Vlran, one of his abler generals, finally found courage to say, "It is my opinion, Lord Banzor, that we should leave this planet alone. We have already conquered more worlds than we knew to exist. Let us go home to our own star and enjoy the benefits of our victories."

"If we go home now, there can be no more attempt at conquest for centuries. The trip takes too long."

"No harm will be done. There will still be something for our successors to accomplish."

Dvorg, envious of Vlran, was almost certain to take the side opposite his. He suggested, "Perhaps we should conquer this one planet and *then* talk of going home. It is impossible that its inhabitants have reached our level of civilization, or else they would have conquered their entire system. We can destroy them with only a small fraction of our strength. The task is hardly worth discussing."

"There, Dvorg, you are wrong," observed Banzor himself thoughtfully. "The creatures are undoubtedly feeble, but we do not yet know how feeble. We must learn before attacking. Remember the red planet. Its inhabitants gave us considerable trouble, destroyed much of our equipment before we finally subdued them."

Dvorg said humbly, "You are right, Lord Banzor, and I spoke too hastily. We must delay, and rebuild our equipment before launching an attack."

"You are wrong again," remarked Banzor. Dvorg's small body seemed to shrink at the rebuff. "We have no time to waste in rebuilding our equipment. When I spoke of assembling a larger fleet, I thought of returning to our native star, to see that all is going well in my absence. That is the choice that confronts us. Either we attack now, with the equipment we have left, or we return home."

"To decide that question we need information we do not have," pointed out Vlran.

Banzor said approvingly, "You see exactly the point I wished to make, Vlran. We do not have the information, but there should be little difficulty in our acquiring it." One of the levers that constituted his mechanical body began to hum. "It appears that we have run across the trail of the two-legged creatures we are talking of destroying."

"I did not know they were two-legged," said Vlran.

"Nor did I. I learned but a few moments ago."

A MECHANICAL body glided into the room like a monstrous spider, summoned by Banzor. The small creature within waited respectfully. The conqueror said, "You, Captain, discovered the ship. Tell us what you found."

The captain spoke hesitantly. "The ship was abandoned with no trace of any crew member or passenger."

"You are sure it came from the third planet?"

"There can be no doubt, Lord Banzor. Its course had been plotted on a three-dimensional chart."

"Good. What else did you learn?"

"The ship was of the same type as those used by the people of the red planet. At first we thought both planets might be inhabited by the same race. We learned better from a photograph of the inhabitants."

"Excellent."

"We decided then that the ship had been built by those of the red planet. The others lacked the intelligence to undertake interplanetary travel."

"It will be an easy conquest," put in Dvorg.

Banzor said reprovingly, "Do not be so hasty, Dvorg. Do you have the photograph, Captain?"

The photograph was at hand. Banzor stared at it in silence for a moment. "Two-legged, as I have said, like those of the

red planet. But smaller, less powerful in appearance. And clothed more simply than those of the red planet."

"They are probably in a state of savagery," said Dvorg, hoping that this time Banzor would agree with him.

"Possibly. But it is wrong to jump to conclusions. Anything else, Captain?"

"We discovered a few traces of writing on the ship, but the samples were undecipherable. We concluded that the ship had been on its way to the red planet, guided by the inhabitants of the latter, when our victory became known. It had been abandoned because its crew feared attracting our attention. They must have taken to a small, inconspicuous lifeboat."

"These are speculations. Any cargo?" asked Banzor.

"Merely clothes."

"Ah. Had the clothes been worn?"

"It appears so. The nature of wearing the clothes is obvious, Lord Banzor, from the photograph."

"Yes, I see." His body began to hum again. To the captain he said, "You are dismissed."

The captain left, to be replaced a moment later by another spiderlike body. Banzor said, "You are Melgul, the scientist, are you not?"

"Yes, Lord Banzor. I have invented a machine—"

"I know all about it." Banzor, who was proud of keeping up with scientific advances, explained to the others, "Melgul's machine analyzes the characters of individuals and races from the clothes they wear. Contact with the wearers changes the molecular structure of the clothes, and Melgul is able to measure this change." He turned to the scientist again. "Analyze the clothes we have captured, and make your report as soon as possible. How long will the process take?"

"An hour at most."

"Take two hours, if necessary. But let the report be accurate."

Melgul withdrew. Banzor said, "I am assuming that the report will be favorable to our purposes. If it is not, we need no plans. We simply return home. But if it is, this is how we shall attack—"

THE others listened in silence. Banzor fancied himself as a military theoretician, and to have interrupted or raised a question as to the correctness of his ideas might have meant death. Two hours passed slowly, and then Melgul appeared again.

"You are not quite so prompt as you had claimed," observed Banzor. "Do you have your report?"

"It is ready. I have delayed so long in order to check it twice. My assistants have also made the analysis. Their results agree with mine."

"And what have you found about the inhabitants of the third planet?"

Melgul said slowly, "We have analyzed a hundred garments, so there can be no substantial error due to inaccurate sampling. The result is almost unbelievable. The inhabitants of the third planet are of very weak minds."

"Less intelligent than those of the red planet?"

"There can be no comparison."

"Are they of sufficient intelligence to have built a spaceship?"

"No, Lord Banzor. It must have been built for them."

There was a look of satisfaction on everyone's face.

Banzor asked, "What else?"

"They are headstrong individualists, uncooperative, victims of their own stupidity and bad tempers. At the same time, they are so simple-minded that their good will is easy to win. After they are conquered, they can be won over by trivial gifts."

"Such as their own clothes, that we can return to them?"

"Yes, Lord Banzor."

Banzor was pleased. "Are there any other qualities that you have discovered?"

"I have prepared a full report in technical language. But almost every quality is to their discredit."

Banzor said, "I am interested chiefly in their lack of intelligence."

"I repeat that they have almost none. They lack even the ability to care for their own needs. It is probable that some higher race, like the one on the red planet, acts as their protector."

"Then they can offer us no opposition. We attack at once. . . ."

IT HAD been a hard battle, and Captain Macklin, gazing at the mass of wreckage that had been the mechanical body of Lord Banzor, Ruler of the Planet Tirania, Conqueror of Solar Systems, Master of the Universe, etc., finally located the lump of flesh and blood that had directed the destinies of so many billions of individuals.

His companion, Captain Farrel, remarked, "So they were organic, with mechanical bodies. I had an idea at first that they were just robots."

Macklin shook his head. "We knew they weren't robots from the reports the Martian colony sent us. Well, we've got our revenge for what happened on Mars."

"What star did they come from?"

Macklin shrugged. "Your guess is as good as mine. Our experts seem to favor Vega, but I have an idea that their home was a bit nearer. At any rate, we're safe from any other attacks for years, and meanwhile we have time to prepare."

Farrel's eyes wandered around what had been a prosperous city. Only the wreckage of war machines was visible now, scattered over the ugly slag into which the city had been molten. "It's a little frightening," he admitted, "when you consider the vast scale of the battle. I don't think there's a continent left untouched. And it was all over in a day."

"What gets me," said Macklin, "is why they failed. If they could defeat our colony on Mars, they should have been able to defeat us. But they seem to have gone ahead without any preparation. Why?"

"They underestimated us."

"Again, why? Didn't they know we were of the same race as the Martians?"

"Apparently not."

Macklin exclaimed suddenly, "Say, look what's here. One of our own spaceships! A freighter!"

They found the hatch of the ship on the upper side, but the sliding door was immovable. Macklin blasted an opening in the hull, and after it had cooled off they climbed in and looked around.

"It just don't make sense," said Farrell helplessly.

"I don't get it either. The ship must have been on its way to Mars to supply the colonists there. They're short on textiles, so Interplanetary Supply has to ship them cloth and clothes. But why the devil did the invaders think the cargo was worth taking along with them?"

"You've got me. A queer bunch, these invaders. But, Macklin, where's the picture that Interplanetary Supply usually has on the walls to advertise their products? It's practically their trademark."

"You mean the one showing the new-fangled way of wearing the things?"

"That's it."

Macklin said, "For some reason or other, the invaders have removed that."

"You don't suppose they were going to use the things themselves, and wanted to study the model, do you? After all, they did have peculiar bodies."

"I don't suppose anything. It's one of those mysteries," decided Macklin, "that I'm afraid we'll never solve. Probably unimportant, though. But it's certainly baffling. The most dangerous invaders our solar system has ever seen—and they drag along with them a ship full of babies' diapers!"

FANTASY REVIEWS

FANTASY BOOKS

"Out of Space and Time", by Clark Ashton Smith. Arkham House, Sauk City, Wisconsin. \$3.00

Arkham House continues its excellent work of publishing anthologies of the greatest weird writers who have made their grade through the pulps. This time it is the incredibly wonderful fantasies of Clark Ashton Smith which are put under one cover.

Smith has been one of the finest American fantasists, surpassing on occasion Dunsany and other Britons, and yet he has been sadly neglected. His poetry found its way into print at rare intervals; his prose is here for the first time made available to the book-reading public.

There are twenty-one of his best tales here and there are many more awaiting only the support of the public to appear in some future volume. But these twenty-one contain part of the cream.

Science-fiction readers will remember with pleasure the novelette, "City of the Singing Flame", which has been counted by many as one of the classics of dimensional fantasy. Others will recall his weird tale of Martian horror, "The Vaults of Yoh-Vombis". Weirdists will delight at the mention of his many Atlantean and Hyperborean fantasies such as "The Testament of Athammaus", "The Dark Eidolon" and others. We must also mention such as "The Monster of the Prophecy", "A Rendezvous in Averroigne" and "The Death of Ilalotha".

We urge that all those who really appreciate great fantasy and beautiful writing make haste to obtain copies of "Out of Space and Time". A writer like Clark Ashton Smith appears only once in a lifetime.

"They Walk Again", edited by Colin de la Mare. Dutton & Co., New York. \$2.50

Dutton has seen fit to reprint Colin de la Mare's anthology of ghost stories, feeling that the present time is ripe for a revival of interest in the weird. The anthology originally appeared in 1931 and is almost entirely confined to British authors.

It is a very good collection as they go—far above several recent ones. It is this volume which first brought the works of William Hope Hodgson to the attention of leading American fantasists, for his "The Voice in the Night", a chilling tale of a sea voyage, is included. Other good pieces to be found here are L. P. Hartley's scary tale of a murdered man's quest for vengeance, "A Visitor From Down Under", M. R. James' ghostly "Story of a Disappearance and an Appearance" and works by Algernon Blackwood, Lord Dunsany ("The Electric King"), R. H. Benson, Walter de la Mare, W. W. Jacobs and others.

Altogether there are nineteen tales. Again we note the presence of Oliver Onions' "The

Beckoning Fair One", a story we persist in considering to be inferior. But outside of that, we think readers will enjoy this book.

"A Comet Strikes the Earth", by H. H. Nininger. Desert Magazine Press, El Centro, California.

This is a small booklet designed to give the reader a knowledge of meteors. The author describes himself as the director of the American Meteorite Laboratory and he writes interestingly of his subject. He describes the appearance of a meteor in space, the probable nature of its collision with the Earth, and the type of impact it makes upon landing. He then discusses the various meteor craters and the search for meteorites in them.

The booklet contains descriptions of the various types of meteoric matter and how to recognize it. Also what to note in the interest of science if you are lucky enough to witness an actual fall. There are a number of illustrations of the famous meteor crater in Arizona and of other relevant material. An actual small meteorite is affixed to the booklet and this we fancy will be its most potent sales feature. The subject is always fascinating for a science enthusiast.

"The Uninvited", by Dorothy Macardle. Doubleday Doran, New York. \$2.50

This ghost-story novel is now gaining considerable sale among that circle which supports the best-seller lists. At first we found that the style of writing was too obviously similar to that used by the authors of novels for slick-paper women's magazines for this reviewer to feel at home. It is not exactly a natural literary style but easy enough after you get into it. We found that after getting past the opening chapters we were able to become quite interested in the yarn. It's actually a rather fascinating supernatural adventure.

Briefly, a brother and sister, both mature, buy a house on the seacoast of Devon. After settling there they become aware of the fact that the house is haunted. What seems to be a not-too-bothersome knowledge soon becomes dangerous and ugly as it affects them and their friends. The ghosts become more and more tangled up with the lives of people—centering mainly about the girl Stella who had been the former owner of the place. The mystery really grows as it becomes difficult to determine what the spectral haunTERS' intent is—whether friendly or antagonistic—or even just how many spirits haunt the place at all. It works up to a satisfactory climax and interesting denouement.

The weird tale is slipping slowly back into popular demand as a result of the war and we suspect "The Uninvited" will help to hasten the advent of other novels of this sort. Miss Macardle does not always handle things in the conventional manner but she does all right.

"Try Another World" by John J. Meyer. The Business Bourse, New York. \$2.50

John J. Meyer is a strange writer who, every few years, undertakes to place another work of his fantastic imaginings before the public. Some may remember his "13 Seconds That Shook the World" and even a previous volume "The Deer Smellers of Haunted Mountain". "Try Another World" carries on in the tradition of the others.

It consists of six startling adventures of one Joe Shaun in the course of which he solves practically every mystery of science, economics and the universe. We are treated to a great amount of satirical writing, some amount of dealing with the famous dead, a visit to a planet of Brutal Frankness and to another ruled by Mr. Meyer's pet concept, the "Mentator", which is a sort of machine amalgamating the best brains of the world which dictate to the planet. It is clearly the author's intention to again expound on this idea as the salvation of humanity from its woes. He is a sort of one-man Mentator Party.

The book may give considerable amusement to some readers, it may be read with curiosity or even serious interest by others.

There are a number of illustrations which we find it impossible to describe other than as quaint.

BOOK NOTES

Our attention has been called to the fact that it is becoming increasingly difficult to obtain the works of Edgar Rice Burroughs. Formerly Grosset & Dunlap reprints of scores of his Tarzan and Mars novels were available practically anywhere. Today most of them appear to be either out of print or out of stock and no more are being produced. Burroughs has not yet successfully renewed his contact with the public and Burroughs fans are therefore well-advised to try to obtain any books they may be missing before it becomes impossible to do so.

Pocket Books are preparing to publish an anthology of science-fiction stories to be called "The Pocket Book of Scientific Romances." Your reviewer had the honor of editing it and it will be available in a few months. Other Pocket Books contain a considerable amount of fantasy. "The Pocket Book of Mystery Stories" contains several fantastic pieces by H. G. Wells, M. R. James, Edward Lucas White and G. B. Stern. "The Pocket Reader" contains "The Turn of the Screw". "The Pocket Companion" has Wells' novel, "The Invisible Man".

Another twenty-five cent book series, the Avon Books, have a volume of famous ghost stories including Wilkie Collins' "The Haunted Hotel". The British paper-backed series, Cherry Tree Books and Penguin Books, have quite a number of fantasy novels in their lists.

There's a new two-volume collection of the works of Stephen Vincent Benet. The prose section contains a great deal of Benet's very fine fantasy stories—including "The King of the

Cats", "By the Waters of Babylon" and "The Devil and Daniel Webster". Benet is one of America's outstanding masters of the short story and about half of his output is fantasy. If you are not familiar with these masterpieces, it is worth going out of your way to obtain a copy.

—DONALD A. WOLLHEIM.

FANTASY STAGE AND SCREEN

"Invisible Agent", a Universal picture with Ilona Massey, Jon Hall, Peter Lorre, Sir Cedric Hardwicke and J. Edward Bromberg.

In 1933 the screen gave us an excellent version of H. G. Wells' "The Invisible Man", with Claude Rains. Early in 1940, Vincent Price appeared in a worthwhile sequel, "The Invisible Man Returns". Today we have Jon Hall in the title role of "Invisible Agent", known in production as "The Invisible Spy" and subdubbed "The Phantom Commando". This is saved from total loss only by the smooth performances of Sir Cedric Hardwicke as a German officer and Peter Lorre as his Japanese ally.

Jon Hall plays Frank Raymond, the grandson of Dr. Griffin of the 1933 film. Selected by a council of the United Nations to inject himself with his grandfather's drug and steal the Axis war plans from Berlin, the Invisible Commando immediately begins to act like a playful idiot. He gets drunk on champagne and dumps a tableful of food on a Nazi officer, J. Edward Bromberg, who is about to spill valuable information to a British agent. He goes to sleep at the least opportune moments, falls into simple traps and makes playful telephone calls that result in the torture of a member of the German underground movement.

All the old invisibility effects are present—now too familiar to movie-goers to be detailed. A new one, however, has the hero smearing his face with cold cream so Ilona Massey can gaze upon his handsome features. The effect, with the outline of the face as high as the forehead, with the eyes empty and the mouth talking away at a great rate, is truly startling.

Eventually, of course, Hall gets the information, which includes the fact that New York is going to be bombed that night, and he and Miss Massey escape in a German plane. Here again, our hero falls asleep and has to be got into his parachute and pushed out by his girl friend after the English gunners have hit the plane.

Peter Lorre, once sympathetic as Mr. Moto, the Japanese detective, is now Baron Ikito, who commits hara-kiri. Chinese Key Luke, once No. 1 son of Charlie Chan, here is a Japanese surgeon. And the transformation of the author of the screen play, Kurt Siodmak of "F. P. 1 Does Not Reply", who became Curt Siodmak for "The Wolf Man", has been completed. Now he is Curtis Siodmak.

"The Loves of Edgar Allen Poe", a 20th Century-Fox picture with John Shepperd, Linda Darnell, Virginia Gilmore and Jane Darwell.

It is said that "The Loves of Edgar Allan Poe" was filmed under the supervision of Edgar A. Poe, a descendant of the pioneer American fantasy writer and poet. Perhaps it was his recommendation that only a bare outline of the author's life be presented, for the picture tells less than can be found in the preface to a high school textbook of his writings. It is a pity that the picture, which could have been so interesting, is so dull.

The film biography jumps from place to place, while gaps are filled in by the voice of a narrator. Liberties are taken with the sequence of events, but the undeniable facts are presented faithfully, from Edgar Poe's adoption by the John Allans, whence his middle name, to his death under peculiar—but not necessarily drunken—circumstances in Baltimore. The "loves" of which the title speaks, are limited to two—an "Elmira Royster" and his child cousin-wife, Virginia Clemm.

John Shepperd gives a gloomy but not very inspired performance and Linda Darnell plays Mrs. Poe about as you might expect. A relatively interesting part of the picture is devoted to Poe's battle for copyright laws to protect writers from unscrupulous publishers.

"The Mad Doctor of Market Street", a Universal picture with Lionel Atwill, Una Merkel, Nat Pendleton, Claire Dodd and Hardie Albright.

This is a picture that was made in 1941 and kept on the shelf until recently, when it was released only at the second-run neighborhood houses. Universal need not have been so surreptitious about it, however, for in a melodramatic way it is an intelligent picture.

Lionel Atwill plays Dr. Ralph Benson, who has suspended animation in animals and succeeded in bringing them back to life. But his first experiment on a human being fails. The subject dies and he is forced to flee to New Zealand. Almost there, the ship catches fire and Atwill, Pendleton, the Misses Dodd and Merkel, a steward and an officer escape in a lifeboat to an island inhabited by savages.

The native king's wife has just died. Atwill brings her back to life and is proclaimed the God of Life. He has stuck to his medicine kit through fire and water and continues with his experiments, assuming an air of arrogance that makes him hated by his white companions. Through a deal with the king, he puts the young steward into a state of suspended animation and walls him up in a cliff. But Claire Dodd is in love with the young man and marries the doctor so he will bring her lover back to life, which he does.

By now the natives are beginning to distrust the doctor. They finally turn against him when they find him unable to revive one of them who has been drowned. They burn the doctor for his

sorcery while the rest of the ship-wrecked passengers are rescued by a plane sent to search for them.

The chief fault of "The Mad Doctor of Market Street", aside from its come-and-be-horrified title, is one in common with too many other pseudo-scientific pictures. Although the protagonist is presented as a pioneer, his theories and experiments are invariably looked upon with disfavor, if not loathing, no matter how beneficial they could turn out for humanity. The result is that any logical-minded moviegoer is more in sympathy with the "villain" than with the intended heroes. And so when the scientist dies at the end, as Hollywood, worshipper of the status quo, seems to think he must, the fantasy fan is likely to feel a little disgusted with the whole thing.

"Talking to You", a play by William Saroyan presented by The Saroyan Theater at the Belasco, New York, with Canada Lee, Irving Morrow, Peter Beauvais, Jules Leni, Lewis Charles, Lillian McGuinness and Andrew Retousheff. Setting by Cleon Throckmorton.

More a fantasy in a strict literary than in a science-fictional sense, Saroyan's one-acter is highly allegorical and perhaps only completely understandable to William himself.

In a basement in San Francisco gather an odd assortment of people, consisting of Blackstone Boulevard, a Negro prizefighter who knows "good people" from "bad people"; the Tiger, a philosophical blind man; Fancy Dan, his brother; the Crow, a Mexican guitarist; a deaf boy and Maggie. All are unhappy—Blackstone because he can't bring himself to hit a good man and hasn't yet fought a bad one, the Tiger because he can't see, the Crow and Maggie because the Tiger is unhappy, the deaf boy because he can't hear, and Fancy Dan because he is being chased.

Fancy Dan is being chased by a German-spouting midget with a gun who goose-steps around in a storm trooper's uniform. But somehow Fancy Dan gets away and it is Blackstone Boulevard who gets killed, while the curtain comes down on the deaf boy's crying, "What's happening? What's the matter?"

Evidently the uniformed midget is the embodiment of the world's evil and the deaf boy is the common people who wonder why it must be—but don't take my word for it. You'll have to ask William.

With "Talking to You" was presented a revival of Saroyan's "Across the Board on Tomorrow Morning", reviewed—favorably—in the August, 1942, issue of *Super Science Stories*. The plays proved financial failures and closed in a week.

The script of "Talking to You" appears in "Razzle-Dazzle", a book of sixteen short plays by William Saroyan; Harcourt, Brace & Co., \$3.50. "Across the Board on Tomorrow Morn-

ing" has been published in the volume, "The Beautiful People", which also includes "Sweeney in the Trees"; same publisher, \$3.00.

"Tarzan's New York Adventure", a Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer picture with Johnny Weissmuller, Maureen O'Sullivan, John Sheffield, Cheetah, Charles Bickford and Paul Kelly.

This is the last Tarzan film to come from the MGM studios. Hereafter Edgar Rice Burroughs' character will come to you through the courtesy of Sol Lesser, who originally held the screen rights, and RKO-Radio. Weissmuller, John Sheffield and Cheetah will be seen in the new series, but Maureen O'Sullivan will be absent as Jane, and replaced, in a platonic way, by Frances Gifford. First of the new series will be "Tarzan Triumphs".

Tarzan is lured from his escarpment in uncharted Africa in this picture when an unscrupulous circus man sees what a way the ape-man's adopted son, Boy, has with animals and kidnaps him in his plane. Jane gets Tarzan into a suit of clothes and off they go to New York in pursuit, with a bagful of gold scooped out of a river to pay their way.

Tarzan has an interesting time in America's metropolis, using skyscrapers for trees and flag lines for vines with which to toss himself about. He has fun with taxis and a circus and the Brooklyn Bridge—from which he dives into the East River to escape the police. Boy is finally rescued and the family returns to its jungle.

The picture has plenty of action and those who like Tarzan will find it right up their alley. It also has Cheetah, the chimpanzee, undoubtedly the greatest comedienne in Hollywood.

COMING AND GOING

Julien Duvivier, noted in the fantasy field for his direction of "The Golem", French-language film produced in Prague in 1937, is the director and, with Charles Boyer, co-producer of "Flesh and Fantasy" at Universal. The four-part picture will attempt to show that man is powerless against the forces of nature, both real and imaginary, according to Mr. Duvivier.

The first episode deals with free will and predestination. The second is a dream fantasy based on a story by Brander Matthews, which questions the difference between reality and unreality. The third part is planned to show that man is helpless against nature unless he is willing to live according to her dictates. The last episode, based on "The Crime of Lord Savil", by Oscar Wilde, is about the love affair of a couple of ghosts, one a woman-hater, the other a man-hater. It's a comedy sequence. "Metropolis", Fritz Lang-directed UFA picture made in Germany in 1926, is on the list of silent film classics which the 55th Street Playhouse, New York, is featuring in a new policy during its fall festival.

The powerful Soviet anti-Nazi play, "This Is the Enemy", has an episode laid in a Rus-

sian telegraph office. There is a commotion in the line waiting at the window and a hand shoves through a message reading, "Hitler, Berlin. Think it over. I tried it once and failed." The sender is Napoleon Bonaparte.

Noel Coward recently acted the leading role in the London company of his play, "Blithe Spirit", and is now touring the provinces with it in his repertory.

"SOS Coast Guard", a 12-episode Republic science-fiction serial with Bela Lugosi and Ralph Byrd, originally released in 1937, has been cut down and made into a feature film.

MGM's forthcoming fantasy, "Cabin in the Sky", may turn out to be a jazz holiday, judging from the additions to the cast—which include Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington and Lena Horne, as well as Rex Ingram and Ethel Waters from the stage version.

Dick Purcell and Joan Woodbury are to be featured in the Monogram picture called "Phantom Killer", formerly known as "Man and the Devil". . . . George Sanders refused to play an unsympathetic role in 20th Century-Fox's "The Undying Monster".

Paramount has bought the screen rights to "The Uninvited", a recently published novel by Dorothy Macardie which deals with the supernatural. . . . "I Married a Witch", the Paramount movie based on "The Passionate Witch", by Thorne Smith and Norman Matson, starring Frederic March and Veronica Lake, will be released through United Artists.

Lillian Gish and Stuart Erwin will play the leads in the Theater Guild's "Mr. Sycamore".

A third factor enters the battle over the proposed revival of "R.U.R.". While both the Theater Guild and a couple of gentlemen named L. Daniel Blank and David Silberman claim all U. S. and Canadian rights to the Karel Capek play about automatons, Paramount Pictures claims "in perpetuity" ownership of the silent rights. Mr. Blank, however, says he has been assured by the owner of the play, a Czech in London, that the talkie rights were never disposed of and that no motion picture version will be released while the play is running. "R.U.R." is noted for having added the word "robot" to the English language.

There is a scene in the Russian Lenfilm musical, "Spring Song", which shows Johann Sebastian Bach stepping down out of a picture frame to defend a young lady whose father does not approve of the "frivolous" music she likes.

"The Cat People", based on a Balkan legend about people who turn into cats at night, is being filmed at RKO, with Simone Simon in the lead. The same studio has bought an original story called "I Walked with a Zombie" as a possible vehicle for Anna Lee. . . . Coincidentally, Monogram has bought screen rights to "While Zombies Walked", a story by science-fiction writer Thorp McCluskey. . . . And, continuing this undead streak, Monogram has rights to a story by Samuel Fielding called "Revenge of the Zombies". On RKO's horror schedule are also "The Leopard Man" and "The Seventh Victim".

—RICHARD WILSON.

