

THRILLING WINTER ISSUE
WONDER
STORIES

15¢

**ATOMIC
STATION**
By FRANK
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LONG

**FORGOTTEN
WORLD**

A Novel of the Future
By EDMOND HAMILTON

THE DISCIPLINARY CIRCUIT
An Amazing Novelet
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A THRILLING
PUBLICATION

Black Planet

and other short stories

Henry Kuttner

We Guard the Black Planet!

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The stratoship dropped me at Stockholm, and an air-ferry took me to Thunder Fjord, where I had been born. In six years nothing had changed. The black rocks still jutted out into the tossing seas, where the red sails of Vikings had once flaunted, and the deep roar of the waters came up to greet me. Against the sky Freya, my father's gerialcon, was wheeling. And high on the crag was the Hall, its tower keeping unceasing vigil over the northern ocean.

On the porch my father was waiting, a giant who had grown old. Nils Esterling had always been a silent man. His thin lips seemed clamped tight upon some secret he never told, and I think I was always a little afraid of him, though he was never unkind. But between us was a gulf. Nils seemed—shackled. I realized that first when I saw him watching the birds go south before the approach of winter. His eyes held a sick longing that, somehow, made me uneasy.

Shackled, silent, taciturn, he had grown old, always a little withdrawn from the world, always I thought, afraid of the stars. In the daytime he would watch his gerialcon against the deep blue of the sky, but at night he drew the shades and would not venture out. The stars meant something to him. Only once, I knew, he had been in space; he never ventured beyond the atmosphere again. What had happened out there I did not know. But Nils Esterling came back changed, with something dead inside his soul.

I was going out now. In my pocket were my papers, the result of six years of exhausting work at Sky Point, where I had been a cadet. I was shipping tomorrow on the Martins, Callisto bound. Nils had

asked me to come home first.

So I was here, and the gerfalcon came down wheeling, dropping, its talons clamping like iron on my father's gloved wrist. It was like a welcome. Freya was old, too, but her golden eyes were still bright, her grip still deadly.

Nils shook hands with me without rising. He gestured me to a chair. "I'm glad you came back, Arn. So you passed. That was good to hear. You'll be in space tomorrow."

"For Callisto," I said. "How are you, Nils? I was afraid--"

His smile held no mirth. "That I was ill? Or perhaps dying. No, Arn. I've been dying for forty years--" He looked at the gerfalcon. "It doesn't matter a great deal now. Except that I hope it comes soon. You'll know why when I tell you about--about what happened to me in space four decades ago. I'll try not to be bitter, but it's hard. Damned hard." Again Nils looked at the gerfalcon.

He went on after a moment, threading the cord through Freya's jesses. "You haven't much time, if your ship blasts off tomorrow. What port? Newark? Well--what about food?"

"I ate on the ferry, Dad--" I seldom called him that.

He moved his big shoulders uneasily. "Let's have a drink." He summoned the servant, and presently there were highballs before us. I could not repress the thought that whiskey was incongruous; in the Hall we should have drunk ale from horns. Well, that was the past. A dead past now.

Nils seemed to read my thought. "The old things linger somehow, Arn. They come down to us in our blood. So--"

"Waes hael," I said.

"Drinc hael." He drained the glass. Knots of muscle bunched at the corners of his jaw. With a sudden, furious motion, he cast off the gerfalcon, the leash slipping through the jesses. Freya took to the air with a hoarse, screaming cry.

"The instinct of flight is in our race," Nils said. "To be free, to fight, and to fly. In the old days we went Viking because of that. Leif the Lucky sailed to Greenland; our ships went down past the Tin Isles to Rome and Byzantium; we sailed even to Cathay. In the winter we caulked our keels and sharpened our swords. Then, when the ice broke up in the fjords, the red sails lifted again. Ran called us--Ran of the seas, goddess of the unknown."

His voice changed; he quoted softly from an old poet.

What is woman that you forsake her, And the hearthstone, and the home-acre, To go--with the old gray Widow-maker....

"Aye," said Nils Esterling, a lost sickness in his eyes. "Our race cannot be prisoned, or it dies. And I have been prisoned for forty years. By all the hells of all the worlds!" he whispered, his voice shaking. "A most damnable prison! My soul turned rotten before I'd been back on earth a week. Even before that. And there was no way out of my prison; I locked it with my own hands, and broke the key.

"You never knew about that, Arn. You'll know now. There's a reason why I must tell you--"

He told me, while the slow night came down, and the borealis flamed and shook like spears of light in the polar sky. The Frost Giants were on the march, for a sudden chill blew in from the fjord. Overhead the wind screamed, like the trumpet cries of Valkyries.

Far beneath us surged the sea, moving with its sliding, resistless motion, spuming against the rocks. Above us, the stars shone brightly.

And on Nils' wrist, where it had returned, the gerdalgon Freya rested, drowsy, stirring a little from time to time, but content to remain there.

It had been thus forty years and more ago, Nils said, in his youth, when the hot blood went singing through his veins, and the Viking spirit flamed within him. The seas were tamed.

The way of his ancestors was no longer open to him. But there were new frontiers open--

The gulfs between the stars held mysteries, and Nils signed as a. b. on a spaceship, a cranky freighter, making the Great Circle of the trade routes. Earth to Venus, and swinging outward again to the major planets.

The life toughened him, after a few years.

And in Marspole North, in a satha-dive, he ran into Captain Morse Damon, veteran of the Asteroid War.

Damon told Nils about the Valkyries--the guardians of the Black Planet.

He was harsh and lean and gray as weathered rock, and his black stare was without warmth. Sipping watered satha, he watched Nils Esterling, noting the leatheroid tunic worn at cuffs and elbows, the frayed straps of the elasto sandals.

"You know my name."

"Sure." Esterling said. "I see the newstapes. But you haven't been

mentioned for a while."

"Not since the Asteroid War ended, no. The pact they made left me out in the cold. I had a guerilla force raiding through the Belt. In another year I could have turned the balance. But after the armistice--"

Damon shrugged. "I'm no good for anything but fighting. I kept a ship; they owed me that. The Vulcan. She's a sweet boat, well found and fast. But I can't use her unless I sign up with the big companies. Besides, I don't want to do freighting. The hell with that. I've been at loose ends, blasting around the System, looking for--well, I don't know what. Had a shot or two at prospecting. But it's dull, sinking assay shafts, sweating for a few tons of ore. Not my sort of life."

"There's a war on Venus."

"Penny-ante stuff. I'm on the trail of something big now. On the trail of--" he smiled crookedly--"ghosts. Valkyries."

"Mars isn't the place, then. Norway, on Earth--"

Damon's gaze sharpened. "Not Norway. Space. Valkyries, I said--women with wings."

Esterling drank satha, feeling the cold, numbing liquor slide down his throat. "A new race on some planet? I never heard of winged humans."

"You've heard of Glory Hole and Davy Jones'Locker. Mean to say you've been in space three years and never heard of the Valkyries--the Black Planet?"

Esterling put down his glass gently. How did Damon know that he'd been a spaceman for three years? Till now he had thought this

merely a casual acquaintance, two Earthmen drinking together on an alien world. Now--

"You mean the legend," he said. "Never paid much attention. When a ship cracks up in space, the crew go to the Black Planet after they die. Spaceman's heaven."

"Yeah. A legend, that's all. When wrecks are found, all the bodies are found in 'em--naturally! But the story is that there are winged women--call them Valkyries--who live in an invisible world somewhere in the System."

"You think they exist?"

"I think there's truth behind the legend. It isn't merely a terrestrial belief. Martians, Vesuvians, Callistans--they all have their yarns about winged space-women."

Esterling coughed in the smoky atmosphere. "Well?"

"Here it is. Not long ago I met up with an archeologist, a guy named Beale. James Beale. He's got a string of degrees after his name, and for ten years he's been going through the System, checking up on the Black Planet, collecting data all over the place. He showed me what he had, and it was plenty convincing. It added up. A scrap of information from Venus, a story from beyond Io. Legends mostly, but there were facts too. Enough to make me believe that there's an invisible world somewhere in space."

"How invisible?"

"I don't know. Beale says it must be a planet with a low albedo--or something of the sort. It absorbs light. The winged people live on it. Sometimes they leave it. Maybe they have ships, though I can't tell about that, of course. So we have legends. Beale and I are going to

the Black Planet."

"All right," Esterling said. "It sounds crazy enough, but you could be right. Only--what do you expect to find there?"

Damon smiled. "Dunno. Excitement, anyhow. Beale's sure there are immense sources of power on the black world. I don't suppose we'll lose anything on the deal. Hell, I'm fed up with doing nothing, knocking around the System waiting for something to happen--and it never does. I'm not alive unless I'm fighting. This is a fight, in a way."

"Well?"

"Want a job?"

"You short-handed?"

"Plenty. You look strong--" Damon reached across the table and squeezed the other's biceps. His face altered, not much, but enough to convince Esterling of what he already suspected.

"Okay, Damon." He rolled up his sleeve, revealing an arm-bracelet of heavy gold clasped about his upper arm. "Is this what you're after?"

The captain's nostrils distended. He met Esterling's stare squarely.

"You want the cards on the table?"

"Sure."

Damon said, "I just got back from Norway, on Earth. I went there to look you up. Beale found out about that bracelet."

Esterling nodded. "It's an heirloom. Belonged to my great-grandmother, Gudrun. I don't know where she got it."

"It has an inscription. A copy of it was made about a hundred years ago for the Stockholm Museum. Beale ran across that copy. He can read Runic, and the bracelet carries an inscription--"

"I know."

"Do you know what it means?"

"Something about the Valkyries. Part of an old Edda, I suppose."

Damon made a noise deep in his throat. "Not quite. It gives the location of the Black Planet."

"The hell it does!" Esterling removed the bracelet and examined it carefully. "I thought it was merely symbolism. The rune doesn't mean anything."

"Beale thought it did. He saw the copy, I said, and it was incomplete. But he found enough to convince him that the complete inscription gave the location of the Black Planet."

"But why--"

"How should I know? Maybe the winged people visited Earth once, maybe somebody found the Black Planet by accident and remembered his space-bearings. He wrote it down where he'd have it safely--on an arm-bracelet. Somehow your great-grandmother got it."

Esterling stared at the golden band. "I don't believe it."

"Will you sign on with me, as supercargo, to look for the Black Planet? You can use a job, by the looks of your clothes."

"Sure I can. But a job like that--"

"Talk to Beale, anyway. He'll convince you."

Esterling grimaced. "I doubt that. However, I suppose I can't lose." He looked again at the bracelet. "Okay, I'll see him."

Damon rose, tossing coins on the stained metal table. Esterling finished his satha, conscious that the treacherous Martian distillate was affecting him. Satha did that. It gave you a deceptive cold clarity that disguised its potency. Martians could take it, with their different metabolism; but it was dangerous to Earthmen.

It was doubly dangerous for Esterling now. He walked beside Damon along the curving street, the ornate, fragile-seeming buildings of Marspole North towering above him--the ones that were not in ruins. It was possible to build tall towers on Mars, because of the slight gravity-pull, but the frequent quakes that shook the ancient planet often brought down those towers in crashing wreckage.

Near the spaceport a man was waiting, thin, dwarfish, and with a pinched, meager face. He was fingering a scrubby mustache and shivering with cold in his thin whites.

"You kept me waiting long enough," he said complainingly, his voice a high-pitched whine. "I'm nearly frozen, drat it. Is he Esterling?"

Damon nodded. "Yeah. Esterling--Beale. He's got the bracelet."

Beale's fingers fluttered at his mouth. "Heavens, that's a relief. We've been tracking you all over the System, man. A week ago we learned you'd shipped out of Io for Marspole North, so we came here by fast express to wait for you. I suppose the captain's told you about the Black Planet."

Esterling was feeling a little sick in the icy air. He had a moment's

qualm, wondering if Damon had doped his drinks. Automatically his hand went to his belt, but he'd pawned his gun that morning.

Damon said, "You talk to him. I'll attend to the ship." He slipped off into the shadows.

Beale peered up at the Norseman. "Would you mind letting me see the bracelet? Thanks...." He blinked nearsightedly at the golden band. The two moons gave little light, and Beale took out a tiny flashlight. His breath hissed out.

"Good heavens, Mr. Esterling, you can have no idea what this means to me. That copy in the Stockholm museum was incomplete, you know. Some of the runes were illegible. But this--"

"It tells where to find this--this black world? I'm a little drunk, but the whole yarn sounds crazy to me."

Beale blinked. "No doubt. No doubt. The legends about the Valley of Kings in Egypt seemed crazy till the tombs were finally discovered. The legend of the Valkyries--the flying women--is extremely widespread in space. There are clues... I reasoned by induction. It added up. I'm firmly convinced that there is such a planet, and that a hundred thousand years ago the winged people visited our own world. They left traces. Perhaps they've died out by now, but their artifacts remain."

"So?"

"I picked these up on Venus. They were found floating free in space. What do you make of them?" Beale fumbled in his pockets and drew out a bit of bone and a thin, pencil-like rod.

Esterling examined them with puzzled interest.

"It looks like a human shoulder-blade--or part of it."

"Yes, of course! But the extension--the prolongation! The osseous base for a wing, man! Notice the ball-and-socket arrangement, and the grooves where tendons have played, tendons strong enough to move wings."

"A freak?"

"No scientist would agree with you," Beale said shortly, and put the bone back in his pocket. "Look at the rod." Esterling could make nothing of it. "Is it a weapon?"

"A weapon without power, at the moment. I took it apart. It's based on an entirely different principle from anything we've known. Atomic quanta-release, perhaps. I don't know. But I mean to find out, and there's only one place where I can do that."

The Norseman rubbed his jaw. "So the clue's on my bracelet. And you want me to join you, eh?"

"We're short-handed. There are difficulties--" Beale shivered again, glancing toward the dark spaceport. "I am a poor man, and it takes much money to outfit a ship."

"I thought Damon had a boat--the Vulcan."

Before Beale could answer, a faint whistle came out of the dark. The scientist caught his breath. "All right," he said. "Come on." He gripped Esterling's arm and urged the big man toward the field.

A ship loomed there, dull silver in the light of the double moons. Silhouetted against the entrance port was Damon, waving. Beale said, "Hurry up," in a tight voice, and started to run.

Satha had dulled Esterling's senses--or Damon had drugged his liquor. He sensed something amiss, but a heavy, languid blanket lay over his mind, making thought an intolerable effort. He let himself be guided toward the ship.

Damon reached down, seized his hand, and drew him up. The man was remarkably strong, for all his slight build. Esterling, off balance, went lurching against a bulkhead, and brought up sharply against the wall of the lock. He turned in time to see Beale clambering up, spider-like.

Footsteps sounded. A man in port officer's uniform came racing across the field, his voice raised in a shout. Esterling saw Beale turn, biting his lips nervously, and draw a gun. He shot down from the airlock, the bullet striking the officer squarely between the eyes.

The shock of that sobered Esterling abruptly. But before he could move, Damon thrust him back into the ship. In the distance the faint wail of a siren began.

Beale said, "Drat it!" and came scrambling into the cabin. The valves slid shut with a dull thud. Esterling, his body numb with liquor or drugs, took a step forward.

"What the devil--"

Damon snapped, "Watch him, Beale! I've got to blast off."

The scientist's gun leveled at Esterling. Beale licked his lips. "Good heavens," he burst out. "Why does everything always go wrong.... Don't move, Mr. Esterling."

Damon had eased himself into the control seat. He spoke briefly into the mike, and then stabbed at the rocket jet buttons. The floor pressed hard against Esterling's feet.

Beale reached up and gripped a strap. "Hold on," he commanded. "That's right. We haven't time to take a smooth orbit out. They'll be after us--"

"They are after us," Damon said dryly. Esterling stole a glance at the visiplat. Marspole North was dropping away below, and a patrol ship was taking off with a burst of red rocket-fire. The ground swung dizzily as Damon played the controls.

Esterling said, "Obviously, this isn't your ship, Captain."

"Of course not," Beale snapped. "But we had to get one. They don't guard the spaceports. Damon picked up a dozen drifters and armed them--enough to take care of the skeleton crew. So--"

"So you killed the crew. I get it."

Without turning, Damon said, "Right. And we're manned by drunken roustabouts who don't know a jet from an escape valve. You'll come in handy, Esterling--you're an a. b."

The ship lurched sickeningly. The plates were red-hot in the atmosphere, and the visiplat was useless now. But speed was necessary to provide escape velocity. The hull was strong enough, Esterling knew; there was no danger through friction. The real peril lay in the patrol ship.

Damon grunted. "This is a fast boat. Once we're beyond the gravity-pull, we'll be safe. Nobody can catch us. Now--"

He jammed on more power. The red flare on the visiplat faded. They were beyond the atmosphere.

The patrol vessel was visible, specks of light flaming from its sides.

Beale grimaced. "Magnetic torpedoes, eh? We--we'll be killed, Damon. Did we have to take such chances?"

Then it happened. The Vulcan seemed to stop in mid-course, a grinding, shaking vibration jolting through its hull. Esterling felt the floor drop away beneath him. He was slammed against the wall, the breath going out of his lungs in an agonizing rush. He saw Beale still clinging to the strap, his lean body jerking and tossing like a puppet on wires. Damon was hurled forward against the instrument board. He pushed himself half erect, blood streaming from a pulped face. Somehow he was still alive. His fingers went out towards the buttons.

Beale was screaming, "Torpedo! The air--"

Damon cursed him thickly, indistinctly. He dashed the blood from his eyes and peered at the visiplat. Under his swift hands the ship lurched again, jolted, and leaped forward like an unleashed greyhound.

It seemed faster now.

"Any leaks?" Damon asked quietly.

Beale was clutching the strap, eyes closed, face gray. Esterling hesitated a moment and then made a circuit of the control cabin, listening at the doors and valves for any betraying hiss of air.

"Try a cigarette," Damon said. "Got one? Here." He extended a blood-stained pack.

Esterling watched the smoke curl out of his nostrils. The only draft was toward the ventilator system, so that was all right. He nodded briefly.

Damon's black eyes were like glacial ice.

He indicated the mike.

"Been trying to raise the men. They were in the bow. No answer. Suppose you put on a suit and check up, eh?"

"Okay," Esterling said. He went to a locker and took out a regulation spacesuit, slipped into it with the ease of familiarity. "What about the patrol boat?"

"We're losing it."

Beale dropped down into a sitting position on the floor-plates, gripping his gun with both hands. He was praying in a low whisper, but interrupted himself to mumble, "Take off the rockets, Mr. Esterling. We don't want you to leave us."

The Norseman compressed his lips, but a glance at the gun muzzle, aimed directly at his heart, made him nod with sardonic resignation. He shrugged out of the rocket harness and let it drop to the floor.

He went out through the hull hatch, Beale handling the levers. Already Mars was far behind, a dull red ball against the black sky. The magnetic soles on his boots held him firmly against the hull, and Esterling clumped laboriously toward the bow. If he had his rocket harness....

Without it, the ship's gravitation prisoned him. He could not escape. Where was the patrol boat?

He could not locate it among the star-points. Well, it scarcely mattered now. He was in for it. Breath misted the face-plate of his helmet, and he turned on the heater coils.

Esterling felt a little sick when he reached the place where the bow

had been. The entire nose of the ship had been blown off. Fragments of scrap and parts of bodies were plastered against the hull, covered by a treacly black fluid which Esterling recognized as rocket fuel. He paused on the jagged edge of the gap, peering down into the hole that had been blasted out of the ship. After a moment he took a deep breath and swung into the darkness.

Ten minutes later he returned to the control cabin and stripped off his suit. Beale was still praying. Damon was at the controls, mopping at his face with a crimson handkerchief. He looked up.

"Well? What damage?"

"Nobody's alive but us three."

"What damage to the ship?" Beale shrieked. "Good heavens, man, that's the important thing!"

Esterling grinned unpleasantly. "Did you know the Vulcan carried a full cargo of rocket fuel?"

"What of it?" Beale asked.

Damon turned sharply, a cold rage in his eyes. He showed his teeth in a snarl.

"Damn!" The oath exploded from him.

"Yeah," Esterling said. "The nose of the ship is blown off, and the inside bulkheads won't stand atmospheric friction. When we hit air again, the plates will get plenty hot. Rocket fuel won't explode without heat and oxygen, so we're safe as long as we're in space. But the minute we touch atmosphere, we go up like a rocket."

"Good heavens!" Beale gasped, fingers fluttering at his lips.

"Damon, we've got to unload that fuel!"

The captain snorted. "In space? We can't. The ship's gravity would pull it right back again."

"Then we've got to land on an airless planet and unload it!"

Damon pointed at the visiscreen. "The patrol boat's following our jets. We're faster, but the minute we slow down, they'll be on our tail. Nope. We've just got to keep going till we lose the patrol. After that--"

"Yes. I suppose so. We'll head out, eh?"

"It's the safest course. We'll jet toward Pluto."

Esterling lit a cigarette. "You're spacetight. You can't dodge the patrol. Why not call it a day and send out a white jet?"

Beale shook his head. "We can't do that. Once we reach the Black Planet we'll be safe."

"We'd better be," Damon said. "Just to make you feel better, I might as well tell you the Vulcan's washed up. Our bow tubes are gone. We can make a crash landing, with space-suits, but we can't take off again. You still think we'll find spaceships on the black world?"

"Yes. Yes, indeed. The winged people visited Earth, as well as other planets, in the past. It's a gamble, of course, but--"

"It's a gamble we've got to take." Damon looked at Esterling sardonically. "Want a gun?"

"Eh?"

"Here." The captain tossed over a compressed-air automatic. "I

don't know what we'll find on the Black Planet, but it may be trouble. You won't use that blaster on us, anyway. D'you think the patrol would believe we'd kidnaped you?"

Esterling slowly holstered the weapon. "I suppose not. But you're taking a chance...."

"I don't think so.... We'll split with you on whatever we find on the black world. According to Beale, that'll mean big money. Enough to buy off the law. Try any tricks, and the best you can expect is a patrol trial, with the cards stacked against you. Hell, keep the gun," Damon finished, with a careless shrug. "You're no fool. You'll play along."

"Yeah," Esterling said. "There's not much else I can do, I guess."

Damon chuckled.

Crippled, broken, a deadly time-bomb, the Vulcan thundered on into the eternal night of the void. The Asteroid Belt lay behind, with its flickering glare-dance of sunlight on the tiny worlds. Immense Jupiter grew larger, a pearly globe with a scarlet wound raw upon its surface--and Jupiter faded and dwindled.

Ringed Saturn was on the other side of the System, but Uranus watched them from the visiplate. They were beyond the Life Zone now. It was too cold, too far from the sun, for life to exist except under artificial conditions. Here and there on frigid moons a few space domes were spotted, outposts of lonely pioneers. But there were not many. Uranus was the borderline, the invisible wall beyond which it was not safe to venture.

The deadly emptiness of the interstellar wastes had reached in with fingers of fiery cold and touched the worlds that swung too far from the sun. They were accursed. Stones from ruined cities had been

found here, artifacts so old that no remotely human race could have built them. The freezing tides of space and time, pulsing in eon-long beats, had swept up and buried them, and receded for a little while.

He had never been this far out. In the long weeks on the Vulcan a change came upon Nils Esterling, a blood heritage that fought its way to the surface and brought out all the latent mysticism of his race. He was plumbing uncharted seas, as his forefathers had done, and something deep within the man, atavistic and powerful, woke to life.

There's a legend that spacemen get their souls frozen on their first voyage. Esterling had been away from Earth for only a few years, but those years had been deadly ones. Planetary voyages are gruelling, racking jobs for the men who work the ships, and, on the far-flung, exotic worlds of the System, there is nothing akin to the green meadows and blue oceans of Earth. The red ochre of Mars blasts the vision; the stinging yellow fogs of Venus creep into your pores; the shifting rainbow light of Callisto shocks your nerves into jolting madness. Men do not live long in space--no! So, while they live, they make the most of the little they possess.

There are flaming brews from Blueland moss, distilled and potent with dreams. There is cold, stealthy satha, and there is the sweet mznqa-liqueur they make in Ednes, on Venus. There is segzr-whiskey that turns the mind into red fire. There is absinthe from Earth and Fruit o'Worlds made by the dark monks of Io. And there are drugs. The sins of all the Systems are at the call of those who can pay.

Nils had gone down that dark path, for there was little choice. In a few years he had grown cold, reckless, embittered. He had tasted the exultation of space flight, and after that Earth would have seemed dull. Ahead of him lay more years alternating periods of arduous

voyages and wild sprees. Nothing else. In the end, death, and space burial.

The life had toughened him, building a harsh shell under which the old idealism had died to an ember. But now--there was a difference.

Three thousand years before his ancestors had gone Viking, their red-sailed ships driving out from the Northland fjords. Recklessly they had pushed on into unknown seas. The lure of mysteries, of exploration, drove them on. That touched Nils Esterling now.

The patrol ship had been lost long since. They were utterly alone, in an emptiness almost inconceivable to the human mind. The old motionless brilliance of the stars merely enhanced their isolation. Day after day the ship roared on through the void, and nothing changed; the sun remained a small yellow star, and the Milky Way lay across the dark sky like Bifrost Bridge that reaches to Asgard. Bifrost, the Bright Rainbow, across which the Valkyries thunder, bearing the souls of warriors fallen in battle.

Legend was not far from fact in this inhuman place, the airless void where man penetrated only by sufferance, venturing in tiny ships that a meteor could destroy easily. Nils Esterling felt the mysticism of far places stealing into his soul. He had felt thus before, once in the Euphrates Valley where the Garden of Eden had been created; and again on Easter Island, facing the silent carved titans whose origins are hidden by the past.

There were gateways and barriers, he thought--walls built to keep intruders from venturing too far. Man had not conquered space. He had reached the nearer worlds, but beyond, in the vastness of the galaxies, lay mysteries. Closer even than that! A black planet, rolling majestically, invisible, on the edge of the System, holding its secrets....

What were those secrets?

Sometimes skepticism came back, and Esterling sneered at his own credulity. How could a planet have remained undiscovered through the ages, beyond the orbit of Pluto?

It would have to be invisible.

But even as long ago as the Twentieth Century astronomers had suspected the existence of a trans-Plutonian world, one so far out from the sun that its influence was negligible, a world unseen, lost in the incredible immensity of space.

Yes. The Black Planet could exist.

Beale spent hours on abstruse calculations. He had figured dead reckoning by the runes on Esterling's bracelet, and Damon changed the course accordingly. The little scientist peered into the visiplat, using the telescopic attachment, but he could catch no glimpse of his goal.

"It must be invisible," he said. "That's a good sign."

Esterling stared at him. "Why?"

"In the plan of nature nothing is normally invisible, at least nothing of planetary size. That means the camouflage was created artificially. Physicists have speculated about the possibility of a negasphere--"

"I've seen dead-black planetoids," Damon broke in. "You never saw them till you were within a few hundred miles."

"Planetoids are small. And their presence could be detected by occlusion. An artificial negasphere would have the property of

warping light-rays. Dwarf stars can draw light toward them, you know. A negasphere could bend it away--around the planet. The world wouldn't hide any stars with its bulk."

They watched the visiplate, but there was nothing there except the frozen rivers of stars in the night sky.

Monotonously time dragged on. There was neither sunrise nor sunset; they ate when hungry, slept when tired. Always the doomed ship fled on into the darkness. Until--

There was no warning. One moment they were in empty space; the next, Damon, at the controls, cried out harshly and cut the jets. The screen flamed white. A bell began to ring shrilly.

"What is it?" Beale hurried toward Damon, leaning over the captain's shoulder. He gasped. Esterling pushed him aside, eying the visiplate.

On the field a world was visible, huge, luminous, distinctly limned against the misty background of the stars. It had sprung out of nothingness. But it was not black. It blazed with cold, swirling radiance, tides of living light rolled across it.

"The Black Planet," Damon said. "But--"

Beale's voice was shrill with excitement. "There was a negasphere! We went through it without realizing. Of course! It isn't a tangible barrier; it's just a hollow shell of darkness around the planet. Out here, on the edge of the System--" He was silent, staring at the immense jewel-world that lay before them.

Esterling said. "We're in atmosphere. Look at those stars--misty, see? We can't stay with the ship."

Damon put the Vulcan at automatic controls, circling inward in a narrowing spiral. The alarm bell was still ringing.

"Yeah. We'd better get into our suits. Come on!"

They struggled with the fastenings. A jolting shock wrenched the vessel. Esterling snapped his helmet shut, looked to see that he had his rocket harness and gun, and lumbered toward the lock, awkward in the heavy spaceboots. He swung open the valve.

On the lips of empty space he paused, looking down. Far beneath him the shining planet lay. He could not gauge its size. There were fewer stars now; the negasphere did not seem to block their light, but the atmosphere did. There was an instant of sickening giddiness before he stepped out.

Then he was hurtling down, and panic clutched at his throat. Instinctively he pressed the stud that activated his rocket-harness, and his flight was arrested. Two figures shot past him, grotesque in their suits, Beale and Damon. They were gone.

He dropped again; there was still a long way to fall, and he did not wish to exhaust his fuel. The Vulcan slowly passed him, its tubes firing spasmodically, driving it down to destruction. From the smashed bow a tongue of flame licked up. There was oxygen in this atmosphere, then.

A Viking funeral for the dead men on the ship, Esterling thought. Against the blackness of the sky red fire blazed suddenly. It was like a beacon--

Struck by a new thought, he glanced down. The flames would certainly attract attention, if there was any life on the Black Planet. But what life could exist on that pearly, shining globe, seething with

luminous tides?

Still he fell. The Vulcan blazed, red against the dark. How many spacemen had watched similar sights, watched their vessels crack up while they remained alone in space, without hope of rescue? No marooned sailor could ever have felt one-tenth of the utter desolation that pressed in from the void. The seas of Earth were wide, but the seas of space had no shores...!

He could not see Beale or Damon. What would happen when he reached the world below? Would those shining tides swallow him? There could be no life there!

Emptiness, and falling, and an hypnotic languor that dulled Esterling's brain.

Across the sky the Milky Way flamed. Bifrost, where the Valkyries rode, the spear-maidens of Asgard. The Valkyries--

Wings beat soundlessly past him.

For a timeless second a face looked into Esterling's. The blood drummed in his temples. Hallucination, he thought. For she could not exist!

Her hair was corn-yellow, her eyes as blue as the southern ocean. No curve of her slender body was hidden by the single gossamer garment she wore, and in all his life Esterling had never seen a girl half so lovely.

Nor half so strange!

Pinions lifted from her shoulders; wings, shining with coruscating light, upheld her in emptiness. She was winged!

One moment the girl hung there, her gaze probing into Esterling's. Then a touch of elfin malice came into the blue eyes. She made a quick gesture--and Esterling was swung off balance by an abrupt tug at his harness. Still falling, he revolved slowly in midair, in time to see another girl, almost a duplicate of the first, holding his rocket harness.

She had ripped it away--and Esterling was falling free, with nothing to halt his plunge to the glowing world beneath!

His mouth was dry with sudden panic; he wrenched out his gun. Apparently the winged girls knew the meaning of the weapons. The one holding the harness let it drop, and in perfect unison they dived toward Esterling. Handicapped as he was by his bulky suit, he had little chance. A hand gripped his arm. The gun was forced up and back. Falling through space, he could get no leverage, no way of exerting his strength.

Helpless, he fought the Valkyries.

It was useless, as he knew from the start. They were in their own element, agile, strong, deft. In the end he let them tear the gun from him, a suicidal hopelessness overcoming him. But the girls did not wish him to die, it seemed. Their arms wrapped about him, while the great pinions pulsed and beat. Esterling's fall slowed.

Far below, the planet grew larger. The tides of light swept across its surface. It filled half the sky. The Vulcan, still afire, plunged down and was swallowed by the luminous glow.

The world grew concave, then flat. Perspective changed. The sphere no longer hung in the void; it was an immense, seething ocean beneath. On that glowing sea were islands--and they drove with the mighty tides like ships.

Cities were built on the isles, fragile-seeming, with a curious architecture, unlike anything Esterling had seen before. There was no regular pattern. Some of the islands were huge, others tiny. But all were garden places, spotted with clusters of towers and minarets that were like lustrous jewels.

The Hesperides--the Isles of the Blessed. Oceans of living light washed those strange shores. Across the rolling, seething seas the islands moved majestically, flotsam of a lost planet.

Toward one of them Esterling dropped, a prisoner of the Valkyries.

He saw above the towers a myriad darting shapes, flying with graceful, easy movements. The winged people! Nor were they all women; there were men among them, their wings stronger, darker.

Walls lifted above Esterling. He was being carried down a shaft. There was an instant of dizzying confusion, during which he was half-blinded by wings flailing and beating about him. Then he felt the strong arms relax.

Solid ground was under his feet. He stood on a little platform of some plastic, blue-tinted substance. Behind him a passageway gaped in the wall. From his feet the pit dropped down to unknown depths.

The Valkyries alighted beside him. He felt slim fingers fumbling with his helmet, and, too late, made a gesture to halt the girl. The face-plate swung back. The air of the new world rushed into his lungs.

One breath told him that there was no danger. It was pure, fresh, and sweet, with a subtle tingling exhilaration that was almost intoxicating. Blue eyes laughed into Esterling's.

"D'm sa asth'neeso." The words were meaningless, but the gesture that accompanied them was significant. Esterling hesitated. A Valkyrie slipped past him, folded her wings like a cloak about her. She moved into the depths of the passage.

"Iyan sa!"

He followed, the other girl at his heels. A tapestry was flung aside, and he found himself in an apartment, obviously a sleeping-chamber, though not built for humans. The walls were transparent as glass.

He was, apparently, in one of the tallest towers. Beneath him lay the city. Beyond that, a luxuriance of rainbow forest, and, farther away, the blazing turmoil of the sea of light. The winged people swooped and glided among the towers.

The Valkyrie Esterling had first seen came closer. She murmured a few liquid, trilling syllables, and her companion vanished. Then, smiling fearlessly up into Esterling's eyes, she tapped the chest of his spacesuit and made a movement of inquiry.

His voice sounded harsh in the silence.

"Yeah. I don't need this, I guess." Gratefully he unburdened himself of the awkward overall garment and helmet.

The girl touched her breast. "Norahn." She repeated it. "Norahn--Norahn."

"Norahn," Esterling said. Her name? He imitated her gesture. "Nils."

There was a scuffle behind them. A group of Valkyries appeared from beyond the curtain, among them two struggling figures--Beale and Damon. They paused at sight of Esterling. Damon snapped open his helmet.

"What's this? Did they get your gun, too?"

"Take it easy," Esterling said. "They're friendly. Our being alive now proves that."

Damon grunted and began to remove his suit. Beale, his lips moving silently, did the same. The Valkyries drew back, as though waiting.

"Norahn--" Esterling said, rather helplessly. The girl smiled at him.

"Vanalsa into."

She pointed to the door. A Valkyrie entered, carrying a great basket loaded with fruits, unfamiliar to the Earthmen. Norahn picked up a scarlet globe and bit into it, afterward offering it to Esterling.

The taste was strange, but acidly pleasant. Damon grunted, squatted on the floor, and began to eat. Beale was more hesitant, sniffing at each fruit warily before he tried it, but soon the three men were gorging themselves. It was a welcome change from space rations. They scarcely noticed when the Valkyries slipped out.

Only Norahn remained. She touched the red sphere Esterling was eating and said, "Khar. Khar."

"Khar. Norahn."

His mouth full, Beale mumbled, "A good sign. They're taking the trouble to teach us their language. Good heavens, I still can't quite believe this. A whole race of flying people--"

"Khar, Nils. Khar."

Time did not exist on the world of the Valkyries. The floating islands

drifted with the shining tides, borne by an unchanging current that swept around the world. What the strange sea was Esterling never learned. It was not water, though one could bathe in it. The winged folk swooped down, dipped below the surface, and came up with glowing star-drops limning their bodies. Radio-activity, perhaps. Or some less understandable source of power, the alien force that had made the Black Planet unlike any other in the System.

It had come from outside, Norahn said, after they had learned to speak her tongue. In the old days, beyond the memory of the winged people, the planet had revolved around another sun, light-years away. That had been the age of science. There was no need for science now, though the tools still remained.

Beale's eyes brightened.

"We have no records, no memories. It was too long ago. There was a war, I think, and our people fled, moving this world like a ship. Across space we went. Long ago we visited the planets of this System. They had life but--that life was not intelligent. And we were afraid our enemies would follow and destroy us. So we made the negasphere, to hide ourselves from those who might pursue. We waited. The years passed. The centuries passed, and the ages. And we changed."

Norahn's wings swept wide. "Science was forgotten; we had no need for it. We fly. We fly!" Briefly her eyes were luminous with ecstasy. "It is decadence, perhaps, but we ask nothing more from the universe. It has been very long since any of us ventured beyond the negasphere. Indeed, it is forbidden. A curse falls on all who leave this world."

"A curse? What--"

"I do not know that. There have been some who ventured out in ships, but they did not return. The life is good here. We have our wings, and our cities. When we drift near the Darkness, we migrate."

Esterling said, "I don't understand. What is the darkness?"

"You will soon know. The tides bring us near to it now, and soon we must find another island. You will see--"

It was a wall of blackness looming upon the horizon. A monstrous pile of cloudy dark, lit luridly by red flashes sparking intermittently through the gloom. The isle swept on toward it--and the bird-people made ready to depart.

"No life can exist in the Darkness." Norahn said. "The only land on this world are the floating isles, and they follow the tide. While they are on the lightside, we can dwell on them. When they enter the darkness, we find another isle, until they have half-circled the planet and emerge once more."

Esterling stared at the great cloud. "What about your cities? Aren't they harmed?"

"No, we find everything as we left it. Our wise men say there is a certain radiation in the Darkness that destroys life--just as there are radiations here, in the sea, that give us power, and make us winged."

"How--"

"I do not know. There are only legends." Norahn shrugged. "It does not matter. In a few hours we must leave for another isle. Be ready."

Esterling would never forget that strange migration across the glowing sea. Like a cloud the winged people rose, carrying the few

belongings they needed--there were not many, Two Valkyries supported Esterling; others took charge of Beale and Damon. Their great wings carried them easily above the ocean.

Behind them the deserted islet drifted on into the Darkness.

Looking back, Esterling felt a tiny chill strike through him. His Norse blood thrilled to sudden warning. He thought of Jotunheim, the place of night, where the Frost Giants wait their time to break forth against the Aesir....

The new isle was like the first, though larger, and with a greater expanse of forest. And the life was unchanged.

The three Earthmen took little part in it; without wings, they were handicapped. The existence of the winged people went on without touching them though Esterling was not so far withdrawn as the others. He did not chafe. He was content to watch, and to talk with Norahn; to see her gliding above the shining sea.

Norahn told them they were prisoners. "If you can call it that, when the freedom of our world is yours. But you cannot leave. In the past, ships from your System have sometimes crashed here, and men have survived. Not for a long time, though. We treated them well. We took them with us to safety when the isles reached the Darkness--and in time they died. You will remain here, too."

"Why?" Damon asked.

"You would bring down the rest of your people upon us. We are happy; we have passed the Age of Science, and no longer need it. We are perfectly adapted to our environment. But we have great sources of power here. Your race would want that power. Our planet would be ruined for us. You would take our islands to build huge, ugly

machines. Nor could we fight. We have forgotten how."

"You must have some weapons," Beale said.

"Perhaps--but we do not need them. We have hidden our world; we guard it against intrusions--that is our greater safety. We could not fight, nor do we wish to. Ages ago all that died out of our race, soon after our science reached its peak and froze there. All we need lies ready to our hand, without further effort on our part."

"But the machines--" Beale persisted. "Don't they ever break down? Don't they ever need repair?"

Norahn shrugged her shining wings. "They are so simple a child could make repairs. That was the last interest that held our scientists, so legend says--they worked until no further need remained for invention, and then they worked to simplify. Even one of you, who never saw a food-maker or a noyai-loom before, could repair it in a few minutes if it broke down. No, we have no need any longer for weapons or invention of anything except--flight." Her great wings lifted away from her body and quivered a little. "It tires me to be still and talk, even to you, Nils. I shall be back." She dropped from the tower and was gone into the cool, pearly light.

Beale said, "They have spaceships here, then." His voice was eager. "That's obvious, or Norahn wouldn't have bothered to tell us we were prisoners. And we could fly them if we could find them. I wonder where--"

"We'll find out," Damon told him.

Then the incredible happened. For a long time Esterling had been conscious of a curious sensation centering around his shoulder-blades. But he did not realize its significance till the day when,

stripped to the waist, he was shaving before an improvised mirror. Damon, lounging by the balcony, said something in a surprised voice.

"Eh?" Esterling scraped at his cheek. "What's up?"

Instead of answering, Damon called for Beale. The scientist came out of the adjoining room, rubbing his eyes.

"Look at Esterling's back," the captain said. "Do you--"

Beale caught his breath. "Good heavens! Don't turn around, man; let me see."

"What is it?" Esterling squirmed before the mirror.

"Something's growing on your shoulder-blades. I'll be damned!" Damon murmured. "It can't be. Norahn!"

The girl's slim figure appeared above the balcony. "Es-tan'ha? Oh!" She leaped lightly to the floor and ran forward. "Be still, Nils." He felt her cool hand touch his back.

A queer, tingling excitement was pulsing within Esterling. Even before Norahn spoke, he guessed the truth.

"Wings," she said. "Yes--that is how they grow. From the buds, slowly expanding till they reach full size."

Damon had stripped off his shirt and was at the mirror. "Funny," he muttered. "I haven't got 'em. Have you, Beale?"

The scientist blinked. "Of course not. I haven't any such recessive characteristics in my background. Nor have you."

Esterling looked at him. "What d'you mean?"

"The answer's obvious, isn't it? I'd wondered how the bracelet, with its rune about the Black Planet, came into your possession. It belonged to your great-grandmother, didn't it?"

"Gudrun. Yes. But--"

"What do you know about her?"

"Damned little," Esterling said. "She was supposed to be blonde, with blue eyes, and very lovely. There was some mystery about her. She didn't live long, and the bracelet was given to her son."

"There was space-travel in your great-grandmother's day," Beale said. "And Norahn said some of her people used to leave this world in their ships. They never came back. It's pretty obvious where Gudrun came from, isn't it?"

"She--she had no wings."

"Wings can be amputated. They're apparently a recessive characteristic, handed down to you from your great-grandmother."

Esterling was trembling a little. "Then why should they grow now? Why wasn't I born with them?"

Beale nodded toward the window, beyond which the shining sea rolled. "There are certain radiations on this planet--radiations that don't exist elsewhere in the System. You were born with wing-buds on your back. But they needed the right kind of environment to develop. That particular radiation exists here. If you'd never come to this world, you'd never have grown wings."

Norahn smiled happily into Esterling's eyes.

"Soon you can fly, Nils! I will show you the way--"

It was like recovering sight after being blind from birth. Flight, to Nils Esterling, unfolded vistas he had never known. The trick of it came with surprising ease. After the wings had reached their full development, the supporting muscles grew stronger, too. He never forgot that first flight. It was not long, but the feeling of complete and absolute freedom, the abrupt and easy checking of his fall, sent the blood singing through his veins. Flight was a heady drunkenness. The wine of it was stronger than any liquor Esterling had ever tasted.

And Norahn taught him, as she had promised.

He understood now the intoxication the winged people felt.

Earthly humanity had dropped from Esterling. He was one of the winged people now. Flight was his heritage, the high, keen delight of utter freedom, not bound by dimensions.

The islet swept on inexorably toward the Darkness.

It was time for the migration again. The winged folk rose and sped away, in search of a new home. Beale and Damon delayed, however. They were determined to remain with the island when it entered the Darkness.

At the window-opening Norahn watched the sky, where the great blackness grew momentarily more menacing. "It is dangerous. You will die."

Damon grunted. "The radiation might not harm us. And I'd like to know what's in the Darkness. Beale thinks--"

"Don't be a fool," Esterling said roughly. "You know damned well you

can't live where the winged people can't. I can't stop you from committing suicide, I suppose. But what can you hope to gain by staying with the island?"

Illogically, Beale and Damon persisted in their arguments--persisted, while the Darkness grew nearer. Norahn's two companions grew more and more uneasy. At last they took flight, white-faced at their closeness to the barrier of the dark.

Esterling watched them go. "Okay," he said. "Maybe Norahn and I can carry you. Make up your minds. Because we're leaving too--right now!"

Damon capitulated with surprising suddenness. "All right. I suppose we'll have to. If you won't wait till we get nearer to the Darkness."

"We're near enough. You'll have to forget your curiosity, Beale. Norahn, can you call back some of your people to help?"

She shook her head. "They are too far. They will not remain on the isle when it drifts near the Darkness. But I can carry the little man easily."

"Okay. Get on my back, Damon. That's it. Lock your legs around my waist. Now--"

The wings were powerful. Beale was a small man, and Damon no giant. Esterling and Norahn dropped from the balcony, flung their pinions wide, and swooped up, gaining altitude. The islet slid away beneath them.

They flew on above the shining sea. Far in the distance was a smudge that showed where the bird-people were, in a close band.

"Listen," Damon said into Esterling's ear, "those people have

spaceships, don't they?"

"They used to."

"Where are they?"

"On some of the islands. None we've ever lived on, though."

"But you've seen them."

"From above--yeah."

"So have I. Once, when they carried us off to visit another island. I know where they are from here, allowing for tidal drift." There was a pause. Damon went on, "How'd you like to get off this world?"

Esterling smiled a little. "Funny. I've never thought of that. This place-- I like it here."

"Well, I don't. How about dropping us where we can get at a spaceship?"

"One of theirs, you mean? Not a chance. For one thing, you couldn't fly it. For another, what about fuel? Remember, they haven't used the ships for ages."

"Oh, yes they have. Norahn told us about how some of them go out into space and never return. And about how simple everything here is to operate. I'll gamble on the fuel. My guess is it's there ready--that's how machinery on this world seems to operate. And if the ship's that simple--well, I can handle anything that flies."

"And you'd be back with an army, wouldn't you? Norahn was right, Damon. This world should be kept isolated. The people here are happy."

"Happy, hell! Beale!" Damon's voice was sharp. "Now!"

Esterling saw the scientist, a dozen yards away, move quickly. There was a gun in his hand. He pressed its muzzle against Norahn's temple. Simultaneously the Norseman felt a cold ring of steel touch his own temple.

"Take it easy," Damon said quietly. "Don't try any stunting. I can fire before you can drop me. So can Beale."

Esterling's face was white. "It's all right," he said, his voice unsteady. "Just keep on, Norahn."

"Yeah," Damon seconded. "Keep on. But in a different direction. You're going to take us to a spaceship, Esterling, or you and Norahn get your heads blown off."

"Where'd you get the guns?" he asked.

"Where they'd been hidden," Damon said. "I've been planning this for some time. I couldn't buck the whole gang of you, but I figured if I could get you and Norahn alone--"

"Yeah," Esterling said. "Yeah."

It was a long flight. Wing muscles were tired and aching when an islet grew in the distance from a tiny speck to a broad expanse. Beale shouted something and pointed.

Damon said into Esterling's ear, "I can see ships down there. No winged people, though. I guess they stay away from anything that reminds them of science. Go down--easy."

Obediently Esterling glided down the slopes of shining air, Norahn

beside him. The silvery, torpedo-shaped rows of ships grew larger. Damon whistled at their design. "I'll bet they're plenty fast!"

Esterling landed lightly. Damon leaped from his back, gun ready, waiting till Norahn and Beale were down.

"Keep your gun out," he said to the scientist. "I want to check up on this ship."

Its lock was childishly simple. In a moment he had vanished into the interior. The others waited tensely. Presently Beale reappeared, smiling.

"I was right. Simple instructions and controls. Anybody could operate who could astrogate. And there's plenty of fuel. Now, Esterling, what about going with us?" The Norseman looked at Norahn. "No," he said. "I'm staying."

Beale bit at his thin lips. "Drat it," he mumbled. "Damon, we should take some proof back with us--"

"We've got the ship."

"Sure. But when we bring men back here, it'll help to know as much as possible about the winged people. Perhaps they can't fight, but they've inherited weapons. We've never been able to locate them. Now Norahn could give us plenty of information--"

Esterling yelled, "Norahn! Get out of here! Quick!" He jumped Damon, his fist striking at the captain's gun. There was a rush of footsteps behind him, and something crashed down on his head with sickening force. Weakness ran like water through his body. He scarcely felt Damon's fist jolt against his jaw.

Dimly he heard Norahn scream. There was the thud of a valve

closing, and then a fiery blast of rockets and a shriek of cleft air. Esterling, flat on his face, groaned weakly and tried to rise. It was useless. A black speck dwindled in the sky. "Norahn!" he said hoarsely. "Norahn--" Somehow Esterling dragged himself to his hands and knees. He was blind and sick with pain, and his skull felt as though it had been fractured. But there was another spaceship looming through the trees, and he had to reach it--

Somehow he did. He never knew how. Somehow he stumbled along shining corridors and found an instrument board that swam before his eyes. Afterward he knew that he must have done the requisite things his reflexes were trained to do on any ship that plies the spaceways. He must have closed the valves and fallen into the astrograter's seat and found the proper instruments ready to his fumbling hands. But it was sheer will-power that did it.

When his head cleared the starry emptiness of space filled the visiplate before him. Already he was through the negasphere. Norahn's world had vanished. And for an instant he remembered the curse that was said to fall upon all natives who left that world.

After that was eternity. Esterling could not leave the controls; he scarcely dared glance away from the visiplate. And a throbbing, blazing ache inside his skull pounded at his brain.

Damon fled sunward. Esterling followed doggedly. They reached the orbit of Pluto.

And now at last, slowly, by infinite degrees, the fleeing ship grew larger in the visiplate.

Esterling manipulated the controls with dizzy recklessness. Now they were almost together, the hunter and the pursued. And now--now--

With a surprisingly light impact he crashed his ship against Damon's, and without pausing to see the results, turned to the rack where the spacesuits hung.

It was while getting into the suit that he noticed for the first time what had happened to his wings. The great shimmering pinions that had carried him over the glowing seas of Norahn's world were colorless--limp.

Out in the void, he kicked himself across to the other ship. He didn't head for the entrance lock; Damon would be expecting that move. Instead, Esterling drew himself, hand over hand, to the emergency escape hatch in the bow. He levered it open.

Beale was waiting for him.

Esterling looked to see that the bow compartment was airtight, the door sealed. Norahn was in this ship, and he had to be careful. But the valve was right.

Beale fired. The bullet went through Esterling's suit and shoulder as he lurched aside. But it was only a flesh wound. He plugged the tear in the suit by bunching the fabric together with one hand, and with the other he reached back and opened the escape hatch.

Beale was not wearing an air-helmet.

He managed one more shot before his breath was wrenched out of his lungs, but the bullet went wild, spattering against metal. The blasting gust of wind racing out of the hatch pulled Beale with it, smashing him against Esterling. The scientist's finger clawed frantically at the other's suit.

Beale slide down, his eyes glaring, his tongue protruding. Esterling looked at the dead man without emotion.

He closed the hatch behind him, opened the door to the rest of the ship, and quickly removed the encumbering suit and helmet. Already fresh air had replaced the vacuum. Esterling picked up Beale's gun and stepped across the threshold.

Four strides took him to another door. He thrust it open.

He was facing Damon. In a corner of the control cabin lay Norahn, bound. Her wings were--withered.

Damon fired. The bullet struck Esterling somewhere. He took a step forward. Norahn was crying, very softly, like a hurt child.

Damon whispered, "Get back. Stay where you are. I'll--"

He thrust the gun forward, his finger contracting on the trigger. Esterling threw his own weapon straight at the other's face as he sprang. His right hand found Damon's gun-wrist. His left touched the corded muscles of a throat.

Norahn was crying bitterly, hopelessly--

"I killed him," my father said. "With my hands. But he died only one death."

Breakers crashed beneath us in Thunder Fjord. The sky had grown light. Freya, the gefaulton, hooded and asleep, stirred on Nils Esterling's shoulder.

I looked out at the dark sea. "You couldn't go back?"

"No. Those wings would never grow again. Only on the Black Planet could they ever have grown. Once withered--" he made a hopeless gesture--"Norahn and I were earth-bound. It was the legendary curse

that fell on any of her folk who left that world. And--and she had been born to flight."

The sun's rim loomed on the horizon. Nils stared up into the burning rays.

"She wouldn't let me take her back. The Black Planet is for those with wings. Not for the earthbound. I brought her to Earth, Arn. I brought her here. She died when you were born. Scarcely a year.... We had happiness, but it was bitter-sweet. For we had known flight."

Nils unhooded the gergefalcon. Freya moved, ruffled her feathers, blinking a golden eye.

"Flight," my father said. "To stop flying is to die. Norahn died in a year. And for over forty years I have been chained here, remembering. Arn--" He slipped something from his arm and dropped it into my hand--"this is yours now. You're going into space. Your heritage is out there, beyond the orbit of Pluto, where the isles of the winged folk drift on the bright tides of Norahn's world. It's your world as well. In you are the seeds of flight"

He looked at the gergefalcon. "I have no words to tell you of your heritage, Arn. You will never know, till you have wings. And then--"

Nils Esterling stood up, casting the gergefalcon free. Freya screamed harshly. Her wings beat the air. She circled, mounted, climbing the winds.

My father's gaze brooded on me as I slipped the golden bracelet on my arm. He dropped back into the chair, as though exhausted.

"That's all, I suppose," he said wearily. "It's time for you to go. And--I'll say good-by."

I left him there. He did not watch me go. Once I turned, far down the path above Thunder Fjord, and Nils Esterling had not moved. He was looking up at Freya, wheeling in the blue.

The next time I looked, the outthrust of the crag hid the Hall. All I could see was the empty sky, and the gerfalcon circling there on splendid wings.

Yvala

with Amaryllis Ackerman

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Northwest Smith leaned against a pile of hemp-wrapped bales from the Martian drylands and stared with expressionless eyes, paler than pale steel, over the confusion of the Lakkdarol space-port before him. In the clear Martian day the tatters of his leather spaceman's garb were pitilessly plain, the ray-burns and the rents of a hundred casual brawls. It was evident at a glance that Smith had fallen upon evil days. One might have guessed by the shabbiness of his clothing that his pockets were empty, the charge in his ray gun low.

Squatting on his heels beside the lounging Earthman, Yarol the Venusian bent his yellow head absently over the thin-bladed dagger which he was juggling in one of the queer, interminable Venusian games so pointless to outsiders. Upon him too the weight of ill fortune seemed to have pressed heavily. It was eloquent in his own shabby garments, his empty holster. But the insouciant face he lifted to Smith was as careless as ever, and no more of weariness and wisdom and pure cat-savagery looked out from his sidelong black eyes than Smith was accustomed to see there. Yarol's face was the face of a seraph, as so many Venusian faces are likely to be, but the set of his mouth told a tale of dissoluteness and reckless violence which belied his features' racial good looks.

"Another half-hour and we eat," he grinned up at his tall companion.

Smith glanced at the tri-time watch on his wrist.

"If you haven't been having another dope dream," he grunted. "Luck's

been against us so long I can't quite believe in a change now."

"By Pharol I swear it," smiled Yarol. "The man came up to me in the New Chicago last night and told me in so many words how much money was waiting if we'd meet him here at noon."

Smith grunted again and deliberately took up another notch in the belt that circled his lean waist. Yarol laughed softly, a murmur of true Venusian sweetness, as he bent again to the juggling of his knife. Above his bent blond head Smith looked out again across the busy port.

Lakkdarol is an Earthman's town upon Martian soil, blending all the more violent elements of both worlds in its lawless heart, and the scene he watched had under-currents that only a ranger of the space ways could fully appreciate. A semblance of discipline is maintained there, but only the space-rangers know how superficial that likeness is. Smith grinned a little to himself, knowing that the bales being trundled down the gangplank from the Martian liner Inghti carried a core of that precious Martian "lamb's-wool" on which the duties run so high. And a whisper had run through the New Chicago last night as they sat over their segir-whisky glasses that the shipment of grain from Denver expected in at noon on the Friedland would have a copious leavening of opium in its heart. By devious ways, in whispers running from mouth to mouth covertly through the spacemen's rendezvous, the outlaws of the space ways glean more knowledge than the Patrol ever knows.

Smith watched a little air-freight vessel, scarcely a quarter the size of the monstrous ships of the Lines, rolling sluggishly out from the municipal hangar far across the square, and a little frown puckered his brows. The ship bore only the non-commercial numerals which all the freighters carry by way of identification, but that particular sequence was notorious among the initiate. The ship was a slaver.

This dealing in human freight had received a great impetus at the stimulation of space-travel, when the temptation presented by the savage tribes on alien planets was too great to be ignored by unscrupulous Earthmen who saw vast fields opening up before them. For even upon Earth slaving has never died entirely, and Mars and Venus knew a small and legitimate traffic in it before John Willard and his gang of outlaws made the very word "slaving" anathema on three worlds. The Willards still ran their pirate convoys along the space-ways three generations later, and Smith knew he was looking at one now, smuggling a cargo of misery out of Lakkdarol for distribution among the secret markets of Mars.

Further meditations on the subject were cut short by Yarol's abrupt rise to his feet. Smith turned his head slowly and saw a little man at their elbow, his rotundity cloaked in a long mantle like those affected by the lower class of Martian shopkeepers in their walks abroad. But the face that peered up into his was frankly Celtic. Smith's expressionless features broke reluctantly into a grin as he met the irrepressible good-humor on that fat Irish face from home. He had not set foot upon Earth's soil for over a year now--the price on his liberty was too high in his native land--and curious pricks of homesickness came over him at the oddest moments. Even the toughest of space-rangers know them sometimes. The ties with the home planet are strong.

"You Smith?" demanded the little man in a rich Celtic voice.

Smith looked down at him a moment in cold-eyed silence. There was much more in that query than met the ear. Northwest Smith's name was one too well known in the annals of the Patrol for him to acknowledge it incautiously. The little Irishman's direct question implied what he had been expecting--if he acknowledged the name he met the man on the grounds of outlawry, which would mean that

the employment in prospect was to be as illegal as he had thought it would be.

The merry blue eyes twinkled up at him. The man was laughing to himself at the Celtic subtlety with which he had introduced his subject. And again, involuntarily, Smith's straight mouth relaxed into a reluctant grin.

"I am," he said.

"I've been looking for you. There's a job to be done that'll pay you well, if you want to risk it."

Smith's pale eyes glanced about them warily. No one was within earshot. The place seemed as good as any other for the discussion of extra-legal bargains.

"What is it?" he demanded.

The little man glanced down at Yarol, who had dropped to one knee again and was flicking his knife tirelessly in the intricacies of his queer game. He had apparently lost interest in the whole proceeding.

"It'll take the both of you," said the Irishman in his merry, rich voice. "Do you see that air freighter loading over there?" and he nodded toward the slaver.

Smith's head jerked in mute acknowledgment.

"It's a Willard ship, as I suppose you know. But the business is running pretty low these days. Cargoes too hot to ship. The patrol is shutting down hard, and receipts have slackened like the devil in the last year. I suppose you've heard that too."

Smith nodded again without words. He had.

"Well, what we lose in quantity we have to make up in quality. Remember the prices Minga girls used to bring?"

Smith's face was expressionless. He remembered very well indeed, but he said nothing.

"Along toward the last, kings could hardly pay the price they were asking for those girls. That's really the best market, if you want to get into the 'ivory' trade. Women. And there you come in. Did you ever hear of Cembre?"

Blank-eyed, Smith shook his head. For once he had run across a name whose rumors he had never encountered before in all the tavern gossip.

"Well, on one of Jupiter's moons--which one I'll tell you later, if you decide to accept--a Venusian named Cembre was wrecked years ago. By a miracle he survived and managed to escape; but the hardships he'd undergone unsettled his mind, and he couldn't do much but rave about the beautiful sirens he'd seen while he was wandering through the jungles there. Nobody paid any attention to him until the same thing happened again, this time only about a month ago. Another man came back half-cracked from struggling through the jungles, babbling about women so beautiful a man could go mad just looking at them.

"Well, the Willards heard of it. The whole thing may sound like a pipe-dream, but they've got the idea it's worth investigating. And they can afford to indulge their whims, you know. So they're outfitting a small expedition to see what basis there may be for the myth of Cembre's sirens. If you want to try it, you're hired."

Smith slanted a non-committal glance downward into Yarol's uplifted black gaze. Neither spoke.

"You'll want to talk it over," said the little Irishman comprehendingly. "Suppose you meet me in the New Chicago at sundown and tell me what you've decided."

"Good enough," grunted Smith. The fat Celt grinned again and was gone in a swirl of black cloak and a flash of Irish merriment.

"Cold-blooded little devil," murmured Smith, looking after the departing Earthman. "It's a dirty business, Yarol."

"Money's clean," observed Yarol lightly. "And I'm not a man to let my scruples stand in the way of my meals. I say take it. Someone'll go, and it might as well be us."

Smith shrugged.

"We've got to eat," he admitted.

"This," murmured Yarol, staring downward on hands and knees at the edge of space-ship's floor-port, "is the prettiest little hell I ever expect to see."

The vessel was arching in a long curve around the Jovian moon as its pilot braked slowly for descent, and a panorama of ravaging jungle slipped by in an unchanging wilderness below the floor-port.

Their presence here, skimming through the upper atmosphere of the wild little satellite, was the end of a long series of the smoothest journeying either had ever known. The Willard network was perfect over the three planets and the colonized satellites beyond, and over the ships that ply the spaceways. This neat little exploring vessel, with its crew of three coarse-faced, sullen slavers, had awaited them

at the end of their journey outward from Lakkdarol, fully fitted with supplies and every accessory the most modern adventurer could desire. It even had a silken prison room for the hypothetical sirens whom they were to carry back for the Willard approval and the Willard markets if the journey proved successful.

"It's been easy so far," observed Smith, squinting downward over the little Venusian's shoulder. "Can't expect everything, you know. But that is a bad-looking place."

The dull-faced pilot at the controls grunted in fervent agreement as he craned his neck to watch the little world spinning below them.

"Damn'glad I'm not goin'out with you," he articulated thickly over a mouthful of tobacco.

Yarol flung him a cheerful Venusian anathema in reply, but Smith did not speak. He had little liking and less trust in this sullen and silent crew. If he was not mistaken--and he rarely made mistakes in his appraisal of men--there was going to be trouble with the three before they completed their journey back into civilization. Now he turned his broad back to the pilot and stared downward.

From above, the moon seemed covered with the worst type of semi-animate, ravenous super-tropical jungle, reeking with fertility and sudden death, hot under lurid Jupiter's blaze. They saw no signs of human life anywhere below as their ship swept in its long curve over the jungle. The tree-tops spread in an unbroken blanket over the whole sphere of the satellite. Yarol, peering downward, murmured,

"No water. Somehow I always expect sirens to have fishtails."

Out of his queer, heterogeneous past Smith dragged a fragment of ancient verse, "--gulfs enchanted, where the sirens sing...." and said

aloud,

"They're supposed to sing, too. Oh, it'll probably turn out to be a pack of ugly savages, if there's anything but delirium behind the story."

The ship was spiraling down now, and the jungle rushed up to meet them at express-train speed. Once again the little moon spun under their searching eyes, flower-garlanded, green with fertile life, massed solid in tangles of ravaging growth. Then the pilot's hands closed hard on the controls and with a shriek of protesting atmosphere the little spaceship slid in a long dive toward the unbroken jungle below.

In a great crashing and crackling they sank groundward through smothers of foliage that masked the ports and plunged the interior of the ship into a green twilight. With scarcely an impact the jungle floor received them. The pilot leaned back in his seat and heaved a tobacco-redolent sigh. His work was done. Incuriously he glanced at the forward port.

Yarol was scrambling up from the floor-glass that now showed nothing but crushed vines and branches and the reeking mud of the moon's surface. He joined Smith and the pilot at the forward port.

They were submerged in jungle. Great serpentine branches and vines like cables looped downward in broken lengths from the shattered trees which had given way at their entrance. It was an animate jungle, full of hungry, reaching things that sprang in one wild, prolific tangle from the rich mud. Raw-colored flowers, yards across, turned sucking mouths blindly against the glass here and there, trickles of green juice slavering down the clear surface from their insensate hunger. A thorn-fanged vine lashed out as they stood staring and slid harmlessly along the glass, lashed again and again blindly until the prongs were dulled and green juice bled from its bruised surfaces.

"Well, we'll have blasting to do after all," murmured Smith as he looked out into the ravenous jungle. "No wonder those poor devils came back a little cracked. I don't see how they got through at all. It's--"

"Well--Pharol take me!" breathed Yarol in so reverent a whisper that Smith's voice broke off in mid-sentence and he spun around with a hand dropping to his gun to front the little Venusian, who had sought the stern port in his exploration. "It's a road!" gasped Yarol. "Black Pharol can have me for dinner if there isn't a road just outside here!"

The pilot reached for a noxious Martian cigarette and stretched luxuriously, quite uninterested. But Smith had reached the Venusian's side before he finished speaking, and in silence the two stared out upon the surprising scene the stern port framed. A broad roadway stretched arrowstraight into the dimness of the jungle. At its edges the hungry green things ceased abruptly, not encroaching by so much as a tendril or a leaf into the clearness of the path. Even overhead the branches had been forbidden to intrude, their vein-looped greenery forming an arch above the road. It was as if a destroying beam had played through the jungle, killing all life in its path. Even the oozing mud was firmed here into a smooth pavement. Empty, enigmatic, the clear way slanted across their line of vision and on into the writhing jungle. "Well," Yarol broke the silence at last, "here's a good start. All we've got to do is follow the road. It's a safe bet there won't be any lovely ladies wandering around through this jungle. From the looks of the road there must be some civilized people on the moon after all."