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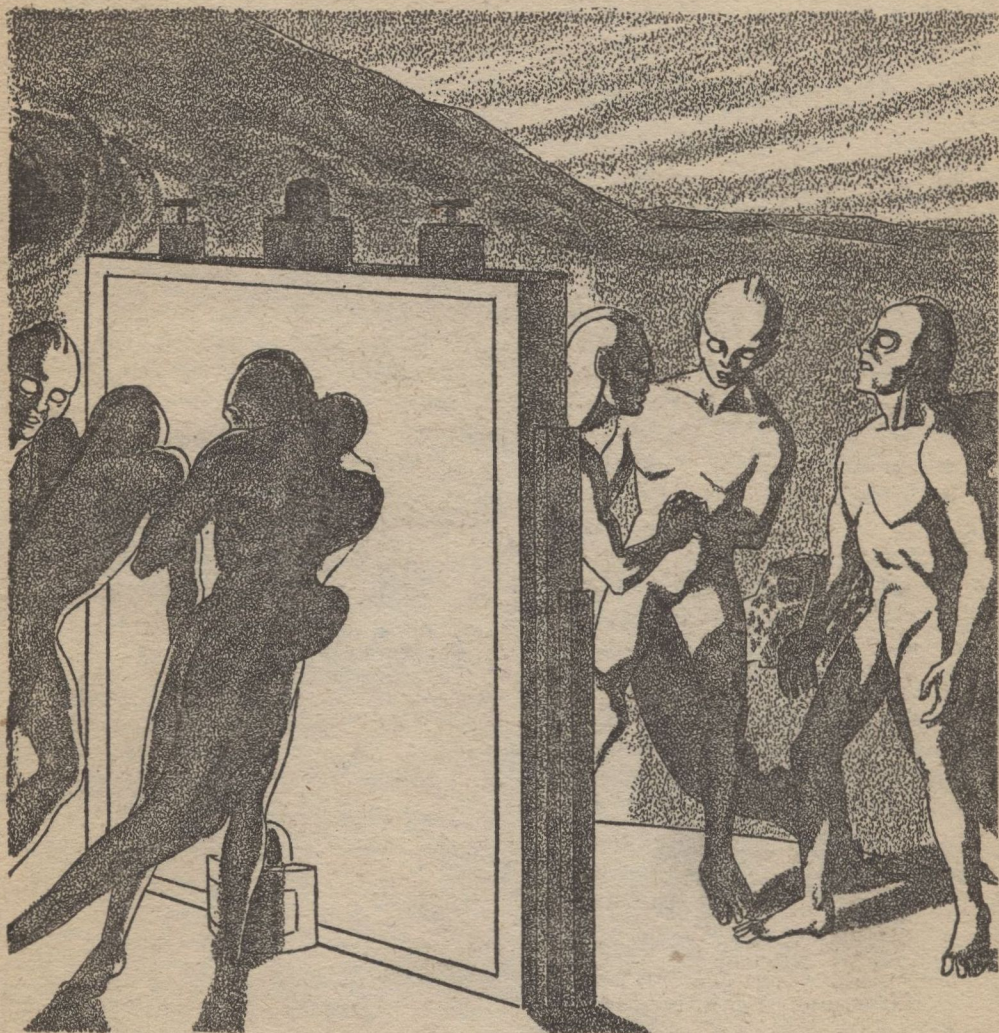
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CIRCLE OF YOUTH

By
FRANK BELKNAP LONG



Youth turns to age, and age grows younger—on the strange
chill moon of Neptune, where a monster race played with
human lives, and time had gone mad!



CALDWELL could have found the place with his eyes shut. Gray, grotesquely distorted rocks guarded the cave entrance, and the soil underfoot seemed to have a strange, weaving life of its own. Almost he sighed with relief as it caressed his calloused soles.

Falling to his knees, he scooped it up in handfuls. It was softer than a woman's skin and faintly luminous. His brain spun dizzily as it sifted between his fingers.

Take it easy, guy, it seemed to whisper to him in the dim Neptunelight. There's plenty of me here, and you don't have to worry about sharing me with anyone. Lonely? Sure, you'll be lonely sitting around waiting for another ship to settle down beside the wreck of the one you came in. But just look at me! Is there anything in civilization you'd rather have than a fistful of me?

"No," he grunted. "Hell, no."

He was lying, of course. In the ship he had wrecked was a girl he couldn't stop thinking about. She was still very much alive, but she wouldn't even talk to him. Worse, there was a lad in the wreck with her who could sympathize with the way she felt.

Almost without thinking he had lifted his fist and sent the lad sprawling with a savage blow. He was sorry now, but it couldn't be helped. The lad had wanted to bail out and take the girl with him. He had faced Caldwell belligerently, his speech thickening.

"Miss Blake will bail out with me, you hear? It's too late now to save the ship. We'll crash anyway. We'll—"

Caldwell's big, rising fist had silenced the lad right in the middle of a sentence. Although Caldwell was a man of kindly instincts he could be as brutal as an ether twister when he had a thrumming deck under him. Saving his ship came first with him and he didn't care who knew it—least of all a brash recruit just out of training school and a little chit of a girl.

A man had to serve, didn't he? Every man at his post—and to blaze with the consequences!

The ship had crashed, sure. But right up to the last moment Caldwell had remained with his feet firm-planted on the thrumming deck, fighting to save his command.

He expected as much from others.

Miss Blake was a first-class navigator, and he—had needed her. His stubby fingers were too clumsy to adjust the delicate units in the control room, and to have attempted to do so would have meant breaking faith with the company.

TWO years before, a Neptune Company administrator had selected Caldwell from a long list of senior commanders as the right man for a hazardous undertaking. There were caverns on Neptune's huge satellite that were rich

in uranium, and for several years now the company had been mining the stuff on an unprecedented scale. Civilization's needs could not be shelved, come hell or high water.

Caldwell had made the trip in a slim wasp ship, and stumbled on a cave rich in deposits. He had returned to Earth, submitted a report, and been given a new command with two assistants. Unfortunately, a gravity-plate had fused when they were close to the great satellite of the frozen planet. The ship was now a tele-scoped mass of wreckage.

Miraculously Janet Blake and young Winters had survived, along with a tired old man who was standing now with naked feet at the entrance of a cave he could have found with his eyes shut.

Old man? Well, he was forty-two, and his bones ached, and all the drive had gone out of him. He was pretending that the gold dust he was sifting through his fingers was sufficient compensation for the loss of his ship, and not succeeding very well. Deep inside the cave he would find company pay-dirt, but at the entrance was sprinkled a different kind of wealth.

Caldwell knew that an article in the company charter granted mining privileges to men who assumed company risks, whether they wore stripes on their sleeves or were humble engine-room mechanics. He could stake out a claim to the gold which no one on Earth could dispute—no one. But he was not on Earth now.

He stood up despairingly, letting the yellow grains drain from his palm. Save for the oxygen mask which covered the lower part of his face he was dressed as though for a tropical yachting cruise on Earth. A porous-weave shirt clung to his drenched torso, and his trousers terminated at his knees. "Blast-furnace breeches" they were called in the argot of the space lanes. He had kicked off his shoes because he liked the feel of the hot soil against his calloused soles.

Now he shivered a little, but not from the cold. It was seldom chilly on Neptune's huge satellite. From vents in the rugged terrain, jets of volcanic vapor arose, warding off the cold of space and producing a heavy film of protective gases overhead.

Raising his wrist lamp, Caldwell stabbed at the murk with a thin pencil of radiance. It was ridiculous, of course, but for an instant he had imagined—

A cold chill inched along his spine.

Just beyond the glow there was a vague blur of movement, as though something huge and misshapen had drawn near to the cave mouth and was watching him.

Savagely cursing himself for a ninny he strode forward into the darkness. Like most blunt men of action Caldwell was at a disadvantage when denied the use of his hands. There was nothing tangible inside the cave for yards, and the instant he clicked off his wrist lamp his imagination ran riot, filling the darkness with receding shapes that seemed to beckon him onward.

He was a hundred feet from the entrance when he saw the circle of radiance. It was hovering directly in his path, blotting out the luminous crevices on both sides of the cavern. He had clicked off his lamp to study the radioactive glimmer, but quickly he raised his wrist and directed a thin stream of light at it.

It seemed to darken and almost disappear in the ray from the little lamp. Its circumference remained faintly luminous and he had to strain to see beyond it. But unmistakably the fieriness had gone out of it. It was at least eight feet in diameter and filled now with pulsing shreds of darkness.

Suddenly it was advancing upon him, so swiftly that he had no time to leap back or aside. He could see the cave wall be-

hind it, and the faintly luminous bulk of something enormous crouching in darkness a little to the left of the onrushing loop. Then a coldness swept over him and the entire top of his head seemed to explode.

WHEN he came to, the circle had vanished. For an instant he was strangely giddy. When he sat up the cavern pinwheeled and jagged lines danced before his vision. Swayingly he got to his feet, shook his head to clear it.

"Great Scott," he muttered aloud to the silences. From all sides the cavern walls echoed back: *Great Scott! Great Scott! Great Scott!*

Somehow his depression had vanished. He felt strangely exultant, springy of step. Perhaps the little chit of a girl would get over her resentment and speak to him again. Perhaps he could make her see things in a sensible light. As for the raw recruit—he'd approach the lad with a smile, stretch out a paw.

"I'm not your skipper here, lad. Just call me 'Jim'," he'd say. And if the kid had the makings, he'd break into a grin a yard wide and come back with: "Sure thing, old man. And I deserved that sock."

Well, he'd better be getting back to the wreck. No telling what had happened in his absence. He had left Janet brewing some black coffee, and the kid nursing a swollen jaw and looking her way.

"Heck," he grumbled, looking down and noticing he had cut his foot on the gravel cavebed. The cut had not been there an instant before. It was curious, but it followed the course of an old scar, branching from between his toes and snaking up toward his ankle. He shrugged and threaded his way out of the cave with his wrist lamp shedding a spectral radi-

ance on the tumbled rocks ahead of him. . . .

Five minutes later he was approaching the wreck with his shoulders thrown back and his stride strangely buoyant. The gray hull of the shattered spaceship loomed up ghostly out of the murk, reminding him of an etching under glass. No lights showed anywhere, and when he shouted, his voice brought only answering echoes from the hollow caverns on the lee side of the telescoped vessel.

A slight twinge of bitterness returned to plague him. They were still nursing a grudge, apparently. The little chit of a girl, and—

His thoughts congealed. Someone was coming toward him through the murk, swaying, stumbling, crying out hoarsely. He stood rigid, sweat breaking out all over him as his wrist lamp pierced the gloom like an exploring eye.

Into the beam the girl staggered, throwing out her arms and falling forward upon her face. As she did so something huge behind her, that looked like an animated tree bole, gnarled and misshapen, moved swiftly away from the beam, and again Caldwell saw a ring of radiance approaching. As he stared in horror it rolled swiftly past him and receded into the murk.

He did not turn, but instead stumbled forward and fell to his knees beside the prostrate girl. Murmuring reassurances he lifted her and stared down into her haggard face. She had opened her eyes and was staring up at him. Her face was drawn and lined, her hair gray. For an instant he did not recognize her.

"Who are you?" she moaned.

H E HAD no need to ask her the same question. She was no longer a young girl, but she was still beautiful. Instinctively his arms tightened about her in a protective embrace.

The ghastly thing that had occurred

had not fully penetrated his consciousness, but he knew he was holding in his arms the woman he loved. She was perhaps thirty-eight, and he—

He looked down at his hands. They were not the hands of a man of forty, but rather those of a youth, hairy and strong. But the veins were no longer prominent, and that excess of muscular strength which comes in early middle age to men who have led strenuous lives seemed to be lacking now. The fingers were thinner, the wrists less sturdy, the—

God—oh, God. He raised his hand and felt his face. Gone was the thick stubble of beard which had covered his chin, and his flesh felt firmer to the touch.

The girl's pupils had dilated suddenly and he knew that she had recognized him, despite the change which must have stripped twenty years from his age and so unnerved him that he was shaking like a leaf.

"Jim," she murmured. "What has happened to us? Oh, my poor dear, we've—"

In utter silence he lifted her up and carried her into the ship. He could not trust himself to speak. If he was to hold fast to his sanity he must not allow her to confirm what he suspected, until he was sure. Perhaps in the half-telescoped control room, with cold lights flooding down, the haggard look would leave her face. Perhaps he had exaggerated what he had seen. Perhaps there was some simpler explanation.

He hadn't exaggerated. Alone together before a shattered control board the man and the woman stood facing each other, their lips white.

"I am no longer young," Janet whispered hoarsely. "And you are scarcely more than a boy."

Caldwell clasped her trembling hand. "Steady, dear. You'd better tell me exactly what happened."

"I saw a face," Janet said, shivering, "through the visiport. A horrible, lump-

ish, inhuman face—staring in. When I screamed, Harry came in from the mess room and saw it too. I don't need to tell you how impulsive he is. He snatched up a heat gun and rushed out through the airlock."

She shuddered. "Jim, it was awful. I heard the gun go off and then—silence. I sat there for ten minutes digging my nails into my palms. Look—"

She extended her white palms toward him. They were as smooth as satin. Utter amazement seemed to sweep her as she stared down at them. Then she remembered and snapped her hands back to her side.

"Of course. I was younger then. The furrows I dug have vanished, together with—"

She let the sentence trail off.

Her lips had begun to tremble, and suddenly she was in Caldwell's arms. He held her tightly, smoothing her hair and kissing her.

"Our minds haven't changed," he said gruffly. "Inwardly I'm still twice your age, and, heck, your eyes haven't changed. And outwardly you're as old as I should like you to be and not a day older. Remember I'm still a man of forty mentally, and you're *physically* about the right age for me. Thirty-four, I should say," he lied. "What are you looking so sad about?"

"Jim, don't let's kid ourselves," she said, with a queer twist of her lips. "I was the right age for you when I was twenty-two. I'm not old now, of course, but the girl you loved has simply—disappeared. But I'll always love you, Jim."

He asked gruffly, "What happened when Harry failed to return?"

"I went out through the airlock too, went out and looked around. I wasn't far from the ship when I saw that thing approaching. It was huge and bent and it moved with a shambling gait. I couldn't see its face very clearly in the murk, but

its eyes—its eyes were horrible, Jim. It was carrying a kind of luminous hoop."

Caldwell nodded. "And then?"

"Then I saw you. The thing was coming toward me, and I was so frightened I lost my head, I guess. I should have ducked back into the ship, but I ran to you instead. The thing was almost upon me when I stumbled. The hoop rolled over me, and then everything went black. . . . Jim, do you think the hoop—"

Caldwell nodded grimly. "It must do something to time," he said. "It rolled over me, too. Perhaps if you go into it from one side you come out younger, and from the other—"

CALDWELL stiffened in sudden alarm. The ship's gravity lock was swinging open, sending a thin vibration pulsing through the battered control room. Giving the girl's arm a reassuring squeeze, he strode from the compartment and padded down a wreckage-littered passageway in his bare feet, his face as grim as death.

The opening lock was sending a draft of damp air into the vessel and frosting the cold light bulbs overhead. But what halted Caldwell with a startled exclamation was not the opening portal, but the two utterly incongruous figures framed therein.

An old man, bent nearly double, was leading by the hand a small boy of eight or ten. The old man's face was scarred and seamed and his bloodshot eyes stared up at Caldwell in piteous appeal, from sockets almost as fleshless as those of a skull. The little boy was squirming about and kicking the old man in the shins. As Caldwell stared, he raised his eyes, and gazed right at him.

"I'm reluctant to ask any favors, Captain," the boy said. "But I'm sunk deep in hell and I have no choice. If you can persuade this crazy fool to let go of me the torment may ease a little. I see you've

gone back a few years too. But at least you are still a man, while I—"

The boy's underlip quivered, and for an instant he seemed on the verge of tears. But he still kept looking at Caldwell as though he wanted to take a poke at him.

"Good God!" Caldwell choked, recognizing in the unruly brat the raw recruit he had sent sprawling a few hours before. "Harry, I—"

"He's my son," the old man mumbled. "Lost him, long ago. Found him. Happy now."

Caldwell could tell at a glance that the old man was demented. His shrunken features twitched and he spoke in a chanting singsong, as though his speech had raced ahead of his thoughts and lost touch with reality.

Caldwell did not waste time trying to reason with him. Instead he gripped the ancient one's scrawny wrist and freed the boy's hand by prying open fingers that seemed to writhe in his clasp.

Instantly the boy leapt back against the passageway bulkhead, the hostility ebbing from his gaze.

"That was decent of you," he choked.

"I can understand what you mean about being in hell," Caldwell said softly. "Janet and I have had a taste of it too. You'd better go to the sick bay and mix yourself a sedative. Then lie down, get some rest. I'm going to question this bird."

"He's—" The boy made a rotary motion with his forefinger close to his forehead.

"I'm afraid so," Caldwell agreed. "But he may be able to tell us more than we know. Did you see a fiery ring too, lad?"

Harry Winters groaned. "Something snatched the heat gun from my hand. And then—yes, I saw a ring all right. It knocked me down and I guess I passed through. When I picked myself up I was like this."

"Yes. Well, it's the sick bay for you."

Setting his lips, the boy saluted, and swung about on his heels.

TEN minutes later Caldwell sat on a corrugated metal chest in the stern rocket room, talking to the dodderer. He had refused to let Janet see the old man. There was something tragic and terrible in the fixity of his gaze and his pallor, and his speech that was like a continuous scream.

"Yes, yes, yes, it is worse than you dream. It is a sacred rite with them—almost religious. They pass through and a new strength flows into them. We humans are guinea pigs to them. Yes, yes, yes, the ring makes us young; the ring makes us old. But they scarcely care. They have lost interest in human beings, lost interest now—"

"You mean there's some strange power inside the ring which restores the vigor of those ghastly creatures?" Caldwell prodded.

"Yes, yes," the old man babbled. "A space warp. Inside the circle space is warped in the direction of motion with the speed of light. People grow younger—Fitzgerald contraction. I was a physicist once. I figured it out. We came in the expedition ship *Silver Queen*, but I am alone now. The others went back too far in time.

"Too far—back too far. Some became squealing infants—some old. Old as I am, and more. Back and forth, and there was no escape. The creatures tormented us night and day. We were guinea pigs to them."

Sweat stood out in beads on Caldwell's forehead, but relentlessly he probed on. "And in the end they tired of experimenting?"

"Yes, yes," the old man babbled. "Some of us became little pink horrors, deformed, hideous. Mutant life is a very primitive stage. And some of us just disappeared. For many months now they

have not troubled me. I am a poor, harmless old man. I live as I may. There are nourishing roots here, caves to hide in—"

When Caldwell stood up he was pale and shaken. "You'd better spend the night with us, grandpop," he said. "You look tired. Suppose you relax on that tarpaulin over there, and think about the *Silver Queen*."

"The *Silver Queen*," the old man murmured. "Aye, she was a ship, lad."

When Caldwell left the rocket room he was careful to lock the door panel.

"So we're a new batch of guinea pigs," he muttered savagely to himself.

He told no one, not even Janet. Descending quietly to what was left of the ship's arsenal, he selected a magneto-tube with a firing range of sixty yards, and filled an ammunition belt with radioactive energy pellets.

It was a gamble, of course. "Desperate" flashed across his mind, but after a moment's thought he pasted a little mental black patch over the qualifying adjective.

He wasn't sure, though, that he ought to leave the ship unguarded. And yet the creatures had made no attempt to enter the hull, and probably wouldn't without provocation. Why should they go exploring when the guinea pigs stuck their necks out, the way he was doing?

He was climbing over a shattered gravity stabilizer in the depths of the wreck when he heard the scream. It was a prolonged and ghastly cry, unutterably terrifying. And it seemed to come from the end of the passageway along which he was moving. His heart stood still, and a cold shock went through him.

"Janet," he whispered hoarsely, and rushed along the passageway in his naked feet, oblivious to the jagged points of metal which projected from the sloping deck.

THE creature was standing in shadows at the end of the passageway. For an instant he had a glimpse of sunken eyes and a mouth like a gaping wound—cavernous, drooling. Then it turned and he saw only its enormous back, and Janet's kicking legs as it bore her away into the darkness.

A vise seemed to tighten about Caldwell's heart, and his lips parted in a despairing, half-articulate cry. In the narrow passageway the magneto-tube he was clasping was of no use to him, save as a suicide weapon.

Take it easy, a voice seemed to drone deep inside him. If you blast, you'll tear a gaping hole in the vessel and shrivel yourself to a crisp. A lot of help you'll be to her then.

Groaning, he tore forward in pursuit of the monstrous shape. Into smothering darkness he plunged, stumbling over tumbled heaps of metal as he forced his way deep into the hold of the half-telescoped vessel. Ahead of him he could hear harsh breathing, and the pattering of footsteps.

The awful realization that Janet had either fainted or been silenced by a claw-like hand was almost too agonizing to endure.

The gap in the hold seemed to swim toward him out of the darkness. It was a mere lessening of the Stygian murk, a kind of ragged negation of light a few yards from his face. But instinctively he knew that it was one of the many small rents which had been torn in the vessel's hull by buckling gravity plates.

He was suddenly sure that the shape had emerged through the rent and was now outside the ship. For several seconds the utter stillness which now reigned within the hold had been preceded by scuffling sounds, as though the creature had experienced difficulty in lifting the girl up.

Caldwell emerged through the rent with his heart hammering against his ribs. For a tense, horrible instant he hung by one hand from a strip of ragged metal, scarcely realizing that the magneto-tube was still in his clasp.

Then his shoulders jerked, and he released his hold on the torn hull. Although the drop was a steep one he landed squarely on his feet, swung about and stared frantically into the murk.

It might have been an illusion, but for a fleeting instant he thought he could discern a gathering together of the darkness far to the left of where he had landed—a kind of lumpish, animated pucker in the murk which was loping away from the ship with something white in its clasp.

THE minutes which followed had a quality of nightmarish unreality which increased with every lengthening of his stride. He did not move parallel to the ship, but directly away from it.

He felt horribly certain that the creature would head for the cave. He had encountered the circle there, and seen the vague outlines of its lumpish kin just outside the beam of his wrist-flash. He was sure that the cave was the lair of the grotesque monsters.

For interminable minutes he plodded over the plain, every nerve in his body quivering. So distraught was he that when finally the dim and familiar rock structures came into view, weaving nebulously in a pale glow, his vision misted over and he saw only the vague outlines of uncouth shapes through the almost impenetrable murk.

Saw only moving outlines, until suddenly the glow crept across the soil toward him and he halted at the edge of it, a band of ice contracting about his heart.

At the entrance of the cave a huge rectangle stood, brimming with a fiery

radiance. Into it, through it, out again on the other side a long line of the creatures were passing, their bent, misshapen bodies dripping radiance and their deep-socketed eyes uprolled.

In utter silence the lumpish creatures moved through the great luminous hoop, and yet there was that in their attitudes when they emerged that spoke more eloquently than words, that told of renewal and rebirth. The rectangle must be like the hoops—time warping, rejuvenating.

The creatures entering the energy square were bent and dispirited, drooping shapes of horror hardly able to stand. The ones emerging strode forth with great, rugose shoulders squared, their heads up-raised.

Some instinct warned Caldwell he was standing too close to the nearest of the emerging monsters. He took refuge behind a boulder, dropping down on his stomach and elevating his magneto-tube as he did so.

Hardly had he arranged the complicated weapon to his satisfaction when into the spreading glow there strode another of the monsters, a limp human form in its clasp.

Caldwell bit down on his underlip to stifle an exclamation, and started fumbling in his ammunition belt, his eyes riveted with haggard intensity on Janet's white face.

Silently the creature took up its position at the end of the dwindling file of monsters awaiting their turn in line. Caldwell's flesh twitched, yet he did not take his eyes from the scene. His fingers moved silently, feeding energy pellets to the silently revolving magneto-tube. He had set the formidable weapon in motion and placed his thumb on the firing mechanism, but he dared not blast. Janet was too directly in the line of fire. The creature holding her was now less than three yards from the square, raising her up as though—

Two more bent and drooping shapes passed into the square as he stared. Now only a single shape stood between his darling and the great luminous hoop, and suddenly a red mist engulfed his faculties and an agony of indecision racked him.

The creature threw Janet into the square with a single heave of its enormous shoulders. The instant it did so Caldwell fired.

The cyclonic blast of energy that tore across the cave mouth scooped a deep funnel in the soil, and whirled the lumpish creatures about as though they were feathers in its path. On both sides of the square great shapes were lifted into the air and torn asunder.

Again and again Caldwell blasted, pumping energy pellets at the surviving monsters and sending sheets of flame zig-zagging between them.

When he ceased firing the ground was strewn with unmoving, hideous fragments—a rugose limb, something that resembled a shoulder, faces upturned to the Neptunelight that brought a chill to his vitals.

At the base of the great, stationary square lay a young girl, her arms out-

flung and her coppery hair aureoling her pale brow like a nimbus of rust-colored ectoplasm.

Slowly—so slowly that for an instant a terrible dread came upon him—her eyelids fluttered open.

“Darling,” she whispered. “Oh, darling—”

“I MUST have been deep in the square when you blasted,” she told him, hours later. They were back in the wreck, and he was looking at her as though he could not tear his eyes from her face.

The tall young man who had been sitting beside them rose slowly, and walked out of the control room. An hour before he had been a boy, but he had stepped back into the square and now he was a man again. But he was not too happy about it. He had a rival now—a man as young as himself, but with a senior commander’s stripes on his sleeve. For some ridiculous reason known only to himself, Caldwell had refused to step back. . . .

“Damn,” Harry Winters muttered, and started fumbling in his jacket for a cigarette.

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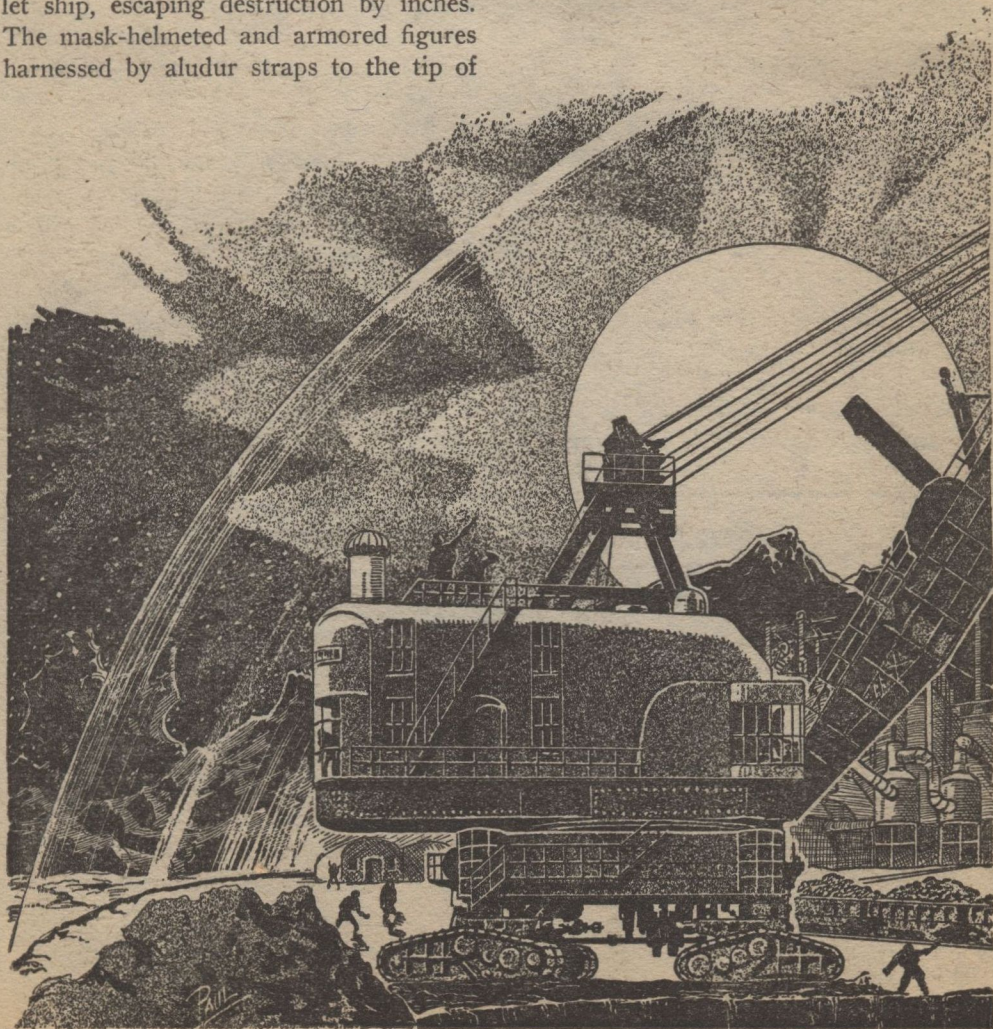
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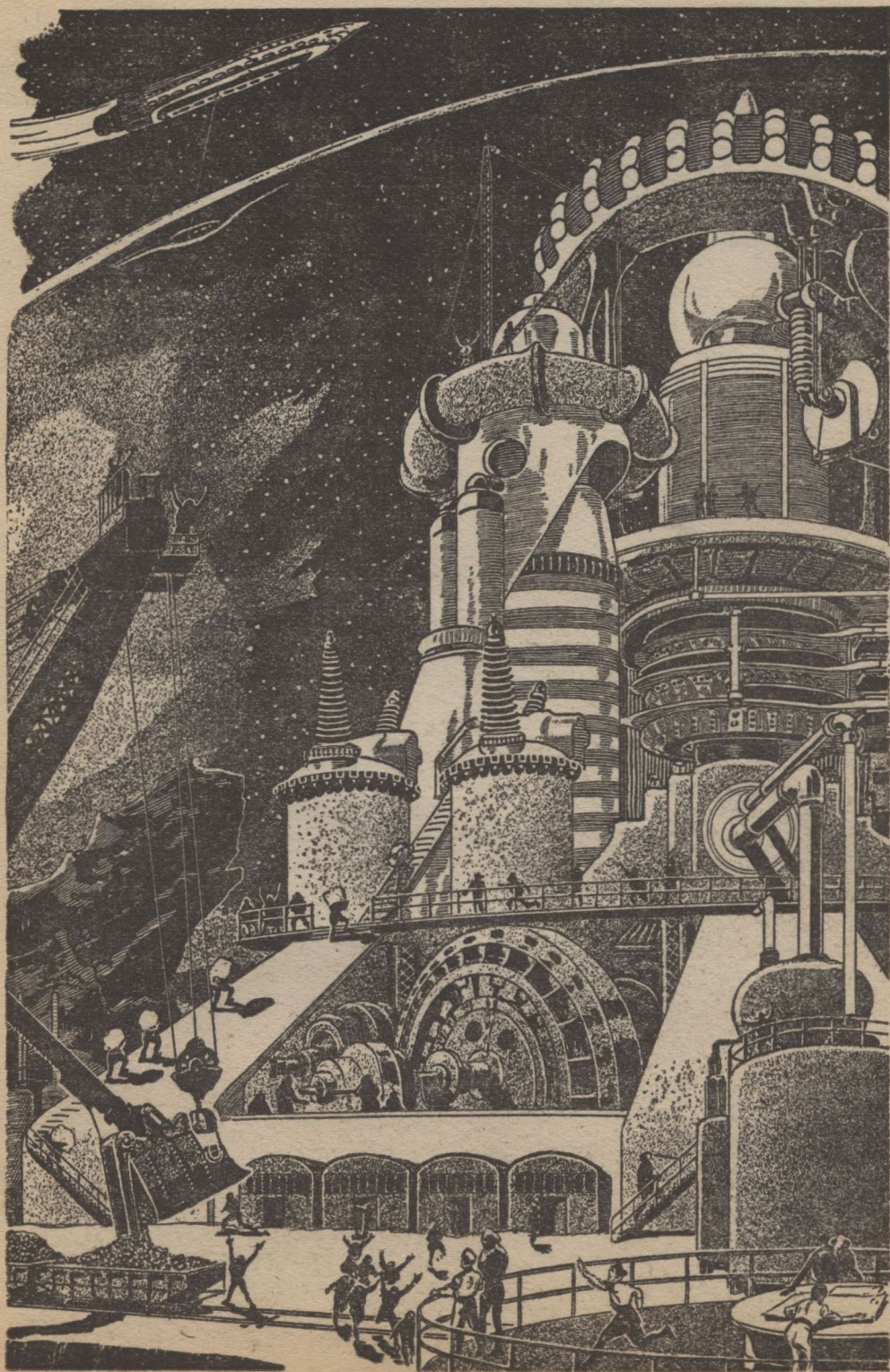
CHAPTER ONE

Cloud of No Light

THE incessant noise of the crowd which had gathered on Whiteface Mountain rose to meet the roar of the furious combat over Lake Placid. An orange plane cut across the nose of a scarlet ship, escaping destruction by inches. The mask-helmeted and armored figures harnessed by aludur straps to the tip of

"Fear — the ancestral, abysmal fear of the dark that no centuries of civilization can quite expunge from Man's marrow—the crawling fear of things unseeable—you will meet them on Sunward Flight. Are you big enough to take the trip?"





each stubby wing leaned rigidly into the speed-gale. A woman screamed shrilly above the sound of the crowd. Princeton's Left Two caught the ball with a magnificent backstroke of his mallet and sent it whirling two miles back down the lake.

"That's polo, Toom Gillis," Rade Hallam shouted in my ear. "That's airpolo at the acme."

The dazzling play had averted a sure goal. The score was still Princeton—one, Rocketeer Training School—one, and the emerald flare that dropped from the referee's gyrocopter signaled that time had run out, that the extra chukker and the game would end at the next pause for score or out-of-bounds.

The helium-inflated ball, losing momentum, was beginning to rise to the level of the marker balloons. The R. T. S. goal-tender had come up-lake with the Red team's wild four-plane charge and not a machine was anywhere near the white sphere.

"No," my wife moaned, her fingers digging into my arm. "Not a tie, Toom."

"Look, Mona!" I flung out a pointing hand. "Look at that!"

Princeton's Number Two had looped over, was streaking across the sunset-flaming sky for the ball. It was clear away—No, by Saturn! A red plane—Three—appearing from nowhere, drove to fly off the orange.

The quarter-million humans packed on this hillside watched silently, breathlessly.

The two planes were long blurs, scarlet and orange, screaming toward a single apex. If either veered, he'd leave the other free to smash the ball down-lake for a Princeton score or back up-lake to where a Rocketeer forward was clear of the pack. If neither gave way they would collide—at four hundred miles per hour!

The nerve of one pilot must break.

Someone was pounding my back, voicelessly. The blows shook me, but I was not really aware of them. Mouth open, I

was up there racing with those planes.

They were yards apart and neither had yet given signs of yielding. Suddenly the scarlet plane swerved—not left nor right but up! Up in an abrupt, incredible leap that let the orange pass far under.

And now the red plane dove for the ball—power-dove!

The cadet at its stick called gravity to aid the drive of his motor and outsped his equal-engined adversary by enough, in the quarter-mile still left, to regain the yardage his maneuver had cost him, and enough more to give his right wingman an eye-wink to catch the ball on his mallet-head and carry it down with him—steeply down to an inevitable crash!

"Antares!" I gasped. "That lad's a flyer."

Ten feet above the water the scarlet plane had pulled out of its dive. What's more, his harness straps denting his armor, the blood whirled from his brain by that terrific arc, Cadet Right Three still held the ball on his mallet.

The machine straightened, fled for the black and orange pylons towering from the upper margin of the long lake. Somehow that youngster on its wing had strength enough left, skill enough, to stroke the white sphere ahead, to stroke it again and again and send it skimming straight and true between the slim Princeton goals.

Rocket Cadets—two, Princeton—one, and the game was over.

IF SOMEONE had told me this morning that by mid-afternoon I should be here in Adirondack Pleasure Park watching this Intercollegiate Championship I'd have laughed in his face. The *Aldebaran* was just in from Venus. As controlman I was due to check her over, refuel her with hydrogen and oxygen and see to her reprovisioning. Rade Hallam, her master rocketeer, was due to make his report at the headquarters of the Inter-

planetary Control Board and get from the I. C. B.'s chartroom the latest dope on such perils to astrogation as new meteor swarms, ether swirls and so on. He had already started for there, but before I could leave the home he shared with me and Mona, our radiophone had rung.

It was Rade.

"Stay there till I get back, Toom," he snapped, and shunted off.

He did not return till afternoon. I sensed at once a tension in him, a sternly repressed excitement.

"Well," I demanded, "what's it all about?"

Slender, erect, despite his graying hair and the thirteen stars that circled his Silver Sunburst, one for each year he'd conned the Spaceways, he looked at me almost as if he didn't see me.

"Snap out of it, Rade," I grinned. "Spill it."

"We're going to Placid to select a midshipman for the *Aldebaran* by the way the cadets shape up as they play."

"To select—Cygnus! Why can't you wait till their records come down to New-york Spaceport next week? You're senior rocketeer of the fleet; you can have your pick. What's all the rush?"

His eyes, eagle-hooded in a gaunt, leather-skinned countenance, had rested for a moment on my face. "I can't explain." Then he had turned to Mona. "If you are coming with us, my dear, you had better hurry. We have just about enough time to make the start of the game."

FLOODLIGHTS came on to bathe the mountainside as the sunset faded out of the sky. The crowd began to disperse from around us as I worked my shoulders, trying to ease the ache in my back from the pounding it had received.

"Oh, look here," someone said behind me. "I didn't realize I was hitting you." The speaker was heavy-jowled, heavily

built, but sleek with good living. "I must apologize, Controlman."

"No apology necessary." He knew my grade by the single-starred Golden Sunburst on the black breast of my uniform. "I was plenty steamed up myself."

"It is kind of you to take it in that way, Mr. —"

"Gillis. Toom Gillis."

"Ah, yes. I have seen some fine reports on your work." The devil he had. "I am Gurd Bardin, Controlman." Leaping Leonids! He was Bardin of the I. C. B., one of the men who have absolute power over all ships traveling space and the men who con them. "If you are Gillis, I take it that this gentleman—" he gestured to Rade—"is Master Rocketeer Hallam."

"Correct," the latter acknowledged for himself, unsmiling.

"It is a pleasure to meet so famous a spaceman." Bardin's too-small eyes shifted to Mona. "This young lady—"

"Is my niece," Hallam said, "Mona Gillis."

As Mona acknowledged the introduction, I felt the cords in my neck grow taut. I do not usually resent men looking at my wife. Slimly graceful as a birch in her tight-fitting airsuit with its bright blue sash, hair a soft brown cloud about a pert-nosed, impudent small face, she is very pleasant to look at, and I am not selfish. But there was something in Bardin's gaze that rasped me.

A rumble of warming-up motors rose from the vast parking field at the base of Whiteface. "If you will excuse us, Mr. Bardin"—I interrupted some inanity he was addressing to Mona—"it is getting late and we shall be some time getting our plane out of that mess down there. We really ought to be moving along."

"But I was hoping for a chat with Master— Look here," Bardin interrupted himself. "Why don't you three join me aboard my stratoyacht, the *Icarus*, and

hop over to Skyland and have dinner with me there?"

I blinked. From what I had heard of the resort atop Pikes Peak, dinner there was the experience of a lifetime—and one within reach only of the very rich. Mona's gray eyes lighted up.

"Thank you," Rade was saying. "We appreciate your invitation, sir, but we have promised to join friends at the Tavern of the Seven Pleiades."

Once more I blinked. Not only had we no such plans, but the Pleiades, as all the three peopled worlds know, is a tawdry dive hugging the boundary fence of Newyork Spaceport, a brawling hole in the wall not to be mentioned in the same breath with Skyland—except for one thing. Master rocketeer or grease-grimed tubeman, all who con the void are welcome there, but none other.

For all his wealth, Gurd Bardin could not set foot across its threshold.

I thought his nostrils pinched a little. I must have been mistaken, for he said, smilingly, "Some other time then," and ambled off to where a gleaming gyrocopter hovered, waiting on idling vanes for his signal.

"What was the idea, Rade?" I demanded as soon as the *Icarus'* tender had lifted out of earshot. "Why slap Bardin in the face with the Pleiades? Saturn! He was being damn nice to us."

"Curiously nice. Look you, Toom. Did it not occur to you as at variance with all you ever heard of Gurd Bardin that he should even mingle on equal terms with such a crowd as this, let alone put himself out to be genial to mere spacemen?"

My brow furrowed. "You mean that he is after— Look here, Rade! What's this secret you're nursing?"

"I told you that I cannot— What gave you the notion I have a secret?" Abruptly his eyes were trying to tell me something. "You've been scanning too many thriller filmags, Toom." My wrist chronometer—

Its many-dialed face glowed brighter in the brilliance of the floodlights than I'd ever seen it in the black dark.

"Fins, Rade." I managed what I hoped was a convincing chuckle, in spite of the chill little prickles that coursed my spine. "Lay off my filmags." That strange glow meant there was a Listener Ray on us, picking up our every word. "Come on. Let's get started for the R. T. S. hangar before the cadets scatter."

STRAIGHT up out of the parking fields at Whiteface's base an immense white shaft soared, brilliant as some columnar sun. From this hub there radiated the broad, horizontal beams that mark and illuminate the skylanes, each at its separate level, each its own lambent hue.

The Northern Route was an icy blue, the Southern a warm, effulgent red. The sea-green Eastern lane was opposed by Westward's yellow of ripened wheat, while in between all the merging gradations of violet and purple, blue-green, green-yellow, yellow-red, sped to the minor compass points.

Along the spiraling spokes of this vast rainbow wheel the throngs streamed homeward—countless black midges in the varihued luminance. There were lumbering aerobusses and swift glider-trains, swank limouplanes, modest amphibians and racketing, rusted jalopies that should have been ruled off the traffic ways.

Close below our small but comfortably fitted amphibian, Lake Placid held a reflection of the darkling, ancient heights that encircle her, and in that brooding frame the shining glory of the modern sky.

"One thing," Rade Hallam remarked. "That final play of the game left us in no doubt as to which cadet to choose for the *Albebaran's* midshipman."

"Right," I agreed from my chair beside Mona's, aft in the little cabin. "Number Three is our man. I hope he's a senior."

"He is, Toom." Mona had her program open to the lineups. "Here's his name: Nat Marney, and his class is 2116, right enough."

"Good! That lad is smart as a whip, Rade. He has guts, too. The way he conceived that final play and executed it—He is far and away the best man on the team."

"No," Hallam disagreed. "The best man on the team, and for the ship, is Jan Lovett, Marney's right wingman. The pilot was magnificent, I grant you, but he had time to plan his play and accept its dangers. Lovett reacted instantaneously to a situation and a peril presented to him without warning. He had no time to think; he did the right thing instinctively, and the ability to do that is the quality a rocketeer needs most."

"I challenge that! If you analyze what the—"

"Hush, Toom," Mona interrupted. "Please hush. Listen."

Rade set our craft down, light as a kiss, on the lake's surface. It broke into a widening shimmer of liquid opalescence.

"Listen," Mona whispered again, her warm, soft hand stealing into mine.

We were roofed by an enormous rumble of motors, but here below an arboreal silence enfolded us. Somewhere there was the shrill, antiphonic chorus of cicadas and from beyond the low, black island that hid the R. T. S. hangar came the sound of young voices, singing the *Rocketeer Cadet's Farewell Song*:

*All things end and so to ending come
our golden college days.*

*Fading fast our youthful friendships,
fading fast into the haze . . .*

Now R. T. S. is nothing to me but a name. I've come up in the Craft the hard way, and myself have been casehardened in the process, but an ache came into my throat as the minor, nostalgic strains float-

ed across the jeweled water, and seemed to come into the cabin with me . . .

*Soon we part, perhaps forever. Soon,
oh brothers, we must part.*

*And the miles between will lengthen,
swift as rocket's blazing dart.*

Swift with spaceship's blazing dart.

The song was in the cabin. Rade Hallam was singing with those youngsters, low, and I think unaware, and it seemed to me that the lines which the years had marked on his gaunt, gray face smoothed out and that a peace came to him he had not known for a long, long time.

The refrain shifted to a more spirited cadence:

*R. T. S. fore'er will bind us,
Brothers all.*

*And this pledge we leave behind us,
Each to all.*

*When you need us, we shall gather.
From the black void's farthest borders*

*We shall blast across the heavens and
shall rally to your call.*

*Brother! To your call we'll rally, one
and all.*

There was a bitterness in me that I was not, could never be, one of that fine brotherhood. We were silent a moment, and then the song began again:

All things end . . .

"Not us," Mona murmured. "Not the love that binds us, Toom. That will never end."

I turned to her. Her gray eyes smiled at me. She parted her lips to say something more—and vanished.

Not literally. My startled hands reached out and found her soft body in the blackness that had swallowed her, the darkness that blotted out the lake and the moun-

tains and the rainbow sky, the absence of light so complete that it seemed to have weight against my eyes.

I could feel Mona, tensed in my arms, her heart beating against mine. I could smell the sweet perfume of her. I could taste the salt saliva of sudden fear on my tongue. I could hear Placid's little waves slapping the amphibian's hull, the R. T. S. seniors harmonizing their *Farewell Song*. Only my sight was gone. Panic struck at me. I'd gone blind—blind!

"What's happened?" Mona quavered. "Toom. What's happened to the light?"

I never heard, never shall hear again, words more welcome. As I relaxed, Hallam spoke, forward, as if to himself. "The queer thing is that I can't even see the glow from Toom's watch."

Queer indeed. Our coldlight tubes might have failed. Some black cloud might have blanketed our craft. But the less any other light, the brighter the chrono on my wrist should be glowing.

"Whatever it is, Rade, it's only right around us here or the cadets would not still be singing— That's the ticket!" My airman's sixth sense told me the amphibian had started to rise. "I was just going to suggest you lift us out of it."

"But I am not, Toom." Rade's voice was tight, strained. "I haven't touched the controls. We are being lifted by something outside the plane."

Mona whimpered a little at the back of her throat. A colloid pane scraped in its sash. Coolness came in from the window Hallam had opened, and the song of the cadets below.

"Yo-o-oh, Kaydets," he shouted. "To me, Kaydets. R. T. S. to—" A dull thud cut him off, the unmistakable dull thud of a body hitting the floor.

"Rade!" I cried. "Rade Hallam!" No answer, not even a groan. I released Mona, plunged forward. A stinging, fierce shock exploded in my brain.

I couldn't move. I couldn't utter a

sound. I was frozen in a strange paralysis.

I still could hear. I heard the colloid Rade Hallam had opened scrape shut again. I heard the faint thrum of 'copter vanes, not ours, too far off. But I couldn't hear Mona.

That was the worst of it. No scream, no sound of struggle or fall came to me in that terrible dark as evidence that Mona was alive, that she was still in this plane.

I DID not need my airman's sense of changing altitudes to know we were rising swiftly and more swiftly. My ears told me that. The cadets' singing faded away beneath. The noises of the traffic lanes beat at me—not from above though. From the left, always from the left, and always a little above.

As the beams rayed out, spiraling from their white central shaft, we were spiraling too, threading the vacant reaches between them. That was a violation of the strictest law of the skylanes. Why did not some police plane, of the many that shepherded the home-flying swarms, intercept us?

It was unreasonable to suppose that they did not see us. Unless—I was fighting terror by forcing myself to think—unless we were as invisible to them as they were to us.

Nothing supernatural about that, I assured myself. Light is vibration, waves in the ether. I knew that sound waves could be blanked out, silenced by sound waves of the same frequency but opposite in phase. Why not light too?

How? How had this cloud of no-light been thrown about us? What of this strange, irresistible paralysis— A lurch of the deck threw me off my precarious balance, I sprawled, swore—heard myself swear!

I could speak aloud. I could thrust at the deck with hands suddenly alive again and shove myself up to my knees.

"Toom," Mona called out of the black.

"It's I, all right." I lurched aft to the sound of her voice.

"Oh, Toom! What has happened to us?"

"Mona." Her hands were icy as they met my groping ones. "Mona, honey. Are you all right?"

"Only scared." Small wonder. "But I'm worried—"

The craft lurched again, threw me across an arm of the chair beside hers. As I twisted, managed to fall into it, metal clanged ponderously somewhere outside, and the amphibian abruptly was steady, dead-feeling.

"Uncle Rade, Toom," Mona gasped. "He—"

"Is whole, hale and hearty," Rade said right above us in the lightless dark. "And not quite as bewildered as Mr. Gurd Bardin might think."

"Cygnus, Rade!" I protested. "You've got Bardin on the brain. What could he possibly have to do with this?"

"A great deal, Controlman Gillis." *It was Gurd Bardin's own voice that answered me!* "Everything, in fact." Light smashed my eyes, blinding.

I stood up, my hands fisting. The dazle faded, but it was not Bardin I saw squeezing in through the hatch. It was a huge Martian, his seven-foot height stooped to our low ceil. I started for him, decided to halt.

The giant's lidless eyes peered at me out of his green-hued visage, with a mild, childlike interest, but he thrust his huge paw at me, and from it came a metallic, lethal glitter. He moved aside a little, uncovering the hatchway—and Bardin, standing apparently on air just outside, the deck cutting him off at the knees.

"I hope, Mr. Gillis," he smiled, "that your lovely wife was not too much startled by the unorthodox method by which I had Tala bring you here."

"Here," I repeated. "Where is here?"

"Some five miles above Mount White-

face." Behind Bardin I now discerned another amphibian, much like our own, and beyond that a rivet-studded high wall of gleaming durasteel. "In the lifeplane bay of the *Icarus*."

"I'll be—" My tone perhaps, or the same unconscious movement that brought Rade's restraining hand to my arm, lifted Tala's paw again. The thing in it was a device of coils and insulated handle such as I had never before seen. Whatever the Martian held, it was undoubtedly a weapon, and was what had produced the frightful paralysis from which we had just been released.

"We turned down your invitation to come aboard, so you had us brought here anyway. Did anyone ever tell you there's a law in this hemisphere against abduction?"

"I think, Toom," Rade murmured. "Mr. Bardin has an idea he is above the law."

"Wrong, Master Hallam. Aboard the *Icarus*, I am the law."

"Interesting. But let us get to the point. What, Mr. Bardin, do you want of us?"

BARDIN stepped in over the hatch coaming. "What I want from you is a very simple matter." I noticed that he was careful not to get between us and the Martian's—shock-gun, I suppose, is as good a name as any for it. "Suppose you answer for me the question Controlman Gillis put to you on Whiteface, shortly after I left you."

Rade's fingers drummed a tattoo on my biceps, but his face was inscrutable. "Since you heard him ask it, you must have heard my reply."

"What I heard was no reply. You did not deny having a secret. Discovering in some way that I had a Listener Ray on you, you merely evaded admitting it. I want to know what it is. I want to know why the I. C. B. has been requested to release the *Aldebaran* from its regular

Venus run and clear it for"—a satiric note crept into Bardin's tone—" 'scientific exploration in Space.' I want to know why you are in such haste to complete your crew and so exacting in their qualifications."

He must have had Listener Rays on us all day.

The black-eaved, small eyes were suddenly agate-hard, reptilian. "In short, my friend, I not only want, but intend to know what mission you were this morning asked to carry out by Hol Tarsash."

My lips pursed to a soundless whistle. Hol Tarsash was dean of Earth's delegation to the Supreme Council of the Tri-Planet Federal Union. If he was concerned in this affair, it was big, something too big for me even to guess at.

"You seem to have a very efficient corps of spies," Rade Hallam murmured.

I shook off his hand, dropped into the seat beside Mona.

"My spies are efficient."

Tala's lidless gaze had followed me but he saw nothing to alarm him in the way I perched tensely on the edge of the dorchrom chair, my right hand gripping its arm, my feet gathered under me.

"Unfortunately," Bardin continued, "the gaulite lining of Tarsash's consultation cubicle is opaque to the Listener Ray."

"Unfortunately?"

"For you—unless you decide to tell me, of your free will, what passed between you."

A tiny muscle twitched under Rade's left eye; otherwise he was a black-uniformed, motionless statue.

"Think, Master Hallam. No one beside the five in this plane knows that you are aboard the *Icarus*, not even my crew. That, by the way, is why I have not yet had you taken from this plane. Once you have given me the information I require of you, you and your companions will be returned to the surface as secretly as you

were brought here and not Hol Tarsash nor anyone else will know you ever left it."

"In other words, I can safely betray the man who has trusted me."

"Precisely."

"And if I refuse?"

Bardin shrugged. "You are completely in my power, you and Toom Gillis and—" tiny light worms crawled in his eyes as they shifted meaningfully to Mona—"your lovely niece. I should regret, of course, but I am sure you understand me."

"Yes," Rade murmured, "I understand you perfectly." His face was a mask, but his hand, the one at the side toward me, closed into a fist.

At this signal my straightening legs pushed me up out of the chair. Keeping my grip on its arm, I whirled it around in front of me, swept it up and down again on Tala's lifting gun wrist.

Bone cracked. The glittering shock-gun arced from greenish fingers as I lunged forward and slammed my left fist into the throbbing spot at the base of the neck where the Martians' nerve system centers.

The giant's eyes glazed. He swayed, started to topple. I was spinning to help Rade who, in accord with the plan his fingers had telegraphed on my arm, had jumped for Bardin as I went for Tala—or should have. Dismayed, I saw him down on the deck, scrambling to hands and knees, saw Bardin diving out through the hatch. Hallan came erect, jammed against me in the narrow aperture. I saw that he grasped the shock-gun and pulled back to let him through—too late.

A durasteel door clanged across the bay.

"Got away," Rade panted as I leaped out and raced past him. "I've messed it, Toom. I—"

"It wasn't your fault, Uncle Rade." That was Mona, from the amphibian. "He couldn't help it, Toom. Bardin caught Tala's gun in midair, by the coils, luckily. Uncle wrenched it from his hand before

he could reverse it, but Bardin tripped him and—”

“Okay,” I grunted, reaching the door through which the man had escaped. “That’s all gas through a rocket tube now.” I dogged home its three ponderous clamps. “He’s away, but he and his confounded crew will only need a torch and a couple of hours’ time to get at us.” I turned. “This bay’s built and fitted like a spaceship airlock.”

“Naturally, Toom.” Hallan was bleak. “If the *Icarus* should be pithed in the stratosphere, they’d have to use this as an airlock to give them time to get into the lifeplanes and batten them to retain normal air pressure. But—”

“Hold it, Rade. That gives me an idea.” I scanned the durasteel-lined space about us, eagerly. “There ought to be . . .” It held still another amphibian beside ours and the one I had already seen, and the gyrotender— “There it is!”

What I looked for was in a far corner— a small compressed-air engine with a five-foot flywheel, a gleaming shaft slanting from it into the deck. “Look.” I pointed to it. “Our troubles are over.”

“You’re right, Toom.”

Rade understood me, of course. He would have thought of it himself, in another minute. There had to be an auxiliary gear in here to open the bay’s portals if the main power unit failed. What’s more, it had to be controllable from within the lifeplanes after they were loaded and hermetically battened, since the bay would lose all air the instant its great doors started to open.

CHAPTER TWO

World Destroyer

BEFORE I could get back to them, Hallam and Mona were already in the plane that had been behind Bardin when I’d had that first startling

sight of him. I climbed in after them.

“Hades!” I exclaimed. “What’s all this?”

There was barely room for the three of us in the cabin, so filled was it with a welter of huge coils, bus-bars, oddly shaped electronic bulbs. “Batten this hatch, Rade, while I see if I can make anything of this set-up.”