"I'd be happier if I knew what made it," said Smith. "There are some damned queer things on some of the moons and asteroids."

Yarol's cat-eyes were shining.

"That's what I like about this life," he grinned. "You don't get bored. Well, what do the readings say?"

From his seat at the control panel the pilot glanced at the gauges which gave automatic report on air and gravity outside.

"o.k.," he grunted. "Better take blast-guns."

Smith shrugged off his sudden uneasiness and turned to the weapon rack.

"Plenty of charges, too," he said. "No telling what we'll run into."

The pilot rolled his poisonous cigarette between thick lips and said, "Luck. You'll need it," as the two turned to the outer lock. He had all the indifference of his class to anything but his own comfort and the completion of his allotted tasks with a minimum of effort, and he scarcely troubled to turn his head as the lock swung open upon an almost overwhelming gush of thick, hot air, redolent of green growing things and the stench of swift decay.

A vine-tip lashed violently into the opened door as Smith and Yarol stood staring. Yarol snapped a Venusian oath and dodged back, drawing his blast-gun. An instant later the eye-destroying blaze of it sheered a path of destruction through the lush vegetable carnivora straight toward the slanting roadway a dozen feet away. There was an immense hissing and sizzling of annihilated green stuff, and an empty path stretched before them across the little space which parted the ship's outer lock from the road. Yarol stepped down into reeking mud that bubbled up around his boots with a stench of fertility and decay. He swore again as he sank knee-deep into its blackness. Smith, grinning, joined him. Side by side they floundered through the ooze toward the road.

Short though the distance was, it took them all of ten minutes to cover it. Green things whipped out toward them from the walls of sheared forest where the blast-gun had burned, and both were bleeding from a dozen small scratches and thorn-flicks, breathless and angry and very muddy indeed before they reached their goal and dragged themselves onto the firmness of the roadway.

"Whew!" gasped Yarol, stamping the mud from his caked boots. "Pharol can have me if I stir a step off this road after this. There isn't a siren alive who could lure me back into that hell again. Poor Cembre!"

"Come on," said Smith. "Which way?"

Yarol slatted sweat from his forehead and drew a deep breath, his nostrils wrinkling distastefully.

"Into the breeze, if you ask me. Did you ever smell such a stench? And hot! Gods! I'm soaked through already."

Without words Smith nodded and turned to the right, from where a faint breeze stirred the heavy, moisture-laden air. His own lean body was impervious to a great variation in climate, but even Yarol, native of the Hot Planet, dripped with sweat already and Smith's own leather-tanned face glistened and his shirt clung in wet patches to his shoulders.

The cool breeze struck gratefully upon their faces as they turned into the wind. In a gasping silence they plodded muddily up the road, their wonder deepening as they advanced. What had made the roadway become more of a mystery at every step. No vehicle tracks marked the firm ground, no footprints. And nowhere by so much as a hair's breadth did the forest encroach upon the path.

On both sides, beyond the rigid limits of the road, the lush and cannibalistic life of the vegetation went on. Vines dangled great sucking disks and thorn-toothed creepers in the thick air, ready for a deadly cast at anything that wandered within reach. Small reptilian things scuttled through the reeking swamp mud, squeaking now and then in the toils of some thorny trap, and twice they heard the hollow bellowing of some invisible monster. It was raw primeval life booming and thrashing and devouring all about them, a planet in the first throes of animate life.

But here on the roadway that could have been made by nothing less than a well-advanced civilization that ravaging jungle seemed very far away, like some unreal world enacting its primitive dramas upon a stage. Before they had gone far they were paying little heed to it, and the bellowing and the lashing, hungry vines and the ravenous forest growths faded into half-heard oblivion. Nothing out of that world entered upon the roadway.

As they advanced the sweltering heat abated in the steady breeze that was blowing down the road. There was a faint perfume upon it, sweet and light and utterly alien to the fetor of the reeking swamps which bordered their way. The scented gusts of it fanned their hot faces gently.

Smith was glancing over his shoulder at regular intervals, and a pucker of uneasiness drew his brows together.

"If we don't have trouble with that crew of ours before we're through," he said, "I'll buy you a case of segir."

"It's a bet," agreed Yarol cheerfully, turning up to Smith his sidelong cat-eyes as insouciantly savage as the ravaging jungle around them. "Though they were a pretty tough trio, at that."

"They may have the idea they can leave us here and collect our share of the money back home," said Smith. "Or once we get the girls they may want to dump us and take them on alone. And if they haven't thought of anything yet, they will."

"Up to no good, the whole bunch of 'em," grinned Yarol. "They--they--"

His voice faltered and faded into silence. There was a sound upon the breeze. Smith had stopped dead-still, his ears straining to recapture the echo of that murmur which had come blowing toward them on the breeze. Such a sound as that might have come drifting over the walls of Paradise.

In the silence as they stood with caught breath it came again--a lilt of the loveliest, most exquisitely elusive laughter. From very far away it came floating to their ears, the lovely ghost of a woman's laughing. There was in it a caress of kissing sweetness. It brushed over Smith's nerves like the brush of lingering fingers and died away into throbbing silence that seemed reluctant to let the exquisite sound of it fade into echoes and cease.

The two men faced each other in rapt bewilderment. Finally Yarol found his voice.

"Sirens!" he breathed. "They don't have to sing if they can laugh like that! Come on!"

At a swifter pace they went on up the road. The breeze blew fragrantly against their faces. After a while its perfumed breath carried to their ears another faint, far-away echo of that heavenly laughter, sweeter than honey, drifting on the wind in fading cadences that died away by imperceptible degrees until they could no longer be sure if it was the lovely laughter they heard or the quickened

beating of their own hearts.

Yet before them the road stretched emptily, very still in the green twilight under the low-arching trees. There seemed to be a sort of haze here, so that though the road ran straight the green dimness veiled what lay ahead and they walked in a queer silence along the roadway through ravaging jungles whose sights and sounds might almost have been on another world for all the heed they paid them. Their ears were straining for a repetition of that low and lovely laughter, and the expectation if it gripped them in an unheeding spell which wiped out all other things but its own delicious echoes.

When they first became aware of a pale glimmer in the twilight greenness ahead, neither could have told. But somehow they were not surprised that a girl was pacing slowly down the roadway toward them, half veiled in the jungle dimness under the trees.

To Smith she was a figure walking straight out of a dream. Even at that distance her beauty had a still enchantment that swallowed up all his wondering in a strange and magical peace. Beauty flowed along the long, curved lines of her body, alternately cloaked and revealed by the drifting garment of her hair, and the slow, swinging grace of her as she walked was a potent enchantment that gripped him helpless in its spell.

Then another glimmer in the dimness caught his eyes away from the bewitchment that approached, and in bewilderment he saw that another girl was pacing forward under the low-hanging trees, her hair swinging about her in slow drifts that veiled and unveiled the loveliness of a body as exquisite as the first. That first was nearer now, so that he could see the enchantment of her face, pale golden and lovelier than a dream with its subtly molded smoothness and delicately tilted planes of cheek-bone and cheek smoothing deliciously upward into a broad, low forehead when the richly colored

hair sprang back in tendrils like licking flames. There was a subtly Slavic tilting to those honey-colored features, hinted in the breadth of the cheeks and the sweet straightness with which their planes slanted downward to a mouth colored like hot embers, curving now in a smile that promised--heaven.

She was very near. He could see the peach-like bloom upon her pale gold limbs and the very throb of the pulse beating in her round throat, and the veiled eyes sought his. But behind her that second girl was nearing, every whit as lovely as the first, and her beauty drew his gaze magnetlike to its own delicate flow and ripple of enchantment. And beyond her--yes, another was coming, and beyond her a fourth; and in the green twilight behind these first, pale blurs bespoke the presence of yet more.

And they were identical. Smith's bewildered eyes flew from face to face, seeking and finding what his brain could still not quite believe. Feature by feature, curve by curve, they were identical. Five, six, seven honey-colored bodies, half veiled in richly tinted hair, swayed toward him. Seven, eight, nine exquisite faces smiled their promise of ecstasy. Dizzy and incredulous, he felt a hand grip his shoulder. Yarol's voice, bemused, half whispered, murmured,

"Is this paradise--or are we both mad?"

The sound of it brought Smith out of his tranced bewitchment. He shook his head sharply, like a man half awake and striving for clarity, and said,

"Do they all look alike to you?"

"Every one. Exquisite--exquisite--did you ever see such satin-black hair?"

"Black--black?" Smith muttered that over stupidly, wondering what was so wrong with the word. When realization broke upon him at last, the shock of it was strong enough to jerk his eyes away from the enchantment before him and turn them sharply around to the little Venusian's rapt face.

Its stainless clarity was set in a mask of almost holy wonder. Even the wisdom and weariness and savagery of its black eyes was lost in the glamor of what they gazed on. His voice murmured, almost to itself,

"And white--so white--like lilies, aren 't they?--blacker and whiter than--"

"Are you crazy?" Smith's voice broke harshly upon the Venusian's rapture. That trance-like mask broke before the impact of his exclamation. Like a man awaking from a dream, Yarol turned blinking to his friend.

"Crazy? Why--why--aren't we both? How else could we be seeing a sight like this?"

"One of us is," said Smith grimly. "I'm looking at red-haired girls colored like--peaches."

Yarol blinked again. His eyes sought the bevy of bewildering loveliness in the roadway. He said,

"It's you, then. They've got black hair, every one of them, shiny and smooth and black as so many lengths of satin, and nothing in creation is whiter than their bodies."

Smith's pale eyes turned again to the road. Again they met honey-pale curves and planes of velvet flesh half veiled in hair like drifting flames. He shook his head once more, dazedly.

The girls hovered before him in the green dimness, moving with little restive steps back and forth on the hardbeaten road, their feet like the drift of flower-petals for lightness, their hair rippling away from the smoothly swelling curves of their bodies and furling about them again in ceaseless motion. They turned lingering eyes to the two men, but they did not speak.

Then down the wind again came drifting the far echo of that exquisite, lilting laugh. The sweetness of it made the very breeze brush lighter against their faces. It was a caress and a promise and a summoning almost irresistible, floating past them and drifting away into the distance in low, far-off cadences that lingered in their ears long after its audible music had ceased.

The sound of it woke Smith out of his daze, and he turned to the nearest girl, blurting,

"Who are you?"

Among the fluttering throng a little shiver of excitement ran. Lovely, identical faces turned to him from all over the whole group, and the one addressed smiled bewilderingly.

"I am Yvala," she said in a voice smoother than silk, pitched to caress the ear and ripple along the very nerve fibers with a slow and soothing sweetness. And she had spoken in English! It was long since Smith had heard his mother tongue. The sound of it plucked at some hidden heart-string with intolerable poignancy, the home language spoken in a voice of enchanted sweetness. For a moment he could not speak.

The silence broke to Yarol's low whistle of surprise.

"I know now we're crazy," he murmured. "No other way to explain her speaking in High Venusian. Why, she can't ever have--"

"High Venusian!" exclaimed Smith, startled out of his moment of silence. "She spoke English!"

They stared at each other, wild suspicions rising in their eyes. In desperation Smith turned and hurled the question again at another of the lovely throng, waiting breathless for her answer to be sure his ears had not deceived him.

"Yvala--I am Yvala," she answered in just that silken voice with which the first had answered. It was English unmistakably, and sweet with memories of home.

Behind her among the bevy of curved, peach-colored bodies and veils of richly tinted hair other full red lips moved and other velvety voices murmured, "Yvala, Yvala, I am Yvala," like dying echoes drifting from mouth to mouth until the last syllable of the strange and lovely name faded into silence.

Across the stunned quiet that fell as their murmurs died the breeze blew again, and once more that sweet, low laughter rang from far away in their ears, rising and falling on the wind until their pulses beat in answer, and falling, fading, dying away reluctantly on the fragrant breeze.

"What--who was that?" demanded Smith softly of the fluttering girls, as the last of it faded into silence.

"It was Yvala," they chorused in caressing voices like multiple echoes of the same rich, lingering tones. "Yvala laughs--Yvala calls.... Come with us to Yvala...."

Yarol said in a sudden ripple of musical speech.

"Geth norri a'Yvali?" at the same moment that Smith's query broke out,

"Who is Yvala, then?" in his own seldom-used mother tongue.

But they got no reply to that, only beckonings and murmurous repetitions of the name, "Yvala, Yvala, Yvala--" and smiles that set their pulses beating faster. Yarol reached out a tentative hand toward the nearest, but she melted like smoke out of his grasp so that he no more than grazed the velvety flesh of her shoulder with a touch that left his fingers tingling delightfully. She smiled over her shoulder ardently, and Yarol gripped Smith's arm.

"Come on," he said urgently.

In a pleasant dream of low voices and lovely warm bodies circling just out of reach they went slowly on down the road in the midst of that hovering group, walking upwind whence that tantalizing laughter had rung, and all about them the golden girls circled on restless, drifting feet, their hair floating and furling about the loveliness of their half-seen bodies, the echoes of that single name rising and falling in cadences as rich and smooth as cream. Yvala--Yvala--Yvala--a magical spell to urge them on their way.

How long they walked they never knew. The changeless jungle slid away behind them unnoticed; the broad enigmatic pavement stretched ahead, a mysterious, green gloom shadowing the whole length of that laughter-haunted roadway. Nothing had any meaning to them outside the circle the murmurous girls were weaving with their swaying bodies and swinging hair and voices like the echoes of a dream. All the wonder and incredulity and bewilderment in the minds of the two men had sunk away into nothingness, drowned and swallowed up in the flagrant music of their enchantresses.

After a long, rapt while they came to the roadway's end. Smith lifted dreaming pale eyes and saw as if through a veil, so remotely that the scene had little meaning to him, the great park-like clearing stretching away before them as the jungle walls fell away on either side. Here the primeval swamplands and animate green life ceased abruptly to make way for a scene that might have been lifted straight over a million years. The clearing was columned with great patriarchal trees ages removed in evolution from the snaky things which grew in the hungry jungle. Their leaves roofed the place in swaying greenery, through which the light sifted with twilight softness upon a carpet of flower-starred moss. With one step they spanned ages of evolution and entered into the lovely dim clearing that might have been lifted out of a world a million years older than the jungle that raved impotently around its borders.

The moss was velvety under their pacing feet. With eyes that but half comprehended what they saw, Smith gazed out across the twilight vistas through the green gloom brooding beneath the trees. It was a hushed place, mystical, very quiet. He thought sometimes he saw the flash of life through the leaves overhead, the stir of it among the trees as small wild things crossed their path and birds fluttered in the foliage, but he could not be sure. Once or twice it seemed to him that he had caught an echo of bird-song, somehow as if the melody had rung in his ears a moment before, and only now, when the sound was fading, did he realize it. But not once did he hear an actual song note or see any animate life, though the presence of it was rife in the green twilight beneath the leaves.

They went on slowly. Once he could have sworn he saw a dappled fawn staring at him with wide, unhappy eyes from a covert of branches, but when he looked closer there was nothing but leaves swaying emptily. And once upon his inner ear, as if with the echo of a just-past sound, he thought he heard a stallion's high whinny. But

after all it did not greatly matter. The girls were shepherding them on over the flowery moss, circling like hollow-throated doves whose only music was "Yvala--Yvala--Yvala..." in unending harmony of rising and falling notes.

They paced on dreamily, the trees and mossy vistas of park sliding smoothly away behind them in unchanging quiet. And more and more strongly that impression of life among the trees nagged at Smith's mind. He wondered if he might not be developing hallucinations, for no arrangement of branches and shadows could explain the wild boar's head that he could have sworn thrust out among the leaves to stare at him for an instant with small, shamed eyes before it melted into patterned shadow under his direct gaze.

He blinked and rubbed his eyes in momentary terror lest his own brain was betraying him, and an instant later was peering uncertainly at the avenue between two low-hanging trees where from the corner of his eye he thought he had seen a magnificent white stallion hesitating with startled head upflung and the queerest, urgent look in its eyes, somehow warning and afraid--and ashamed. But it faded into mere leaf-cast shadows when he turned.

And once he started and stumbled over what was nothing more than a leafy branch lying across their path, yet which an instant before had looked bewilderingly like a low-slung cat-beast slinking across the moss with sullen, hot eyes upturned in hate and warning and distress to his.

There was something about these animals that roused a vague unrest in his mind when he looked at them--something in their eyes that was warning and agonized and more hotly aware than are the eyes of beasts--something queerly dreadful and hauntingly familiar about the set of their heads upon their shoulders--hinting horribly at another gait than the four-footed.

At last, just after a graceful doe had bounded out of the leaves, hesitated an instant and flashed away with a fleetness that did not look like the fleetness of a quadruped, turning upon him as she vanished a great-eyed agony that was warning as a cry, Smith halted in his tracks. Uneasiness too deep to be magicked away by the crooning girls urged him of danger. He paused and looked uncertainly around. The doe had melted into leaf-shadows flickering upon the moss, but he could not forget the haunting shame and the warning of her eyes.

He stared about the dim greenness of the tree-roofed clearing. Was all this a lotus-dream, an illusion of jungle fever, or a suddenly unstable mind? Could he have imagined those beasts with their anguished eyes and their terribly familiar outlines of head and neck upon four-footed bodies? Was any of it real at all?

More for reassurance than for any other reason he reached out suddenly and seized the nearest honey-colored girl in a quick grip. Yes, she was tangible. His fingers closed about a firm and rounded arm, smoothly soft with the feel of peach-bloom velvet over its curving surface. The girl did not pull away. She stopped dead-still at his touch, slowly turning her head, lifting her face to his with a dream-like easiness, tilting her chin high until the long, full curve of her throat was arched taut and he could see the pulse beating hard under her velvet flesh. Her lips parted softly, her lips drooped low.

His other arm went out of its own accord, drawing her against him. Then her hands were in his hair, pulling his head down to hers, and all his uneasiness and distress and latent terror spun away at the kiss of her parted lips.

The next thing he realized was that he was strolling on under the trees, a girl's lithe body moving in the bend of his arm. Her very

nearness was a delight that sent his senses reeling, so that the green woodland was vague as a dream and the only reality dwelt in the honey-colored loveliness in the circle of his arm.

Dimly he was aware that Yarol strolled parallel with them a little distance away through the leaves, a bright head on his shoulder, another golden girl leaning against his encircling arm. She was so perfectly the counterpart of his own lovely captive that she might have been a reflection in a mirror. Uneasily a remembrance swam up in Smith's mind. Did it seem to Yarol that a snow-white maiden walked with him, a black head leaned upon his shoulder? Was the little Venusian's mind yielding to the spell of the place, or was it his own? What tongue could it be that the girls spoke which fell upon his ears in English phrases and upon Yarol's in the musical lilt of High Venusian? Were they both mad?

Then in his arm the supple golden body stirred, the softly shadowed face turned to his. The woodland vanished like smoke from about him in the magic of her lips.

There were dim glades among the trees where piles of white ruins met Smith's unseeing eyes sometimes without leaving more than the merest trace of conscious remembrance. Vague wonders swam through his mind of what they might once have been, what vanished race had wrested this clearing from the jungle and died without leaving any trace save these. But he did not care. It had no significance. Even the half-seen beasts, who now turned eyes full of sorrow and despair rather than warning, had lost all meaning to his enchanted brain. In a lotus dream he wandered on in the direction he was urged, unthinking, unalarmed. It was very sweet to stroll so through the dim green gloom, with purest magic in the bend of his arm. He was content.

They strolled past the white ruins of scattered buildings, past great

bending trees that dappled them with shadow. The moss yielded underfoot as softly as thick-piled carpets. Unseen beasts slunk by them now and then, so that the tail of Smith's eyes was continually catching the--almost--hint of humanity in the lines of their bodies, the set of a head upon bestial shoulders, the clarity of urgent eyes. But he did not really see them.

Sweetly--intolerably sweetly and softly, laughter rang through the woods. Smith's head flung up like a startled stallion's. It was a stronger laughter now, from near, very near among the leaves. It seemed to him that the voice indeed must come from some lovely, ardent houri leaning over the wall of Paradise--that he had come a long way in search of her and now trembled on the very brink of his journey's end. The low and lovely sound echoed through the trees, ringing down the green twilight aisles, shivering the leaves together. It was everywhere at once, a little world of music superimposed upon the world of matter, enclosing everything within its scope in a magical spell that left no room for any other thing but its lovely presence. And its command rang through Smith's mind with the sharpness of a sword in his flesh, calling, calling unbearably through the woods.

Then they came out of the trees into a little space of mossy clearing in whose center a small white temple rose. Somehow Yarol was there too--and somehow they were alone. Those exquisite girls had melted like smoke into oblivion. The two men stood quite still, their eyes dazed as they stared. This building was the only one they had seen whose columns still stood upright, and only here could they tell that the architecture of those fallen walls whose ruins had dotted the wooded glades had been one at variance to anything on any world they knew. But upon the mystery of that they had no desire to dwell. For the woman those slim columns housed drove every other thought out of their dazzled minds.

She stood in the center of the tiny temple. She was pale golden, half veiled in the long cloak of her curls. And if the siren girls had been lovely, then here stood loveliness incarnate. Those girls had worn her form and face. Here was that same exquisitely molded body, colored like honey, half revealed among the drifts of hair that clung to it like tendrils of bright flames. But those bewildering girls had been mere echoes of the beauty that faced them now. Smith stared with a kindling of colorless eyes.

Here was Lilith--here was Helen--here was Circe--here before him stood all the beauty of all the legends of mankind; here on this marble floor, facing them gravely, with unsmiling eyes. For the first time he looked into the eyes that lighted that sweet, tilt-planed face, and his very soul gasped from the sudden plunge into their poignant blueness. It was not a vivid blue, not a blazing one, but its intensity far transcended anything he had words to name. In that blueness a man's soul could sink for ever, reaching no bottom, stirred by no tides, drowned and steeped through and through with an infinity of absolute light.

When the blue, blue gaze released him he gasped once, like a drowning man, and then stared with new amazement upon a reality whose truth had escaped him until this moment. That instant of submerged ecstasy in the blue depths of her eyes must have opened a door in his brain to new knowledge, for he saw as he stared a very strange quality in the loveliness he faced.

Tangible beauty dwelt here, an indwelling thing that could root itself in human flesh and clothe a body in loveliness as with a garment. Here was more than fleshly beauty, more than symmetry of face and body. A quality like a flame glowed all but visibly--no, more than visibly--along the peach-bloomy lines and smoothly swelling curve of her, giving a glory to the high tilt of her bosom and the long, subtly curved thigh and the exquisite line of shoulder gliding down into fuller beauty

half veiled in drifting hair.

In that dazed, revealing moment her loveliness shimmered before him, too intensely for his human senses to perceive save as a dazzle of intolerable beauty before his half-comprehending eyes. He flung up his hands to shut the glory out and stood for a moment with hidden eyes in a self-imposed darkness through which beauty blazed with an intensity that transcended the visible and beat unbearably on every fiber of his being until he stood bathed in light that permeated the ultimate atoms of his soul.

Then the blaze died. He lowered shaking hands and saw that lovely, pale-gold face melting slowly into a smile of such heavenly promise that for an instant his senses failed him again and the world spun dizzily around a focus of honey-pale features breaking into arcs and softly shadowed curves, as the velvety mouth curled slowly into a smile.

"All strangers are very welcome here," crooned a voice like a vibration of sheerest silk, sweeter than honey, caressing as the brush of a kissing mouth. And she had spoken in the purest of earthly English. Smith found his voice.

"Who--who are you?" he asked in a queer gasp, as if his very breath were stopped by the magic he faced.

Before she could answer, Yarol's voice broke in, a little unsteady with sudden, savage anger.

"Can't you answer in the language you're addressed in?" he demanded in a violent undertone. "The least you could do is ask her name in High Venusian. How do you know she speaks English?"

Quite speechless, Smith turned a blank gray gaze upon his

companion. He saw the blaze of hot Venusian temper fade like mist from Yarol's black eyes as he turned to the glory in the temple. And in the lovely, liquid cadences of his native tongue, that brims so exquisitely with hyperbole and symbolism, he said.

"Oh, lovely and night-dark lady, what name is laid upon you to tell how whiter than sea-foam is your loveliness?"

For a moment, listening to the beauty of phrase and sound that dwells in the High Venusian tongue, Smith doubted his own ears. For though she had spoken in English, yet the loveliness of Yarol's speech seemed infinitely more suited to have fallen from the lyric curving of her velvet-red mouth. Such lips, he thought, could never utter less than pure music, and English is not a musical tongue.

But explain Yarol's visual illusion he could not, for his own steel-pale eyes were steadfast upon richly colored hair and pale gold flesh, and no stretch of imagination could transform them into the black and snow-whiteness his companion claimed to see.

A hint of mirth crept into the smile that curled up the softness of her mouth as Yarol spoke. She answered them both in one speech that to Smith was pure English, though he guessed that it fell upon Yarol's ears in the music of High Venusian cadences.

"I am Beauty," she told them serenely. "I am incarnate Beauty. But Yvala is my name. Let there be no quarrel between you, for each man hears me in the tongue his heart speaks, and sees me in the image which spells beauty to his own soul. For I am all men's desire incarnate in one being, and there is no beauty but Me."

"But--those others?"

"I am the only dweller here--but you have known the shadows of

myself, leading you through devious ways into the presence of Yvala. Had you not gazed first upon these reflections of my beauty, its fullness which you see now would have blinded and destroyed you utterly. And later, perhaps, you shall see me even more clearly....

"But no, Yvala alone dwells here. Save for yourselves there is in this park of mine no living creature. Everything is illusion but myself. And am I not enough? Can you desire anything more of life or death than you gaze on now?"

The query trembled into a music-ridden silence, and they knew that they could not. The heaven-sweet murmur of that voice was speaking sheerest magic, and in the sound of it neither of them was capable of any emotion but worship of the loveliness they faced. It beat out in waves like heat from that incarnate perfection, wrapping them about so that nothing in the universe had existence but Yvala.

Before the glory that blazed in their faces Smith felt adoration pouring out of him as blood gushes from a severed artery. Like life-blood it poured, and like life-blood draining it left him queerly weaker and weaker, as if some essential part of him were gushing away in great floods of intensest worship.

But somewhere, down under the lowest depths of Smith's subconsciousness, a faint disquiet was stirring. He fought it, for it broke the mirror surfaces of his tranced adoration, but he could not subdue it, and by degrees that unease struggled up through layer upon layer of rapt enchantment until it burst through into his conscious mind and the little quiver of it ran disturbingly through the exquisite calm of his trance. It was not an articulate disquiet, but it was somehow bound up with the scarcely seen beasts he had glimpsed—or had he glimpsed?—in the wood. That, and the memory of an old Earth legend which try as he would he could not quite exorcise: the legend of a lovely woman—and men turned into

beasts.... He could not grasp it, but the elusive memory pricked at him with little pinpoint goads, crying danger so insistently that with infinite reluctance his mind took up the business of thinking once more.

Yvala sensed it. She sensed the lessening in that lifeblood gush of rapt adoration poured out upon her loveliness. Her fathomless eyes turned upon his in a blaze of transcendent blueness, and the woods reeled about him at the impact of their light. But somewhere in Smith, under the ultimate layer of conscious thought, under the last quiver of instinct and reflex and animal cravings, lay a bedrock of savage strength which no power he had ever met could wholly overcome, not even this--not even Yvala. Rooted deep in that immovable solidity the little uneasy murmur persisted. "There is something wrong here. I mustn't let her swallow me up again--I must know what it is...."

That much he was aware of. Then Yvala turned. With both velvety arms she swept back the curtain of her hair, and all about her in a glory of tangible loveliness blazed out the radiance that dwelt in such terrible intensity here. Smith's whole consciousness snuffed out before it like a blown candle-flame.

Remotely, after eons, it seemed, awareness overtook him again. It was not consciousness, but a sort of dumb, blind knowledge of processes going on around him, in him, through him. So an animal might be aware, without any hint of real self-consciousness. But hot above everything else the tranced adoration of sheer beauty was blazing now in the center of his universe, and it was devouring him as a flame devours fuel, sucking out his worship, draining him utterly. Helpless, unbodied, he poured forth adoration into the ravenous blaze that held him, and as he poured it out he felt himself fading, somehow sinking below the level of a human being. In his dumb awareness he made no attempt to understand, but he felt himself-degenerating.

It was as if the insatiable appetite for admiration which consumed Yvala and was consuming him sucked him dry of all humanity. Even his thoughts were sinking now as she drained him, so that he no longer fitted words to his sensations, and his mind ran into figures and pictures below the level of human minds....

He was not tangible. He was a dark, inarticulate memory, bodiless, mindless, full of queer, hungry sensations.... He remembered running. He remembered the dark earth flowing backward under his flying feet, wind keen in his nostrils and rife with the odors of a thousand luscious things. He remembered the pack baying around him to the frosty stars, his own voice lifting in exultant, throat-filling clamor with the rest. He remembered the sweetness of flesh yielding under fangs, the hot gush of blood over a hungry tongue. Little more than this he remembered. The ravenous craving, the exultation of the chase, the satisfying reek of hot flesh under ripping fangs--all these circled through his memory round and round, leaving room for little else.

But gradually, in dim, disquieting echoes, another realization strengthened beyond the circle of hunger and feeding. It was an intangible thing, nothing but the faint knowledge that somehow, somewhere, in some remote existence, he had been--different. He was little more than a recollection now, a mind that circled memories of hunting and killing and feeding which some lost body in long-ago distances had performed. But even so--he had once been different. He had--

Sharply through that memory-circle broke the knowledge of presences. With no physical sense was he aware of them, for he possessed no physical senses at all. But his awareness, his dumb, numb mind, knew that they had come--knew what they were. In memory he smelled the rank, blood-stirring scent of man, felt a

tongue lolling out over suddenly dripping fangs; remembered hunger gushed up through his sensations. Now he was blind and formless in a formless void, recognizing those presences only as they impinged upon his. But from the man-presences realization reached out and touched him, knowing his presence, realizing his nearness. They sensed him, lurking hungrily so close. And because they sensed him so vividly, their minds receiving the ravenous impact of his, their brains must have translated that hungry nearness into sight for just an instant; for from somewhere outside the gray void where he existed a voice said clearly,

"Look! Look--no, it's gone now, but for a minute I thought I saw a wolf..."

The words burst upon his consciousness with all the violence of a gun-blast; for in that instant, he knew. He understood the speech the man used, remembered that once it had been his speech--realized what he had become. He knew too that the men, whoever they were, walked into just such danger as had conquered him, and the urgency to warn them surged up in his dumbness. Not until then did he know clearly, with a man's word-thoughts, that he had no being. He was not real--he was only a wolf-memory drifting through the dark. He had been a man. Now he was pure wolf--beast--his soul shorn of its humanity down to the very core of savagery that dwells in every man. Shame flooded over him. He forgot the men, the speech they used, the remembered hunger. He dissolved into a nothingness of wolf-memory and man-shame.

Through the dizziness of that a stronger urge began to beat. Somewhere in the void sounded a call that reached out to him irresistibly. It called him so strongly that his whole dim being whirled headlong in response along currents that swept him helpless into the presence of the summoner.

A blaze was burning. In the midst of the universal emptiness it flamed, calling, commanding, luring him so sweetly that with all his entity he replied, for there was in that burning an element that wrenched at his innermost, deepest-rooted desire. He remembered food--the hot gush of blood, the crunch of teeth on bone, the satisfying solidarity of flesh under his sinking fangs. Desire for it gushed out of him like life itself, draining him--draining him.... He was sinking lower, past the wolf level, down and down....

Through the coming oblivion terror stabbed. It was a lightning-flash of realization from his long-lost humanity, one last throb that brightened the dark into which he sank. And out of that bed-rock of unshakable strength which was the core of his being, even below the wolf level, even below the oblivion into which he was being sucked--the spark of rebellion lashed.

Before now he had floundered helplessly with no firmness anywhere to give him foothold to fight; but now, in his uttermost extremity, while the last dregs of conscious life drained out of him, the bed-rock lay bare from which the well-springs of his strength and savagery sprang, and at that last stronghold of the self called Smith he leaped into instant rebellion, fighting with all the wolf-nature that had been the soil from which his man-soul rooted. Wolfishly he fought, with a beast's savagery and a man's strength, backed by the bed-rock firmness that was the base for both. Space whirled about him, flaming with hungry fires, black with flashes of oblivion, furious and ravenous in the hot presence of Yvala. But he was winning. He knew it, and fought harder, and abruptly felt the snap of yielding opposition and was blindingly aware again, blindingly human. He lay on soft moss as a dead man lies, terribly relaxed in every limb and muscle. But life was flowing back into him, and humanity was gushing like a river in spate back into the drained hollows of his soul. For a while he lay quiet, gathering himself into one body again. His hold on it was so feeble that sometimes he thought he was floating clear and had to

struggle hard to force re-entrance. Finally, with infinite effort, he tugged his eyelids open and lay there in a deathly quiet, watching.

Before him stood the white marble shrine which housed Beauty. But it was not Yvala's delirious loveliness he gazed on now. He had been through the fire of her deepest peril, and he saw her now as she really was--not in the form which spelled pure loveliness to him, and, as he guessed, to every being that gazed upon her, whether it be man or beast--not in any form at all, but as a blaze of avid light flaming inside the shrine. The light was alive, quivering and trembling and animate, but it bore no human form. It was not human. It was a life so alien that he wondered weakly how his eyes could ever have twisted it into the incarnate loveliness of Yvala. And even in the depths of his peril he found time to regret the passing of that beauty--that exquisite illusion which had never existed save in his own brain. He knew that as long as life burned in him he could never forget her smile.

It was a thing of some terribly remote origin that blazed here. He guessed that the power of it had fastened on his brain as soon as he came within its scope, commanding him to see it in that lovely form which meant heart's-desire to him alone. It must have done the same thing to countless other beings--he remembered the beast wraiths that had brushed his brain in the forest with the faint, shamed contact of theirs.

Well, he had been one of them--he knew now. He understood the warning and the anguish in their eyes. He remembered too the ruins he had seen in the woods. What race had dwelt here once, imposing its civilization and its stamp of quiet glades and trees upon the ravenous forest? A human race, perhaps, dwelling in seclusion under the leaves until Yvala the Destroyer came. Or perhaps not a human race, for he knew now that to every living creature she wore a different form, the incarnation of each individual's highest desire.

Then he heard voices, and after an infinity of effort twisted his head on the moss until he could see whence they came. At what he saw he would have risen if he could, but a deathly weariness lay like the weight of worlds upon him and he could not stir. Those man-presences he had felt in his beast-form stood here--the three slavers from the little ship. They must have followed them not far behind, with what dark motives would never be known now, for Yvala's magic had seized them and there would be no more of humanity for them after the next few moments were past. They stood in a row there before the shrine with an ecstasy almost holy on their faces. Plainly he saw reflected there the incarnate glory of Yvala, though to his eyes the thing they faced was only a formless flame.

He knew then why Yvala had let him go so suddenly in that desperate struggle. Here was fresh fodder for her avidity, new worship to drink in. She had turned away from his outworn well-springs to drain new prey of its humanity. He watched them standing there, drunk with loveliness before what to them must be a beautiful woman veiled in drifting hair, glowing with more than mortal ardency where, to him, only a clear flame burned.

But he could see more. Cloudy about those three figures, rapt before the shrine, he could see--was it some queer reflection of themselves dancing upon the air? The misty outlines wavered as, with eyes that in the light of what he had just passed through had won momentarily a sight which penetrated beyond the flesh, he looked upon that dancing shimmer which clearly must be the reflection of some vital part of those three men, visible now in some strange way at the evocation of Yvala's calling.

They were man-shaped reflections. They strained toward Yvala from their anchorage in the bodies that housed them, yearning, pulling as if they would forsake their fleshly roots and merge with the incarnate

beauty that called them so irresistibly. The three stood rigid, faces blank with rapture, unconscious of that perilous tugging at what must be in their very souls.

Then Smith saw the nearest man sag at the knees, quiver, topple to the moss. He lay still for a moment while from his fallen body that tenuous reflection of himself tugged and pulled and then in one last great effort jerked free and floated like a smoke-wreath into the white-hot intensity in the shrine. The blaze engulfed it, flaring brighter as if at the kindling of new fuel.

When that sudden brightness died again the smokewreath drifted out, trailing through the pillars in a form that even to Smith's dimmed eyes wore a strange distortion. It was no longer a man's soul. All of humanity had burned out from it to feed the blaze that was Yvala. And that beast foundation which lies so close under the veneer of civilization and humanity in every human creature was bared and free. Cold with understanding, Smith watched the core of beast instinct which was all that remained now that the layer of man-veneer had been stripped away, a core of animal memories rooted eons deep in that far-away past when all man's ancestors ran on four paws.

It was a cunning beast that remained, instinct with foxy slyness. He saw the misty thing slink away into the green gloom of the woods, and he realized afresh why it was he had seen fleeting glimpses of animals in the park as he came here, wearing that terrible familiarity in the set of their heads, the line of shoulder and neck that hinted at other gaits than the four-footed. They must have been just such wraiths as this, drifting through the woods, beast-wraiths that wore still the tatters and rags of their doffed humanity, brushing his mind with the impact of theirs until their vividness evoked actual sight of the reality of fur and flesh, just for a glimpse, just for a hint, before the wraith blew past. And he was cold with horror at the thought of how

many men must have gone to feed the flame, stripping off humanity like a garment and running now in the nakedness of their beast natures through the enchanted woods.

Here was Circe. He realized it with a quiver of horror and awe. Circe the Enchantress, who turned the men of Greek legend into beasts. And what tremendous backgrounds of reality and myth loomed smokily behind what happened here before his very eyes! Circe the Enchantress--ancient Earthly legend incarnate now on a Jovian moon far away through the void. The awe of it shook him to the depths. Circe--Yvala--alien entity that must, then, rove through the universe and the ages, leaving dim whispers behind her down the centuries. Lovely Circe on her blue Aegean isle--Yvala on her haunted moon under Jupiter's blaze--past and present merged into a blazing whole.

The wonder of it held him so wrapt that when the reality of the scene before him finally bore itself in upon his consciousness again, both of the remaining slavers lay prone upon the moss, forsaken bodies from which the vitality had been sucked like blood in Yvala's flame. That flame burned more rosily now, and out of its pulsing he saw the last dim wraith of the three who had fed her come hurrying, a swinish brute of a wraith whose grunts and snorts were almost audible, tusks and bristles all but visible as it scurried off into the wood.

Then the flame burned clear again, flushed with hot rose, pulsing with regular beats like the pulse of a heart, satiate and ecstatic in its shrine. And he was aware of a withdrawal, as if the consciousness of the entity that burned here were turned inward upon itself, leaving the world it dominated untouched as Yvala drowsed and digested the sustenance her vampire-craving for worship had devoured.

Smith stirred a little on the moss. Now, if ever, he must make some effort to escape, while the thing in the shrine was replete and

uninterested in its surroundings. He lay there, shaken with exhaustion, forcing strength back into his body, willing himself to be strong, to rise, to find Yarol, to make his way somehow back to the deserted ship. And by slow degrees he succeeded. It took a long while, but in the end he had dragged himself up against a tree and stood swaying, his pale eyes alternately clouding with exhaustion and blinking aware again as he scanned the space under the trees for Yarol.

The little Venusian lay a few steps away, one cheek pressing the ground and his yellow curls gay against the moss. With closed eyes he looked like a seraph asleep, all the lines of hard living and hard fighting relaxed and the savageness of his dark gaze hidden. Even in his deadly peril Smith could not suppress a little grin of appreciation as he staggered the half-dozen steps that parted them and fell to his knees beside his friend's body.

The sudden motion dazed him, but in a moment his head cleared and he laid an urgent hand on Yarol's shoulder, shaking it hard. He dared not speak, but he shook the little Venusian heavily, and in his brain a silent call went out to whatever drifting wraith among the trees housed Yarol's naked soul. He bent over the quiet yellow head and called and called, turning the force of his determination in all its intensity to that summoning, while weakness washed over him in great slow waves.

After a long time he thought he felt a dim response, somewhere from far off. He called harder, eyes turned apprehensively toward the rosily pulsing flame in the shrine, wondering if this voiceless summoning might not impinge upon the entity there as tangibly as speech. But Yvala's satiety must have been deep, and there was no changing in the blaze.

The answer came clearer from the woods. He felt it pulling in toward

him along the strong compulsion of his call as a fisherman feels a game fish yielding at last to the tug of his line. And presently among the leafy solitudes of the trees a little mist-wraith came gliding. It was a slinking thing, feline, savage, fearless. He could have sworn that for the briefest instant he saw the outlines of a panther stealing across the moss, misty, low-slung, turning upon him the wise black gaze of Yarol--exactly his friend's black eyes, with no lessening in them of lost humanity. And something in that familiar gaze sent a little chill down his back. Could it be--could it possibly be that in Yarol the veneer of humanity was so thin over his savage cat-nature that even when it had been stripped away the look in his eyes was the same?

Then the smoke-beast was hovering over the prone Venusian figure. It curled round Yarol's shoulders for an instant; it faded and sank, and Yarol stirred on the moss. Smith turned him over with a shaking hand. The long Venusian lashes quivered, lifted. Black, sidelong eyes looked up into Smith's pale gaze. And Smith in a gush of chilly uncertainty did not know if humanity had returned into his friend's body or not, if it was a panther's gaze looking up into his or if that thin layer of man-soul veiled it, for Yarol's eyes had always looked like this.

"Are--are you all right?" he asked in a breathless whisper.

Yarol blinked dizzily once or twice, then grinned. A twinkle lighted up his black cat gaze. He nodded and made a little effort to rise. Smith helped him sit up. The Venusian was not a fraction so weak as the Earthman had been. After a little interval of hard breathing he struggled to his feet and helped Smith up, apprehension in his whole demeanor as he eyed the flame that pulsed in its white shrine. He jerked his head urgently.

"Let's get out of here!" his silent lips mouthed. And Smith in fervent agreement turned in the direction he indicated, hoping that Yarol

knew where he was going. His own exhaustion was still too strong to permit him anything but acquiescence.

They made their way through the woods, Yarol heading unerringly in a direct course toward the roadway they had left such a long time ago. After a while, when the flamehousing shrine had vanished among the trees behind them, the Venusian's soft voice murmured, half to itself,

"--wish, almost, you hadn't called me back. Woods were so cool and still--remembering such splendid things--killing and killing--I wish--"

The voice fell quiet again. But Smith, stumbling on beside his friend, understood. He knew why the woods seemed familiar to Yarol, so that he could head for the roadway unerringly. He knew why Yvala in her satiety had not even wakened at the withdrawal of Yarol's humanity--it was so small a thing that the loss of it meant nothing. He gained a new insight in that moment into Venusian nature that he remembered until the day he died.

Then there was a gap in the trees ahead, and Yarol's shoulder was under his supportingly, and the road to safety shimmered in its tree-arched green gloom ahead.

Siren Satellite

by Arthur K. Barnes

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Chapter I.

Ill-Starred Voyage

Gerry Carlyle draped her very lovely form over the functionally-designed Plastair and nibbled moodily at a long, bronze curl. She had just discovered how vulnerable she was and, like all important public figures who happen to find themselves in such a situation, she was annoyed. That she was important, no one could deny. Gerry Carlyle was perhaps the most famous woman on Earth. She was beautiful. She was rich. And she was amazingly successful in a profession so rigorous and exacting that not one man in a thousand would dare face the dangers and hardships and excitement that she faced almost daily.

Queen of the space-rovers, in her mighty ship, The Ark, this slim woman covered nearly the entire Solar System in her quest for exotic and weird life-forms to be returned live for the edification and astonishment of the public at the London Interplanetary Zoo. Her name was a byword, and she was respected and loved throughout the System for her courage, as well as her beauty.

And yet, for all this, Gerry Carlyle was very vulnerable in one regard. Like all champions, she couldn't pass up a dare or a challenge, no matter what its nature. She had to take on all comers, and she had just realized that fact.

"The nerve of that fellow!" she muttered, then looked up in annoyance at her fiance, Tommy Strike. "You're none too sympathetic, either. What are you pacing around for?"

Strike was medium tall, and darkly good-looking in a rugged sort of way. He grinned tolerantly at her, the grin that always made her heart stumble.

"Just trying out the new flooring," he said.

The pilot room and main corridors of the Ark had just been refloored with zinal, the new metal, plastic, air bubble combination which gave under the foot like an expensive rug, but which never showed signs of wear.

Gerry pouted.

"Well, you might show a little interest," she said. "After all, you're second in command around here." But Gerry was not the pouting kind, so the pout was not very successful.

"You've been mumbling to yourself for the past half hour," Tommy Strike pointed out. "How do you expect me to know what it's all

about? If you care to commence at the commencement, in words of one syllable, so my dull wits can grasp whatever it is that has so upset you, perhaps I'll listen."

Gerry gave her man a smoky, heavilylidded glance, smiled, and made room for him on the Plastair.

"It's this fellow Dacres," she began. "He came around the other day with a business proposition. Said he wanted to use The Ark to rescue his brother whose expedition has apparently cracked up on Triton. He offered to finance the whole thing, with me furnishing the regular crew. He would simply be a passenger. Naturally, I turned him down. Gerry Carlyle does not run a taxi service.

"Triton, eh?" Strike grunted. "Neptune's only satellite. And with a very nasty reputation. Isn't that the place that's never been explored?"

"That's the place, all right. Two or three expeditions tried it. None ever returned."

"Oh, yeah. I remember reading about that. They call it the 'siren satellite.'Very dramatic. And also a very long way from here. Your pal Dacres must be well off to be able to afford such a jaunt."

Gerry tossed her blond hair.

"He's no pal of mine!" she said, hotly. "Wait till you hear what he did! He's blackmailing me!"

"Ah?"

"He's gone to all the papers and telefilm services and spread the story that I refused to rescue Dacres'brother because the rumors about Triton have scared me off. How do you like that?"

He leaned over, snapped the telenews switch, and pointed to the wall-screen. A headline flashed on.

Gerry Carlyle Spurns Rescue Plea!

Angrily, Gerry spun a dial to reveal a second lead.

Queen of Huntresses Shies Away from Triton Challenge!

Miss Gerry Carlyle, the Catch-'em-Alive woman renowned the world over for her adventures while raiding the Solar System for weird monsters, today rejected the plea of Lawrence Dacres that she put her space-ship, The Ark, at his disposal for the rescue of his brother, believed lost on Triton.

Mr. Dacres alleges that fear of unknown forces upon the lonely, unexplored satellite of Neptune prompted the refusal.

It is true that Triton's record of being the grave of more than one ill-fated expedition is cause enough to make anyone wary. But if, as is asserted, something has been discovered at last which gives pause to the redoubtable Miss Carlyle, then man, indeed, bites dog.

Gerry's furious fingers again moved, and a third line of heavy type declared:

Sweetheart of Space Shuns Siren Satellite!

Strike sniggered. Gerry interrupted.

"I had a few words with the editor who dreamed that one up," she said with quietly vicious satisfaction. "He is now resting in a sanitarium."

"I can see what an awkward position that puts you in," he admitted.

"The Dacres fellow's already tried the case in the press and found you guilty of something or other."

He rose, walked around behind Gerry. Presently his voice came again, musingly.

"Now let's see. Triton. Diameter, three thousand miles. Revolution, five days, seven hours, three minutes. Stellar magnitude--"

"You sound like an encyclopedia." Gerry twisted around, trying to see.

"That's because I'm reading from an encyclopedia, I'll bet.... Stellar magnitude at opposition, thirteen. Retrograde motion. Gravity, two and a half times that of Earth. Oh, yeah. That's why they call it the 'siren satellite.' It lures the unwary space-traveler close, then hauls him in with the unexpected gravity.... Mmm. Composed of matter not native to the Solar System--hence the terrific mass. Believed to be a wanderer from space trapped by Neptune. That would explain the retrograde motion."

Brisk, muffled footsteps sounded along the corridor, followed by an impatient knock on the pilot room door.

"That'll be friend Dacres now." Gerry grimaced. "Come in!"

Dacres made his entrance. He was not self-important, but he was imposing, and whenever he entered a room he would inevitably command attention. He was tall, slender in the manner of a rapier, and blond. He bowed stiffly.

"Good morning, Miss Carlyle," he said.

Gerry almost expected to hear his heels click. She introduced the two men, mentally compared them, as all women do.

"So, you've come to apologize for your insufferable conduct?" she said then.

"I've come to see if you have reconsidered your unfriendly and uncooperative attitude," he amended.

Gerry began to incandesce.

"Why, you--you--" she could scarcely contain herself. "You deliberately spread lies and false insinuations through the press, making me a laughing-stock, blasting my reputation, impugning my courage! And now you have the crust to pretend that I'm in the wrong for not throwing my whole organization into the lap of every would-be joyrider who comes along! You're nothing but a blackmailer!"

Dacres refused to be stampeded.

"Sorry to exert pressure on you in such fashion, Miss Carlyle," he said, unperturbed. "As you imply, however, I have, no scruples. None, at least, when my brother's life is at stake."

Gerry found it hard to answer that one. She had tried unsuccessfully to answer it ever since Dacres had first spoken to her. The blond man knew this, and pursued his advantage.

"While we argue here," he pointed out, "my brother and his crew may be dying slowly, being crushed flat by the terrible gravity. He weighed two hundred on Earth. Up there, he'd weigh five hundred. The human heart simply cannot stand that kind of punishment. It'll quit."

The words conjured an unpleasant picture of freezing, starving men crawling painfully about like injured crabs, praying for quick release from agony. Gerry winced.

"Weren't the explorers equipped with degrav units?" she asked.

"Yes, but how long will they last? A couple of weeks at low power, possibly. Then--" Dacres brought his palms together with slow expressiveness. "That's why every second is precious."

Gerry felt cornered, and she glanced at Tommy Strike in an exasperated appeal for reinforcement. But Strike was strictly neutral. If anything, he found her predicament amusing, taking a perverse delight in seeing the ever victorious Gerry at bay for once.

She made one last try.

"Why pick on me, Mr. Dacres?" she asked. "Why is it so essential to have my ship, and only mine?"

"Rocket ships visiting Triton, however powerful, have so far all cracked up. Complete safety demands the tremendous power of a centrifugal flyer, like The Ark. How many such ships exist today? A handful. And how many of those are owned by other than government agencies? Only yours, Miss Carlyle. If you refuse me, I shall have to try and find a lesser ship. But I'm staking a great deal on having publicly put you into an intolerable position, so you can't afford to turn me down."

Gerry gasped. The fellow was certainly frank about it. What's more, he seemed to have all the answers. If she were ready to quit her romantic and risky business and settle down, she could safely say no. But as long as she wished to remain queen of the space-rovers, she dared not let a single questionable act stain her record.

She looked despairingly at Strike, but he simply shrugged, grinning faintly.

"Well, here we go again," he said.

Dacres tendered an olive branch.

"There might, of course, be some interesting alien life-forms on Triton. After the rescue is completed, you'd be welcome to try for a couple of specimens, if that would enable you to--er--save face."

Gerry felt her temperature climb to a new high, and she counted ten, then stood up.

"You are insulting, Mr. Dacres," she announced. "I do not like you. The only reason my fiance has not knocked you down is because he feels I sometimes think too highly of myself, and that a dressing down does me good. However, your brother's peril and your own machinations force me to accept your proposition. Come back in an hour with your checkbook and your attorney. Our contract will be ready for you. We can leave at dawn."

Dacres bowed again, very tall and ever so slightly triumphant.

"Thank you," he said. "I regret our inability to be friends but, after all, that is unimportant. I'm sure we'll manage a successful and uneventful voyage."

He stalked out, ramrod-stiff.

"Whew!" Strike shook himself like a big dog. "The electric potential of this room must be terrific. Think I'll go outside and ground myself. I've never seen a fellow so completely right every time he opens his mouth. Most disconcerting."

And Tommy Strike gave out with a roar of accumulated laughter.

Lawrence Dacres seemed to have been in error once, however, when he predicted a journey without incident. Just before reaching

Mars, five of The Ark's crew became violently ill after dinner.

"Food poisoning," was the verdict in the Martian hospital. The men were out of danger and would be released in two or three days, but as The Ark had left Earth with only a skeleton crew, in order to save expense, a serious problem was now at hand. Dacres, frantic at delay which cost him hundreds of dollars a day, suggested that he recruit replacements at the Martian spaceport.

"We must get under way at once, Miss Carlyle," he said, "or I'll go broke just waiting here. After all, it wasn't your key men who became ill, just subordinates. The chief engineer, for instance, is all right. He could get along with new men for just this one trip."

It was true. On a routine journey such as this, Gerry had no need of the special qualifications and training which made those sick men expert hunters, trappers, and zoologists, as well as engineers. Any good mechanics could replace them.

So she agreed. But she couldn't help feeling that, conceived in anger and already stricken with misfortune, the expedition was ill-starred.

Chapter II.

Intrigue in Space

It was Tommy Strike who, several hours out from Mars, stumbled upon the extraordinary and amusing scene which suggested that the journey was indeed fated to be anything but routine. Glancing in through a half-open door in the crew's quarters, he observed a man, a total stranger, going through weird antics. The newcomer was holding his head very gingerly between his hands, as if it were about to explode, and walking around the small but comfortable room with awkwardly high steps.

The man glared at himself in the mirror, and Strike grinned at the homely reflection the man saw. It was epitome of the battered, broken-down boxer--flat nose, lumpy cheeks, scar tissue under the brows, cauliflower ears.

The man with the clownish face now staggered to a porthole to look out. Then he reeled back with a stricken, bewildered expression. He groaned piteously, obviously in the grip of a hangover to end all hangovers.

Strike leaned quietly against the door jamb, to watch. Gradually, both he and the broken-down pugilist became aware of voices in the next room, voices hushed but intense. The ex-bruiser wobbled over to the door and cocked his tin ear.

"Monk, you fool!" came the voice. "How the devil did that tramp get aboard?"

There was a shuffle of feet.

"Boss, I swear I dunno," came the conciliatory reply. "We didn't expect you right away, so we was havin'ourselves a time."

"A drunken carousal, you mean?"

"Okay, have it your way. Anyhow, when your message come, we headed for the space port, but everything was pretty happy, see, an'this fellow must have got sort of attached to the party, an'--" Monk's voice trailed away. "As a matter of fact, I don't much remember exactly what did happen."

"So when you checked in, seven souse-pots instead of six, no one thought anything of it. Beautiful!" The invisible speaker was very bitter. "Well, the tramp's aboard now, and the damage is done. I

suppose I should have met you myself. Question is--"

The lumpy-faced man suddenly shoved open the door. It was like a French farce, with Strike able to see all that happened, while remaining unobserved. Six toughfisted mechanics, the men recruited by Dacres in the emergency, were looking very ill at ease as Dacres tongue-lashed them. Strike frowned slightly. He would have to remind the tall, blond Dacres that it was the captain alone who had the right to discipline the men.

Then the unidentified, clown-faced man spoke.

"You!" he snapped out. "Who're you?"

"Lawrence Dacres, and keep a civil tongue in your head."

"You shanghaied me aboard this here spaceship, Dacres, an' I demand you turn around and take me back to Mars pronto. Or else!"

There was a round of mirth, and Strike moved nearer to watch the rest of the scene. The strange, lumpy-faced man purpled.

"I mean it," he declared. "D'you know who I am?"

"Don't tell us. Let us guess." The heavy irony came from Monk, the man who had been trying to explain how the extra person had come aboard at the spaceport. He had a receding forehead and long, hairy arms.

"I'm Kid McCray, the Martian middleweight champion, that's who!"

The crewmen dissolved into the helpless hilarity of complete disbelief, and Strike fought back his own urge to laugh. Middleweight McCray ranted and stormed, trying to convince them of his sincerity. It was useless. In fury, he doubled his fists and sprang at Dacres.

However, Strike decided, whatever ring experience McCray might have had didn't include the trickiness of moving out in space. His lunge carried him well off the floor. He sailed, floundering, like a man in deep water, awkward and off balance. In this defenseless position, the blond man's punch caught him flush on the jaw and slammed him head-first against the steel wall.

McCray took a full count.

"Nobody can do this to me," he muttered dizzily, and was still shaky when he managed to stand again.

The crew men were weeping in their joy.

"The champ's off form today!" the guffawing Monk yelled. "He ain't so good in the light gravity!"

Strike thought it about time to intervene, so he stepped into the room. There was a sudden silence of frozen attitudes and wary eyes.

"Oh, Captain Strike," Dacres said, relaxing. "Glad you're here. If you overheard what's been going on, you realize that we have a stowaway aboard with some peculiar notions in his head."

"I understand, Dacres." Strike tried to look sternly at the groggy, clown-faced McCray. "Just how did you get on the ship?"

"Well,"--McCray screwed up his face in thought--"Well, there was the fight, see? First championship bout ever held on Mars. I win by a kayo in the eleventh. Then we celebrated--parties, taverns, lots o'womans.... Then I don't remember nothin'till a few minutes--" He looked very baffled. "Doncha believe me?"

Obviously, the various celebrants had somehow formed into one big

party during the gay evening. It sounded like a fight night. There probably had been a fight. But as for a man with a face like McCray's being a champion--

Strike and Dacres exchanged sad smiles, and Dacres made a cranking motion with one finger to his temple.

"Perhaps a few weeks' work will straighten out your thinking, McCray," Strike said. "We'll go and see my partner, and you'd better act sensibly because technically you're subject to severe penalties. Here. Slip these on."

He kicked over a pair of gravity clogs--thick metal plates containing a power unit to adjust the wearer against differing gravities. Straps fastened them to the feet. Everyone else was wearing them. They enabled scrambled-ears McCray to follow Strike and Dacres up the long corridor to the elevator leading to the flight deck.

Tommy Strike noted with satisfaction McCray's reaction, as the pugilist's eyes fell on the glorious, copper-blond beauty of the ship's famous mistress.

"Holy Smoke!" McCray goggled at her. "You're Gerry Carlyle!"

In the questioning silence that followed, Strike explained.

"We have a stowaway, Gerry," he said. "Unintentional. Says he came aboard by mistake in a moment of alcoholic aberration. No one of us realized he wasn't one of the new men. He seems to be a bit punch-drunk."

The uninvited guest snapped out of it with a roar.

"Punch-drunk?" he yelled. "Listen, you! I'm Kid McCray, middleweight champ of Mars! I got influence, an' if you don't take me

back to Mars right now, there'll be trouble!"

Strike, Dacres, and Gerry Carlyle doubled over with laughter.

"O--oh--h!" gasped the woman. "Those Martian liquors! I've heard they frequently bring on delusions of grandeur!"

However cool a ringman McCray might once have been, he had now had too much. He advanced vengefully upon Strike, his every thought written plainly on his battered face. Remembering his earlier experience, the fighter shuffled forward with determined caution. As a result, Strike found him practically a sitting duck.

Being in the light-heavyweight class, Strike promptly accepted the challenge and clubbed the intruder with a whistling right cross.

McCray spun round, fought clumsily for balance on the gravity clogs, then crashed, bouncing his head off the binnacle. "This just ain't possible," he muttered faintly.

"The 'champ,'" Dacres declared in an amused voice, "isn't so good with the footwork this morning."

"Overtrained, perhaps," offered Gerry.

There was more gaiety.

"Well, we can't put back to Mars, of course," Strike said then. "Better put him to work."

Actually, Strike was not at all sorry. McCray was probably in for some amusingly rough and humiliating hours. He would be assigned to the most menial tasks. He would be referred to derisively as "the Champ." He would have to learn that Space Law dealt ruthlessly with men with too-ready fists. But The Ark was on a grim mission, and

Strike felt sure that McCray, once he found his place, would be good for many tension-relieving laughs....

Kid McCray was surprisingly persistent, however. Two days later, he buttonholed Strike and urged him to radio Mars, on the theory that if there were a missing middleweight champion, that might prove his story.

"Too bad you didn't think of that before," Strike smothered a grin and pointed out solemnly. "We're already too far from Mars for the limited capacity of our ship's radio."

No whit discouraged, McCray again petitioned the captain next day. He had learned the story of Dacres'brother, and the peculiar, untimely illness which had reduced the crew of The Ark.

"Don't that seem kinda odd, Captain?" insisted McCray, striving to look mysterious. "An'could anybody be so lucky as to find a half-dozen number-one mechanics on Mars at a moment's notice? Maybe we better turn baek right now!"

Strike got endless amusement from the little battles of wits in which McCray clumsily offered varied reasons for returning to Mars. But the ex-fighter's point about Dacres'substitute crewmen stuck in his mind. He remembered, too, the conversation he'd overheard the day McCray had awakened on the ship. The exact words escaped him, but hadn't Dacres been speaking as if to long-time acquaintances? The sudden silence, the suspicious looks when he shoved open the door and entered the room--had they meant anything?

Feeling very foolish, Strike dropped down to talk with Baumstark, the chief engineer, and was quickly reassured.

"It's working out fine, sir," the engineer said, "The new fellows are

really topnotch engine men, especially that Monk. Not much to look at, but always asking questions. Probably could run the ship himself right now!"

After that, even McCray seemed to give up trying, tending strictly to business, as the mighty ship fled at astronomical speeds through the vast remoteness of the spaceways. Days drifted into weeks. One by one, the major planets' orbits passed astern. Then, another of those queerly unrelated incidents ruffled the surface of the quiet routine.

McCray was involved, as usual. On an inspection tour, Strike came upon him sprawled on the floor of one of the cabins, nursing a welt above his ear. Standing over him was Monk, a wrench in one hand and a wicked-looking proton pistol in the other.

"Nosey!" Monk was shouting. "Buttinsky! What's the idea?"

McCray explained fuzzily that he had just been searching for a tool in Monk's spacebag, and accidentally found the gun.

"Well, next time ask me first," Monk cried. "Besides, finding I got a gun is nothin' to get excited about. We're goin' to a strange world, an' it might be dangerous, see? We might need some weapons."

Tommy Strike chose that moment to make his presence known. He lashed Monk verbally, took the gun from him.

"It's the officers' duty to take care of the arsenal aboard this ship. No weapons are ever permitted in the men's quarters."

Monk scuffed his feet, made a handsome apology, and he and McCray went back to work. Strike watched them pensively, recalling past events, wondering if there were a pattern. On impulse, he searched the belongings of Dacres' recruits, and found exactly nothing out-of-the-way. Sheepishly, he returned to the flight deck.

resolved not to bother Gerry with his unworthy suspicions.

That proved a mistake. The mystery came to a sudden and explosive head before the next changing of the watch. They were only one day out from Triton, and Gerry was making telescopic observations of the satellite.

"I've checked Triton's rotational speed, Tommy," she said. "It spins once around on its axis every forty-five minutes or so. Really rolling down this cosmic bowling alley, eh?"

Those were the most important words Strike had ever heard in his life, though he did not realize it then. Instead, he made idle conversation.

"Yes," he said, "but there's precedent for it. Look at Jupiter--twenty-nine times as large as this marble, counting its atmospheric envelope, rotating once in a bit over nine hours."

As if the words were a cue, the door burst open, and Dacres, Monk, and the other substitute crewmen shouldered through. All were armed. In a split second, the entire plot, portions of which had been tantalizing Strike for days, was clear.

"So," said Gerry Carlyle, "it's mutiny."

Dacres nodded, smiling, and interpreted correctly her quick glance down the hall.

"It's no use," he said. "All the others have been bound and gagged."

Chapter III.

Half of Strike's mind boiled with astonishment and self-revilement. It was his fault. He should have known. McCray had practically proved this was coming, but he had insisted on laughing the fellow off as a "character." He had been criminally blind and stupid.

Yet the other part of his brain admitted his actions had only been natural, that no one in his senses would have credited Dacres with the foolhardy idea of stealing the most famous spaceship in the entire System. It was just crazy.

Purple-faced with fury, Strike put this thought into words.

"Just what d'you think you're going to do, anyhow?"

"We're taking over The Ark, camouflaging it, and using it for a short career of piracy among the Outer Planets. Perhaps a halfdozen quick strikes, then we all retire wealthy before the law even starts to hunt."

There it was, beautifully simple, grim, dastardly.

"And what about us?" asked the woman.

"So sorry." Dacres smiled hypocritically. "You and your crew will be packed into a lifeboat and marooned on Triton. Another regrettable accident to another would-be explorer of the 'siren satellite.'"

"That's murder!" Strike lashed out. "We'll die there, horribly, crushed flat by that gravity."

Dacres warned Strike back with his gun.

"Tut, tut, Captain," he said. "You didn't think we could afford to leave you alive, to carry tales to any possible rescue parties, did you? It's

all part of my scheme. Everything must appear accidental."

Strike looked at his fiancée, and was never prouder of her. If the mutineers expected tears or hysteria, they must have been shocked at the hardy defiance of her next remark.

"You're a fool, Dacres, if you don't kill us all right now."

There was implacable hate in the woman's voice, but Dacres merely grinned.

"Oh, no, Miss Carlyle," he said. "No shooting. No hint of foul play. I see what's in your mind. You foresee furious rescue operations when The Ark becomes overdue. Naturally, Triton will be searched, and you intend to leave an explanatory message where it will be easily found.