Squeezing forward past Mona I was relieved when I found, above the standard flight controls, a panel of pushbuttons, each labeled with a small etched plate. “*Emergency Escape.*” I read the first to the left. “That’s it, on the nail.”

I thumbed the button thus marked, sank into the pilot’s bucket seat. Somewhere behind me armatures clicked. Through the colloid on my left, I saw the air engine’s flywheel waver, begin to spin.

“Check,” I breathed, watching the wall of the bay split ahead of me, vertically from deck to rivet-studded ceil.

The others came up behind me as that rift widened. I let in the clutch, taxied to the opening, settled back to wait until it should be wide enough to let us through. Three yards, I estimated the plane would need, with its wings folded. Not much, but those huge leaves separated very slowly, sliding in their grooves.

Antares, they moved slowly!

I could feel the thumping of Mona’s heart as she leaned against my back, watching. I could hear Hallam’s deep breathing. I glanced down at my wrist. My chrono wasn’t glowing.

“Look here, Rade,” I said. “There’s no Listener Ray on us. Don’t you think it’s about time you let us in on this business?”

“Yes, Toom, I do.” His hand pressed my shoulder. “But the secret is not mine. Look you, lad. This is no private feud between Bardin and Tarsash. It concerns—literally, not by any hyperbole—the peace, the happiness, the very lives of the peoples of the Earth, perhaps of the Three Worlds. We are fighting almost alone,

almost hopelessly, to stave off a very—”

“Something’s wrong,” Mona broke in. “Something—Toom! Those doors have stopped moving.”

“It just looks that way, honey, because you are so—” I cut off. She was right. I could see, out there before me, the blue-black sky of the upper altitudes. I could see more stars, but the aperture through which I saw them was no longer widening.

I twisted to the side colloid. The little engine was lifeless.

I saw why.

From the wall beside it to the compressed-air tank that powered it, a bright blue thread angled down. Bardin’s men could not burn a gap through the dura-steel wall in time to prevent our escape, but they’d had just enough time to pierce it with the needle flame of their blowtorch, and the tank just our side of it, and to bleed the tank of the stored air that should be whirling those shining spokes.

“Evidently,” Rade Hallam remarked, dryly, “Gurd Bardin likes our company too well to permit us to leave.”

The opening in the wall of the *Icarus*’s lifeplane bay mocked us with its view of the gold-dusted, free sky, a view too narrow by barely six inches.

I SHOVED up, twisted, got to the cabin hatch and slapped open its clamp.

“Toom!” Mona gasped, “there’s almost no air out there now.” Her eyes were round, frightened. “What do you think you can do?”

“I can gain the six inches we need.” Normal air pressure in here, the tenuous atmosphere of five miles above the Adirondacks on the other side, the door was held shut as firmly as though it were still dogged. “If I can get to that engine, I can—”

“Spin the flywheel by hand,” Rade Hallam comprehended. “That will do it.” He

shoved in between me and the door edge, got a purchase. “We need you too, Mona.”

She was haggard as she found a handhold.

“Be ready to slam it again,” I warned, “so you don’t lose too much air.” It would be touch and go. “All together now. Heave!”

Hallam’s neck corded. The muscles across my back roped. The door gave. I lurched against Rade, broke his hold and half-jumped, half was blown out through the aperture.

The hatch slammed shut behind me. I didn’t look back as I sprinted across the bay, but I guessed the look that must be on the master rocketeer’s face.

He’d known as well as I that the two left behind would not be able to open the hatch again against a pressure three barely had overcome. He’d maneuvered to beat me out and I’d tricked him, not because of any puerile heroics but because since only one of us could escape from the *Icarus*, it must be he.

He’d given me only a hint of the momentous issue to which the secret he shared only with Hol Tarsash was the key, but that hint was enough. At whatever cost, it must be put beyond Gurd Bardin’s reach.

I had gripped the flywheel’s spokes, was bearing down on them, before I had to let go of the breath with which I’d filled my lungs the instant the hatch was yielding. Mouth wide, I pulled in the fierce cold of the upper sky—but no air.

The cold struck into me. The flywheel started to turn. The unendurable cold pierced me, and there was no air to breathe. I was climbing the gleaming spokes with my hands, spokes that were already so cold they burned my hands, but the wheel was moving faster, always a little faster, and I dared to look at the bay’s great portals.

They were moving again in their

grooves. They were sliding apart, minutely as yet, but sliding.

My laboring lungs were a torture in my chest. The momentum of the wheel's ponderous rim came to my aid and the wheel spun faster still. Something sputtered past me, white-hot, coruscant, spattering the farther half of the whirling wheel. Sparks!

My head twisted to their source—the wall. The slim blue flame no longer angled down to the tank. It was burning a red-rimmed slash in the durasteel wall, a slit that grew inexorably toward me. The flame groped toward me, and to keep the wheel spinning I must stay here till it found me.

Keep the wheel spinning. Keep the wheel spinning. It was a kind of song within my head that was bound by an iron band. *Keep the wheel spinning.* I flailed hands at the blurred gleam of the wheel and the sparks spattered my uniform now, burned through and stung my skin. The wheel was blurred and the sky was blurred and the waiting plane was blurred against the sky. The sparks stung—

That fierce pain in my shoulder was no spark. It was the flame itself. I winced from it, sprawled, and had no strength to push up again to the flywheel that above me slowed, slowed—spun no longer.

I had failed.

"Sorry," I muttered. "Sorry, Mona, I tried." I strained to make out the plane. It was a blurred, vague shape that to my failing vision seemed to drift away from me.

It leaped through the portal I'd widened just six inches. In an instant of sight restored, I saw its wings unfold, catch the thin air. The plane was a fine, free shape against the gold-spangled sky—and was gone.

MY HEAD dropped to my arm. My weary eyes closed, but the sting of sparks shocked them open again, and the heat on the back of

my head as the blue flame slid downward.

Instinct, I suppose, no conscious will, shoved my hands and knees against deck steel and started me crawling from the flame, but once I started crawling I crept on. I must have kept going because, when a rumbling thunder brought me out of the fog into which I had sunk, I was almost to the lip of the Icarus's hatch.

Or was I? Was I not still on White-face, the game not over yet? A plane soared out there, scarlet in the fan of light from behind me, and on its fuselage was painted a huge *Three*.

It vanished. Of course. I hadn't seen it. It had been a phantom evoked by my dying brain. It—Something thudded behind me.

Tala, recovered, dropped from the amphibian's hatch. He saw me, lurched toward me, one clawed paw dangling from his broken wrist, the other reaching out to grab me.

I knew what an enraged Martian can do to a man—better the lip of the hatch and a clean death. I had only to drag myself a foot forward and go over, go down and down in the way a spaceman should die. My hands crawled to the edge, folded over it. My arms—I hadn't the strength. The poloplane was out there again, but I knew now it was only delirium, for on the tip of its stubbed wing a helmeted figure leaned rigid against aludur straps into the speed-gale.

Only in delirium could a plane stall as that plane seemed to, and sideslip toward me so that the dream-player seemed to hang level with me, seemed to lean in and catch my wrists and swing me out into the sky.

An enormous black bulk loomed over me, whirled under, was beside, then above me again. My mind cleared and for an instant and I knew that Tala mercifully had hurled me over the lip of the Icarus's hatch, that I was spinning down.

Then I blanked out.

“DIDN'T I tell you this new Verill airfoil would let us pull stunts which for centuries the physicists have taught couldn't be done?” It was a pleasant, young voice. “Maybe you'll trust my flight-dynamics now, old fruit.”

“Trust you now?” someone else drawled. “If I didn't trust you before, would I have walked out to that wingtip on your say-so? Not that I didn't have a bad sec or two while you had us in that three-thousand foot spin. I thought my arms would pull out of their sockets, hangin' on to our ruddy friend here. He wasn't much help.”

It didn't make sense. I should be dead instead of hearing a couple of youngsters chaff one another about Verill airfoils and flight-dynamics.

“Look,” I asked weakly, opening my eyes. “Are you a couple of blasted angels, or am I lying cramped on the deck of a cabin not big enough for one full-sized human, let alone three?”

“Well, Mr. Gillis.” The one with the shock of carrot hair grinned down at me. “We're no angels, though Nat Marney here might qualify for a denizen of the other place. How're you feelin'?”

“Plenty sore all over, and this burned shoulder is giving me hell, but who am I to complain?” I liked this big kid who stood straddled over me in singlet and shorts, and athlete's flat muscles sliding under his freckle-sprinkled skin. I ought to like him, he'd just saved my life at the very real risk of his own. “If that's Nat Marney, I imagine you must be Jan Lovett.”

“Correct, sir,” he drawled as he bent to help me rise. That seared shoulder was bad.

“Nat, say hello to the man.”

The black-haired chap at the controls turned, said, “How do you do, sir.” Sharper-featured than Lovett, shorter and far less brawny, he seemed more the

studious type, but the corners of his eyes were crinkled too, with long squinting into the sky winds. “It is an honor to have you aboard.”

“Believe it or not, the pleasure's mine.” It would be, I knew, the wrong thing to thank them for what they'd done. “How in Saturn did you two happen to pop up so opportunely?”

“Well, sir,” Lovett's soft drawl answered me as Marney turned back to his controls, “it wasn't precisely happenstance. You see, Nat and I have been together all through coll an' Trainin' School an' so we were—well, knowin' we're going to bust up in a week we kind of couldn't take singin' the *Farewell Song* with the rest of the class. We were squattin' together, not sayin' anything, on the wing of old Three here, when suddenly we heard the old ‘Yoh Kaydets’ from overhead.”

They couldn't see anything when they looked up, except a peculiar black blot against the red skylane, rising rapidly, but agreed that the shout had seemed to come from this. The R.T.S. rallying cry was not to be ignored. They tumbled into the plane's cabin and took off.

It had been easy at first to keep the odd patch of blackness in sight while they wrangled about what it was and what they could do about the cry for help that had come from within it. When the thing started spiraling up in the forbidden areas under the lane-lights, however, a police plane had started for them and they were compelled to make for the white central zone where a plane is permitted to rise.

They came out at the top in time to see the strange black cloud blotched against the lighted gap in the Icarus's hull, and then the hatch closed on it. Still curious, they hovered about, uncertain whether to hail the strato-yacht or descend.

“All of a sudden,” Jan continued, “from maybe fifty miles off, we saw that life-plane bay start to open up again, but get

stuck. Thinkin' maybe there was trouble aboard we sidled over to investigate, but before we were near enough to hail the *Icarus* a plane shot out and dropped away fast. About a mile down it started to circle, as if undecided on its course, so we sent it a call. What do we learn but that the pilot is R.T.S.'s most famous graduate, Rade Hallam, 'Eighty-three,' and that it was he who'd called the '*Yoh Kaydets*.' He didn't explain, but asked us to slide upstairs and see what was what, so—"

"You spoke Rade Hallam?" I broke in. "Where are— Where is he now?"

"Right out there, sir." Lovett pointed past me to the starboard colloid.

I turned eagerly, peered out, but Marney must have banked the poloplane just then, for all I saw was black ground, tipped up at a forty-five degree angle.

THE night-bound reaches were netted by the skylane's brilliant lines of color, meeting, dispersing, meeting again. The Hudson ran diagonally up across the black plane to where, at its top, it vanished beneath the soaring towers and leaping arabesques of New-york. It slid away beneath and the amphibian I looked for slid into the colloid's frame.

It winged smoothly on a parallel course to ours, not fifty yards off our starboard bow, and in its forward colloid I made out a small head canted in a familiar pert poise, a cloud of soft brown hair.

As though she heard my silent cry across the night, Mona turned.

"Would you care to speak them, sir?" Lovett was holding a radio mike out to me. I grabbed it.

"Mona."

"Toom," came from the speaker disc over the pilot's head. "Toom, dear," and then a sob caught her throat.

"Steady, honey." My own throat was thick. "Steady. It's all over and done with. We're all safe away."

"Not yet, my boy." That was Rade Hallam. "Look to your port, up and astern."

I wheeled, stared. "I don't see anything, Rade."

"About thirty degrees west of north. In Leo."

"I— Yes, I see what you mean." It wasn't much, only a black blot fitting across the constellation of the Lion. "You think it's—"

"A plane from the *Icarus*, blacked out. Yes, Toom. Bardin's not done with us yet."

"Nice," I murmured. "Lovely. He can crash both our planes and no one will ever know why . . . Rade!" A new thought came. "The shock-gun. They don't have to crash us."

"No," Master Hallam agreed. "They don't have to crash us. They can paralyze us and take us back to the *Icarus*." His amphibian was lifting, was sliding off on its port wing. "Cadet Marney!" Abruptly there was crisp authority in the voice from the speaker-disc. "Hold your course and speed, regardless of me."

"Aye, sir," Marney snapped into the mike I'd handed to him. "I am holding course and speed." I no longer could see Rade's plane but I could hear the thunder of his propeller, right overhead, merging with our own.

Lovett was gaping at me, his mouth open to form a question.

"Cadet Marney—" Hallam's voice forestalled him—"at my word, 'now', off power and release your controls. Do you understand?"

"Aye, sir. At your word, 'now' I am to off power and release controls."

"Make it so. Now!"

There was no propeller thunder from either plane—and no light! Once more the utter blackness thumbled my eyes, and there was still terror in it—fear, the ancestral, abysmal fear of the dark that no centuries of civilization can quite ex-

punge from Man's marrow, the crawling fear of things unseeable.

Somewhere in the voiceless black there was a whimper of fear in a youth's throat. Under my feet the deck slanted steeply forward.

"Hallam's blacked out our planes," I explained, "with a device on his own." The coils, of course, that crowded the cabin of the *Icarus's* amphibian. "He had grappled ours and is gliding both as a unit, down and away from where Bardin's men last glimpsed us." Groping for support, my hand brushed a naked arm and felt the cold sweat on it. "We could see them against the stars but we're below them and against the black ground. We're invisible."

"Smooth," Jan chuckled, but a quiver in his drawl gave away that chuckle as bravado. "A very smooth stunt, what I mean."

Marney was more practical, though his voice was thin with the horror of this sightlessness. "How can he keep us from crashing the skyplanes, Mr. Gillis, when he can't see them?"

Rade saved me from having to confess I did not know the answer. "The forward colloid of this plane seems to be of some new material that makes visible the vibrations ordinarily incapable of affecting the human eye," he explained. "The infra-red or ultra-violet—the violet it is. I can make out our antagonist's Listener Rays, sweeping the sky, searching for us." The deck came level beneath me. "I can see the skyplanes well enough to avoid being silhouetted against them and am winging silent on the helicopter vanes with which this plane is equipped, but those Listener Rays are a danger we must avoid. There will be no more talk, please, till I give the word."

That was that. I sank to the deck, disposed myself to await what would come next in as much comfort as I could manage.

IT WAS not much. My shoulder was giving me hell, to say nothing of the spark burns with which my skin was liberally sprinkled. My bones ached with a fatigue they had not known since I had fought the *Aldebaran* through a seven-hour meteor swarm. And there was the weight of the blackness upon me, the panic of claustrophobia shuddering in my veins.

I tried to forget all this by thinking about what had happened in the last couple of breathless hours. I tried to think. Exhaustion welled up into my skull and I slid away into a dream.

I was a bus-boy again in the Tavern of the Seven Pleiades, but crippled now and blind, and so nearly deaf that I could hear only dimly the stirring *Song of the Spacemen*. . . .

*Blast old Earth from under keel!
Set your course by the stars.
Spurn apace Sol's burning face,
Give. . . .*

"Mr. Gillis." Nick Kaster had hold of my shoulder, one-armed, one-eyed, evil Nick Kaster whom long ago I saw disintegrate into ashes on an island in the sky. "Mr. Gillis." His steel claws sank into my shoulder. "Wake up."

I was awake, but someone was still shaking me by the shoulder and I was still blind, still hearing dimly the chorus out of my dream. . . .

Give Earth's greeting to Mars. . . .

"Gemini!" Jan Lovett drawled. "I can't shake him awake."

"All right," I grunted, coming up to my feet. "I'm awake. What's up?"

"We're down, sir. Master Hallam has directed us to debark."

"Down! Where?"

"I'll be pithed if I know. This way, sir." The tiny poloplane had no hatch. You

crawled out a colloid to debark from her, on to a wing. Still in utter darkness, I felt the coolness of the night wind on my face. The *Song of the Spacemen* had been no dream; the wind still brought it to me:

*Say good-by to the Earthbound race
For back you may come nevermore. . .*

I knew where I was—Newyork Spaceport, and by the direction from which that singing came, the *Aldebaran's* berth.

The *Aldebaran* is was. Coming off the wing, I felt underfoot the familiar planes of her capacious cargo-hold and then, abruptly, I stepped out of the black cloud that blanketed the hatch in her outer skin.

There in the hold, coldlight making an aureole of her hair, was Mona.

"Hello," she said, a little twisted grin on her face. "Hello, Toom." That was all, except for the way her hands took hold of mine and clung.

Still holding them, I turned to the youngsters. "These are the two heroes of this afternoon's game, honey. The big one's Jan Lovett; the little dark one, Nat Marney. My wife, boys."

I didn't mind the way they stared at her, open-eyed.

"It was a grand game," she told them, "and you both were marvelous."

A little to my surprise, the loquacious Lovett remained tongue-tied while Marney, who had been so taciturn in the plane, smiled and thanked her. "We played the best we knew how, ma'am, but we had to have the breaks to win. That Princeton team was good."

"But R.T.S. was—"

"Gangway." A green-skinned Martian lumbered in out of the black—it seemed to have a well-defined boundary. "Gangway, Bahss Toom." This was Atna, the *Aldebaran's* tubeman and her guardian when she was laid up in port and deserted by the rest of her crew. *The black cloud was following him in!*

We retreated before it, but it swallowed Atna. It stopped moving. Within it, the *Aldebaran's* hatch thudded shut.

The black cloud vanished.

Where it had been, the *Icarus's* lifeplane stood, wings folded. Rade Hallam climbed down out of it. His look found me. A smile flickered across his leathery countenance, like heat lightning, and then he turned to the cadets.

THEY had come to attention, heels together, backs ramrod stiff, eyes wide with something very near adoration. Master Rocketeer Hallam was a tradition, almost a legend of their Craft.

"Your rescue of Controlman Gillis, gentlemen," he said, "was well done. My compliments."

Their faces shone, but his went bleak. "Your strict attention, Cadets," he rapped out. "I can arrange that you return to Training School, without untoward consequences from what you have done thus far tonight." Hol Tarsash, I supposed, would take care of that. "I am, however, about to request you to do something important whose consequences I cannot foresee. I can give you only the assurance that to do as I ask would most likely result in your being barred from the spaceways for life, and not improbably, a terrible death."

His thin nostrils pinched, flared again. "The *Aldebaran* has no clearance from I.C.B. and so may not leave this berth without rendering her officers and crew liable to Earthbinding. She is fully fueled, but only a quarter provisioned. She has not been inspected since her last flight and may very possibly develop a fatal flaw. Her crew-complement is twenty-one trained spacemen. To attempt to astrogate her with five, two of them novices to actual space, would be suicidal.

"I intend, gentlemen, to blast off for interspace within ten minutes, if you make that possible by volunteering to blast off with me."

He paused. It was very still in the vast, bare cargo-hold as his eyes studied the cadets' faces. Some flicker of expression, not quite a smile, told me he was satisfied with what he saw, and then there was once more the even, unemotional flow of his voice.

"This morning, I gave my pledge to a great and very wise man to speak of what passed between us to no one on Earth. I cannot, however, ask you to risk your careers, your lives, without explanation. Perhaps—" now he smiled, but the faint smile that touched his thin lips held bitterness—"it is quibbling to say that when the hatch of this spaceship closed on us, it somehow divorced us from Earth, yet that is the feeling of all spacemen. I feel justified, therefore, in making that quibble. That hatch may open again, however, at your word, to return you to Earth. I rest it on your honor as space cadets that if it should, what I say to you now will remain within the hull of the *Aldebaran*. I know that I can fully trust that it will."

The skin over my cheekbones was tight. Mona's lips were half parted and her breath seemed to hang upon them. Was it the coldlight that made Rade Hallam seem so haggard?

"As you all know," he began again, "for a hundred and forty years, since the War of the Three Worlds ended in the organization of the Tri-Planet Federal Union, all humankind has lived under a government of, by and for the people. Venusians, Martians, Terrestrians alike, within the limits only of our obligation to interfere as little as possible with the happiness of others, we are free to pursue happiness, each in our own way.

"It must seem incredible to you, as it did to me until this morning, that any man should wish to change this. Yet there is such a man—"

"Gurd Bardin!" I could not help exclaiming. "That's what—" and then Rade's look silenced me.

"Yes, the man is Gurd Bardin. Ambition, lust for power, some biological urge, perhaps impels him to add his name to the long list—Yo Husoshima, Hitler, Napoleon, Genghis Khan and many more on our planet alone, to say nothing of the others—who have attempted to make themselves masters of their worlds, its people their slaves.

"This, by a lucky accident, Hol Tarsash discovered. Bardin's conspiracy is only in its formative stage as yet; his adherents, though completely under his domination, still few. The whole thing could easily be crushed by decisive action, but when Tarsash took what he had learned to his colleagues on the Tri-Planet Council, he was met only with unbelief and derision.

"'Proof,' they demand of him. 'Bring us proof that this is true, and, if true, anything more than a madman's dream.' They say, as democratic parliaments have always said to those who warned them against a threat to democracy, 'In these civilized times, no man can make himself so strong that we need fear him.' And they will wait, as parliaments have always waited, until the man has made himself so strong that he cannot be stopped without widespread destruction, desolation, disaster."

Rade Hallam pulled in breath, let it seep slowly out between his thin, colorless lips. "They would wait, in the age-old pattern, till it is almost too late to stop Bardin, and there would be no hope of moving them before that, except for one thing.

"Like Napoleon's artillery, Hitler's planes and tanks, Husoshima's Flaming Death, scientific development has perfected for Bardin a weapon so terrible, so resistless, that if his possession of it can be proved to the Council they might be shocked into moving against him before he is ready to use it. We have no information as to what this weapon is, and only a vague idea where he is building it.

"This, gentlemen, is the mission with

which Hol Tarsash entrusted me this morning—to find that weapon and bring back to him incontrovertible proof of its existence.

"This is the mission, gentlemen, in which I ask you to join me. As soon as Gurd Bardin learns we are aboard the *Aldebaran*, he will mobilize the forces of the I.C.B. to prevent our blasting off. We must leave at once, or not at all, and so I can give you only ten seconds to make your decision."

Jan Lovett started to speak.

"Wait!" Hallam snapped. "I insist that you take the full ten seconds before you reply."

Ten seconds to decide whether to gamble their careers and their lives against a man's word that the gamble was worth it. Ten short seconds—nine now by the sweeping hand of the clock on the cargo-hold wall.

Mona's hand, clasping mine, trembled a little . . . Eight seconds . . . Rade Hallam was a slender, expressionless figure, his gaunt countenance a mask, his brooding eyes on that inexorable second hand . . . Six seconds . . . Atna, a stoop-shouldered, ungainly hulk in the metal-fibred suit the workers from the red planet affect, watched Hallam out of lidless eyes that mirrored a doglike devotion . . . Three seconds . . . The coldlight twinkled on the satin-smooth, bronzed arms of the two cadets and that was the only movement in the great, empty cargo-hold.

But it seemed to me that something stirred here, inconceivably vast in numbers, in extent of space and time, waiting for what would be said here as the infinitely long ten seconds ended.

"Well, gentlemen," Master Rocketeer Hallam asked, "what is your decision?"

Nat Marney had not consulted Jan Lovett by so much as a glance, but we knew he spoke for both. "We are with you, sir. What are our orders?"

The corners of Rade's stern mouth

twitched. "You will take your orders from Tubeman Atna for the present." Only his eyes gave them accolade. "Atna!" He turned to the Martian. "Take them to the fuel hole and prepare to blast off in five minutes.—Controlman Gillis!"

"On deck."

"Ready ship for space, then report to me in the control cabin."

As I followed Atna and the two youngsters out of the hold, I heard Rade, his voice no longer the clipped, impersonal one of the master rocketeer but warm and affectionate—and regretful.

"Mona, dear, I should have liked to set you ashore, but I can afford neither the time nor the risk that Bardin might snatch you again."

"Set me ashore!" Her laugh was silvery, tinkling. "Leave me behind! Why, uncle, you should no more have thought of that than you did of asking Toom whether he wanted to go along."

"Toom— By Scorpio! It never occurred to me to put the choice to him."

"He would never have forgiven you if you had."

She knew me almost better than I knew myself, that gray-eyed wife of mine,

CHAPTER THREE

"Black Space Is Bridged . . ."

I WAS strapped into the controlman's chair, Master Rade Hallam clamped into the hammock spring-hung from the ceil of the *Aldebaran's* control cabin. His stratagem in concealing our arrival and entrance into the spaceship by use of the black cloud from Bardin's lifeplane had been completely successful. No light had shown out across the spaceport's tarmac. No one could know there was anyone beside Atna aboard.

They would know in an instant.

"All set for blast-off," I reported.

"Make it so, mister." Rade acknowl-

edged. My hand closed on the handle of the switchbar before me. "Blast off!"

I shoved over the switchbar.

A gigantic, invisible weight forced me down on the chair's heavy springs. There was no breathing, no sight, no thought but that I must not let go the handle in my grip. Blood swelled my fingers, my body, as an acceleration of ten times gravity pressed consciousness from my darkening brain. Somewhere a bell rang, signal that we had attained the seven miles per second speed that would free us from Earth's pull to her center of mass. I held the switchbar an instant longer, released it.

The weight was gone. My head cleared and sight returned. In the central pentagon of the great six-fold viewscreen that filled the wall in front of me, I saw only the starry blackness of space to which the *Aldebaran's* nose was pointed. In four of the squares leafing out from that pentagon were only the stars; port, starboard, keelward and above—above with respect to the ship's own decks. In the lower, the sternward square, however, was a vast, concave bowl, night-filled except along one arc of its rim where the flaming colors of the sunrise were painted.

That bowl was the Earth from which we rushed; our only link to it as it rounded out to a hemisphere was a violet, diaphanous streamer, the glowing gases from the rocket tubes that sped us into the void.

The glowing steam, rather, heated to incandescence. Our fuel was hydrogen and oxygen, mixed one to two at the tube nozzles and ignited. Ignited and exploded, their product was water.

"Power off!" I heard Master Hallam's order.

"Power off," I signaled Atna in the fuel hole.

The *Aldebaran* was in free fall.

Between us and our lavender wake, a black gap grew swiftly. We were leaving no trail by which our course might be traced.

"Well—" I grinned feebly, turning to Rade—"we're in for it."

"Yes, Toom, we're in for it. Gurd Bardin needs trump up no excuse now to set the Patrol on our tail."

IT WASN'T long before we knew Bardin had done just that. The message came, a sputter of dots and dashes, from space-radio speaker, the order to the I.C.B.'s far-flung watchdogs of the spaceways.

T.S.S. ALDEBARAN IN UNAUTHORIZED FLIGHT. ARREST. PITH IF RESISTED.

But we were off the Venus and Mars routes by that time, where the Patrol keeps its eternal vigil against the pirates who nest in the Asteroid Belt. Even though our tubes were on again, building our speed up to an even twenty mile-second pace, it was a million-to-one chance we should be sighted.

The *Aldebaran*, half-a-million tons of durasteel, was an infinitesimal mite in the immensity of space.

The first Earthday out Hallam devoted to settling our routine. He put Mona in charge of the galley. Atna's division was, of course, the fuel hole. Astrogation and all the other innumerable tasks about ship were to be shared between himself and me.

A single tubeman could not manipulate all the *Aldebaran's* innumerable valves and so the cadets were to alternate in aiding the Martian, the youngster free of that duty to help me or Rade, whichever needed help most.

"We'll have to make that do, Toom." He smiled wanly when the others had dispersed to their stations. "But it's going to be tough."

Tough was right. With a full crew there would be, aside from the galley-complement, three at the tubes, two in the control cabin and two on general duty for

each watch, and there would be three watches. We had only five to do the work of twenty-one.

Sleep? We snatched twenty winks when we could; there was never time for forty. Eat? Mona tailed us about the decks practically forking food into our mouths. Rest? We forgot even the meaning of the word.

On the sixth day—I think it was the sixth; the Sun in space makes no neat black and white parcels of day and night and I'd lost all sense of time—Nat Marney was helping me check position.

"Alpha twenty-four point six." He repeated the readings I called from the starscope. "Beta eighty-nine point seventy-three. Gamma three point forty-six." He looked up from the chart. "Right, sir."

"Make it so," I told him and then something in his dark face made me ask, "What's the matter? Aren't you really sure it clicks?"

"No, sir. I mean yes, sir. It clicks, all right, but—" He checked, turned away from me to stow the Mulvihall's Tables.

"But what?" I rasped. "What's eating you?"

"Well." He looked for all the world like a troubled twelve-year old caught in some dereliction. "It's our course, Mr. Gillis. Unless my reckoning is all wrong, the only planet in this quarter of space is Mercury."

Knotting small muscles ridged my jaw. "Your reckoning is correct. What of it?"

"Master Hallam can't be planning to land us on Mercury. We'd be crisped."

"Cadet Marney!" I had been thinking along the same lines, my uneasiness growing. Perhaps that was why my voice was thick, growling, as I demanded, "Do they teach you at R.T.S. it is part of a midshipman's duty to question his master's judgment?"

"No, sir, but you asked—"

"Marney!" I broke in. "You are insubordinate." My shoulders hunched forward and I glared at him narrow-lidded. "If we were not short-handed, I should brig you."

He paled a little, drew himself rigidly erect. "I am sorry, sir, if I appear to be, but may I suggest that you are unjust?"

"Unjust, am I?" I was moving toward him, stiff-kneed. "Why, you blasted whipper-snapper." My fist rose. "I'll—"

"Mr. Gillis," Hallam's quiet voice said behind me, "if you can spare Marney for ten minutes, I should like him to go below and check the gravity grids."

"I can spare him," I growled, "plenty more than ten minutes . . . You heard, Marney. What are you waiting for?"

The cadet saluted smartly and exited.

I twisted to Rade. "You were right, down there on Placid. He's a hero in front of a crowd, but when the going really gets rough, he can't take it."

The master looked at me, a half-smile on his tired visage. He was more gaunt than ever, his eyes red-rimmed, and at the center of his brow were two deep, vertical lines of pain. "He is young, Toom, and for a lad's first trip into space, this is—" His bony hand made a small, eloquent gesture. "All our nerves are scraped raw. Look here. Why don't you take fifteen minutes or so and visit with Mona in the galley? She must be wondering by this time if she really has a husband aboard."

It wasn't till afterwards that I realized I had heard the cabin hatch open, behind me, when Marney first mentioned Mercury.

THAT blessed quarter-hour with Mona was the last I had for a long time. The hours blurred and the days blurred to a featureless grayness,

and still our wake of glowing gases trailed behind us across the black waste. Two million miles in each of her days we laid Earth behind us and in the stern view-screen she dwindled to a tiny ball in the heavens, to a star lost among the myriads crowding the void.

I waited with mounting apprehension for the order to change course, but it did not come.

Twenty million miles out, the orb of Mercury was black against the blaze of the sun . . . Thirty million miles . . . The *Aldebaran* was triple-skinned against the absolute zero of interspace, but her hull was pierced by cargo-hold hatch and airlocks. Insulated though these were, they brought in to us the torrid heat that beat upon them. The ship became an oven, a breathless kiln.

Thirty-five million miles.

Surely by now we were safe to make for our real objective. Surely by now the I.C.B. must have given up the hunt for us—A sputter from the space-radio broke in on my thoughts, giving the designation of a Patrol spaceship, its location ninety-five degrees of arc from us. Then:

NO TRACE OF T.S.S. ALDEBARAN.
MAY WE RETURN TO STATION?

Faintly the answer came, very faintly:

KEEP SEARCHING . . . BARDIN, I.C.B.

"They will never find us," I croaked. "Who would think us insane enough to drive so near the Sun?"

The eyes Rade turned to me were deep sunken in bluish hollows. "One man knows now where we must be, since the Patrol has not found us, but he dares not send them to search for us in this quadrant of space. They might find something he dares not let them see . . . Keep her as she is," he ended, relinquishing the chair to me.

Keep her as she was! Into the blaze of the Sun, into heat no human could long endure quiescent, let alone labor at building a weapon. The speculation against which for some time I had barred my mind entered it now.

Conning space as a master rocketeer saps not so much the body as the brain of a man. Rade Hallam's Silver Sunburst was ringed by thirteen stars, and before that he had served ten years as control-man. No spaceman in all the fleet has ever come within four years of matching that length of service, yet more than one rocketeer has been known to crack up, mentally, on the spaceways. The grueling flights through blackness are murderous. Not Rade, not Rade Hallam. Once more I closed my mind against the thought.

Forty million miles.

I HAD been inspecting the tiers of chemical trays that cleansed our breathed air of carbon dioxide, restore life-giving oxygen. Forcing reluctant legs to carry me down the companionway toward the fuel hole, I heard a fatigue-blurred but infinitely sweet voice singing:

*Behind the Moon, a million miles,
Lovely lady, I dream of thee. . .*

I stopped short, the ache of weariness in my bones easing. Mona was singing our song, the song that I had heard her sing even before I first saw her, the song that was the refrain of our love. The mists cleared from my vision and I made out the rectangle of the galley hatch breaking the rivet-studded companionway bulkhead, here beside me.

*. . . Black space is bridged by your
mem'ried smiles,
And the stars bring your kisses to
me. . .*

Looking through the hatch, the heart drained out of me. Mona was not thinking of me as she sang that song. Jan Lovett was in there, slumped in a chair and she stroked his hair, standing over him and singing.

"Mr. Gillis!" There was urgency in the shout that pulled me around to the fuel hole. "Mr. Gillis!" It was Marney, calling me from that hatch. By the sound of his voice there was trouble.

He ducked back in as I started on a stumbling run for him; he was bending over a greenish bulk sprawled on the deck plates as I entered.

"Atna has keeled over," he grunted. "And I can't find his pulse."

"Even a Newyork summer half kills him," I rumbled, staring down at the scarcely breathing Martian, "and this is a cavern in Hell. Fifty above is hot on Mars— Well, get him to the sick bay. Mona will bring him around."

As Nat carried him out, I pressed the heels of my hands against my throbbing temples. *Mona . . . Lovett—That must wait. Atna has collapsed. I shall have to take over as tubeman.*

How was Rade going to manage? Neither cadet was ripe for a trick at the switchbars, but Hallam could not con the ship without sleep.

A second's drowse, a meteor not glimpsed in time, and the *Aldebaran* would be pithed.

"Controlman Gillis," a metallic voice droned my name. "Gillis." It was the intra-ship communicator. As I got to the mike I was vaguely aware that Marney had returned, Lovett with him.

"Controlman Gillis on deck," I reported. "In the fuel hole."

"I want you up here, Toom."

"Sorry, Rade. The heat's got Atna; I have to take over his division."

"Atna!" Hallam's ingress of breath was plainly audible. "But—"

"We can manage, sir." Lovett's eager

voice was loud in my ear. "Nat and I know this hole by now; we can handle it."

"You can handle—" I checked as Rade's, "Controlman Gillis!" cut across my exclamation. "Turn the tubes over to Cadets Lovett and Marney, Gillis, and report to me at once."

"Very well, sir." I had no option except to yield, but, as I pounded into the control cabin, I protested, "Those cubs will wreck us, Rade. You can't do it."

"What do you make of this, Toom?" He seemed not to have heard me, so absorbed he was in the sternward view-screen. I reached him. "Five degrees gamma of Terra." He told me where to look.

A star was missing, out of Draco.

"I see. Thuban's blotted out."

"Has been for the last five minutes."

"So there's a meteor moving along the straight line between us, either away from, or following us."

"Following us." Rade's voice was so tense it thrummed. "And not a meteor. Take a look through the electelscope."

Karsdale's remarkable application of electronics to optics that in the space of a tube no larger than a man's arm reduces the apparent distance of an object to one-tenth the actual, was already switched in, but the thing that obscured Thuban must have moved since Rade focused it. I twirled thumbscrews until I got it clear again.

No, it was not a meteor. Silhouetted against it was a spaceship, slimmer than any craft I had ever seen. Wasplike, she seemed, and, like us, she was in a quadrant of space where no craft ought to be.

Doped with the poisons of fatigue, still shaken by what I had glimpsed in the galley, I forgot I was not on watch. I grabbed the mike, hailed the stranger. "Ship ahoy! What ship is that?"

Her reply was a bolt that lightnined, blue and vicious, across the void to pith the *Aldebaran*!

THE Sun, that so nearly had sapped the life from us, now saved our lives. It dazzled the wasp ship's gunner and, though his shot whizzed by too close for comfort, it missed.

Violet dust against black velvet, the stranger's rocket-flare spewed from her tubes now, to make a wake matching our own. She had been sneaking up on us, hopeful to take us unaware. Well, she had almost succeeded. By the 'scope's range-finder, she was within a hundred thousand miles of us, which in the scale of space is a small distance indeed—especially when one is stalked by death.

She spat another bolt at us, better aimed, but, watching for the flash, Hallam flung the *Aldebaran* portwise and slipped it. Those high-potential charges travel only half as fast as light, and so he'd had a full second to estimate its trajectory and avoid it. He would not have as long for the next; the attacker was closing in fast.

Rade shunted in all our stern tubes, dodged the third bolt. Our relative-speed indicator, set on Polaris, showed that we'd leaped to forty miles a second, the *Aldebaran's* limit.

It was not enough. The killer craft was pulling up on us fast. Her master, however, seemed to have made up his mind to expend no more bolts till he was near enough to be sure of a hit. Every one of those whirling bits of ionic disruption drained five hundred thousand kilofarads from his condensers and, huge though they might be, they were not inexhaustible.

"She's doing forty-five mile-seconds, Rade," I reported from the relative-speed indicator that I had set to our pursuer. "I didn't know there was a ship ever built could accelerate to that and maintain it."

"There was one." I realized with a sort of shock it was the first time he had spoken. "You are looking at the *Wanderer*."

"The *Wanderer*," I echoed the word,

not the calm matter-of-factness of his tone. "I don't recall—"

"Bardin's one great philanthropy, supposedly." Rade chuckled. "Strap me in, please."

I passed the blast-off straps around his chest and thighs as he went on. "He had her built, at staggering expense, as a floating laboratory, to study the cause and course of ether swirls. She blasted off for her trial flight three years ago, and never has been reported since."

"Her loss was faked." His meaning dawned on me. "Bardin has been using her as his contact with wherever in space he is building those mysterious weapons of his."

"Obviously. She probably makes Earthport in one of the great deserts, is loaded there from his big airfreighter tramps. Look you. She was probably a day or two out on her Earthward journey when we blasted off. Bardin would be overheard radioing her to turn and chase us, and had to wait till she made her grounding."

"All of which," I observed, "is very interesting, but it doesn't alter the fact that her speed beats our best by at least five mile-seconds and that she is using it to overtake us and pith us."

"Perhaps," Rade Hallam said softly, "we can do something about that." I had the impression that he had come to some decision. "Pass the order to Mona to strap Atna in his bunk, and herself in a blast-off hammock."

I complied. Mona acknowledged, started to ask a question.

I cut her off, turned back to Hallam with blood pounding in my temples. "Look, Rade. I don't know what you are up to, but I'd better get down to the fuel hole and take over."

"What for?" he wanted to know. "The youngsters have done all right so far, haven't they?"

"Aye," I admitted, grudgingly. "I guess they have." I had to; not even At-

na could have responded to Rade's signals more instantly. "But—"

"I am satisfied with their performance," he broke in coldly, "and I may need you here. Get into your own hammock, Mr. Gillis. At once."

I should have been content, I suppose, as I complied. These preparations indicated Hallam expected the *Aldebaran* to be tossed around. Anyone in the fuel hole would take a licking, since tubemen must be free to move around. I should have been content, but I was not.

Whether I was or not would make little difference when the *Wanderer* had closed to a distance at which we'd have no time to dodge the bolt that would rip the *Aldebaran* stem to stern, gut her of air and leave her a durasteel coffin to drift eternally in space. Clamped in the hammock, I looked at the viewscreen to see how much she had gained.

"Cygnus!" I gasped. "Where's the *Wanderer* gone to?" Only whirling stars showed in the astern leaf. "She—" The Sun sliced down into it, blazing.

The Sun was behind us! It couldn't be—but there it was, and there was the *Wanderer* in the central pentagon. The Sun was behind us and the *Wanderer* was ahead, visibly swelling in size, fairly leaping at us!

That meant—leaping Leonids! It meant that Rade had put the *Aldebaran* clear about, that he was hurling her, forty miles a second, at the wasp ship, herself rushing toward us at forty-five. *Deliberately, he was closing the gap between us and our enemy by five thousand miles a minute.*

It was sheer madness. Unless—

"Bardin's aboard her," I voiced my sudden inspiration. "You're going to ram her and take him to Sheol with us. Well, that's one way of making sure he'll never be tyrant of the Three Worlds."

"It would be," Rade agreed, "but—"

I hit the ceil as the *Aldebaran* crash-dove to avoid the bolt a startled gunner

had flung at us. Hallam brought her to even keel again, was once more catapulting her at the destroyer. "But," he continued, unperturbed, "I should be very much surprised if he has risked his precious neck aboard her."

I gave up trying to think what he was about. A stern chase is proverbially a long chase, and in a long chase some miracle might have happened to save us. He was throwing away the chance of that miracle to make a magnificent but futile gesture.

Magnificent it was. Never in all the long history of space-flight has a craft been handled as Rade Hallam handled the *Aldebaran*.

He danced that half-million tons of durasteel like a flitter-moth, there in the void. He flung her at the wasp ship, dodged a bolt, streaked for the *Wanderer* again. He played the switchbars as though they were the keys of a piano. He ducked and leaped and wove, and every chance he got hurtled, like a bat out of hell, for the killer-craft Gurd Barden had dispatched to murder us.

Mad it might be, but it was splendid.

INEXORABLY the distance separating us shortened . . . Fifty thousand miles . . . Forty . . . Ten thousand—Abruptly I realized that for a long minute no bolts had spat at us from the slim wasp ship.

"He's used up his condenser charge," Rade grunted, and slung the *Aldebaran* at the *Wanderer*, head on across the void.

I ought to be scared, I told myself. I ought to be numb with fright. That is death ahead, waiting for us. . . .

Not waiting, leaping to embrace us. Bardin's killers matched daring with Rade Hallam's daring, courage with his courage—madness with his madness. They streaked head on to meet us, to crash us, there, forty million miles from the planet that had given us birth. They could have

turned, easily could have fled us, but they leaped to meet us.

Across my mind there trailed the thought of Mona, brown-haired, gray-eyed, nose pert-tipped and mouth red and sweet. In minutes, Mona would die too. An hour ago it would not have been so dreadful to die, knowing that in death we still would not be parted, but I had heard her sing, in this past hour, had seen her, through a galley hatch. . . .

The bitterness in my breast was not because I was to die so soon.

A hundred miles only separated us from the *Wanderer* . . . fifty . . . She filled the central viewscreen—*shot down out of it!*

We had leaped up over the catapulting wasp ship. It was Rade Hallam who in the ultimate instant had lost nerve!

Sun-glare blazed out of the middle pentagon. The middle! Rade had back-looped the *Aldebaran*, was hurling her back toward the Sun. Antares! The *Wanderer* was in our keel screen! Rade was holding the *Aldebaran* over her, right over her. He was holding the *Wanderer* in the fierce down-blast of our under-keel rocket tubes, oxygen and hydrogen mixed one to one and ignited. He'd made a gigantic blow torch of our keel tubes, just such a torch as had sliced the *Icarus's* durasteel wall, and in that awful blast he held the ship Gurd Bardin had dispatched to murder us.

I saw the *Wanderer* flare to a red horror. I saw her blaze white as the blaze of the Sun. I saw her slim, graceful shape blur and melt in upon itself. In the *Aldebaran's* keel-screen I saw a glowing cinder, a bit of slag without shape or form or life.

Only one craft died there in space, forty-two million miles from Earth.

I ROLLED out of the hammock, clutched at the back of the controlman's chair. "By Saturn, Rade," I gasped. "If I hadn't seen you do it, I would not have believed it could be done."

He turned to stare at me, gray-lipped, nerves twitching under his gray skin. "It wasn't easy. Toom. It wasn't easy at all. But it would not have been possible if it had not been for those youngsters in the fuel hole."

"Those—" I was bruised, battered with the tossing about I had taken in the hammock. They had been in no hammock, had been strapped to no bunk. Pitched about in a cavern of hell, in the face of a peril the more appalling because they could not know its nature, they had responded to every demand upon them almost before it was made.

"They are spacemen, Toom," I scarcely heard Rade. "They— Where are you going?"

"To the fuel hole."

Marney's cheek was laid open by a deep, jagged gash. Lovett had one across his flat abdomen, and his left arm dangled limply at his side. He stared at me as I thudded toward him, his eyes red in a face blood-smeared, grimed with sweat and grease.

"I want to shake your hand," I growled, and thrust my paw at him. "Yours and Nat's." He winced as I gripped him, but he grinned too, white teeth flashing. "You turned in a job, lads—a grand job."

"Well, Mr. Gillis, there was a job to do. At that—" Lovett reeled, caught at a valve half his height—"it wasn't so tough."

I wondered why those bloodshot eyes of his slid to Marney, and away again.

"Lay off, you unlicked pup. I know what this fuel hole has been like the past half-hour. All right, Lovett, you're the worst banged up. I'll relieve you here while you go up to the sickbay and get patched up."

"But—"

"Get going. That's an order."

Bleakly, I watched him fumble through the hatch and turn toward the bay where Mona waited for him.

CHAPTER FOUR

A Satellite for Mercury

MERCURY was huge now in our noseward screen, blazing white as the *Aldebaran* slid toward her. A slim, black crescent bit into her farther limb, the edge of it knife-sharp as the demarcation between a planet's night and day must be when there is no atmosphere to blur it with dusk.

"Reduce speed, Toom." Rade was at the electroscope, had been there since I relieved him two hours ago.

"Reduce speed," I parroted automatically. "Aye, sir."

"Make it so."

As I pulled the switchbars to obey the order, it penetrated. "What's the idea? You're not, by any chance, planning to land."

"No." Rade kept his nose shoved against the 'scope's eyepiece. "I hardly think it would be safe." Safe! A space-suit would keep a man alive about fifteen minutes in that heat. "Start your descending spiral, with the planet's rotation."

But he'd just said—"Gauge your deceleration so that at a thousand miles mean altitude the ship will be making two point two five mile-seconds, and hold that."

"Two— Cygnus, Rade! Two and a quarter miles per second is Mercury's velocity of escape. If I do that, we'll go into a circular orbit around her, become a satellite."

"Precisely," he responded, still not bothering to raise his head from the instrument. "Mercury has been without a moon long enough."

I shrugged. He was master, I had no choice except to obey. It was a neat trick to contrive the precise adjustment between the centrifugal force of our circling and the planet's gravity, and there was the

nearness of the Sun to complicate matters. It was a very neat trick, but in three and a half hours I had made of the *Aldebaran* a moon that would flash through Mercury's sky, a thousand miles above her surface, once in approximately every two Earth hours.

"Off all tubes," I signaled the fuel hole. There was no friction to slow us; we needed no power to keep circling thus forever. I turned to Hallam.

He was still crouched over the electroscope. "It's not on the night side," I heard him mutter. "It can't be. We can't stay here eighty-eight Earth days."

Mercury's day is just eighty-eight times as long as Terra's.

"We will if we have to." That strange, half-toned mutter of his went on. "We'll stay ten times eight-eight days if we have to."

A chill prickle ran along my spine. I had just recalled the old tale of the master of the *Arcturus* who, cracking up, had chased a comet out toward the Galaxies until his controlman had split his skull with a wrench and taken over.

"What are you looking for down there, Rade?" I asked. "What do you expect to find there except red-hot rock and desolation?"

"I don't know." He seemed to be trying to crawl into the 'scope tube. "There is something." A shrillness of hysteria edged his voice. "There has to be—a machine, men building it."

"Men!" My laugh was a scarcely human croak. "In that furnace?" The wild, impossible story he'd told us in New York Spaceport, the mad flight he'd used it to justify. "Now I know you're crazy."

He didn't flare at me for that. He didn't even notice it. He just kept staring into the tube, muttering unintelligibly.

He didn't see me shove up out of the chair and steal soundlessly across the cabin to a locker near the hatch. I reached the locker, got it open without sound.

Yes, there was the curious device of coils and in insulated handle I had seen Rade stow there, the shock-gun he had taken from Tala, aboard the *Icarus*.

Rade Hallam was my friend. I could never bring myself to split his skull with a wrench. But the paralysis this contrivance induced had had no ill effects on any of us.

My hand closed on its butt—froze as Rade spun to me, eyes red-rimmed and terrible.

"I'm crazy, am I?" he croaked. "Come here, Toom. Come here, my doubting Thomas. Come see the pretty little thing I have found."

Screening it with my body, I slipped the shock-gun beneath the waistband of my sweat-sodden shorts. Then I was at the 'scope, was peering through its eyepiece.

"Cygnus!" I whispered. "Great leaping Leonids." No. Rade Hallam was not insane. Staring at the thing the electroscope showed me, I believed, at last I really believed, that the man who had built it could conquer the three peopled worlds.

I had only a glimpse of it and then the *Aldebaran*, rounding Mercury, entered its night.

A GREAT dome, the thing had been, an enormous crystal hemisphere rising from the blazing waste. "It must be five miles across," I gasped, gaping, at Rade Hallam, "and as many high at its apex. Like a—" I sought for some homely comparison that would temper my awe—"like a vast, transparent beehive, swarming with men."

"Aye, Toom. Thousands, on the ground and buzzing about in tiny gyrocopters. But did you see the machine they are building? Coil upon coil of gleaming copper, intricate convolutions towering halfway to the ceil of that enormous dome."

"What is it?" I whispered. "Rade, what is it and what can it do?"

He pulled the side of his hand across his

eyes. The hand, rock steady on its switchbar as the *Aldebaran* had hurtled toward what had seemed certain death, was trembling now. "We must find out. But we shall have to wait till the dome rolls under us again."

"An Earth-hour."

That hour somehow seemed longer than a day of the many we had spent scorching across space. Hallam called the cadets and Mona into the control cabin. Working feverishly, we set up the camera with which the I.C.B.'s researchers provide every spaceship, for recording any unusual phenomenon of the void, and a number of other instruments whose use I did not know.

And then the dome came into view again.

The others, busy with their instruments, left Mona and me to share the electroscope. "Those long buildings along the edge there," she exclaimed. "Do you suppose they are—"

"Barracks, of course. And that's a spaceship cradle over there, which will never berth the *Wanderer* again. But look at those tractors, will you, scuttering like strange monsters with a life of their own. And those aerial cranes! Have you ever seen any so huge?"

"The men working them are Martians," Mona responded in a sort of ecstatic antiphony. "You can tell by their size. And that gang digging a trench have the silver, scaly skins of Venusians." Womanlike, her interest was in the humans who thronged there rather than in the astounding machines they operated. "But the flyers—they seem to be supervisors—are Earthmen—Toom!" Her head lifted from the 'scope. "You told me there's no air on Mercury. How do they breathe?"

"I can answer that, Mrs. Gillis," Lovett called from one of the unfamiliar instruments, and my hackles bristled at the sound of his voice. "There is plenty of air inside there, according to this refracto-

meter. They undoubtedly manufacture enough to fill the dome, from chemicals as abundant on this planet as on Earth. To keep it breathable they would only have to have the same sort of apparatus we use on the *Aldebaran*, tremendously magnified, of course."

"But the heat, Jan." She was not as sly as he; she called him by his first name even before me. "We have hardly been able to stand it even for a few days and millions of miles farther from the Sun. How do they—"

"It is not hot under the dome, Mona." That was Rade. "Not unendurably, at any rate. I have just succeeded in analyzing the material of which it is composed, by means of this ultra-spectroscope. It is—" I did not understand, nor can I reproduce the harsh collection of syllables.

"What is that?" Mona wanted to know.

"A plastic, completely non-conductive of heat and immensely strong. I did not know it could be made transparent—Hm." His look turned inward and by his tone I knew that he no longer spoke to Mona but was thinking aloud. "You would think they'd prefer it opaque, to screen the glare of a Sun three times the size and nine times the brilliance we see it on Earth. Now why should they— Watch your exposure time, Marney." Nat was very busy at the whirring camera. "If you scorch those—"

"Don't worry, sir." The intent cadet didn't look up from the open tank through which the photos were moving on an endless belt, automatically developed. "They're coming through clear as crystal. The S-22 filters you suggested were just right, and I've got her stopped down to—"

Once more some technical terminology that was gibberish to me. If I could only understand. But while these youngsters had been in the universities, learning all that, I was scraping dirty dishes in the

Tavern of the Seven Pleiades' kitchen.

"Never mind, Toom." Mona must have read my thoughts in my face. "You're still the best controlman in the fleet."

"Right," I growled. "That's all I'm good for, to pull switchbars." I jerked away from the hand she had laid on my shoulder, bent to the electroscope.

"Toom." She dropped her voice so that it was too low to be heard by the others. "What's the matter, Toom? Why did you pull away from me like that?"

She sounded upset. She was putting on a good act. I stared through the 'scope, my hands gripping its motile levers so hard the bruises showed long after.

All I saw was a blur.

If this only were Lovett's neck I had my hands on— The bustle about me ceased abruptly.

"I think we have enough," I heard Rade Hallam say, "but to make doubly sure we shall take another set of recordings when we come around again."

The dome must have dropped out of view and I must have looked like a fool, peering at something that wasn't there. I lifted my head.

MONA had her gray eyes on me and there was a hurt question in them. "Do you think that's wise, sir?" Marney was asking as I turned my back on her. "They may have spotted us and be ready for our return."

Rade shook his head. "At a thousand miles above them, against the glare of the Sun, the *Aldebaran* would be invisible to the naked eye. There is no reason for them to have been scanning the sky with a 'scope. The *Wanderer* sent no message, and certainly Bardin would not chance a radio warning from Earth. It would be overheard, investigated whether in the clear or in cipher. No. They have been undisturbed too long to be worrying now about any possibility of being observed as they build their machine."

"What is it?" There was awe in Lovett's tone. "What do you think it can possibly be?"

"Yes," the other cadet reinforced him. "What is it? I expected to find something like a vast fleet of spaceships being turned out, armed with some new weapon against which the Union would have no defense. Look here! That tremendous construction cannot possibly be moved off Mercury." He shrugged. "I'm willing to stake my chance of getting back to Terra that whatever it is, it's no weapon."

Hallam's gaunt countenance was deeply lined again. "It must be." His voice was flat and there was no confidence in it. "It has to be."