"Spare yourself the trouble, please. We'll give you a few days--it'd be interesting to see just how long the human heart can endure such strain--then visit your little tomb on Triton. Any messages subsequently found will be written by me, neatly explaining the destruction of The Ark in space, with no suggestion of criminal action."

Hopelessness was a knot in Strike's stomach. The plot was really ironclad. But even now Gerry seemed unshaken. She looked around the group of thieves and murderers as if memorizing their faces for future reference. Then she saw McCray, hiding shamefacedly in the rear. Her eyebrows raised.

"You, too, 'Champ'? I'm disappointed."

The pugilist crimsoned.

"The 'Champ' had a silly idea that he could remain neutral in this

game," Dacres explained easily. "We can use a muscular man, so we gave him his choice. He chose to live, with us."

Gerry nodded.

"Just for curiosity," she said, "do you really have a brother?"

"No. The lost expedition was just windowdressing. Rather nicely done, I thought. We actually arranged for a ship to leave Mars a few months ago under my charter, in case you checked on it."

"Swine!" Gerry Carlyle spat the word, and swung her right hand in a slap that smacked into Dacres'face. Holstering his gun, he wiped his watering eyes and started for Gerry.

At that instant, something happened to McCray. It seemed to Strike that the man's natural instincts as a fighter and sportsman got tangled up with his admiration for a courageous woman. At any rate, moving expertly now on his clogs, he slid before Gerry.

"Look, lady," he said. "Always hit straight, not roundhouse. Like this."

Then he cracked the blond man a beautiful punch, flush on the button. Dacres fell, out cold. Instantly, Strike whirled on Monk, who was about to draw a bead.

"Remember what he said!" he shouted. "No gunplay!"

For heart-stopping moments, sudden death trembled in the air, as Monk squinted murderously at McCray down the glittering rod of his proton pistol. McCray drew breath again only when Monk drew back with a harsh laugh.

"Okay, bum," Monk said. "It's only a matter o'hours, anyways. Seein'as how you decided to play with the losin'team!"

Strike almost smiled when he saw McCray's transparent face register appalled realization. Kid McCray gulped, looked anxiously at Gerry Carlyle, and then grinned broadly as she winked at him in wordless thanks.

"Oh, well," he said, strutting ever so faintly, "it ain't when a fellow goes, it's how he goes!"

It was plain Kid McCray considered himself in distinguished company.

Tommy Strike examined his sweaty palms, marked where the nails had dug in when he fought down the suicidal impulse to fling himself at Dacres'piratical crew. Then he looked around the cramped confines of the tiny lifeboat.

Though intended for six, nine persons were packed in the craft. Save for the slap-happy boxer, McCray, whose heart was certainly bigger than his brains, all the occupants were intimate friends, welded together in a unit by adventure and danger, failures and successes. Young Barrows, Kranz, Baumstark, with all of them their proudest boast was that they were envied members of Gerry Carlyle's entourage.

And now had come the ignominious end of the trail. After each recent hairbreadth exploit, Strike had vowed he would wed Gerry and they would settle down on some peaceful suburban estate. But the demons of excitement in their blood had not been conquered. So, seemingly, the pitcher had gone once too often to the well. Death was the end of this adventure, sure and horrid. And Strike felt himself to blame.

The seething silence, brought on by the enormity of Dacres'daring to lay a hand upon their beloved leader, was broken by Kranz.

"I hear the gravity down there is two-and-a-half gs," he said. "We might as well make a break for it right now. Go down fighting, anyhow."

Strike shrugged.

"It's no use. Dacres has--"

A sudden thought made Strike examine the fuel gauge, but though there was enough fuel to take them to Triton, there was not nearly enough to enable them to try for the nearest outpost in the Uranian System. He ground his teeth.

"No, that bird has thought of everything," he sighed. "I said that the first day I talked to him. It's still true."

"Exception, please," Gerry interposed suddenly. "Mr. Dacres has forgotten one thing, mathematics. Just take it quietly, men. Our inning may yet come."

Tommy Strike and the others stared at her, forlorn hope fighting with despair. He couldn't see any value in calculus when a man suddenly found himself crushed to the ground by a weight of four hundred and fifty pounds. It would be a task even to pick up a pencil. He was about to argue the matter when a sudden lurch threw them all into a tangle at one end of the little rocket-car. It was too late for debate now--Dacres had thrown the lever catapulting the lifeboat into space.

To the tiny craft's left, and slightly above, The Ark, enormous and glittering, receded with uncanny effortlessness. Below and to the right, dollar-size in the cold blackness of interstellar space, the Siren Satellite beckoned irresistibly.

Strike slid into the pilot's seat, for once at a loss as to what to do,

and stared at Gerry questioningly. She nodded.

"Triton," she said.

The tubes bucked with miniature thunder, as Strike deftly manipulated the controls. It was but a three-hour journey, but it loomed as the most frightful three hours any of them had ever dreamed of enduring.

While still an hour out from Triton, the pull of that mighty gravity was already making itself felt. If anyone had occasion to move, he took slow, ponderous steps. The increasing weight was endurable while lying prone, but even so there were whimpers, as invisible but relentless fingers seemed striving to tear loose the internal organs themselves. Barrows was suddenly sick on the floor, and the sight promptly urged three of the others to follow suit.

Strike wound a coil of light rope around himself as an abdominal support. It afforded some relief, but nothing could take the terrible strain from his heart, as it laboriously fought to pump the sluggishly heavy blood through pinched veins. He speculated dispassionately on how long a heart would hold up.

He glanced at Gerry. She lay with her face hidden in her arms, breathing asthmatically. Slowly, her head raised, as if it weighed a ton.

"Tommy," she spoke thickly, with a tongue that would not obey. "I'm going to--pass out. Head toward--equator--"

She slumped. Though Gerry was vigorous and athletic, no human frame was never intended to sustain the ordeal it was subject to now.

Strike saw the others, especially McCray, were passing out, too. Most of them had endured several gs for short moments while

stunting or test-flying, but none had ever experienced anything like this ceaseless drag which crushed the chest and threatened to pull the very flesh away from the bones.

Sweat blinded Strike momentarily, and with a leaden hand he wiped it aside. Triton, pale and featureless, loomed large now, revolving with visible motion. The crisis was at hand. The tiny lifeboat plunged with sickening speed, and Strike fought the controls with corded muscles in the intensity of his desire to rectify what he felt to be his fault. The jets blasted full in a savage battle against the gravity, and it took all Strike's skill to keep the ship from rolling off its delicate position atop that vital column of flame.

As the craft thundered in over the swiftly sliding terrain, only luck averted disaster, for Strike's anchored fingers were too slow for the exacting manipulation of a landing. The craft plowed in fast and hard, swathed in flame, skidding with bone-racking jerks.

The lifeboat made one complete somersault and came to rest—right side up.

The nine castaways sorted themselves out, untangled broken safety belts, stood up, and suddenly, the realization of a miracle dawned upon them!

Like a bestowing of a soothing, deific benison, the grip of that terrifying, crushing gravity was gone. Utterly gone!

They weighed no more, apparently, than they ever had on Earth!

Each gave thanks or expressed his joy in his own way, but the dominant emotion was aptly expressed by McCray.

"Gosh!" he said. "I don't get it!"

None of the men understood the phenomenon, but a horrible suspicion was growing in Strike's mind. He turned to stare at Gerry, who had revived at once with no ill effects.

"You knew this was going to happen!" he said accusingly. "That's what you meant when you babbled about Dacres and his mathematics. Why didn't you tell us, spare us some of the mental agony?"

"Sorry," Gerry blushed faintly. "But I wasn't at all sure. It would have been an awful disappointment if it hadn't come off."

"Never mind that. What's the angle? Out with it! How come?"

Gerry grinned in reply to this bombardment of queries.

"Patience, m'lord, and I shall demonstrate." She found pencil, paper, and slide rule and commenced calculating. "The key to the problem is the fact that Triton's rotation, once every forty-five minutes, develops a centrifugal force at the equator, the thrust of which neutralizes the pull of its high gravity. Now suppose you weigh a hundred and fifty pounds."

"But I weigh a hundred and eighty-three," objected Strike.

"Okay, okay. Just pretend, huh? So you'd expect to weigh three seventy-five here. But--" Gerry scribbled.

weight=150 pounds

diam. of Triton=3000 miles= 1.584×10^7 ft. radius of Triton= 7.92×10^6 ft.

gravity=2.5 g

rotation 45 minutes.

$$n = 1/45 = .0222 \text{ rpm}$$

$$w (?) = 2\pi n / 60 = .00233 \text{ rad/sec}$$

$$m = 150/g = w/32.2 = 4.81 \text{ slugs}$$

"A slug is actually the name of the engineering unit of mass," Gerry interrupted herself to explain—quite unnecessarily as most of the others were well grounded in math.

$$\text{Centrifugal Force} = mrw(?)$$

$$= 4.81 (7.92) (2.33)[2] = 207 \text{ lbs. net weight} = 2.5(150) - 207 = 375 - 207 = 168 \text{ lbs.}$$

"So!" Gerry concluded triumphantly. "We weigh only a few more pounds at the equator here than we do on Earth, despite the high gravity. The closer we move to the poles, the more we'll weigh. Of course, I have only a five-inch slide-rule, and the figures may be correct only to two significant figures, but you get the idea."

"I guess we get it, all right," Strike muttered, still a bit miffed that Gerry had kept it to herself when they had so desperately needed a ray of hope. "So long as we maintain contact with Triton's surface, we're safe. But the moment we lose contact—uh-uh!"

Intrigued by the thought, Barrows experimented with a little upward jump. He promptly came down with a teeth-rattling jolt. No one ventured to duplicate the demonstration. They were effectively held by unseen chains.

"Say!" Strike had another idea. "Dacres will be dropping in again in a few days to write our farewell message for us. If we can rig up a

welcome, maybe there'll be a surprise ending yet to the draymah of 'Gerry and the Pirates.'"

Chapter IV.

A Hairy Intruder

Tensed up as they were, having undergone terrible physical stress under fear of impending death, the men needed that feeble joke as an excuse to let down. They roared with laughter, as if it had been brilliantly witty, or even the broadest slapstick gag. They repeated it with variations and comic embroidery till they were emotionally spent, completely relaxed.

Finally, someone made the obvious point that if they were to surprise Dacres on his return, then they must prepare to survive the intervening days.

Sobered, under Gerry's leadership, they began to assess their situation.

Outside, the terrain of Triton was bleakly unrelieved in the dim light, seemingly of volcanic origin. There was an occasional tree, squat and massive and spiny. Hoar frost coated the hollows, and a gusty wind whistled thinly.

With quiet efficiency, the men went about their duties, thrusting delicate instruments through the special valves, testing temperature, pressure, analyzing the atmosphere. Strike took one look at the thermometer and shivered.

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

"Oxygen out there, all right," Kranz, working with the air sample,

announced with satisfaction. "Trace of hydrogen. Trace of water vapor." Then after an interval, "Oh--oh. Chlorine, too. Not much, though; easy to adjust the filters on our pressure suits to take care of it.... Couple of inert gases, nothing harmful." He looked up.

Gerry and Strike traded glances.

"Good as could be expected," Strike said. "Naturally the gravity would hold a substantial atmospheric envelope. Shall we stroll about the yard and meet the neighbors?"

They drew lots for the six space-suits, and presently the winners poured out upon the surface of Triton like school children at recess. McCray and Kranz promptly staggered tipsily and fell down. Strike and the other men lurched and scrambled and finally remained upright in very weird positions, as if leaning against a gale. They all looked about in amazed bewilderment except Gerry, who was convulsed in unseemly merriment.

Strike inspected the landscape, which was apparently quite flat, then tried to understand why everyone acted as if standing on a hillside. He borrowed an apt phrase from McCray's vocabulary.

"I don't get it," he said.

"Another item I forgot to mention," Gerry explained. "One of Triton's more amusing properties. 'Down' is not perpendicular to the ground, except at the poles and the equator! Evidently, you didn't land quite at the equator, though you came close enough. The phenomenon isn't so noticeable in the lifeboat because it's already lying at an angle. Incidentally, a trip from the poles to the equator would be downhill all the way!"

"Aren't you the cute one, though," Strike growled.

He thought about this strange state of affairs, and had an awful vision of Triton slowly breaking up, with everything rolling down from its two poles till there was nothing left but an equator, spinning solemnly through the heavens like a runaway wheel.

To rid himself of this nightmare, he became very businesslike, dividing the castaways into groups for a general stock-taking. Exploration of the immediate vicinity was not encouraging. There was very little surface moisture, and drilling for water was of course out of the question. A kettle of melted frost, painfully gathered, proved potable, after boiling had driven off the chlorine.

The air was breathable through filtermasks, though cold as a knife-blade in the lungs. McCray, excited as a boy over the new experiences, tried spitting, and was delighted to find the result turned to icicles before reaching the ground. He abandoned his fun, however, when his lips froze together painfully.

Food, either animal or vegetable, there seemed to be none. This worried Strike.

"Here's a lockerful of concentrates," he said, "but they won't last nine of us too long. We can only hope friend Dacres doesn't wait too long before returning to check on us."

His voice trailed off as he saw Gerry staring wide-eyed past him. He turned. Thirty yards away, something new had been added to the landscape--a five-foot high Thing covered completely with dark, coarse hair, tapering to a blunt point from a broad base. It somewhat resembled a blackly furry bishop, strayed from a gigantic chessboard. The Thing stood utterly motionless in the grayness, as they watched. Though apparently without features, it somehow gave the feeling of watching them in intense curiosity.

"Pretend not to look at it," Gerry suggested finally.

At once, the weird-looking intruder glided swiftly forward to within twenty yards, then froze stiffly again in its watchful attitude. McCray's eyes were popping. He hadn't the background to take this experience in stride.

"What is it?" he croaked. "Vegetable or mineral? Didja see how it sort o'glides along, sneakin' up on us? No feet! How does it work?"

"What a beautiful specimen!" Gerry sighed with professional longing. "I really think it wants to make friends. Doesn't it remind you of an oversize Scotty pup sitting up to beg?"

Strike snorted.

"What an imagination! Looks more to me like--"

"Watch it!" came the sudden warning.

In the discussion, they had taken their eyes from the newcomer, and it had seized the opportunity to move in. The center of its head opened to reveal an enormous mouth, filled with hideous, slavering, black fangs. Emitting an eerie whistling note, the Thing rushed savagely upon the group, in a horridly blind fury.

Everyone scattered like flushed quail and the hairy enemy, unable to make quick turns, charged harmlessly through like a bull. Abandoning all pretense, it turned and came sliding back in another silent, deadly rush. Again, the castaways dodged aside.

"He has such an endearing way of showing his friendliness!" Strike gibed at his fiancée.

But though there were elements of humor in being chased round and

round the spaceboat, tiring muscles soon warned that the situation was no joke.

"This can't go on indefinitely," Gerry finally gasped. "Someone'll slip, or dodge a little too late. And if we retreat into the ship, it'll just mean a siege. If that blasted Dacres had only left us a weapon--"

She might have been a lady Aladdin, speaking the magic formula, for the lifeboat opened and Barrows, knowing Gerry hated to kill even the most dangerous beasts as much as she loved to capture them alive, tossed an improvised contraption to Strike. It consisted of two scalpels, fastened with wires from the control panel to a three-foot metal piece of weather-stripping ripped from the doorsill, to form a spear.

"Best we could do on short notice," Barrows apologized, then retreated precipitately, as the shaggy, faceless nemesis charged raveningly against the closing port.

As the Thing reeled back from the shock, Strike deftly moved in with his crude weapon, slashing for the abdomen. The result was so completely devastating that Strike was dumbfounded.

The razor-sharp little knives went in as if through butter, and when they were withdrawn, a torrent of grayish fluid spouted forth almost endlessly, as if the strange creature were filled with the stuff to the exclusion of any kind of organs.

Eventually, the rank flood ceased, and the enemy collapsed like an empty glove, dead. The victory was so absolute--the weird animal had been so utterly ferocious, animated solely by the two emotions of cunning and hate. It had been defeated so easily--that bewilderment took the place of triumph. Everyone gathered round Strike and his trophy.

"Funny stuff," Kranz said, pointing to the great puddle of vital fluid, as yet unaffected by the temperature. "Wonder what it is?"

"Must be anti-freeze," Strike hazarded.

"Be interesting to examine the beast," Gerry said slowly.

She and Kranz exchanged a long look and, by common consent, seized the shrunken carcass and bore it into the lifeboat. They could rig up a rough laboratory there, putter around for hours with the smelly corpse, and be quite happy.

Kranz was a fiend for chemical analysis. He would sample the Styx as Charon rowed him across. Strike, concerned with setting up guards around the ship in case there were other deadly alien creatures lurking out of site but preparing to attack, shrugged it off. It was one of the few times in his life he missed a point.

Seven times, Neptune's pale bulk popped over the horizon to make its swift journey across the sky before Gerry, smiling like a cat in a bird-cage, invited Strike into the lifeboat.

"Interesting beastie," she observed. "Skin as thin as paper, despite the shaggy coat. No circulatory system. Somehow that mess of fluid takes the place of blood--has corpuscles and things in it, too. Rudimentary organs of some kind about where you'd expect to find eyes. In the absence of a Latin scholar, we've named it Apod Shaggiusfootless because it has no feet and is hairy. 'Shaggie'for short."

"That hardly accounts for the self-satisfied smile," Strike said shrewdly.

Gerry grinned wider.

"We analyzed the fluid," she said. "It's a chlorinated compound, as you might expect basically perchlorethylene."

"And so?"

"Kranz thinks it would be easy to convert the stuff, right inside the creature's body, into hexachlorethane, without any immediate harm. Just a few injections."

"Now there's a brilliant experiment!" Strike simmered exasperatedly. "And at a time like this, marooned at the outer extremities of the System, our days numbered! Why, for heaven's sake?"

He still did not see the point nor did any of the others except Kranz. Just as Gerry had kept still about Triton's peculiar balance of centrifugal and gravitational forces while she wasn't sure, so she kept her own council this time. She would have her little mystery till she knew whether the experiment was going to pan out.

The fact was, within a few hours, or days, Dacres would be returning to see if his murder plot had worked, and to set the stage for the rescue parties. The castaways would have one chance and one only—to fight for their lives. It had to be good. And anything, however unlikely, that might give them an edge was well worth the effort.

"Never mind why," Gerry urged. "Just be a pal and help me out. All we need is one of these Shaggies captured alive to work on. You and I can do it. There's chloroform in the medical kit, and a rope that'd make a fine lasso."

"What do you mean we?" Strike jeered, determined to pay her back for the mystery. "Surely one little monster couldn't faze the inimitable Gerry Carlyle!"

Gerry choked back some very unladylike words.

Chapter V.

Gerry's Stratagem

Came the day when Gerry Carlyle's stomach had butterflies in it. That was not from hunger, although rations hadn't been generous. It was the sensation that every fighter knows as the ring lights go on, and the house darkens, and she awaits the bell for the first round.

They were all awaiting the bell now, tense and drawn-faced, as they hid in the darkened lifeboat, ready for a bigger, more desperate fight than any their prizefight pal, Kid McCray, had ever engaged in. Days of anxious waiting were over. Miles above the tricky Neptunian satellite, hovered The Ark, slowly descending, quartering in geometric pattern, as the detectors sought the smaller craft.

Were they ready for battle? Gerry wondered. Some crude knives and knuckledusters had been made, and there had been some excitement when they captured one of the weird-looking hairy creatures they called Shaggies. Gerry's enthusiasm for the experiment she and Kranz had performed on the beast had waned.

It was admittedly a longshot, though even if it didn't succeed, they would be no worse off than before. What it all boiled down to was an ambush. Dacres and his mob would be expecting to find nine corpses, the result of the murderous gravity. He was due for a shock.

It would be attacking proton-pistol-armed killers almost barehanded, but they had the advantage of stunning surprise. And the captured Shaggie just might help. It had been "doped up," as McCray expressed it, and turned loose when The Ark had finally come into sight. Now it stood out there, a blot on the landscape, surely one of

Nature's mistakes.

Of course, the creature would inevitably attack any moving thing, including unwary pirates, with vigor. But whether subsequent events would conform with theory, was in the lap of the gods. And to them, Gerry prayed fervently.

At length the time for wondering was over, for Dacres had finally located the wreck and was bringing The Ark down in a swift plunge, to hover lightly a few feet above the surface, balloon-like.

"They sure handle it sweet," someone muttered grudgingly.

"They ought to. They've had plenty of time to practice." That was Baumstark.

"S--sh! They might hear us!" Strike cautioned.

Minutes ticked away, as the gangsters in The Ark made their routine tests. Then the ship came to rest, the main port slid open, and the entire vicious mob stood in the big lock staring eagerly out. All wore gravity clogs.

Tommy Strike recognized Dacres at once, taller than the others, and anger began to seethe in his brain like an acid bath, ran like liquor through his veins. He felt his companions stir in the grip of that emotion, as they peered through pin-point peepholes. He could literally smell the hate as it sweated out of their trembling bodies.

Gerry sensed his tension. "Not yet. Not yet," She whispered restrainingly. "Watch."

It was an ancient movie--jerky action, but no accompanying sound. Outside, the Shaggie was going through its familiar routine, sliding closer and closer, as it believed itself unobserved, to the men in the

lock entrance, amazingly like an enormous friendly puppy, afraid of a kick, but hoping for a bone.

One of the gangsters, completely taken in, snapped his fingers at the creature invitingly. Then, inevitably following its fixed emotion-habit pattern, the Shaggie plunged viciously into action. Its initial rush carried it right into the air-lock.

A fearful tangle ensued.

Mouths popped open in soundless cries. Faces grimaced in sudden terror. Dodging madly about, the men fought to retreat into the main corridor of The Ark.

The Shaggie's second blind, slavering rush took it right along with them, and someone went down. There was a nasty moment before a proton bolt blasted the Shaggie quite literally to bits, flooding the passageway with its evil-smelling, vital fluid.

"This is it!"

Gerry's voice was suddenly sharp and triumphant. A spate of grimly vengeful men, with Kid McCray in the lead, poured from the lifeboat and ran toward The Ark. Finely trained fighting men that they were, they didn't even pause at the astounding sight that met their eyes. From out of The Ark's open port came billow after billow of dense white smoke. It was as if the entire ship's interior had suddenly begun to burn.

As the crew dashed across the short intervening space--they had left off their pressure suits for sake of freedom of action--Gerry breathlessly explained in triumph:

"The smoke's harmless! Don't be afraid! Hexachlorethane in the Shaqqie reacts vigorously with metallic zinc in the zincal floor and

forms zinc chloride. Reaction liberates such great heat that the zinc chloride is immediately evaporated, and a dense cloud o'white smoke is generated!"

As Gerry fought for breath, she saw the man called Monk stagger out of the blinding smoke into view, squarely in the path of the charging McCray. Without even slowing, McCray let drive with a frightful blow, a concentrate of days of fear and hunger and hate.

The blow caught the man squarely in the pit of the stomach and through a momentary thinning of the smoke, the astonished castaways saw Monk go sailing clear through the air-lock and across the corridor to smash sickeningly against the far wall.

The truth dawned instantly. The piratical gang had adjusted their clogs to handle two-and-a-half gs. Consequently, they were only flyweights now, not having had time to discover the facts of the gravitational situation.

With howls of pure joy, Gerry and Strike plowed after McCray into the wild melee that surged savagely through the white murk, throwing haymakers at everything in reach. If he hit someone who was solid, he muttered apologies and sought a new target. If his victim vanished from sight in the smoke from a single punch, he eagerly followed it up.

The end of the battle was a foregone conclusion. Completely surprised and disorganized, Dacres and his gang were overwhelmed. Only half realizing they were being attacked by men supposedly flat, frozen corpses, and not daring to use their guns for fear of hitting their own comrades they were scattered, beaten senseless, and disarmed in three incredible minutes of fighting against phantoms.

Only two escaped that first onslaught.

They fled down The Ark's endless corridors, firing around corners in a deadly, sniping rear-guard action at their relentless pursuers. Strike, with the aid of captured weapons, quickly laid out a foolproof campaign against the two remaining pirates.

The pirates were driven to the ship's stern by constant threat of being outflanked, as the crew of The Ark infiltrated through dark side passages and storerooms. Then, with the arsenal room in his hands, Gerry ordered anesthetic bombs broken in the ship's ventilating system. Everyone donned masks. Presently, the two diehards were captured as they slept soundly, faces flushed, in the galley.

The battle was over. Gerry, at her own insistence, rewarded each of the valiant victors with a kiss.

Chapter VI.

Knockout

Gerry Carlyle, during her tumultuous career, had known some wild celebrations. But she had never witnessed anything like the welcome that awaited them this time.

At a brief stopover on Mars for fresh food, Gerry had broken the whole fantastic story, which had promptly been forwarded by ether-beam to Earth in complete detail--the treacherous attempt of pirates to seize The Ark and murder its crew, the marooning, the outwitting of certain death, the strange fight, and finally the return of Gerry Carlyle, bringing the criminals back alive.

For the last leg of Mars-Earth run, they had an escort of police craft, and in midspace, an armed guard was put aboard. Privately, the

crew considered this very unnecessary, but Gerry permitted it only as part of a hard bargain she characteristically drove--an understanding that before Dacres was indicted, she would have first crack at his bank account to pay for the trip to Triton, exactly as contracted for.

And now the home spaceport was in truth a sea of humanity, frothing with white, as thousands of faces turned upward to watch the descent. There were cheers, and speeches, and officials, and photographers, and telenewscasters.

Autograph-hunters broke through the police lines time and again. There was a nasty few minutes as Dacres and his band were hustled through the crowd to the police 'copters. And during it all, Gerry Carlyle and Tommy Strike remained smiling, gracious and friendly. Such marked adulation would have embarrassed any but the most poised.

Finally as the celebrants began to drift away, one of the reporters spotted McCray standing patiently in The Ark's air-lock. Instantly, climax piled upon climax, as the man shouted:

"Hey, look! It's Kid McCray! It's the missing Martian middleweight champ!"

Back came the crowds, the cameramen, the broadcasters. The crew of The Ark turned to McCray with jaws ludicrously agape. "You mean you really are a boxing champion?" Gerry cried.

McCray grinned self-consciously.

"I tried to tell ya. Nobody wouldn't believe me, that's all."

"Well, I'll be!" Gerry swore an unladylike oath, to the broadcasters' confusion, and the delight of everyone else.

Then a hundred questions showered on the little group, and bit by bit the amazing story behind McCray's presence on The Ark came out.

Darkness was approaching when the spectators, surfeited with the excitement and surprises of the afternoon, at last gave the weary wanderers rest.

Comparatively alone at last, The Ark's crew grinned feebly at one another. Tommy Strike had been very thoughtful, since McCray's identity was established. Now he tried to move unobtrusively away. Too late. The erstwhile, pushed-around menial placed a firm hand on the captain's arm.

"Uh, look, Mr. Strike. There's sump'in I just gotta do. I only dropped the duke a few times in my life, an'every time I come back to reverse the decision. Even with Dacres an'Monk, I squared things. So you're the only fellow in the world to stop me--remember that first day in the pilot room?--who I ain't got even with. Doncha see? I'm the champ. I just have to reverse that decision." His eyes pleaded for understanding.

Strike nodded resignedly.

"Matter of principle, I suppose?"

"Sure." McCray nodded eagerly. "It won't take long. Just one knockdown, strictly friendly. You won't hardly feel it, Mr. Strike."

"Okay." Strike's fists came up, and they squared off.

McCray bobbed and weaved, bored in after the retreating Strike--and suddenly the pugilist's feet slid into a weird tangle and he sat down hard. He leaned forward to clutch his ankle and howled in anguish.

Strike, who hadn't landed a blow, and the amazed spectators gathered around. McCray's ankle was visibly swelling--a bad sprain. The bout was over. "What on earth happened?" Strike inquired.

McCray gave up groaning a moment, pointed to the moist, bruised peel of a Martian banana, then looked around accusingly for a culprit to blame. His glance stopped on Gerry Carlyle, whose cheeks were bulging as she chewed heroically. She gulped it down.

Breathless, she raised her fiance's arm.

"The winnah," she cried, "and still champeen--Tommy Strike!"

Hand in hand, they ran laughing away into the darkness, while Kid McCray beat the tarmac in futile exasperation.

"Aw, wait a minute," he wailed. "You just can't do this to me!" The End

Epilogue

Interplanetary Huntress To Retire!

Interplanetary Huntress Announces Nuptals!

n. y. June 23, up. Exclusive from Tony Quade, ace cameraman for Nine Planets Films, Inc. Like so many women, the domestic bug had finally bitten the catch-'em-alive gal. "I'm going to retire, get married, set up housekeeping, and have babies!" Gerry Carlyle told this reporter in an exclusive interview after her return from Triton, the "Siren Satelite." Women throughout the solar system, to whom she has been an inspiration, will grieve. News broadcasters will have to look elsewhere for stirring copy with the Interplanetary Huntress gone domestic.

Quade Story All Wrong, Carlyle Claims!

Interplanetary Huntress to Join Greatest Expedition in History!

n. y. June 23, up. "As usual, that sensation-hunting excuse for a camera man got it all wrong," the glamorous adventurer Gerry Carlyle explained at a hastily called press conference today. "Just what you would expect from someone associated with that two-bit outfit of fakers at Nine Planets Films.

"Tommy Strike and I do plan to be married, I am quitting my job for the London Interplanetary Zoo. But that's because we've both signed aboard as colonists on the first starship to Alpha Centuri. We hope to build a home there and have babies when we get there, all right--because we'll among the pioneers buiding a new life for humanity on Earth's first colony."

The End

Shambleau

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Man has conquered space before. You may be sure of that. Somewhere beyond the Egyptians, in that dimness out of which come echoes of half-mythical names--Atlantis, Mu--somewhere back of history's first beginnings there must have been an age when mankind, like us today, built cities of steel to house its star-roving ships and knew the names of the planets in their own native tongues--heard Venus'people call their wet world "Sha-ardol" in that soft, sweet, slurring speech and mimicked Mars'guttural "Lakkdiz" from the harsh tongues of Mars'dry-land dwellers. You may be sure of it. Man has conquered Space before, and out of that conquest faint, faint echoes run still through a world that has forgotten the very fact of a civilization which must have been as mighty as our own. There have been too many myths and legends for us to doubt it. The myth of the Medusa, for instance, can never have had its roots in the soil of Earth. That tale of the snake-haired Gorgon whose gaze turned the gazer to stone never originated about any creature that Earth nourished. And those ancient Greeks who told the story must have remembered, dimly and half believing, a tale of antiquity about some strange being from one of the outlying planets their remotest ancestors once trod.

"Shambleau! Ha... Shambleau!" The wild hysteria of the mob rocketed from wall to wall of Lakkdarol's narrow streets and the storming of heavy boots over the slag-red pavement made an ominous undertone to that swelling bay, "Shambleau! Shambleau!"

Northwest Smith heard it coming and stepped into the nearest doorway, laying a wary hand on his heat-gun's grip, and his colorless eyes narrowed. Strange sounds were common enough in the streets

of Earth's latest colony on Mars--a raw, red little town where anything might happen, and very often did. But Northwest Smith, whose name is known and respected in every dive and wild outpost on a dozen wild planets, was a cautious man, despite his reputation. He set his back against the wall and gripped his pistol, and heard the rising shout come nearer and nearer.

Then into his range of vision flashed a red running figure, dodging like a hunted hare from shelter to shelter in the narrow street. It was a girl--a berry-brown girl in a single tattered garment whose scarlet burnt the eyes with its brilliance. She ran wearily, and he could hear her gasping breath from where he stood. As she came into view he saw her hesitate and lean one hand against the wall for support, and glance wildly around for shelter. She must not have seen him in the depths of the doorway, for as the bay of the mob grew louder and the pounding of feet sounded almost at the corner she gave a despairing little moan and dodged into the recess at his very side.

When she saw him standing there, tall and leather-brown, hand on his heat-gun, she sobbed once, inarticulately, and collapsed at his feet, a huddle of burning scarlet and bare, brown limbs.

Smith had not seen her face, but she was a girl, and sweetly made and in danger; and though he had not the reputation of a chivalrous man, something in her hopeless huddle at his feet touched that chord of sympathy for the underdog that stirs in every Earthman, and he pushed her gently into the corner behind him and jerked out his gun, just as the first of the running mob rounded the corner.

It was a motley crowd, Earthmen and Martians and a sprinkling of Venusian swamp men and strange, nameless denizens of unnamed planets--a typical Lakkdarol mob. When the first of them turned the corner and saw the empty street before them there was a faltering in the rush and the foremost spread out and began to search the

doorways on both sides of the street.

"Looking for something?" Smith's sardonic call sounded clear above the clamor of the mob.

They turned. The shouting died for a moment as they took in the scene before them--tall Earthman in the space-explorer's leathern garb, all one color from the burning of savage suns save for the sinister pallor of his no-colored eyes in a scarred and resolute face, gun in his steady hand and the scarlet girl crouched behind him, panting.

The foremost of the crowd--a burly Earthman in tattered leather from which the Patrol insignia had been ripped away--stared for a moment with a strange expression of incredulity on his face overspreading the savage exultation of the chase. Then he let loose a deep-throated bellow, "Shambleau!" and lunged forward. Behind him the mob took up the cry again, "Shambleau! Shambleau! Shambleau!" and surged after.

Smith, lounging negligently against the wall, arms folded and gun-hand draped over his left forearm, looked incapable of swift motion, but at the leader's first forward step the pistol swept in a practiced half-circle and the dazzle of blue white heat leaping from its muzzle seared an arc in the slag pavement at his feet. It was an old gesture, and not a man in the crowd but understood it. The foremost recoiled swiftly against the surge of those in the rear, and for a moment there was confusion as the two tides met and struggled. Smith's mouth curled into a grim curve as he watched. The man in the mutilated Patrol uniform lifted a threatening fist and stepped to the very edge of the deadline, while the crowd rocked to and fro behind him.

"Are you crossing that line?" queried Smith in an ominously gentle voice.

"We want that girl!"

"Come and get her!" Recklessly Smith grinned into his face. He saw danger there, but his defiance was not the foolhardy gesture it seemed. An expert psychologist of mobs from long experience, he sensed no murder here. Not a gun had appeared in any hand in the crowd. They desired the girl with an inexplicable bloodthirstiness he was at a loss to understand, but toward himself he sensed no such fury. A mauling he might expect, but his life was in no danger. Guns would have appeared before now if they were coming out at all. So he grinned in the man's angry face and leaned lazily against the wall.

Behind their self-appointed leader the crowd milled impatiently, and threatening voices began to rise again. Smith heard the girl moan at his feet.

"What do you want with her?" he demanded.

"She's Shambleau! Shambleau, you fool! Kick her out of there--we'll take care of her!"

"I'm taking care of her," drawled Smith.

"She's Shambleau, I tell you! Damn your hide, man, we never let those things live! Kick her out here!"

The repeated name had no meaning to him, but Smith's innate stubbornness rose defiantly as the crowd surged forward to the very edge of the are, their clamor growing louder. "Shambleau! Kick her out here! Give us Shambleau! Shambleau!"

Smith dropped his indolent pose like a cloak and planted both feet wide, swinging up his gun threateningly. "Keep back!" he yelled. "She's mine! Keep back!"

He had no intention of using that heat-beam. He knew by now that they would not kill him unless he started the gun-play himself, and he did not mean to give up his life for any girl alive. But a severe mauling he expected, and he braced himself instinctively as the mob heaved within itself.... To his astonishment a thing happened then that he had never known to happen before. At his shouted defiance the foremost of the mob--those who had heard him clearly--drew back a little, not in alarm but evidently surprised. The ex-Patrolman said, "Yours! She's yours?" in a voice from which puzzlement crowded out the anger.

Smith spread his booted legs wide before the crouching figure and flourished his gun.

"Yes," he said. "And I'm keeping her! Stand back there!"

The man stared at him wordlessly, and horror and disgust and incredulity mingled on his weather-beaten face, The incredulity triumphed for a moment and he said again,

"Yours!"

Smith nodded defiance.

The man stepped back suddenly, unutterable contempt in his very pose. He waved an arm to the crowd and said loudly, "It's--his!" and the press melted away, gone silent, too, and the look of contempt spread from face to face.

The ex-Patrolman spat on the slag-paved street and turned his back indifferently. "Keep her, then," he advised briefly over one shoulder. "But don't let her out again in this town!"

Smith stared in perplexity almost open-mouthed as the suddenly

scornful mob began to break up. His mind was in a whirl. That such bloodthirsty animosity should vanish in a breath he could not believe. And the curious mingling of contempt and disgust on the faces he saw baffled him even more. Lakkdarol was anything but a puritan town--it did not enter his head for a moment that his claiming the brown girl as his own had caused that strangely shocked revulsion to spread through the crowd. No, it was something deeper rooted than that. Instinctive, instant disgust had been in the faces he saw--they would have looked less so if he had admitted cannibalism or Pharol-worship.

And they were leaving his vicinity as swiftly as if what-ever unknowing sin he had committed were contagious. The street was emptying as rapidly as it had filled. He saw a sleek Venusian glance back over his shoulder as he turned the corner and sneer, "Shambleau!" and the word awoke a new line of speculation in Smith's mind. Shambleau! Vaguely of French origin, it must be. And strange enough to hear it from the lips of Venusians and Martian drylanders, but it was their use of it that puzzled him more. "We never let those things live," the ex-Patrolman had said. It reminded him dimly of something... an ancient line from some writing in his own tongue... "Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live." He smiled to himself at the similarity, and simultaneously was aware of the girl at his elbow.

She had risen soundlessly. He turned to face her, sheathing his gun and stared at first with curiosity and then in the entirely frank openness with which men regard that which is not wholly human. For she was not. He knew it at a glance, though the brown, sweet body was shaped like a woman's and she wore the garment of scarlet--he saw it was leather--with an ease that few unhuman beings achieve toward clothing. He knew it from the moment he looked into her eyes, and a shiver of unrest went over him as he met them. They were frankly green as young grass, with slit-like, feline pupils that pulsed unceasingly, and there was a look of dark, animal wisdom in their

depths--that look of the beast which sees more than man.

There was no hair upon her face--neither brows nor lashes, and he would have sworn, that the tight scarlet turban bound around her head covered baldness. She had three fingers and a thumb and her feet had four digits apiece too, and all sixteen of them were tipped with round claws that sheathed back into the flesh like a cat's. She ran her tongue over her lips--a thin, pink, flat tongue as feline as her eyes--and spoke with difficulty. He felt that that throat and tongue had never been shaped for human speech.

"Not--afraid now," she said softly, and her little teeth were white and pointed as a kitten's.

"What did they want you for?" he asked her curiously. "What had you done? Shambleau, is that your name?"

"I--not talk, your--speech," she demurred hesitantly.

"Well, try to--I want to know. Why were they chasing you? Will you be safe on the street now, or hadn't you better get indoors somewhere? They looked dangerous."

"I--go with you." She brought it out with difficulty.

"Say you!" Smith grinned. "What are you, anyhow? You look like a kitten to me."

"Shambleau." She said it somberly.

"Where d'you live? Are you a Martian?"

"I come from--from far--from long ago--far country--"

"Wait!" laughed Smith. "You're getting your wires crossed. You're not

a Martian?"

She drew herself up very straight beside him, lifting the turbaned head, and there was something queenly in the poise of her.

"Martian?" she said scornfully. "My people--are--are--you have no word. Your speech--hard for me."

"What's yours? I might know it--try me."

She lifted her head and met his eyes squarely, and there was in hers a subtle amusement--he could have sworn it.

"Some day I--speak to you in--my own language," she promised, and the pink tongue flicked out over her lips, swiftly, hungrily.

Approaching footsteps on the red pavement interrupted Smith's reply. A dryland Martian came past, reeling a little and exuding an aroma of segir-whisky, the Venusian brand. When he caught the red flash of the girl's tatters he turned his head sharply, and as his segir-steeped brain took in the fact of her presence he lurched toward the recess unsteadily, bawling, "Shambleau, by Pharol! Shambleau!" and reached out a clutching hand.

Smith struck it aside contemptuously.

"On your way, drylander," he advised.

The man drew back and stared, blear-eyed.

"Oh! Yours, eh?" he croaked. "Zut! You're welcome to it!"

And like the ex-Patrolman before him he spat on the pavement and turned away, muttering harshly in the blasphemous tongue of the drylands.

Smith watched him shuffle off, and there was a crease between his colorless eyes, a nameless unease rising within him.

"Come on," he said abruptly to the girl. "If this sort of thing is going to happen we'd better get indoors. Where shall I take you?"

"With you," she murmured.

He stared down into the flat green eyes. Those ceaselessly pulsing pupils disturbed him, but it seemed to him, vaguely, that behind the animal shallows of her gaze was a shutter--a closed barrier that might at any moment open to reveal the very deeps of that dark knowledge he sensed there.

Roughly he said again, "Come on, then," and stepped down into the street.

She pattered along a pace or two behind him, making no effort to keep up with his long strides, and though Smith--as men know from Venus to Jupiter's moons--walks as softly as a cat, even in spacemen's boots, the girl at his heels slid like a shadow over the rough pavement, making so little sound that even the lightness of his footsteps was loud in the empty street.

Smith chose the less frequented ways of Lakkdarol, and somewhat shamefacedly thanked his nameless gods that his lodgings were not far away, for the few pedestrians he met turned and stared after the two with that by now familiar mingling of horror and contempt which he was as far as ever from understanding.

The room he had engaged was a single cubicle in a lodginghouse on the edge of the city. Lakkdarol, raw camp-town that it was in those days, could have furnished little better anywhere within its limits, and Smith's errand there was not one he wished to advertise. He had

slept in worse places than this before, and knew that he would do so again.

There was no one in sight when he entered, and the girl slipped up the stairs at his heels and vanished through the door, shadowy, unseen by anyone in the house. Smith closed the door and leaned his broad shoulders against the panels, regarding her speculatively.

She took in what little the room had to offer in a glance--frowsy bed, rickety table, mirror hanging unevenly and cracked against the wall, unpainted chairs--a typical camp-town room in an Earth settlement abroad. She accepted its poverty in that single glance, dismissed it, then crossed to the window and leaned out for a moment, gazing across the low roof-tops toward the barren countryside beyond, red slag under the late afternoon sun.

"You can stay here," said Smith abruptly, "until I leave town. I'm waiting here for a friend to come in from Venus. Have you eaten?"

"Yes," said the girl quickly. "I shall--need no--food for--a while."

"Well--" Smith glanced around the room. "I'll be in sometime tonight. You can go or stay just as you please. Better lock the door behind me."

With no more formality than that he left her. The door closed and he heard the key turn, and smiled to himself. He did not expect, then, ever to see her again.

He went down the steps and out into the late-slanting sunlight with a mind so full of other matters that the brown girl receded very quickly into the background. Smith's errand in Lakkdarol, like most of his errands, is better not spoken of. Man lives as he must, and Smith's living was a perilous affair outside the law and ruled by the ray-gun

only. It is enough to say that the shipping-port and its cargoes outbound interested him deeply just now, and that the friend he awaited was Yarol the Venusian, in that swift little Edsel ship the Maid that can flash from world to world with a derisive speed that laughs at Patrol boats and leaves pursuers floundering in the ether far behind. Smith and Yarol and the Maid were a trinity that had caused the Patrol leaders much worry and many gray hairs in the past, and the future looked very bright to Smith himself that evening as he left his lodging-house.

Lakkdarol roars by night, as Earthmen's camp-towns have a way of doing on every planet where Earth's outposts are, and it was beginning lustily as Smith went down among the awakening lights toward the center of town. His business there does not concern us. He mingled with the crowds where the lights were brightest, and there was the click of ivory counters and the jingle of silver, and red segir gurgled invitingly from black Venusian bottles, and much later Smith strolled homeward under the moving moons of Mars, and if the street wavered a little under his feet now and then--why, that is only understandable. Not even Smith could drink red segir at every bar from the Martian Lamb to the New Chicago and remain entirely steady on his feet. But he found his way back with very little difficulty--considering--and spent a good five minutes hunting for his key before he remembered he had left it in the inner lock for the girl.

He knocked then, and there was no sound of footsteps from within, but in a few moments the latch clicked and the door swung open. She retreated soundlessly before him as he entered, and took up her favorite place against the window, leaning back on the sill and outlined against the starry sky beyond. The room was in darkness.

Smith flipped the switch by the door and then leaned back against the panels, steadying himself. The cool night air had sobered him a little, and his head was clear enough--liquor went to Smith's feet, not

his head, or he would never come this far along the lawless way he had chosen. He lounged against the door now and regarded the girl in the sudden glare of the bulbs, blinking a little as much at the scarlet of her clothing as at the light.

"So you stayed," he said.

"I--waited," she answered softly, leaning farther back against the sill and clasping the rough wood with slim, three-fingered hands, pale brown against the darkness.

"Why?"

She did not answer that, but her mouth curved into a slow smile. On a woman it would have been reply enough--provocative, daring. On Shambleau there was something pitiful and horrible in it--so human on the face of one half-animal. And yet... that sweet brown body curving so softly from the tatters of scarlet leather--the velvety texture of that brownness--the white-flashing smile.... Smith was aware of a stirring excitement within him. After all--time would be hanging heavy now until Yarol came.... Speculatively he allowed the steel-pale eyes to wander over her, with a slow regard that missed nothing. And when he spoke he was aware that his voice had deepened a little.

"Come here," he said.

She came forward slowly, on bare clawed feet that made no slightest sound on the floor, and stood before him with downcast eyes and mouth trembling in that pitifully human smile. He took her by the shoulders--velvety soft shoulders, of a creamy smoothness that was not the texture of human flesh. A little tremor went over her, perceptibly, at the contact of his hands. Northwest Smith caught his breath suddenly and dragged her to him... sweet yielding brownness in the circle of his arms... heard her own breath catch and quicken as

her velvety arms closed about his neck. And then he was looking down into her face, very near, and the green animal eyes met his with the pulsing pupils and the flicker of--something--deep behind their shallows--and through the rising clamor of his blood, even as he stooped his lips to hers, Smith felt something deep within him shudder away--inexplicable, instinctive, revolted. What it might be he had no words to tell, but the very touch of her was suddenly loathsome--so soft and velvet and unhuman--and it might have been an animal's face that lifted itself to his mouth--the dark knowledge looked hungrily from the darkness of those slit pupils--and for a mad instant he knew that same wild, feverish revulsion he had seen in the faces of the mob.

"God!" he gasped, a far more ancient invocation against evil than he realized, then or ever, and he ripped her arms from his neck, swung her away with such a force that she reeled half across the room. Smith fell back against the door, breathing heavily, and stared at her while the wild revolt died slowly within him.

She had fallen to the floor beneath the window, and as she lay there against the wall with bent head he saw, curiously, that her turban had slipped--the turban that he had been so sure covered baldness--and a lock of scarlet hair fell below the binding leather, hair as scarlet as her garment, as un-humanly red as her eyes were unhumanly green. He stared, and shook his head dizzily and stared again, for it seemed to him that the thick lock of crimson had moved, squirmed of itself against her cheek.

At the contact of it her hands flew up and she tucked it away with a very human gesture and then dropped her head again into her hands. And from the deep shadow of her fingers he thought she was staring up at him covertly.

Smith drew a deep breath and passed a hand across his forehead.

The inexplicable moment had gone as quickly as it came--too swiftly for him to understand or analyze it. "Got to lay off the segir," he told himself unsteadily. Had he imagined that scarlet hair? After all, she was no more than a pretty brown girl-creature from one of the many half-human races peopling the planets. No more than that, after all. A pretty little thing, but animal.... He laughed a little shakily. "No more of that," he said. "God knows I'm no angel, but there's got to be a limit somewhere. Here." He crossed to the bed and sorted out a pair of blankets from the untidy heap, tossing them to the far corner of the room. "You can sleep there."

Wordlessly she rose from the floor and began to rearrange the blankets, the uncomprehending resignation of the animal eloquent in every line of her.

Smith had a strange dream that night. He thought he had awakened to a room full of darkness and moonlight and moving shadows, for the nearer moon of Mars was racing through the sky and everything on the planet below her was endued with a restless life in the dark. And something... some nameless, unthinkable thing... was coiled about his throat... something like a soft snake, wet and warm. It lay loose and light about his neck... and it was moving gently, very gently, with a soft, caressive pressure that sent little thrills of delight through every nerve and fiber of him, a perilous delight--beyond physical pleasure, deeper than joy of the mind. That warm softness was caressing the very roots of his soul with a terrible intimacy. The ecstasy of it left him weak, and yet he knew--in a flash of knowledge born of this impossible dream--that the soul should not be handled.... And with that knowledge a horror broke upon him, turning the pleasure into a rapture of revulsion, hateful, horrible--but still most foully sweet. He tried to lift his hands and tear the dream-monstrosity from his throat--tried but half-heartedly, for though his soul was revolted to its very deeps, yet the delight of his body was so great that his hands all but refused the attempt. But when at last he tried to

lift his arms a cold shock went over him and he found that he could not stir... his body lay stony as marble beneath the blankets, a living marble that shuddered with a dreadful delight through every rigid vein.

The revulsion grew strong upon him as he struggled against the paralyzing dream--a struggle of soul against sluggish body--titanically, until the moving dark was streaked with blankness that clouded and closed about him at last and he sank back into the oblivion from which he had awakened.

Next morning, when the bright sunlight shining through Mars' clear thin air awakened him, Smith lay for a while trying to remember. The dream had been more vivid than reality, but he could not now quite recall... only that it had been more sweet and horrible than anything else in life. He lay puzzling for a while, until a soft sound from the corner aroused him from his thoughts and he sat up to see the girl lying in a cat-like coil on her blankets, watching him with round, grave eyes. He regarded her somewhat ruefully.

"Morning," he said "I've just had the devil of a dream.... Well, hungry?"

She shook her head silently, and he could have sworn there was a covert gleam of strange amusement in her eyes.

He stretched and yawned, dismissing the nightmare temporarily from his mind.

"What am I going to do with you?" he inquired, turning to more immediate matters. "I'm leaving here in a day or two and I can't take you along, you know. Where'd you come from in the first place?"

Again she shook her head.

"Not telling? Well, it's your own business. You can stay here until I give up the room. From then on you'll have to do your own worrying."

He swung his feet to the floor and reached for his clothes.

Ten minutes later, slipping the heat-gun into its holster at his thigh, Smith turned to the girl. "There's food-concentrate in that box on the table. It ought to hold you until I get back. And you'd better lock the door again after I've gone."

Her wide, unwavering stare was his only answer, and he was not sure she had understood, but at any rate the lock clicked after him as before, and he went down the steps with a faint grin on his lips.

The memory of last night's extraordinary dream was slipping from him, as such memories do, and by the time he had reached the street the girl and the dream and all of yesterday's happenings were blotted out by the sharp necessities of the present.

Again the intricate business that had brought him here claimed his attention. He went about it to the exclusion of all else, and there was a good reason behind everything he did from the moment he stepped out into the street until the time when he turned back again at evening; though had one chosen to follow him during the day his apparently aimless rambling through Lakkdarol would have seemed very pointless.

He must have spent two hours at the least idling by the space-port, watching with sleepy, colorless eyes the ships that came and went, the passengers, the vessels lying at wait, the cargoes--particularly the cargoes. He made the rounds of the town's saloons once more, consuming many glasses of varied liquors in the course of the day and engaging in idle conversation with men of all races and worlds, usually in their own languages, for Smith was a linguist of repute

among his contemporaries. He heard the gossip of the spaceways, news from a dozen planets of a thousand different events. He heard the latest joke about the Venusian Emperor and the latest report on the Chino-Aryan war and the latest song hot from the lips of Rose Robertson, whom every man on the civilized planets adored as "the Georgia Rose." He passed the day quite profitably, for his own purposes, which do not concern us now, and it was not until late evening, when he turned homeward again, that the thought of the brown girl in his room took definite shape in his mind, though it had been lurking there, formless and submerged, all day.

He had no idea what comprised her usual diet, but he bought a can of New York roast beef and one of Venusian frog-broth and a dozen fresh canal-apples and two pounds of that Earth lettuce that grows so vigorously in the fertile canal-soil of Mars. He felt that she must surely find something to her liking in this broad variety of edibles, and--for his day had been very satisfactory--he hummed The Green Hills of Earth to himself in a surprisingly good baritone as he climbed the stairs.

The door was locked, as before, and he was reduced to kicking the lower panels gently with his boot, for his arms were full. She opened the door with that softness that was characteristic of her and stood regarding him in the semi-darkness as he stumbled to the table with his load. The room was unlit again.

"Why don't you turn on the lights?" he demanded irritably after he had barked his shin on the chair by the table in an effort to deposit his burden there.

"Light and--da'rk--they are alike--to me," she murmured.

"Cat eyes, eh? Well, you look the part. Here, I've brought you some dinner. Take your choice. Fond of roast beef? Or how about a little

frog-broth?"

She shook her head and backed away a step.

"No," she said. "I can not--eat your food."

Smith's brows wrinkled. "Didn't you have any of the food-tablets?"

Again the red turban shook negatively.

"Then you haven't had anything for--why, more than twenty-four hours! You must be starved."

"Not hungry," she denied.

"What can I find for you to eat, then? There's time yet if I hurry. You've got to eat, child."

"I shall--eat," she said softly. "Before long--I shall--feed. Have no worry."

She turned away then and stood at the window, looking out over the moonlit landscape as if to end the conversation. Smith cast her a puzzled glance as he opened the can of roast beef. There had been an odd undertone in that assurance that, undefinably, he did not like. And the girl had teeth and tongue and presumably a fairly human digestive system, to judge from her form. It was nonsense for her to pretend that he could find nothing that she could eat. She must have had some of the food concentrate after all, he decided, prying up the thermos lid of the inner container to release the long-sealed savor of the hot meat inside.

"Well, if you won't eat you won't," he observed philosophically as he poured hot broth and diced beef into the dish-like lid of the thermos can and extracted the spoon from its hiding-place between the inner

and outer receptacles. She turned a little to watch him as he pulled up a rickety chair and sat down to the food, and after a while the realization that her green gaze was fixed so unwinkingly upon him made the man nervous, and he said between bites of creamy canal-apple, "Why don't you try a little of this? It's good."

"The food--I eat is--better," her soft voice told him in its hesitant murmur, and again he felt rather than heard a faint undernote of unpleasantness in the words. A sudden suspicion struck him as he pondered on that last remark--some vague memory of horror-tales told about campfires in the past--and he swung round in the chair to look at her, a tiny, creeping fear unaccountably arising. There had been that in her words--in her unspoken words, that menaced.

She stood up beneath his gaze demurely, wide green eyes with their pulsing pupils meeting his without a falter. But her mouth was scarlet and her teeth were sharp....

"What food do you eat?" he demanded. And then, after a pause, very softly, "Blood?"

She stared at him for a moment, uncomprehending; then something like amusement curled her lips and she said scornfully, "You think me--vampire, eh? No--I am Shambleau!"

Unmistakably there were scorn and amusement in her voice at the suggestion, but as unmistakably she knew what he meant--accepted it as a logical suspicion--vampires! Fairy-tales--but fairy-tales this unhuman, outland creature was most familiar with. Smith was not a credulous man, nor a superstitious one, but he had seen too many strange things himself to doubt that the wildest legend might have a basis of fact And there was something namelessly strange about her....

He puzzled over it for a while before deep bites of the canal-apple. And though he wanted to question her about a great many things, he did not, for he knew how futile it would be.

He said nothing more until the meal was finished and another canal-apple had followed the first, and he had cleared away the meal by the simple expedient of tossing the empty can out of the window. Then he lay back in the chair and surveyed her from half-closed eyes, colorless in a face tanned like saddle-leather. And again he was conscious of the brown, soft curves of her, velvety-subtle arcs and planes of smooth flesh under the tatters of scarlet leather. Vampire she might be, unhuman she certainly was, but desirable beyond words as she sat submissive beneath his low regard, her red-turbaned head bent, her clawed fingers lying in her lap. They sat very still for a while, and the silence throbbed between them.

She was so like a woman--an Earth woman--sweet and submissive and demure, and softer than soft fur, if he could forget the three-fingered claws and the pulsing eyes--and that deeper strangeness beyond words.... (Had he dreamed that red lock of hair that moved? Had it been segir that woke the wild revulsion he knew when he held her in his arms?. Why had the mob so thirsted for her?) He sat and stared, and despite the mystery of her and the half-suspicious that thronged his mind--for she was so beautifully soft and curved under those revealing tatters--he slowly realized that his pulses were mounting, became aware of a kindling within... brown girl-creature with downcast eyes... and then the lids lifted and the green flatness of a cat's gaze met his and last night's revulsion woke swiftly again, like a warning bell that clanged as their eyes met--animal, after all, too sleek and soft for humanity, and that inner strangeness....

Smith shrugged and sat up. His failings were legion, but the weakness of the flesh was not among the major ones. He motioned the girl to her pallet of blankets in the corner and turned to his own

bed.

'From deeps of sound sleep he awoke much later. He awoke suddenly and completely, and with that inner excitement that presages something momentous. He awoke to brilliant moonlight, turning the room so bright that he could see the scarlet of the girl's rags as she sat up on her pallet. She was awake, she was sitting with her shoulder half turned to him and her head bent, and some warning instinct crawled coldly up his spine as he watched what she was doing. And yet it was a very ordinary thing for a girl to do--any girl, anywhere. She was unbinding her turban....

He watched, not breathing, a presentiment of... something horrible stirring in his brain, inexplicably.... The red folds loosened, and--he knew then that he had not dreamed--again a scarlet lock swung down against her cheek... a hair, was it? a lock of hair?...thick as a worm it fell, plumply, against that smooth cheek more scarlet than blood and thick as a crawling worm... and like a worm it crawled.

Smith rose on an elbow, not realizing the motion, and fixed an unwinking stare, with a sort of sick, fascinated incredulity, on that--that lock of hair. He had not dreamed. Until now he had taken it for granted that it was the segir which had made it seem to move on that evening before. But now... it was lengthening, stretching, moving of itself. It must be hair, but it crawled; with a sickening life of its own it squirmed down against her cheek, caressingly, revoltingly, impossibly.... Wet, it was, and round and thick and shining....

She unfastened the last fold and whipped the turban off. From what he saw then Smith would have turned his eyes away--and he had looked on dreadful things before, without flinching--but he could not stir. He could only lie there on his elbow staring at the mass of scarlet, squirming--worms, hairs, what?--that writhed over her head in a dreadful mockery of ringlets. And it was lengthening, falling,

somehow growing before his eyes, down over her shoulders in a spilling cascade, a mass that even at the beginning could never have been hidden under the skull-tight turban she had worn. He was beyond wondering, but he realized that. And still it squirmed and lengthened and fell, and she shook it out in a horrible travesty of a woman shaking out her un-bound hair--until the unspeakable tangle of it--twisting, writhing, obscenely scarlet--hung to her waist and beyond, and still lengthened, an endless mass of crawling horror that until now, somehow, impossibly, had been hidden under the tight-bound turban. It was like a nest of blind, restless red worms... it was--it was like naked entrails endowed with an unnatural aliveness, terrible beyond words.

Smith lay in the shadows, frozen without and within in a sick numbness that came of utter shock and revulsion.

She shook out the obscene, unspeakable tangle over her shoulders, and somehow he knew that she was going to turn in a moment and that he must meet her eyes. The thought of that meeting stopped his heart with dread, more awfully than anything else in this nightmare horror; for nightmare it must be, surely. But he knew without trying that he could not wrench his eyes away--the sickened fascination of that sight held him motionless, and somehow there was a certain beauty....

Her head was turning. The crawling awfulnesses rippled and squirmed at the motion, writhing thick and wet and shining over the soft brown shoulders about which they fell now in obscene cascades that all but hid her body, Her head was turning. Smith lay numb, And very slowly he saw the round of her cheek foreshorten and her profile come into view, all the scarlet horrors twisting ominously, and the profile shortened in turn and her full face came slowly round toward the bed--moonlight shining brilliantly as day on the pretty girl-face, demure and sweet, framed in tangled obscenity that crawled....

The green eyes met his. He felt a perceptible shock, and a shudder rippled down his paralyzed spine, leaving an icy numbness in its wake. He felt the goose-flesh rising. But that numbness and cold horror he scarcely realized, for the green eyes were locked with his in a long, long look that somehow presaged nameless things--not altogether unpleasant things--the voiceless voice of her mind assailing him with little murmurous promises....

For a moment he went down into a blind abyss of submission; and then somehow the very sight of that obscenity, in eyes that did not then realize they saw it, was dreadful enough to draw him out of the seductive darkness... the sight of her crawling and alive with unnamable horror.

She rose, and down about her in a cascade fell the squirming scarlet of--of what grew upon her head. It fell in a long, alive cloak to her bare feet on the floor, hiding her in a wave of dreadful, wet, writhing life. She put up her hands and like a swimmer she parted the waterfall of it, tossing the masses back over her shoulders to reveal her own brown body, sweetly curved. She smiled exquisitely, and in starting waves back from her forehead and down about her in a hideous background writhed the snaky wetness of her living tresses. And Smith knew that he looked upon Medusa.

The knowledge of that--the realization of vast backgrounds reaching into misted history--shook him out of his frozen horror for a moment, and in that moment he met her eyes again, smiling, green as glass in the moonlight, half hooded under drooping lids. Through the twisting scarlet she held out her arms. And there was something soul-shakingly desirable about her, so that all the blood surged to his head suddenly and he stumbled to his feet like a sleeper in a dream as she swayed toward him, infinitely graceful, infinitely sweet in her cloak of living horror.

And somehow there was beauty in it the wet scarlet writhings with moonlight sliding and shining along the thick, worm-round tresses and losing itself in the masses only to glint again and move silvery along writhing tendrils--an awful, shuddering beauty more dreadful than any ugliness could be.

But all this, again, he but half realized, for the insidious murmur was coiling again through his brain, promising, caressing, alluring, sweeter than honey; and the green eyes that held his were clear and burning like the depths of a jewel, and behind the pulsing slits of darkness he was staring into a greater dark that held all things.... He had known--dimly he had known when he first gazed into those flat animal shallows that behind them lay this--all beauty and terror, all horror and delight, in the infinite darkness upon which her eyes opened like windows, paned with emerald glass.

Her lips moved, and in a murmur that blended indistinguishably with the silence and the sway of her body and the dreadful sway of her--her hair--she whispered--very softly, very passionately, "I shall--speak to you now--in my own tongue--oh, beloved!"

And in her living cloak she swayed to him, the murmur swelling seductive and caressing in his innermost brain--promising, compelling, sweeter than sweet. His flesh crawled to the horror of her, but it was a perverted revulsion that clasped what it loathed. His arms slid round her under the sliding cloak, wet, wet and warm and hideously alive--and the sweet velvet body was clinging to his, her arms locked about his neck--and with a whisper and a rush the unspeakable horror closed about them both.

In nightmares until he died he remembered that moment when the living tresses of Shambleau first folded him in their embrace. A nauseous, smothering odor as the wetness shut around him--thick,

pulsing worms clasping every inch of his body, sliding, writhing, their wetness and warmth striking through his garments as if he stood naked to their embrace.

All this in a graven instant--and after that a tangled flash of conflicting sensation before oblivion closed over him. For he remembered the dream--and knew it for nightmare reality now, and the sliding, gently moving caresses of those wet, warm worms upon his flesh was an ecstasy above words--that deeper ecstasy that strikes beyond the body and beyond the mind and tickles the very roots of the soul with unnatural delight. So he stood, rigid as marble, as helplessly stony as any of Medusa's victims in ancient legends were, while the terrible pleasure of Shambleau thrilled and shuddered through every fiber of him; through every atom of his body and the intangible atoms of what men call the soul, through all that was Smith the dreadful pleasure ran. And it was truly dreadful. Dimly he knew it, even as his body answered to the root-deep ecstasy, a foul and dreadful wooing from which his very soul shuddered away--and yet in the innermost depths of that soul some grinning traitor shivered with delight. But deeply, behind all this, he knew horror and revulsion and despair beyond telling, while the intimate caresses crawled obscenely in the secret places of his soul--knew that the soul should not be handled--and shook with the perilous pleasure through it all.

And this conflict and knowledge, this mingling of rapture and revulsion all took place in the flashing of a moment while the scarlet worms coiled and crawled upon him, sending deep, obscene tremors of that infinite pleasure into every atom that made up Smith. And he could not stir in that slimy, ecstatic embrace--and a weakness was flooding that grew deeper after each succeeding wave of intense delight, and the traitor in his soul strengthened and drowned out the revulsion--and something within him ceased to struggle as he sank wholly into a blazing darkness that was oblivion to all else but that devouring rapture.

The young Venusian climbing the stairs to his friend's lodging-room pulled out his key absent mindedly, a pucker forming between his fine brows. He was slim, as all Venusians are, as fair and sleek as any of them, and as with most of his countrymen the look of cherubic innocence on his face was wholly deceptive. He had the face of a fallen angel, without Lucifer's majesty to redeem it; for a black devil grinned in his eyes and there were faint lines of ruthlessness and dissipation about his mouth to tell of the long years behind him that had run the gamut of experiences and made his name, next to Smith's, the most hated and the most respected in the records of the Patrol.

He mounted the stairs now with a puzzled frown between his eyes. He had come into Lakkdarol on the noon liner--the Maid in the hold very skillfully disguised with paint and otherwise--to find in lamentable disorder the affairs he had expected to be settled. And cautious inquiry elicited the information that Smith had not been seen for three days. That was not like his friend--he had never failed before, and the two stood to lose not only a large sum of money but also their personal safety by the inexplicable lapse on the part of Smith. Yarol could think of one solution only: fate had at last caught up with his friend. Nothing but physical disability could explain it.

Still puzzling, he fitted his key in the lock and swung the door open.

In that first moment, as the door opened, he sensed something very wrong.... The room was darkened, and for a while he could see nothing, but at the first breath he scented a strange unnamable odor, half sickening, half sweet. And deep stirrings of ancestral memory awoke within him--ancient swamp-born memories from Venusian ancestors far away and long ago....

Yarol laid his hand on his gun, lightly, and opened the door wider. In

the dimness all he could see at first was a curious mound in the far corner.... Then his eyes grew accustomed to the dark, and he saw it more clearly, a mound that somehow heaved and stirred within itself.... A mound of--he caught his breath sharply--a mound like a mass of entrails, living, moving, writhing with an un-speakable aliveness. Then a hot Venusian oath broke from his lips and he cleared the door-sill in a swift stride, slammed the door and set his back against it, gun ready in his hand, although his flesh crawled--for he knew....

"Smith!" he said softly, in a voice thick with horror. "Northwest!"

The moving mass stirred--shuddered--sank back into crawling quiescence again.

"Smith! Smith!" The Venusian's voice was gentle and insistent, and it quivered a little with terror.

An impatient ripple went over the whole mass of alive-ness in the corner. It stirred again, reluctantly, and then tendrils by writhing tendrils it began to part itself and fall aside, and very slowly the brown of a spaceman's leather appeared beneath it, all slimed and shining.

"Smith! Northwest!" Yarol's persistent whisper came again, urgently, and with a dream-like slowness the leather garments moved... a man sat up in the midst of the writhing worms, a man who once, long ago, might have been Northwest Smith. From head to foot he was slimy from the embrace of the crawling horror about him. His face was that of some creature beyond humanity--dead-alive, fixed in a gray stare, and the look of terrible ecstasy that overspread it seemed to come from somewhere far within, a faint reflection from immeasurable distances beyond the flesh. And as there is mystery and magic in the moonlight which is after all but a reflection of the everyday sun, so in that gray face turned to the door was a terror unnamable and sweet,

a reflection of ecstasy beyond the understanding of any who have known only earthly ecstasy themselves. And as he sat there turning a blank, eyeless face to Yarol the red worms writhed ceaselessly about him, very gently, with a soft, caressive motion that never slacked.

"Smith... come here! Smith... get up... Smith. Smith!" Yarol's whisper hissed in the silence, commanding, urgent--but he made no move to leave the door.

And with a dreadful slowness, like a dead man rising, Smith stood up in the nest of slimy scarlet. He swayed drunkenly on his feet, and two or three crimson tendrils came writhing up his legs to the knees and wound themselves there, supportingly, moving with a ceaseless caress that seemed to give him some hidden strength, for he said then, without inflection,

"Go away. Go away. Leave me alone." And the dead ecstatic face never changed.

"Smith!" Yarol's voice was desperate. "Smith, listen! Smith, can't you hear me?"

"Go away," the monotonous voice said. "Go away. Go away. Go--"

"Not unless you come too. Can't you hear? Smith! Smith!"

He hushed in mid-phrase, and once more the ancestral prickle of race-memory shivered down his back, for the scarlet mass was moving again, violently, rising....

Yarol pressed back against the door and gripped his gun, and the name of a god he had forgotten years ago rose to his lips unbidden. For he knew what was coming next, and the knowledge was more dreadful than any ignorance could have been.

The red, writhing mass rose higher, and the tendrils parted and a human face looked out--no, half human, with green cat-eyes that shone in that dimness like lighted jewels, compellingly....

Yarol breathed "Shar!" again, and flung up an arm across his face, and the tingle of meeting that green gaze for even an instant went thrilling through him perilously.

"Smith!" he called in despair "Smith, can't you hear me?"

"Go away," said that voice that was not Smith's. "Go away."

And somehow, although he dared not look, Yarol knew that the--the other--had parted those worm-thick tresses and stood there in all the human sweetness of the brown, curved woman's body, cloaked in living horror. And he felt the eyes upon him, and something was crying insistently in his brain to lower that shielding arm.... He was lost--he knew it, and the knowledge gave him that courage which comes from despair. The voice in his brain was growing, swelling, deafening him with a roaring command that all but swept him before it. A command to lower that arm--to meet the eyes that opened upon darkness, to submit--and a promise, murmurous and sweet and evil beyond words, of pleasure to come....

But somehow he kept his head--somehow, dizzily, he was gripping his gun in his upflung hand--somehow, incredibly, crossing the narrow room with averted face, groping for Smith's shoulder. There was a moment of blind fumbling in emptiness, and then he found it, and gripped the leather that was slimy and dreadful and wet--and simultaneously he felt something loop gently about his ankle and a shock of repulsive pleasure went through him, and then another coil, and another, wound about his feet....

Yarol set his teeth and gripped the shoulder hard, and his hand

shuddered of itself, for the feel of that leather was slimy as the worms about his ankles, and a faint tingle of obscene delight went through him from the contact.

That caressive pressure on his legs was all he could feel, and the voice in his brain drowned out all other sounds, and his body obeyed him reluctantly--but somehow he gave one heave of tremendous effort and swung Smith, stumbling, out of that nest of horror. The twining tendrils ripped loose with a little sucking sound, and the whole mass quivered and reached after, and then Yarol forgot his friend utterly and turned his whole being to the hopeless task of freeing himself. For only a part of him was fighting, now only a part of him struggled against the twining obscenities, and in his innermost brain the sweet, seductive murmur sounded, and his body clamored to surrender....

"Shar! Shar y'danis... Shar mor'la-rol--" prayed Yarol, gasping and half unconscious that he spoke, boy's prayers that he had forgotten years ago, and with his back half turned to the central mass he kicked desperately with his heavy boot at the red, writhing worms about him. They gave back before him, quivering and curling themselves out of reach, and though he knew that more were reaching for his throat from behind, at least he could go on struggling until he was forced to meet those eyes.

He stamped and kicked and stamped again, and for one instant he was free of the slimy grip as the bruised worms curled back from his heavy feet, and he lurched away dizzily, sick with revulsion and despair as he fought off the coils, and then he lifted his eyes and saw the cracked mirror on the wall. Dimly in its reflection he could see the writhing, scarlet horror behind him, that face peering out with its demure girl-smile, dreadfully human, and all the red tendrils reaching after him. And remembrance of something he had read long ago swept incongruously over him, and the gasp of relief and hope that

he gave shock for a moment the grip of the command in his brain.

Without pausing for a breath he swung the gun over his shoulder, the reflected barrel in line with the reflected horror in the mirror, and flicked the catch.

In the mirror he saw its blue flame leap in a dazzling spate across the dimness, full into the midst of that squirming, reaching mass behind him. There was a hiss and a blaze and a high, thin scream of inhuman malice and despair--the flame cut a wide arc and went out as the gun fell from his hand, and Yarol pitched forward to the floor.

Northwest Smith opened his eyes to Martian sunlight streaming thinly through the dingy window. Something wet and cold was slapping his face, and the familiar fiery sting of segir-whisky burnt his throat.

"Smith!" Yarol's voice was saying from far away. "N. W.! Wake up, damn you! Wake up!"

"I'm--awake," Smith managed to articulate thickly. "Wha's matter?"

Then a cup-rim was trust against his teeth and Yarol said irritably, "Drink it, you fool!"

Smith swallowed obediently and more of the fire-hot segir flowed down his grateful throat. It spread a warmth through his body that awakened him from the numbness that had gripped him until now, and helped a little toward driving out the all-devouring weakness he was becoming aware of, slowly. He lay still for a few minutes while the warmth of the whisky went through him, and memory sluggishly began to permeate his brain with the spread of the segir. Nightmare memories... sweet and terrible... memories of--

"God!" gasped Smith suddenly, and tried to sit up. Weakness smote him like a blow, and for an instant the room wheeled as he fell back

against something firm and warm--Yarol's shoulder. The Venusian's arm supported him while the room steadied, and after a while he twisted a little and stared into the other's black gaze.

Yarol was holding him with one arm and finishing the mug of segir himself, and the black eyes met his over the rim and crinkled into sudden laughter, half hysterical after that terror that was passed.

"By Pharol!" gasped Yarol, choking into his mug. "By Pharol, N. W.! I'm never gonna let you forget this! Next time you have to drag me out of a mess I'll say--"

"Let it go," said Smith. "What's been going on? How--"

"Shambleau." Yarol's laughter died. "Shambleau! What were you doing with a thing like that?"

"What was it?" Smith asked soberly.

"Mean to say you didn't know? But where'd you find it? How--"

"Suppose you tell me first what you know," said Smith firmly. "And another swig of that segir, too, please. I need it."

"Can you hold the mug now? Feel better?"

"Yeah--some. I can hold it--thanks. Now go on."

"Well--I don't know just where to start. They call them Shambleau--"

"Good God, is there more than one?"

"It's a--a sort of race, I think, one of the very oldest. Where they come from nobody knows. The name sounds a little French, doesn't it? But it goes back beyond the start of history. There have always been

Shambleau."

"I never heard of 'em."

"Not many people have. And those who know don't care to talk about it much."

"Well, half this town knows. I hadn't any idea what they were talking about, then. And I still don't understand, but--"

"Yes, it happens like this, sometimes. They'll appear, and the news will spread and the town will get together and hunt them down, and after that--well, the story didn't get around very far. It's too--too unbelievable."

"But--my God, Yarol!--what was it? Where'd it come from? How--"

"Nobody knows just where they come from. Another planet--maybe some undiscovered one. Some say Venus--I know there are some rather awful legends of them handed down in our family--that's how I've heard about it. And the minute I opened that door, awhile back--I--I think I knew that smell...."

"But--what are they?"

"God knows. Not human, though they have the human form. Or that may be only an illusion... or maybe I'm crazy. I don't know. They're a species of the vampire--or maybe the vampire is a species of--of them. Their normal form must be that--that mass, and in that form they draw nourishment from the--I suppose the life-forces of men. And they take some form--usually a woman form, I think, and key you up to the highest pitch of emotion before they--begin. That's to work the life-force up to intensity so it'll be easier. And they give, always, that horrible, foul pleasure as they--feed. There are some men who, if they survive the first experience, take to it like a drug--can't give it up--"

-keep the thing with them all their lives--which isn't long--feeding it for that ghastly satisfaction. Worse than smoking ming or--or 'praying to Pharol."

"Yes," said Smith. "I'm beginning to understand why that crowd was so surprised and--and disgusted when I said--well, never mind. Go on."

"Did you get to talk to--to it?" asked Yarol.

"I tried to. It couldn't speak very well. I asked it where it came from and it said--'from far away and long ago'--something like that."

"I wonder. Possibly some unknown planet--but I think not. You know there are so many wild stories with some basis of fact to start from, that I've sometimes wondered--mightn't there be a lot more of even worse and wilder superstitions we've never even heard of? Things like this, blasphemous and foul, that those who know have to keep still about? Awful, fantastic things running around loose that we never hear rumors of at all!

"These things--they've been in existence for countless ages. No one knows when or where they first appeared. Those who've seen them, as we saw this one, don't talk about it. It's just one of those vague, misty rumors you find half hinted at in old books sometimes.... I believe--they are an older race than man, spawned from ancient seed in times before ours, perhaps on planets that have gone to dust, and so horrible to man that when they are discovered the discoverers keep still about it--forget them again as quickly as they can.

"And they go back to time immemorial. I suppose you recognized the legend of Medusa? There isn't any question that the ancient Greeks knew of them. Does it mean that there have been civilizations before

yours that set out from Earth and explored other planets? Or did one of the Shambleau somehow make its way into Greece three thousand years ago? If you think about it long enough you'll go off your head! I wonder how many other legends are based on things like this--things we don't suspect, things we'll never know.

"The Gorgon, Medusa, a beautiful woman with--with snakes for hair, and a gaze that turned men to stone, and Perseus finally killed her--I remembered this just by accident, N. W., and it saved your life and mine--Perseus killed her by using a mirror as he fought to reflect what he dared not look at directly. I wonder what the old Greek who first started that legend would have thought if he'd known that three thousand years later his story would save the lives of two men on another planet. I wonder what that Greek's own story was, and how he met the thing, and what happened....

"Well, there's a lot we'll never know. Wouldn't the records of that race of--of things, whatever they are, be worth reading! Records of other planets and other ages and all the beginnings of mankind! But I don't suppose they've kept any records. I don't suppose they've even any place to keep them--from what little I know, or anyone knows about it, they're like the Wandering Jew, just bobbing up here and there at long intervals, and where they stay in the meantime I'd give my eyes to know! But I don't believe that terribly hypnotic power they have indicates any superhuman intelligence. It's their means of getting food--just like a frog's long tongue or a carnivorous flower's odor. Those are physical because the frog and the flower eat physical food. The Shambleau uses a--a mental reach to get mental food. I don't quite know how to put it. And just as a beast that eats the bodies of other animals acquires with each meal greater power over the bodies of the rest, so the Shambleau, stoking itself up with the life-forces of men, increases its power over the minds and the souls of other men. But I'm talking about things I can't define--things I'm not sure exist.

"I only know that when I felt--when those tentacles closed around my legs--I didn't want to pull loose, I felt sensations that--that--oh, I'm fouled and filthy to the very deepest part of me by that--pleasure--and yet

"I know," said Smith slowly. The effect of the segir was beginning to wear off, and weakness was washing back over him in waves, and when he spoke he was half meditating in a low voice, scarcely realizing that Yarol listened. "I know it--much better than you do--and there's something so indescribably awful that the thing emanates, something so utterly at odds with everything human--there aren't any words to say it. For a while I was a part of it, literally, sharing its thoughts and memories and emotions and hungers, and--well, it's over now and I don't remember very clearly, but the only part left free was that part of me that was all but insane from the--the obscenity of the thing. And yet it was a pleasure so sweet--I think there must be some nucleus of utter evil in me--in everyone--that needs only the proper stimulus to get complete control; because even while I was sick all through from the touch of those--things--there was something in me that was--was simply gibbering with delight.... Because of that I saw things--and knew things--horrible, wild things I can't quite remember--visited unbelievable places, looked backward through the memory of that creature--I was one with, and saw--God, I wish I could remember!"

"You ought to thank your God you can't," said Yarol soberly.

His voice roused Smith from the half-trance he had fallen into, and he rose on his elbow, swaying a little from weakness. The room was wavering before him, and he closed his eyes, not to see it, but he asked, "You say they--don't turn up again? No way of finding--another?"

Yarol did not answer for a moment. He laid his hands on the other man's shoulders and pressed him back, and then sat staring down into the dark, ravaged face with a new, strange, undefinable look upon it that he had never seen there before--whose meaning he knew, too well.

"Smith," he said finally, and his black eyes for once were steady and serious, and the little grinning devil had vanished from behind them, "Smith, I've never asked your word on anything before, but I've I've earned the right to do it now, and I'm asking you to promise me one thing."

Smith's colorless eyes met the black gaze unsteadily. Irresolution was in them, and a little fear of what that promise might be. And for just a moment Yarol was looking, not into his friend's familiar eyes, but into a wide gray blankness that held all horror and delight--a pale sea with unspeakable pleasures sunk beneath it. Then the wide stare focused again and Smith's eyes met his squarely and Smith's voice said, "Go ahead. I'll promise."

"That if you ever should meet a Shambleau again--ever, anywhere--you'll draw your gun and burn it to hell the instant you realize what it is. Will you promise me that?"

There was a long silence. Yarol's somber black eyes bored relentlessly into the colorless ones of Smith, not wavering.

And the veins stood out on Smith's tanned forehead. He never broke his word--he had given it perhaps half a dozen times in his life, but once he had given it, he was incapable of breaking it. And once more the gray seas flooded in a dim tide of memories, sweet and horrible beyond dreams. Once more Yarol was staring into blankness that hid nameless things. The room was very still.

The gray tide ebbed. Smith's eyes, pale and resolute as steel, met Yarol's levelly.

"I'll--try," he said. And his voice wavered.

The Piper's Son

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Somehow I had to stay alive until they found me. They would be hunting for the wreck of my plane, and eventually they'd find it, and then they'd find me, too. But it was hard to wait.

Empty blue day stretched over the white peaks; then the blazing night you get at this altitude, and that was empty too. There was no sound or sight of a jet plane or a helicopter. I was completely alone.

That was the real trouble.

A few hundred years ago, when there were no telepaths, men were used to being alone. But I couldn't remember a time when I'd been locked in the bony prison of my skull, utterly and absolutely cut off from all other men. Deafness or blindness wouldn't have mattered as much. They wouldn't have mattered at all, to a telepath.

Since my plane crashed behind the barrier of mountain peaks, I had been amputated from my species. And there is something in the constant communication of minds that keeps a man alive. An amputated limb dies for lack of oxygen. I was dying for lack of... there's never been any word to express what it is that makes all telepaths one. But without it, a man is alone, and men do not live long, alone.

I listened, with the part of the mind that listens for the soundless voices of other minds. I heard the hollow wind. I saw snow lifting in feathery, pouring ruffles. I saw the blue shadows deepening. I looked up, and the eastern peak was scarlet. It was sunset, and I was alone.

I reached out, listening, while the sky darkened. A star wavered, glimmered, and stood steadily overhead. Other stars came, while the air grew colder, until the sky blazed with their westward march.

Now it was dark. In the darkness, there were the stars, and there was I. I lay back, not even listening. My people were gone.

I watched the emptiness beyond the stars.

Nothing around me or above me was alive. Why should I be alive, after all? It would be easy, very easy, to sink down into that quiet where there was no loneliness, because there was no life. I reached out around me, and my mind found no other thinking mind. I reached back into my memory, and that was a little better.

A telepath's memories go back a long way. A good long way, far earlier than his birth.

I can see clearly nearly two hundred years into the past, before the sharp, clear telepathically-transmitted memories begin to fray and fade into secondary memories, drawn from books. Books go back to Egypt and Babylon. But they are not the primary memories, complete with sensory overtones, which an old man gives telepathically to a young one, and which are passed on in turn through the generations. Our biographies are not written in books. They are written in our minds and memories, especially the Key Lives which are handed down as fresh as they were once lived by our greatest leaders....

But they are dead, and I am alone.

No. Not quite alone. The memories remain, Burkhalter and Barton, McNey and Line Cody and Jeff Cody—a long time dead, but still vibrantly alive in my memory. I can summon up every thought, every emotion, the musty smell of grass—where?—the yielding of a rubbery

walk beneath hurrying feet--whose?

It would be so easy to relax and die.

No. Wait. Watch. They're alive, Burkhalter and Barton, the Key Lives are still real, though the men who once lived them have died. They are your people. You're not alone.

Burkhalter and Barton, McNeely and Line and Jeff aren't dead. Remember them. You lived their lives telepathically as you learned them, the way they once lived them, and you can live them again. You are not alone.

So watch. Start the film unreeling. Then you won't be alone at all, you'll be Ed Burkhalter, two hundred years ago, feeling the cool wind blow against your face from the Sierra peaks, smelling the timothy grass, reaching out mentally to glance into the mind of your son... the piper's son....

It began.

I was Ed Burkhalter.

It was two hundred years ago--

The Green Man was climbing the glass mountains, and hairy, gnomish faces peered at him from crevices. This was only another step in the Green Man's endless, exciting odyssey. He'd had a great many adventures already--in the Flame Country, among the Dimension Changers, with the City Apes who sneered endlessly while their blunt, clumsy fingers fumbled at deathrays. The trolls, however, were masters of magic, and were trying to stop the Green Man with spells. Little whirlwinds of force spun underfoot, trying to trip the Green Man, a figure of marvelous muscular development, handsome as a god, and hairless from head to foot, glistening pale

green. The whirlwinds formed a fascinating pattern. If you could thread a precarious path among them--avoiding the pale yellow ones especially--you could get through.

And the hairy gnomes watched malignantly, jealously, from their crannies in the glass crags.

Al Burkhalter, having recently achieved the mature status of eight full years, lounged under a tree and masticated a grass blade. He was so immersed in his daydreams that his father had to nudge his side gently to bring comprehension into the half-closed eyes. It was a good day for dreaming, anyway--a hot sun and a cool wind blowing down from the white Sierra peaks to the east. Timothy grass sent its faintly musty fragrance along the channels of air, and Ed Burkhalter was glad that his son was second-generation since the Blowup. He himself had been born ten years after the last bomb had been dropped, but secondhand memories can be pretty bad too.

"Hello, Al," he said, and the youth vouchsafed a half-lidded glance of tolerant acceptance.

"Hi, Dad."

"Want to come downtown with me?"

"Nope," Al said, relaxing instantly into his stupor.

Burkhalter raised a figurative eyebrow and half turned. On an impulse, then, he did something he rarely did without the tacit permission of the other party; he used his telepathic power to reach into Al's mind. There was, he admitted to himself, a certain hesitancy, a subconscious unwillingness on his part, to do this, even though Al had pretty well outgrown the nasty, inhuman formlessness of mental babyhood. There had been a time when Al's mind had

been quite shocking in its alienage. Burkhalter remembered a few abortive experiments he had made before Al's birth; few fathers-to-be could resist the temptation to experiment with embryonic brains, and that had brought back nightmares Burkhalter had not had since his youth. There had been enormous rolling masses, and an appalling vastness, and other things. Prenatal memories were ticklish, and should be left to qualified mnemonic psychologists.

But now Al was maturing, and daydreaming, as usual, in bright colors. Burkhalter, reassured, felt that he had fulfilled his duty as a monitor and left his son still eating grass and ruminating.

Just the same there was a sudden softness inside of him, and the aching, futile pity he was apt to feel for helpless things that were as yet unqualified for conflict with that extraordinarily complicated business of living. Conflict, competition, had not died out when war abolished itself; the business of adjustment even to one's surroundings was a conflict, and conversation a duel. With Al, too, there was a double problem. Yes, language was in effect a tariff wall, and a Baldy could appreciate that thoroughly, since the wall didn't exist between Baldies.

Walking down the rubbery walk that led to town center, Burkhalter grinned wryly and ran lean fingers through his well-kept wig. Strangers were very often surprised to know that he was a Baldy, a telepath. They looked at him with wondering eyes, too courteous to ask how it felt to be a freak, but obviously avid. Burkhalter, who knew diplomacy, would be quite willing to lead the conversation.

"My folks lived near Chicago after the Blowup. That was why."

"Oh." Stare. "I'd heard that was why so many--" Startled pause.

"Freaks or mutations. There were both. I still don't know which class I

belong to," he'd add disarmingly.

"You're no freak!" They did protest too much.

"Well, some mighty queer specimens came out of the radioactive-affected areas around the bomb-targets. Funny things happened to the germ plasm. Most of 'em died out; they couldn't reproduce; but you'll still find a few creatures in sanitariums--two heads, you know. And so on."

Nevertheless they were always ill-at-ease. "You mean you can read my mind--now?"

"I could, but I'm not. It's hard work, except with another telepath. And we Baldies--well, we don't, that's all." A man with abnormal muscle development wouldn't go around knocking people down. Not unless he wanted to be mobbed. Baldies were always sneakily conscious of a hidden peril: lynch law. And wise Baldies didn't even imply that they had an... extra sense. They just said they were different, and let it go at that.

But one question was always implied, though not always mentioned. "If I were a telepath, I'd... how much do you make a year?"

They were surprised at the answer. A mindreader certainly could make a fortune, if he wanted. So why did Ed Burkhalter stay a semantics expert in Modoc Publishing Town, when a trip to one of the science towns would enable him to get hold of secrets that would get him a fortune?

There was a good reason. Self-preservation was part of it. For which reason Burkhalter, and many like him, wore toupees. Though there were many Baldies who did not.

Modoc was a twin town with Pueblo, across the mountain barrier

south of the waste that had been Denver. Pueblo held the presses, photolintypes, and the machines that turned scripts into books, after Modoc had dealt with them. There was a helicopter distribution fleet at Pueblo, and for the last week Oldfield, the manager, had been demanding the manuscript of "Psychohistory," turned out by a New Yale man who had got tremendously involved in past emotional problems, to the detriment of literary clarity. The truth was that he distrusted Burkhalter. And Burkhalter, neither a priest nor a psychologist, had to become both without admitting it to the confused author of "Psychohistory."

The sprawling buildings of the publishing house lay ahead and below, more like a resort than anything more utilitarian. That had been necessary. Authors were peculiar people, and often it was necessary to induce them to take hydrotherapeutic treatments before they were in shape to work out their books with the semantic experts. Nobody was going to bite them, but they didn't realize that, and either cowered in corners, terrified, or else blustered their way around, using language few could understand. Jem Quayle, author of "Psychohistory," fitted into neither group; he was simply baffled by the intensity of his own research. His personal history had qualified him too well for emotional involvements with the past--and that was a serious matter when a thesis of this particular type was in progress.

Dr. Moon, who was on the Board, sat near the south entrance, eating an apple which he peeled carefully with his silver-hilted dagger. Moon was fat, short, and shapeless; he didn't have much hair, but he wasn't a telepath; Baldies were entirely hairless. He gulped and waved at Burkhalter.

"Ed... urp... want to talk to you."

"Sure," Burkhalter said, agreeably coming to a standstill and rocking on his heels. Ingrained habit made him sit down beside the

Boardman; Baldies, for obvious reasons, never stood up when non-telepaths were sitting. Their eyes met now on the same level. Burkhalter said, "What's up?"

"The store got some Shasta apples flown in yesterday. Better tell Ethel to get some before they're sold out. Here." Moon watched his companion eat a chunk, and nod.

"Good. I'll have her get some. The copter's laid up for today, though; Ethel pulled the wrong gadget."

"Foolproof," Moon said bitterly. "Huron's turning out some sweet models these days; I'm getting my new one from Michigan. Listen, Pueblo called me this morning on Quayle's book."

"Oldfield?"

"Our boy," Moon nodded. "He says can't you send over even a few chapters."

Burkhalter shook his head. "I don't think so. There are some abstracts right in the beginning that just have to be clarified, and Quayle is--" He hesitated.

"What?"

Burkhalter thought about the Oedipus complex he'd uncovered in Quayle's mind, but that was sacrosanct, even though it kept Quayle from interpreting Darius with cold logic. "He's got muddy thinking in there. I can't pass it; I tried it on three readers yesterday, and got different reactions from all of them. So far 'Psychohistory' is all things to all men. The critics would lambaste us if we released the book as is. Can't you string Oldfield along for a while longer?"

"Maybe," Moon said doubtfully. "I've got a subjective novella I could

rush over. It's light vicarious eroticism, and that's harmless; besides, it's semantically o.k.'d. We've been holding it up for an artist, but I can put Duman on it. I'll do that, yeah. I'll shoot the script over to Pueblo and he can make the plates later. A merry life we lead, Ed."

"A little too merry sometimes," Burkhalter said. He got up, nodded, and went in search of Quayle, who was relaxing on one of the sun decks.

Quayle was a thin, tall man with a worried face and the abstract air of an unshelled tortoise. He lay on his flexiglass couch, direct sunlight toasting him from above, while the reflected rays sneaked up on him from below, through the transparent crystal. Burkhalter pulled off his shirt and dropped on a sunner beside Quayle. The author glanced at Burkhalter's hairless chest and half-formed revulsion rose in him: A Baldy... no privacy... none of his business... fake eyebrows and lashes; he's still a--

Something ugly, at that point.

Diplomatically Burkhalter touched a button, and on a screen overhead a page of "Psychohistory" appeared, enlarged and easily readable. Quayle scanned the sheet. It had code notations on it, made by the readers, recognized by Burkhalter as varied reactions to what should have been straight-line explanations. If three readers had got three different meanings out of that paragraph--well, what did Quayle mean? He reached delicately into the mind, conscious of useless guards erected against intrusion, mud barricades over which his mental eye stole like a searching, quiet wind. No ordinary man could guard his mind against a Baldy. But Baldies could guard their privacy against intrusion by other telepaths--adults, that is. There was a psychic selector band, a--

Here it came. But muddled a bit. Darius: that wasn't simply a word; it

wasn't a picture, either; it was really a second life. But scattered, fragmentary. Scraps of scent and sound, and memories, and emotional reactions. Admiration and hatred. A burning impotence. A black tornado, smelling of pine, roaring across a map of Europe and Asia. Pine scent stronger now, and horrible humiliation, and remembered pain... eyes.... Get out!

Burkhalter put down the dictograph mouthpiece and lay looking up through the darkened eye-shells he had donned. "I got out as soon as you wanted me to," he said. "I'm still out."

Quayle lay there, breathing hard. "Thanks," he said. "Apologies. Why you don't ask a duello--"

"I don't want to duel with you," Burkhalter said. "I've never put blood on my dagger in my life. Besides, I can see your side of it. Remember, this is my job, Mr. Quayle, and I've learned a lot of things--that I've forgotten again."

"It's intrusion, I suppose. I tell myself that it doesn't matter, but my privacy--is important."

Burkhalter said patiently, "We can keep trying it from different angles until we find one that isn't too private. Suppose, for example, I asked you if you admired Darius."

Admiration... and pine scent... and Burkhalter said quickly, "I'm out. o.k.?"

"Thanks," Quayle muttered. He turned on his side, away from the other man. After a moment he said, "That's silly--turning over, I mean. You don't have to see my face to know what I'm thinking."

"You have to put out the welcome mat before I walk in," Burkhalter told him.

"I guess I believe that. I've met some Baldies, though, that were... that I didn't like."

"There's a lot on that order, sure. I know the type. The ones who don't wear wigs."

Quayle said, "They'll read your mind and embarrass you just for the fun of it. They ought to be--taught better."

Burkhalter blinked in the sunlight. "Well, Mr. Quayle, it's this way. A Baldy's got his problems, too. He's got to orient himself to a world that isn't telepathic; and I suppose a lot of Baldies rather feel that they're letting their specialization go to waste. There are jobs a man like me is suited for--"

"Man!" He caught the scrap of thought from Quayle. He ignored it, his face as always a mobile mask, and went on.

"Semantics have always been a problem, even in countries speaking only one tongue. A qualified Baldy is a swell interpreter. And, though there aren't any Baldies on the detective forces, they often work with the police. It's rather like being a machine that can do only a few things."

"A few things more than humans can," Quayle said.

Sure, Burkhalter thought, if we could compete on equal footing with nontelepathic humanity. But would blind men trust one who could see? Would they play poker with him? A sudden, deep bitterness put an unpleasant taste in Burkhalter's mouth. What was the answer? Reservations for Baldies? Isolation? And would a nation of blind men trust those with vision enough for that? Or would they be dusted off--the sure cure, the check-and-balance system that made war an

impossibility.

He remembered when Red Bank had been dusted off, and maybe that had been justified. The town was getting too big for its boots, and personal dignity was a vital factor; you weren't willing to lose face as long as a dagger swung at your belt. Similarly, the thousands upon thousands of little towns that covered America, each with its peculiar specialty--helicopter manufacture for Huron and Michigan, vegetable farming for Conoy and Diego, textiles and education and art and machines--each little town had a wary eye on all the others. The science and research centers were a little larger; nobody objected to that, for technicians never made war except under pressure; but few of the towns held more than a few hundred families. It was check-and-balance in most efficient degree; whenever a town showed signs of wanting to become a city--thence, a capital, thence, an imperialistic empire--it was dusted off. Though that had not happened for a long while. And Red Bank might have been a mistake.

Geopolitically it was a fine set-up; sociologically it was acceptable, but brought necessary changes. There was subconscious swashbuckling. The rights of the individual had become more highly regarded as decentralization took place. And men learned.

They learned a monetary system based primarily upon barter. They learned to fly; nobody drove surface cars. They learned new things, but they did not forget the Blowup, and in secret places near every town were hidden the bombs that could utterly and fantastically exterminate a town, as such bombs had exterminated the cities during the Blowup.

And everybody knew how to make those bombs. They were beautifully, terribly simple. You could find the ingredients anywhere and prepare them easily. Then you could take your helicopter over a

town, drop an egg overside--and perform an erasure.

Outside of the wilderness malcontents, the maladjusted people found in every race, nobody kicked. And the roaming tribes never raided and never banded together in large groups--for fear of an erasure.

The artisans were maladjusted too, to some degree, but they weren't antisocial, so they lived where they wanted and painted, wrote, composed, and retreated into their own private worlds. The scientists, equally maladjusted in other lines, retreated to their slightly larger towns, banding together in small universes, and turned out remarkable technical achievements.

And the Baldies--found jobs where they could.

No nontelepath would have viewed the world environment quite as Burkhalter did: He was abnormally conscious of the human element, attaching a deeper, more profound significance to those human values, undoubtedly because he saw men in more than the ordinary dimensions. And also, in a way--and inevitably--he looked at humanity from outside.

Yet he was human. The barrier that telepathy had raised made men suspicious of him, more so than if he had had two heads--then they could have pitied. As it was--

As it was, he adjusted the scanner until new pages of the typescript came flickering into view above. "Say when," he told Quayle.

Quayle brushed back his gray hair. "I feel sensitive all over," he objected. "After all, I've been under a considerable strain correlating my material."

"Well, we can always postpone publication." Burkhalter threw out the suggestion casually, and was pleased when Quayle didn't nibble. He

didn't like to fail, either.

"No. No, I want to get the thing done now."

"Mental catharsis--"

"Well, by a psychologist, perhaps. But not by--"

"--a Baldy. You know that a lot of psychologists have Baldy helpers. They get good results, too."

Quayle turned on the tobacco smoke, inhaling slowly. "I suppose.... I've not had much contact with Baldies. Or too much--without selectivity. I saw some in an asylum once. I'm not being offensive, am I?"

"No," Burkhalter said. "Every mutation can run too close to the line. There were lots of failures. The hard radiations brought about one true mutation: hairless telepaths, but they didn't all hew true to the line. The mind's a queer gadget--you know that. It's a colloid balancing, figuratively, on the point of a pin. If there's any flaw, telepathy's apt to bring it out. So you'll find that the Blowup caused a hell of a lot of insanity. Not only among the Baldies, but among the other mutations that developed then. Except that the Baldies are almost always paranoidal."

"And dementia praecox," Quayle said, finding relief from his own embarrassment in turning the spotlight on Burkhalter.

"And d. p. Yeah. When a confused mind acquires the telepathic instinct--a hereditary bollixed mind--it can't handle it all. There's disorientation. The paranoia group retreat into their own private worlds, and the d. p.'s simply don't realize that this world exists. There are distinctions, but I think that's a valid basis."

"In a way," Quayle said, "it's frightening. I can't think of any historical parallel."

"No."

"What do you think the end of it will be?"

"I don't know," Burkhalter said thoughtfully. "I think we'll be assimilated. There hasn't been enough time yet. We're specialized in a certain way, and we're useful in certain jobs."

"If you're satisfied to stay there. The Baldies who won't wear wigs--"

"They're so bad-tempered I expect they'll all be killed off in duels eventually," Burkhalter smiled. "No great loss. The rest of us, we're getting what we want--acceptance. We don't have horns or halos."

Quayle shook his head. "I'm glad, I think, that I'm not a telepath. The mind's mysterious enough anyway, without new doors opening. Thanks for letting me talk. I think I've got part of it talked out, anyway. Shall we try the script again?"

"Sure," Burkhalter said, and again the procession of pages nickered on the screen above them. Quayle did seem less guarded; his thoughts were more lucid, and Burkhalter was able to get at the true meaning of many of the hitherto muddy statements. They worked easily, the telepath dictating rephrasings into his dictograph, and only twice did they have to hurdle emotional tangles. At noon they knocked off, and Burkhalter, with a friendly nod, took the dropper to his office, where he found some calls listed on the visor. He ran off repeats, and a worried look crept into his blue eyes.

He talked with Dr. Moon in a booth at luncheon. The conversation lasted so long that only the induction cups kept the coffee hot, but

Burkhalter had more than one problem to discuss. And he'd known Moon for a long time. The fat man was one of the few who were not, he thought, subconsciously repelled by the fact that Burkhalter was a Baldy.

"I've never fought a duel in my life, Doc. I can't afford to."

"You can't afford not to. You can't turn down the challenge, Ed. It isn't done."

"But this fellow Reilly--I don't even know him."

"I know of him," Moon said. "He's got a bad temper. Dueled a lot."

Burkhalter slammed his hand down on the table. "Its ridiculous. I won't do it!"

"Well," Moon said practically, "Your wife can't fight him. And if Ethel's been reading Mrs. Reilly's mind and gossiping, Reilly's got a case."

"Don't you think we know the dangers of that?" Burkhalter asked in a low voice. "Ethel doesn't go around reading minds any more than I do. It'd be fatal--for us. And for any other Baldy."

"Not the hairless ones. The ones who won't wear wigs. They--"

"They're fools. And they're giving all the Baldies a bad name. Point one, Ethel doesn't read minds; she didn't read Mrs. Reilly's. Point two, she doesn't gossip."

"La Reilly is obviously an hysterical type," Moon said. "Word got around about this scandal, whatever it was, and Mrs. Reilly remembered she'd seen Ethel lately. She's the type who needs a scapegoat anyway. I rather imagine she let word drop herself, and had to cover up so her husband wouldn't blame her."

"I'm not going to accept Reilly's challenge," Burkhalter said doggedly.

"You'll have to."

"Listen, Doc, maybe--"

"What?"

"Nothing. An idea. It might work. Forget about that; I think I've got the right answer. It's the only one, anyway. I can't afford a duel and that's flat."

"You're not a coward."

"There's one thing Baldies are afraid of," Burkhalter said, "and that's public opinion. I happen to know I'd kill Reilly. That's the reason why I've never dueled in my life."

Moon drank coffee. "Hm-m-m. I think--"

"Don't. There was something else. I'm wondering if I ought to send Al off to a special school."

"What's wrong with the kid?"

"He's turning out to be a beautiful delinquent. His teacher called me this morning. The playback was something to hear. He's talking funny and acting funny. Playing nasty little tricks on his friends--if he has any left by now."

"All kids are cruel."

"Kids don't know what cruelty means. That's why they're cruel; they

lack empathy. But Al's getting--" Burkhalter gestured helplessly. "He's turning into a young tyrant. He doesn't seem to give a care about anything, according to his teacher."

"That's not too abnormal, so far."

"That's not the worst. He's become very egotistical. Too much so. I don't want him to turn into one of the wigless Baldies you were mentioning." Burkhalter didn't mention the other possibility; paranoia, insanity.

"He must pick things up somewhere. At home? Scarcely, Ed. Where else does he go?"

"The usual places. He's got a normal environment."

"I should think," Moon said, "that a Baldy would have unusual opportunities in training a youngster. The mental rapport--eh?"

"Yeah. But--I don't know. The trouble is," Burkhalter said almost inaudibly, "I wish to God I wasn't different. We didn't ask to be telepaths. Maybe it's all very wonderful in the long run, but I'm one person, and I've got my own microcosm. People who deal in long-term sociology are apt to forget that. They can figure out the answers, but it's every individual man--or Baldy--who's got to fight his own personal battle while he's alive. And it isn't as clear-cut as a battle. It's worse; it's the necessity of watching yourself every second, of fitting yourself into a world that doesn't want you."

Moon looked uncomfortable. "Are you being a little sorry for yourself, Ed?"

Burkhalter shook himself. "I am, Doc. But I'll work it out."

"We both will," Moon said, but Burkhalter didn't really expect much

help from him. Moon would be willing, but it was horribly difficult for an ordinary man to conceive that a Baldy was--the same. It was the difference that men looked for, and found.

Anyway, he'd have to settle matters before he saw Ethel again. He could easily conceal the knowledge, but she would recognize a mental barrier and wonder. Their marriage had been the more ideal because of the additional rapport, something that compensated for an inevitable, half-sensed estrangement from the rest of the world.

"How's 'Psychohistory'going?" Moon asked after a while.

"Better than I expected. I've got a new angle on Quayle. If I talk about myself, that seems to draw him out. It gives him enough confidence to let him open his mind to me. We may have those first chapters ready for Oldfield, in spite of everything."

"Good. Just the same, he can't rush us. If we've got to shoot out books that fast, we might as well go back to the days of semantic confusion. Which we won't!"

"Well," Burkhalter said, getting up, "I'll smooch along. See you."

"About Reilly--"

"Let it lay." Burkhalter went out, heading for the address his visor had listed. He touched the dagger at his belt. Dueling wouldn't do for Baldies, but--

A greeting thought crept into his mind, and, under the arch that led into the campus, he paused to grin at Sam Shane, a New Orleans area Baldy who affected a wig of flaming red. They didn't bother to talk.

Personal question, involving mental, moral and physical well-being.

A satisfied glow. And you, Burkhalter? For an instant Burkhalter half-saw what the symbol of his name meant to Shane.

Shadow of trouble.

A warm, willing anxiousness to help. There was a bond between Baldies.

Burkhalter thought: But everywhere I'd go there'd be the same suspicion. We're freaks.

More so elsewhere, Shane thought. There are a lot of us in Modoc Town. People are invariably more suspicious where they're not in daily contact with--Us.

The boy--I've trouble too, Shane thought. It's worried me. My two girls--

Delinquency?

Yes.

Common denominators?

Don't know. More than one of Us have had the same trouble with our kids.

Secondary characteristic of the mutation? Second generation emergence?

Doubtful, Shane thought, scowling in his mind, shading his concept with a wavering question. We'll think it over later. Must go.

Burkhalter sighed and went on his way. The houses were strung out

around the central industry of Modoc, and he cut through a park toward his destination. It was a sprawling curved building, but it wasn't inhabited, so Burkhalter filed Reilly for future reference, and, with a glance at his timer, angled over a hillside toward the school. As he expected, it was recreation time, and he spotted Al lounging under a tree, some distance from his companions, who were involved in a pleasantly murderous game of Blowup.

He sent his thought ahead.

The Green Man had almost reached the top of the mountain. The hairy gnomes were pelting on his trail, most unfairly shooting sizzling light-streaks at their quarry, but the Green Man was agile enough to dodge. The rocks were leaning--

"Al."

--inward, pushed by the gnomes, ready to--

"Al!" Burkhalter sent his thought with the word, jolting into the boy's mind, a trick he very seldom employed, since youth was practically defenseless against such invasion.

"Hello, Dad," Al said, undisturbed. "What's up?"

"A report from your teacher."

"I didn't do anything."

"She told me what it was. Listen, kid. Don't start getting any funny ideas in your head."

"I'm not."

"Do you think a Baldy is better or worse than a non-Baldy?"

Al moved his feet uncomfortably. He didn't answer.

"Well," Burkhalter said, "the answer is both and neither. And here's why. A Baldy can communicate mentally, but he lives in a world where most people can't."

"They're dumb," Al opined.

"Not so dumb, if they're better suited to their world than you are. You might as well say a frog's better than a fish because he's an amphibian." Burkhalter briefly amplified and explained the terms telepathically.

"Well... oh, I get it, all right."

"Maybe," Burkhalter said slowly, "what you need is a swift kick in the pants. That thought wasn't so hot. What was it again?"

Al tried to hide it, blanking out. Burkhalter began to lift the barrier, an easy matter for him, but stopped. Al regarded his father in a most unfilial way--in fact, as a sort of boneless fish. That had been clear.

"If you're so egotistical," Burkhalter pointed out, "maybe you can see it this way. Do you know why there aren't any Baldies in key positions?"

"Sure I do," Al said unexpectedly. "They're afraid."

"Of what, then?"

"The--" That picture had been very curious, a commingling of something vaguely familiar to Burkhalter. "The non-Baldies."

"Well, if we took positions where we could take advantage of our

telepathic function, non-Baldies would be plenty envious--especially if we were successes. If a Baldy even invented a better mousetrap, plenty of people would say he'd stolen the idea from some non-Baldy's mind. You get the point?"

"Yes, Dad." But he hadn't. Burkhalter sighed and looked up. He recognized one of Shane's girls on a nearby hillside, sitting alone against a boulder. There were other isolated figures here and there. Far to the east the snowy rampart of the Rockies made an irregular pattern against blue sky.

"Al," Burkhalter said, "I don't want you to get a chip on your shoulder. This is a pretty swell world, and the people in it are, on the whole, nice people. There's a law of averages. It isn't sensible for us to get too much wealth or power, because that'd militate against us--and we don't need it anyway. Nobody's poor. We find our work, we do it, and we're reasonably happy. We have some advantages non-Baldies don't have; in marriage, for example. Mental intimacy is quite as important as physical. But I don't want you to feel that being a Baldy makes you a god. It doesn't. I can still," he added thoughtfully, "spank it out of you, in case you care to follow out that concept in your mind at the moment."

Al gulped and beat a hasty retreat. "I'm sorry. I won't do it again."

"And keep your hair on, too. Don't take your wig off in class. Use the stickum stuff in the bathroom closet."

"Yes, but... Mr. Venner doesn't wear a wig."

"Remind me to do some historical research with you on zoot-suiters," Burkhalter said. "Mr. Venner's wiglessness is probably his only virtue, if you consider it one."

"He makes money."

"Anybody would, in that general store of his. But people don't buy from him if they can help it, you'll notice. That's what I mean by a chip on your shoulder. He's got one. There are Baldies like Venner, Al, but you might, sometime, ask the guy if he's happy. For your information, I am. More than Venner, anyway. Catch?"

"Yes, Dad." Al seemed submissive, but it was merely that. Burkhalter, still troubled, nodded and walked away. As he passed near the Shane girl's boulder he caught a scrap: --at the summit of the Glass Mountains, rolling rocks back at the gnomes until--

He withdrew; it was an unconscious habit, touching minds that were sensitive, but with children it was definitely unfair. With adult Baldies it was simply the instinctive gesture of tipping your hat; one answered or one didn't. The barrier could be erected; there could be a blank-out; or there could be the direct snub of concentration on a single thought, private and not to be intruded on.

A copter with a string of gliders was coming in from the south: a freighter laden with frozen foods from South America, to judge by the markings. Burkhalter made a note to pick up an Argentine steak. He'd got a new recipe he wanted to try out, a charcoal broil with barbecue sauce, a welcome change from the short-wave cooked meats they'd been having for a week. Tomatoes, chile, mm-m--what else? Oh, yes. The duel with Reilly. Burkhalter absently touched his dagger's hilt and made a small, mocking sound in his throat. Perhaps he was innately a pacifist. It was rather difficult to think of a duel seriously, even though everyone else did, when the details of a barbecue dinner were prosaic in his mind.

So it went. The tides of civilization rolled in century-long waves across the continents, and each particular wave, though conscious of

its participation in the tide, nevertheless was more preoccupied with dinner. And, unless you happened to be a thousand feet tall, had the brain of a god and a god's life-span, what was the difference? People missed a lot--people like Venner, who was certainly a crank, not batty enough to qualify for the asylum, but certainly a potential paranoid type. The man's refusal to wear a wig labeled him as an individualist, but as an exhibitionist, too. If he didn't feel ashamed of his hairlessness, why should he bother to flaunt it? Besides, the man had a bad temper, and if people kicked him around, he asked for it by starting the kicking himself.

But as for Al, the kid was heading for something approaching delinquency. It couldn't be the normal development of childhood, Burkhalter thought. He didn't pretend to be an expert, but he was still young enough to remember his own formative years, and he had had more handicaps than Al had now; in those days, Baldies had been very new and very freakish. There'd been more than one movement to isolate, sterilize, or even exterminate the mutations.

Burkhalter sighed. If he had been born before the Blowup, it might have been different. Impossible to say. One could read history, but one couldn't live it. In the future, perhaps, there might be telepathic libraries in which that would be possible. So many opportunities, in fact--and so few that the world was ready to accept as yet. Eventually Baldies would not be regarded as freaks, and by that time real progress would be possible.

But people don't make history--Burkhalter thought. Peoples do that. Not the individual.

He stopped by Reilly's house, and this time the man answered, a burly, freckled, squint-eyed fellow with immense hands and, Burkhalter noted, fine muscular co-ordination. He rested those hands on the Dutch door and nodded.

"Who're you, mister?"

"My name's Burkhalter."

Comprehension and wariness leaped into Reilly's eyes. "Oh, I see. You got my call?"

"I did," Burkhalter said. "I want to talk to you about it. May I come in?"

"o.k." He stepped back, opening the way through a hall and into a spacious living room, where diffused light filtered through glassy mosaic walls. "Want to set the time?"

"I want to tell you you're wrong."

"Now wait a minute," Reilly said, patting the air. "My wife's out now, but she gave me the straight of it. I don't like this business of sneaking into a man's mind; it's crooked. You should have told your wife to mind her business--or keep her tongue quiet."

Burkhalter said patiently, "I give you my word, Reilly, that Ethel didn't read your wife's mind."

"Does she say so?"

"I... well, I haven't asked her."

"Yeah," Reilly said with an air of triumph.

"I don't need to. I know her well enough. And... well, I'm a Baldy myself."

"I know you are," Reilly said. "For all I know, you may be reading my mind now." He hesitated. "Get out of my house. I like my privacy. We'll meet at dawn tomorrow, if that's satisfactory with you. Now get

out." He seemed to have something on his mind, some ancient memory, perhaps, that he didn't wish exposed.

Burkhalter nobly resisted the temptation. "No Baldy would read--"

"Go on, get out!"

"Listen! You wouldn't have a chance in a duel with me!"

"Do you know how many notches I've got?" Reilly asked.

"Ever dueled a Baldy?"

"I'll cut the notch deeper tomorrow. Get out, d'you hear?"

Burkhalter, biting his lips, said, "Man, don't you realize that in a duel I could read your mind?"

"I don't care... what?"

"I'd be half a jump ahead of you. No matter how instinctive your actions would be, you'd know them a split second ahead of time in your mind. And I'd know all your tricks and weaknesses, too. Your technique would be an open book to me. Whatever you thought of--"

"No." Reilly shook his head. "Oh, no. You're smart, but it's a phony set-up."

Burkhalter hesitated, decided, and swung about, pushing a chair out of the way. "Take out your dagger," he said. "Leave the sheath snapped on; I'll show you what I mean."

Reilly's eyes widened. "If you want it now--"

"I don't." Burkhalter shoved another chair away. He un-clipped his

dagger, sheath and all, from his belt, and made sure the little safety clip was in place. "We've room enough here. Come on."

Scowling, Reilly took out his own dagger, held it awkwardly, baffled by the sheath, and then suddenly feinted forward. But Burkhalter wasn't there; he had anticipated, and his own leather sheath slid up Reilly's belly.

"That," Burkhalter said, "would have ended the fight."

For answer Reilly smashed a hard dagger-blow down, curving at the last moment into a throat-cutting slash. Burkhalter's free hand was already at his throat; his other hand, with the sheathed dagger, tapped Reilly twice over the heart. The freckles stood out boldly against the pallor of the larger man's face. But he was not yet ready to concede. He tried a few more passes, clever, well-trained cuts, and they failed, because Burkhalter had anticipated them. His left hand invariably covered the spot where Reilly had aimed, and which he never struck.

Slowly Reilly let his arm fall. He moistened his lips and swallowed. Burkhalter busied himself reclipping his dagger in place.

"Burkhalter," Reilly said, "you're a devil."

"Far from it. I'm just afraid to take a chance. Do you really think being a Baldy is a snap?"

"But, if you can read minds--"

"How long do you think I'd last if I did any dueling? It would be too much of a set-up. Nobody would stand for it, and I'd end up dead. I can't duel, because it'd be murder, and people would know it was murder. I've taken a lot of cracks, swallowed a lot of insults, for just that reason. Now, if you like, I'll swallow another and apologize. I'll

admit anything you say. But I can't duel with you, Reilly."

"No, I can see that. And--I'm glad you came over." Reilly was still white. "I'd have walked right into a set-up."

"Not my set-up," Burkhalter said. "I wouldn't have dueled. Baldies aren't so lucky, you know. They've got handicaps--like this. That's why they can't afford to take chances and antagonize people, and why we never read minds, unless we're asked to do so."

"It makes sense. More or less." Reilly hesitated. "Look, I withdraw that challenge. o.k.?"

"Thanks," Burkhalter, said, putting out his hand. It was taken rather reluctantly. "We'll leave it at that, eh?"

"Right." But Reilly was still anxious to get his guest out of the house.

Burkhalter walked back to the Publishing Center and whistled tunelessly. He could tell Ethel now; in fact, he had to, for secrets between them would have broken up the completeness of their telepathic intimacy. It was not that their minds lay bare to each other, it was, rather, that any barrier could be sensed by the other, and the perfect rapport wouldn't have been so perfect. Curiously, despite this utter intimacy, husband and wife managed to respect one another's privacy.

Ethel might be somewhat distressed, but the trouble had blown over, and, besides, she was a Baldy too. Not that she looked it, with her wig of fluffy chestnut hair and those long, curving lashes. But her parents had lived east of Seattle during the Blowup, and afterward, too, before the hard radiation's effects had been thoroughly studied.

The snow-wind blew down over Modoc and fled southward along the

Utah Valley. Burkhalter wished he was in his copter, alone in the blue emptiness of the sky. There was a quiet, strange peace up there that no Baldy ever quite achieved on the earth's surface, except in the depths of a wilderness. Stray fragments of thoughts were always flying about, subsensory, but like the almost-unheard whisper of a needle on a phonograph record, never ceasing. That, certainly, was why almost all Baldies loved to fly and were expert pilots. The high waste deserts of the air were their blue hermitages.

Still, he was in Modoc now, and overdue for his interview with Quayle. Burkhalter hastened his steps. In the main hall he met Moon, said briefly and cryptically that he'd taken care of the duel, and passed on, leaving the fat man to stare a question after him. The only visor call was from Ethel; the playback said she was worried about Al, and would Burkhalter check with the school. Well, he had already done so--unless the boy had managed to get into more trouble since then. Burkhalter put in a call and reassured himself. Al was as yet unchanged.

He found Quayle in the same private solarium, and thirsty. Burkhalter ordered a couple of dramzowies sent up, since he had no objection to loosening Quayle's inhibitions. The gray-haired author was immersed in a sectional historical globe-map, illuminating each epochal layer in turn as he searched back through time.

"Watch this," he said, running his hand along the row of buttons. "See how the German border fluctuates? And Portugal. Notice its zone of influence? Now--" The zone shrank steadily from 1600 on, while other countries shot out radiating lines and assumed sea power.

Burkhalter sipped his dramzowie. "Not much of that now."

"No, since... what's the matter?"

"How do you mean?"

"You look shot."

"I didn't know I showed it," Burkhalter said wryly. "I just finagled my way out of a duel."

"That's one custom I never saw much sense to," Quayle said. "What happened? Since when can you finagle out?"

Burkhalter explained, and the writer took a drink and snorted. "What a spot for you. Being a Baldy isn't such an advantage after all, I guess."

"It has distinct disadvantages at times." On impulse Burkhalter mentioned his son. "You see my point, eh? I don't know, really, what standards to apply to a young Baldy. He is a mutation, after all. And the telepathic mutation hasn't had time to work out yet. We can't rig up controls, because guinea pigs and rabbits won't breed telepaths. That's been tried, you know. And--well, the child of a Baldy needs very special training so he can cope with his ultimate maturity."

"You seem to have adjusted well enough."

"I've--learned. As most sensible Baldies have. That's why I'm not a wealthy man, or in politics. We're really buying safety for our species by foregoing certain individual advantages. Hostages to destiny--and destiny spares us. But we get paid too, in a way. In the coinage of future benefits--negative benefits, really, for we ask only to be spared and accepted--and so we have to deny ourselves a lot of present, positive benefits. An appeasement to fate."

"Paying the piper," Quayle nodded.

"We are the pipers. The Baldies as a group, I mean. And our children. So it balances; we're really paying ourselves. If I wanted to take unfair advantage of my telepathic power--my son wouldn't live very long. The Baldies would be wiped out. Al's got to learn that, and he's getting pretty antisocial."

"All children are antisocial," Quayle pointed out. "They're utter individualists. I should think the only reason for worrying would be if the boy's deviation from the norm were connected with his telepathic sense."

"There's something in that." Burkhalter reached out left-handedly and probed delicately at Quayle's mind, noting that the antagonism was considerably lessened. He grinned to himself and went on talking about his own troubles. "Just the same, the boy's father to the man. And an adult Baldy has got to be pretty well adjusted, or he's sunk."

"Environment is as important as heredity. One complements the other. If a child's reared correctly, he won't have much trouble--unless heredity is involved."

"As it may be. There's so little known about the telepathic mutation. If baldness is one secondary characteristic, maybe--something else--emerges in the third or fourth generations. I'm wondering if telepathy is really good for the mind."

Quayle said, "Humph. Speaking personally, it makes me nervous--"

"Like Reilly."

"Yes," Quayle said, but he didn't care much for the comparison. "Well--anyhow, if a mutation's a failure, it'll die out. It won't breed true."

"What about hemophilia?"

"How many people have hemophilia?" Quayle asked. "I'm trying to look at it from the angle of psychohistorian. If there'd been telepaths in the past, things might have been different."

"How do you know there weren't?" Burkhalter asked.

Quayle blinked. "Oh. Well. That's true, too. In medieval times they'd have been called wizards--or saints. The Duke-Rhine experiments--but such accidents would have been abortive. Nature fools around trying to hit the... ah... the jackpot, and she doesn't always do it on the first try."

"She may not have done it now." That was habit speaking, the ingrained caution of modesty. "Telepathy may be merely a semisuccessful try at something pretty unimaginable. A sort of four-dimensional sensory concept, maybe."

"That's too abstract for me." Quayle was interested, and his own hesitations had almost vanished; by accepting Burkhalter as a telepath, he had tacitly wiped away his objections to telepathy per se. "The old-time Germans always had an idea they were different; so did the Japanese. They knew, very definitely, that they were a superior race because they were directly descended from gods. They were short in stature; heredity made them self-conscious when dealing with larger races. But the Chinese aren't tall, the Southern Chinese, and they weren't handicapped in that way."

"Environment, then?"

"Environment, which caused propaganda. The Japanese took Buddhism, and altered it completely into Shinto, to suit their own needs. The samurai, warrior-knights, were the ideals, the code of honor was fascinatingly cockeyed. The principle of Shinto was to

worship your superiors and subjugate your inferiors. Ever seen the Japanese jewel-trees?"

"I don't remember them. What are they?"

"Miniature replicas of espaliered trees, made of jewels, with trinkets hanging on the branches. Including a mirror--always. The first jewel-tree was made to lure the Moon-goddess out of a cave where she was sulking. It seemed the lady was so intrigued by the trinkets and by her face reflected in the mirror that she came out of her hideout. All the Japanese morals were dressed up in pretty clothes; that was the bait. The old-time Germans did much the same thing. The last German dictator, Hitler, revived the old Siegfried legend. It was racial paranoia. The Germans worshiped the house-tyrant, not the mother, and they had extremely strong family ties. That extended to the state. They symbolized Hitler as their All-Father, and so eventually we got the Blowup. And, finally, mutations."

"After the deluge, me," Burkhalter murmured, finishing his dramzowie. Quayle was staring at nothing.

"Funny," he said after a while. "This All-Father business--"

"Yes?"

"I wonder if you know how powerfully it can affect a man?"

Burkhalter didn't say anything. Quayle gave him a sharp glance.

"Yes," the writer said quietly. "You're a man, after all. I owe you an apology, you know."

Burkhalter smiled. "You can forget that."

"I'd rather not," Quayle said. "I've just realized, pretty suddenly, that

the telepathic sense isn't so important. I mean--it doesn't make you different. I've been talking to you--"

"Sometimes it takes people years before they realize what you're finding out," Burkhalter remarked. "Years of living and working with something they think of as a Baldy."

"Do you know what I've been concealing in my mind?" Quayle asked.

"No. I don't."

"You lie like a gentleman. Thanks. Well, here it is, and I'm telling you by choice, because I want to. I don't care if you got the information out of my mind already; I just want to tell you of my own free will. My father... I imagine I hated him... was a tyrant, and I remember one time, when I was just a kid and we were in the mountains, he beat me and a lot of people were looking on. I've tried to forget that for a long time. Now"--Quayle shrugged--"it doesn't seem quite so important."

"I'm not a psychologist," Burkhalter said. "If you want my personal reaction, I'll just say that it doesn't matter. You're not a little boy any more, and the guy I'm talking to and working with is the adult Quayle."

"Hm-m-m. Ye-es. I suppose I knew that all along--how unimportant it was, really. It was simply having my privacy violated.... I think I know you better now, Burkhalter. You can--walk in."

"We'll work better," Burkhalter said, grinning. "Especially with Darius."

Quayle said, "I'll try not to keep any reservation in my mind. Frankly, I won't mind telling you--the answers. Even when they're personal."

"Check on that. D'you want to tackle Darius now?"

o.k." Quayle said, and his eyes no longer held suspicious wariness. "Darius I identify with my father--"

It was smooth and successful. That afternoon they accomplished more than they had during the entire previous fortnight. Warm with satisfaction on more than one point, Burkhalter stopped off to tell Dr. Moon that matters were looking up, and then set out toward home, exchanging thoughts with a couple of Baldies, his co-workers, who were knocking off for the day. The Rockies were bloody with the western light, and the coolness of the wind was pleasant on Burkhalter's cheeks, as he hiked homeward.

It was fine to be accepted. It proved that it could be done. And a Baldy often needed reassurance, in a world peopled by suspicious strangers. Quayle had been a hard nut to crack, but-- Burkhalter smiled.

Ethel would be pleased. In a way, she'd had a harder time than he'd ever had. A woman would, naturally. Men were desperately anxious to keep their privacy unviolated by a woman, and as for non-Baldy women--well, it spoke highly for Ethel's glowing personal charm that she had finally been accepted by the clubs and feminine groups of Modoc. Only Burkhalter knew Ethel's desperate hurt at being bald, and not even her husband had ever seen her unwigged.

His thought reached out before him into the low, double-winged house on the hillside, and interlocked with hers in a warm intimacy. It was something more than a kiss. And, as always, there was the exciting sense of expectancy, mounting and mounting till the last door swung open and they touched physically. This, he thought, is why I was born a Baldy; this is worth losing worlds for.

At dinner that rapport spread out to embrace Al, an intangible, deeply-rooted something that made the food taste better and the

water like wine. The word home, to telepaths, had a meaning that non-Baldies could not entirely comprehend, for it embraced a bond they could not know. There were small, intangible caresses.

Green Man going down the Great Red Slide; the Shaggy Dwarfs trying to harpoon him as he goes.

"Al," Ethel said, "are you still working on your Green Man?"

Then something utterly hateful and cold and deadly quivered silently in the air, like an icicle jaggedly smashing through golden, fragile glass. Burkhalter dropped his napkin and looked up, profoundly shocked. He felt Ethel's thought shrink back, and swiftly reached out to touch and reassure her with mental contact. But across the table the little boy, his cheeks still round with the fat of babyhood, sat silent and wary, realizing he had blundered, and seeking safety in complete immobility. His mind was too weak to resist probing, he knew, and he remained perfectly still, waiting, while the echoes of a thought hung poisonously in silence.

Burkhalter said, "Come on, Al." He stood up. Ethel started to speak.

"Wait, darling. Put up a barrier. Don't listen in." He touched her mind gently and tenderly, and then he took Al's hand and drew the boy after him out into the yard. Al watched his father out of wide, alert eyes.

Burkhalter sat on a bench and put Al beside him. He talked audibly at first, for clarity's sake, and for another reason. It was distinctly unpleasant to trick the boy's feeble guards down, but it was necessary.

"That's a very queer way to think of your mother," he said. "It's a queer way to think of me." Obscenity is more obscene, profanity

more profane, to a telepathic mind, but this had been neither one. It had been--cold and malignant.

And this is flesh of my flesh, Burkhalter thought, looking at the boy and remembering the eight years of his growth. Is the mutation to turn into something devilish?

Al was silent.

Burkhalter reached into the young mind. Al tried to twist free and escape, but his father's strong hands gripped him. Instinct, not reasoning, on the boy's part, for minds can touch over long distances.

He did not like to do this, for increased sensibility had gone with sensitivity, and violations are always violations. But ruthlessness was required. Burkhalter searched. Sometimes he threw key words violently at Al, and surges of memory pulsed up in response.

In the end, sick and nauseated, Burkhalter let Al go and sat alone on the bench, watching the red light die on the snowy peaks. The whiteness was red-stained. But it was not too late. The man was a fool, had been a fool from the beginning, or he would have known the impossibility of attempting such a thing as this.

The conditioning had only begun. Al could be reconditioned. Burkhalter's eyes hardened. And would be. And would be. But not yet, not until the immediate furious anger had given place to sympathy and understanding.

Not yet.

He went into the house, spoke briefly to Ethel, and televised the dozen Baldies who worked with him in the Publishing Center. Not all of them had families, but none was missing when, half an hour later,

they met in the back room of the Pagan Tavern downtown. Sam Shane had caught a fragment of Burkhalter's knowledge, and all of them read his emotions. Welded into a sympathetic unit by their telepathic sense, they waited till Burkhalter was ready.

Then he told them. It didn't take long, via thought. He told them about the Japanese jewel-tree with its glittering gadgets, a shining lure. He told them of racial paranoia and propaganda. And that the most effective propaganda was sugar-coated, disguised so that the motive was hidden.