"Maybe," Lovett drawled. "Maybe it is." My neck cords tautened with a new anger. "But if you ask me what Bardin's doin' he's found a deposit of some valuable mineral on Mercury and he's devised a way to mine it." Those puling brats! "And that's what you brought us here to find out."

They were accusing him of having led them on a wild-goose chase. Master Rocketeer Hallam, whose shoes they were unworthy to shine. If I could only prove him right, some way. Fine chance! They had more science in their little fingers than I had in my useless brain.

"I was so sure." Rade was an old man suddenly, all the erectness, all the fine, proud certainty of himself drained out of him. "So sure—A mine?" His effort to stave off admission of defeat was pathetic. "No, Lovett, not a mine. Not those gigantic coils. . . . But what could they be? How can Gurd Bardin use them against Earth from fifty million miles Sunward? What—"

"Toom!" Mona cried. "Where—" I brushed off the hand she flung out to detain me, went through the hatch. I was running down a companionway, clutching the wet photo I had snatched from the camera's fixing bath. . . .

CHAPTER FIVE

Cradle of Death

I WAS grinning as I strode back into the control cabin. "I've got it," I flung at the faces that turned to me. "I know what Bardin's building, and what it can do."

"You know?" Mona stared. "You, Toom?"

"Me. Toom Gillis, the dumb control-man, the guy that doesn't know beans about science. Look at this, Rade." I thrust at him the photo that showed every whorl, every detail of the monstrous thing Bardin was building. "Look at it closely, Master Hallam. Have you ever seen anything like it before?"

"Seen it?" He was looking at me rather than the still dripping picture. "Where could I possibly have seen anything like it?"

"In the amphibian you taxied into our cargo-hold just before the *Aldebaran* blasted off and have never bothered to look at since." A wild hope was dawning in his weary eyes. "I've been down there to look at it, more than once, trying to dope out how that blackout business works, and I've just been down there again. That machine under the dome is the same, Rade, exactly the same, blown up about five thousand times."

"I'll be eternally ether-torqued," Jan Lovett murmured.

"You get it now, don't you?" I rattled on, savoring my triumph. Poignantly conscious of the way the cadets gaped open-mouthed at me, of the light in Rade's eyes, but most of all of Mona. "You get why Bardin is building it here on Mercury, which lies between the Sun and each of the three inhabited planets for varying periods in each of their years."

I could see that they were getting a glimmering of my meaning, went on to make it clearer. "Between them," I ham-

mered the point, "and the Sun that gives them light. That will give them no light when Bardin's machine is finished and he throws its switch."

I had to stop for breath, but no one spoke till I began again. "Maybe you scientists can work out how. I can't, being only a spaceman. But I am not too lack-brained to guess, remembering what the miniature model of that machine has done, that the larger will not only cut off daylight from whatever planet Gurd Bardin wishes, but will black out all artificial illumination also.

"I remember, and I know you do too, the terror that leaped up in us when suddenly, inexplicably, we went blind."

Yes, I could see in their faces that they remembered, that they were beginning to glimpse the same picture of horror that had come to me, just now in the cargo hold, when I had checked my recollection of the apparatus in the *Icarus's* tender with the actuality.

"Think back to that," I told them, "and imagine if you can the terror of the peoples of the Earth when all Earth goes blind. Imagine planes, glider-trains, crashing in the dead black no searchlight will penetrate. Imagine the crowds, mad with unreasoning panic, surging the streets of the cities, running sightless through the sightless countrysides. Blind, helpless, all Earth at the mercy of a few determined men, of Bardin's men—"

"Wait up, Mr. Gillis." It would be Lovett who would interrupt me. "I'll grant all our armaments would be useless if we can't see to use them, but Bardin's crowd would be blind too, wouldn't they?"

"No, Cadet Lovett, they would not." It felt swell to be able to flatten him. "Is not there a colloid in the *Icarus's* amphibian through which Master Hallam was able to see out of the blackness? No. Bardin's men will not be blind. They will see well enough to use their shock-guns, paralyzing out of the terrible dark what-

ever opposition might be gathered against them. They will see well enough, no possible doubt, to seize our world's nerve centers of communication, her water reservoirs, her power plants, and make their leader, Gurd Bardin, completely master of it before he returns light to it. Look here!" I whirled to Rade. "We've got to destroy that devilish thing. We've got to smash it."

He was himself again, justified. "How, Toom? The dome's fabric is proof against our rocket blasts, and we have no other weapon with which to attack it."

"We have the *Aldebaran*, have we not? We can drive the *Aldebaran* full tilt at the dome, and through it, to smash the machine. We will die, but Bardin's men will die too, as their air gusts out into space and we smash their machine to tangled wreckage."

"That's the ticket!" Lovett exclaimed, but Marney's thinned voice drowned him out.

"No! No, that would be absurd." I turned to him. "Bardin will still be alive with his wealth and his will to make himself tyrant, and his plans. We can smash his dome and his machine, but he can rebuild them again, his secret still safe because we will be dead."

"Dead," I snarled. "That's what bothers you, you yellow-bellied—"

"Toom!" Hallam's sharp cry cut me off. "Marney is right. We will indulge in no silly heroics but return at once to Earth and place in Hol Tarsash's hands the photos and graphs with which he can prove to the Council—"

"If we can get them to him, across fifty million miles of space." That would be putting all our eggs in one basket, with a vengeance. "Fifty million miles—and then there's the chance that he will not be able to convince the Council. How do you know," a new thought struck me, "that enough of them are not controlled by Bardin to prevent—"

"That will be enough," Rade rapped out. "We return to Earth. To your stations, all hands. Marney! Lovett! To the—Hello!" He looked about the cabin, uncertainly. Jan Lovett was gone from it—and Mona. While we had been absorbed, they had slipped out together.

The hatch jolted open.

"Uncle Rade!" Mona clawed at the jamb, her pupils dilated. "Jan. I tried to stop him. He is in the escape lock. He—" Her arm lifted. Her fingers pointed to the viewscreen.

The dome was in it again, just coming up over the bulge of Mercury. Something else was in it too, black, elongated, stream-nosed. A manshell, the lifeplane of the spaceship. It was jetting violet flame from its truncated stern as it fell away from the *Aldebaran's* keel and streaked, on a long diagonal, for the gleaming great dome on Mercury!

Within that manshell was Jan Lovett. Against the chance that the *Aldebaran* might fail on its Earthward flight, he had made a human projectile of himself to die that the peoples of the three planets might live, still free.

"**T**HE fool," I heard Master Rade Hallam whisper. "The magnificent fool!" and then no one spoke, no one moved, as we watched that manshell catapult toward the dome.

To the two and a quarter mile-second throw of the *Aldebaran*, Lovett was adding the acceleration of his gas jets and Mercury that of her gravity. A third that of Earth, this last, but in a thousand-mile fall with no air-friction to set terminal velocity—I gave up trying to figure the footpounds of impact when he struck. It would be terrific.

No one spoke, but I heard Mona sob and recalled again how I had heard her sing to Jan Lovett, stroking his hair. She had lost him almost as soon as she had found him but, knowing her, I knew that

the memory of him would stay with her always—with her and with me, and between us.

"They see him." I hadn't noticed Nat Marney get to the electelscope. "They know he's coming." In the viewscreen, the manshell now was a tiny speck, but even in the screen I could make out a great scattering around within the dome. "They—Saturn! He's slowing." Marney was so choked up he was barely intelligible. "He's not falling half as fast as he was before. Not a quarter. But his gas jets are still driving him toward the dome. I can't understand—"

"I can," Rade was gray-faced. "With no atmosphere to burn them up by friction, the dome would be bombarded by meteors at certain seasons, would have to be protected against it. It must have some sort of envelope of repellent force, an anti-gravity shield—by Draco! I remember hearing that one invention of such a nature was once offered to the I.C.B. for its spaceships, and that Committee on Research, of which Bardin was chairman at the time, reported that it was ineffective. He—"

"Maybe he was right," I interrupted. "Jan's smacked. Look!"

The manshell had struck at the very topmost point of the dome's round surface—struck hard, in spite of whatever had slowed it. Lines of light rayed along the transparent hemisphere from where it had hit. The glass-like stuff dented—dented, but did not break.

"Useless," Rade Hallam groaned. "His sacrifice was useless." The plastic out of which Bardin had shaped his dome was far from fragile. "That brave lad—dead uselessly."

I stared at the black mite, held in its cuplike depression.

"Not dead!" Marney swung from the 'scope, his face grotesquely clownlike with sweat streaks cut through its grime of black grease. "Jan is not dead. His gas

jets flared out, just now, as if he were trying to lift the shell, and cut off and flared out again. Now they're gone, but they wouldn't have showed at all if he was alive."

"Maybe—" I was hoarse—"he is still alive, but that is all the worse for him." I didn't dare look at Mona. "He can't get off, and though those new manshells are pretty well insulated, the heat will get at him. He'll fry—"

"Master Hallam!" Marney broke in. "Can you— Is it possible to maneuver the *Aldebaran* so as just to skim the top of that dome?"

Rade stared.

"Is it?" The youth's fingers gripped, sank into Hallam's arm. "Tell me. I've got to know."

"Why, I suppose I could manage it, but what good—"

"Men go out on the ship's skin in spacesuits, don't they, to make repairs?"

"Yes, but even far from the pull of any planet, that is a dangerous procedure. Here—"

"I'm going out there, with a grapnel." Nat seemed not to have heard anything but that "yes." "If you will take the *Aldebaran* down—"

"Look you, my son." Hallam got his attention. "It is a thousand-to-one chance that all you would accomplish would be to get yourself killed too."

"I understand that, sir," Nat Marney said; and then he said, very quietly, "Jan is my friend, sir. I have a right to take that chance."

And this, I thought, is the lad I called a yellow-bellied coward.

Rade's arm was around his shoulder now. "Jan is your friend, my boy, and you have every right to risk your life to save his, but does it occur to you that you have no right to risk the cause for which we have come so far and suffered so much? With both of you gone and Atna laid up, who will tend tubes?"

"Me, Bahss." Green-hued, gigantic, Atna filled the hatchway. "Misse Mon make me all right now. I ready to go to work."

"And I'll help him, Uncle Rade," Mona cried. "Please let Nat try it." She was haggard, her face drawn. "Please."

"Just a minute." It was high time I took a hand in this. "It doesn't seem to have occurred to any of you that a manshell, loaded, weighs a thousand pounds on Earth. True enough, that makes it only three-ten here on Mercury, but how the devil can one man, grapnel or no, handle over three hundred pounds?"

I heard the whimper in Marney's throat, but it was Mona's face I saw—her eyes.

"He can't," Rade said, "and that seems to end the discussion."

"Not quite," I smiled. "If you will permit me, Master Hallam, I shall go out on the hull with Cadet Marney and help him."

A little later we were out on the ledge that runs along the *Aldebaran's* keel, Nat Marney and I, huge and clumsy in our space-suits. I had harnessed us with aludur cables to the ship's skin and we had air enough to breathe, but no suit could protect us from the heat, the stifling, awful heat that beat upon us.

From the three-times-too-big Sun that heat came, and from the blue flare of gases that spouted from the keel tubes of the *Aldebaran's* nose or her stern as Rade Hallam played the switchbars in the control cabin.

If this handling of the ship during our brush with the *Wanderer* had been magnificent, what word is there to describe his seamanship now? He swooped his giant craft down and down on a singing arc to the dome; he gauged speed and distance so exactly that her keel all but brushed its summit—

I did not see that.

Marrow of my bones sizzling, vision

burned from my eyes, I saw neither the dome nor the men with whom Gurd Bardin had peopled it, nor the machine they were building.

I saw only a vague gleam, a cup in the gleam, and at the bottom of the cup a blurred black thing.

I knew only that I must sling at that thing the aludur cable gripped by the steel hands of my spacesuit, the cable whose other end was in the claws of Marney's, and from whose center swung the grapnel that must snatch that black shell from its cup.

A weight pulled my arms from their sockets. I was being pulled apart by the weight that strove to drag me from the *Aldebaran's* hull as very dimly I sensed that she zoomed upward again, and then darkness invaded my skull.

The weight still dragged at me and it was still dark, but there was coolness within the spacesuit, reviving and grateful coolness, and the suit's transparent faceplate was frosted by my breath.

I rubbed a clear space in that frost with my nose. The *Aldebaran's* skin rounded away from me. Against its silvery sheen I made out the black line of cable that streamed away from me to a black, penduluming manshell. Beyond the manshell the line ran to a sprawl of swollen legs and arms and bloated torso, Nat Marney in his spacesuit.

But there was darkness about us, star-thronged.

Darkness and cold, so near the Sun? How— I had the answer, but it slipped from me as thought, consciousness, slipped away.

"Darkness and cold, so near the Sun?" I thought I said it aloud, but I could not hear myself. "Of course, you fool. We are in Mercury's shadow-cone. That's why there's no light—" But there *was* light in my opening eyes, coldlight that struck through a cloud of soft, brown hair and made an aureole of it.

A NIMBUS framed a small, pert face, tip-tilted nose and gray eyes, and lips whispered.

"Toom. You— You've come back."

"Back?" I could hear myself now. "Where?"

"The *Aldebaran's* sickbay. Don't you remember? You fixed cables to a windlass so that Atna and I could pull you back into the airlock if you and Nat couldn't get to it yourselves."

"Jan?"

"Jan too. Alive, but dreadfully hurt. He's over there in that last bunk, near the hatch."

My lids drooped. I was tired. Tired? Lord! "I—I want to sleep, Mona. That's all I need. You can go to—to Jan."

"Oh, but there's nothing more I can do for him, just now. Look, Toom. You go to sleep. I'll just sit here by you, quiet as a mouse."

She didn't have to pretend. I must tell her she didn't have to pretend any longer.

"Look, Mona." I made myself speak very clearly, very distinctly. "You—I heard you singing our moon song to him. I saw you stroking his hair—"

"You heard—Oh, Toom. That was why you've been acting so strangely." Laughter bubbled from her lips, clear, tinkling laughter. "Why, you silly. The poor kid was on the verge of breaking, with the heat and the long strain, and I sang to him to soothe him, as I might have to a child." Her laughter was like cool water laving me, easing me at last. "And you thought—" Her palms, warm, soft, took my aching head between them and her eyes were twin gray stars, shining through tears. "Oh, Toom, you silly darling."

"Will you—" I gulped—"forgive me, Mona, for thinking—"

"Forgive you?" A little, chuckling laugh this time. "Don't you know, stupid, that a woman is never quite certain her man loves her till he's jealous of her?"

"You little devil," I growled. Every movement was a separate and exquisite agony, but I got my arm up and around her and pulled her lips to mine.

WHAT a wife for a spaceman Mona is! Not only did she tend her patients and the galley, but made shift to help Atna in the fuel hole too, the two Earth-days it took Nat and me to get back on our feet. After that it was easier for Master Hallam, though Jan was not able to move from his bunk till the day, three weeks later, that the *Aldebaran* limped into Newyork Spaceport with the guns of an I.C.B. Patrol ship trained on her.

Hol Tarsash settled that little matter quickly enough, when we turned over to him the photos we'd taken of the great dome on Mercury and what was within it, the instrument graphs and the *Icarus'* strangely equipped lifeplane.

All the three worlds know how he called an emergency meeting of the Supreme Council of the Tri-Planet Federal Union, and of the orders that issued from them, sending the whole I.C.B. Patrol fleet speeding across the void to smash the dome on Mercury with their blue bolts, the dome and all that was within it. All the three worlds listened to the Tri-Planet Court that condemned Gurd Bardin to the Lunar Penal Colony for life.

The photos Nat Marney took from the *Aldebaran* those few hours it was a satellite of the Sun's nearest neighbor were reproduced on the facsimile newsets of all the three worlds, but these were not quite as they were when Hol Tarsash displayed them to the Council. The image of the machine was blotted out from them, as the machine itself had been blotted out.

The unretouched pictures, and the miniature models of Bardin's machine with which the *Icarus'* two amphibians had been equipped, are buried in the most secret vaults of the Union, to be used

only when and if the peace of the Union shall ever again be threatened. Some wished that these also be destroyed, saying that with the easy defeat of Gurd Bardin democracy has proven that at last it has learned to defend itself.

Perhaps they are right. But I, for one, am glad that Hol Tarsash won his fight to have the secret of the Bardin machine preserved.

Rade Hallam was given command of the great new *Betelgeuse*. Since she is double the size of any spaceship heretofore launched, it was decided that she would require the services of two master rocketeers. Thus, I was not separated from him, although the Sunburst on my uniform is silver now. We had the naming of our controlmen and so our dispute as to the respective merits of Jan Lovett and Nat Marney never had to be settled.

Those two youngsters insisted that no one but Mona might sew on their bright new Golden Sunbursts. I made no objection to that.

The schedule of the *Betelgeuse* worked out this year so that we were able to attend the R.T.S.—Princeton game at Lake Placid. Princeton won, three to two, but the cadets did not seem too downcast over that, judging from their fresh young voices as they came softly across the shimmering, opalescent waters:

*All things end and so to ending come
our golden college days.*

*Fading fast our youthful friendships,
fading into misty haze. . . .*

*R.T.S. fore'er will bind us,
Brothers all.*

*And this pledge we leave behind us;
Each to all.*

*When you need us, we shall gather.
From the black void's farthest borders
We shall blast across the heavens and
shall rally to your call.*

*Brother! To your call we'll rally, one
and all.*

By ROBERT
BLOCH

★ THE ★
**FEAR
PLANET**

"Look around, reader. Look around! If you see a moving green shape behind you, the story's over!"

I HOPE nobody reads this. Because if they do, it means someone else has come here. And if they come here, they'll get caught, like we were caught.

Just to play safe, I won't mention dates. I won't give the name of our expedition, either. No clues. Just a warning.

I'll write it as a warning, then. Write it now, while I'm still able to.

We landed yesterday on this accursed asteroid. There were four of us—Commander Jason Sturm in charge; little Benson, engineer and navigator; Hecker, our biologist. And myself—radioman, assistant navigator, jack of all trades.

Never mind about the trip. It was nasty. Packed like sardines in a tin ship, hurtling through space. We'd have landed on a comet just to feel solid ground under our feet.

Commander Sturm's chartings showed brilliant imagination, but damned little else. Why he chose this particular destination I'll never know. A God-forsaken little asteroid is what it seemed to me—



and it certainly turned out to be one.

But we were elated when we nosed down. Benson's indications on atmospheric pressure, density and component analysis showed we could step out freely without using our insulated suits. Moist air, and almost too much oxygen. Temperature above eighty.

When we landed, Benson looked through the perio-glass.

"God!" he muttered. "What a spot!"

I couldn't improve on his comments anyway.

I squinted out at the surface of this miniature earth. In my time I've done a little serious drinking. I've seen pink elephants. But this was the first time I ever saw green nightmares.

That's what the place was—a green nightmare.

Nothing but forest, as far as the eye could see—a lush, tropical green forest. Swamplike growths rising out of mud that was not brown, but a verdant green. And twining through mazes of twisted vegetable tentacles was the mist. The livid mist of coiling, greenish steam.

Our own Amazon was nothing compared to this ripe and rotten blight. A true green hell.

But we'd been weeks inside the ship. As I say, anything looked good. And if the air was right—

"Let's go," said Commander Jason Sturm. Tall, gruff-looking, weather-beaten old space dog, but a big name in the annals of interspatial exploration.

He already had the flag out and unrolled. Typical Sturm touch. Gangling biologist Hecker helped me lug the marker with the official exploration disc.

The four of us lowered the ladder and clambered down into the ooze.

Sturm led the way. The new Columbus, you know—flag and all. He stepped down into the swirling mist and walked forward. Three paces and we could hardly

see him. The steam was that thick. Literally pea soup.

But he stuck the end of his flagpole down in the mud and made a little speech.

"I claim this body in the name of—"

I didn't listen. I was trying to haul that marker along. Hecker grunted beside me. The damned thing was heavy. Every step caused us to sink into that slimy ooze. We gasped.

Breathing the moist, warm steam wasn't much relief.

"Curse these vines!" Hecker almost tripped as his feet were enmeshed in the octopoidal coils of a trailing plant.

"Wait a minute!" Sturm had concluded his verbal formalities. He stood beside me and raised his hand.

"Better get some knives," he suggested. "We'll carry the marker over to some kind of rise and clear away the vines around it. That way, the marker will stand out."

"Doubt if it will do much good," commented Hecker, stooping over and examining a stray tendril. "This stuff will probably grow over again in forty-eight hours."

"What is it?"

"Don't know, yet. Certainly isn't earthly. Something like the Venus formations. Note the valvular conformations."

"To hell with the valvular conformations!" decided Sturm. "Time for that later. Let's get out the knives and set the marker."

WE SHOULD have taken a couple of aborigines along with their machetes. We had to virtually hack our way through the forest of plant life. No trees here, understand. Just towering vegetables and ferns and bushes.

We didn't mind, at first. The elation of landing was still buoying us up. Hecker wiped the steam from his spectacles and grinned. Benson cut a swath ahead.

Sturm stormed along, good-natured as ever.

"Here's a spot," he suggested, indicating a little green knoll.

Hecker and I set down the marker with gasps of relief.

I didn't like to gasp. Inhaled too much of that air—rank, fetid air. Rank and fetid, like the vegetation. Vegetation—

"Say!" Hecker's voice rose in an excited whisper.

"What's up?" I gave him a look. He was peering over his shoulder apprehensively.

"Thought I saw something move. A bush, over in that clump."

I followed his glance. Nothing there but a mass of livid growths waving gently.

"You're mistaken. Wipe the steam off your glasses."

Hecker grinned and followed my suggestion.

We moved the marker up, ready to dig around the base and sink it. Sturm and Benson bent down to assist.

That's why we didn't see what was coming until too late.

"Look out!"

I straightened up with a jerk, whirled around. Whirled around and stared at slithering horror.

The thing was green. That's all I saw at first—the green outlines of the rushing figure. The great green figure with the waving arms. Then I looked and realized the truth.

"It's a plant!" I yelled. "And it's alive!"

Undulating toward me, undulating on trailing tentacles that somehow resembled bloated caricatures of human legs, a towering monstrosity swept forward. Two stalks carried a pulpy, swollen body like that of an obscene idol. Above were the waving arms of the plant creature, on either side of a rising growth corresponding to a head.

The head was the worst of all. Round, squat, the size of a green melon, it bobbed on the monstrosity's neck—if neck it was—like a nodding flower. But there was nothing flowery in the wrinkled, obscene visage that peered from the forefront of the rounded head. The thing had a face—a face with eyes and mouth.

I know it had a mouth. Because it came too quickly for me to do more than stare, shudder, and try to dodge the groping arms. I did swerve to one side, but too late. The tentacles enfolded me.

Sturm was shouting orders. Benson was waving his knife. I couldn't see Hecker. But I paid no attention. My being—physical and mental—was literally gripped by the silent, slithering green horror with the coiling arms that now squeezed my throat in a rubbery embrace.

I fought and clawed, but I was pressed close to the pulpy body of the monstrosity; close enough to smell the rank carrion odor of fetid decay. The tentacles pinned my head back. I stared into the horrid greenish wrinkles that parodied a face on the end of the nodded stalk that served for a neck. I stared into emerald eyes—eyes with livid pupils that seemed to swim in chlorophyll.

My fist lashed out at that dreadful mockery of a countenance, landed deeply in the putrescent mass. The thing squeezed tighter. I saw Sturm at my side. He too had a knife, and it stabbed down in a vicious arc into the body of the vegetable creature.

"Look out!" he shouted, again.

Suddenly the creature raised me in its arms. I kicked air as the plant held me aloft. The head strained closer to me, the ghastly semblance of a face craning at the end of the stalklike neck as though it sought to bury its mouth in my flesh. I watched that champing hole of a mouth—

Writhing frantically, I wriggled free. But too late. As I fell, the tentacles

caught my ankles. I hung head downward as the gigantic vegetable bent. I felt the rubbery lips of the monster press against my leg. Press, and drink deep. Needle-like pains lanced through my calves.

Then, dizzy and faint, I fell.

My last memory was that of kaleidoscopic vistas of horror. The rank nausea of the face, the pain of the creature's bite; the distorted faces of Sturm, Benson and Hecker as they plunged their knives into the towering green body—and then the cool softness of the mossy earth as I landed.

WHEN I awoke I was in my bunk. Sturm bent over me, eyes grave. I sat up.

"What are you doing to my leg?" I asked. He'd ripped the trousers away from my right leg, baring it to the knee. Now he tore the cloth from my left leg.

"The thing must have stung you," he told me.

His fingers indicated the two incisions in the flesh of either calf. Tiny punctures, deep in the fatty part, with little purplish discolorations around them. I noted a slight angry swelling at the points of the wounds.

"Better cut into them," Sturm grunted. "Damned thing might have a poisonous sting."

I shook my head. "Put on some antiseptic and let's see what happens," I suggested. "They don't hurt now—and I'd hate to be laid up on the voyage back if it isn't necessary."

Sturm shrugged.

"What happened after I passed out?" I asked.

He sighed, rose, busied himself with the antiseptic and a swab.

"Devil got away," he confessed. "Stung you, dropped you, and scuttled off. We had our knives into it. Benson tried to follow. The plant just lashed out once

with one of those green cables and knocked him flat. Scooted hell for leather back into the jungle."

Antiseptic applied, he stepped back. I wheeled around and attempted to stand up.

I didn't succeed. A wave of weakness swept over me in a giddy cloud. I dropped back on to the bunk.

"What's the matter, boy?" asked Sturm. His eyes, on my face, were anxious.

"I—I don't know," I murmured. "I feel weak. My legs seem numb."

"What's that? Can't hear you."

Was it possible? I thought I was talking in a normal voice, yet he couldn't hear me. I must be weaker than I thought.

"Better lie down and let me cut," Sturm advised.

"No." I forced a grin. "I'll just lie down and sleep for a bit. That'll fix me up."

"Think you'll be all right? We're going out to take a look around the place. Want to see if we run into any more of those things. And this time we'll go armed."

"Go ahead," I said. "Good luck."

Sturm clumped out. I turned my face to the wall. I felt hot, feverish. My legs were numb, and the numbness seemed to be creeping up to my hips. It was a warm, pleasant feeling. With an effort, I sat up and propped my head on my hand. I stared down at my exposed legs. The swelling hadn't perceptibly increased.

That was a relief. I dropped back to the pillow and lay there. The numbness was natural, after all. I was very tired. Very tired. I would sleep.

I drifted off.

How long I slept I do not know. But when I opened my eyes again, I was a different man.

The numbness was gone. I sat up and took another look. My legs were unchanged. No inflammation. No pain. I swung off the bunk, stood up. Everything was all right.

Rummaging around, I found an old white shirt. I ripped it up into strips and quickly bandaged my legs, improvising puttees.

Then I strolled out.

The change was remarkable. My depression had passed. Now I could gaze on the weird landscape with new appreciation. Whatever terrors might lurk out beyond, there was a certain ghastly beauty in this God-forsaken spot on a lonely asteroid.

As I watched, green twilight crept over the land. The trees were shadowed by approaching darkness, and the steam assumed new and fanciful shapes, peopling the abysses of the forest with misty ghost-presences.

Ghost-presences!

I wondered about that monster from the jungle. What was it—this walking vegetable? What freak, what mutation, what biological aberration had produced the strange life-form which had attacked me?

I gazed into the twilight and pondered.

IT WAS dark when they returned. Not the familiar bluish darkness of earth, but green-dark. A deep, heavy green.

I was sitting on the ladder.

"How do you feel?" asked Sturm.

"Fine." I indicated the bandages I'd wrapped around my legs. "These help."