A Green Man, hairless, heroic--symbolic of a Baldy.

And wild, exciting adventures, the lure to catch the young fish whose plastic minds were impressionable enough to be led along the roads of dangerous madness. Adult Baldies could listen, but they did not; young telepaths had a higher threshold of mental receptivity, and adults do not read the books of their children except to reassure themselves that there is nothing harmful in the pages. And no adult would bother to listen to the Green Man mindcast. Most of them had accepted it as the original daydream of their own children.

"I did," Shane put in. "My girls--"

"Trace it back," Burkhalter said. "I did."

The dozen minds reached out on the higher frequency, the children's wavelength, and something jerked away from them, startled and apprehensive.

"He's the one," Shane nodded.

They did not need to speak. They went out of the Pagan Tavern in a compact, ominous group, and crossed the street to the general

store. The door was locked. Two of the men burst it open with their shoulders.

They went through the dark store and into a back room where a man was standing beside an overturned chair. His bald skull gleamed in an overhead light. His mouth worked impotently.

His thought pleaded with them--was driven back by an implacable deadly wall.

Burkhalter took out his dagger. Other slivers of steel glittered for a little while--

And were quenched.

Venner's scream had long since stopped, but his dying thought of agony lingered within Burkhalter's mind as he walked homeward. The wigless Baldy had not been insane, no. But he had been paranoid.

What he had tried to conceal, at the last, was quite shocking. A tremendous, tyrannical egotism, and a furious hatred of nontelepaths. A feeling of self-justification that was, perhaps, insane. And--we are the Future! The Baldies! God made us to rule lesser men!

Burkhalter sucked in his breath, shivering. The mutation had not been entirely successful. One group had adjusted, the Baldies who wore wigs and had become fitted to their environment. One group had been insane, and could be discounted; they were in asylums.

But the middle group were merely paranoid. They were not insane, and they were not sane. They wore no wigs.

Like Venner.

And Venner had sought disciples. His attempt had been foredoomed to failure, but he had been one man.

One Baldy--paranoid.

There were others, many others.

Ahead, nestled into the dark hillside, was the pale blotch that marked Burkhalter's home. He sent his thought ahead, and it touched Ethel's and paused very briefly to reassure her.

Then it thrust on, and went into the sleeping mind of a little boy who, confused and miserable, had finally cried himself to sleep. There were only dreams in that mind now, a little discolored, a little stained, but they could be cleansed. And would be.

"Quest of the Starstone"

Published in *Weird Tales*, Vol. 30, No. 5 (November 1937).

Jirel of Joiry is riding down with a score of men at her back, For none is safe in the outer lands from Jirel's outlaw pack; The vaults of the wizard are over-full, and locked with golden key, And Jirel says, "If he hath so much, then he shall share with me!" And fires flame high on the altar fare in the lair of the wizard folk, And magic crackles and Jirel's name goes whispering through the smoke. But magic fails in the stronger spell that the Joiry outlaws own: The splintering crash of a broadsword blade that shivers against the bone, And blood that bursts through a warlock's teeth can strangle a half-voiced spell Though it rises hot from the blistering coals on the red-hot floor of Hell!

The rivet-studded oaken door crashed open, splintering from the assault of pikebutts whose thunderous echoes still rolled around the

walls of the tiny stone room revealed beyond the wreck of the shattered door. Jirel, the warrior-maid of Joiry, leaped in through the splintered ruins, dashing the red hair from her eyes, grinning with exertion, gripping her two-edged sword. But in the ruin of the door she paused. The mail-clad men at her heels surged around her in the doorway like a wave of blue-bright steel, and then paused too, staring.

For Franga the warlock was kneeling in his chapel, and to see Franga on his knees was like watching the devil recite a paternoster. But it was no holy altar before which the wizard bent. The black stone of it bulked huge in this tiny, bare room echoing still with the thunder of battle, and in the split second between the door's fall and Jirel's crashing entry through its ruins Franga had crouched in a last desperate effort at--at what?

His bony shoulders beneath their rich black robe heaved with frantic motion as he fingered the small jet bosses that girdled the altar's block. A slab in the side of it fell open abruptly as the wizard, realizing that his enemy was almost within sword's reach, whirled and crouched like a feral thing. Blazing light, cold and unearthly, streamed out from the gap in the altar.

"So that's where you've hidden it!" said Jirel with a savage softness.

Over his shoulder Franga snarled at her, pale lips writhed back from discolored teeth. Physically he was terrified of her, and his terror paralyzed him. She saw him hesitate, evidently between his desire to snatch into safety what was hidden in the altar and his panic fear of her sword that dripped blood upon the stones.

Jirel settled his indecision.

"You black devil!" she blazed, and lunged like lightning, the dripping

blade whistling as it sheared the air.

Franga screamed hoarsely, flinging himself sidewise beneath the sword. It struck the altar with a shivering shock that numbed Jirel's arm, and as she gasped a sound that was half a sob of pain and fury, half a blistering curse, he scurried crabwise into a corner, his long robe giving him a curiously amorphous look. Recovering herself, Jirel stalked after him, rubbing her numbed arm but gripping that great wet sword fast, the highlights of murder still blazing in her yellow eyes.

The warlock flattened himself against the wall, skinny arms outstretched.

"Werhi-yu-io!" he screamed desperately. "Werhi! Werhi-yu!"

"What devil's gibberish is that, you dog?" demanded Jirel angrily. "I'll--"

Her voice silenced abruptly, the red lips parted. She stared at the wall behind the wizard, and something like awe was filming the blood-lust of her eyes. For over that corner in which Franga crouched a shadow had been drawn as one draws a curtain.

"Werhi!" screamed the warlock again, in a cracked and strained voice, and--how could she not have seen before that door against whose panels he pressed, one hand behind him pushing it open upon darkness beyond? Here was black magic, devil's work.

Doubtfully Jirel stared, her sword lowering. She did not know it, but her free hand rose to sign her breast with the church's guard against evil. The door creaked a little, then swung wide. The blackness within was blinding as too much light is blinding--a dark from which she blinked and turned her eyes away. One last glimpse she had of the

gaunt, pale face of Franga, grinning, contorted with hate. The door creaked shut.

The trance that had gripped Jirel broke with the sound. Fury flooded back in the wake of awe. Choking on soldier-curses she sprang for the door, swinging up her sword in both hands, spitting hatred and bracing herself for the crash of the heavy blade through those oaken panels so mysteriously veiled in the shadow that clung about the corner.

The blade clanged shiveringly against stone. For the second time, the agonizing shock of steel swung hard again, solid rock shuddered up the blade and racked Jirel's shoulders. The door had vanished utterly. She dropped the sword from nerveless hands and reeled back from the empty corner, sobbing with fury and pain.

"C-coward!" she flung at the unanswering stone. "H-hide in your hole, then, you fiend-begotten runaway, and watch me take the Starstone!"

And she whirled to the altar.

Her men had shrunk back in a huddle beyond the broken door, their magic-dazzled eyes following her in fascinated dread.

"You womanish knaves!" she flared at them over her shoulder as she knelt where the wizard had knelt. "Womanish, did I say? Ha! You don't deserve the flattery! Must I go the whole way alone? Look then-- here it is!"

She plunged her bare hand into the opening in the altar from which streamed that pale, unearthly light, gasped a little, involuntarily, and then drew out what looked like a block of living flame.

In her bare hand as she knelt she held it, and for minutes no one moved. It was pale, this Starstone, cold with unearthly fire, many-

faceted yet not glittering. Jirel thought of twilight above the ocean, when the land is darkening and the smooth water gathers into its surface all the glimmering light of sea and sky. So this great stone gleamed, gathering the chapel's light into its pale surface so that the room seemed dark by contrast, reflecting it again transmuted into that cold, unwavering brilliance.

She peered into the translucent depths of it so near her face. She could see her own fingers cradling the gem distorted as if seen through water--and yet somehow there was a motion between her hand and the upper surface of the jewel. It was like looking down into water in whose depths a shadow stirred--a living shadow--a restlessly moving shape that beat against the prisoning walls and sent a flicker through the light's cold blue-white gleaming. It was--

No, it was the Starstone, nothing more. But to have the Starstone! To hold it here in her hands at last, after weeks of siege, weeks of desperate battle! It was triumph itself she cradled in her palm. Her throat choked with sudden ecstatic laughter as she sprang to her feet, brandishing the great gem toward that empty corner through whose wall the wizard had vanished.

"Ha, behold it!" she screamed to the unanswering stone. "Son of a fiend, behold it! The luck of the Starstone is mine, now a better man has wrested it from you! Confess Joiry your master, you devil-deluder! Dare you show your face? Dare you?"

Over that empty corner the shadow swept again, awesomely from nowhere. Out of the sudden darkness creaked a door's hinges, and the wizard's voice called in a choke of fury,

"Bel's curse on you, Joiry! Never think you've triumphed over me! I'll have it back if I--if I--"

"If you--what? D'ye think I fear you, you hell-spawned warlock? If you--what?"

"Me you may not fear, Joiry," the wizard's voice quavered with fury, "but by Set and Bubastis, I'll find one who'll tame you if I must go to the ends of space to find him--to the ends of time itself! And then--beware!"

"Bring on your champion!" Jirel's laughter was hot with scorn. "Search hell itself and bring out the chiefest devil! I'll lift the head from his shoulders as I'd have lifted yours, with one sweep, had you not fled."

But she got for answer only the creak of a closing door in the depths of that shadow. And now the shadow faded again, and once more empty stone walls stared at her enigmatically.

Clutching the Starstone that--so legend had it--carried luck and wealth beyond imagination for its possessor, she shrugged and swung round to her soldiers.

"Well, what are you gaping at?" she flared. "Before heaven, I'm the best man here! Out--out--pillage the castle--there's rich loot of that devil's servant, Franga! What are you waiting for?" and with the flat of her sword she drove them from the chapel.

"By Pharol, Smith, have you lost your taste for segir? I'd as soon have expected old Marnak here to sprout legs!" Yarol's cherubic face was puzzled as he nodded toward the waiter who was moving quickly about the little private drinking booth of polished steel in the back of the Martian tavern, placing fresh drinks before the two men, regardless of his artificial limbs--lost, some said, during an illicit amorous visit to the forbidden dens of the spider women.

Northwest Smith frowned moodily, pushing the glass away. His scarred dark face, lighted with the pallor of steel-colored eyes, was morose. He drew deeply on the brown Martian cigarette that smoked between his fingers.

"I'm getting rusty, Yarol," he said. "I'm sick of this whole business. Why can't something really worth the effort turn up? Smuggling--gun-running--I'm sick of it, I tell you! Even segir doesn't taste the same."

"That's old age creeping up," Yarol advised him owlishly above the rim of his glass. "Tell you what you need, N.W., a snort of the green Mingo liquer old Marnak keeps on his top shelf. It's distilled from pani-berries, and one shot of it will have you prancing like a pup. Wait a minute, I'll see what I can do."

Smith hunched over his folded arms and stared at the shining steel wall behind Yarol's vacant chair as the little Venusian slid out of the booth. Hours like these were the penalty of the exiled and the outlaw. Even the toughest of them knew times when the home planet called almost intolerably across the long voids of the spaceways, and all other places seemed flat and dull. Homesickness he would not have admitted to anyone alive, but as he sat there alone, morosely facing his dim reflection in the steel wall, he found himself humming that old sweet song of all Earth's exiled people, The Green Hills of Earth:

Across the seas of darkness The good green Earth is bright-- Oh,
star that was my homeland Shine down on me tonight...

Words and tune were banal, but somehow about them had gathered such a halo of association that the voices which sang them went sweeter and softer as they lingered over the well-remembered phrases, the well-remembered scenes of home. Smith's surprisingly good baritone took on undernotes of a homesick sweetness which he would have died rather than admit:

My heart turns home in longing
Across the voids between,
To know beyond the spaceways
The hills of Earth are green....

What wouldn't he give just now,
to be free to go home again?
Home without a price on his head,
freedom to rove the blue seas of Earth,
the warm garden continents of the Sun's loveliest planet?
He hummed very softly to himself,
--and count the losses worth
To see across the darkness
The green hills of Earth....

and then let the words die on his lips unnoticed as he narrowed steel-colored eyes at the polished wall in which a moment before his dim reflection had faced him. It was darkening now, a shadow quivering across the bright surfaces, thickening, clouding his mirrored face. And the wall--was it metal, or--or stone? The shadow was too thick to tell, and unconsciously he rose to his feet, bending across the table, one hand hovering back toward the heat-gun on his thigh. A door creaked open in the dimness--a heavy door, half seen, opening upon darkness beyond too black to gaze on--darkness, and a face.

"Are your services for hire, stranger?" quavered a cracked voice speaking in a tongue that despite himself sent Smith's pulses quickening in recognition. French, Earth's French, archaic and scarcely intelligible, but unquestionably a voice from home.

"For a price," he admitted, his fingers closing definitely on his gun. "Who are you and why do you ask? And how in the name of--"

"It will reward you to ask no questions," said the cracked quaver. "I seek a fighting-man of a temper strong enough for my purpose, and I think you are he. Look, does this tempt you?"

A claw-like hand extended itself out of the shadow, dangling a double rope of such blue-white pearls as Smith had never dreamed

of. "Worth a king's ransom," croaked the voice. "And all for the taking. Will you come with me?"

"Come where?"

"To the planet Earth--to the land of France--to the year of 1500."

Smith gripped the table-edge with one frantic hand, wondering if the segir he had drunk could somehow have sent him into paroxysms of dream. By no stretch of imagination could he really be standing here, in this drinking-booth in a Martian tavern, while out of a door that opened upon darkness a cracked voice beckoned him into the past. He was dreaming, of course, and in a dream it could do no harm to push back his chair, skirt the table, step closer to that incredible door thick-hung with shadows, take the outstretched hand over whose wrist the luminous pearls hung gleaming....

The room staggered and whirled into darkness. From somewhere far away he heard Yarol's voice shouting frantically, "N.W.! Wait! N.W., where're you going--" And then night too black to gaze on blinded his dark-dazzled eyes and cold unthinkable flamed through his brain, and--and--

He stood on a green hilltop whose gentle slope rolled downward to a meadow where a brook wound with a sound of rippling water. Beyond, on a high upthrust of craggy rock, a great gray castle loomed. The sky was blessedly blue, the air fresh in his nostrils with the sweetness of green growing things. And all about him rolled grassy uplands. He took a deep, deep breath. "The Green Hills of Earth!"

"N.W., what in--by Pharol, f--hell's blazes, man, what's happened?" Yarol's spluttering amazement jolted him out of his delight.

Smith turned. The little Venusian stood on the soft grass beside him, two small glasses full of pale green liquid in his hands and a look of almost idiotic bewilderment on his good-looking, cherubic face. "I come back into the booth with the pani-juice," he was muttering dazedly, "and there you are stepping through a door that--damn it!--that wasn't there when I left! And when I try to pull you back l--l--well, what did happen?"

"You stumbled through the Gateway--uninvited," said a cracked voice ominously behind them.

Both men whirled, hands dropping to their guns. For a dazed moment Smith had forgotten the voice that had lured him into the past. Now for the first time he saw his host--a small man, wizened, dark, stooping under his robe of rich black velvet as if the evil reflected on his seamed face were too heavy to bear upright. Dark wisdom glinted in the eyes that stared malevolently at Yarol.

"What's he saying, N.W.?" demanded the little Venusian.

"French--he's speaking French," muttered Smith distractedly, his gaze on the lined and evil face of their host. And then to the warlock, "Qui etes-vous, m'sieur? Pourquoi--"

"I am Franga," interrupted the old man impatiently. "Franga, the warlock. And I am displeased with this blundering stranger who followed us through the door. His speech is as uncouth as his manners. Were it not for my magic I could not guess his meaning. Has he never learned a civilized tongue? Well, no matter--no matter.

"Listen, now. I have brought you here to avenge my defeat at the hands of the lady of Joiry whose castle you see on yonder hilltop. She stole my magical jewel, the Starstone, and I have vowed to find a man who could tame her if I had to search outside my own world

and time to do it. I am too old myself, too feeble now. Once when I was as young and lusty as you I won the jewel from a rival as it must be won, bloodily in battle, or its magic is void to the possessor. Too, it may be given freely and maintain its power. But by neither method can I take it from Joiry, and so you must go up to the castle and in your own way win the stone.

"I can help you--a little. This much I can do--I can put you beyond the reach of the pikes and swords of Joiry's men."

Smith lifted an eyebrow and laid his hand lightly on his heat-gun, a blast of whose deadly violence could have mowed down a charging army like wheat ripe for the scythe.

"I'm armed," he said shortly.

Franga frowned. "Your arms would not avail you against a dagger in the back. No, you must do as I say. I have my reasons. You must go--beyond the Gateway."

Cold, pale eyes met the wizard's veiled stare for a moment. Then Smith nodded.

"It doesn't matter--my gun burns as straight in any land. What's your plan?"

"You must get the lady of Joiry through the Gateway--that same Gateway by which you came hither. But it will take you into another land, where--where"--he hesitated--"where there are--powers--favorable to me, and therefore to you. Make no mistake; it will not be easy to wrest the Starstone from Joiry. She has learned much of the dark lore."

"How shall we open the Gateway?"

Franga's left hand rose in a swift, strangely archaic gesture. "By this sign--learn it well--thus, and thus."

Smith's gun-callused brown hand imitated the queer motion. "Thus?"

"Yes--and the spell must be learned as well." Franga mouthed something queer and garbled, Smith echoing him with twisted tongue, for the words were as strange as he had ever spoken.

"Good." The warlock nodded, and again the strange syllables came incoherently from his thin lips, again his hand moved, giving the gestures an oddly cadenced rhythm. "When you voice the spell again the Gateway will open for you--as it opens now for me!"

Silently a shadow swept down upon them, dimming the sunlit hill. In its midst a blacker oblong darkened, the creak of a door sounded faintly as if from enormous distances.

"Bring Joiry through the Gateway," the wizard whispered, vicious lights crawling in his cold eyes, "and follow. Then you may seize the Starstone, for the powers in this this other land will fight with you. But not here, not in Joiry. You must follow me.... As for this little man who blundered through my door of darkness--"

"He is my friend," said Smith hastily. "He will help me."

"Eh--well, let his life be hostage then to your success. Win me the stone, and I stay my wrath at his stupid interference. But remember--the sword of my magic hovers at your throat...."

A shadow quivered over the wizard's black-robed form. His image quivered with it as a reflection in troubled water shakes, and abruptly shadow and man were gone.

"By great Pharol," articulated Yarol in measured syllables, "will you

tell me what this is all about? Drink this--you look as though you need it. As for me"--he thrust a small glass into Smith's hand, and drained his own drink at a gulp--"if all this is a dream, I hope there's liquor in it. Will you kindly explain--"

Smith threw back his head and tossed the pani-spirits down his grateful throat. In crisp sentences he outlined the situation, but though his words were brisk his eyes lingered like a caress over the warm, sweet-scented hills of home.

"Urn-m," said Yarol, when he had finished. "Well, why are we waiting? Who knows, there may be a wine-cellar in that cozy-looking castle over there." He licked his lips reflectively, tasting the last of the green liqueur. "Let's get going. The sooner we meet the woman the sooner she'll offer us a drink."

So they went down the long hill, Earth's green grass springing under their spaceman's boots, Earth's warm June breezes caressing their Mars-burned faces.

The gray heights of Joiry loomed above the two before life stirred anywhere in the sunny midday silences of this lost century. Then high in the buttresses a man shouted, and presently, with a rattling of hooves and a jangle of accouterments, two horsemen came thundering across the lowered drawbridge. Yarol's hand went to his heat-gun, and a smile of ineffable innocence hovered on his face. The Venusian never looked so much like a Raphael cherub as when death was trembling on his trigger finger. But Smith laid a restraining hand on his arm.

"Not yet."

The horsemen bore down on them, vizors lowered. For a moment Smith thought they would trample them down, and his hand hovered

ever so lightly over his gun, but the men reined to a halt beside the two and one of them, glaring down through his helmet bars, roared a threatening question.

"We're strangers," Smith told him haltingly at first, and then more easily as long-forgotten French flowed back into his memory. "From another land. We come in peace."

"Few come in peace to Joiry," snapped the man, fingering his sword-hilt, "and we do not love strangers here. Have you, perhaps"--a covetous gleam brightened the eyes half hidden by the vizor--"gold? Or gems?"

"Your lady can judge of that, fellow." Smith's voice was as cold as the steel-gray eyes that caught the man's gaze in a stare of sudden savagery. "Take us to her."

The man hesitated for an instant, uncertainty eloquent in the eyes behind the vizor. Here was a dusty stranger, afoot, swordless, unarmed, such a fellow as Joiry's men might ride down on the highway and never notice twice. But his eyes were the eyes of--of--he had never seen such eyes. And command spoke in his cold, clipped voice. The soldier shrugged inside his mail and spat through the bars of the helmet.

"There's always room in Joiry's dungeons for one more varlet, if our lady doesn't fancy you," he said philosophically. "Follow me, then."

Yarol, plodding across the drawbridge, murmured, "Was he speaking a language, N. W.--or merely howling like a wolf?"

"Shut up," muttered Smith. "I'm trying to think. We've got to have a good story ready for this--this Amazon."

"Some brawny wench with a face like a side of beef." speculated

Yarol.

So they entered Joiry, over the drawbridge, under the spiked portcullis, into the high-vaulted, smoke-blackened banquet hall where Jirel sat at midday table. Blinking in the dimness Smith looked up to the dais at the head of the great t-shaped board where the lady of Joiry sat. Her red mouth glistened with the grease of a mutton-bone she had been gnawing, and the bright hair fell flaming on her shoulders.

She looked into Smith's eyes.

Clear and pale and cold as steel they were, and Joiry's yellow gaze met them with a flash like the spark of meeting blades. For a long moment there was silence between them, and a curious violence flamed in the silent stare. A great mastiff loped to Smith's knee, fangs bared, a growl rumbling in its furry throat. Without looking down, Smith's hand found the beast's head and the dog sniffed for a moment and let the man rough its shaggy fur. Then Jirel broke the silence.

"Tigre--ici!" Her voice was strong and suddenly deeper in timbre, as if emotions she would not acknowledge were stirring in her. The mastiff went to her chair and lay down, finding a well-gnawed bone to crack. But Jirel's eyes were still fast on Smith's, and a slow flush was mounting her face.

"Pierre--Voisin," she said. "Who is he?"

"I bring you news of treasure," said Smith before they could speak. "My name is Smith, and I come from a--a far land."

"Smeet," she murmured. "Smeet.... Well, what of this treasure?"

"I would speak to you alone of that," he said guardedly. "There are jewels and gold, guarded by thieves but ripe for the harvesting. And I think Joiry--harvests well." "C'est vrai. With the luck of the Starstone--" She hesitated, wiping her mouth on the back of a narrow hand. "Are you lying to me? You who come so curiously clad, who speak our language so strangely--always before I have seen the lie in the eyes of the man who tells it. But you--"

Suddenly, and so quickly that despite himself Smith blinked, she had flung herself across the table, leaning there on one knee while the slender blade of her dagger flickered in the air. She laid the point of it against Smith's bare brown throat, just where a strong pulse stirred beneath sunburnt flesh. He watched her without a quiver of expression, without twitch of muscle.

"I cannot read your eyes--Smeet... Smeet.... But if you are lying to me"--the point dented the full swell of his muscular throat--"if you are, I'll strip the skin from your carcass in Joiry's dungeons. Know that!"

The blade fell to her side. Something wet trickled stickily down Smith's neck inside the leather collar. So keen was that blade he had not known himself scratched. He said coldly,

"Why should I lie? I can't get the treasure alone--you can help me win it. I came to you for aid."

Unsmilingly she bent toward him across the table, sheathing her dagger. Her body was one sweep of flowing grace, of flowing strength, slim as a sword-blade, as she half knelt among the broken meats upon the board. Her yellow eyes were cloudy with doubt.

"I think there is something more," she said softly, "something you have left untold. And I have a memory now of a yelling warlock who fled from my blade, with certain--threats...."

The yellow eyes were cold as polar seas. She shrugged at last and stood up, her gaze sweeping down over the long table where men and women divided their time between feasting and fascinated staring at the tableau by the tablehead.

"Bring him up to my apartment," she said to Smith's captors. "I'd learn more of this--treasure."

"Shall we stay to guard him?"

Jirel's lips curled scornfully.

"Is there a man here who can best me with steel--or anything else?" she demanded. "Guard yourselves, you cravens! If you brought him in without getting a poniard in the belly, I can safely talk with him in the heart of Joiry's stronghold. Well, don't stand there gaping--go!"

Smith shrugged off the heavy hand laid on his shoulder.

"Wait!" he said crisply. "This man goes with me."

Jirel's eyes dwelt on Yarol with a velvety, menacing appraisal. Yarol's sidelong black stare met hers eloquently.

"Brawny wench, did I say?" he murmured in the liquid cadences of High Venusian. "Aie--the Minga maidens were not more luscious. I'll kiss that pretty mouth of yours before I go back to my own time, lady! I'll--"

"What is he saying--he gurgles like a brook!" Jirel broke in impatiently. "He is your friend? Take them both, then, Voisin."

Jirel's apartment lay in the top of the highest tower of Joiry, at the head of a winding stone stairway. Lofty-roofed, hung with rich tapestries, carpeted with furs, the place seemed to Smith at once

alien and yet dearly familiar with a strange, heart-warming familiarity. Separated from his own time by dusty centuries, yet it was Earth-sprung, Earth-born, reared on the green hills of his home planet.

"What I need," said Yarol carefully, "is some more Minga-liqueur. Did you see how that hell-cat looked me over? Black Pharol, I don't know if I'd sooner kiss her or kill her! Why, the damned witch would run her sword through my gullet on a whim--for the sheer devilry of it!"

Smith chuckled deep in his throat. "She's dangerous. She--"

Jirel's voice behind him said confidently,

"Wait beyond the door, Voisin. These two strangers may visit our dungeons, after all. This little one--how are you named?"

"He's called Yarol," Smith said curtly.

"Yes--Yarol. Well, we may find means to make you a taller man, Yarol. You would like that, eh? We have a little device--a ladder which I got from the Count of Gorz when he visited me last summer--and the Count is clever in these things."

"He does not speak your tongue," Smith interrupted.

"No? It is not strange--he looks as though he came from a far land indeed. I have never seen a man like him." Her eyes were puzzled. She half turned her shoulder to them, toying with a sword that lay on a table at her side, and said without looking up, "Well, your story. Let's have it. And--yes, I'll give you one more chance at living--if you're lying, go now. None will stop you. You are strangers. You do not know Joiry--or Joiry's vengeance."

Over her shoulder she slanted into Smith's eyes a level glance that burnt like the stab of lightnings. Hell-fires flickered in it, and despite

himself Smith knew a sudden crawl of unease. Yarol, though he did not understand the words, whistled between his teeth. For a heartbeat no one spoke. Then very softly in Smith's ear a voice murmured,

"She has the Starstone. Say the spell of the Gateway!"

Startled, he glanced around. Jirel did not stir. Her lion-yellow eyes were still brooding on him with a gaze that smoldered. Yarol was watching her in fascination. And Smith realized abruptly that he alone had heard the cracked quaver of command in--yes, in Franga's voice! Franga, the warlock, whispering through some half-opened door into infinity. Without glancing aside at Yarol he said in the ripples of High Venusian, "Get ready--watch the door and don't let her out."

Jirel's face changed. She swung round from the table, her brows a straight line of menace. "What are you muttering? What devil's work are you at?"

Smith ignored her. Almost involuntarily his left hand was moving in the queer, quick gesture of the spell. Phrases in the unearthly tongue that Franga had taught him burned on his lips with all the ease of his mother-tongue. Magic was all about him, guiding his lips and hands.

Alarm blazed up in Jirel's yellow eyes. An oath smoked on her lips as she lunged forward, the sword she had been toying with a gleam in her fist. Yarol grinned. The heat-gun danced in his hand, and a white-hot blast traced a trail of fire on the rug at Jirel's feet. She shut her red lips on a word half uttered, and twisted in midair, flinging herself back in swift terror from this sudden gush of hell-flame. Behind her the door burst open and men in armor clanged into the room, shouting, dragging at their swords.

And then--down swept the shadow over the noisy room. Cloudy as the sweep of the death-angel's wings it darkened the sunny air so that the ray from Yarol's gun blazed out in dazzling splendor through the gloom. As if in the misted depths of a mirror Smith saw the men in the door shrink back, mouths agape, swords clattering from their hands. He scarcely heeded them, for in the far wall where a moment before a tall, narrow window had opened upon sunlight and the green hills of Earth--was a door. Very slowly, very quietly it was swinging open, and the black of utter infinity lay beyond its threshold.

"Hai--s'lelei--Smith!" Yarol's warning voice yelled in the darkness, and Smith threw himself back in a great leap as he felt a sword-blade prick his shoulder. Jirel sobbed a furious curse and plunged forward, her sword and sword-arm a single straight bar. In the dimness Yarol's gun hand moved, and a thin beam of incandescence burned bright. Jirel's sword hissed in midair, glowed blindingly and then dripped in a shower of white-hot drops to the stone floor. Her momentum carried her forward with a hilt and a foot of twisted steel still gripped in her stabbing hand, so that she lunged against Smith's broad chest thrusting with the stump of the ruined sword.

His arms prisoned her, a writhing fury that sobbed wild oaths and twisted like a tiger against him. He grinned and tightened his arms until the breath rushed out of her crushed lungs and he felt her ribs give a little against his chest.

Then vertigo was upon him. Dimly he realized that the girl's arms had gone round his neck in a frantic grip as the room swayed--tilted dizzily, amazingly, revolving as though on a giant axis--or as if the black depths of the Gateway were opening under him... he could not tell, nor was he ever to understand, just what happened in that fantastic instant when nature's laws were warped by strange magic. The floor was no longer solid beneath his feet. He saw Yarol twisting like a small-sleek cat as he stumbled and fell--fell into oblivion with

his gun hand upflung. He was falling himself, plunging downward through abysses of dark, clasping a frightened girl whose red hair streamed wildly in the wind of their falling.

Stars were swirling about them. They were dropping slowly through stars while the air danced and dazzled all around them. Smith had time to catch his breath and flex the muscles of his gun thigh to be sure the comforting weight pressed there before a spongy ground received them softly. They fell like people in a nightmare, slowly and easily, with no jar, upon the strange dim surface of the land beyond the Gateway.

Yarol landed on his feet like the cat he was, gun still gripped and ready, black eyes blinking in the starry dark. Smith, hampered by the terrified Jirel, sank with nightmare ease to the ground and rebounded a little from its sponginess. The impact knocked the stump of sword from the girl's hand, and he pitched it away into the blinding shimmer of the star-bright dark before he helped her to her feet.

For once Joiry was completely subdued. The shock of having her sword melted by hell-fire in her very grasp, the dizzying succession of manhandling and vertigo and falling into infinity had temporarily knocked all violence out of her, and she could only gasp and stare about this incredible starlit darkness, her red lips parted in amazement.

As far as they could see the mist of stars quivered and thickened the dim air, tiny points of light that danced all around them as if thousands of fireflies were winking all at once. Half blinded by that queer, shimmering dazzle, they could make out no familiar topography of hills or valleys, only that spongy dark ground beneath them, that quiver of stars blinding the dim air.

Motion swirled the shimmer a little distance away, and Jirel snarled as Franga's dark-robed form came shouldering through the stars, spinning them behind him in the folds of his cloak as he moved forward. His withered features grimaced into a grin when he saw the dazed three.

"Ah--you have her!" he rasped. "Well, what are you waiting for? Take the stone! She carries it on her."

Smith's pale eyes met the warlock's through the star-shimmer, and his firm lips tightened. Something was wrong. He sensed it unmistakably--danger whispered in the air. For why should Franga have brought them here if the problem was no more complex than the mere wresting of a jewel from a woman? No--there must be some other reason for plunging them into this starry dimness. What had Franga hinted--powers here that were favorable to him? Some dark, nameless god dwelling among the stars?

The warlock's eyes flared at Jirel in a flash of pure murder, and suddenly Smith understood a part of the puzzle. She was to die, then, when the jewel could no longer protect her. Here Franga could wreak vengeance unhampered, once the Starstone was in his hands. Here Joiry was alone and helpless--and the flame of hatred in the wizard's eyes could be quenched by no less than the red flood of her bloody death.

Smith glanced back at Jirel, white and shaken with recent terror, but snarling feebly at the warlock in invincible savagery that somehow went to his heart as no helplessness could have done. And suddenly he knew he could not surrender her up to Franga's hatred. The shift of scene had shifted their relations, too, so that the three mortals--he could not think of Franga as wholly human--stood together against Franga and his malice and his magic. No, he could not betray Jirel.

His gaze flicked Yarol's with a lightning message more eloquent than a warning shout. It sent a joyous quiver of tautening along the little Venusian's body, and both men's gun hands dropped to their sides with simultaneous casualness.

Smith said: "Return us to Joiry and I'll get the stone for you: Here--no."

That black glare of murder shifted from Jirel to Smith, bathing him in hatred.

"Take it from her now--or die!"

A smothered sound like the snarl of an angry beast halted Smith's reflexive snatch at his gun. Past him Jirel lunged, her red hair streaming with stars, her fingers flexed into claws as she leaped bare-handed at the warlock. Rage had drowned out her momentary terror, and soldier's curses tumbled blistering from her lips as she sprang.

Franga stepped back; his hand moved intricately and between him and the charging fury the starlight thickened--solidified into a sheet like heavy glass. Jirel dashed herself against it and was hurled back as if she had plunged into a stone wall. The silvery mist of the barrier dissolved as she reeled back, gasping with rage, and Franga laughed thinly.

"I am in my own place now, vixen," he told her. "I do not fear you or any man here. It is death to refuse me--bloody death. Give me the stone."

"I'll tear you to rags with my bare nails!" sobbed Joiry. "I'll have the eyes out of your head, you devil! Ha--even here you fear me! Come out from behind your rampart and let me slay you!"

"Give me the stone." The wizard's voice was calm.

"Return us all to Joiry and I think she'll promise to let you have it." Smith fixed a meaning stare upon Jirel's blazing yellow eyes. She shrugged off the implied advice furiously.

"Never! Yah--wait!" She leaped to Yarol's side and, as he shied nervously away, his eyes mistrustfully on her pointed nails, snatched from his belt the small knife he carried. She set the blade against the full, high swell of her bosom and laughed in Franga's face. "Now--kill me if you can!" she taunted, her face a blaze of defiance. "Make one move to slay me--and I slay myself! And the jewel is lost to you for ever!"

Franga bit his lip and stared at her through the mist of stars, fury glaring in his eyes. There was no hesitancy in her, and he knew it. She would do as she threatened, and--

"The stone had no virtue if not taken by violence or given freely," he admitted. "Lifted from a suicide's corpse, it would lose all value to anyone. I will bargain with you then, Joiry."

"You'll not! You'll set me free or lose the jewel for ever."

Franga turned goaded eyes on Smith. "Either way I lose it, for once in her own land Joiry would die before surrendering it, even as she would here. You! Fulfill your bargain--get me the Starstone!"

Smith shrugged. "Your meddling's spoiled everything now. There's little I can do."

The angry black eyes searched his for a long moment, evil crawling in their deeps. They flicked to Yarol. Both men stood on the spongy ground with feet braced, bodies balanced in the easy tautness which

characterizes the gunman, hands light on their weapons, eyes very steady, very deadly. They were two very dangerous men, and Smith realized that even here Franga was taking no chances with their strange weapons. Behind them Jirel snarled like an angry cat, her fingers flexing themselves involuntarily. And suddenly the wizard shrugged.

"Stay here then, and rot!" he snapped, swinging his cloak so that the stars swirled about him in a blinding shower. "Stay here and starve and thirst until you'll surrender. I'll not bargain with you longer."

They blinked in the sudden eddy of that starry mist, and when their vision cleared the bent black figure had vanished. Blankly they looked at one another through the drifting stars.

"Now what?" said Yarol. "Shan, but I could drink! Why did he have to mention thirst?"

Smith blinked about him in the swirling brightness. For once he was utterly at a loss. The wizard had every advantage over them in this dim, blinding outland where his god reigned supreme.

"Well, what have we to lose?" he shrugged at last. "He's not through with us, but there's nothing we can do. I'm for exploring a bit, anyhow."

Yarol raked the starry dark with a dubious gaze. "We couldn't be worse off," he admitted.

"Comment?" demanded Jirel, suspicious eyes shifting from one to the other. Smith said briefly,

"We're going to explore. Franga's got some trick in mind, we think. We'd be fools to wait here for him to come back. We--oh, wait!" He snapped his fingers involuntarily and turned a startled face on the

surprised two. The Gateway! He knew the spell that opened it--Franga had taught him that. Why not voice the invocation now and see what happened? He drew a quick breath and opened his mouth to speak--and then faltered with the remembered words fading from his very tongue-tip. His fingers rose halfheartedly in the intricate gestures of the spell, groping after the vanished memory as if it could be plucked out of the star-misted air. No use. His mind was as blank of the magical remembrance as if it had never been. Franga's magic worked well indeed.

"Are you crazy?" demanded Yarol, regarding his hesitating ally with an amazed gaze. Smith grinned ruefully.

"I thought I had an idea," he admitted. "But it's no good. Come on."

The spongy ground was wicked to walk on. They stumbled against one another, swearing in a variety of tongues at the blinding air they groped through, the hard going under foot, the wretched uncertainty that kept their eyes scanning the dazzle as they walked.

It was Jirel who first caught sight of the shrunken brown thing. Indeed, she almost stumbled over it, a mummified body, curled up on its side so that its bony knees nearly touched the brown fleshless forehead. Smith turned at her little gasp, saw the thing, and paused to bend over it wonderingly.

It was not pleasant to see. The skin, stretched tightly over the bony frame, was parchment-brown, hideously rough in texture, almost as if the hide of some great lizard had been stretched over the skeleton of a man. The face was hidden, but the hands were slender claws, whitish in places where the granulated skin had been stripped from the bone. Wisps of straw-like hair still clung to the wrinkled scalp.

"Well, come along," said Yarol impatiently. "Certainly he can't help

us, or harm us either."

Silently assenting, Smith swung on his heel. But some instinct--the little tingling danger-note that whispers in the back of a spaceman's head--made him turn. The position of the recumbent figure had changed. Its head was lifted, and it was staring at him with swollen, glazed eyes.

Now the thing should have been dead. Smith knew that, somehow, with a dreadful certainty. The face was a brown skull-mask, with a vaguely canine cast, and the nose, although ragged and eaten away in places, protruded with a shocking resemblance to a beast's muzzle.

The limbs of the horror twitched and moved slowly, and the skeletal, tattered body arose. It dragged itself forward among the whirling star-motes, and instinctively Smith recoiled. There was something so unutterably dreary about it, despite the dreadful attitude of hunger that thrust its beast's head forward, that he sickened a little as he stared. From Jirel came a little cry of repugnance, quickly muffled.

"We'd better get out of here," said Smith harshly. Yarol did not speak for a moment. Then he murmured, "There are more of the things, N. W. See?"

Hidden by the starry mists close to the ground, the ghastly things must have been closing in upon them with that hideous dreary slowness for the past several minutes. They came on, scores of them veiled in stars, moving with a dreadful deliberation, and none of them stood upright. From all sides they were converging, and the dancing motes lent them a curious air of nightmare unreality, like carven gargoyles seen through a fog.

For the most part they came on hands and knees, withered brown

skull-faces and glaring bulbous eyes staring blindly at the three. For it seemed to Smith that the beings were blind; the swollen eyes were quite whitish and pupilless. There was nothing about them that savored of the breathing flesh which they so hideously caricatured save the terrible hunger of their approach, made doubly hideous by the fact that those rotting jaws and parchment-dry bellies could never satisfy it by any normal means.

The deformed muzzles of some of them were twitching, and Smith realized abruptly what instinct had led them here. They hunted, apparently, by scent. And their circle was closing in, so that the three humans, recoiling before that creeping, dryly rustling approach, stood very close together now, shoulder to shoulder. Smith felt the girl shudder against him, and then give him a swift sidelong glance, hot with anger that she should have betrayed weakness even for a moment.

A little hesitantly he drew his heat-gun. There was something a bit incongruous about the very thought of shooting at these already dead things. But they were coming closer, and the prospect of contact with those brown, scaling bodies was so repulsive that his finger pressed the trigger almost of its own volition.

One of the approaching horrors toppled over, the left arm completely burned from its body. Then it regained its balance and crawled onward with a crab-like sidewise motion, the severed arm forgotten behind it, although the skeleton fingers writhed and clawed convulsively. The creature made no outcry, and no blood flowed from the wound.

"Shan!" breathed Yarol. "Can't they--die?" His gun jarred and bucked in his hand. The head of the nearest horror became a blackened, cindery stub, but the thing betrayed no pain. It crawled on slowly, the nimbus of swirling stars like a malefic halo about the burned remnant

of a head.

"Yarol!" said Smith sharply. "Double strength--we'll cut a path through them. Follow us, Jirel." Without waiting for an acknowledgment he flicked over a lever on his heat-gun's muzzle, and sent the searing ray flaming through the dark.

The stars danced more swiftly, troubled. Smith sensed a quick, intangible menace in their aroused motion. It was as though something, drowsy and dreaming, had awakened suddenly from slumber to confront the intruders in this strange land. Yet nothing happened; the stars raced back from the heat-ray's beam, but the crawling monsters paid it no attention, even though they blackened into cinders as they crept. The dry, rustling hordes of them advanced straight into the heat-gun's path, and crisped into ruin--and crunched under the feet of their destroyers into fragments that twitched and squirmed with unquenchable animation too hideous to be called life.

Yarol and Smith and Jirel moved forward over brittle black things that still moved and crunched and crept beneath their feet. The two heat-guns hissed softly, mowing a path. Jirel's yellow eyes dwelt speculatively on Smith's brawny back, and once she touched Yarol's dagger sheathed at her side. But she made no hostile move.

So they won free at last from the withered brown horrors, although until the thickening star-mist hid them Smith could see the nightmare horde crawling behind them, slowly, inexorably. And ever the stars danced and swung in their oddly patterned orbits, seeming to watch with detached and sardonic amusement as the three moved on.

The misty brilliance thickened about them sometimes until they could not see each other's faces; sometimes it thinned so that distances were visible, long corridors of emptiness stretched through the stars. Along one of these aisles at last they caught a glimpse of rising

ground, and turned toward it in some hopeless hope of escape.

The spongy earth became firmer as they advanced, until by the time they reached the upland they were walking on black, splintered rock from which a sort of star-veiled mountain rose into the misty upper air. Here the stars thickened about them again, so that they could see nothing, but they stumbled up the jagged slope blindly, clutching at the rock with slipping fingers as they helped one another from ledge to ledge.

In Smith, as he mounted the difficult slopes, a fever of exploration had begun to burn so hotly that their danger retired to the back of his mind. What lay ahead, what unimaginable heights rearing among the stars, what lands beyond the mountain? He was not to know, then or ever.

The slope had grown steeper and more rugged at every step. There was no progress save by painful climbing. And now, as Smith braced his back against a rocky outcropping, straining upward to his full height as he supported Yarol's scrambling boots which a moment before had left his shoulders, his arms encountered a queer, thick obstruction in the starry mist overhead. Full of the desire to know what lay ahead, his mind intent on helping Yarol to a foothold above, he scarcely heeded it until the obstruction had thickened until he could hardly move his hands.

Then the shock of memory jarred him sickeningly awake as he recalled the wall of mist that had solidified between Franga and Jirel. He moved with whiplash swiftness to jerk his arms down, but not quite swiftly enough. That thickening mist had turned to strong steel about his wrists, and after a moment of surging struggle against it, while the veins stood out on his forehead and the blood thundered in his ears, he relaxed against the stone, stretched painfully to full height so that he almost swung from his prisoned wrists, and blinked

about him in the dazzling dim air, searching for Franga.

He knew now, with a sick regretfulness, that danger had never been farther from them in the mist than they had been from one another. Franga must have moved invisibly at their sides, waiting patiently for the men's hands to stretch far enough from their guns so that his shackles could prison them before they could reach the weapons. Well, he had them now.

From above, Yarol's voice, muffled in the starry mist, spoke passionately of gods and devils. Smith heard boots thrashing upon the rock and realized that the little Venusian must be struggling with bonds like his own. As for himself, he stood spread-eagled with his back to the mountain and his face to the starry void, boots braced on a long slope of rising stone.

He saw Jirel's back as she loitered below them on the slope, waiting for their call that the next highest ledge had been reached. He said quietly, "Joiry!" and met her gaze with a small, rueful grin.

"Well--what?" She was at his side before the question was out of her mouth, a blaze smoldering in her yellow eyes as she saw what had happened. Then she said viciously, "Good! This comes of trafficking with warlocks! May you hang there till you rot!"

"Heh!" came a dry chuckle from behind her. "He'll do just that, Joiry, if he doesn't obey my commands!" Franga came shuffling up the slope, emerging from the stars as from a thick fog, his malice-bright eyes gloating on the prisoned men. From above, Yarol's voice poured smoking Venusian curses upon the wizard's unheeding head.

Jirel matched his fervor with a hot French oath and spun toward Franga purposefully. He smiled crookedly and stepped back, his

hands weaving in the air between them. And once more the cloudy barrier thickened in the dimness. Through it, in a triumphant voice, Franga called to Smith,

"Now will you fulfill your bargain and wrest the jewel from Jirel?"

Smith pressed his head back against the stone and said wearily,

"Not until you return us to Joiry."

The warlock's eyes were on his, and in the baffled fury glaring there he thought he read suddenly the full reason why they had been brought here. Franga had no thought of paying the debt he had contracted, nor of letting any of the three escape alive. Once the stone was surrendered they would die here, in some unimaginable way, and their bones would whiten until Judgment Day in the darkness at the mountain's foot. Their only hope of salvation lay in their ability to bargain with Franga over the Starstone. So he shut his lips on the refusal and shifted his shoulders to ease his already aching arms. The weight of the gun on his leg was a tantalization almost unbearable, so near and yet so hopelessly far from his shackled hands.

Franga said: "I think I can change your mind."

His hands behind the barrier moved cryptically, and there came a stirring in the stars that danced between him and Smith. They moved as if fireflies were swarming there, moved toward Smith and swirled about him dizzily, blindingly, so that the eye despaired of following their motion. They turned into streaks of flame spinning about him, and now the nearest brushed across his cheek.

At the touch he started involuntarily, jerking back his head from the flame. For it was hot with a heat that sent pain stabbing deeper than

a ray-burn through his flesh. Above him he heard Yarol's sharply caught breath, and knew that the hot pain was upon him too. He set his teeth and stared through the swirl at the warlock, his eyes pale and deadly. The spinning flames closed in, brushing his body with scores of tiny tongues, and at every touch the white-hot pain of their torment leaped through him until it seemed to him that every inch of his body flamed with deep-running agony.

Through the blinding pain and the blinding shimmer Franga's voice rasped, "Will you do my bidding?"

Stubbornly Smith shook his head, clinging even in the hot torture of the flames to the desperate hope which was all that remained to him--that so long as Franga had not the Starstone he dared not kill them. Smith had endured pain before; he could endure it now long enough to hold Franga to his bargain. And Yarol must endure it with him for a while. The Venusian had a shameless sort of bravery against physical pain for the simple reason that he could not endure it, quietly fainted and was out of it if called upon to suffer long. Smith hoped he reached that point soon. He said, "No," shortly, between clenched teeth, and pressed his head back against the rock, feeling sweat gather on his forehead as the flashing streaks of flame seared by him, every touch sending deep agony flaming through his flesh.

Franga laughed in a brief, hard cackle and gestured with one hand. And the star-swirls began to flash like knives before Smith's eyes. If they had flamed before, now they dazzled too blindingly to follow. The deep, hot torture of their flickering roared over him in a storm of agony, so that the torment wiped out all thought of Franga or Jirel or Yarol or anything but his own racked flesh flaming with ray-hot pain. He did not know that his fists were clenched above the shackles, or that the muscles stood out in ridges along his jaws as he fought to keep the agony voiceless behind his teeth. The world was a hell of unbearable torment that swept him on a white-hot tide of pain deep

into blazing oblivion. He did not even feel the drag on his wrists as his knees gave way beneath him.

Jirel had been watching with mingling emotions as the stars began to swirl into flames about her tall enemy. Triumph was foremost among them, as resentment and fury were foremost among her thoughts just then. But somehow, she who had looked hardily on torture many times before now felt a queer, hot weakness rising in her as the stars became brushing flames and she saw the sweat beading Smith's forehead and his fists clench against the rock.

Then Franga's hateful voice demanded that he rob her by violence of her jewel and she had tensed herself involuntarily to the struggle before she heard Smith's tortured but resolute "No." She stared at him then half in amazement, her mind whirling with wonder at his motives. And a small, reluctant admiration was coloring her resentment of him as she watched. Jirel was a connoisseur of torture, and she could not remember a man who had endured it more resolutely than Smith. Nor was there a sound from Yarol, half hidden in the starry mist above them, though the small flames streaked the dimness even there.

Then she saw the tenseness melting from Smith's racked body as his long legs buckled at the knees, saw him collapse against the mountainside, swinging by his wrists from the shackles. And a sudden fury of sympathy and hot emotion rushed over her, a sudden gust of pain in his pain. Without realizing how it had happened she found herself beating with clenched fists against the barrier that parted her from Franga, heard her own voice crying,

"Stop it! Stop! Let him go free--I give you the Starstone!"

In the deeps of his pain-flaming oblivion Smith heard that high, passionate cry. The significance of it jolted him back into the

memory that a world existed outside the burning circle of his agony, and with infinite effort he lifted his sagging head, found a footing on the rocky slope once more, struggled back into consciousness and flaming anguish. He called in a voice as hoarse as if it had screamed itself raw,

"Jirel! Jirel, you fool, don't do it! He'll kill us all! Jirel!"

If she heard him she did not heed. She was wrenching with both hands at the doeskin tunic buckled at her throat, and Franga, the barrier dissolving, leaned eagerly forward with clawed hands outstretched.

"Don't--Jirel, don't!" yelled Smith despairingly through the dazzle of the flames as the leather parted and suddenly, blindingly, the Starstone flamed in her hands.

Even his own hot pain was blotted for a moment from Smith's mind as he stared. Franga bent forward, breath sucked in, eyes riveted upon the great pale glory of the jewel.

There was utter silence in that strange, dim place as the Starstone blazed through the dusk, its cold, still pallor burning in Jirel's fingers like a block of frozen flame. Looking down, she saw again her own fingers distorted through its translucency, saw again that queer, moving flicker as if a shadow stirred in the deeps of the stone.

For a moment it seemed to her as if these smooth, cool surfaces against her hands enclosed a space as vast as the heavens. In a moment of sudden vertigo she might have been staring deep into an infinity through whose silences moved a something that filled it from edge to edge. Was it a world she held here, as vast in its own dimensions as space itself, even though her narrow hands cradled it between them? And was there not a Dweller in that vast, glowing

place--a moving shadow that--

"Jirel!" Smith's pain-hoarse voice startled her out of her dreaming daze. She lifted her head and moved toward him, half visible in the swirl of his torture, holding the jewel like a lamp in her hands. "Don't--don't do it!" begged Smith, gripping hard at his ebbing consciousness as the flames stabbed through him.

"Free him!" she commanded Franga, feeling her own throat constrict inexplicably as she saw the pain etched upon Smith's scarred face.

"You surrender the stone willingly?" The warlock's eyes were ravenous upon her hands.

"Yes--yes, only free him!"

Smith choked on his own desperation as he saw her holding out the jewel. At any cost he knew he must keep it from Franga's clutches, and to his pain-dazed brain there seemed only one way for that. How it would help he did not stop to think, but he put all his weight on his prisoned wrists, swinging his long body through the burning stars in an arc as he kicked the jewel from Jirel's outstretched hands.

She gasped; Franga screamed in a thin, high note that quivered with terror as the Starstone was dashed from her hands against the jagged rock of the mountainside. There was a cracking sound that tinkled like broken glass, and then--

And then a pale, bright glory rolled up in their faces as if the light that dwelt in the jewel were pouring out of its shattered prison. The winking stars were swallowed up in its splendor, the dim air glowed and brightened, the whole mountainside was bathed in the calm, still glory that a moment before had blazed in the Starstone's deeps.

Franga was muttering frantically, twisting his hands in spells that

accomplished nothing, gabbling in a cracked voice incantations that evoked no magic. It was as if all his power had melted with the melting stars, the vanished dimness, and he stood unprotected in the full glow of this alien light.

Smith was scarcely heeding it. For as the great pale glory billowed up about him the flashing torment of the stars vanished as their flames vanished, and the utter bliss of peace after pain left him so weak with relief that as the shackles dissolved about his wrists he could only reel back against the rock while waves of near-oblivion washed over him.

A rattling and scuffling sounded above him, and Yarol's small form slid to the ground at his feet in the complete relaxation of unconsciousness. There was a silence while Smith breathed deeply and slowly, gathering strength again, while Yarol stirred in the beginnings of awakening and Franga and Jirel stared about them in the broadening light from the Starstone.

Then down about them swept a thing that can be called only a shadow of light--a deeper brilliance in the glory of the pale day about them. Smith found himself staring directly into its blazing heart, unblinded, although he could make out no more than the shadowy outlines of a being that hung above them--inhuman, utterly alien--but not terrible, not menacing. A presence as tangible as flame--and as intangible.

And somehow he sensed a cool and impersonal regard, an aloof, probing gaze that seemed to search the depths of his mind and soul. He strained his eyes, staring into the heart of the white blaze, trying to make out the nature of the being that regarded him. It was like the graceful whorl of a nautilus--and yet he sensed that his eyes could not fully comprehend the unearthly curves and spirals that followed a fantastic, non-Euclidean system of some alien geometry. But the

beauty of the thing he could recognize, and there was a deep awe within him, and a feeling of fathomless delight in the wonder and beauty of the being he gazed on.

Franga was screaming thinly and hoarsely, falling to his knees to hide his eyes from the deep splendor. The air quivered, the shadow of brilliance quivered, and a thought without words quivered too through the minds of the three at the mountain's foot.

"For this release We are grateful," said a voiceless voice as deep and still and somehow flaming as the light that made it manifest. "We Whom strong magic prisoned in the Starstone ages ago would grant one last favor before We return to Our own place again. Ask it of Us."

"Oh, return us home again!" gasped Jirel before Smith could speak. "Take us out of this terrible place and send us home!"

Abruptly, almost instantaneously, the shadow of light enveloped them, swept blindingly about them all. The mountain dropped away underfoot, the glory-bright air swept sidewise into nothingness. It was as if the walls of space and time opened up all around them.

Smith heard Franga's shriek of utter despair--saw Jirel's face whirled by him with a sudden, desperate message blazing in her yellow eyes, the red hair streaming like a banner in the wind--and then that dazzle all about him was the dulled gleam of steel walls, and a cold steel surface was smooth against his cheek.

He lifted his head heavily and stared into silence, into Yarol's eyes across the table in the little Martian drinking-booth he had left an eon ago. In silence the Venusian returned that long stare.

Then Yarol leaned back in his chair and called, "Marnak! Liquor--quick!" and swung round and began to laugh softly, crazily.

Smith groped for the glass of segir-whisky he had pushed away when he rose from this table, ages past. He threw back his head and tossed the liquid down his throat with a quick, stiff-wristed gesture, closing his eyes as the familiar warmth burned through him. Behind the closed lids flashed the remembrance of a keen, pale face whose eyes blazed with some sudden violence of emotion, some message he would never know—whose red streaming hair was a banner on the wind. The face of a girl dead two thousand years in time, light-years of space away, whose very dust was long lost upon the bright winds of earth.

Smith shrugged and drained his glass.

The Iron Standard

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Alien races didn't have to be either friendly or unfriendly; they could be stubbornly indifferent--with serious effect.

"So the ghost won't walk for a year--Venusian time," Thirkell said, spooning up cold beans with a disgusted air.

Rufus Munn, the captain, looked up briefly from his task of de-cockroaching the soup. "Dunno why we had to import these. A year plus four weeks, Steve. There'll be a month at space before we hit Earth again."

Thirkell's round, pudgy face grew solemn. "What happens in the meantime? Do we starve on cold beans?"

Munn sighed, glancing through the open, screened port of the spaceship Goodwill to where dim figures moved in the mists outside. But he didn't answer. Barton Underhill, supercargo and handy man, who had wangled his passage by virtue of his father's wealth, grinned tightly and said, "What d'you expect? We don't dare use fuel. There's just enough to get us home. So it's cold beans or nothing."

"Soon it will be nothing," Thirkell said solemnly. "We have been spendthrifts. Wasting our substance in riotous living."

"Riotous living!" Munn growled. "We gave most of our grub to the Venusians."

"Well," Underhill murmured, "they fed us--for a month."

"Not now. There's an embargo. What do they have against us, anyhow?"

Munn thrust back his stool with sudden decision. "That's something we'll have to figure out. Things can't go on like this. We simply haven't enough food to last us a year. And we can't live off the land—" He stopped as someone unzipped the valve screen and entered, a squat man with high cheekbones and a beak of a nose in a red-bronze face.

"Find anything, Redskin?" Underhill asked.

Mike Soaring Eagle tossed a plastisac on the table. "Six mushrooms. No wonder the Venusians use hydroponics. They have to. Only fungi will grow in this sponge of a world, and most of that's poisonous. No use, skipper."

Munn's mouth tightened. "Yeah. Where's Bronson?"

"Panhandling. But he won't get a fal." The Navaho nodded towards the port. "Here he comes now."

After a moment the others heard Bronson's slow footsteps. The engineer came in, his face red as his hair. "Don't ask me," he murmured. "Don't say a word, anybody. Me, a Kerry man, trying to bum a lousy fal from a shagreen-skinned so-and-so with an iron ring in his nose like a Ubangi savage. Think of it! The shame will stay with me forever."

"My sympathy," Thirkell said. "But did you get any fals?"

Bronson glared at him. "Would I have taken his dirty coins if he'd offered them?" the engineer yelled, his eyes bloodshot. "I'd have flung them in his slimy face, and you can take my word for it. I touch

their rotten money? Give me some beans." He seized a plate and morosely began to eat.

Thirkell exchanged glances with Underhill. "He didn't get any money," the latter said.

Bronson started back with a snort. "He asked me if I belonged to the Beggars' Guild! Even tramps have to join a union on this planet!"

Captain Munn scowled thoughtfully. "No, it isn't a union, Bronson, or even much like the medieval guilds. The tarkoinars are a lot more powerful and a lot less principled. Unions grew out of a definite social and economic background, and they fill a purpose--a check-and-balance system that keeps building. I'm not talking about unions; on Earth some of 'em are good--like the Air Transport--and some are graft-ridden, like Undersea Dredgers. The tarkoinars are different. They don't fulfil any productive purpose. They just keep the Venusian system in its backwater."

"Yes," Thirkell said, "and unless we're members, we aren't allowed to work--at anything. And we can't be members till we pay the initiation fee--a thousand sofals."

"Easy on those beans," Underhill cautioned. "We've only ten more cans."

There was silence. Presently Munn passed cigarettes.

"We've got to do something, that's certain," he said. "We can't get food except from the Venusians, and they won't give it to us. One thing in our favor: the laws are so arbitrary that they can't refuse to sell us grub--it's illegal to refuse legal tender."

Mike Soaring Eagle glumly sorted his six mushrooms. "Yeah. If we can get our hands on legal tender. We're broke--broke on Venus--

and we'll soon be starving to death. If anybody can figure out an answer to that one--"

This was in 1964, three years after the first successful flight to Mars, five years since Dooley and Hastings had brought their ship down in Mare Imbrium. The Moon, of course, was uninhabited, save by active but unintelligent algae. The big-chested, alert Martians, with their high metabolism and their brilliant, erratic minds, had been friendly, and it was certain that the cultures of Mars and Earth would not clash. As for Venus, till now, no ship had landed there.

The Goodwill was the ambassador. It was an experiment, like the earlier Martian voyage, for no one knew whether or not there was intelligent life on Venus. Supplies for more than a year were stowed aboard, dehydrates, plastibulbs, concentrates and vitamin foods, but every man of the crew had a sneaking hunch that food would be found in plenty on Venus.

There was food--yes. The Venusians grew it, in their hydroponic tanks under the cities. But on the surface of the planet grew nothing edible at all. There was little animal or bird life, so hunting was impossible, even had the Earthmen been allowed to retain their weapons. And in the beginning it had seemed like a gala holiday after the arduous space trip--a year-long fete and carnival in an alien, fascinating civilization.

It was alien, all right. The Venusians were conservative. What was good enough for their remote ancestors was quite good enough for them. They didn't want changes, it seemed. Their current set-up had worked o.k. for centuries; why alter it now?

The Earthmen meant change--that was obvious.

Result: a boycott of the Earthmen.

It was all quite passive. The first month had brought no trouble; Captain Munn had been presented with the keys of the capital city, Vyring, on the outskirts of which the Goodwill now rested, and the Venusians brought food in plenty--odd but tasty dishes from the hydroponic gardens. In return, the Earthmen were lavish with their own stores, depleting them dangerously.

And the Venusian food spoiled quickly. There was no need to preserve it, for the hydroponic tanks turned out a steady, unflinching supply. In the end the Earthmen were left with a few weeks' stock of the food they had brought with them, and a vast pile of garbage that had been lusciously appetizing a few days before.

Then the Venusians stopped bringing their quick-spoiling fruits, vegetables and meat-mushrooms and clamped down. The party was over. They had no intention of harming the Earthmen; they remained carefully friendly. But from now on it was Pay as You're Served--and no checks cashed. A big meat-mushroom, enough for four hungry men, cost ten fals.

Since the Earthmen had no fals, they got no meat-mushrooms--nor anything else.

In the beginning it hadn't seemed important. Not until they got down to cases and began to wonder exactly how they could get food.

There was no way.

So they sat in the Goodwill eating cold beans and looking like five of the Seven Dwarfs, a quintet of stocky, short, husky men, big-boned and muscular, especially chosen for their physiques to stand the rigors of space flight--and their brains, also specially chosen, couldn't help them now.

It was a simple problem--simple and primitive. They, the representatives of Earth's mightiest culture, were hungry. They would soon be hungrier.

And they didn't have a fal--nothing but worthless gold, silver and paper currency. There was metal in the ship, but none of the pure metal they needed, except in alloys that couldn't be broken down.

Venus was on the iron standard.

"--there's got to be an answer," Munn said stubbornly, his hard-bitten, harsh face somber. He pushed back his plate with an angry gesture. "I'm going to see the Council again."

"What good will that do?" Thirkell wanted to know. "We're on the spot, there's no getting around it. Money talks."

"Just the same, I'm going to talk to Jorust," the captain growled. "She's no fool."

"Exactly," Thirkell said cryptically.

Munn stared at him, beckoned to Mike Soaring Eagle and turned towards the valve. Underhill jumped up eagerly.

"May I go?"

Bronson gloomily toyed with his beans. "Why do you want to go? You couldn't even play a slot machine in Vyring's skid row--if they had slot machines. Maybe you think if you tell 'em your old man's a Tycoon of Amalgamated Ores, they'll break down and hand out meal tickets--eh?"

But his tone was friendly enough, and Underhill merely grinned. Captain Munn said, "Come along, if you want, but hurry up." The

three men went out into the steaming mists, their feet sloshing through sticky mud.

It wasn't uncomfortably hot; the high winds of Venus provided for quick evaporation, a natural air conditioning that kept the men from feeling the humidity. Munn referred to his compass. The outskirts of Vyring were half a mile away, but the fog was, as usual, like pea soup.

On Venus it is always bird-walking weather. Silently the trio slogged on.

"I thought Indians knew how to live off the land," Underhill presently remarked to the Navaho. Mike Soaring Eagle looked at him quizzically.

"I'm not a Venusian Indian," he explained. "Maybe I could make a bow and arrow and bring down a Venusian—but that wouldn't help, unless he had a lot of sofals in his purse."

"We might eat him," Underhill murmured. "Wonder what roast Venusian would taste like?"

"Find out and you can write a best seller when you get back home," Munn remarked. "If you get back home. Vyring's got a police force, chum."

"Oh, well," Underhill said, and left it at that. "Here's the Water Gate. Lord—I smell somebody's dinner!"

"So do I," the Navaho grunted, "but I hoped nobody would mention it. Shut up and keep walking."

The wall around Vyring was in the nature of a dike, not a fortification. Venus was both civilized and unified; there were, apparently, no wars

and no tariffs--a natural development for a world state. Air transports made sizzling noises as they shot past, out of sight in the fog overhead. Mist shrouded the streets, torn into tatters by occasional huge fans. Vying, shielded from the winds, was unpleasantly hot, except indoors where artificial air conditioning could be brought into use.

Underhill was reminded of Venice: the streets were canals. Watercraft of various shapes and sizes drifted, glided or raced past. Even the beggars travelled by water. There were rutted, muddy footpaths beside the canals, but no one with a fal to his name ever walked.

The Earthmen walked, cursing fervently as they splashed through the muck. They were, for the most part, ignored.

A water taxi scooted towards the bank, its pilot, wearing the blue badge of his tarkoinar, hailing them. "May I escort you?" he wanted to know.

Underhill exhibited a silver dollar. "If you'll take this--sure." All the Earthmen had learned Venusian quickly; they were good linguists, having been chosen for this as well as other transplanetary virtues. The phonetic Venusian tongue was far from difficult.

It was no trouble at all to understand the taxi pilot when he said no.

"Toss you for it," Underhill said hopefully. "Double or nothing."

But the Venusians weren't gamblers. "Double what?" the pilot inquired. "That coin? It's silver." He indicated the silver, rococo filigree on the prow of his craft. "Junk!"

"This would be a swell place for Benjamin Franklin," Mike Soaring Eagle remarked. "His false teeth were made of iron, weren't they?"

"If they were, he had a Venusian fortune in his mouth," Underhill said.

"Not quite."

"If it could buy a full-course dinner, it's a fortune," Underhill insisted.

The pilot, eyeing the Earthmen scornfully, drifted off in search of wealthier fares. Munn, doggedly plodding on, wiped sweat from his forehead. Swell place, Vyring, he thought. Swell place to starve to death.

Half an hour of difficult hiking roused Munn to a slow, dull anger. If Jorust refused to see him, he thought, there was going to be trouble, even though they'd taken away his guns. He felt capable of tearing down Vyring with his teeth. And eating the more edible portions.

Luckily, Jorust was available. The Earthmen were ushered into her office, a big, luxurious room high above the city, with windows open to the cooling breezes. Jorust was skittering around the room on a high chair, equipped with wheels and some sort of motor. Along the walls ran a slanting shelf, like a desk and presumably serving the same function. It was shoulder-high, but Jorust's chair raised her to its level. She probably started in one corner in the morning, Munn thought, and worked her way around the room during the day.

Jorust was a slim, gray-haired Venusian woman with a skin the texture of fine shagreen, and alert black eyes that were wary now. She climbed down from her chair, gestured the men to seats, and took one herself. She lit a pipe that looked like an oversized cigarette holder, stuffing it with a cylinder of pressed yellow herbs. Aromatic smoke drifted up. Underhill sniffed wistfully.

"May you be worthy of your fathers," Jorust said politely, extending her six-fingered hand in greeting. "What brings you?"

"Hunger," Munn said bluntly. "I think it's about time for a show-down."

Jorust watched him inscrutably. "Well?"

"We don't like being pushed around."

"Have we harmed you?" the Council head asked.

Munn looked at her. "Let's put our cards on the table. We're getting the squeeze play. You're a big shot here, and you're either responsible or you know why. How about it?"

"No," Jorust said after a pause, "no, I'm not as powerful as you seem to think. I am one of the administrators. I do not make the laws. I merely see that they are carried out. We are not enemies."

"That might happen," Munn said grimly. "If another expedition comes from Earth and finds us dead--"

"We would not kill you. It is untraditional."

"You could starve us to death, though."

Jorust narrowed her eyes. "Buy food. Any man can do that, no matter what his race."

"And what do we use for money?" Munn asked. "You won't take our currency. We haven't any of yours."

"Your currency is worthless," Jorust explained. "We have gold and silver for the mining--it is common here. A difal--twelve fals--will buy a good deal of food. A sofal will buy even more than that."

She was right, of course, Munn knew. A sofal was one thousand seven hundred twenty-eight fals. Yeah!

"And how do you expect us to get any of your iron money?" he snapped.

"Work for it, as our own people do. The fact that you are from another world does not dispose of your obligatory duty to create through labor."

"All right," Munn pursued, "we're willing. Get us a job."

"What kind?"

"Dredging canals! Anything!"

"Are you a member of the canal dredgers'tarkoinar?"

"No," Munn said. "How could I have forgotten to join?"

Jorust ignored the sarcasm. "You must join. All trades here have their tarkoinars."

"Lend me a thousand sofals and I'll join one."

"You have tried that before," Jorust told him. "Our moneylenders reported that your collateral was worthless."

"Worthless! D'you mean to say we've nothing in our ship worth a thousand sofals to your race? It's a squeeze play and you know it. Our water purifier alone is worth six times that to you."

Jorust seemed affronted. "For a thousand years we have cleansed our water with charcoal. If we changed now, we would be naming our ancestors fools. They were not fools; they were great and wise."

"What about progress?"

"I see no need for it," Jorust said. "Our civilization is a perfect unit as it stands. Even the beggars are well fed. There is no unhappiness on Venus. The ways of our ancestors have been tested and found good. So why change?"

"But--"

"We would merely upset the status quo if we altered the balance," Jorust said decisively, rising. "May you be worthy of your fathers' names."

"Listen--" Munn began.

But Jorust was back on her chair, no longer listening.

The three Earthmen looked at one another, shrugged and went out. The answer was definitely no.

"And that," Munn said, as they descended in the elevator, "is emphatically that. Jorust plans to have us starve to death. The word's out."

Underhill was inclined to disagree. "She's all right. As she said, she's just an administrator. It's the tarkoinars who are the pressure group here. They're a powerful bloc."

"They run Venus. I know." Munn grimaced. "It's difficult to understand the psychology of these people. They seem unalterably opposed to change. We represent change. So they figure they'll simply ignore us."

"It won't work," Underhill said. "Even if we starve to death, there'll be more Earth ships later."

"The same gag could work on them, too."

"Starvation? But--"

"Passive resistance. There's no law compelling Venusians to treat with Earthmen. They can simply adopt a closed-door policy, and there's not a thing we can do about it. There's no welcome mat on Venus."

Mike Soaring Eagle broke a long silence as they emerged to the canal bank. "It's a variation of ancestor worship, their psychology. Transferred egotism, perhaps--a racial inferiority complex."

Munn shook his head. "You're drawing it a bit fine."

"All right, maybe I am. But it boils down to worship of the past. And fear. Their present social culture has worked for centuries. They want no intrusions. It's logical. If you had a machine that worked perfectly at the job for which it had been designed, would you want improvements?"

"Why not?" Munn said. "Certainly I would."

"Why?"

"Well--to save time. If a new attachment would make the machine double its production, I'd want that."

The Navaho looked thoughtful. "Suppose it turned out--say--refrigerators. There'd be repercussions. You'd need less labor, which would upset the economic structure."

"Microscopically."

"In that case. But there'd also be a change in the consumer's angle. More people would have refrigerators. More people would make

home-made ice cream. Sales on ice cream would drop--retail sales. The whole-salers would buy less milk. The farmers would--"

"I know," Munn said. "For want of a nail the kingdom was lost. You're speaking of microcosms. Even if you weren't, there are automatic adjustments--there always are."

"An experimental, growing civilization is willing to stand for such adjustments," Mike Soaring Eagle pointed out. "The Venusians are ultraconservative. They figure they don't need to grow or change any more. Their system has worked for centuries. It's perfectly integrated. Intrusion of anything might upset the apple cart. The tarkoinars have the power, and they intend to keep it."

"So we starve," Underhill put in.

The Indian grinned at him. "Looks like it. Unless we can dope out some way of making money."

"We ought to," Munn said. "We were chosen for our i.q., among other things."

"Our talents aren't too suitable," Mike Soaring Eagle remarked, kicking a stone into the canal. "You're a physicist. I'm a naturalist. Bronson's an engineer and Steve Thirkell's a sawbones. You, my useless young friend, are a rich man's son."

Underhill smiled in an embarrassed fashion. "Well, dad flame up the hard way. He knew how to make money. That's what we need now, isn't it?"

"How did he clean up?"

"Stock market."

"That helps a lot," Munn said. "I think our best plan is to find some process the Venusians really need, and then sell it to them."

"If we could wireless back to Earth for help--" Underhill began.

"--then we'd have nothing to worry about," the Navaho ended. "Unfortunately Venus has a Heaviside layer, so we can't wireless. You'd better try your hand at inventing something, skipper. But whether or not the Venusians will want it afterwards, I don't know."

Munn brooded. "The status quo can't remain permanently that way. It ain't sensible, as my grandfather used to say about practically everything. There are always inventors. New processes--they've got to be assimilated into the social set-up. I should be able to dope out a gadget. Even a good preservative for foods might do it."

"Not with the hydroponic gardens producing as they do."

"Um-m. A better mousetrap--something useless but intriguing. A one-armed bandit--"

"They'd pass a law against it."

"Well, you suggest something."

"The Venusians don't seem to know much about genetics. If I could produce some unusual foods by crossbreeding... eh?"

"Maybe," Munn said. "Maybe."

Steve Thirkell's pudgy face looked into the port. The rest of the party were seated at the table, scribbling on stylopads and drinking weak coffee.

"I have an idea," Thirkell said.

Munn grunted. "I know your ideas. What is it now?"

"Very simple. A plague strikes the Venusians and I find an antivirus that will save them. They will be grateful--"

"--and you'll marry Jorust and rule the planet," Munn finished. "Ha!"

"Not exactly," Thirkell went on imperturbably. "If they're not grateful, we'll simply hold out on the antitoxin till they pay up."

"The only thing wrong with that brainstorm is that the Venusians don't seem to be suffering from a plague," Mike Soaring Eagle pointed out. "Otherwise it's perfect."

Thirkell sighed. "I was afraid you'd mention that. Maybe we could be unethical--just a little, you know--and start a plague. Typhoid or something."

"What a man!" the Navaho said admiringly. "You'd make a grand murderer, Steve."

"I have often thought so. But I didn't intend to go as far as murder. A painful, incapacitating disease--"

"Such as?" Munn asked.

"Diphtheria?" the murderous physician suggested hopefully.

"A cheerful prospect," Mike Soaring Eagle muttered. "You sound like an Apache."

"Diphtheria, beriberi, leprosy, bubonic plague," Pat Bronson said violently. "I vote for all of 'em. Give the nasty little frogs a taste of their own medicine. Wallop 'em good."

"Suppose we let you start a mild plague," Munn said. "Something that couldn't conceivably be fatal--how would you go about it?"

"Pollute the water supply or something... eh?"

"Eh? What with?"

Thirkell suddenly looked heartbroken. "Oh! Oh!"

Munn nodded. "The Goodwill isn't stocked for that sort of thing. We're germless. Antiseptic inside and out. Have you forgotten the physical treatment they gave us before we left?"

Bronson cursed. "Never will I forget that--a hypo every hour! Anti-toxins, shots, ultraviolet x-rays, till my bones turned green."

"Exactly," Munn said. "We're practically germless. It's a precaution they had to take, to prevent our starting a plague on Venus."

"But we want to start a plague," Thirkell said plaintively.

"You couldn't even give a Venusian a head cold," Munn told him. "So that's out. What about Venusian anaesthetics? Are they as good as ours?"

"Better," the physician admitted. "Not that they need them, except for the children. Their synapses are funny. They've mastered self-hypnosis so they can block pain when it's necessary."

"Sulfa drugs?"

"I've thought of that. They've got those, too."

"My idea," Bronson broke in, "is water power. Or dams. Whenever it rains, there's a flood."

"There's good drainage, though," Munn said. "The canals take care of that."

"Now let me finish! Those fish-skinned so-and-sos have hydropower, but it isn't efficient. There's so much fast water all over the place that they build plants wherever it seems best--thousands of them--and half the time they're useless, when the rains concentrate on another district. Half of the plants are inoperable all the time. Which costs money. If they'd build dams, they'd have a steady source of power--without the terrific overhead."

"It's a thought," Munn acknowledged.

Mike Soaring Eagle said, "I'll stick to my crossbreeds in the hydroponic gardens. I can raise beefsteak-mushrooms to taste of Worcestershire sauce or something. An appeal to the palate, you know--"

"Fair enough. Steve?"

Thirkell rumped his hair. "I'll think of an angle. Don't rush me."

Munn looked at Underhill. "Any flashes of intellect, chum?"

The youngster grimaced. "Not just now. All I can think of is manipulating the stock market."

"Without money?"

"That's the trouble."

Munn nodded. "Well, my own idea is advertising. As a physicist, it's in my line."

"How?" Bronson wanted to know. "Demonstrating atom-smashing?"

A strong-man act?"

"Pipe down. Advertising isn't known on Venus, though commerce is. That's funny. I should think the retailers would jump at the chance."

"They've got radio commercials."

"Stylized and ritualistic. Their televisions are ready-made for splash advertising. A visual blurb... yeah. Trick gadgets I could make to demonstrate the products. Why not?"

"I think I'll build an x-ray machine," Thirkell said suddenly, "if you'll help me, skipper."

Munn said sure. "We've got the equipment--and the blueprints. Tomorrow we'll start. It must be pretty late."

It was, though there was no sunset on Venus. The quintet retired, to dream of full-course dinners--all but Thirkell, who dreamed he was eating a roast chicken that abruptly turned into a Venusian and began to devour him, starting at the feet. He woke up sweating and cursing, took some nembatal, and finally slept again.

The next morning they scattered. Mike Soaring Eagle took a microscope and other gadgets to the nearest hydroponic center and went to work. He wasn't allowed to carry spores back to the Goodwill, but there was no objection to his experimenting in Vyring itself. He made cultures and used forced-growth vitamin complexes and hoped for the best.

Pat Bronson went to see Skottery, head of Water Power. Skottery was a tall, saturnine Venusian who knew a lot about engineering and insisted on showing Bronson the models in his office before they settled down to a talk.

"How many power stations do you have?" Bronson asked.

"Third power twelve times four dozens. Forty-two dozen in this district."

Nearly a million altogether, Bronson made it. "How many in actual operation now?" he carried on.

"About seventeen dozen."

"That means three hundred idle--twenty-five dozen, that is. Isn't the upkeep a factor?"

"Quite a factor," Skottery acknowledged. "Aside from the fact that some of those stations are now permanently inoperable. The terrain changes rapidly. Erosion, you know. We'll build one station on a gorge one year, and the next the water will be taking a different route. We build about a dozen a day. But we salvage something from the old ones, of course."

Bronson had a brainstorm. "No watershed?"

"Eh?"

The Earthman explained. Skottery shook his shoulders in negation. "We have a different type of vegetation here. There's so much water that roots don't have to strike deeply."

"But they need soil?"

"No. The elements they need are in suspension in the water."

Bronson described how watersheds worked. "Suppose you imported Earth plants and trees and forested the mountains. And built dams to retain your water. You'd have power all the time, and

you'd need only a few big stations. And they'd be permanent."

Skottery thought that over. "We have all the power we need."

"But look at the expense!"

"Our rates cover that."

"You could make more money--difals and sofals--"

"We have made exactly the same profits for three hundred years," Skottery explained. "Our net remains constant. It works perfectly. You fail to understand our economic system, I see. Since we have everything we need, there's no use making more money--not even a fal more."

"Your competitors--"

"We have only three, and they are satisfied with their profits."

"Suppose I interest them in my plan?"

"But you couldn't," Skottery said patiently. "They wouldn't be interested any more than I am. I'm glad you dropped in. May you be worthy of your father's name."

"Ye soulless fish!" Bronson yelled, losing his temper. "Is there no red blood in your green-skinned carcass? Does no one on this world know what fight means?" He hammered a fist into his palm. "I wouldn't be worthy of the old Seumas Bronson's name unless I took a poke at that ugly phiz of yours right now--"

Skottery had pressed a button. Two large Venusians appeared. The head of Water Power pointed to Bronson.

"Remove it," he said.

Captain Rufus Munn was in one of the telecasting studios with Bart Underhill. They were sitting beside Hakkapuy, owner of Veetsy--which might be freely translated as Wet Tingles. They were watching the telecast commercial plug for Hakkapuy's product, on the 'visor screen high on the wall.

A Venusian faded in, legs wide apart, arms akimbo. He raised one hand, six fingers spread wide.

"All men drink water. Water is good. Life needs water. Veetsy is good also. Four fals buys a globe of Veetsy. That is all."

He vanished. Colors rippled across the screen and music played in off-beat rhythm. Munn turned to Hakkapuy.

"That isn't advertising. You can't get customers that way."

"Well, it's traditional," Hakkapuy said weakly.

Munn opened the pack at his feet, brought out a tall glass beaker, and asked for a globe of Veetsy. It was given him, and he emptied the green fluid into his beaker. After that, he dropped in a half dozen colored balls and added a chunk of dry ice, which sank to the bottom. The balls went up and down rapidly.

"See?" Munn said. "Visual effect. The marbles are only slightly heavier than Veetsy. It's the visual equivalent of Wet Tingles. Show that on the televisor, with a good sales talk, and see how your sales curve jumps."

Hakkapuy looked interested. "I'm not sure--"

Munn dragged out a sheaf of papers and hammered at the breach in

the wall. After a time a fat Venusian came in and said, "May you be worthy of your ancestors' names." Haklcapuy introduced him as Lorish.

"I thought Lorish had better see this. Would you mind going over it again?"

"Sure," Munn said. "Now the principle of display windows--" When he had finished, Hakkapuy looked at Lorish, who shook his shoulders slowly.

"No," he said.

Hakkapuy blew out his lips. "It would sell more Veetsy."

"And upset the economy charts," Lorish said. "No."

Munn glared at him. "Why not? Hakkapuy owns Veetsy, doesn't he? Who are you, anyhow--a censor?"

"I represent the advertisers'tarkoinar," Lorish explained. "You see, advertising on Venus is strongly ritual. It is never changed. Why should it be? If we let Hakkapuy use your ideas, it would be unfair to other makers of soft drinks."

"They could do the same thing," Munn pointed out.

"A pyramiding competition leading to ultimate collapse. Hakkapuy makes enough money. Don't you, Hakkapuy?"

"I suppose so."

"Are you questioning the motives of the tarkoinars?"

Hakkapuy gulped. "No," he said hastily. "No, no, no! You're perfectly

right."

Lorish looked at him. "Very well. As for you, Earthman, you had better not waste your time pursuing this--scheme--further."

Munn reddened. "Are you threatening me?"

"Of course not. I simply mean that no advertiser could use your idea without consulting my tarkoinar, and we would veto it."

"Sure," Munn said. "o.k. Come on, Bert. Let's get out of here." They departed, to stroll along a canal bank and confer. Underhill was thoughtful.

"The tarkoinars have held the balance of power for a long time, it looks like. They want things to stay as they are. That's obvious."

Munn growled.

Underhill went on, "We'd have to upset the whole apple cart to get anywhere. There's one thing in our favor, though."

"What?"

"The laws."

"How do you figure that out?" Munn asked. "They're all against us."

"So far--yes. But they're traditionally rigid and unswerving. A decision made three hundred years ago can't be changed except by a long court process. If we can find a loophole in those laws, they can't touch us."

"All right, find the loophole," Munn said grumpily. "I'm going back to the ship and help Steve build an x-ray machine."

"I think I'll go down to the stock exchange and snoop," Underhill said. "It's just possible--"

After a week, the x-ray device was finished. Munn and Thirkell looked through the Vyring law records and found they were permitted to sell a self-created device without belonging to a tarkoinar, provided they obeyed certain trivial restrictions. Leaflets were printed and strewed around the city, and the Venusians came to watch Munn and Thirkell demonstrating the merits of Roentgen rays.

Mike Soaring Eagle knocked off work for the day and recklessly smoked a dozen cigarettes from his scanty store, burning with dull fury as he puffed. He had run into trouble with his hydroponic cultures.

"Crazy!" he told Bronson. "Luther Burbank would have gone nuts--the way I'm going. How the devil can I guess-pollinate those ambiguous specimens of Venusian flora?"

"Well, it doesn't seem exactly fair," Bronson consoled. "Eighteen sexes, eh?"

"Eighteen so far. And four varieties that apparently haven't any sex at all. How can you crossbreed those perverted mushrooms? You'd have to exhibit the result in a side show."

"You're getting nowhere?"

"Oh, I'm getting places," Mike Soaring Eagle said bitterly. "I'm getting all sorts of results. The trouble is nothing stays constant. I get a rum-flavored fungus one day, and it doesn't breed true--its spores turn into something that tastes like turpentine. So you see."

Bronson looked sympathetic. "Can't you swipe some grub when they're not looking? That way the job wouldn't be a complete

washout."

"They search me," the Navaho said.

"The dirty skunks," Bronson yelled. "What do they think we are? Crooks?"

"Mph. Something's going on outside. Let's take a look."

They went out of the Goodwill to find Munn arguing passionately with Jorust, who had come in person to examine the x-ray machine. A crowd of Venusians watched avidly. Munn's face was crimson.

"I looked it up," he was saying. "You can't stop me this time, Jorust. It's perfectly legal to build a machine and sell it outside the city limits."

"Certainly," Jorust said. "I'm not complaining about that."

"Well? We're not breaking any law."

The woman beckoned, and a fat Venusian waddled forward. "Patent three gross squared fourteen two dozen, issued to Metzi-Stang of Mylosh year fourth power twelve, subject sensitized plates."

"What's that?" Munn asked.

"It's a patent," Jorust told him. "It was issued some time ago to a Venusian inventor named Metzi-Stang. A tarkoinar bought and suppressed the process, but it's still illegal to infringe on it."

"You mean somebody's already invented an x-ray machine on Venus?"

"No. Merely sensitized film. But that's part of your device, so you

can't sell it."

Thirkell pushed forward. "I don't need film--"

The fat Venusian said, "Vibratory patent three gross two dozen and seven--"

"What now?" Munn broke in.

Jorust smiled. "Machines employing vibration must not infringe on that patent."

"This is an x-ray machine," Thirkell snapped.

"Light is vibration," Jorust told him. "You can't sell it without buying permission from the tarkoinar now owning that patent. It should cost--let's see--five thousand sofals or so."

Thirkell turned abruptly and went into the ship, where he mixed a whisky-and-soda and thought wistfully about diphtheria germs. After a time the others appeared, looking disconsolate.

"Can she do it?" Thirkell asked.

Munn nodded. "She can do it, chum. She's done it."

"We're not infringing on their patents."

"We're not on Earth. The patent laws here are so wide that if a man invents a gun, nobody else can make telescopic sights. We're rooked again."

Underhill said, "It's the tarkoinars again. When they see a new process or invention that might mean change, they buy it up and suppress it. I can't think of any gadget we could make that wouldn't

be an infringement on some Venusian patent or other."

"They stay within the law," Munn pointed out. "Their law. So we can't even challenge them. As long as we're on Venus, we're subject to their jurisprudence."

"The beans are getting low," Thirkell said morosely.

"Everything is," the captain told him. "Any ideas, somebody?"

There was silence. Presently Underhill took out a globe of Veetsy and put it on the table.

"Where'd you, get that?" Bronson asked. "It costs four fals."

"It's empty," Underhill said. "I found it in an ash can. I've been--investigating glassite--the stuff they use for things like this."

"What about it?"

"I found out how they make it. It's a difficult, expensive process. It's no better than our flexiglass, and a lot harder to make. If we had a flexiglass factory here--"

"Well?"

"The bottom would drop out of Amalgamated Glassite."

"I don't get it," Bronson said. "So what?"

"Ever heard of a whispering campaign?" Underhill asked. "My father wangled many an election that way, the old devil. Suppose we passed the word around that there was a new process for making a cheaper, better substitute for glassite? Wouldn't Amalgamated stock drop?"

"Possibly," Munn said.

"We could clean up."

"What with?"

"Oh." Underhill was silent. "It takes money to make money."

"Always."

"I wonder. Here's another idea. Venus is on the iron standard. Iron's cheap on Earth. Suppose we talked about bringing in iron here--strewing it broadcast. There'd be a panic, wouldn't there?"

"Not without some iron to strew around," Munn said. "Counter-propaganda would be telecast; we couldn't compete with it. Our whispering campaign would be squashed before we got it started. The Venusian government--the tarkoinars--would simply deny that Earth had unlimited iron supplies. We wouldn't profit, anyway."

"There must be some angle," Underhill scowled. "There's got to be. Let's see. What's the basis of the Venusian system?"

"No competition," Mike Soaring Eagle said. "Everybody has all he wants."

"Maybe. At the top. But the competitive instinct is too strong to be suppressed like that. I'll bet plenty of Venusians would like to make a few extra fals."

"Where does that get us?" Munn wanted to know.

"The way my father did it... Hm-m-m. He manipulated, pulled the wires, made people come to him. What's the weak spot in Venusian economy?"

Munn hesitated. "Nothing we can strike at--we're too handicapped."

Underhill shut his eyes. "The basis of an economic and social system is--what?"

"Money," Bronson said.

"No. Earth's on the radium standard. Years ago it was gold or silver. Venus is on iron. And there's the barter system, too. Money's a variable."

"Money represents natural resources--" Thirkell began.

"Man-hours," Munn put in quietly.

Underhill jumped. "That's it! Of course--man-hours! That's the constant. The amount of production a man can turn out in an hour represents an arbitrary constant--two dollars, a dozen difals or whatever it is. That's the base for any economic set-up. And it's the base we've got to hit. The ancestor worship, the power of the tarkoinars--they're superficial really. Once the basic system is challenged, they'll go down."

"I don't see where it gets us," Thirkell said.

"Make the man-hours variable," Underhill explained. "Once we do that, anything can happen."

"Something had better happen," Bronson said, "and quick. We've little food left."

"Shut up," Munn said. "I think the kid's got the right angle. Alter the man-hour constant, eh? How can we do that? Specialized training? Train a Venusian to turn out twice as much stuff in the same period of

time? Skilled labor?"

"They've got skilled labor," Underhill said. "If we could make 'em work faster, or increase their stamina--"

"Benzedrine plus," Thirkell interrupted. "With enough caffeine, vitamin complex and riboflavin--I could whip up a speeder-upper, all right."

Munn nodded slowly. "Pills, not shots. If this works out, we'll have to do it undercover after a while."

"What the devil will it get us to make the Venusians work faster?" Bronson asked.

Underhill snapped his fingers. "Don't you see? Venus is ultra-conservative. The economic system is frozen static. It isn't adapted to change. There'll be hell popping!"

Munn said, "We'll need advertising to arouse public interest first of all. A practical demonstration." He looked around the table, his gaze settling on Mike Soaring Eagle. "Looks like you're elected, Redskin. You've more stamina than any of us, according to the tests we took back on Earth."

"All right," the Navaho said. "What do I do?"

"Work!" Underhill told him. "Work till you drop!"

It began early the next morning in the main plaza of Vyring. Munn had checked up carefully, determined to make sure nothing would go wrong, and had learned that a recreation building was to be constructed on the site of the plaza. "Work won't start for several weeks," Jorust said. "Why?"

"We want to dig a hole there," Munn said. "Is it legal?"

The Venusian smiled. "Why, of course. That's public domain--until the contractors begin. But a demonstration of your muscular prowess won't help you, I'm afraid."

"Eh?"

"I'm not a fool. You're trying to land a job. You hope to do that by advertising your abilities. But why do it in just this way? Anybody can dig a hole. It isn't specialized."

Munn grunted. If Jorust wanted to jump at that conclusion, swell. He said, "It pays to advertise. Put a steam shovel to work, back on Earth, and a crowd will gather to watch it. We don't have a steam shovel, but--"

"Well, whatever you like. Legally you're within your rights. Nevertheless you can't hold a job without joining a tarkoinar."

"Sometimes I think your planet would be a lot better off without the tarkoinars," Munn said bluntly.

Jorust moved her shoulders. "Between ourselves, I have often thought so. I am merely an administrator, however. I have no real power. I do what I'm told to do. If I were permitted, I would be glad to lend you the money you need--"

"What?" Munn looked at her. "I thought--"

The woman froze. "It is not permitted. Tradition is not always wisdom, but I can do nothing about it. To defy the tarkoinars is unthinkable and useless. I am sorry."

Munn felt a little better after that, somehow. The Venusians weren't all

enemies. The all-powerful tarkoinars, jealous of their power, fanatically desirous of preserving the status quo, were responsible for this mess.

When he got back to the plaza, the others were waiting. Bronson had rigged up a scoreboard, in phonetic Venusian, and had laid out mattock, pick, shovel, wheelbarrow and boards for the Navaho, who stood, a brawny, red-bronze figure, stripped to the waist in the cool wind. A few canal-boats had stopped to watch.

Munn looked at his watch. "o.k., Redskin. Let's go. Steve can start--"

Underhill began to beat a drum. Bronson put figures on the scoreboard: 4:03:00, Venusian Vyring Time. Thirkell went to a nearby camp table, littered with bottles and medical equipment, shook from a vial one of the stimulant pills he had concocted, and gave it to Mike Soaring Eagle. The Indian ate it, heaved up the mattock and went to work.

That was all.

A man digging a hole. Just why the spectacle should be so fascinating no one has ever figured out. The principle remains the same, whether it's a steam shovel scooping out half a ton of earth at a bite, or a sweating, stocky Navaho wielding shovel and pick. The boats grew thicker.

Mike Soaring Eagle kept working. An hour passed. Another. There were regular, brief rest periods, and Mike kept rotating his tools, to get all his muscles into play. After breaking earth for a while with the mattock, he would shovel it into the wheelbarrow, roll his burden up a plank and dump it on an ever growing pile some distance away. Three hours. Four. Mike knocked off for a brief lunch. Bronson kept track of the time on his scoreboard.

Thirkell gave the Navaho another pill. "How're you doing?"

"Fine. I'm tough enough."

"I know, but these stimulants--they'll help."

Underhill was at a typewriter. He had already ground out a tremendous lot of copy, for he had been working since Mike Soaring Eagle started. Bronson had discovered a long-forgotten talent and was juggling makeshift Indian clubs and colored balls. He'd been keeping that up for quite a while, too.

Captain Rufus Munn was working a sewing machine. He didn't especially like the task, but it was precision work, and therefore helpful to the plan. All the party except Thirkell was doing something, and the physician was busy administering pills and trying to look like an alchemist.

Occasionally he visited Munn and Underhill, collected stacks of paper and carefully sewn scraps of cloth, and deposited them in various boxes near the canal, labelled, "Take One." On the cloth a legend was machine-embroidered in Venusian: "A Souvenir from Earth." The crowds thickened.

The Earthmen worked on. Bronson kept juggling, with pauses for refreshment. Eventually he experimented with coin and card tricks. Mike Soaring Eagle kept digging. Munn sewed. Underhill continued to type--and the Venusians read what his flying fingers turned out.

"Free! Free! Free!" the leaflets said. "Souvenir pillow-case covers from Earth! A free show! Watch the Earthmen demonstrate stamina, dexterity and precision in four separate ways. How long can they keep it up? With the aid of Power Pills--indefinitely! Their output is doubled and their precision increased by Power Pills--they pep you

up! A medical product of Earth that can make any man worth twice his weight in sofals!"

It went on like that. The old army game--with variations. The Venusians couldn't resist. Word got around. The mob thickened. How long could the Earthmen keep up the pace?

They kept it up. Thirkell's stimulant pills--as well as the complex shots he had given his companions that morning--seemed to be working. Mike Soaring Eagle dug like a beaver. Sweat poured from his shining red-bronze torso. He drank prodigiously and ate salt tablets.

Munn kept sewing, without missing a stitch. He knew that his products were being scanned closely for signs of sloppy workmanship. Bronson kept juggling and doing coin tricks, never missing. Underhill typed with aching fingers.

Five hours. Six hours. Even with the rest periods, it was gruelling. They had brought food from the Goodwill, but it wasn't too palatable. Still, Thirkell had selected it carefully for caloric.

Seven hours. Eight hours. The crowds made the canals impassable. A policeman came along and argued with Thirkell, who told him to see Jorust. Jorust must have put a flea in his ear, for he came back to watch, but not to interfere.

Nine hours. Ten hours. Ten hours of Herculean effort. The men were exhausted--but they kept going.

They had made their point by then, though, for a few Venusians approached Thirkell and inquired about the Power Pills. What were they? Did they really make you work faster? How could they buy the--The policeman appeared to stand beside Thirkell. "I've a message from the medical tarkoinar," he announced. "If you try to sell any of

those things, you go to jail."

"Wouldn't think of it," Thirkell said. "We're giving away free samples. Here, buddy." He dug into a sack and tossed the nearest Venusian a Power Pill. "Two days' work in that instead of your usual one. Come back for more tomorrow. Want one, pal? Here. You, too. Catch."

"Wait a minute--" the policeman said.

"Go get a warrant," Thirkell told him. "There's no law against making presents."

Jorust appeared with a burly, intolerant-looking Venusian. She introduced the latter as head of the Vyring tarkoinars.

"And I'm here to tell you to stop this," the Venusian said.

Thirkell knew what to say. His companions kept on with their work, but he felt them watching and listening.

"What rule do you invoke?"

"Why... why, peddling."

"I'm not selling anything. This is public domain; we're putting on a free show."

"Those... ah... Power Pills--"

"Free gifts," Thirkell said. "Listen, pal. When we gave all our food to you Venusian crooks, did you squawk? No, you took it. And then clamped down. When we asked for our grub back, you just told us that we had no legal recourse; possession is nine points of the law, and we had a perfect right to make free gifts. That's what we're doing now--giving presents. So what?"

Jorust's eyes were twinkling, but she hooded them swiftly. "I fear he speaks the truth. The law protects him. It is no great harm."

Thirkell, watching her, wondered. Had Jorust guessed the right answer? Was she on their side? The tarkoinar leader turned dark green, hesitated, swung on his heel and went away. Jorust gave the Earthmen a long, enigmatic look, moved her shoulders and followed.

"I'm still stiff," Mike Soaring Eagle said a week later in the Goodwill. "Hungry, too. When do we get grub?"

Thirkell, at the valve, handed out a Power Pill to a Venusian and came back rubbing his hands and grinning. "Wait. Just wait. What's going on, skipper?"

Munn nodded towards Underhill. "Ask the kid. He got back from Vyring a few minutes ago."

Underhill chuckled. "There was hell popping. All in a week, too. We've certainly struck at the economic base. Every Venusian who labors on a piecework basis wants our pills, so he can speed up his production and make more fals. It's the competitive instinct--which is universal."

"Well?" Bronson asked. "How do the lizard-faced big shots like that?"

"They don't like it. It's hit the economic set-up they've had for centuries. Till now, one Venusian would make exactly ten sofals a week--say--by turning out five thousand bottle caps. With the pills Steve made up, he's turning out eight or ten thousand and making correspondingly more dough. The guy at the next bench says what the hell, and comes to us for a Power Pill for himself. Thus it goes. And the lovely part is that not all the labor is on piecework basis. It

can't be. You need tangibles for piecework. Running a weather machine has got to be measured by time--not by how many raindrops you make in a day."

Munn nodded. "Jealousy, you mean?"

Underhill said, "Well, look. A weather-machine operator has been making ten sofals a week, the same as a bottle capper on piecework. Now the bottle capper's making twenty sofals. The weather-machine man doesn't see the point. He's willing to take Power Pills, too, but that won't step up his production. He asks for a raise. If he gets it, the economy is upset even more. If he doesn't, other weather-machine operators get together with him and figure it's unfair discrimination. They get mad at the tarkoinars. They strike!"

Mike Soaring Eagle said, "The tarkoinars have forbidden work to any Venusian taking Power Pills."

"And still the Venusians ask us for Power Pills. So what? How can you prove a man's been swallowing them? His production steps up, sure, but the tarkoinars can't clamp down on everybody with a good turn-out. They tried that, and a lot of guys who never tried the Power Pills got mad. They were fast workers, that was all."

"The demonstration we put on was a good idea," Thirkell said. "It was convincing. I've had to cut down the strength of the pills--we're running low--but the power of suggestion helps us."

Underhill grinned. "So the base--the man-hour unit--had gone cock-eyed. One little monkey wrench, thrown where it'll do the most good. It's spreading, too. Not only Vyring. The news is going all over Venus, and the workers in the other cities are asking why half of Vyring's laborers should get better pay. That's where the equal standard of exchange helps us--one monetary system all over Venus. Nothing

has ever been off par here for centuries. Now--"

Munn said, "Now the system's toppling. It's a natural fault in a perfectly integrated, rigid set-up. For want of a nail the tarkoinars are losing their grip. They've forgotten how to adjust."

"It'll spread," Underhill said confidently. "It'll spread. Steve, here comes another customer."

Underhill was wrong. Jorust and the Vyring tarkoinar leader came in. "May you be worthy of your ancestors'names," Munn said politely. "Drag up a chair and have a drink. We've still got a few bulbs of beer left."

Jorust obeyed, but the Venusian rocked on his feet and glowered. The woman said, "Malsi is distressed. These Power Pills are causing trouble."

"I don't know why," Munn said. "They increase production, don't they?"

Malsi grimaced. "This is a trick! A stratagem! You are abusing our hospitality!"

"What hospitality?" Bronson wanted to know.

"You threatened the system," Malsi plunged on doggedly. "On Venus there is no change. There must be none."

"Why not?" Underhill asked. "There's only one real reason, and you know it. Any advances might upset the tarkoinars--threaten the power they hold. You racketeers have had the whip hand for centuries. You've suppressed inventions, kept Venus in a backwater, tried to drive initiative out of the race, just so you could stay on top. It can't be done. Changes happen; they always do. If we hadn't come,

there'd have been an internal explosion eventually."

Malsi glared at him. "You will stop making these Power Pills."

"Point of law," Thirkell said softly. "Show precedent."

Jorust said, "The right of free gift is one of the oldest on Venus. That law could be changed, Malsi, but I don't think the people would like it."

Munn grinned. "No. They wouldn't. That would be the tipoff. Venusians have learned it's possible to make more money. Take that chance away from them, and the tarkoinars won't be the benevolent rulers any more."

Malsi turned darker green. "We have power--"

"Jorust, you're an administrator. Are we protected by your laws?" Underhill asked.

She moved her shoulders. "Yes, you are. The laws are sacrosanct. Perhaps because they have always been designed to protect the tarkoinars."

Malsi swung towards her. "Are you siding with the Earthmen?"

"Why, of course not, Malsi. I'm merely upholding the law, according to my oath of office. Without prejudice--that's it, isn't it?"

Munn said, "We'll stop making the Power Pills if you like, but I warn you that it's only a respite. You can't halt progress."

Malsi seemed unconvinced. "You'll stop?"

"Sure. If you pay us."

"We cannot pay you," Malsi said stubbornly. "You belong to no tarkoinar. It would be illegal."

Jorust murmured, "You might give them a free gift of--say--ten thousand sofals."

"Ten thousand!" Malsi yelled. "Ridiculous!"

"So it is," Underhill said. "Fifty thousand is more like it. We can live well for a year on that."

A Venusian came to the valve, peeped in and said: "I made twice as many difals today. May I have another Power Pill?" He saw Malsi and vanished with a small shriek.

Munn shrugged. "Suit yourself. Pay up, or we go on handing out Power Pills--and you'll have to adjust a rigid social economy. I don't think you can do it."

Jorust touched Malsi's arm. "There is no other way."

"I--" The Venusian by now was almost black with impotent rage. "All right," he capitulated, spitting the words between his teeth. "I won't forget this, Jorust."

"But I must administer the laws," the woman said. "Why, Malsi! The rule of the tarkoinars has always been unswerving honesty."

Malsi didn't answer. He scribbled a credit check for fifty thousand sofals, validated it and gave the tag to Munn. After that he sent a parting glare around the cabin and stamped out.

"Well!" Bronson said. "Fifty grand! Tonight we eat!"

"May you be worthy of your fathers'names," Jorust murmured. At the

valve she turned. "I'm afraid you've upset Malsi."

"Too bad," Munn said hypocritically.

Jorust moved her shoulders slightly. "Yes. You've upset Malsi. And Malsi represents the tarkoinars--"

"What can he do about it?" Underhill asked.

"Nothing. The laws won't let him. But--it's nice to know the tarkoinars aren't infallible. I think the word will get around."

Jorust winked gravely at Munn and departed, looking as innocent as a cat, and as potentially dangerous.

"Well!" Munn said. "What does that mean? The end of the tarkoinar's rule, maybe?"

"Maybe," Bronson said. "I don't give a damn. I'm hungry and I want a beefsteak-mushroom. Where can we cash a check for fifty grand?"

The Sky Is Falling

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The Blow-Up was coming. It was near... Johnny Dyson knew he would see it soon. One minute, Earth. The next... little Nova, weeping radioactive dust into the void. Then Johnny and the Robot would build an Eden on Mars....

Johnny wondered when the spaceship would get there. He didn't know where "there" was--nobody knew. But he was anxious for landing-day to come. It would give day a real meaning, after the endless artificial days and nights of the ship.

Not that the ship wasn't comfortable, and not that there wasn't purpose in that comfort. Johnny would have to be in perfect shape when the hour of landing finally came and his job would begin. Because he wanted to be in condition to do the job, he had trained his mind to complete relaxation.

So he lay back in his deep chair and watched the viziports with their troubling tri-dimensional visions of what no longer existed. Blue sky, white clouds, birds, the tops of buildings--he closed his eyes. Perhaps it had been a mistake, after all, this hiding the blackness of space by camouflage. He didn't want to remember Earth. There was no Earth. There was a shaking white blaze among the stars, somewhere a long way back now, and that was all. No Earth.

All that remained of it was himself, this ship, the robot that took care of them both, and the images that filled the viziports with nostalgic pictures.

The rest was over, finished. He didn't often let himself think about the unpleasant past, or how, for himself, the beginning of the end had happened....

Leaning back against the bulkhead, Johnny Dyson smiled.

"Go on," he said to the hooked fish named Benjy White.

White tipped his head back cautiously because of the cumbersome helmet he wore, sprouting wires like Medusa-hair. He looked at his own foreshortened image reflected dimly in the steel ceiling and nodded sagely at himself.

"Yeah," he said, "I learned about women from her. I sure did. Toughest tomato I ever met, then or since. Only one thing ever scared Poochie--I called her Poochie--"

Beyond the steel walls lay the endless red hills of Mars. Beyond the steel ceiling hung Orion in a blue-black sky lighted by tumbling moons. Somewhere between here and Orion rolled a time-bomb called Earth with its fuse set and lighted and the hours ticking along toward Blow-Up.

"I called her Poochie," White said. "If I told you her real name you'd be surprised. After she swiped my dough and divorced me she went right on to the top. What a woman. Now she owns half--"

Johnny Dyson thought of the take-off, scheduled for noon tomorrow. Back to Earth. Back to the eve of Armageddon. "Back to the world I never made," he thought fiercely. "--'I, a stranger and afraid--"

Well, he had a right to be afraid. He knew what was coming. He thought:

Problem: To keep the ship on Mars.

Method: To steal the atomic fuel.

It was perfectly simple. All good plans were simple. Unfortunately it depended on the simple mind of White whether or not the plan worked out. And White was a well-hooked fish, all right, but he wasn't landed yet. He wore the transmitter that controlled the ship's robot. And the robot was the key to the fuel supply which could bridge the long jump between Mars, where life could be an Eden, and Earth, where life was doomed. Sooner or later, sooner or later....

"Oh, well," White was saying, "Funny thing is, there's a warrant out for my arrest back on Earth, and the company that issued it belongs to Poochie lock, stock and barrel. She don't know about it, of course." He chuckled sardonically.

"Think I could get her to quash that warrant? No, sir. Only one thing ever scared that woman. Thunder. If I went to Poochie right now--only it'd be a long walk-- if I went to her and said, 'Poochie, remember how you used to try to crawl in my pocket whenever it thundered? Well, now, for old time's sake--'"

He grinned, shaking his head until the Medusa-wires whined against each other.

"That woman," he said admiringly. "That woman. She'd put the cuffs on me herself. Tough as pig-iron. Never was very pretty, but "she looks like a hippo these days. My opinion, if she ever got the idea of conquering the world, she'd do it. Oh, well. She went up. I didn't."

"What's the warrant for?" Dyson asked, not caring.

"Larceny. I guess I sort of miscalculated there." White grinned again. "Not so good, is it? I look older than I am, the life I led, but I'm under fifty. And I always felt I had my best years ahead. Still feel that way. I'd

hate to waste 'em in jail. I'll tell you, Johnny, I kind of like your idea of staying on here. Not going back. Nobody to say, 'Move along, bud.' And then there's lots of things I always wanted to do, never been let. Lots of things. On Earth, I'd never get a chance."

Now they were getting to it. Dyson kept the eagerness out of his voice with rigid control. All he said was, "We're in Eden, Benjy. We've got all the power we need in the batteries--safe power. Safe atomic power. We've got the robot. People were right when they said heaven was in the sky, Benjy. Mars is heaven."

"Mm-m. Sometimes Mars is underneath, too. Still, the closer I get to that larceny rap, the more I like your idea. Just like Paradise. Milk and honey for free. All we'd need is some hours," White said, mispronouncing it.

"You can't have everything."

"Guess not. Still, it almost seems like in this set-up you got planned, I could wish for anything and just get it. If I wished for a woman--" He snorted. "I might get Poochie, come to think of it. Oh, Lord. Maybe later we could put the robot to work on quasi-biology. I recollect something about surrogate plasms. If I could rig the genes in advance I could maybe work out a nice, comfortable little lady and speed up her growing tune. Wonder how long it'd take her to hit biological twenty? It's an idea, Johnny, it's an idea."

"Sure, why not? Wish on a star. All you need's to be on the right star. This is it. We can do anything we want, and there's nobody to stop us."

"Martine," White said.

"Two against one. Benjy?"

"Yeah?"

"We can do it. Right now."

White's brows lifted.

"What's happened? Not--" His face changed. He tilted his head to stare at the dull reflection in the ceiling. Beyond it he was seeing the night sky and the blue-green star of Earth.

"Oh no, no," Dyson said quickly. "Not the Blow-Up. Not yet, anyhow."

White shrugged. "May never come," he said, and stretched his arm out for a cigarette on the table beside him. "May never come at all."

"It'll come," Dyson said quietly. "It doesn't matter a hoot whether or not our cargo gets back to Earth. Ever since the Forties physicists have been looking for an atomic safety, and if they couldn't even find it through artificial radio-elements, what good can Martian ores do? We've wasted six months mining junk."

"Can't tell that," White said, blowing smoke. "We got no equipment for refining and testing. All we do is hunt, dig and load. The rest is up to the physics boys."

Dyson shook his head.

"It'll come," he insisted. "Ever since Alamogordo it's been coming. So I say, what's the use of going back? All you'll get out of it's jail. All I'll get is--oh, I don't know. More hard work, more worries, the same old routine. And for what? The Blow-Up. That's all. Why work?"

White, sitting on the edge of the bunk, humped himself forward, elbows on knees, cigarette dangling from his lips. The wires of the helmet cast complex shadows over his face. He didn't answer.

Dyson said eagerly, "We can pull our plan right now, Benjy. Martine's micro-photographing the log. He'll be busy for a couple of hours more anyway. We'll have all the time we need to hide the fuel."

White tried absently to scratch his head and tangled his fingers in a maze of insulated wiring.

"Not so fast," he said. "What's the big rush? We got to think this over. I'm not going to haul that fuel around. Even if I had lead skin, I'd still say no thanks."

"Who's asking you to haul fuel? All you've got to do is hand over that transmitter."

White looked at him sidewise. His eyes grew slightly glassy. "Hold on there. The robot's got to stay energized. It takes somebody's mind to do that. If I took it off--"

"I'd put it on."

"Yes, but--look here, there might be trouble if I--"

"Martine's busy, I tell you."

"I mean robot trouble. Suppose we need the critter in an emergency? After all, the robot's the lad who's got to pilot us home."

"Not if we don't go. Look, Benjy. We won't be leaving Mars. Got that?"

White screwed up his face dubiously. "Yeah," he said.

"Okay. That means the ship will be immobilized. Got that too?"

White blew smoke and studied it, squinting.

"Sure."

"So we don't have to worry about the robot. All it's going to do is take the fuel out and hide it where Martine can't find it. Got that?"

White snorted and inhaled smoke.

"Sure I got it. I ain't dumb. Even if they did pick three beat-up techs like us for this crazy trip, that don't mean my head's soft yet. I get it, all right. Only, I got my orders about this robot. Martine would blow his top if he caught you with the helmet on."

"I know how to handle the thing. I've done it before."

"Not since the Chief caught you passing the buck to the robot," White said with the air of one capturing a minor pawn.

That had happened a month before when Dyson, wearing the transmitter, had sent the robot down a deep crevasse to test rock strata. Martine had objected violently. While the robot was far stronger and more agile than a man, it was also much heavier and more fragile, even in the decreased gravity of Mars. Obviously too, Martine considered the robot much less expendable than Johnny Dyson. Insofar as this argument applied to the social unit it was true, since the piloting of the ship depended on the precision, memory and integration of the robot. Dyson, however, remained unconvinced.

Now he grinned. "You learn by experience," he said. "This time he won't catch me. Just hand the transmitter over. I know what I'm doing."

"Well," White said, "well--of course if we do it at all, the robot's the boy to send. If a shield or a damper should slip I'd rather the robot

was carrying the stuff than me. I'd hate to get my bones sunburned. Only, what about afterwards?"

"Martine? Oh, he'll come around. He'll have to. He can't get away without fuel. He'll find out Mars is a nice place to live--not to visit."

"I wonder about that," White murmured, and Dyson's eyes narrowed. He drew a deep breath. So much depended on this fool, this fool--

"I thought you were convinced," he said, after a safe interval.

"Take it easy. I didn't say no, did I? I got that larceny rap to think of. But--" he made a wrinkled grimace of indecision and touched the control button at his forehead with a hesitating hand.

"Go on," Dyson urged. "Take it off. From now on you can relax. You're free. You can do anything you want. Only give me the helmet."

White put both hands to the steel crown of the thing, lifted it a little, rolled frightened eyes at Dyson and then suddenly, with a gesture of abnegation, raised it from his head and held it out. The white line its pressure had left on his forehead turned pink. He wrinkled his brow anxiously.

"Careful, now, careful," he said unnecessarily. "Look out for that cord. And cut down to minimum before you put it on. Easy, now. Turn it up easy, Johnny."

Dyson paid no attention to him. This was his moment of triumph, and Benjy White had ceased to exist. A slow warmth seeped through his skull from the contact of the helmet, and the remote vibrations he felt were like the vibrations of music heard from far away. The music of the spheres, he thought. With this on his head he could control a planet--if Martine gave him another five minutes of freedom.

"We'll have to take the robot outside," he said. "Got a control unit on a portable?"

"Sure have." White did things to a wall panel and a square box slid out and cradled itself on a carriage with flexible telescoping legs.

"Two miles of wire will do," Dyson said. "I've got the place for the cache spotted."

"Two miles... mm-m. Two... got it. Johnny, you really figure there won't be rescue ships sent out for us?"

"Not a chance. Millions for defense, but try to get a few bucks spent on an expedition like ours, once our work's done. Rescue ships, ha. Rescue ships take expensive equipment. They take man-hours. You can't waste stuff like that, Benjy. Ask the Energy Allocation Board. It took a miracle to get this ship out and another to keep it from going for military defense."

Dyson was talking with the topmost level of his mind, waiting for enough power to accumulate, listening to the music grow stronger and stronger in his skull.

"Maybe so," White said doubtfully. "What if the Chief sends out a signal, though? He might do it somehow. He might mark a big sos out on the desert."

Dyson considered the possibility, weaving it in and out of that beautiful, distant vibration of music. Martine was a problem, of course. But any problem could be solved, if you approached it the right way.

"He'll come around," he said. "It's two against one, remember. Once he knows he can't ever get back to Earth, he'll come around. Once he knows our plans.... Who'd turn down Eden?"

"Oh, it sounds like a lazy man's paradise, all right," White said. "That's for me. Little streams of whiskey come trickling down the rocks. Just the same, I'd kind of like to see our cargo get back home."

"What for? It's no good."

"Can't tell. It might be. All I'm saying is, I wish I could kick the ship on the rump and send her back to Earth."

"How can the ship get back without the robot to guide it?" Dyson asked in a too-patient voice, his eyes unfocused as he concentrated on the gathering power in the helmet.

He touched it with a tentative finger and then bent to the mirror set in the wall to read the reversed image of the dial set in the helmet's front. "Won't be long now," he murmured. "We're going to need the robot, Benjy. Just remember that. Unless you want to work like a dog."

"I been working like a dog all my life," White said. "And all the bones had the meat chewed off before I got 'em. Oh, I'm convinced, Johnny, but I can't help thinking about Poochie."

"You'd have plenty of time to think about her in jail."

"Guess so. Tell you what. Maybe later we can figure a way to get the cargo home. If we built another robot—it might take quite a while, but if we managed it—we could spare the one we got now."

"Why not?" Dyson agreed quickly. "Plenty of time to work that out later on."

"Plenty. We'll want something to keep us busy, after Eden's all built. I

just—" He grinned a little sheepishly. "I don't know, I guess I just hate to give up without a struggle."

"We aren't!" Dyson was stung. "There's no use struggling when you haven't got a chance. If there was a chance I'd be the last man to give up, Benjy. I'd fight to the last ditch. But Earth's as good as gone, and... oh, shut up. Don't think about it."

But he could feel it and see it—the solid planet shuddering underfoot, buckling above hollow emptiness, and the mushroom cloud rolling majestically toward the sky. Was it Man's fault? He'd picked up that fatally sharp knife of his own volition, but who gave Man the knife in the first place? God? It was the fruit of the tree of knowledge, all right, and to taste it was to die. God's fault, then, not Adam's.

"Let's go," he said abruptly. "We haven't got all the time in the world. Where's the robot?"

"Storage. Johnny, you thought how a court of law might feel about this?"

"The same way they'd feel about larceny, maybe," Dyson said, and walked the control carriage out the door. As he tip-toed it along the passage he could hear White padding after him, worrying softly under his breath.

Luckily they didn't have to pass Martine's door. Dyson urged the carriage faster, watched the trundling box rock hastily along before him like a dog on a leash. A plump Scotty, perhaps, with greyhound legs. He squeezed the bulb at the leash's end and the Scotty sprinted.

Its radioactive sodium battery had a half-life of three years. After that, the battery could be recharged, but not without a pile to produce the

right isotope. And there were no atomic piles on Mars. And there never would be. Plenty of storage batteries in the ship, but all of those, even hooked up in series, couldn't throw enough power into the ship to overcome Martian gravity. No, Mars hugged the ship to her bosom now with an unbreakable grip. Mars the mother, restraining it with strong apron strings, however foolishly it might try to plunge back across space to the world where doom awaited it. Mars would receive and hide the fuel and hold the ship to her bosom forever.

The batteries would be useful, though. They'd help provide all the comforts of home. This world, Dyson assured himself, was going to be a perfect Eden, an Eden with modern plumbing.

He reined the control carriage to a halt and opened the door at his shoulder. There was the robot, waiting in storage. It hung cradled in a resilient mould that rocked occasionally as balances automatically shifted and compensated inside the grey, gleaming body.

Gigantic and inhuman. Segmented like an ant, thorax and abdomen linked by a universal joint. Many specialized limbs. That was the robot. It had bulb-shaped eyes set in its abdomen, for underwater vision. A turret-tower of mosaic eyes, some for day and some for night, rose from the top of the thorax.

Lion-yellow, these eyes looked at Dyson.

Urging the carriage before him, he stepped quickly into the room and moved to one side uneasily, trying to elude that steady stare. But he could not, of course. There were always facets whose optic axes faced the observer accurately enough to reveal the dark pigments around the visual sense-cells. Any spider can do the same trick. But the false pupils'stare unnerved Dyson.

He reached for a dial on the control unit. White hissed a nervous warning from the door, and Dyson closed his mouth on an equally nervous retort. After all, it had been over a month since he had worn the transmitter, and if the robot fell down the noise would wake the dead.

He turned the dial very gently. The music deepened in his skull. And the robot stirred majestically, lifting its thorax. You could hear oiled steel moving sweetly on oiled steel. Solemnly the great gleaming creature climbed from its cradle and crossed the room, walking with no remotest likeness to the motion of life.

Dyson met it in the center of the floor, at the chart-table, shooing the control-carriage before him on its nimble legs. Together man and robot bent above the table, the robot's thoracic section hanging enormous above Dyson's shoulder, reared upright and curving over him while a compound crown of eyes focused on the maps.

Dyson spun the selector until the right chart came up and spread itself out on the table in moulded relief that took the shadows of the room in miniature perfection, casting long fingers of shade across the tiny plastic valleys that duplicated what lay just outside the ship. It was perfect duplication, every hill slope and plateau showing clear. There was even--and Dyson blinked to see it--a blunt oval replica of the ship they stood in.

He felt a little dizzy, half believing that inside that vinylite bulge on the map was a doll-sized room where a doll-sized Johnny Dyson stood watching a doll-sized chart....

Above him the robot creaked conscientiously as it lowered its compound focus toward the map. Dyson shook off the illusion of infinitely repeated Johnny Dysons receding into the microcosm and touched the map with a careful finger, thinking into the transmitter as

his fingers traced a course across the plain and up the hillside. The robot watched. Faint, remote clickings could be heard from inside it as it memorized the path.

Dyson was just attempting to shake off the further illusion that a multiplicity of other and larger Johnny Dysons extended the opposite way, into the macrocosm, when a harsh, crisp voice spoke like God's, out of the air.

"Dyson!" the voice said. "Dyson!"

White inhaled with a soft, appalled gasp. Dyson looked up sharply, feeling his stomach turn over. For he hadn't heard the inter-com click on. There had been no warning. And that could mean it had been on all the time. His voice and White's could have been babbling their mutinous plans straight into Martine's office, straight into his listening ears.

"Dyson, report to my room. At once!"

Dyson gulped. Then he shook his head at White and lifted a warning finger. If the inter-com had been open both ways, caution didn't matter now. Still, if Martine knew what they were doing, why waste time with the inter-com. The Chief's quarters were less than half a ship's length away. And Martine had long legs and a loaded revolver.

"Reporting, sir," Dyson said hoarsely.

"That's all."

There was no concluding click to prove the inter-com had been shut off. Dyson kept his finger raised.

White was having difficulty in swallowing.

There was still a chance, a good chance if Dyson hurried. He bent over the chart again, moving his finger along the course he meant the robot to travel. He worked fast, but accurately. His orders clicked out with almost mechanical precision into the precise, mechanical brain of the robot. It took about thirty seconds to finish.

Then the robot stepped back. Its huge thorax lowered on the gently purring joint, and it walked quickly out of the room. Walked--rolled--glided. There is no word for the gait of an organism like that. It went smoothly and quite fast, making no sound except for the faint, small noises within it as mechanisms adjusted to the task at hand. Clicking with metallic thoughts, it moved away.

Now it would go directly to the fuel supply chamber. Dyson's mind ran ahead of the great shining ant-shaped thing and traced its course out of the ship and across the face of Mars, as he had just traced it across the map. Over the plain, up the slope, into the cavern he had found weeks ago and marked for just this purpose. Load by load the fuel would accumulate there until not an ounce remained in the ship. And nobody but Johnny Dyson would ever know where it was. Nobody, that is, if the robot's memory track were erased in time.

As the huge, majestic metal thing vanished down the corridor White caught Dyson's eye and drew his finger across his throat.

Dyson grinned. He reached for a stylo pad with one hand and turned down the control-power with the other.

"All set," he wrote. "Robot has orders. Keep transmitter on. Robot will signal when finished. Then erase memory track." He underlined the last sentence twice for emphasis and held it under White's nose.

God's voice spoke again, peremptorily out of the empty air.

"Dyson! I'm waiting!"

"Yes, sir--coming."

Now he would have to move fast. He waited impatiently--and yet reluctantly, too--while the music of the spheres died slowly out of his skull. While its faint vibrations still rang he lifted the helmet off and fitted it on White's head. Neither of them dared to speak.

Dyson turned and ran.

He slowed down by the time he reached Martine's closed door, and his strong will buckled slightly in the middle. What was going to happen now? Suppose Mar-tine's first words were an accusation?

... Never mind, the take-off was due tomorrow. All three men would be needed. At worst, Martine would say unpleasant things. They might be very unpleasant--if the inter-com had been on long enough.

Actually, the more urgent thing was what White would do. His conviction was shaky, at best. And he had full control of the robot now. He was entirely capable of recalling it, replacing the fuel and letting events take their own disastrous course, back to Earth, if Dyson left him alone long enough for his nerve to fail. So much depended on Dyson now--so terribly much.

He had a moment's deep longing to lay his burden down. If he just stood here silent long enough, something might happen....

Which was, he realized, exactly the sort of philosophy that kept Earth rolling along the old familiar groove toward atomic holocaust.

He made himself knock on the door.

* * *

Martine's collar was open at the throat. He had his shoes off and his feet in neatly darned wool socks were crossed comfortably on the desk. Johnny Dyson stared at him in shocked amazement. He had never seen the Chief before except in full uniform, rigidly correct. Now Martine's face reminded him somehow of the robot deactivated. When he saw the bottle on the desk he knew why.

For the first time he saw that Martine had a fat, soft face.

The big slob, Dyson thought exultantly. So he's solved that problem, all by himself. He's got a turn-off switch, after all. I won't have to kill him, later on. There won't be any trouble I can't handle. He can have all the whiskey he wants. We can make the stuff. Just pull out the nail in his foot, let the fire drain out, and refill with ninety-proof Martian vin du pays, home brewed. No, distilled. Doesn't matter. You can make the stuff out of anything. All you need is a ferment. And there's plenty of ferment in this ship right now.

He restrained his immediate mad impulse to spit in Martine's eye and declare his intentions, which was probably just as well, for the Chief kept a revolver in his desk. Dyson waited, at attention, until Martine, who had been looking vacantly at the ceiling, glanced down and saw him.

"Oh. At ease. Sit down, Dyson."

"Yessir," Dyson said with a respect he no longer felt. It was hard to keep the triumph out of his voice. He should have realized that Martine had to be a second-rater too. They couldn't have spared him for this trip if he'd been first rate. "Thanks, sir," he said.

Martine waved at the desk, where a second, and empty, glass stood beside a full one and the bottle.

"Pour yourself a drink, Dyson."

This was too good to be true. Dyson moved forward willingly, because from the desk he could see the inter-com switch. While whiskey gurgled into the glass he leaned forward enough to observe that the switch was closed, after all. So Martine hadn't heard a thing. So the plan should work out perfectly, if White played along.

"Happy landings, sir," he said, lifting his small glass.

"Happy landings," Martine nodded, sniffing at his.

But they meant very different things. Dyson was thinking, "We've already made ours. And it's going to be happy ever after, world without end, amen." Not like Earth. This is the way the world ends--how did that line go? That quoted-to-death line with the irritating ending. He couldn't quite remember. This is the way the world ends, not with a bang but--but-- Never mind.

"You're off duty," Martine said. "Relax."

"I'll try, sir."

"We've done a hard job," Martine said with satisfaction. "Six months in the field. Shoddy equipment. Only three of us to do everything. It's been quite a responsibility. If anything had gone wrong--" He took another drink. "Well, the ore's loaded, the records went off to Earth half an hour ago and everything's done. Every microscopic, piddling, vital detail. Tomorrow we go on duty again. But our mission's accomplished."

"For all the good it will do in the long run," Dyson said, and told himself to shut up. He looked down warily at the glass in his hand, surprised to find it empty. Careful, Johnny, careful, he thought.

"What do you mean?"

"Oh, I don't know. After all, the nuclear physics boys have been working on the problem a long time without getting anywhere, haven't they? I don't see--"

"Are you a qualified nuclear physicist?"

"I came within an ace of being one," Dyson said. Martine stared at him. "What happened?"

"Oh, I don't know." Dyson shrugged. "I guess I just realized finally how hopeless it all was. A good thing, too, from my viewpoint. If I were qualified now I'd be back home working on military projects like all the other competent boys. Whether they want to or not. It's practically martial law back there now."

"Got to be," Martine said, looking at him curiously. "You can't just give up, you know."

It was the same thing White had said, and it infuriated Dyson. They wouldn't see! He caught his breath for a sharp rebuttal, but what good would that do? None so blind, he thought, and remarked instead: "People don't change, sir. That's the trouble. People in general are--well, a bad lot, I'm afraid. They're bringing on the Blow-Up and no one can stop it. No matter what anybody does."

"Very likely," Martine said, bored. "Have another drink."

"Thanks, sir." Dyson leaned over and poured himself a second glass, wondering as he did so why he kept on calling the Chief sir.... For the first time, he realized, it didn't matter whether or not he irritated Martine. The important point was to allow time to get the fuel hidden. After that, Martine would stop being an officer automatically. (Of course, there was the revolver in the desk. He mustn't go too far.)

"Where's White?" Martine asked. It was perfectly clear that he was bored. Maybe White would offer better entertainment.

"He's--resting," Dyson said wildly.

"Oh yes, energizing the robot for the take-off. I forgot. Well, now you've had your drink why don't you spell him? Maybe he'd like a drink, too."

Dyson knew he had to say something that would catch the Chief's interest--it didn't matter what--anything, anything. White must be left to do what he was doing until the job was accomplished. All doubt in his mind vanished as to whether White was actually operating the robot as he had promised. Dyson was suddenly confident about that. The only thing that mattered was to let him finish, to give him time, to keep Martine quiet.

"Sir," he said, "sir, I'd like your opinion. You've had experience. If I'm wrong I wish you'd tell me. Is it wrong to feel my generation's been cheated of its rights?"

Martine yawned. Then he leaned back to flip a switch, and a tape began to play Lili Marlene with infinitely saccharine emphasis.

"You think the world owes you a living, eh?" he asked unpleasantly.

"No, sir! Well--yes. Yes, a living, that's all. I want to stay alive. It isn't much to ask, is it? And the Blow-Up--"

"Dyson, you've got atomophobia. Just try to remember that when we get back to Earth you'll have a better perspective. I know the last six months haven't been a picnic, but we had a job to do. Now--"

"I've had perspective," Dyson said. "Ever since I was a kid. Sir, my

father was Dr. Gerald Dyson."