"Maybe you could use some more salve," Hecker suggested.

"Don't bother. I'm all right."

I was, too. I felt much better after my leaden slumber. Full of new energy.

"What are you staring at?" Sturm asked me.

"Look," I whispered, pointing over his shoulder.

They turned. Stared at the rising moons.

Yes, moons. Two of them. Moons for an asteroid. Green moons.

Nightmare moons for a nightmare world.

They rose over the horizon, wide apart, like two green eyes set in the broad face of space. Green eyes that gloated down on this twisted, tangled world of mad life.

Sure, I know what that sounds like. But the sight of those moons inspired that kind of thinking.

"Where'd you go?" I asked.

"Didn't get very far," Sturm told me. "That damned jungle is too thick to plow through in darkness. Besides, those things—"

"Forget it," I said, quickly.

"I can't forget it." Hecker interrupted, rubbing his glasses with a handkerchief. "There's something wrong here. Animate vegetables with animal characteristics. Almost anthropomorphic."

"Almost what?"

"Anthropomorphic. Manlike."

"You're crazy."

"I'm not crazy. Nature is crazy, yes. I tell you, I want to investigate. This is something new. Never in the annals of interspatial biological or chemical discovery have I heard of this life-form. Why, the chemistry is all wrong! The chlorophyll doesn't react—it's like blood plasma!"

"Why don't you set up the portable lab equipment and do a little checking?" asked Sturm. "Might as well put something down in your notebooks. We'll be getting out of here in the morning—whenever that is."

"That's right," Benson added. "Wonder how long night lasts in these parts?"

"We shall see. But I hope it's short. Frankly, this place gives me the creeps."

Coming from a man like Commander Sturm, this was an admission.

But we all felt it.

Nevertheless, Hecker did get busy. He went back into the ship and began to putter around. I could hear him humming under his breath. An eerie sound in the

dead green emptiness all about us.

"What next?" asked Benson.

"A little food," Sturm suggested.

They ate.

"What about you?" Sturm asked me.

"I'm not hungry," I answered. And truthfully. I didn't want to eat.

"You're shaken up. Why not lie down again?"

I laughed the suggestion off.

"I feel too full of pep. Let's have another look around after you finish eating."

"You go, Benson," said Sturm. "I'll take a nap here while Hecker works."

So Benson and I started off.

Our flashlights cut a swath of white radiance through the greenish jungle. Our knives cut their swath also. It was a slow, painful journey that we made, burrowing into the lair of nightmare.

If there had only been some sound, some sign of life! But there was only the silence, the interminable silence as deep as the vegetable forest itself.

Yet we were straining our ears for a sound. A rustling sound. The sound those plants would make—the creeping plants that coiled and struck and stung. Somewhere they lurked and waited. Somewhere they crouched in the green maze beyond.

Benson and I toiled silently on. Until—

"Over there!" Benson gripped my shoulder. And I saw it.

Through the towering, outlandish boles of a clump of vegetable monstrosities, the livid moonlight fell on that incredible vision.

"A ship!" I gasped.

IT WAS indeed just that. A spaceship, blunt nose buried in the ichorous slime, from which the arms of strangler vines rose to embrace it and drag it down farther into the ooze.

It was a ship—but what a ship! I haven't seen one like it except in the

museums back home. Fully seventy or eighty years old—an ancient model with the big old tube-drive. How such a tub ever managed to land here under its own power was past comprehension.

We crept closer.

Benson opened his mouth to call hello, and then stopped. He grinned in embarrassment. Of course there was no need of calling out. Obviously the ship was deserted.

We found the guide rope leading up to the cabin. The door swung open, on dangling hinges. An old-style model indeed, we saw—the kind of ship they used to blowtorch shut before a voyage and then reopen at landing.

We went in. Small cabin, of course.

"Let's look for the papers," Benson suggested. We looked. The safe compartment was unlocked. I rummaged around inside.

"Here they are," I said.

But I spoke too soon. My hands encountered nothing but ashes.

"The papers—they burned them," I whispered.

"I wonder why?" Benson asked.

I didn't answer. I thought I knew, but I couldn't be sure.

"Better get out of here," I told him. "We can come back tomorrow with Sturm and really investigate."

I tried to push him from the cabin. But he saw it.

"There," he muttered. "On the floor."

He saw it, all right. Those reddish stains . . . and the tattered scraps of clothing . . . and the rotted bits of tendrils.

They told the story.

"Those vegetable things," Benson whispered. "They must have come in here. But where are the bodies?"

"Never mind that," I answered. "Let's clear out."

We cleared out, but the matter was not forgotten. The thought haunted us. The

thought haunted the ghastly forest through which we floundered. It leered from the greenish mist. Leered like the pulpy visage of the monster—

"I see it!"

Benson tugged at my arm. I winced, stepped back. He pointed at the clearing ahead. Sure enough, I recognized the all-too-familiar shape of a vegetable creature. It was stalking sluggishly through the mist, long green neck craned off to one side.

We crouched back as it passed.

"Look at its back," Benson urged.

I stared. Was I mad—or did I see the tattered remnants of a garment trailing in rotted shreds from the body of the monstrosity

It couldn't be. The things destroyed the men on the ship we found, and then took their garments, like apes or aborigines might.

More mystery. A strange ship. Burned papers. And vegetables wearing clothes. Why?

We watched the apparition moving off into the mist. Then Benson led the way. We almost ran back to camp. I couldn't move too fast. My swollen legs prevented. My hands, too, were oddly numb. That damned vegetable horror, attacking me—

But I forgot all that when we reached our camp site.

Sturm had a fire going, and his eyes reflected its glare as we approached.

"Thank God," he muttered. "You're safe."

"Where's Hecker?" I asked.

Sturm didn't answer. He gripped my shoulder, steered me towards the ship. Benson followed.

I almost expected what I saw—a duplicate of the scene in the ruined spaceship we'd found in the forest.

The portable laboratory was no more. Shattered glass and twisted metal spread a tangle of debris across the floor of the ship. And glistening against the glass and

steel were ominously bright red drops of a thick fluid. . . .

"I DOZED off," Sturm whispered. "Just dozed off. I thought I saw a shadow pass the fire. It slithered swiftly as though I glimpsed it in a dream. But it was no dream when I heard Hecker scream."

"Where is Hecker?" I repeated.

Sturm pointed mutely towards the shambles on the floor. I didn't understand. Then his finger followed an imaginary line outwards. A line not wholly imaginary, marked in bright red drops.

"Those things are swift," he muttered. "It dragged him off through the trees, into the forest and the fog. I couldn't leave the camp alone and follow. Besides—from the way he screamed—I knew it would be no use any more. No use at all. Hecker's gone."

I turned away. But Benson, at my side, shivered openly.

"Let's refuel and get out of here," he whispered. "We must."

If such a suggestion usurped Commander Sturm's authority, he gave no sign. His shrug held, instead, a definite indication of relief.

"How long will it take to get up power?" he asked.

"Seven or eight hours, full speed."

"That means we're stranded all night."

"We could take turns keeping watch."

I opened my mouth. "No need of that. Benson, you'll be working inside. Sturm, you might as well sleep. I can hold the fort by the fire here. I'm not tired."

Sturm gave me a grateful smile, then frowned quickly.

"No, you don't," he said. "You're still shaky; your legs are swollen. That was a narrow escape you had today. Don't go in for mock heroics. You sleep and I'll stand watch."

"But—"

"Orders." Sturm patted my shoulder.

"Let Benson go to work. You lie down in the other cabin. I'll stick by the fire."

For a moment there was silence. All three of us turned, as if by common impulse, and stared out at the green fog. Stared at the livid eyes of the moons. Stared into the darkness and wondered what shambled there, lurking in wait for warm flesh.

Then, "Let's go," Sturm muttered.

He strode off.

Benson, with a shuddering glance at the floor, turned to the control panels.

I sought a bunk in the other cabin, lay down.

Before I turned out the light I got bandages. More bandages. I hadn't told Sturm how accurate his diagnosis had been. I was shaky. Very shaky.

I bound myself up like a mummy. Vague apprehensions whirled through my brain. I fought them back, bound them in under mental bandages as tight as the actual ones which swathed my limbs.

I didn't dare think. I slept.

And then I dreamed.

I dreamed of the fog-filled forest, and the ship we'd found. I dreamed of the vegetable monsters and of what happened

to poor Hecker. In this dream, Sturm and Benson and I played curious roles. Roles that were somehow quite natural—now. I seemed to understand, for the first time, that this was all *right*, somehow. I lived through our discovery again, but this time there was no feeling of strangeness. It was natural.

Even the scream was natural. The scream that shattered my sleep, forced me bolt upright. It sent me out of bed and racing into the other cabin.

By the time I reached it, the scream had died away into a horrible, gurgling moan. A ghastly thud, punctuated by muffled breathing, followed. Then another moan, and silence. Deep, green silence.

I wrenched open the door, then stepped back. The horrid tableau was plainly visible—too plainly, for no man can look clearly on nightmare.

Benson, slumped over the control board, was quite dead. As dead as a partially decapitated man can be.

Sturm, at his side, was quite alive. The axe in his hand still swung heavily from his wrist.

But I only glanced at these two. My eyes were riveted on the figure that

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sprawled at Benson's feet, tentacles still twitching up to his throat. The green figure, the forest figure, the image of vegetable madness that had torn Benson's neck with avid fangs.

The vegetable figure—that wore human garments!

I stared and stared at that grotesque horror, that mad caricature of all that had once been a man. A scarecrow figure, half-human and half-vegetable—with just the trace of contorted features in the pulpy face.

Sturm had smashed into the body with his axe, and now the creature was dead. Dead, and pouring its awful reddish, greenish ichor in a vast pool from mingled cells and veins.

I stared and blinked again, this time at those human garments which were bursting at the seams and at the plant tentacles that forced their way through. Human garments—

Hecker's garments!

STURM looked at me, tossed the axe to the floor. I picked it up, looked at the discolored blade, and flung it out of the cabin doorway.

"Don't you understand?" whispered Sturm. "It *is* Hecker. He was bitten and carried off by those vegetable monsters. And now—he's one himself!"

Sturm sat down on one of the cabin bunks, head in hands. I watched the cords throb convulsively in his neck.

"You see what it means," he murmured. "Hecker turned into one and bit Benson. Now Benson will rise. Like—like that old Earth legend about vampires.

"Something must get into the bloodstream, change the whole physiological structure. A virus, but more than a virus. Something that changes chemically, with amazing swiftness. Holds back death, too. Turns animal life into carnivorous vegetable life."

Suddenly Sturm sat up, a sheepish smile on his face.

"But such a thing is incredible," he blustered. "No, I've been talking like a frightened child. It couldn't be that way, could it?"

I walked over to him, moving slowly, impeded by the bulk of my bandages.

"Maybe it could, Sturm," I said. "I believe it could."

He grinned at me, but I went right on.

"You see, I know," I whispered.

"Know? How?"

"Because I lied to you today. I wasn't stung by those things when they attacked me earlier today—I was bitten. And I didn't go to sleep afterwards when you left me lying down.

"I *died* instead. And came alive."

Sturm was on his feet then, but he was too late.

I pushed him back against the bunk. He was a strong man, but I was strong, too. Very strong. And quite determined—when I looked at his neck.

My bandages loosened. I brought my hands up to his throat.

He saw them.

For the first time he noticed how they had changed. That they were green. . . .

And then he saw what heaved out from my coat, budding forth from my chest and sides. He saw my face. My strength blossomed, yes, blossomed!

That was hours ago, of course. I'm still changing as I write this. Sturm isn't *awake* yet. But he will be. And so will Benson. Then we shall be together again.

The three of us will go out and seek Hecker in the forest. And the others—the ones that came before us. We shall live there, grow there forever.

And some day a new ship will come. A new ship, with new men. Men with white throats. Men with red blood.

Look around, reader. Look around. If you see a moving green shape behind you—the story's over!

THE SCIENCE FICTIONEER

Official Organ of
The Science Fictioneers

THE SCIENCE FICTIONEER proudly calls your attention to the two stars on the list of the members of the Advisory Board. The two starred members are now in the service of the United States, as Army privates.

Advisor Milton A. Rothman, known better to some fans as Lee Gregor—his pen-name—enlisted August 12th. A fan for many years, he was an officer of such fan organizations as the Fantasy Amateur Press Association, the Philadelphia Science Fiction Society, the Science Fiction League and many others. He has published a number of fan magazines, the latest of which is *Milty's Mag*, an informal periodical of news and comment.

Forrest J Ackerman has repeatedly been selected Science-fiction Fan Number One, in almost all the polls taken by various fans and organizations. Inducted through the workings of Selective Service early in August, Forrie hopes to continue to be active in science-fiction fandom, when the more urgent task of being a soldier gives him time.

Like all members of America's fighting forces, these two fans will be hungry for correspondence. Keep them posted on what's going on. Write them care of *The Science Fictioneer*, if you don't know their

ADVISORY BOARD

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everchanging Army addresses—but write them!

NEWS FROM OUR BRANCHES

The Futurian Society of New York reports on its progress as follows:

"As of today, the FSNY has lost six of its twenty-odd members to the war effort. Dan Burford, Dave Kyle, Herman Leventman and Dirk Wylie enlisted in the Army; Jack Gillespie is in the Merchant Marine. Jack Robins is somewhere off on the Pacific Coast, building ships—after having been turned down by all the armed forces due to poor eyesight. We miss all of them, and hope to have them back soon.

"One thing we'd like to point out—there isn't a draftee among the lot.

"What with a quarter of the membership being scattered here, there and everywhere—Burford was last reported in

England, and Gillespie is God-knows-where on the high seas, with the remainder scattered about the continental U. S.—the activities of the club have naturally slackened off a bit. Meetings have been practically non-existent, occasional informal but well-attended talk sessions taking their place. Publishing fan magazines has been suspended, except for occasional items for the Fantasy Amateur Press Association.

"The prospects for the future—the

meeting place. However, that handicap may be solved very shortly. We still retain the old constitution, but it will be subject to revision during the coming months.

"Quoting from *The California Mercury*, our unofficial club organ, 'The membership now includes Louis Smith, Lorraine Smith, Everett Wyers, Jack Riggs, George Evey, Bill Watson, George Wheeler, Tom Wright, Joe Fortier and Doug Blakely. Two new visitors, Anthony

SCIENCE FICTIONEER BRANCHES

Only three members are needed to start a branch of *The Science Fictioneers*. There is no fee involved. Merely send National Headquarters the names of your members (as well as the numbers of their membership cards) and we will send you a charter. When new members wish to join the branch, just see to it that their names and card numbers are sent us after they have been accepted. We also require a copy of your branch constitution and your official minutes.

You'll find a coupon in this issue of *Super Science Stories* which will enable anyone to join *The Science Fictioneers* itself.

immediate future, that is—are not bright, particularly since several more members are about ripe to join the colors. But one thing is certain—the club is not going to disintegrate, though it may go into suspended animation for a while. And after the war—ah, just wait till after the war. You'll see some speed!"

* * *

One of the members of the Golden Gate Fantasy Society, George Ebey, obliges us with the following information.

"Club elections were held at the last meeting with the following results: Lorraine Smith is our new Directress, and J. J. Fortier became Secretary-Librarian.

"Our chief difficulty is the lack of a

Boucher and Phil McKernan, may join the ranks soon."

"A few items about our new members:

"Watson and Wheeler are San Franciscan fans, the latter being in the Marine Corps, while the former is a prolific letter-writer.

"Doug Blakely is a former M. F. S. fan, now stationed at Fort Baker, Sausalito.

"Another fan, visiting member Jimmy Cripps, is an expert on rocketry, and often turns up at meetings to give us the latest dope on his experiments.

"That's about all—except that there will probably be a lot of changes in the G. G. F. S."

Here's the latest information on the Alpha Centaurians, the Blackfoot, Idaho branch of the Science Fictioneers, taken from their carbon-copied club organ, *The Screwball*. As you will see, they are in a bad way—or rather, *he* is!

"The censorship ban on census figures for the Tellus Branch of the Alpha Centaurians has been lifted. We have been allowed to reveal the following catastrophic information:

"All but one of the five Terrestrials in the organization have skipped out!

"Member Montgomery, who was to go to Arcturus as ambassador, changed his mind and went to Oakland, California. He may be reached at 1315 B 65th Avenue, of that city.

"Member Crawford is 'somewhere' in Bangor, Maine.

"Member Arbuckle is nowhere to be found.

"Member Kinney is at the University of Idaho, located at Moscow, Idaho, Earth.

"Member Carter—that's me—is left behind to run *The Screwball* and broadcast this appeal for help.

"We are in one bad way.

"Help!"

* * *

The Western Pennsylvania Science Fictioneers make their official report to NHQ as follows:

"Results of the election of officers are as follows: Leonard J. Moffatt, re-elected Director. Blaine R. Dunnire, elected Assistant Director, replacing Lavelle Summers. Nick Risko, re-elected Secretary.

"Election of officers will be held every six months.

"The WPSF has formed a lending library for members only. Books have been donated by 'Doc' Dunnire, Vaughn Ralph Hiener and Len Moffatt. Dunnire has been appointed Official Librarian.

"*The Ghoul*, combined with *Stellar*

Tales, is now the WPSF's official organ."

* * *

The Los Angeles Science Fantasy Society reports on its latest meeting, by way of the club secretary.

"The meeting was called to order at exactly 8:34 P.M., Pacific Coast War Time, by Our Director, Gus Willmorth. The minutes were read and left alone, except that one nameless person didn't like the so-called verbosity of them. That was beside the point, and after several contemptuous stares he subsided.

"T. Bruce Yerke sent in a note pleading for a leave of absence. It was probably granted.

"Someone started an argument on the way most great men aren't recognized until after death. Some of us slept while it went on.

"A motion was made to get some more staples for the stapler. Our unlucky guest was deputized to go and get them. She made a donation to the club of the money they cost her. Our guest for this evening was Miss Gladys Briggs, who made an instantaneous and complete hit with all the members of the club.

"Because nothing else happened, the meeting was adjourned at 8:59½ P. M. Everyone left after that, much soon."

THE SCIENCE FICTIONEERS

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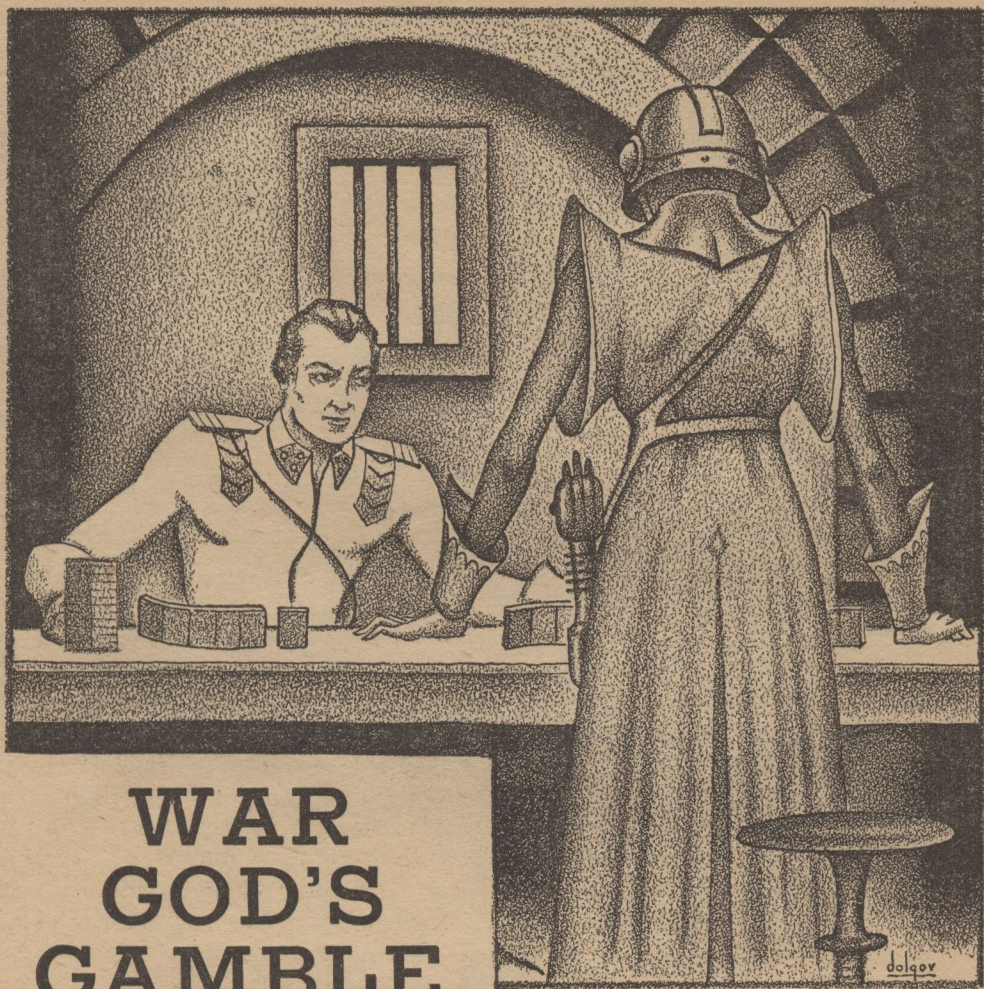
I am a regular reader of science fiction and would like to join *The Science Fictioneers*. I enclose a stamped, self-addressed envelope for my membership card.

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WAR GOD'S GAMBLE



His world would perish if he lost—and the fruits of victory would be taken from him if he won. But Flight Lieutenant Stirn had to take a mad gamble with destiny—at which he could not win honestly, and dared not cheat!

By

HARRY WALTON

THE door segment slid aside with a brief hiss. One second later it shut soundlessly. In that interval Flight Lieutenant Stirn had entered the tiny, cylindrical cell. He stood just where he was, staring with horror-glazed eyes at nothing whatsoever.

At the table Navigation Officer Edmond threw down a card in his endless game of solitaire, observing Stirn keenly in one quick glance. He was deliberate in selecting a slender Martian cigarette from the pack at his elbow. Without a word he extended it to Stirn. Slow alarm crept into his expression as the lieutenant made no move toward it.

Edmond unfolded his lean bulk from the

chair and came toward the other, whose eyes still took note of nothing. Abruptly the navigator's hand flicked out. The slap cracked loudly in the tiny cell; it left red welts on Stirn's cheek, but had no other effect.

Like a striking snake Edmond's hand flashed out again. Skilled fingers played an instant at the base of Stirn's neck. Abruptly they took their toll; the lieutenant buckled to the floor like a disjointed doll. Edmond caught him as he fell and dragged him to one of the cots.

It was fifteen minutes before Stirn showed signs of recovering from the nerve paralysis induced by that touch, but when his eyes opened they were normal. He managed a wan smile as his glance locked with Edmond's.

"Hi, fellow!"

"Hi, Jerry. You were souped when you came in. I dished a neuro jolt. Have a tough go?"

A visible shudder shook Stirn's slight figure. "Hell on full jets. If I haven't aged fifty years, I'm good for ten thou. The full routine. That devil Gamirand."

Edmond lit a cigarette for him. "Go on, spill. Does you good."

Stirn paused to take a long drag. "Of course, Gamirand was polite as usual—officers' courtesy and all that. Full of regrets for what would happen if I didn't talk—as if this were the first time! Then he turned me over to the psychos. Those green ladies of hell! I honestly think it wouldn't be so bad if they were men instead."

"Their psychos are all women, even the therapists."

"These weren't healers," retorted Stirn. "They gave me a needle and I floated off easy—but awake, you understand, and conscious. I'd have traded my pension for a neuro jolt the next half hour—"

"'Prisoners of war shall not be subjected to physical torture of any kind,'" quoted Edmond bitterly. "We wrote the

War Code out of the depths of our ignorance, and the Martians signed with their tongues in their cheeks. And yet we knew of psychosuggestion, all the way from Mesmer in 1775."

"These harpies of Gamirand's go back ten thousand years before that," said Stirn. "They started easy—branding on the arms with a white-hot iron. Damned realistic too, even before the—I mean the induction furnace, and the warm air it radiated, just like the real thing. Maybe they hurried it a bit at that. I remember the iron was black one moment, white-hot the next. Funny the things you think about even while your hide is frying."

"Gamirand came in to ask whether I could possibly give him a hint as to where our grand fleet might be gathering—said he wouldn't ask more of a brother officer. I invited him to hell. The irons vanished and of course there wasn't a mark on my arms, as he asked me to note. Then he said something about a superior race not resorting to crudities. I wonder what they call their own brand of hellishness?"

"I know. 'Certain nuances of the mind, which we find useful in dealing with the lower orders.' Unquote."

"Thanks. I'll cut the grisly details, except to say that they went on to pulling out fingernails, one at a time, and finished with a case of Martian cancer, all very vivid. By that time I—well, you saw me."

"Damn their guts!" exploded Edmond. "Why don't they dish it evenly at least? Why pick on you only?"

"Gamirand explained that. Your neurograph says you won't fold that way. I may. They don't waste effort."

"The block held? You didn't—"

"Spill? Not yet. But you know our psychos aren't in a class with the Marshies. I can feel the block slipping. You'd think knowing it's only hypersuggestion would help you stand it. By God, it doesn't! You live everything they dish

out—everything. What good does it do to wake up afterwards and know it wasn't real?"

Edmond's fingers snapped the prison-issue cigarette in two, his heel ground the fragments viciously into the black plastic floor. "Get some sleep now. I want to think."

STIRN drifted off like a child. Twice Edmond paused in his pacing to look at him. He could kill Stirn now and end his agonies. Perhaps he should. The boyish lieutenant had suffered much and was sure to suffer more. He might break any day, any hour, and shriek out what the Marshies wanted to know—information that might cost Earth the war and her freedom.

But what right had he to decide on Stirn's death?

His pacing footsteps echoed to the high roof of their cylindrical prison, twenty-five feet above. The tiny twelve-foot circle of floor was furnished with two cots, two chairs, a table and sanitary arrangements. Clean, light and well ventilated, it fell just short of comfort. The Martians treated prisoners according to the letter of the Code, if not according to the spirit.

His own pacing around the circular cell began to tell on Edmond's nerves. Deliberately he sat down and lit another cigarette. He could not help noticing that his fingers trembled.

It was always like that after Stirn had been tortured. Two weeks of that, his own inactivity since the blasting of the *Medo* and their capture by a Martian cruiser, had left Edmond's nerves almost as raw as the lieutenant's.

If the neurograph ruled out torture in his case, what were the Martians holding him for? Ordinary prisoners were sent to a camp north of the capital. Yet they kept him here, made him watch Stirn suffer the agonies of the damned. What were they softening him up for?

He whirled at the low hiss that announced the opening of the door, but only in time to see it close behind Gamirand. The soft-footed Martian stood regally at ease, his eight-foot figure faultless in a white-and-gold uniform that admirably became his saffron complexion. He accorded Edmond the courtesy of clicking his heels together and snapping his left forearm smartly across his chest, palm down, in the Martian military salute.

"A FEW words, if you please, Officer Edmond," said the other, stressing the sibilants in the manner of his kind.

"We have nothing to say to each other," returned Edmond curtly.

Gamirand smiled apologetically, yellow teeth gleaming. "You resent the treatment poor Lieutenant Stirn brings upon himself. But of course! I agree. It is deplorable that this accursed war should bring such a necessity upon us. Indeed, it is concerning the lieutenant that I wish to speak with you."

"Then I'll listen, promising nothing."