Martine opened his eyes.

"Oh, So that's how you qualified for this trip. I wondered. You had the right technical training, of course, but--I wondered."

"Oh yes, I had training. My fatter insisted on that. He worked on one of the first bombs, you know. He was one of the men who said, 'Oops, sorry.' Afterward he got a mission in life--to find an atomic control. Of course, there isn't any. He'd just lighted a stick of dynamite and handed it over to me. Until I was old enough to stand up for my rights and say the devil with it. Parents always try to compensate for their failures through their children. But I've finally got clear 'away from Earth. For the first time in my life I'm out from under the shadow of--" He paused, looked down at his glass, shuddered a little.

"The shadow of the cloud, sir. A big black cloud, spreading out. I was brought up with it. My father ran the films over and over, studying them. I dreamed about that cloud. It got bigger and bigger. My father could have handed me an Eden on Earth, with controlled atomic power. It could have been like a magic wand. It could make all work unnecessary. By rights a fellow like me, born in the Atomic Age, should never have any problems at all. Unlimited power's the answer to everything. But the only answer we're getting is the Blow-Up."

"I wish you'd quit saying that," Martine declared with sudden irritation. "You talk as if Earth had already gone up. It hasn't. Maybe it won't. There's a good chance we can still find a control. At least, we can go on trying."

"But don't you see, that kind of thinking is just a pep talk to the galley slaves?"

"If your precious Blow-Up ever does come," Martine said severely, "it'll come because people like you--" He paused and then shrugged. "Skip it," he said. "You've been under a strain, too. How about spelling White now at the robot and... no, wait a minute. I forgot." He regarded Dyson with distrustful memory showing on his face.

Dyson thought of the robot climbing down the crevasse and Martine blowing his top. He almost grinned. The Chief's paramount nightmare must be that something would happen to the robot. It had taken seven years in building and it was as integral a part of the ship as the fuel load. The fuel made up the muscles, but the robot was the brain that kept the complicated organism of the ship functioning in space. Dyson had thought first of disabling the robot, but he'd discarded the idea very soon. For one thing, he didn't know how. The robot had compensatory protective devices, the equivalent of an ego balancing its id. And anyhow, later on it would be useful.

When Eden was built on Mars the robot would furnish the perfect means of reducing details to a minimum. It could do almost anything. To Martine its primary function was running the ship, and it was less expendable than the men, but Martine's feeling toward the robot had a touch of narcissism, Dyson thought. Probably every time Martine looked in a mirror he saw a synthesis of Martine and robot.

Later on, when the robot was made a hewer of wood and drawer of water--Dyson found himself suppressing a grin. Martine wouldn't like that at all. But he'd come around eventually. He could be bought, one way or another, just as Benjy White had been bought, with an intangible coinage.

Martine sat up, lifted his feet to the floor and groped with his toes for the discarded shoes.

"Guess I'll take White a little drink," he said.

The whiskey's spreading warmth had been relaxing all the tension in Dyson's body. Now suddenly every nerve twanged taut again and he heard without a sound the same vibrating chords like distant music which he had sensed in his skull when he wore the control helmet. Only this time the music was all discords. He had to stop Martine. He had to.

But Martine was on his feet now, stamping into his shoes, leaning to snap their catches. He tucked the bottle under his arm and picked up two clean glasses.

"Sir!"

"Well?"

"I--I'll take over, sir. I know how to handle the transmitter. Let me go. I'll send White in--"

Martine was at the door now. He simply shook his head briskly and went out, letting the door slam behind him.

Dyson looked at the clock, horrified to see how little time had passed, horrified to realize that in spite of all he had done this could still be happening. Surely, he had thought, at the last moment something would occur to him, some clever way to outwit Martine, some way to carry through the scheme that had so far worked so smoothly....

Martine's footsteps receded down the passage into silence. Lili Marlene crooned itself away in over-sweet harmonies toward a close while Dyson swung like a metronome toward the door and away from it, waiting in vain for some idea about what to do next. Finally Lili Marlene was left for good and all under the lamplight, and Dyson discovered that he was opening Martine's desk with shaking hands.

But the revolver wasn't there any more.

So Martine would catch White while the robot was still at work hiding the fuel, and the ship would go back to Earth, and all Johnny Dyson's brave plans for a new world began to waver around the edges. Of course, he could run away, he could hide. They could go back without him, if they would--but in the long run he couldn't win. Sooner or later ships would come screaming down through the thin air above the scarlet plains, loaded with truant officers hunting Johnny Dyson....

* * *

He stopped on the threshold of the storage room. Benjy White was solving nothing by twisting his hands together in an agonized way above the spindle-legged control carriage. The robot-cradle, of course, was empty. Martine wore the transmitter helmet, and by the look on his face Dyson knew the robot's activation directions were coming in clear and strong. Martine knew everything.

His eyes met Dyson's.

Dyson turned and ran.

A doll-sized Johnny Dyson ran across the contours of a doll-sized chart away from a doll-sized vinylite spaceship. He didn't dare look up because in the sky the face of a gigantic Johnny Dyson might be looking down at him. Time had slipped back fifteen minutes and he had fallen into the microcosm, and somewhere up there, enormous in an inconceivably vast spaceship, the whole scene was playing itself over again, from the moment Martine's voice had snapped an order-to-report into the inter-com.

The vast, invisible finger of giant Johnny Dyson, fifteen-minutes-ago-Johnny-Dyson, had traced his trail in advance. He knew where to run.

He knew the route the robot would have followed. But the time-factor was unknown.

The fuel might already be stored in the cache and camouflaged. Even if it had, still he had failed. For White hadn't erased the robot's memory track and Martine could follow every step of the way through the path of the metal mind.

Martine was running behind him now. So was White, he thought. But he didn't look back. He was running from more than Martine, more than men. He ran from the power and tyranny of a suicidal and homicidal Earth. Under his feet the ground rang hollow, as though his subterranean palace were already built, and waited, a hollow Eden, for its inheritor.

Then on the hillside ahead he saw a flicker of moonlight on metal and in the grey pallor of the night the robot came ponderously into his range of vision, toiling mindlessly under its fuel load toward the cave.

A shout sounded behind him, ringing thinly in the cold air. Glancing back, Dyson saw the dwarfed figures still running behind him. The ship looked doll-sized beyond. Illusion persisted. Everything had gone small. Ahead of the minimized White came marionette Martine, the transmitter gleaming on his head, while he guided a puppet's puppet, the control box, at a grotesque rocking run across the plain. All of them, pursuers and pursued, moved with the nightmare slowness and lightness that Martian gravity induces.

Dyson's head started—for he had plunged headlong out of the ship, and the others had lost time searching for him in the corridors—was a totally useless thing. He knew it. But he could not yet give up the faint hope that somehow, somehow, a way would be revealed to him at the last crucial moment.

There was a white flash in the dark, and the thin report of a revolver behind him. Probably it was a warning only, for he heard no whine of a bullet going by. He looked up, meeting the crooked gaze of the two moons like two uneven eyes--eyes in the face of giant Johnny Dyson. The sky around him was rilled with conflict. Orion's club was lifted, Taurus'horns were lowered, Andromeda struggled in her chains, Sirius was a bared and gleaming fang. And bright among them hung a blue-green planet--blue for purity, green for peace....

Dyson's vision telescoped through a dizzy spiral, down diminishing vortices of time and space. At the end was the blue-green world and ten-years-ago Johnny Dyson, fifteen-years-ago Johnny Dyson, quite ignorant and quite safe. The world was his parents'responsibility in those golden days. Not his. Oh youth, youth, lovely and lost and safe.

Martine fired again.

Here-and-now Johnny Dyson ran on toward the robot, which was in the act of vanishing into the dark mouth of the cave. The cave was only an ant-burrow and the robot was a shining pale ant with a grain of sand clutched in its mandibles. Spatial dimensions had lost all importance along with the rest of the natural laws. Only in dreams did you seem to float like this when you leaped, running as if through glue from pursuing dangers.

Directly ahead was a pile of shielded canisters, damper-hooks in place. Dyson slowed to study them, trying confusedly to estimate how many foot-pounds or tons of lifting pressure they represented. Not enough to lift the ship. There were only eight. If the robot had hidden all the rest, then Mars'apron-strings would still be strong enough to tie the ship down forever. If--if... of course! If the rest were in the cave, and if he could get there first, then the answer was childishly easy. How could he have missed it? Exultation boiled up in him, filling his throat with triumph.

He heard his name shouted, and he sprinted, bending low at each jump so the thrust of his toe would carry him forward and not up against the easy gravity of Mars.

He reached the cave mouth just as the robot's emerging thorax caught light from the rolling moons. It did not pause, but its false pupils examined him, the radioatomic brain analyzed him as a mobile obstacle, and the great worker-ant walked straight ahead. Dyson got out of the way. The worker-ant moved majestically downhill toward the remaining fuel-canisters.

Dyson paused at the cave mouth, peering in. It was so dark in there. He hesitated for a moment, knowing the solution to his problem was waiting for him in the dark, but feeling a curious reluctance to enter that black enclosure.

He glanced back. Martine and White were much closer, running silently, and the robot was moving down the slope toward them ahead of its twin shadows. There were more shadows than men moving toward him up the hill, twice as many shadows, in twinned pairs, one black and one gray on the purple mosses. Deimos and Phobos spun through the emptiness overhead, pale silver shaping the ghosts of all moving things behind them on the ground. But it was Phobos that guided them. Phobos, who is Fear.

Dyson turned his back on them. They were still far enough away to look tiny. He could reach across the vinylite map and take the control box away from Martine between his thumb and finger....

Instead he took out a pocket fluorescent and shook it alight. With an uncomfortable feeling that he was somehow violating a sanctuary, he stepped into the cave. There were the canisters, row upon row against the rocky wall.

This was the mouth of Eden. He had chosen this site for his underground palace, hidden safely away in case after all rescue ships did come from Earth. But he hadn't really expected rescue ships. The spreading cloud of his childhood had gradually swelled until Earth was scarcely visible to him any more. It was a shadow cast before the flash of the Blow-Up.

Working quickly, with both hands, he stripped the damper-hooks from the canisters....

A few minutes afterward he ran out of the cave and down the slope toward the approaching men with their escort of nervous shadows. His shout broke on a high-pitched note of triumph.

"Walk right in!" he cried across the plain. "It's all there, Martine! It's all in the cave! Go and get it!"

Then the thunders began.

There wasn't any real danger. Not as long as they stayed out of the cave. The fuel was blowing off canister by canister, not all at once, because each was a unit and constructed with every safety precaution mankind knew how to apply. Each one had a half-life of sixty-five seconds. They weren't blowing all at once because Dyson hadn't activated them all at once. He had only two hands.

One canister blew. Eight seconds later another one blew. The power that should have lifted a spaceship was going into light and sound and radiation too subtle to look dangerous. A man could walk into the cave and right up to the canisters, if he wanted. And he could walk out again.

What would happen to his cells, his marrow, his blood and bones, later, was another matter. Radium can be leached from the human

body. But the invisible poisons in the cave couldn't be, ever. Gamma radiation leprosy, quite incurable, was pouring out of the canisters into the alternate white glare and blind darkness of the cave.

Before that threat human conflicts altered.

But not quite instantly. There was a brief, stunned interval in which Martine struggled with the readjustment of his own mind, changing rage over into terror, triumph into the awareness of defeat.

He pointed his revolver.

"Go back in," he said. "Turn it off."

"No," Dyson said.

"I'll count three."

"I'd rather be dead."

Martine hesitated a moment. Then, "White," he said.

White was staring at the bright mouth of the cave. It blinked and went dark. He licked his lips.

"No, sir," he said.

"Go in yourself," Dyson said to Martine, grinning, seeing the older man's face lighted again by the renewed glare from the cave. He waited until the thunder ceased briefly to vibrate, and said, "It's easy, you know. Just push the dampers in again. Either way, you lose. Stay where you are and you're washed up as a commander. Or go in the cave. You'll get back to Earth with the cargo and maybe you'll wear more stars on your shoulders--only you won't have any shoulders."

"Shut up," Martine said crisply.

The thunders rolled.

Martine drew a noisy breath and yanked the control-carriage toward him. It came on its spindling legs, like a dog. He turned a dial. There was a clank of metal on rock and the robot moved slowly into sight toward them. He had cancelled its commands, then, and Dyson's orders were erased from its mind. But too late. Much too late.

Now it began to move mindlessly toward the cave.

"Fine," Dyson jeered. "That's the way to save the fuel, all right. It'll ruin the robot, of course, so it can't pilot the ship. But what of it? Mars is a nice place to live!"

Martine began to curse him.

"Oh shut up," Dyson said. "You're through. So's Earth. When the Blow-Up comes, we'll be out of it right here in our Ark, watching the Deluge from a nice safe distance."

The thunders rolled.

Martine made his mistake. He fell back on argument. His voice was still firm, but what he said was, "Earth needs our cargo--"

Dyson took a long chance and swung his arm. The revolver sailed out of Martine's grip and thudded softly on the moss at Benjy White's feet. That meant Martine's finger hadn't been inside the guard, on the trigger. And that meant many things....

"Our cargo?" Dyson echoed, poised on his toes and watching Martine intently, ready to forestall the slightest move toward the revolver. He wanted to pick it up himself, but that would instantly

change the plane of conflict from moral to physical, and on the moral plane he knew he was already the winner.

Why didn't White pick it up? Why had White come along, anyhow? Whose side was he on? Probably he didn't know himself. Dyson grimaced angrily at him. But he kept on talking:

"We haven't got the cure for the Blow-Up in our cargo, Martine. There isn't any cure. And for one reason--just one. That's people. Men and women. They're no good, Martine. So they're going to die. All of them." He nodded toward the roaring cave. "This is the way the world ends," he said.

Martine looked up the slope, listened to the thunder. He didn't move. He had nothing to say. Watching him, Dyson realized that he didn't care whether White picked up the gun or not. Ha, had won without guns.

"All right, Martine," he said, almost casually. "Let's have the helmet. You won't be needing the transmitter any more."

There was a pause. The thunders rolled. Dyson glanced at White, who was staring at the pale eye of the cave. Dyson stooped swiftly and picked up the gun.

"Johnny."

It was White, still looking as if hypnotized into the cave-eye.

"Well?"

"Listen."

The thunders rolled.

"I hear it," Dyson said. Martine neither moved nor spoke.

"Pint-sized Blow-Up," White said. "The real one would be a lot worse. Noisier. Somehow I never thought of that before. The noise."

"We won't hear it."

"We'd see it, though. I'd see it. I'd know." He wrenched his gaze away from the glare of the cavern and looked up into the dark, toward the blue-green star of Earth. "Poochie," he said slowly, "was always afraid of thunder."

Dyson felt the bottom of his stomach drop out. He didn't know why yet, not with his mind. But there was some danger approaching that had taken the lead away from him, out of his control. It was coming closer and closer, with every word White spoke and every slow thought that took shape in his brain.

"I told you about Poochie," White said. "She used to be my wife, once. And the only thing that ever scared her was thunder. Used to hang on to me when--"

The thunders rolled.

"Benjy," Dyson said, his mouth dry. "Benjy--"

"Se I'm crazy," White said. "Can't help what you think, kid. I never thought the Blow-Up would sound like this. I think I ought to be around where Poochie could find me, if she wanted, in case the Blow-Up comes."

He started up the slope toward the cave.

"Benjy!" Dyson said. His voice trembled. "You'd be dead in six months. And what good would it do? Our cargo can't stop the Blow-

Up."

"How do you know?" White asked over his shoulder. "It's not for us to say. Our job wasn't to stop the Blow-Up. It was to get some Martian ores back home. A man ought to do his job if he takes the pay for it."

"Benjy! Don't move! I tell you, you can't stop the Blow-Up!"

"I sure as hell can stop this one," White said, and went on up the slope.

"Benjy, if you take another step I'll shoot!"

White glanced over his shoulder.

"No you won't, Johnny," he said. "No, you won't."

Dyson tried to squeeze the trigger.

He couldn't.

He concentrated on White's silhouetted back and sighted along the revolver, and he forced a command down his arm, into his index finger. But the message never got through. Martine moved faster.

Martine took the long, quick forward step and slammed the edge of his palm down on Dyson's wrist. The gun exploded in mid-air as it spun away.

The thunders rolled.

"Benjy!" Dyson shouted. It came out a thin whisper. He had to stop Benjy. He had to. Benjy mustn't go into that cave. It was very, very wrong, somehow, for anyone but Johnny Dyson to go into that cave. He took a step forward, but Martine, revolver ready, blocked his path.

Martine, the truant officer, ready to collar him and drag him back to Earth. Back to work, discipline, responsibility.

Work. Discipline. Responsibility--

"Oh, no, no!" Johnny Dyson whispered. In his mind's eye he saw his fragile Martian Eden glisten under the moons, all its palaces and shining towers beginning to dissolve around him.

A Geiger began to tick in his brain.

It ticked faster and louder.

It roared.

Then he felt the flash. He felt the top of his head open and the bursting nova explode and the ballooning black cloud spurt upward through the sutures of his skull. The cloud rolled out enormously, its edges curling over and under in the familiar, the terrible shape of doom. He looked up to see it....

He saw the Earth-star, blue-green against the dark. He saw it change. He saw it change....

The explosion in his head must have been only a faint and remote echo, he thought, of that other and larger and farther nova-burst. For an instant half the sky was blotted out in the white glare of exploding Earth. He saw it happen.

Then the glare receded and condensed. The Earth-star took shape again, no longer blue for purity and green for peace, but a dreadful, shaking, unstable glow.

This is the way the world ends....

Not with a bang, but a whimper.

He heard himself laughing.

He stumbled up the slope after White.

"Benjy!" he yelled. "Benjy, wait! It's happened! Didn't you hear? Look up--it's happened!"

"Benjy! What's the matter with you? Earth's gone... we're safe!"

White slogged on, not turning. Dyson labored after him, seized his shoulder. White paused and looked uncertainly into his face. Dyson couldn't stay still. He couldn't stop laughing. He danced--the old, old dance of triumph. When Martine reached the spot he danced around Martine too.

"What's happened?" Martine shouted at him.

"The end of the world!" Dyson shrieked. "This is the way, all right. You must have heard it! Earth's gone. We're safe. Safe in Eden. Look up, you dopes, look up!"

Two of the men looked up, while the third danced. Danced and laughed. Johnny couldn't stop laughing, even when Martine and White lowered their gaze and stared at him.

"Dyson," Martine said in a curious, low voice. "Dyson. Listen. Nothing's happened. You must have--imagined it. Look up, see for yourself."

Johnny looked. It was still there, all right. A trembling white glare in the sky. He laughed more shrilly than ever.

"But Dyson--" Martine said. White shook his head at him, reached

out and took Johnny by the arm, stopping his dance.

"It's all right, Johnny," he said. "You're safe now. Everything's fine. Now you just take it easy and wait for me. I'll be back in a little while." He whispered something to Martine. Then he started up the slope again, toward the cave.

Johnny stared after him.

"Benjy!"

There was no answer.

"Benjy, what's the matter with you? You don't need to save the fuel now. Earth's gone. We're safe. We don't have to go back. Don't you understand--"

"Easy," Martine said. "It's all right."

White went on slowly up the hill, his shoulders hunched as if against a wind that was now blowing. He was getting smaller and smaller, vanishing into the microcosm. Johnny Dyson blinked into the white eye of the cave. Then the rolling thunders swallowed Benjy.

After a while they were in the ship again, ready for the take-off. And, after that, Martine and White talked as if they had actually left Mars, headed back toward--well, not Earth, because obviously there was no Earth. Where, then?

Johnny tried to figure it out. When he asked questions the answers he got were so irrational that he had to translate them into his own terms; but presently he found a solution that satisfied him. When they said "Earth" they meant it only as a symbol. They were, logically enough, going to try to locate another habitable planet somewhere, a planet even better than Mars, where they could rebuild Eden.

And that was all right too. Because, after thinking it over, Johnny realized that it would have taken a lot of hard work to build his Martian Eden, even with the robot to help. It would have been quite a responsibility.

It was better to let the older men have the responsibility.

Of course the Blow-Up must have been quite a shock to Martine and White. It was difficult for them to readjust. But it did no harm to let them pretend. The name didn't matter. They thought of the new, undiscovered planet as Earth. When they found it they might even call it Earth--New Earth, in memory of the bad Old Earth that was gone. Gone forever, with all its worthless, evil infestations of humanity. For that Johnny couldn't really feel regret.

He made allowances for his companions, even when they acted a little crazy. It was odd, being the only completely sane man in the ship.

He waited. There was a period of vivid, confusing dreams in which he almost imagined himself back on Earth, but presently the dreams passed and were gone., Then he was able to sleep soundly again.

... Johnny's spaceship kept on going.

Sometimes he wondered when it would reach its destination. He was tired of the artificial days and nights of the ship, and those viziports with their disturbingly vivid images of what no longer existed. It had been pointless, after all, trying to disguise the blackness of space with those visions of Old Earth outside the windows. And it had been rather foolish to disguise the robot so that it looked like a man in white when it came in to bring him food and get its orders from him.

Someday when he felt more like it, he would change the orders and remake the robot, casting it back into its metal reality. But he was tired. He had to rest. He mustn't take on any unnecessary responsibilities now, because the day was coming when the ship would land on a habitable planet and his work would begin.

And he'd do his job. He'd do it well. He hadn't given up. Oh no, not Johnny Dyson.

His own father had lain down on the job, of course, first trying to pass the buck to Johnny, and then, when that failed, simply by going insane. A complete refusal to accept responsibility. Yes, that was the only sin—giving up. For if his father had stayed on the job, he might have found an answer. After all, Dr. Gerald Dyson had been a brilliant man.

But Dr. Gerald Dyson had given up. He had ended his career in an insane asylum, very likely so happy in his ultimate retreat that he'd never even known it when the Blow-Up came.

If I'd had my father's chances, I'd have kept on fighting to the last ditch, Johnny thought. But I've got my own job. It isn't too late. And if the ship ever reaches a habitable world, I'll start right in working at it.

He glanced at the viziport images of a world that had given up and therefore had died, quickly and painlessly.

Johnny smiled.

He was so happy in his spaceship room that he never knew it when the real Blow-Up came.

Piggy Bank

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Ballard's diamonds were being stolen as fast as he could make new ones. Insurance companies had long since given him up as a bad risk. Detective agencies were glad to offer their services, at a high fee, but, since the diamonds were invariably stolen, anyhow, this was simply more money down the drain. It couldn't keep up. Ballard's fortune was founded on diamonds, and the value of gems increases in inverse proportion to their quantity and availability. In ten years or so, at the present rate of theft, unflawed blue-whites would be almost worthless.

"So what I need is a perfect safe," Ballard said, sipping a liqueur. He stared across the table at Joe Gunther, who only smiled.

"Sure," Gunther said. "Well?"

"You're a technician. Figure it out. What do I pay you for?"

"You pay me for making diamonds and not telling anybody I can make 'em."

"I hate lazy people," Ballard remarked. "You graduated top man at the Institute in 1990. What have you done since then?"

"Practiced hedonism," Gunther said. "Why should I work my head off when I can get everything I want just by making diamonds for you? What does any man want? Security, freedom, a chance to indulge his whims. I got that. Just by finding a formula for the Philosopher's Stone. Too bad Cain never guessed the potentialities of his patent. Too bad for him; lucky for me."

"Shut up," Ballard said with soft intensity.

Gunther grinned and glanced around the gigantic dining hall. "Nobody can hear us." He was a little drunk. A lock of lank dark hair fell over his forehead; his thin face looked sharp and mocking. "Besides, I like to talk. It makes me realize I'm as much of a big shot as you are. Swell stuff for my soul."

"Then talk. When you're quite finished, I'll get on with what I've got to say."

Gunther drank brandy. "I'm a hedonist, and I've got a high i.q. When I graduated, I looked around for the best way of supporting Joe Gunther without working. Building something new from scratch wastes time. The best system is to find a structure already built, and add something more. Ergo, the Patent Office. I spent two years going through the files, looking for pay dirt. I found it in Cain's formula. He didn't know what it was. A theory about thermodynamics--he thought. Never realized he could make diamonds simply by developing the idea a bit. So," Gunther finished, "for twenty years that formula has been buried in the Patent Office, and I found it. And sold it to you, on condition that I keep my mouth shut and let the world believe your diamonds were real."

"Finished?" Ballard asked.

"Sure."

"Why do you recapitulate the obvious on an average of once a month?"

"To keep you reminded," Gunther said. "You'd kill me if you dared. Then your secret would be quite safe. The way I figure it, ever so often you work out a method of getting rid of me, and it biases your

judgment. You're apt to go off half-cocked, get me killed, and then realize your mistake. When I'm dead, the formula will be made public, and everybody can make diamonds. Where'll you be, then?"

Ballard shifted his bulky body, half closing his eyes and clasping large, well-shaped hands behind his neck. He regarded Gunther coolly.

"Symbiosis," he said. "You'll keep your mouth shut, because diamonds are your security, too. Credits, currency, bonds--they're all apt to become worthless under current economic conditions. But diamonds are rare. I want to keep 'em that way. I've got to stop these thefts."

"If one man builds a safe, another man can crack it. You know the history of that. In the old days, somebody invented a combination lock. Right away, somebody else figured out the answer--listening to the fall of the tumblers. Tumblers were made noiseless; then a crook used a stethoscope. The answer to that was a time lock. Nitroglycerin canceled that. Stronger metals were used, and precision jointures. o.k.--thermite. One guy used to take off the dial, slip a piece of carbon paper under it, replace it--and come back a day later, after the combination had been scratched on the carbon. Today it's x rays, and so forth."

"A perfect safe can be made," Ballard said.

"How?"

"There are two methods. One, lock the diamonds in an absolutely un-crackable safe."

"No such thing."

"Two, leave the diamonds in plain sight, guarded by men who never

take their eyes from them."

"You tried that, too. It didn't work. The men were gassed once. The second time, a ringer got in, disguised as one of the detectives."

Ballard ate an olive. "When I was a kid, I had a piggy bank made of glass. I could see the coins, but I couldn't get 'em out without breaking the pig. That's what I want. Only--I want a pig who can run."

Gunther looked up, his eyes suddenly sharp. "Eh?"

"A pig who's conditioned to flight--self-preservation. One who specializes in the art of running away. Animals do it--herbivores chiefly. There's an African deer that reacts to movement before it's made. Better than split-second reaction. A fox is another example. Can a man catch a fox?"

"He'd use dogs and horses."

"Uh-huh. So foxes run through herds of sheep, and cross water, to spoil the scent. My pig must do that, too."

"You're talking about a robot," Gunther said.

"The Metalman people will make us one to order, with the radioatomic type of brain. A seven-foot robot, studded with diamonds, conditioned to running away. An intelligent robot."

Gunther rubbed his jaw. "Lovely. Except for one thing. The intelligence must be limited. Metalman have made robots of human mind-power, but each one covers a city block. Mobility's lost as intelligence increases. They haven't yet found a substitute for the colloid brain. However--" He stared at his fingernails. "Yeah. It could be done. The robot must be conditioned in one line only, self-preservation. It must be able to build logically from that motivation.

and that's all it needs."

"Would that be enough?"

"Yes, because a robot's logical. You can drive a seal or a deer into a trap. Or a tiger. The tiger hears the beaters behind him, and runs from them. To him, that's the only danger he knows, till he falls in the pit that's been dug for him. A fox might be smarter. He might think of both the menace behind him and the one in front. A robot--he wouldn't stampede blindly. If he was driven toward a cul-de-sac, he'd use logic and wonder what was up that blind alley."

"And escape?"

"He'd have split-second--in fact, instantaneous reaction. Radioatomic brains think fast. You've set me a beautiful problem, Bruce, but I think it can be done. A diamond-studded robot, parading around here--psychologically, it's right up your alley."

Ballard shrugged. "I like ostentation. As a kid I had a hell of an inferiority complex. I'm compensating for that now. Why do you suppose I built the castle? It's a showplace. I need an army of servants to keep it going. The worst thing I can imagine is being a nonentity."

"Which in your mind is synonymous with poverty," Gunther murmured. "You're essentially imitative, Bruce. You built your economic empire through imitation. I don't think you've ever had an original thought in your life."

"What about this robot?"

"Induction--simple addition. You figured out your requirements and added them up. The result is a diamond-studded robot conditioned

to flight." Gunther hesitated. "Flight isn't enough. It's got to be escape--self-preservation. Sometimes offense is the best defense. The robot should run as long as that's feasible and logical--and then try escape in other ways."

"You mean giving him armament?"

"Uh-huh. If we started that, we couldn't stop. We want a mobile unit, not a tank. The robot's intelligence, based on flight logic, should enable him to make use of whatever he needs, the tools that are at hand. Squirt his brain full of the basic patterns, and he'll do the rest. I'll get at it immediately."

Ballard wiped his lips with a napkin. "Good."

Gunther got up. "I'm not really signing my death warrant, you know," he said conversationally. "If you have a theft-proof safe like the robot, you won't need me to make more diamonds. There'll be enough on the robot to satisfy all your needs till you die. If you kill me, then, your diamond monopoly's safe--nobody can make them but me. However, I wouldn't make that robot without taking precautions. The Patent Office formula isn't listed under the name of Cain, and it isn't really a thermodynamic principle."

"Naturally," Ballard said. "I checked on that, without telling my investigators exactly what I was after. The patent number is your secret."

"And I'm safe as long as it remains my secret. It will, until I die. Then it'll be broadcast, and a lot of people will have their suspicions confirmed. There's a pretty widespread rumor that your diamonds are artificial, but nobody can prove it. I know one guy who'd like to."

"Ffoulkes?"

"Barney Ffoulkes, of Mercantile Alloys. He hates your insides as much as you hate his. But you're a bigger man than he is, just now. Yeah, Ffoulkes would love to smash you, Bruce."

"Get busy on the robot," Ballard said, rising. "See if you can finish it before there's another robbery."

Gunther's grin was sardonic. Ballard didn't smile, but the skin crinkled around his eyes. The two men understood each other thoroughly--which was probably the reason they were both still alive.

"Metalman, eh?" Barney Ffoulkes said to his chief of staff, Dangerfield. "Making a diamond-studded robot for Ballard, eh? Bloody show-off!"

Dangerfield didn't say anything.

"How big?"

"Seven feet, perhaps."

"And studded--wonder how thickly? Ballard's going to tie up a lot of rocks in that sandwich man. Wonder if he'll have the diamonds spell out, 'Hurrah for Bruce Ballard'?" Ffoulkes got up from his desk and buzzed around the room like a mosquito, a ginger-haired, partially bald little man with a wrinkled rat-trap face, soured in brine. "Get an offensive ready. Revise it daily. Chart a complete economic front, so we can jump on Ballard from all directions when we get the tip-off."

Dangerfield still said nothing, but his eyebrows lifted inquiringly in the sallow, blank face.

Ffoulkes scuttled toward him, twitching. "Do I have to make a blueprint? Whenever we've had Ballard in a spot before, he's wriqqled out--insurance companies, loan flotations, more diamonds.

No insurance company will handle him now. His diamonds can't be inexhaustible, unless they're artificial. If they are, he'll find it harder and harder to float a loan. See?"

Dangerfield nodded dubiously.

"Hm-m-m. He'll have a lot of gems tied up in this robot. It'll be stolen, naturally. And that time we'll strike."

Dangerfield pursed his lips.

"o.k.," Ffoulkes said. "So it may not work. It hasn't worked before. But in this game the whole trick is to keep hammering till the wall's breached. This time may be the charm. If we can once catch Ballard insolvent, he'll go under. Anyhow, we've got to try. Prepare an offensive. Stocks, bonds, utilities, agricultures, ores--everything. What we want to do is force Ballard to buy on margin when he can't cover. Meantime, be sure our protection's paid. Hand the boys a bonus."

Dangerfield made a circle with thumb and forefinger. Ffoulkes chuckled nastily as his chief of staff went out.

It was a time of booms and panics, of unstable economics and utterly crazy variables. Man hours, as usual, remained the base. But what in theory seemed effective in practice was somewhat different. Man hours, fed into the hopper of the social culture, emerged in fantastic forms. Science had done that--science enslaved.

The strangle hold of the robber barons was still strong. Each one wanted a monopoly, but, because they were all at war, a species of toppling chaos was the result. They tried desperately to keep their own ships afloat while sinking the enemy fleet. Science and government were handicapped by the Powers, which were really

industrial empires, completely self-contained if not self-supporting units. Their semanticists and propagandists worked on the people, ladling out soothing sirup. All would be well later--when Ballard, or Ffoulkes, or All-Steel, or Unlimited Power, took over. Meantime--Meantime the technicians of the robber barons, well subsidized, kept throwing monkey wrenches into the machinery. It was the time preceding the Scientific Revolution, and akin to the Industrial Revolution in its rapid shifting of economic values. All-Steel's credit was based chiefly on the Hallwell Process. Unlimited Power's scientists discovered a better, more effective method that scrapped the Hallwell Process. Result, the bottom fell out of All-Steel, and there was a brief period of frantic readjustment, during which All-Steel yanked certain secret patents out into the open and utilized them, playing hell with Ffoulkes, whose Gatun Bond Issue was based on a law of supply and demand which was automatically revised by the new All-Steel patents. Meantime each company was trying to catch the others with their pants down. Each one wanted to be master. When that enviable day arrived, the economic mess would settle, it was hoped, under the central control, and there would be Utopia.

The structure grew like the Tower of Babel. It couldn't stop--naturally. Crime kept pace with it.

Because crime was a handy weapon. The old protection racket had been revived. All-Steel would pay the Donner gang plenty to keep their hands off All-Steel interests. If the Donner boys happened to concentrate on robberies that would weaken Ffoulkes or Ballard or Unlimited Power--fine! Enough spectacular thefts would lead to a panic during which enemy stocks would drop to the bottom, one asked, nothing bid.

And if a man went down, he was lost. His holdings would go to the wolves, and he himself would be too potentially dangerous ever to be allowed power again. *Vae victis!*

But diamonds were increasingly rare--and so, till now, Bruce Ballard's empire had been safe.

The robot was sexless, but gave the impression of masculinity. Neither Ballard nor Gunther ever used the neuter pronoun in reference to the creature. Metalman Products had done their usual satisfactory job, and Gunther improved on it.

So Argus came to the castle, for final conditioning. Rather surprisingly, the robot was not vulgarly ostentatious. He was functional, a towering, symmetrical figure of gold, studded with diamonds. He was patterned on an armored knight, seven feet tall, with a cuirass of bright gold, golden greaves, golden gauntlets that looked clumsy but which contained remarkably sensitive nerve-endings. His eyes had diamond lenses, specially chosen for their refractive powers, and, logically, Ballard called him Argus.

He was blazingly beautiful, a figure out of myth. In a bright light he resembled Apollo more than Argus. He was a god come to Earth, the shower of gold that Danae saw.

Gunther sweated over the conditioning process. He worked in a maze of psychological charts, based on the mentalities of the creatures that lived by flight. Automatic reactions had to have voluntary cut-offs, controlled by logic, when reasoning power took over--reasoning power based on the flight-instinct. Self-preservation was the prime factor. The robot had it in a sufficient amount.

"So he can't be caught," Ballard said, regarding Argus.

Gunther grunted. "How? He automatically adjusts to the most logical solution, and readjusts instantly to any variable. Logic and superswift reactions make him a perfect flight machine."

"You've implanted the routine?"

"Sure. Twice a day he makes his round of the castle. He won't leave the castle for any reason--which is a safeguard. If crooks could lure Argus outside, they might set an ingenious trap. But even if they captured the castle, they couldn't hold it long enough to immobilize Argus. What have you got burglar alarms for?"

"You're sure the tour's a good idea?"

"You wanted it. Once in the afternoon, once at night--so Argus could show off to the guests. If he meets danger during his round, he'll adjust to it."

Ballard fingered the diamonds on the robot's cuirass. "I'm still not sure about--sabotage."

"Diamonds are pretty tough. They'll resist a lot of heat. And under the gold plate is a casing that'll resist fire and acid--not forever, but long enough to give Argus his chance. The point is that Argus can't be immobilized long enough to let himself be destroyed. Sure, you could play a flame thrower on him--but for how long? One second, and then he'd scam."

"If he could. What about cornering him?"

"He won't go into corners if he can help it. And his radioatomic brain is good! He's a thinking machine devoted to one purpose: self-preservation.

"And he's strong," Gunther said. "Don't forget that. It's important. He can rip metal, if he can get leverage. He's not a superdooper, of course-- if he were, he couldn't be mobile. He's subject to normal physical laws. But he is beautifully adaptive; he's very strong; he has

super-swift reactive powers; he's not too vulnerable. And we're the only guys who can immobilize Argus."

"That helps," Ballard said.

Gunther shrugged. "Might as well start. The robot's ready." He jerked a wire free from the golden helm. "It takes a minute or so for the automatic controls to take over. Now--"

The immense figure stirred. On light, rubberoid soles, it moved away, so quickly that its legs almost blurred. Then it stood motionless once more.

"We were too close," Gunther said, licking his lips. "He reacts to the vibrations sent out by our brains. There's your piggy bank, Bruce!"

A little smile twisted Ballard's lips. "Yeah. Let's see--" He walked toward the robot. Argus slid away quietly.

"Try the combination," Gunther suggested.

Ballard said softly, almost whispering, "All is not gold that glitters." He approached the robot again, but it reacted by racing noiselessly into a distant corner. Before Ballard could say anything, Gunther murmured, "Say it louder."

"Suppose someone overhears? That's--"

"So what? You'll change the key phrase, and when you do, you can get close enough to Argus to whisper it."

"All is not gold that glitters." Ballard's voice rose. This time, when he went to the robot, the giant figure did not stir.

Ballard pressed a concealed stud in the golden helm and murmured,

"These are pearls that were his eyes." He touched the button again, and the robot fled into another corner. "Uh-huh. It works, all right."

"Don't give him such obvious combinations," Gunther suggested. "Suppose one of your guests starts quoting Shakespeare? Mix up your quotations."

Ballard tried again. "What light through yonder window breaks
I come here to bury Caesar now is the time for all good men."

"Nobody's going to say that by accident," Gunther remarked. "Fair enough. Now I'm going out and enjoy myself. I need relaxation. Write me a check."

"How much?"

"Couple of thousand. I'll telecall you if I need more."

"What about testing the robot?"

"Go ahead and test him. You won't find anything wrong."

"Well, take your guards."

Gunther grinned sardonically and headed for the door.

An hour later the air taxi grounded atop a New York skyscraper. Gunther emerged, flanked by two husky protectors. Ballard was running no risks of having his colleague abducted by a rival. As Gunther paid the air cabman, the detectives glanced at their wrist spotters and punched the red button set into each case. They reported thus, every five minutes, that all was well. One of Ballard's control centers in New York received the signals and learned that all was well—that there was no need to send out a rush rescue squad. It was complicated, but effective. No one else could use the spotters,

for a new code was used each day. This time the key ran: first hour, report every five minutes; second hour, every eight minutes; third hour, every six minutes. And, at the first hint of danger, the detectives could instantly send in an alarm.

But this time it didn't work out successfully. When the three men got into the elevator, Gunther said, "The Fountain Room," and licked his lips in anticipation. The door swung shut, and as the elevator started its break-neck race down, anaesthetic gas flooded the little cubicle. One of the detectives managed to press the alarm warning on his spotter, but he was unconscious before the car slowed at the basement. Gunther didn't even realize he was being gassed before he lost consciousness.

He woke up fettered securely to a metal chair. The room was windowless, and a spotlight was focused on Gunther's face. He manipulated sticky eyelids, wondering how long he had been out. Scowling, he twisted his arm so that his wrist watch was visible.

Two men loomed, shadowy beyond the lamp. One wore a physician's white garment. The other was a little man, ginger-haired, with a hard rat trap of a face.

"Hi, Ffoulkes," Gunther said. "You saved me a hangover."

The little man chuckled. "Well, we've done it at last. Lord knows I've been trying long enough to get you away from Ballard's watchdogs."

"What day is this?"

"Wednesday. You've been unconscious for about twenty hours."

Gunther frowned. "Well, start talking."

"I'll do that, first, if you like. Are Ballard's diamonds artificial?"

"Don't you wish you knew?"

"I'll offer you about anything you want if you'll cross up Ballard."

"I wouldn't dare," Gunther said candidly. "You wouldn't have to keep your word. It'd be more logical for you to kill me, after I'd talked."

"Then we'll have to use scopolamin."

"It won't work. I've been immunized."

"Try it, anyway. Lester!"

The white-gowned man came forward and put a hypodermic deftly into Gunther's arm. After a while he shrugged.

"Complete immunization. Scop is no good, Mr. Ffoulkes."

Gunther smiled. "Well?"

"Suppose I try torture?"

"I don't think you'd dare. Torture and murder are capital crimes."

The little man moved nervously around the room. "Does Ballard himself know how to make the diamonds? Or are you the only one?"

"The Blue Fairy makes 'em," Gunther said. "She's got a magic wand."

"I see. Well, I won't try torture yet. I'll use duress. You'll have plenty to eat and drink. But you'll stay here till you talk. It'll get rather dull after a month or so."

Gunther didn't answer, and the two men went out. An hour passed,

and another.

The white-gowned physician brought in a tray and deftly fed the prisoner. After he had vanished, Gunther looked at his watch again. A worried frown showed on his forehead.

He grew steadily more nervous.

The watch read 9:15 when another meal was served. This time Gunther waited till the physician had left, and then recovered the fork he had managed to secrete in his sleeve. He hoped its absence wouldn't be noticed immediately. A few minutes was all he wanted, for Gunther knew the construction of these electromagnetic prison chairs. If he could short circuit the current-- It wasn't too difficult, even though Gunther's arms were prisoned by metal clamps. He knew where the wires were. After a bit, there was a crackling flash, and Gunther swore at the pain in his seared fingertips. But the clamps slid free from his arms and legs.

He stood up, looking again at his wrist watch. Scowling, he prowled around the room till he found what he wanted--the window buttons. As he pressed these, panels in the blank walls slid aside, revealing the lighted towers of New York.

Gunther glanced at the door warily. He opened a window and peered down. The height was dizzying, but a ledge provided easy egress. Gunther eased himself over the sill and slid along to his right till he reached another window.

It was locked. He looked down, hesitating. There was another ledge below, but he wasn't sure he could make it. Instead, he went on to the next window.

Locked.

But the one after that was open. Gunther peered into the dimness. He could make out a bulky desk, and the glimmer of a telepanel. Sighing with relief, he crawled into the office, with another glance at his watch.

He went directly to the televisor and fingered a number. When a man's face appeared on the panel, Gunther merely said, "Reporting. o.k.," and broke the connection. His consciousness recorded a tiny click.

He called Ballard then, but the castle's secretary answered. "Where's Ballard?"

"Not here, sir. Can I--"

Gunther went white, remembering the click he had heard. He broke the connection experimentally, and heard it again. Ballard-- "Hell!" Gunther said under his breath. He returned to the window, crawled out, hung by his hands, and let himself drop. He almost missed the ledge one story below. Skin ripped from his fingertips as he fought for a grip.

But he got it at last. He kicked his way through the window before him and dived in, glass showering. No televisor here. But there was a door dimly defined in the wall.

Gunther opened it, finding what he wanted on the other side. He switched on a lamp, riffling through the drawers till he was certain that this office wasn't another plant. After that, he used the televisor, fingering the same number he had called before.

There was no answer.

"Uh-huh," Gunther said, and made another call.

He had just broken the connection when a man in a surgeon's gown came in and shot him through the head.

The man who looked like Ffoulkes scrubbed make-up from his face. He glanced up when the physician entered.

"o.k.?"

"Yeah. Let's go."

"Did they trace Gunther's call?"

"That's not our pie. Come on."

A gray-haired man, tied securely in his chair, swore as the hypodermic pierced his skin. Ballard waited a minute and then jerked his head at the two guards behind him.

"Get out."

They obeyed. Ballard turned to the prisoner.

"Gunther was supposed to report to you every day. If he failed, you were told to release a certain message he gave you. Where's the message?"

"Where's Gunther?" the gray-haired man said. His voice was thick, the words slurring as the scopolamin began its work.

"Gunther's dead. I arranged matters so that he'd telecall you on a tapped beam. I traced the call. Now where's the message?"

It took a little while, but at last Ballard unscrewed a hollow table leg and took out a thin roll of recording wire tape, carefully sealed.

"Know what's in this?"

"No. No. No--"

Ballard went to the door. "Kill him," he said to the guards, and waited till he heard the muffled shot. Then he sighed with heartfelt relief.

He was, at last, impregnable.

Barney Ffoulkes called his chief of staff. "I hear Ballard's robot is finished. Clamp down. Put the squeeze on him. Force him to liquidate. Tell the Donner boys about the robot."

Dangerfield's face showed no expression as he made thumb and forefinger into a circle.

What Gunther had called Cain's thermodynamic patent was in reality something different, as the wire tape showed. Actually it was "McNamara, Torsion Process, Patent No. r-735-v-2z." Ballard recorded that in his capacious memory and looked up the patent himself. This time he wished to share the secret with no one. He was enough of a scientist, he thought, to be able to work out the details himself. Besides, Gunther's machines for diamond-making were already set up in the castle laboratory.

Ballard immediately ran into an annoying, though not serious, hitch. The original McNamara process was not designed to create artificial diamonds. It was a method of developing certain electronic alterations in matter, and through torsion changing the physical structure involved. Gunther had taken McNamara's system, applied it to carbon, and made diamonds.

Ballard felt certain he could do the same, but it would take time. As a matter of fact, it took exactly two weeks. Once the new application was discovered, the rest was incredibly easy. Ballard started to

make diamonds.

There was one other difficulty. The annealing process took nearly a month. If the carbon was removed from the chamber before that time, it would be merely carbon. In the past, Gunther had kept a supply of diamonds on hand for emergencies; that supply was depleted now, most of the gems having gone to cover the golden robot. Ballard sat back and shrugged. In a month-- Long before that Ffoulkes struck. He clamped down with both hands.

Propaganda, whispering campaigns, releasing of new patents that rendered Ballard's worthless--all the weapons of economic warfare were unleashed against the diamond king. Holdings depreciated. There were strikes in Ballard's mines and factories. An unexpected civil war knocked the bottom out of certain African stocks he held. Word began to go around that the Ballard empire was collapsing.

Margin was the answer--that, and security. Diamonds were excellent collateral. Ballard used up his small hoard lavishly, trying to plug the leaks in the dike, buying on margin, using the tactics that had always succeeded for him in the past. His obvious confidence stemmed the tide for a while. Not for long. Ffoulkes kept hitting, hard and fast.

By the end of the month, Ballard knew, he would have all the diamonds he needed, and could re-establish his credit. In the meantime--

The Donner gang tried to steal Argus. They didn't know the robot's capabilities. Argus fled from room to room, clanging an alarm, ignoring bullets, until the Donners decided to give it up as a bad job and escape. But by that time the police had arrived, and they failed.

Ballard had been too busy pulling strings to enjoy his golden plaything. The advent of the Donners gave him a new idea. It would

be a shame to mar the robot, but the diamonds could be replaced later. And what good was a bank except for emergencies?

Ballard found a canvas bag and went into the robot's room, locking the doors behind him. Argus stood motionless in a corner, his diamond eyes inscrutable. Ballard took out a tiny chisel, shook his head rather sadly, and said in a firm voice, "What light through yonder window breaks--"

He finished the scrambled quotation and walked toward the robot. Argus silently went away.

Ballard moved his shoulders impatiently. He repeated the key sentence louder. How many decibels were necessary? A good many-- Argus still ran away. This time Ballard yelled the key at the top of his voice.

And the robot's flight mechanism continued to operate. The automatic alarm began to work. The siren screech hooted deafeningly through the room.

Ballard noticed that a little envelope was protruding from a slot in Argus' cuirass. Automatically he reached for it--and the robot fled.

Ballard lost his temper and began to follow Argus around the room. The robot kept at a safe distance. Eventually Argus, since he was untiring, won the race. Panting, Ballard unlocked the door and rang for help. The alarm siren died.

When servants came, Ballard ordered them to surround the robot. The circle of humanity closed in gradually, until Argus, unable to retreat within himself, chose the most logical solution and walked through the living wall, brushing the servants aside casually. He continued toward the door and through it, in a crackling of splintered

mahogany panels. Ballard looked after the retreating figure without saying anything.

The envelope had been brushed free by the encounter with the door, and Ballard picked it up. The brief note inside read:

Dear Bruce:

I'm taking no chances. Unless I make a certain adjustment on Argus daily, he reverts to a different code phrase from the one you give him. Since I'm the only guy who knows that code, you'll have a sweet time catching Argus in case you cut my throat. Honesty is the best policy.

Love,

Joe Gunther.

Ballard tore the note into tiny fragments. He dismissed the servants and followed the robot, who had become immobile in the next room.

He went out, after a while, and televised his divorced wife in Chicago.

"Jessie?"

"Hello," Jessie said. "What's up?"

"You heard about my golden robot?"

"Sure. Build as many as you want, as long as you keep on paying my alimony. What's this I hear about your hitting the skids?"

"Ffoulkes is behind that," Ballard said grimly. "If you want your alimony to continue, do me a favor, I want to register my robot in your

name. Sign it over to you for a dollar. That way, I won't lose the robot even if there's a foreclosure."

"Is it that bad?"

"It's plenty bad. But as long as I've got the robot, I'm safe. It's worth several fortunes. I want you to sell the robot back to me for a dollar, of course, but we'll keep that document quiet."

"You mean you don't trust me, Bruce?"

"Not with a diamond-studded robot," Ballard said.

"Then I want two dollars. I've got to make a profit on the transaction. o.k. I'll attend to it. Send me the papers and I'll sign 'em."

Ballard broke the beam. That was done, anyhow. The robot was unequivocally his, and not even Ffoulkes could take it away from him.

Even if he went broke before the month was up and the new diamonds ready, the robot would put him on his feet again in no time. However, it was first necessary to catch Argus--

There were many telecalls that day. People wanted collateral. Brokers wanted margin covered. Ballard frantically juggled his holdings, liquidating, attempting flotations, trying to get loans. He received a visit from two bulky men who made a business of supplying credit, at exorbitant rates.

They had heard of the robot. But they demanded to see it....

Ballard was gratified by their expressions. "What do you need credit for, Bruce? You've got plenty tied up in that thing."

"Sure. But I don't want to dismantle it. So you'll help me out till after

the first--"

"Why the first?"

"I'm getting a new shipment of diamonds then."

"Uh-huh," said the taller of the two men. "That robot runs away, doesn't he?"

"That's why he's burglar-proof."

The two brokers exchanged glances. "Mind if we make a closer examination?" They went forward, and Argus fled.

Ballard said hastily, "Stopping him is rather a complicated process. And it takes time to start him again. Those stones are perfect."

"How do we know? Turn off the juice, or whatever makes the thing tick. You don't object to our making a closer examination, do you?"

"Of course not," Ballard said. "But it takes time----"

"I smell a rat," one of the brokers remarked. "You can have all the credit you want, but I insist on testing those diamonds. Call me when you're ready."

They both went out. Ballard cursed silently. The telescreen in the corner flickered. Ballard didn't bother to answer; he knew very well what the purport of the message would be. Collateral-- Ffoulkes was closing in for the kill.

Ballard's lips tightened. He glared at the robot, spun on his heel, and summoned his secretary. He issued swift orders.

The secretary, a dapper, youngish man with yellow hair and a

perpetually worried expression, went into action. He, in turn, issued orders. People began to come to the castle--workmen and technicians.

Ballard consulted with the technicians. None of them could suggest a certain method for immobilizing the robot. Yet they were far too optimistic. It didn't seem difficult to them to catch a machine.

"Flame throwers?"

Ballard considered. "There's an alloy casing under the gold plate."

"Suppose we can corner it long enough to burn through to the brain? That should do the trick."

"Well, try it. I can afford to lose a few diamonds if I can get my hands on the rest of 'em."

Ballard watched as six men, armed with flame throwers, maneuvered Argus into a corner. He warned them finally, "You're close enough. Don't go any nearer, or he'll break through you."

"Yes, sir. Ready? One... two--"

The nozzles blasted fire in unison. It took an appreciable time for the flame to reach the robot's head--some fractional part of a second, perhaps. By that time, Argus had ducked, and, safely under the flames, was running out of his corner. Crouching, he burst through the line of men, his alarm siren screeching. He fled into the next room and relapsed into contented immobility.

"Try it again," Ballard said glumly, but he knew it wouldn't work. It didn't. The robot's reactions were instantaneous. The men could not correct their aim with sufficient speed to hit Argus. A good deal of valuable furniture was destroyed, however.

The secretary touched Ballard's sleeve. "It's nearly two."

"Eh? Oh--that's right. Call the men off, Johnson. Is the trapdoor ready?"

"Yes, sir."

The robot suddenly turned and headed for a door. It was time for his first tour of the castle that day. Since his route was prearranged and never swerved an iota from its course, it had been easy to set a trap. Ballard hadn't really expected the flame throwers to work, anyhow.

He followed, with Johnson, as Argus moved slowly through the ornate rooms of the castle. "His weight will spring the trapdoor, and he'll drop into the room below. Can he get out of that room?"

"No, sir. The walls are reinforced metal. He'll stay put."

"Fair enough."

"But... uh... won't he keep dodging around that room?"

"He may," Ballard said grimly, "till I pour quick-setting concrete in on him. That'll immobilize the so-and-so. It'll be easy after that to drill through the concrete and get the diamonds."

Johnson smiled weakly. He was a little afraid of the huge, glittering robot.

"How wide is the trap?" Ballard asked abruptly.

"Ten feet."

"So. Well, call the men with the flame throwers. Tell 'em to close in

behind us. If Argus doesn't fall into the trap, we want to be able to drive him in."

Johnson hesitated. "Wouldn't he simply smash his way through the men?"

"We'll see. Put the men on both sides of the trap, so we'll have Argus cornered. Hop to it!"

The secretary raced away. Ballard followed the robot through room after room. Eventually Johnson and three of the flame-throwing crew appeared. The others had circled around to flank the robot.

They turned into the passage. It was narrow, but long. Halfway along it was the trapdoor, concealed by a rich Bokhara rug. In the distance Ballard could see three men waiting, flame throwers ready, watching as the robot approached them. Within minutes now the trap would be sprung.

"Turn it on, boys," Ballard said, on a sudden impulse. The crew of three walking in front of him obeyed. Fire jutted out from the nozzles they held.

The robot increased its pace. It had eyes in the back of its head, Ballard remembered. Well, eyes wouldn't help Argus now. The rug-- A golden foot came down. The robot began to shift its weight forward, and suddenly froze as instantaneous reactions warned it of the difference in pressure between the solid floor and the trap. There was no time for the door to drop down, before Argus had instantly readjusted, withdrew his foot, and stood motionless on the verge of the rug. The flame throwers gushed out toward the robot's back. Ballard yelled a command.

The three men beyond the trapdoor began to run forward, fire

spouting from their hoses. The robot bent its legs, shifted balance, and jumped. It wasn't at all bad for a standing broad jump. Since Argus could control his movements with the nicest accuracy, and since his metal body had strength in excess of his weight, the golden figure sprang across the ten-foot gap with inches to spare. Flame lashed out at him.

Argus moved fast--very fast. His legs were a blinding blur of speed. Ignoring the fire that played on his body, he ran toward the three men and through them. Then he slowed down to a normal walk and continued mildly on his way. The alarm siren was screaming Ballard realized, just as it died.

For Argus, the danger was over. Here and there on his metal body the gold had melted into irregular blobs. That was all.

Johnson gulped. "He must have seen the trap."

"He felt it," Ballard said, his voice low with fury. "Hell! If we could just immobilize Argus long enough to pour concrete on him--"

That was tried an hour later. A metal-sheathed ceiling collapsed on the robot, a ceiling of mesh metal through which concrete could be poured. Ballard simply had liquid concrete run into the room above till the platform collapsed under the weight. The robot was below--

Was below. The difference in air pressure warned Argus, and he knew what to do about it. He lunged through the door and escaped, leaving a frightful mess behind him.

Ballard cursed. "We can't shoot concrete at the devil. If he's sensitized to differences in air pressure--hell! I don't know. There must be some way. Johnson! Get me Plastic Products, quick!"

A short while later Ballard was closeted with a representative of

Plastic Products.

"I don't quite understand. A quick-drying cement--"

"To be squirted out of hoses, and to harden as soon as it hits the robot. That's what I said."

"If it dries that quickly, it'll dry as soon as air hits it. I think we've got almost what you want. A very strong liquid cementoid; it'll harden half a minute after being exposed to air."

"That should work. Yeah. How soon--"

"Tomorrow morning."

The next morning, Argus was herded into one of the huge halls downstairs. A ring of thirty men surrounded the robot, each armed with a tank, filled with the quick-drying cementoid. Ballard and Johnson watched from the side lines.

"The robot's pretty strong, sir," Johnson hazarded.

"So's the cementoid. Quantity will do it. The men will keep spraying the stuff on till Argus is in a cocoon. Without leverage he can't break out. Like a mammoth in a tar pit."

Johnson made a clicking noise with his lips. "That's an idea. If this shouldn't work, perhaps I--"

"Save it," Ballard said. He looked around at the doors. Before each one was stationed a group of men, also armed with cementoid tanks.

In the center of the room stood Argus, blankly impassive, waiting. Ballard said, "o.k.," and from thirty positions around the robot

streams of cementoid converged on his golden body.

The warning siren screamed deafeningly. Argus began to turn around.

That was all. He kept turning around. But--fast!

He was a machine, and could develop tremendous power. He spun on his longitudinal axis, a blazing, shining, glittering blur of light, far too fast for the eye to follow. He was like a tiny world spinning through space--but a world has gravitation. Argus'gravitational pull was negligible. There was, however, centrifugal force.

It was like throwing an egg into an electric fan. The streams of cementoid hit Argus, and bounced, repelled by the centrifuge. Ballard got a gob of the stuff in his middle. It had hardened enough to be painful.

Argus kept on spinning. He didn't try to run, this time. His alarm kept screeching deafeningly. The men, plastered with cementoid, continued to squirt the stuff at Argus for a while.

But the cementoid stuck to them when it was flung back. It hardened on them. Within seconds the scene resembled a Mack Sennett pie-throwing comedy.

Ballard roared commands. His voice went unheard in the uproar. But the men did not continue their hopeless task for long. They, not Argus, were becoming immobilized.

Presently the warning siren stopped. Argus slowed down in his mad spinning. He was no longer the target of cementoid streams.

He went quietly out of the room, and nobody tried to stop him.

One man almost strangled before the hardened cementoid could be dislodged from his mouth and nostrils. Aside from that, there were no casualties, save to Ballard's temper.

It was Johnson who suggested the next experiment. Quicksand would immobilize anything. It was difficult to introduce quicksand into the castle, but a substitute was provided--a gooey, tarry mess poured into an improvised tank twenty-five feet wide. All that remained was to lure Argus into the quicksand.

"Traps won't work," Ballard said glumly. "Maybe stringing a wire to trip him--"

"I think he'd react instantly to that, too, sir," Johnson vetoed. "If I may make a suggestion, it should not be difficult to drive Argus into the pit, once he's maneuvered into a passage leading to it."

"How? Flame throwers again? He automatically reacts away from the most serious danger. When he came to the pit, he'd turn around and go the other way. Break right through the men."

"His strength is limited, isn't it?" Johnson asked. "He couldn't pass a tank."

Ballard didn't see the point immediately. "A midget tractor? Not too small, though--some of the castle's passages are plenty wide. If we got a tank just broad enough to fill the hall--a pistol that would drive Argus into the quicksand--"

Measurements were made, and a powerful tractor brought into the castle. It fitted the passage, leaving no room to spare--at least, not enough to accommodate the robot. Once Argus was driven into that particular passage, he could go only one way.

The tractor, at Johnson's suggestion, was camouflaged, so the

robot's flight-conditioned brain would not recognize and consider it as a serious factor. But the machine was ready to roll into the passage instantly.

The trick would probably have succeeded, had it not been for one difficulty. The consistency of the artificial quicksand had been calculated carefully. It had to be soft enough to drag the robot down, and stiff enough so that Argus would be helpless. The robot could walk safely under water; that had been proved days ago, in an abortive early experiment.

So the mix had surface tension, though not enough to bear Argus'great weight.

The robot was maneuvered into the passage without trouble, and the tractor swung after it, blocking Argus'escape. It rumbled slowly on, driving the robot before it. Argus seemed untroubled. When he reached the edge of the artificial quicksand, he bent and tested the consistency, with one golden hand.

After that, he lay flat on his face, legs bent like a frog's, feet braced against one wall of the passage, head pointed out over the quicksand. He thrust strongly.

Had Argus walked into the goo feet first, he would have sunk. But his weight was spread over a far larger surface area now. Not enough to sustain him indefinitely, but long enough for his purposes. He simply didn't have time to sink. Argus skimmed over the quicksand like a skiff or a sandboat. His powerful initial thrust gave him sufficient impetus. No human could have done it, and, while Argus weighed more than a human, he had also had more strength.

So he shot out, angling across the tank, buoyed by surface tension and carried on by his impetus. The quicksand got hold at last and

bogged him down, but by that time Argus'powerful hands reached their destination, the edge of the tank. Another door was in the wall at that point, and Ballard and Johnson were standing on the threshold, watching.

They dodged before Argus trampled them in his automatic flight-reaction, away from the quicksand tank.

The robot dripped goo over a dozen valuable rugs before he dried. But after that he was no longer so dazzling a spectacle. However, his abilities were unimpaired.

Ballard tried the quicksand trick again, with a larger tank and smooth walls, on which the robot could get no grip. Yet Argus seemed to learn through experience. Before entering a passage now, he would make certain that there were no tractors within reach. Ballard concealed a tractor in an adjoining room where Argus could not see it, and the robot was induced to go into the fatal passage; but he ran out again the moment the tractor clanked into movement. Argus had an excellent sense of hearing.

"Well--" Johnson said doubtfully.

Ballard moved his lips silently. "Eh? Get that stuff from the quicksand washed off Argus. He's supposed to be a showpiece!"

Johnson looked after Ballard's retreating figure. His eyebrows lifted quizzically.

Ballard had a tough session with the televisor. His enemies were closing in from all sides. If only the end of the month would come, when he could get the new diamonds! His holdings were falling in ruin around him. And that damned robot held the key to--everything!

He gave such orders as he could and wandered upstairs, to

Argus'room. The robot, newly cleaned, stood by the window in a blaze of sunlight, a figure of fantastic beauty. Ballard noticed his own reflection in a nearby mirror. Instinctively he drew himself up.

It was a singularly futile gesture. The silent presence of Argus was like a rebuke. Ballard looked at the robot.

"Oh, damn you!" he said. "Damn you!"

Through the visor the impassive face of Argus ignored him. A whim had made Ballard shape the robot to resemble a knight. Somehow the idea seemed less satisfactory now.

Ballard's long-suppressed inferiority complex was suffering badly.

The golden knight stood there, towering, beautiful, mighty. There was dignity in its silence. It was a machine, Ballard told himself, merely a machine that man had made. He was certainly better than a machine.

But he wasn't.

Within its specialized limits, the robot had greater intelligence than his own. It had security, for it was invulnerable. It had wealth--it was wealth, a Midas without the Midas curse. And it had beauty. Calm, huge, utterly self-confident, Argus stood ignoring Ballard.

If Ballard could have destroyed the robot then, he might have done so. If only the damned thing wouldn't ignore him! It was wrecking his life, his power, his empire--and doing so unconsciously. Malice and hatred Ballard could have faced; as long as a man is important enough to be hated, he is not a cipher. But, to Argus, Ballard simply did not exist.

The sunlight blazed yellow from the golden cuirass. The diamonds

sent out rainbow rays into the still air of the room. Ballard did not realize that his lips had drawn back into a snarling rictus--

After that events moved swiftly. The most notable was the impounding of the castle, a result of Ballard's avalanching economic collapse. He had to move out. Before he did so, he risked opening the annealing chamber on the new diamonds, a week before the process was finished. The result was worthless carbon. But Ballard could not have waited a week, for by that time the castle and all it contained would have been out of his possession.

Except the robot. That was still his own--or, rather, it belonged technically to his divorced wife. The documents he and Jessica had signed were thoroughly waterproof and legal. Ballard secured a court judgment; he was permitted to enter the castle and take away the robot at any convenient time. If he could find a way of immobilizing Argus long enough to dismantle the creature.

In time he might hit on a way. Maybe. Maybe--

Ffoulkes summoned Ballard to a conference, superficially a luncheon engagement. For a time Ffoulkes talked of casual matters, but there was a sardonic gleam in his eyes.

At last he said, "How are you getting on with that robot of yours, Bruce?"

"All right." Ballard was wary. "Why?"

"The castle's impounded, isn't it?"

"That's right. But I can get the robot whenever I like. The court ruled in my favor--special circumstances."

"Think you can catch the thing. I don't. Gunther was a smart man. If he

made that robot invulnerable. I'll bet you won't be able to get your hands on it. Unless you know the key phrase, of course."

"I--" Ballard stopped. His eyes changed. "How'd you know--"

"That there was a code? Gunther phoned me just before he... ah... met his unfortunate accident. He suspected you were going to kill him. I do not know the ins and outs of the thing, but I got a telecall from him that night. All he said was to tell you what the key code was--but not to tell you till the right time. Gunther was pretty farsighted."