"Good." Instinctively the Martian had spoken in a low tone, and Edmond also, so as not to disturb the man on the cot. "Surely you know he is slowly breaking. That he resists us so magnificently is merely unfortunate, as much for him as for us. Once we break down the inhibiting block your psychologists have implanted in his subconscious, his mind will fail. It is inevitable—surely you have seen the signs."

"Come to the point!" rasped Edmond.

Gamirand sighed, thoughtfully twisted one of the two goatees that grew from his jowls. "You are an impatient race, ruled by emotion. A Martian would draw me out at greater length, if he could, hoping to gain thereby. But I shall come to the point as you ask. You yourself show the effect of our questioning of Lieutenant

(Continued on page 132)

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(Continued from page 130)

Stirn in a different way, yet as markedly as he does. You display the concern of the strong for the weak, so common in primitive cultures. Suffering nothing yourself, you have nevertheless reached a point where you are tortured by inaction. I offer you release."

"I'm still listening."

"The scouting launch of the *Medo* was not damaged when we took your ship. It lies outside the city, fueled and space-worthy. It is yours, together with safe-conduct past our defensive fleet, in return for your answer to one question."

"I'll give it to you now," said Edmond. "It's 'no'."

"You decide hastily," Gamirand retorted with a sneer. "Your life is safe, and your sanity. Can you say as much for Stirn's?"

Edmond made no reply.

"All we ask," the Martian continued, seeing that the shot had told, "is the rendezvous of your fleet. Does that insure our victory? Hardly—the battle is still to be fought. For a scrap of information, for a doubtful advantage, we are willing to pay a fair price—the freedom of two gallant enemy officers. But even if it did insure our victory—surely it is to Earth's advantage that the war be shortened, particularly since a Martian victory is inevitable in view of Martian superiority."

"That," retorted Edmond, "is something you'll have to demonstrate before we'll believe it. Granting you had ten thousand years of written history before we learned that caves kept the rain off us, I wonder whether you haven't already started down the other side of the hill we're still climbing. Decadence is the name for it—"

He was pleased to see the quiver of Gamirand's twin goatees at this assault on his racial pride.

"Our superiority," returned the Martian stiffly, "is such as your race may

not aspire to in ten times ten thousand years. It is inherent in our physical and mental character. What you call the subconscious mind is in us always under control. No Martian could be tortured subjectively, as you can be. Physically the differences are equally great. I can remain alert fifty hours without sleep or drugs, go ninety days without water, three hundred without food. Our very blood is different—that of my race yellow-green, unlike that of any other creatures on Mars—yours, I am told by officers who have seen your wounded, like that of our cattle!"

There was a long moment of silence.

"On your honor as an officer," said Edmond at last, "would Stirn recover if he were set free now?"

"Knowing you would ask, I inquired. He would."

Edmond stared doubtfully at his chest. Suddenly resolved, he unpinning the be-ribboned medal that hung there, and offered it to the astounded Martian, who took it gravely.

"Know what that is?" asked Edmond hoarsely.

Gamirand studied it. "The imprint evidently represents the solar system. Never having studied your heraldry, I cannot say what the black-and-white ribbon signifies."

"It's given for outstanding service in navigation—why I got it doesn't matter. No, don't give it back. I'd rather not wear it again. I'm going to make a deal."

Gamirand's features showed no surprise. "Excellent. You will be given safe-conduct as soon as our scouts can verify the information you give us. It will be only a few hours."

"Not so fast. I'm not accepting your offer; I'm going to make one myself. For all your culture, you Martians are great gamblers. I'll play you for the information you want."

(Continued on page 134)

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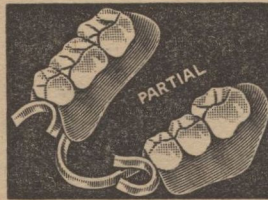
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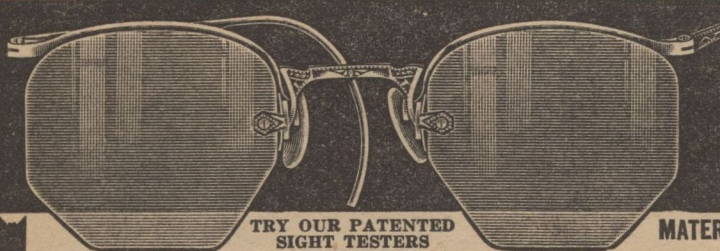
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SUPER SCIENCE STORIES

(Continued from page 132)

Gamirand stiffened. "This is no time for absurd humor."

"I'm not joking. You stay cooped up for two weeks facing two alternatives—to keep on watching a brother officer break under what those devils of yours are doing to him or to play the traitor—and see if you wouldn't welcome even a gambling chance."

"On what basis?"

"We play a game familiar to us both. If I lose, Stirn and I are set free in return for the information you want. You can check first, of course. But if I win, we're set free at once and tell you nothing."

Gamirand smiled sardonically. "Quite absurd, but how typical! I accept the terms. What shall the game be—your chess perhaps? I am well acquainted with it."

"Too well, I think, for my money," said Edmond dryly. "I prefer more of a gambler's game. Poker?"

Gamirand spread his hands. "I have never played it. Do you know our *Dianard*?"

Edmond shook his head. "The only Martian game I'd dare play is *Chianto*. Maybe you know—but why not *Chianto*?"

"Why not?" smiled Gamirand. "I shall send for tiles."

THE cell door opened to his mental command, and he left silently. Edmond gathered up the cards, wiped a few crumbs of tobacco off the table. But in turning away he upset the light chair. The clatter of its fall echoed and re-echoed from the rounded wall.

"Hello," came from Stirn a moment later. "What's up?"

Edmond whirled on him, frowning. "Spilled the chair. Sorry it woke you."

It was Stirn's turn to frown. "Something's up. Gamirand been here?"

"No. Better get back to sleep."

Stirn hunched about on the cot. Scarcely a minute later the door opened to admit Gamirand and an orderly, who placed a handsome platinum-bound plastoid chest on the table. When the man had left, the door slid soundlessly shut behind him.

Gamirand drew four trays from the chest, displaying as many layers of plastoid tiles, their face markings worked in ivory and black, their jet-black backs intricately carved in a uniform design.

"A traditional set," murmured the Martian. "I give you my word they are unmarked."

"Accepted," said Edmond. "Two games to shake down the play, the third for our stakes, if that's agreeable."

Gamirand nodded courteously and shuffled the tiles, face down. He then arranged the fifty-six in rows of seven and folded his hands to show the game might begin.

Edmond drew a trey in an honor suite; Gamirand imperturbably drew one in turn. Each placed his piece on edge before him, its back to his opponent. The second draw gave Edmond a numerical tile, which squared the value of the first. He was not so fortunate in his third, which was of a negative value and would have halved the value of his hand, but he was later able to discard it.

The game went on in silence except for low-voiced announcements of discards and challenges. When the scores were totaled, it was Gamirand who had the higher.

"The fortunes of chance," he smiled. "At least I give you fair warning that I mean to win."

"Better luck next time," responded Edmond. "I'm not going to hand your strategic staff the information it wants without a fight. Loser shuffles, I believe?"

The Martian nodded, then, looking across the cell, half rose from his chair. An instant later a hand grasped Edmond's collar and hauled him roughly to his feet. Stirn faced him with burning eyes.

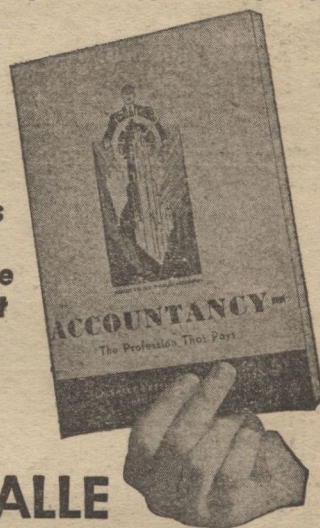
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SUPER SCIENCE STORIES

"What is this? What filthy scheme is this?" he demanded.

"You were asleep," retorted Edmond sullenly. "Why the hell didn't you stay asleep?"

"Because you said Gamirand hadn't been here—but he came back with that." The lieutenant jerked his head toward the *Chianto* chest. "I lay awake, listening. It took me till now to piece together enough of the dirty business. You're not gambling away military secrets, Edmond."

A dark flush suffused Stirn's honest face. "Unless you stop this now I'm going to forget you're top officer."

"Forget and be damned! I'm going to play—"

Stirn hit him twice, viciously, the impact of fists on flesh surprisingly loud in that confined space. Edmond barely lowered his head quickly enough to escape a knockout blow. He was hit in the face both times. Before he could retaliate, two guards had appeared as if by magic and pounced on Stirn. At a word from Gamirand they hauled him, despite his desperate struggles, from the cell.

"Shall we continue?" asked Gamirand. "But no—you are injured."

"I can play," said Edmond, staunching the flow of blood from his nose with a handkerchief. "But let's cut it short. Next game for the stakes agreed upon."

Gamirand's goatees twitched with surprise. "The next game, then. May I shuffle for you?"

"I'm not asking favors," snarled Edmond. "I'll shuffle."

Clumsily he did so, turning the tiles face down one at a time with one hand—all had been turned face up for scoring. Gamirand watched with thinly veiled disgust, for Edmond's handkerchief was soon soaked with blood. Not until he had awkwardly shuffled the tiles and laid them out did the bleeding stop.

The play was swifter, more intense, yet

Gamirand seemed almost preoccupied at times, as though striving to remember some forgotten fact. Twice Edmond called penalties, and as the Martian could not show superior honor titles, scored on both occasions. But on the last draw Gamirand smiled triumphantly.

"The Tile of Death," he said, flipping over a piece that bore on its face a thin-boned Martian skull. "I challenge your score as void."

"So it is, unless I can counter with the Tile of Oblivion. Right?"

The Martian nodded, his eyes incredulous yet anxious. The Tile of Oblivion was a penalty piece, usually discarded as quickly as possible. Its possession after the last draw halved the player's score, unless it was used to counter such a challenge as Garimand had made, in which case it doubled the value of its hand.

Very slowly Edmond turned over a tile. Its face was blank. It was the Tile of Oblivion.

Gamirand bowed curtly in acknowledgement of the parry. All the tiles were turned up for scoring. The Martian spread his hands.

"But you have won—magnificently."

"Thanks," said Edmond dryly. "And now will you call off your sensitives? I've felt the hot breath of at least three of them on my neck for the last ten minutes."

"Four," Gamirand admitted with a wry smile. "Our best telepaths. Unfortunately your guard was impregnable. They could no more tell me what tiles you held than where your fleet is to meet. But you cannot blame me for trying."

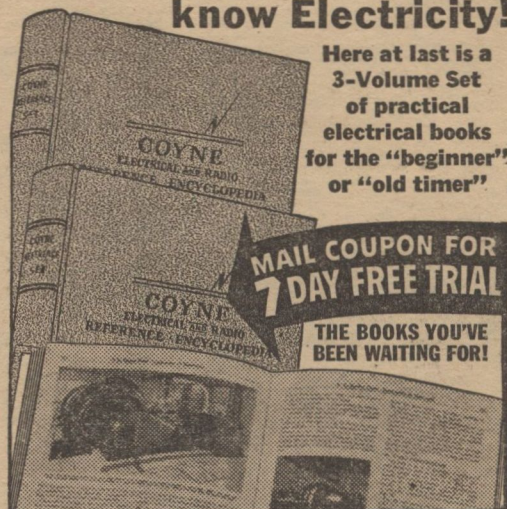
"I don't," said Edmond. "And now, one thing more. Part of our wager was Lieutenant Stirn's freedom. It may be he'll refuse it. Will you see that he comes with me anyway?"

The Martian bowed. "With us a gambling debt is truly a debt of honor. We shall make every effort to persuade the

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SUPER SCIENCE STORIES

lieutenant to go with you. Should we fail, he will come unknowingly."

THE thunder of the spatial drive was drumming through the little ship when Stirn groaningly lifted himself to face Edmond.

"Don't ask," said the latter at once. "I'll just start answering. One, we're aboard the *Medo's* life launch, free as air. Two, Gamirand doesn't know where the fleet is. Three, you were souped when they carried you in, thanks to some heroics about not winning your freedom by treason—I'm sorry, there was nothing else to be done. Four, we're headed for Pallas."

"Pallas!" roared Stirn. "Why the hell Pallas, when you know the fleet—"

Edmond clapped a hand over his mouth.

"The reason," said Edmond, "lies forward."

He led the way through the tiny passageways of the ship while Stirn followed on unsteady legs—past the food lockers, the drive cubby, the rear emergency port, until they came to a niche in which was racked a bank of seven oxygen tanks.

Edmond spun the valve of the fifth tank. No hiss of gas ensued.

"This nifty bit of camouflage," he explained, "covers an oscillator. You didn't think that old fox Gamirand would overlook a bet, did you? It took me three hours to find this; when I did, I was glad I'd set course for Pallas to begin with. You can bet your buttons that Martian Strategic has a tracer on us. So to Pallas we will go, and I hope the Martian grand fleet follows. Our boys will mop up."

"Okay," grunted Stirn. "I owe you half an apology, maybe. But it was a moon-brained stunt. What if you'd lost?"

"I had to take a chance, I admit. For a minute I thought you'd gone back to sleep."

"I'd gone *what*?"

"Oh, it worked out fine, although I hate to think what would have happened if you hadn't managed to belt me a couple before Gamirand got the guards in to cop you. Poor Gamirand! He tried so hard to keep the game straight—on my side at least."

"If you don't unscramble," threatened Stirn, "I'm going to belt you again."

"Okay. You gave me the first clue yourself, when you said the iron turned from black to white-hot. The psychos made you see that, of course, by hypnotic suggestion only. Then Gamirand made a crack about our inferior blood, and I remembered something one of our chaps once guessed about the Martians—something they've never let us check. But I checked, by handing Gamirand my service medal. When it clicked, I offered to gamble with him."

"Keep talking," warned Stirn.

"The psychos didn't show the iron red-hot. Gamirand told me my medal had a black-and-white ribbon. And the blood of Martian cattle is black. Ergo, all Martians are completely color-blind to red. Of course their scientists know it, but the average chap, like Gamirand, won't remember it. Out of sight, out of mind. They've never seen red; why should they remember it? Even their egotism helps them forget there's anything they can't see that we can. And remember they learn our language under hypnosis. So their minds simply reject the word 'red' as meaningless, and forget it."

"I hope," said Stirn grimly, "that all this has a point."

"Rather—that's why I had to let you sock me. My nose never was able to take it, and right then I needed gore—which looked plain black to Gamirand, and didn't show against the backs of the tiles. I marked the high ones with blood when I turned them over. There wasn't a chance of my losing. Even if I did win by a nose."

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SUPER SCIENCE STORIES

MISSIVES AND MISSILES

(Continued from page 8)

Dear Mr. Norton—

Probably this letter will arrive too late
for inclusion in Missives and Missiles, but
shux, there's nothing else to do except write
six or seven letters, wash 186¾ (I broke
one) dishes, and engage myself with various
household chores.

I'm completely free.

And realizing how you must be *drooling*
over the wastepaper basket in sweltering
Nyack, feverishly running through your
mail in the vain hope of receiving a letter
from this correspondent, with the true fan's
generosity I sit me down to type out this
little letter which will probably run three
pages, and thus assuage your burning thirst.

I might begin by stating that I've never
considered S. S. S. the ultimate of perfec-
tion, as one adjective-drunk reader has it.
Personally I think that prior to the August
issue, I'd never even thought of it as a *good*
magazine. Consistently good, that is.

Once in a while, 'tis true, good stories
have been presented. De Camp's "Genus
Homo" for instance. But outside of that the
rest were only fair to middlin', plus a few
extremely poor offerings from old hacks and
raw newcomers. The illustrators were way
below par, except for Bok and Dun who
both seem to have left the field.

However, under the new management the
mag has improved more or less steadily
until with the August issue you have reached
some sort of new high which, I hope, will
be even bettered in the next.

Among the first noticed of the new im-
provements are the variety of artists. It's
my guess that of all letters you receive, not
one will gripe about the excellent additions
to the *Super Science* staff. How could they
with such striking pics staring 'em in the
face? I'm speaking of the frontispiece for
the Brackett novelette, the Leydenfrost for
"Mars Warning" and both Wessos. The
answer to a fan's prayer!

Since art was the biggest defect of
S. S. S., I consider the mag to have im-
proved about 50% already.

Then the stories. To make this letter
come up to the forecast of paragraph three
I'm going to rate them in 1-2-3 order.

No. 1. "Cube From Space." The first
Brackett yarn I've liked in a long, long
time. No doubt the Dolgov illustrations had
something to do with this choice.

No. 2. "Return From Zero." I'm an old
Rocklynne hater but this one rang the tradi-
tional bell with me. The character of Stoc
was realistic and interesting; the ending
was logical and still satisfying. Both to
the characters and the reader!

No. 3. "Wreckers of the Star Patrol." Old
plot, nice handling, and Jameson's space
stories have a ring of authenticity. As re-
gards the illustration, Musacchia ought to
learn how to draw a ray gun.

No. 4. "Mars Warning." The ending gave this one fourth place. Otherwise it was entirely routine. Leydenfrost could also improve his rayguns.

No. 5. Ummm, about now it gets hard. Let's give fifth to "An Old Neptunian Custom." Vaguely amusing in spots, the ending especially so. I was glad to note that Mariner gave a good reason for each of the somewhat wacky customs. Otherwise it would have rated lower.

No. 6. Goes to Asimov's "Victory Unintentional." Not much of a plot, and I've liked other of I, Asimov's robot yarns better. He's got congratulations coming for daring to draw Jupiter's climate, inhabitants, etc., in a reasonable way. The ending seemed rather phony, tho.

No. 7—"Cham of the Hills." The one disliked story. This is action, pure and simple, and not very good action at that. The plot has been used before, and where, oh where is that mostly alien element of science fiction stories—science?

Comments: yum, first a Finlay, then a Rogers cover. Will wonders ever cease? The two best cover artists in sfiction and appearing consecutively! "More, more," I gasp! Missives and Missiles—quite sprightly this issue. Glad to see editorial comments, which were the only thing lacking. Seeing Watson's letter reminded me of a plea he sent in to S. S. S. some issues back, regarding his desire to join a fan club. He's now a member of the rejuvenated Golden Gate Futurians who are now the Golden Gate Fantasy Society—Oakland. Since we're a branch of the Science Fictioneers, you can expect—soon—a copy of the minutes of the last meeting, plus new list of members.

Ah! Page three, and still more to say! Heigho, what's left. . . .

Nothing much except that I think the Science Fictioneer has improved tremendously. Who's the "coordinator?"

By all means hang on to the Fantasy Reviews. I read this column ahead of the reader's column, even!

Hey, what's the idea in calling "Cham of the Hills", (23 pages) a "novel", and "Cube from Space", (22 pages) a mere novelette. That one page must make quite a big difference. Another thing: the guy who wrote the blurb for Tanner's "novel" certainly never read it. "Last of their kind were they, the remnants of a world gone mad, the lean-jawed fighting men who followed a strange lost chieftain—Cham of the Hills, who had sworn to set his people free!"

Haw!

Since when were his people slaves? I quote from the . . . er—"novel": Cham: "... We're loyal to Hendrik up there, and I heard there was going to be a war, so I've come down to join the army." Not to "set his people free," dear blurb-writer.

Wow! Have I thunk up an idee to dispense with the readers who complain about

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SUPER SCIENCE STORIES

disgusting back-cover "foot-itch" ads. 'Twas simple enuff for a warped brain like mine. Just have Morey sign his name to the photograph! I feel sure everybody will understand.

Odd thoughts: that ad for *Astonishing* looks mighty good. Confession: I've always liked that mag a wee bit better than S. S. S.

Great Gawd! The bottom of the page!
George Ebey,
4766 Reinhardt Drive,
Oakland, California

Everyone sits on the editor, John!

Dear Sirs:

Hmmmm—well, well, well. Say, 'tain't bad, 'tain't at all. No sir. And now that the exclamations of surprise are over with and done away with, I'll go into the technical side of the issue. It's good! It's swell! Especially "Mars Warning" and "Cube from Space". And for a good, laughable one, I'll take "An Old Neptunian Custom", any day. I'm still laughing. Believe me, this is one of the best editions you've put out in a long while! The cover is nice, not throbbing with bright, jumbled, clashing, colors, or messed up in general, but fairly accurate and easy on the eyes. Say, how about something to fill up the back of the mag, instead of plastering advertisements on it? Huh? Something like a scientific article, or a good painting. Come on back, I ain't finished yet. Not by a long shot, hah!

Somebody sit on the editor! Hold him down! He'll probably want to fly when he hears this. *Every one* of the stories in this issue is swell! And, when you hear this from me, it's really something! The stories are rated as follows: A—Super-excellent; B—Excellent; C—Swell.

(1) "Cham of the Hills"—C—The plot was a little rusty, the ending wasn't so good. Illustration very good.

(2) "Cube from Space"—B—A good plot—Illustration fair.

(3) "Wreckers of the Star Patrol"—C—A little different slant. Illustration good.

(4) "Return from Zero". Swell twist in

story, really good—B—Illustration very good.

(5) "Mars Warning"—A plus. What a plot! Swell illustration too.

(6) "An Old Neptunian Custom"—A. I'm still laughing. Illustration fair.

(7) "Victory Unintentional"—A—fairly good plot, rather poor ending. Illustration a little off the record, but good, anyway.

Yours truly,
John Schomburg (Jr.)

Gosh. We liked that Kuttner yarn!

Dear Ed:

Well, you condescended to print my first letter to old triple S, so who knows—perhaps there is hope for this one. I rather doubt it, though, because I'm going to sling some hard brick-bats your way.

In the first place—the cover. Well drawn? Yes, I suppose so. But inaccurate as hell! Dear God, whyowhy must Our Hero always be encased in a bulky old spacesuit, while winged women cavort around clothed only in scanty pink nightgowns that are sadly lacking in bras, without so much as an air-helmet.

And I take it that planet in the background is supposed to be the Black Planet. If so, how many light years does it take said scantily clad heroines to fly back home? Gad!

And that spaceship burning merrily along in oxygenless space. Hah! Of course, you might argue that the ship is in the Black Planet's atmosphere, but in the story I understood that Our Hero left the ship and went to the Black Planet, but on the cover it is *between* the hero and the planet.

Now don't get me wrong. SSS isn't the only mag that depicts such goshawful errors. No indeed. Perhaps I am mistaken in my assumptions. Maybe I'm wacky. But I'd like some brief explanation.

The stories, on the most part, were pretty smelly. They rate thus—

1. "Sky Test." I doubt if a man as familiar with space ships as Patten would fail to notice the marked absence of wings and windows on the rocket. Good tale though.

2. "We Guard the Black Planet!" Kuttner at his worst, I'm sorry to say. He almost always turns out a super story, but not today, thank youse.

3. "Beyond the End of Time." Can it be that RC is improving? Getting back into his old stride, as it were?

4. "The Revolt of the Machine Men." Only fair. And why in the Universe did Tanner have to name his robot after another, and much more intelligent, robot in a rival mag?

5. "Parrots of Venus." Never read a story like this before, yet it seemed a little stereotyped.

6. "The Man without a Planet." Corn, pure and simple.



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7. "The Planet Called Aquella." Rather obvious from the first paragraph.

8. "His Aunt Thiamin."

9. "The Imaginary." I read it. I forced myself to. Absolutely Asimov's worst. Better Isaac should have stayed single, yes? No?

The works of art were only passable, with Lawrence taking first and the artist(?) for "His Aunt T." being last. I have a horrible feeling that it was done by Bok. If so, it is absolutely his worst. Geez. Everybody seems to turn out their worst for Super.

Morey's spread for "Sky Test" was his best in cons. But why did you sack Leydenfrost? He is absolutely the greatest science-fiction find of '42. Get a cover by him soon, please.

Just get rid of that abominable space ship on the cover, and make the paintings more accurate, and you'll be on your way to having a swell jacket on your mag. Incidentally, a few old-fashioned fans like myself still read stories, besides the letter section and other departments, so you might make some improvements there, too.

By the way, is there any way poor fans could get some original interior pics? Would you sell them?

Sincerely,

Gene Hunter,

(Missouri's gift to Science-Fiction)

616 E. McCarty Avenue,

Jefferson City, Missouri

Mr. Kuttner makes prompt rebuttal.

Sir:

I fear I must plead guilty to a charge Mr. Hunter does not make; apparently I failed to make "We Guard the Black Planet!" sufficiently interesting, for obviously he did not read the yarn except in a cursory way. The "errors" he mentions aren't errors at all. And, if Mr. Hunter should care to reread the story, I think he'd withdraw his brickbats—since they're actually bricks without straw.

But I'd like to answer his questions, for the record. Space suits are worn for a variety of reasons besides protection against a vacuum. They provide a certain amount of bracing against the shock of rocket charges, and my protagonist was wearing an auxiliary rocket-gadget in lieu of a parachute. As for the air-helmet, if you were in an atmosphere of unknown constituents, I daresay you'd wear one too.

Referring to the story, I find that (a) the space ship entered the atmosphere of the Black Planet and burst into flame, (b) the protagonist, with space suit and rocket auxiliary, jumped out, (c) the winged gals grabbed him, and (d) the ship continued its crash-dive past him, all of this taking place in the air-envelope of the Black Planet. I think I made this clear enough in the yarn. Indeed, it's been years since I've written pure fantasy; nowadays I always stick

MISSIVES AND MISSILES

to sober, authenticated fact. But if Mr. Hunter wants to object to verified fact, all I can say is that one of these days he's going to be mighty sorry—yes, sir. I hope he'll have a tank of oxygen along then, but I fear the worst. Iconoclasts never take precautions. And when he's on some airless planetoid, frantically trying to build a fire, and with his nose turning blue with cold, my spaceship will be burning like mad in an oxygenated atmosphere—yes, oxygen, Mr. Hunter—and not a B.T.U. will you get.

You also inquired how many light years will it take for the gals to fly back to the planet in the background. Not long, really. You see, you jumped at the erroneous conclusion that the planet was about the size of Earth, something I never specifically stated. It was, in fact, pretty small.

I regret to note the puritanical tendency of Mr. Hunter to deplore the lack of brassieres on the Valkyries. These confining garments interfere with a good, hearty wing-stroke, and thus were never invented on the Black Planet. I suggest Mr. Hunter don a suit of 12th Century armor and try a brisk run around the track. It's all very well to talk, my good man, but *honi soit qui mal y pense*, and a good thing it is, too.

Always glad to receive more brickbats from your direction too, Mr. Hunter—but you had better read the story first. I've been bawled out by experts.

Ever thine,
Henry Kuttner

So you don't like our blurbs, hey?

Dear Editor:

First I would like to in a way answer Gene Hunter. Why, I ask do you want trimmed edges? I read a magazine, and look at the pictures if such there be. Do I finger the edges and snort my disgust if they be rough, or drool over them if trimmed? Heck no!

Another gripe that I noticed was the yellow cut on the cover with *Super Science* in it. This looks like a legit gripe, cause the yellow is pretty loud.

A word about Fictioneer chain letters. I am happy to add my approval to this project. Sounds swell and I hope I'm included in the chain.

Lawrence did a pretty good cover and all interior pix are fair to middlin' except for Bok's horror on page 94. Spaceships? Ugh! How could he do it? Three carrots (with rocket tubes) and a corrugated rubber ball. I repeat—Ugh!!!

That was a fine write up on contraterrene matter by Ley. A convincing proof that there is more to s. f. than entertainment value.

Yours very truly,
Editor's little helper,
Jay F. Chidsey,
Box 16,
Green Springs, Ohio

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