"You know the code?" Ballard said, his voice expressionless.

Ffoulkes shook his head. "No."

"Just what do you mean?"

"Gunther said this: 'Tell Ballard that the key code is what he finds on the wire tape--the name and number of the patent for making artificial diamonds.'"

Ballard looked at his fingernails. The wire tape. The secret he had found only by tricking and killing Gunther. Only in his mind now did that information exist--"McNamara, Torsion Process, Patent No. r-73-v-22."

And Gunther must have keyed the robot to that chain of phrases before he died.

"Finished?" Ffoulkes asked.

"Yeah." Ballard got up, crumpling his napkin.

"This is on me.... One more point, Bruce. It would be distinctly to my advantage if diamonds became valueless. I've sold out all my

diamond holdings, but plenty of my competitors have interests in the African mines. If the bottom falls out of the market, I can do some good for myself."

"Well?"

"Would you tell me that patent number?"

"No."

"I thought not," Ffoulkes said, sighing. "Well, good-by."

Ballard commandeered a truck, well armored, and hired a dozen guards. He drove out to the castle. The officer at the gate nodded agreeably.

"Want to go in, sir?"

"Yes. I have permission--"

"I know that, sir. Go right ahead. You're after your robot?"

Ballard didn't answer. The castle, after he had entered, seemed strange to him. Already there had been alterations, rugs removed, pictures stored, furniture carried away. It was no longer his.

He glanced at his watch. Five after two. Argus would be making his rounds. The great hall-- Ballard headed for it. He caught sight of the golden robot emerging into the hall and beginning its slow circuit. Two men followed it, just beyond the circle of reaction. They were police guards.

Ballard walked toward them. "I'm Bruce Ballard."

"Yes, sir."

"What... what the devil! Aren't you Dangerfield? Ffoulkes'chief of staff? Wh--"

Dangerfield's blank face didn't change expression. "I've been sworn in as special deputy. The authorities consider your robot too valuable to be left unguarded. We're detailed to keep an eye on it."

Ballard didn't move for a moment. Then he said, "Well, your job's finished. I'm taking the robot away."

"Very well, sir."

"You can leave."

"Sorry, sir. My orders were not to leave the robot unguarded for a moment."

"Ffoulkes gave you those orders," Ballard said, his voice not quite under control.

"Sir?"

Ballard looked at the other guard. "Are you Ffoulkes'man, too?"

"Sir?"

Dangerfield said, "You're quite free to remove your robot whenever you wish, but until it's out of the castle, we mustn't take our eyes off those diamonds."

They had, as they talked, been following Argus. Now the robot moved on into the next hall and commenced its slow circuit. Ballard ran around in front of the creature. Covering his lips with one hand, he whispered, "McNamara, Torsion Process, Patent No. r-735-v-22."

The robot kept on walking. Dangerfield said, "You'll have to say it louder, won't you?"

He was holding a little notebook and stylo.

Ballard stared at the other for a moment. Then he ran in toward Argus, beginning to whisper the code phrase again. But the robot instantly fled till it was beyond Ballard's triggering nearness.

He couldn't get close enough to whisper the code. And if he said it loudly enough for Argus to hear, Dangerfield was ready to carry the formula to Ffoulkes. What Ffoulkes would do was obvious--publicize the process, so that the bottom would fall out of the diamond market.

The trio moved on, leaving Ballard where he was. Could there be a way out? Was there any way of trapping the robot?

The man knew that there was none--none he could employ in a house no longer his own. With power and wealth, he might eventually figure out a way. But time was important.

Even yet, he could re-establish himself. A month from now he could not. By that time the strings of empire would have passed forever from his hands. Frantically his mind doubled back on its tracks, seeking escape.

Suppose he used the process to make more diamonds?

He might try. But he was no longer Bruce Ballard, the robber baron. He did not have the invulnerability of the very wealthy. Ffoulkes could have him shadowed, could trace his every movement. There was no possibility of secrecy. Whatever he did from now on would be an open book to Ffoulkes. So, if he made more diamonds, Ffoulkes' men would discover the method. There was no escape that

way.

Escape. So easy for the robot. He had lost invulnerability, but the robot was invulnerable. He had lost wealth; Argus was Midas. His intelligence could not help him now in this greatest crisis of his life. For an insane moment he wondered what Argus would do in his place--Argus whose infallible metal brain was so far superior to the brain that had brought it into being.

But Argus would never be in this position--Argus cared for nothing on Earth but Argus'own magnificent golden hide, studded with flashing glory. Even now he was stalking on his way through the castle, uncaring and unheeding.

Ballard drew an unsteady breath and went down to the cellar, where he found a heavy sledge hammer. After that he went up to look for Argus.

He found him in the dining hall, moving with a slow, majestic tread as light from the windows slid softly over his golden mail, splintered into rainbows from his jewels.

Ballard was sweating, though not with exertion. He got in front of Argus and said, "Stop right there, you--" He called the robot an unprintable name.

Argus moved to circle him. Ballard in a clear, carrying voice said, "McNamara, Torsion Process, Patent No. r-735-v-za."

Dangerfield's stylo moved swiftly. The robot stopped. It was like stopping some inexorable force of nature, as if an avalanche had halted halfway down a mountain. In the unnatural silence Ballard heard the other guard ask:

"Got it?"

"Yeah," said Dangerfield. "Let's go."

They went out. Ballard hefted the sledge. He walked toward Argus on the balls of his feet. Argus towered over him, serene and blind.

The first blow sent diamonds showering and flashing, gouged gold from the robot's massive chest. With tremendous dignity Argus rocked backward from the blow. The thunder of his fall echoed through the silent hall.

Ballard lifted the sledge and brought it down again. He couldn't break through the almost impermeable casing beneath the gold plate, of course, nor crush the gems, but his furious blows ripped diamonds free and tore great furrows and gouges in the golden armor.

"You... damned... machine!" Ballard shouted, wielding the sledge in a blind, clamorous fury of meaningless destruction. "You... damned... machine!"

Atomic!

A Novelet of the Future

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Chapter I

The Eye

The alarm went off just after midnight. The red signal showed emergency. But it was always emergency at first. We all knew that. Ever since the arachnid tribe in the Chicago Ring had mutated we'd known better than to take chances. That time the human race had very nearly gone under. Not many people knew how close we'd been to extinction. But I knew.

Everybody in Biological Control Labs knew. To anyone who lived before the Three-Hour War such things would have sounded incredible. Even to us now they sound hard to believe. But we know.

There are four hundred and three Rings scattered all over the world and every one of them is potentially deadly.

Our Lab was north of what had been Yonkers and was a deserted, ruinous wilderness now. The atomic bomb of six years ago hadn't hit Yonkers of course. What it struck was New York. The radiation spread far enough to wipe out Yonkers and the towns beyond it, and inland as far as White Plains--but everyone who lived through the Three-Hour War knows what the bomb did in the New York area.

The war ended incredibly fast. But what lingered afterward made the real danger, the time-bomb that may quite easily lead to the wiping out of our whole civilization. We don't know yet. All we can do is keep the Labs going and the planes out watching.

That's the menace--the mutations.

It was familiar stuff to me. I recorded the televised report on the office ticker, punched a few buttons and turned around to look at Bob Davidson, the new hand. He'd been here for two weeks, mostly learning the ropes.

My assistant, Williams, was due for a vacation and I had about decided to take young Davidson on as a substitute.

"Want to go out and look it over, Dave?" I asked.

"Sure. That's a red alarm, isn't it? Emergency?"

I pulled a mike forward.

"Send up relief men," I ordered, "and wake Williams to take over. Get the recon copter ready. Red flight." Then I turned to Davidson.

"It'll be routine," I told him, "unless something unexpected happens.

Not much data yet. The sky-scanners showed a cave-in and some activity around it. May be nothing but we can't take chances. It's Ring Seventy-Twelve."

"That's where the air liner crashed last week, isn't it?" Dave asked, looking up with renewed interest. "Any dope yet on what became of the passengers?"

"Nothing. The radiations would have got them if nothing else did. That's in the closed file now, poor devils. Still, we might spot the ship." I stood up. "The whole thing may be a wild-goose chase but we never take any chances with the Rings."

"It ought to be interesting, anyhow," Dave said and followed me out.

We could see it from a long way off. Four hundred and three of them dot the world now, but in the days before the War no one could have imagined such a thing as a Ring and it would be hard to make anyone visualize one through bare description. You have to feel the desolation as you fly over that center of bare, splashed rock in which nothing may ever grow again until the planet itself disintegrates, and see around that dead core the violently boiling life of the Ring.

It was a perimeter of life brushed by the powers of death. The sun-forces unleashed by the bombs gave life, a new, strange, mutable life that changed and changed and changed and would go on changing until a balance was finally struck again on this world which for three hours reeled in space under the blows of an almost cosmic disaster. We were still shuddering beneath the aftermath of those blows. The balance was not yet.

When the hour of balance comes, mankind may no longer be the dominant race. That's why we keep such a close watch on all the Rings. From time to time we work them over with flame-throwers.

Only atomic power, of course, would quiet that seething life permanently--which is no solution. We've got Rings enough right now without resorting to more atom bombs.

It's a hydra-headed problem without an answer. All we can do is watch, wait, be ready....

The world was still dark. But the Ring itself was light, with a strange, pale luminous radiance that might mean anything. It was new. That was all we knew about it yet.

"Let's have the scanner," I said to Davidson. He handed me the mask and I pushed the head-clips past my ears and settled the monocular view-plate before my eyes, expecting to see the darkness melt into the reversed vision of the night-scanner.

It melted, all right--the part that didn't matter. I could see the negative images of trees and ruined houses standing ghostly pale against the dark. But within the Ring--nothing.

It wasn't good. It could be very bad indeed. In silence I pulled off the mask and handed it to Davidson, watched him look down. When he turned I could see his troubled frown through the monocular lens even before he lowered the scanner. He looked a little pale in the light of the instrument board.

"Well?" he asked.

"Looks as if they'd hit something good this time," I said.

"They?"

"Who knows? Could be anything this time. You know how the life-forms shoot up into mutations without the least warning. Something's done it again down there. Maybe something that's been quietly

working away underground for a long time, just waiting for the right moment. Whatever it is they can stop the scanners and that isn't an easy thing to do."

"The first boys over reported a cave-in," Davidson said, peering futilely down. "Could you see anything?"

"Just the luminous fog. Nothing inside. Total blackout. Well, maybe daylight will show us what's up. I hope so."

It didn't. A low sea of yellow-gray fog billowed slowly in a vast circle over the entire Ring as far as we could see. Dead central core and outer circle of unnatural life had vanished together into that mist which no instrument we had could penetrate--and we've developed a lot of stuff for seeing through fog and darkness. This was solid. We couldn't crack it.

"We'll land," I told Davidson finally. "Something's going on behind that shield, something that doesn't want to be spied on. And somebody's got to investigate--fast! It might as well be us."

We wore the latest development in the way of lead-suits, flexible and easy on the body. We snapped our face-plates shut as the ground came up to meet us and the little Geiger-counter each of us carried began to tick erratically, like a sort of Morse code mechanically spelling out the death in the air we sank through.

I was measuring the ground below for a landing when Davidson grabbed my shoulder suddenly, pointing down.

"Look!" His voice came tinnily through the ear-diaphragms in my helmet. I looked. Now this is where the story gets difficult to tell.

I know what I saw. That much was clear to me from start to finish. I saw an eye looking up through the pale mist at us. But whether it was

an enormous lens far below or a normal-sized eye close to us I couldn't have said just then. My distance-sense had stopped functioning.

I stared into the Eye....

The next thing I remember is sitting in the familiar lab office across the desk from Williams, hearing myself speaking.

"... no signs of activity anywhere in the Ring. Perfectly normal--"

"There's that lake, of course," Davidson interrupted in a conscientious voice. I looked at him. He was turning his cap over and over in his hands as he sat there by the wall. His pink-cheeked face was haggard and there was something strained and dazed in the glance he turned to meet mine. I knew I looked dazed too.

It was like waking out of a dream, knowing you've dreamed, knowing you're awake now--but having the dream go on--being powerless to stop it. I wanted to jump up and slam my fist on the desk and shout that all this was phony.

I couldn't.

Something like a tremendously powerful psychic inhibition held me down. The room swam before me for a moment with my effort to break free and I met Davidson's eyes and saw the same swimming strain in them.

It wasn't hypnosis.

We don't win our posts in Bio Control until we've been through exhaustive tests and a lot of heavy training. None of us are hypnosis-prone. We can't afford to be. It's been tried.

We can't be hypnotized except under very special circumstances safeguarded by Bio Control itself.

No, the answer wasn't that easy. It seemed to lie in--myself. Some door had slammed in the center of my brain, to shut in vital information that must not escape--yet--under any circumstances at all.

The minute I hit on that analogy I knew I was on the right trail. I felt safer and surer of myself. Whatever had happened in that blank space just passed my instinct was in control now. I could trust that instinct.

"... break-through, just as the boys reported," Davidson was saying. "That must be what started the lake pouring up. Nothing stirring there now, though. I suppose the regular sky-scanners are watching it?"

His glance crossed mine and I knew he was right. I knew he was talking to me, not Williams. Of course the lake couldn't be hidden now that it was out in plain sight. We couldn't make a worse mistake than to rouse interest in ourselves and the lake by telling obvious lies about it....

What lake?

Like a mirage, swimming slowly back through my mind, the single memory came. Ourselves, standing on the raw, bare rock of the deathly Ring-center, looking through a rift of mist like a broad, low window a mile long and not very high.

The lake was incredibly blue in the dawn, incredibly calm. Beyond it a wall of cliff stretched left and right beyond our vision, a wall like a great curtain of rock hanging in majestic folds, pink in the pink dawn, looming about its perfect image reflected in the mirror of the lake.

The mirage dissolved. That much I could remember--no more. There was a lake. We had stood on its rocky shore. And then--what? Reason told me we must have seen something, or heard or learned something, that made the lake a deadly danger to mankind.

I knew that feel of naked terror deep in my mind must have a cause. But all I could do now was follow my instinct. The basic human instincts, I told myself, are self preservation and preservation of the species. If I rely on that foundation I can't go wrong....

But--I didn't know how long I'd been back here. I didn't know how much I'd said, or how little--what orders I'd given to my subordinates, or whether anything in my outward aspect had roused any suspicion yet.

I looked around--and this time gave a perfectly genuine start of surprise. Except for Williams and myself the office was quite empty. In this last bout with my daydreaming memory I must really have lost touch with things.

Williams was looking at me with--curiosity? Suspicion?

I rubbed my eyes, put weariness in my voice.

"I'm tired," I said. "Almost dozed off, didn't I? Well--"

The sound of the ticker behind Williams interrupted my alibi. I knew in a moment what was happening. A televised report had come into my own office which my secretary was switching to the ticker for me. That meant it was important. It also meant--as I had reason to hope an instant later--that the visor was shut off in my office and the news clicking directly here for our eyes alone.

Leaning over Williams's shoulder, I read the tape feeding through.

It read--

Unidentified activities in progress around new Ring lake. Suggest destroyers work over area.

Fitzgerald.

The bottom dropped out of my stomach. Only one thing stood clear in my mind's confusion--this must not happen. There was some terrible, some deadly danger to the whole fabric of civilization if Fitzgerald's message reached any other eyes than ours. I had to do something, fast.

Williams was rereading the tape. He glanced up at me across his shoulder. "Fitz is right," he said. "Of course. Can't let anything get started down there. Better wipe it out right now, hadn't we?"

I said, "No!" so explosively that he froze in the act of reaching for the interoffice switch.

"Why not?" He stared at me in surprise. I opened my mouth and closed it again hopelessly, knowing the right words wouldn't come. To me it seemed so self-evident I couldn't even explain why we must disregard the message. It would be like trying to tell a man why he mustn't touch off an atom bomb out of sheer exuberance--the reasons were so many and so obvious I couldn't choose among them.

"You weren't there. You don't know." My voice sounded thick and unsteady even to me. "Fitz is wrong. Let that lake alone, Williams!"

"You ought to know." He gave me a strange look. "Still, I've got to record the report. Headquarters will make the final decision." And he reached again for the switch.

I'm not sure how far I would have gone toward stopping him. Instinct deeper than all reason seemed to explode in me in the urgent forward surge that brought me to my feet. I had to stop him--now--without delay--taking no time to delve into my mind and dredge up a reason he would accept as valid.

But the decision was taken out of our hands.

A burst of soundless white fire flashed blindingly across my eyes. It blotted out Williams, it blotted out the ticker with its innocent, deadly message. I was aware of a killing pain in the very center of my skull....

Chapter II

The Other Peril

Someone was shaking me. I sat up dizzily, meeting a stare that I recognized only after what seemed infinities of slow waking. Davidson, his pink face frightened, shook me again.

"What happened? What was it? Jim, are you all right? Wake up, Jim! What was it?"

I let him help me to my feet. The room began to steady around me but it reeled sharply again when I saw what lay before the ticker, the tape looping down about him--face down on the floor, blood still crawling from the bullet hole in his back....

Williams never saw who got him. It must have been the same flash that blinded me. I felt my cheek for the powder burn that must have scorched it as the unseen killer fired past my face. I felt only numbness. I was numb all over, even my brain. But one thing had to be settled in a hurry.

How much time had elapsed? Had that deadly message gone out while I lay here helpless? I made it to the ticker in two unsteady strides. The tape that looped the fallen Williams still bore its dangerous message.

Whoever fired past my cheek had fired for another reason, then, than this message. Of course, for how could anyone else have known its importance? There was a bewildering mystery here but I had no time to think about it.

I tore off the tape, crumpled it into my pocket. I flipped the ticker switch and sent a reverse message out as fast as my shaking hand could operate the machine.

Fitzgerald Urgent Urgent Meet me at Ring Post 27 Am leaving headquarters now Do nothing until I arrive Urgent

Signed J. Owen.

Davidson watched me, round-eyed, as I vised for a helicopter. He put out his hand as I turned toward the door. I forced myself to stop and think.

"Well?" I said.

He didn't speak. He only glanced at Williams'body on the floor.

"No," I said. "I didn't kill him. But I might have if that had turned out to be the only way. There's trouble at the lake." I hesitated. "You were there too, Dave. Do you know what I mean?" I wasn't quite sure what I was trying to find out. I waited for his answer.

"You're the boss," was all he said. "Still, it wasn't any mutation that did--this. It was a bullet. You've got to know who shot him, Jim."

"I don't though. I blanked out. Something...." My mind whirled and then steadied again with a sudden idea. I put a hand to my forehead, dizzy with trying to remember things still closed to me.

"Maybe something like a mutation had a part in it at that," I conceded. "Maybe we're not alone in wanting to--to keep the lake quiet. I wonder--could something from the Ring have blanked me out deliberately, so I wouldn't see Williams killed?"

But there wasn't time to follow even that speculation through. I said impatiently, "The point is, Dave, one man's death doesn't mean a thing right now. The Ring...." I stopped, unable to go on. I didn't need to.

"What do you want me to do?" Davidson asked. That was better. I knew I could depend on him, and I might need someone dependable very soon.

"Take over here," I said. "I'm going to see Fitzgerald. And listen, Dave, this is urgent. Hold any messages Fitzgerald sends. Any! Understand?"

"Check," he said. His eyes were still asking questions as I went out. Neither of us could answer them--yet.

The desolation spun past below me, aftermath of the Three-Hour War, ruined buildings, ruined fields, ruined woods. Far off I could catch a pale gleam of water beyond the seething edge of the Ring.

I'd been en route long enough to make some sort of order in my mind--but I hadn't done it. Evidently more than time would be required to open the closed doors in my brain.

I had been in the Ring today--I had seen something or learned

something there--and whatever I learned had been of such vital and terrible import that memory of it was wiped from Davidson's mind and mine until the hour came for action.

I didn't know what hour or what action. But I knew with a deep certainty that when the time for decision came I would not falter. Along with the terror and the blackness in my mind went that one abiding knowledge upon which all my actions now were based. I could trust that instinct.

Fitzgerald's copter was waiting. I could see his lead-suited figure, tiny and far below, pacing up and down impatiently as I dropped toward him. My copter settled lightly earthward. And for a moment another thought crossed my mind.

Williams! A man murdered, a man I knew and had worked with. A man I liked. That should have affected me much more deeply than it did. I knew why it hadn't. Williams' death was unimportant--completely trivial in the face of the--the other peril that loomed namelessly, in all its invisible menace, like a shrouded ghost rising from the lake beyond us.

Fitzgerald was a big blond man with blue eyes and a scar puckering his forehead, souvenir of our last battle with mutated marmosa in the Atlanta Ring. His transmitter-disc vibrated tinnily as I got out of the copter.

"Hello, chief. You got my second message?"

"No. What was it?"

"More funny stuff." He gestured toward the Ring. "In the lake this time--signs of life. I can't make anything out of it."

I drew a deep breath of relief. Davidson would have stopped that

message. It was up to me now to find a way to keep Fitzgerald quiet.

"We'll take a look at the lake, then," I said. "What's your report?"

"Well...." He shifted uneasily from one foot to the other, glancing at me through his face-plate as if he didn't quite expect me to believe him. "It's a funny place, that lake. I got the impression it was--well, watching me.

"I know it sounds silly but I have to tell you. It could be important, I suppose. And then when I was making a second turn over the water I saw something in the lake." He paused. "People," he added after a moment.

"What kind of people?"

"I--they weren't human."

"How do you know?"

"They weren't wearing lead suits," he said simply, glad of a chance to pin his story down with facts. "I figured they were either not human or else insane. They heard my ship. And they went into the lake."

"Swimming?"

"They walked in. Right under the water. And they stayed there."

"What did they look like?"

"I didn't get a close look," he said evasively, his eyes troubled as they avoided mine.

I was aware of a strange, mounting excitement that swelled in my throat until I could hardly speak. I jerked my head toward the lake.

"Come on," I said.

There lay the blue water, moving gently in the breeze. The cliffs like folded curtains rose beyond it. There was no sign of life in sight as we crossed the bare, pitted rocks. Fitzgerald eyed me askance as we clumped toward the water in our heavy lead-lined boots. I knew he expected doubt from me.

But I knew also that he had told the truth. The lost memory of danger sent its premonitory shadows through my mind and I believed, dimly, that I too had seen those aquatic-people, sometime in that immediate past which had been expunged from my brain.

We were halfway across the rocks, our Geiger-counters clicking noisy warning of the death in the air all around us, when the first of the lake people rose up before us from behind a ledge of rock.

He was a perfectly normal looking man--except that he stood there in khaki trousers and shirt, sleeves rolled up, in the bath of potent destruction which was the very air of the Ring. He looked at us with a blankness impossible to describe and yet with a strangely avid interest in his eyes.

When we were half a dozen paces away he raised his arm and, without changing expression, in a voice totally without inflection, he spoke.

"Go back," he said. "Go back. Get away from here, now!"

It was all returning to me.... I knew why he looked so strange, why he spoke so flatly, why that interest watched us from his eyes....

I didn't know. The knowledge brushed the edges of my awareness and withdrew. I stumbled forward, Fitzgerald beside me excited and

eager, calling out a question to the man.

He made no answer. He took one last look at us, blank, intent, impersonal, his eyes as blue as the water in the lake. And then he dropped straight downward, without stooping, without seeming to move a muscle. He vanished behind the knee-high ledge of rock.

We reached it together, shouldering one another in our eagerness. We bent over the ledge. The man had disappeared, leaving no sign behind him. Nothing but a little hollow in the rock where he had stood, a hollow no bigger than a saucer, in which blue water swayed. We stood there half stunned, for the time it took the water to gurgle downward and vanish in the hole and surge up again twice from some action of subterranean waters.

Memory was battering at the closed doors of my mind.

I knew the answer. I knew it well—but the door stayed shut. The time to remember was not yet.

They were watching us from the edge of the water by the time we had come within hailing distance. One by one we saw them wade up from the blue depths and take their stand in the edge of the water, ankle deep, rivulets running from their hair and clothing—drowned men and women, watching us.

They weren't drowned, of course. They looked perfectly healthy and there was more intelligence and animation in their faces than had looked at us from the vanished man of the ledge.

These were real people. The other had not been. I thought that much must be evident even to Fitzgerald, though it was a subterranean knowledge running through my mind that told me so.

"Wait, Jim." Fitzgerald said suddenly, catching my elbow. "I—don't

like 'em. Stand back." He was watching the silent people in the water.

I let him stop me. Now that I was here I wasn't certain what came next. The terrible urgency still rang its alarm in the closed room of my brain but until I could gain entry into that room I wouldn't know what was expected of me.

Fitzgerald waved to the people in the water, a beckoning gesture. They stared at us.

Then they turned and talked briefly together, glancing at us over their shoulders. Finally one of the women came up out of the lake and picked her way toward us over the lava-like rock.

She had long fair hair sleeked back from her face by the water and hanging like pale kelp across her shoulders. Her blue dress clung to her over a beautiful, supple body, water spattering from the dripping cloth and the dripping hair as she came.

Belatedly I remembered that crashed airliner and its vanished people. Were these the passengers and crew? I thought they were. But what had induced them against all reason to come this far into the deadly air of the Ring? The lake? Up to that point the thing was possible, but it was sheer madness from the moment I imagined them entering the water.

The lake, then? Was there something inexplicably strange and compelling about the lake itself that had drawn them in and sent them out again like this, alive, unharmed in the singing air that made our counters clatter?

I looked out over the waters for an answer, and--

And I got my answer--or part of it.

For out there on the rippling blue surface a shadow moved. A long, coiling shadow cast not from above but from below. Deep down in the lake something was stirring.

I strained my eyes and in the sealed deeps of my mind terror and exultation moved in answer to that coiling darkness. I knew it. I recognized it. I.... The recognition passed.

The vast shadow moved lazily, monstrously, moved and coiled and drew itself in under the cliffs.

Slowly it disappeared, coil by coil, shadow by shadow.

I turned. The fair-haired woman was standing before us; gazing into our faces with a remote, impersonal curiosity. It was as if she had never seen another human creature before and found us interesting but--disassociated. No species that might share relationship with her.

"You're from the liner?" I asked, my voice reverberating in my own ears inside the helmet. "We--we can take you back." I let the words die. They meant nothing to her. They meant no more than the clatter of our belt-counters or the patter of drops around her on the rocks.

"Jim." Fitzgerald's voice buzzed in my earphones. "Jim, we've got to take her back with us. She's out of her head. They all are--don't you see? We've got to save them."

"How?" I tried to sound practical. "We haven't got room. There's a full liner load here."

"We can take this one." He reached out and took her arm gently. She let him, her eyes turning that remote, impersonal gaze upon his face.

"It's probably too late," he said, looking at her with compassion, "but we can't leave her here, can we?"

I was watching his hand on her arm and a thought came to me out of nowhere, a fact that seemed to slip through the closed doors in my mind as they opened a tiny crack. This girl was flesh and blood. A hand closed on her arm met firm resistance. But I knew that if I had touched that first man my hand would have closed over the smooth instability of water.

I looked at the girl's face where a passing breeze brushed it, and a shiver went down my back. For it was a warm breeze, drying her hair and cheek where it blew--and I saw dark, wrinkled desiccation wherever dryness touched her skin. The sleek fair hair lost its silkiness and turned brown and brittle, the satiny cheek darkened, furrowed....

I knew if she left the lake she would die. But it didn't matter. I knew there was no actual danger, either way. (Danger to what? From what? No use asking myself that yet--the door would be open in its own time.)

I took her other arm. Between us she went docilely toward the waiting copters, saying nothing. I don't think Fitzgerald noticed what that drying breeze was doing to her until we were nearly at the edge of the Ring.

By then it was too late to take her back even if he had understood what the trouble was.

I heard Fitzgerald catch his breath but he said nothing and neither did I.

We lifted her into his copter. I took off behind him and the visors were

silent between our ships as we flew back toward Base. What could we have said to each other then?

Chapter III

Living Lake

Thirty minutes after we hit the Base the girl was in a jury-rigged hydrating tank, wrapped in wet sheets, with a slow trickle of fresh warm water soaking them. Even her face was loosely covered, and I was glad of that. It was an old woman's face by now, drawn tight and furrowed over her skull. Only an arm was bare, shriveled flesh beneath which the tendons stood sharply etched.

The arm was bare for the needle that fed sodium pentothal into a vein, slowly, under the watchful eye of Sales, one of our best Base medics. We knew that presently, when the drug began to cloud her mind, Sale's skillful questions would start drawing out the memories of what had happened to her, reconstructing the basic scenes which had led to--this.

Or--we hoped they would.

"It looks like aphasia," Sales murmured. "No brain injury so far as we know yet, but--"

"Chief!" It was Davidson, touching my arm. We all turned in the half-darkness that was part of this narcosynthesis treatment. "Chief, the Mobile Staff's on its way down here. They vised after you left."

"What for?" I asked sharply, a nervous dread knotting my stomach.

"I don't know. They wouldn't say. You're the boss, after all."

But I wasn't the boss of Mobile Staff. They were bigger than I, the bureau of specialists that controlled the administration of all the Rings. They were the bosses. And if they came here now....

I caught Davidson's eye in the gloom. Very slightly he shook his head. The secret of Williams's death was still safe, then. But not for long. And if the Staff talked to Fitzgerald about the lake....

I made an enormous effort and fought down the rising panic. Information first. Then action. I had to keep that order. Sales grunted and I looked back, forcing my attention to the business at hand. "She must have the tolerance of an elephant," Sales said, eyeing the tube through which sodium pentothal still fed into the girl's arm. "Or else there's some chemical metamorphosis—I don't know. I've given her enough to put a dozen men to sleep. But look at her."

I didn't like to look at her. It was obvious to me that she was dying. Yet when Sales pushed the wet sheets back from her face the impersonal disinterested attention still dwelt upon the ceiling, fully awake, uncaring, hearing nothing we said, feeling nothing we did.

Fitzgerald said, "How could she have breathed under water?"

"She couldn't." Sales scowled at him. "There's no physiological change at all. Her respiratory system's normal."

"She must have," Fitzgerald said stubbornly. "I know what we saw."

"Anything's possible in a Ring," Sales admitted, voicing an aphorism. "But I don't see how it could have worked." He looked up at me. "How important is this, chief?"

I told him.

"Give me an hour," Sales said briefly when I had finished. "I'm going

to try something else. Several other things. Maybe one of 'em will work."

"One of 'em's got to," I told him, getting up.

In that hour a lot happened. Sales found what he wanted, for one thing. For another, the Mobile Staff arrived. Williams' body was found. And as for me--it was the hour that marked the turning point in my life.

Williams' death was reported on my private visor as soon as I got back to my office. I could feel Davidson's silence like a tangible thing as he listened to the exclamations and incredulity of the others.

All I could do was order the usual investigations got under way immediately. At that moment I decided not to speak of my own presence when he died. I couldn't let myself be diverted by useless questions on a subject only distantly related to my own terrible problem.

Worse than ever that deathly fear was stirring restlessly behind the closed doors of my unconscious. I knew the doors would swing open soon. Little by little they had let facts escape the barrier, and the barrier itself would be ready to fall.... Soon, I thought, soon.

Looking back now I lose my time-sense about that eventful hour. I think we were still lost in dismayed wonder over Williams when the visor flickered and then framed the grim, creased face of Mobile Staff's chief, Lewis.

There was a hunted, nightmare quality about this piling of crisis upon crisis, I thought, as I went down to the reception hall to welcome my superiors. If only I could find five minutes of peace to try again those slowly opening doors!

Mobile Staff wears black uniforms. If all Bio employees are carefully tested then Mobile men are screened with such stringent care that there is reason to marvel how anyone ever passes their tests. All of these men in their severe black looked taut, nervous, keen with an edge almost ruthless in its steely temper.

"What about this lake development in Ring Seventy-Twelve?" was the first thing Lewis said to me as we walked back toward my office. It couldn't have been worse, I told myself. If they had timed themselves deliberately they couldn't have chosen a worse time.

"Three of us have seen it closely," was all I answered. "You'll want to discuss it with us in detail, I suppose."

Lewis nodded crisply. We didn't speak again until we were settled in my office, Davidson and Fitzgerald ready for questions beside me. We told what--overtly--we knew. It was Lewis, of course, who spoke with decision.

"I think we'd better destroy the thing pronto."

"Frankly, sir--" this was Davidson "frankly, I'd think that over first. The thing's isolated, whatever it is. We'd run the risk of scattering it abroad."

"I incline that way myself," I said quickly. "Isolation. Ring it off, reroute air traffic. Leave it alone and study it... study it?" I suspected that was wrong. A warning bell had clanged in my brain.

Lewis sat there silently, shifting his keen glance from face to face. Just as he drew his breath to speak my desk visor buzzed. "Report ready on Williams' death, sir," an impersonal voice said.

"All right. Hold it awhile," I began. But Lewis bent forward and gave

the face in the visor a narrowed glance.

"No, let's have it right now," he said. Despairingly I wondered how much he knew and how much that abnormally keen brain had guessed already of the undercurrents running swiftly beneath the surface of events here.

The face in the visor glanced at me. I shrugged. Lewis was boss as long as Mobile Staff remained here.

"Body of J. L. Williams, assistant to chief, was found in a locker in his own office forty minutes ago," the report began. "The shot was fired from..." The voice went off into medical and ballistic details I ceased to hear. I was turning over in my mind crazy questions about how I could prevent an immediate close study of the lake at the very best, and at the worst its destruction.

"... revolver of this caliber possessed only by Chief Owen himself," the visor declared. I woke with a start. "Last men seen with the deceased were Robert Davidson and Chief Owen. Chief Owen subsequently suppressed a report from Ring Station 27 and ordered a copter for immediate departure. He then took off for--"

The visor buzzed suddenly and the mono-toned report blanked out. It was an emergency interruption. Very briefly Dr. Sales' face flashed upon the screen.

"This is urgent, Chief," he said, looking into my eyes significantly. "Could you spare me five minutes in my lab right now?"

It seemed like a heaven-sent relief. I glanced at Lewis for permission. His gaze was cold and suspicious but he nodded after a moment and I got up with a single look at Davidson's deliberately blank face and went out.

Something prompted me to pause at the door after I had closed it. I was not really surprised to hear Lewis'harsh voice. "See that Chief Owen doesn't leave the building before I've talked to him again. That's an urgent. Give it priority."

I shrugged. Things were beyond my control now. All I could do was ride along and trust to instinct.

Although Sales had asked for only five minutes of my time, he seemed oddly reluctant to begin. I sat down across the desk from him and watched him fidget with his desk blotter. Finally he looked up and spoke abruptly.

"You know the girl died, of course."

"I expected it. When?"

"Half an hour ago. I've been doing some quick thinking since then. And a lot of quick analyses. There hasn't been time yet to check, but I think she died of psychosomatic causes, chief."

"That's hard to credit," I said. "Tell me about it."

"She was a perfectly normal specimen by all quantitative and qualitative tests. I think suggestion killed her."

"But how?"

"You know you can hypnotize a subject, touch his arm with ice and tell him it's red-hot metal. Typical burn weals will appear. Most physical symptoms can be induced by suggestion. That girl died of dehydration and asphyxia as far as I can tell."

"We gave her moisture and oxygen."

"She didn't know it was oxygen. She didn't think she was breathing at all. So her motor reflexes were paralyzed and--she died. As for the hydrating apparatus...." Sales shook his head in a bewildered way. "This sounds crazy but I think our mistake there was in giving her water as a hydrating factor. Chief, how closely did you see that lake? Do you know that it's water?"

Again that bell seemed to ring in my head. Water? Water? Of course it isn't water, not as we've known water up to now.

"Until I thought of that," Sales went on, "I couldn't understand her apparent breathing under water. Now I think I'm beginning to understand. A liquid can't be breathed by human beings, but there could be--well, artificial isotopes that would do the trick. Also, something drove that girl insane.

"I think she was insane. You might call it a variant of schizophrenia. Or possession if you prefer. Her mind was completely blanketed and subjugated by--something else." He drummed on the desk. Then, looking up sharply, he said, "I got samples of the lake's--water. From her body. It's not water.

"Maybe it once was but now it's mixed with other compounds. The stuff seems half alive. Not protoplasm but close to it. I can't evaporate or break it down with any chemical I've yet tried.

"There are traces of hemoglobin. In fact, the stuff has many of the attributes of blood. But--and this is important, Chief--I couldn't find traces of a single leukocyte. You see what that means?"

I shook my head.

"One of the primary results of exposing an organism to radioactivity is a reduction of the number of white cells, making it subject to

infection. The proportion of polymorphonuclear white cells goes down relatively. That's axiomatic. But surely you see what it suggests!"

Again I shook my head. A deep uneasiness was mounting in me but I had to hear him out before I acted. I knew I'd have to act. I think I knew already what I would have to do before I left this room. But I wanted to hear the rest of his story first. I signaled him to go on.

"Another thing I observed about the--call it water," he said carefully, "was the presence of considerable boron and some lithium. Of course the whole Ring area is subject to constant radiations of all kinds, but the important ones just now are the hard electromagnetic and the nuclear radiations that produce biological reactions.

"I suppose you remember that boron and lithium both tend to concentrate the effects of a bombardment of slow neutrons, so an organism like the lake would get a very heavy dose of the radiations that have the greatest effect on it."

"The lake--an organism?" I echoed.

"I think it is. Up to now we've come into conflict only with evolved and mutated creatures that were recognizable as animals even before genetic changes took place. One reason might be that mutated genes divide more slowly than others and tend to lose out in the race for supremacy.

"A complete mutation like--this lake--is something nobody really expected. The odds are too heavy against it. But we've known it could happen. And I think this time we're up against something dangerous. Big and dangerous and impossible to understand."

I leaned forward. I knew what I had to do. Now? No, not quite yet.

Inside my mind the closed doors were moving slowly, swinging wider and wider, while behind them pressed the crowding memories of danger which would burst the barrier at any moment now.

"Forget all that for awhile," Sales said with a sudden change of expression. "I talked to the girl before she died. I'm taking cross-bearings on my conclusion, Chief. One line I've already indicated. The second is what the girl said. They check." He looked at me thoughtfully.

"I had to blank her mind clear down to the lowest articulate levels," he said, "before I could cut back under whatever compulsion it was that killed her. She didn't know she was talking. I hadn't much time--she was dying as she spoke. But from what she said I've pieced a theory together." He paused. "Tell me, did you see anything at all during your experiences with the lake to make you suspect it might be--alive?"

Chapter IV

Voice of the Lake

With stunning suddenness, out of my memory came the vision of a great eye staring up at me through the pale fog as I maneuvered our copter above the Ring when Davidson and I first visited it.

The Eye was the lake, a vast translucent lens that had caught us like birds in a nest and drawn us down. The power of its compelling summons pouring from the lens into our brains, like sunshine into a darkened room.

"No," I said thickly. "No, I saw nothing. Go on."

"What its origin was I can't even guess," Sales said. "But originally

some molecule like a gene, out of a million other molecules in that Ring area, suffered a liberation of energy when a secondary ionizing particle shot past and it changed from a gene to--something else. Something that grew and grew and grew.

"Most of the development must have taken place underground. I think the organism was complete when that cave-in occurred that exposed it to the light and to our attentions. It developed amazingly, into forms so complex we may never understand them exactly." He smiled grimly.

"If we're lucky we never will. I can tell you this much, though--it recognized its danger. Perhaps electric impulses from our own brains struck answering chords in the--the organism. And it knew it had to defend itself, fast.

"Now the lake has one fatal weakness. By that I think we can destroy it. I believe the organism is quite aware of this because of the way it chose to combat us." He paused, looking at me so strangely that I almost acted in that silent moment. But just as I was gathering my muscles to rise, he began again.

"The girl told me what happened when that air-liner came down. It must have been sheer accident, its making a forced landing at the edge of the Ring. Radio-activity blanked out their communications and of course the air itself was close to deadly. There didn't seem any hope at all for the people in the ship.

"The girl said many of them complained of feeling--well, call it attention--focused on them. I know now it was the lake itself, that gigantic organism, studying them, slowly working around to a decision about its next move. Then it came to a conclusion that may not yet have reached its final equation.

The passengers saw a man stand up from behind a rock near them. The girl said he looked familiar. He shouted and waved them away. He warned them it would mean their death if they came closer. He vanished. But the passengers were still trying to get a message out and they stayed in the ship. The man appeared three times in all, each time warning them away in stronger and stronger terms.

"Finally he rose from behind a rock very near them and this time he invited them into the Ring. They were surprised to find that when seen this close he was a mirror image of one of their crew members. The image beckoned and ordered them in. They didn't want to obey. But they went.

"That image, as you may have deduced, was a water-figure created by the lake itself, no one knows how completely. It may have been ninety percent illusion, shaped in the minds of the watchers. But you'll notice the lake had to imitate one of the crew. It didn't at that time know enough about human bodies to improvise.

"It did know a lot, though, about human minds. In fact, its power over them and its amazing selectivity make me suspect that the original gene from which the organism developed might once have been human or close to it.

"The water image was the lake's first attempt to fight off mankind. The attempt failed. In other words an imitation wouldn't do. But the real thing was close at hand for experimentation.

"What happened next no one will ever know. Logically the organism must have moved forward another step in its defense against invasion by mankind. In effect it created antibodies. It was inoculating itself with the virus of humanity in an effort to immunize itself against a later attack.

"But it had to effect a change in the humans before it could absorb them. Physically they must be changed to live under the lake and mentally they had to alter radically to stay there of their own will. It was their will the lake attacked. You saw that.

"I said before that something had apparently been washed from the mind of that girl we saw and some other basic drive substituted in her. I believe now I was nearer the truth than I guessed." He looked at me keenly, almost speculatively.

"If I were in a spot like that," he said, "with the problem of altering a human being's whole emotional outlook, I think I'd strike straight at the root. It would be much simpler than trying to blanket his impulses with anything like hypnotism, for instance. I think that for the instinct of self-preservation those people now have another drive--instinct for the preservation of the Organism. It would be so simple, and it would work so well."

There was a roaring in my ears. For a moment I heard nothing of what Sales said. The flood-gates had opened and through the back flung doors all my memories were pouring.

"But it hasn't worked perfectly," Sales was saying from far away. "Unless the lake goes a step further, we can destroy it. Perhaps it has. Perhaps it realizes that static antibodies which can't exist outside its own bloodstreams won't help much.

"Do you think, chief, that it might have captured still other humans and worked its basic change in their minds? Could it have implanted in men like yourself a shift in instinct so that you know only one basic drive--the Organism must be preserved?"

The idea had struck him suddenly. I could see that in his face as he leaned forward across the desk, half rising, his features congesting

with the newness and the terrible danger of the thought.

I didn't even get up from my chair. I'd had my revolver out on my knee for the past several minutes, though he couldn't see it from where he sat.

I shot him at close range, through the chest.

For a moment he hung there above the desk, his hands gripping the blotter convulsively. He had one thing more to say but it was hard for him to get it out. He tried twice before he made it.

"You--it's no good," he said very thinly.

"Can't--stop me now. I've sent--full report--Mobile Staff--reading it now."

Blood cut off whatever else he wanted to say. I watched impersonally as it bubbled from his lips and he collapsed forward into the scarlet puddle forming so fast on the desk top. I saw how the blotter took it up at first but the fountain ran too fast and finally a trickle began to spill over the desk edge and patter on the floor with a sound like the dripping of lake water from that girl's garments as she crossed the rocks toward us.

The lake was blue and wonderful in the sunlight. It was the most important thing in the world. If anything happened to destroy it I knew the world would end in that terrible, crashing moment. All my mind and all my effort must be dedicated to protecting it from the danger threatening it now.

A knock at the door banished that vision. I sprang to my feet and blocked off the desk from sight.

Davidson lunged into the room, slammed the door, put his back to it.

He was breathing hard.

"They're after you, Jim," he said. "They know about Williams."

I nodded. I knew too, now. I knew why my mind had gone blank when the need to silence Williams was paramount. At that time it wasn't safe for me to remember too much. It wasn't safe for me to know too much about my own actions, my own motives. Oh yes, I had killed him, all right.

"You knew all along?" I asked him. He nodded.

"You've got to do something quick, Jim," he said. "I tell you, they're coming! They know we were there together and they're almost certain you did it. Fingerprints, bullet type--think of something, Jim! I--"

There was a heavy blow on the door behind him. He wasn't expecting it. He jolted forward into the room and the door slammed back against the wall. What looked like a tide of black uniforms poured through, Lewis at the front, his granite face set, his eyes like steel on mine.

"Want to ask you some questions, Owen," he began. "We have reason to think you know more than--"

Then he saw what lay across the desk behind me. There was an instant of absolute silence in the room. Davidson had been hurled past me by the slamming open of the door and the first sound I heard was his gasp of intaken breath as he leaned over the chair from which I'd risen.

My mind was perfectly blank. I knew it was desperately imperative that I clear myself but I'd had too many shocks, one on another, all that day. My brain just wasn't working any more.

I had to say something. I took a deep breath and opened my mouth, praying for the right words.

Davidson's hand closed on my arm. It was a hard, violent grasp, but very quickly, before his next move, he pressed my biceps three times, rapid, warning squeezes. Then he completed his motion and hurled me aside so hard I staggered three paces across the rug and came up facing him, stupid with surprise.

He had scooped up the revolver which I had dropped in my chair. I saw his fingers move over the butt as if for a firmer grip. But I knew what he was doing. His prints would have effaced mine when the time came to test it.

"All right, Lewis," he said quietly. "I did it. I shot them both." His glance shifted from face to face. When it crossed mine I recognized the desperate appeal in his eyes. It was up to me. I couldn't refuse this last offer of aid from him, in the service of a cause greater than any cause men ever fought for.

I knew the truth of that as I knew my own name. There could be no greater cause than the protection of the lake.

A look of wildness which I knew was deliberate suddenly convulsed his face. He lifted the revolver and fired straight at me.

Except—it wasn't straight. Davidson was a good shot. He couldn't miss at this range unless he meant to. The bullet sang past my ear and shattered something noisy behind me. And I saw the look of deep satisfaction relax his face an instant before Lewis'bullet smashed into it, erasing his features in a crimson blur.

(He had to fire the gun at someone—I think he remembered that wax-

tests would otherwise prove he hadn't fired one recently. And it might as well be at me, to clear me of suspicion. Perhaps too he knew he couldn't make his story stand under close questioning. So it was suicide, in a way, but suicide in a cause of tremendous, unquestionable rightness. That I knew in the deepest recesses of my mind.)...

"All right, Owen. You give the word. Where would you say it's most vulnerable?" Was Lewis watching me with irony in his keen eyes as he asked it? For that question of all others was the one I could not answer. Physically could not, even had I wished. I think my tongue would have turned backward in my throat and strangled me, if need be, before I could tell them the truth.

"Make another circle," I said. "I'll look it over once more."

Five hundred feet below us the lake lay blue and placid. Seen from this height the majestic cliffs above it were foreshortened into insignificance, but I knew that deep beneath those rocks lay the vital cavern which no bombs must touch.

There was no sign of the mindless men and women which it had used and discarded. The antitoxin premise was no longer valid. But the next step, to a bacteriophage which would seek out and devour the virus of attack--that must not fail. I well knew what my task was.

"Try the shallows over here," I said, pointing. The ship circled and Lewis presently raised his hand.

The depth-bombs floated away behind us in a long, falling drift. They were not, I knew, merely depth bombs. Sales'memorandum had worked its recorder's will too fast for me. I had silenced the doctor but I could not silence the records. I watched the falling bombs with a sickness in my heart that was near despair.

"The Organism has no white blood-cells," Sales had reported to the Staff, his dead voice speaking the words of my own destruction in the very moment I killed him. "I believe it can be eradicated if we infect it thoroughly with a culture of every microbe and bacterium we can pour into it. The chances are something will take hold.

"If it doesn't, then we'll have to try until something does. I would suggest depth bombs. What tests I have made so far indicate the so-called water of the lake is in effect a thick skin which has so far protected the Organism from the entry of ordinary infection.

"The depth charges would serve the purpose of a hypodermic needle in introducing our weapons where they may take effect. Down there under the surface something must lie which is the heart of the dangerous being, something we have not yet seen. But destroy it we must, before it mutates any further, into a thing nothing could cope with."

When the first bombs burst, they might have been bursting in my own brain. Only dimly I saw the blue water fountain toward us.

We circled, watching. The water poured itself over that terrible wound. Ripples ran sluggishly out around it toward shore. It seemed to me there was a flush in the water where those death-laden charges had fallen, but if there was, something working in the lake effaced it, washed out the toxins, healed and soothed the danger away.

I breathed a sigh of relief.

"Where next, Owen?" Lewis demanded relentlessly and I knew my ordeal had only begun. Desperation was welling up in me. How long could I drag this out? Sooner or later we would work our way around to the danger-area and this helpless being below us would die in an

unimaginable agony--unimaginable to all but myself.

"Try over there," I said, pointing at random, seeing my hand shake as I held it out. I shut the fingers into a fist to stop their trembling.

How long it went on I could not remember afterward. There comes a point when flesh and blood can record no further and, mercifully for me, I reached that point after a while. By then I knew what the end must be, no matter how long I postponed it. I had done what a man could but it wasn't enough. The lake and I were helpless together and I knew--it was soothing to be sure--that we would in the end die together.

Round after round we made above the shuddering blue water. Charge after charge dropped, splashed, vanished, fountained up again. From shore to shore the lake was racked by interlocking ripples from those dreadful wounds. Sometimes the poisons the bombs carried were washed out and dissolved, but as time went on, more and more often they started great spreading circles of infection that traced iridescence upon the water.

Yellow virulence rippled shoreward and crossed ripples running from circles of angry crimson. The color of bruises mingled with the color of blood and the shuddering lake shivered no more than I, but in me it was a hidden shuddering. It had to be hidden.

At least it wasn't I who pointed out the heart of the lake. That happened by sheer accident. It had to come sooner or later and after a long while it came.

Deep under the cliffs that shadowy blue cavern which I had never seen was riven asunder by a burst of white fire. And that which lay coiled in it was riven too, blinded and agonized by the tearing of the explosion and the quick avid onslaught of the disease it could not

fight.

The first we saw from above was the ominous shadow suddenly uncoiling from beneath the cliff. It lashed out like a gigantic serpent, a Midgard Serpent that clasped the world in its embrace. Convulsively it unwound itself from that shadowed cavern and burst into the open in an agonized series of spasms that made the lake boil around it.

The men around me broke into a hoarse, triumphant shouting. If I could have done it I would have killed them all. But it was hopeless now. I had no longer even the will to revenge. When a man's basic instinct dies within him he ceases intrinsically to be a man at all.

The water frothed and boiled beneath us. We lost sight of whatever it was that lashed the lake in its death-frenzy. I knew but I would not look or think. I had failed and I was ready now for death along with my dying master.

Very dimly I heard Lewis giving orders for the whole area to be bombed systematically to wipe out any lingering vestiges of the thing which had died here. It didn't matter. Nothing mattered.

I was an automaton, going through the motions of a man until I could shut them out at last and take from my locked file drawer the little revolver I kept there. In a way I envied Davidson. He at least had died for a purpose, trusting me to make his sacrifice not in vain.

I had failed him, too. I had failed myself.

I had no more reason to live. I put the muzzle of the revolver against my head.

And then--and then I found I could not pull the trigger! Something stopped me, some deep command in a level of the mind below conscious recognition. For an instant of frantic hope my reason tried

to tell me that it was all a mistake, that there had not, after all, been wrought upon me that change which turned me from a human to an instrument in the command of another will.

Was it self-preservation, after all, that stayed my hand? If I had that I was free. No—it was not self-preservation. In the next instant I knew and for one immeasurable moment the hope I had so briefly cherished flickered and then went out and was swallowed up in a great surge of command. It was not dead. It lay far down in subterranean waters, buried, waiting, depending upon me, commanding me to stay the hand that would destroy it with me. I must live. I must serve it.

One deep wave of sick regret swept me in those levels of the mind where human reason dwelt. If only I had pulled the trigger an instant sooner, before that command came!

It was too late. And now a warm, confident cunning began to well into my mind from that far-away source of command. It could wait. I could wait. I could recruit where I must and it would help me to make others like myself, until our ranks were strong enough.

I had not wholly failed but until I fulfilled my duty I must obey. Obedience would be a pleasure and a joy, the insidious voice promised me. Good and faithful servant, the whisper said, work for my kingdom upon Earth and your rewards will be delightful beyond imagination.

I got up and locked the revolver away again. Turning back, I caught my reflection in a mirror on the wall and paused there, staring deep into my own eyes.

I smiled....

Black God's Kiss

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1

They brought in Joiry's tall commander, struggling between two men-at-arms who tightly gripped the ropes which bound their captive's mailed arms. They picked their way between mounds of dead as they crossed the great hall toward the dais where the conqueror sat, and twice they slipped a little in the blood that spattered the flags. When they came to a halt before the mailed figure on the dais, Joiry's commander was breathing hard, and the voice that echoed hollowly under the helmet's confines was hoarse with fury and despair.

Guillaume the conqueror leaned on his mighty sword, hands crossed on its hilt, grinning down from his height upon the furious captive before him. He was a big man, Guillaume, and he looked bigger still in his spattered armor. There was blood on his hard, scarred face, and he was grinning a white grin that split his short, curly beard glitteringly. Very splendid and very dangerous he looked, leaning on his great sword and smiling down upon fallen Joiry's lord, struggling between the stolid men-at-arms.

"Unshell me this lobster," said Guillaume in his deep lazy voice. "We'll see what sort of face the fellow has who gave us such a battle. Off with his helmet, you."

But a third man had to come up and slash the straps which held the iron helmet on, for the struggles of Joiry's commander were too fierce, even with bound arms, for either of the guards to release their

hold. There was a moment of sharp struggle; then the straps parted and the helmet rolled loudly across the flagstones.

Guillaume's white teeth clicked on a startled oath. He stared. Joiry's lady glared back at him from between her captors, wild red hair tousled, wild lion-yellow eyes ablaze.

"God curse you!" snarled the lady of Joiry between teeth. "God blast your black heart!"

Guillaume scarcely heard her. He was still staring, as men stared when they first set eyes upon Jirel of Joiry. She was tall as most men, and as savage as the wildest of them, and the fall of Joiry was bitter enough to her heart as she stood snarling curses up at her conqueror. The face above her mail might not have been fair in a woman's head-dress, but in the steel setting of her armor it had a biting, sword-edge beauty as keen as the flash of blades. The red hair was short upon her high, defiant head, and the yellow blaze of her eyes held fury as a crucible holds fire.

Guillaume's stare melted into a slow smile. A little light kindled behind his eyes as he swept the long, strong lines of her with a practised gaze. The smile broadened, suddenly he burst into full-throated laughter, a deep bellow of amusement and delight.

"By the Nails!" he roared. "Here's welcome for the warrior! And what forfeit d'ye offer, pretty one, for your life?"

She blazed a curse at him.

"So? Naughty words for a mouth so fair, my lady. We'll not deny you put up a gallant battle. No man could have done better, and many have done worse, But Guillaume--" He inflated his splendid chest and grinned down at her from the depths of his jutting beard. "Come

to me, pretty one," he commanded. "I'll wager your mouth is sweeter than your words."

Jirel drove a spurred heel into the shin of one guard and twisted from his grip as he howled, bringing up an iron knee into the abdomen of the other. She had writhed from their grip and made three long strides toward the door before Guillaume caught her. She felt his arms closing about her from behind, and lashed out with heels in a futile assault upon his leg armor, twisting like a maniac, fighting with her knees and spurs, straining hopelessly at the ropes which bound her arms. Guillaume laughed and whirled her round, grinning down into the blaze of her yellow eyes. Then deliberately he set a fist under her chin and tilted her mouth up to his. There was a cessation of her hoarse curses.

"By Heaven, that's like kissing a sword-blade," said Guillaume, lifting his lips at last.

Jirel choked something that was mercifully muffled as she darted her head sidewise, like a serpent striking, and sank her teeth into his neck. She missed the jugular by a fraction of an inch.

Guillaume said nothing, then. He sought her head with a steady hand, found it despite her wild writhing, sank iron fingers deep into the hinges of her jaw, forcing her teeth relentlessly apart. When he had her free he glared down into the yellow hell of her eyes for an instant. The blaze of them was hot enough to scorch his scarred face. He grinned and lifted his ungauntleted hand, and with one heavy blow in the face he knocked her halfway across the room. She lay still upon the flags.

Jirel opened her yellow eyes upon darkness. She lay quiet for a while, collecting her scattered thoughts. By degrees it came back to her, and she muffled upon her arm a sound that was half curse and half sob. Joiry had fallen. For a time she lay rigid in the dark, forcing herself to the realization.

The sound of feet shifting on stone near by brought her out of that particular misery. She sat up cautiously, feeling about her to determine in what part of Joiry its liege lady was imprisoned. She knew that the sound she had heard must be a sentry, and by the dank smell of the darkness that she was underground. In one of the little dungeon cells, of course. With careful quietness she got to her feet, muttering a curse as her head reeled for an instant and then began to throb. In the utter dark she felt around the cell. Presently she came to a little wooden stool in a corner, and was satisfied. She gripped one leg of it with firm fingers and made her soundless way around the wall until she had located the door.

The sentry remembered, afterward, that he had heard the wildest shriek for help which had ever rung in his ears, and he remembered unbolting the door. Afterward, until they found him lying inside the locked cell with a cracked skull, he remembered nothing.

Jirel crept up the dark stairs of the north turret, murder in her heart. Many little hatreds she had known in her life, but no such blaze as this. Before her eyes in the night she could see Guillaume's scornful, scarred face laughing, the little jutting beard split with the whiteness of his mirth. Upon her mouth she felt the remembered weight of his, about her the strength of his arms. And such a blast of hot fury came over her that she reeled a little and clutched at the wall for support. She went on in a haze of red anger, and something like madness burning in her brain as a resolve slowly took shape out of the chaos of her hate. When that thought came to her she paused again, mid-step upon the stairs, and was conscious of a little coldness blowing

over her. Then it was gone, and she shivered a little, shook her shoulders and grinned wolfishly, and went on.

By the stars she could see through the arrow-slits in the wall it must be near to midnight. She went softly on the stairs, and she encountered no one. Her little tower room at the top was empty. Even the straw pallet where the serving-wench slept had not been used that night. Jirel got herself out of her armor alone, somehow, after much striving and twisting. Her doeskin shirt was stiff with sweat and stained with blood. She tossed it disdainfully into a corner. The fury in her eyes had cooled now to a contained and secret flame. She smiled to herself as she slipped a fresh shirt of doeskin over her tousled red head and donned a brief tunic of link-mail. On her legs she buckled the greaves of some forgotten legionary, relic of the not long past days when Rome still ruled the world. She thrust a dagger through her belt and took her own long two-handed sword bare-bladed in her grip. Then she went down the stairs again.

She knew there must have been revelry and feasting in the great hall that night, and by the silence hanging so heavily now she was sure that most of her enemies lay still in drunken slumber, and she experienced a swift regret for the gallons of her good French wine so wasted. And the thought flashed through her head that a determined woman with a sharp sword might work some little damage among the drunken sleepers before she was overpowered. But she put that idea by, for Guillaume would have posted sentries to spare, and she must not give up her secret freedom so fruitlessly.

Down the dark stairs she went, and crossed one corner of the vast central hall whose darkness she was sure hid wine-deadened sleepers, and so into the lesser dimness of the rough little chapel that Joiry boasted. She had been sure she would find Father Gervase there, and she was not mistaken. He rose from his knees before the altar, dark in his robe, the starlight through the narrow

window shining upon his tonsure.

"My daughter!" he whispered. "My daughter! How have you escaped? Shall I find you a mount? If you can pass the sentries you should be in your cousin's castle by daybreak."

She hushed him with a lifted hand.

"No," she said. "It is not outside I go this night. I have a more perilous journey even than that to make. Shrive me, father."

He stared at her.

"What is it?"

She dropped to her knees before him and gripped the rough cloth of his habit with urgent fingers.

"Shrive me, I say! I go down into hell tonight to pray the devil for a weapon, and it may be I shall not return."

Gervase bent and gripped her shoulders with hands that shook.

"Look at me!" he demanded. "Do you know what you're saying? You go--"

"Down!" She said it firmly. "Only you and I know that passage, father--and not even we can be sure of what lies beyond. But to gain a weapon against that man I would venture into perils even worse than that."

"If I thought you meant it," he whispered, "I would waken Guillaume now and give you into his arms. It would be a kinder fate, my daughter."

"It's that I would walk through hell to escape," she whispered back fiercely. "Can't you see? Oh, God knows I'm not innocent of the ways of light loving--but to be any man's fancy, for a night or two, before he snaps my neck or sells me into slavery--and above all, if that man were Guillaume! Can't you understand?"

"That would be shame enough," nodded Gervase.

"But think, Jirel! For that shame there is atonement and absolution, and for that death the gates of heaven open wide. But this other--Jirel, Jirel, never through all eternity may you come out, body or soul, if you venture--down!"

She shrugged.

"To wreak my vengeance upon Guillaume I would go if I knew I should burn in hell forever."

"But Jirel, I do not think you understand. This is a worse fate than the deepest depths of hell-fire. This is--this is beyond all the bounds of the hells we know. And I think Satan's hottest flames were the breath of paradise, compared to what may befall there."

"I know. Do you think I'd venture down if I could not be sure? Where else would I find such a weapon as I need, save outside God's dominion?"

"Jirel, you shall not!"

"Gervase, I go! Will you shrive me?" The hot yellow eyes blazed into his, lambent in the starlight.

After a moment he dropped his head. "You are my lady. I will give you God's blessing, but it will not avail you--there."

She went down into the dungeons again. She went down a long way through utter dark, over stones that were oozy and odorous with moisture, through blackness that had never known the light of day. She might have been a little afraid at other times, but that steady flame of hatred burning behind her eyes was a torch to light the way, and she could not wipe from her memory the feel of Guillaume's arms about her, the scornful press of his lips on her mouth. She whimpered a little, low in her throat, and a hot gust of hate went over her.

In the solid blackness she came at length to a wall, and she set herself to pulling the loose stones from this with her free hand, for she would not lay down the sword. They had never been laid in mortar, and they came out easily. When the way was clear she stepped through and found her feet upon a downward-sloping ramp of smooth stone. She cleared the rubble away from the hole in the wall, and enlarged it enough for a quick passage; for when she came back this way--if she did--it might well be that she would come very fast.

At the bottom of the slope she dropped to her knees on the cold floor and felt about. Her fingers traced the outline of a circle, the veriest crack in the stone. She felt until she found the ring in its center. That ring was of the coldest metal she had ever known, and the smoothest. She could put no name to it. The daylight had never shone upon such metal.

She tugged. The stone was reluctant, and at last she took her sword in her teeth, and put both hands to the lifting. Even then it taxed the limit of her strength, and she was strong as many men. But at last it rose, with the strangest sighing sound, and a little prickle of goose-flesh rippled over her.

Now she took the sword back into her hand and knelt on the rim of the invisible blackness below. She had gone this path once before and once only, and never thought to find any necessity in life strong enough to drive her down again. The way was the strangest she had ever known. There was, she thought, no such passage in all the world save here. It had not been built for human feet to travel. It had not been built for feet at all. It was a narrow, polished shaft that corkscrewed round and round. A snake might have slipped in it and gone shooting down, round and round in dizzy circles—but no snake on earth was big enough to fill that shaft. No human travelers had worn the sides of the spiral so smooth, and she did not care to speculate on what creatures had polished it so, through what ages of passage.

She might never have made that first trip down, nor anyone after her, had not some unknown human hacked the notches which made it possible to descend slowly; that is, she thought, it must have been a human. At any rate, the notches were roughly shaped for hands and feet, and spaced not too far apart; but who and when and how she could not even guess. As to the beings who made the shaft in long-forgotten ages—well, there were devils on earth before man, and the world was very old.

She turned on her face, and slid feet-first into the curving tunnel. That first time she and Gervase had gone down in sweating terror of what lay below, and with devils tugging at their heels. Now she slid easily, not bothering to find footholds, but slipping swiftly round and round the long spirals with only her hands to break the speed when she went too fast. Round and round she went, round and round.

It was a long way down. Before she had gone very far the curious dizziness she had known before came over her again, a dizziness not entirely induced by the spirals she whirled around, but a deeper, atomic unsteadiness as if not only she but also the substances around her were shifting. There was something queer about the

angles of those curves. She was no scholar in geometry or aught else, but she felt intuitively that the bend and slant of the way she went were somehow outside any other angles or bends she had ever known. They led into the unknown and the dark, but it seemed to her obscurely that they led into deeper darkness and mystery than the merely physical, as if, though she could not put it clearly even into thoughts, the peculiar and exact lines of the tunnel had been carefully angled to lead through poly-dimensional space as well as through the underground--perhaps through time, too. She did not know she was thinking such things; but all about her was a blurred dizziness as she shot down and round, and she knew that the way she went took her on a stranger journey than any other way she had ever traveled.

Down, and down. She was sliding fast, but she knew how long it would be. On that first trip they had taken alarm as the passage spiraled so endlessly and with thoughts of the long climb back had tried to stop before it was too late. They had found it impossible. Once embarked, there was no halting. She had tried, and such waves of sick blurring had come over her that she came near to unconsciousness. It was as if she had tried to halt some inexorable process of nature, half finished. They could only go on. The very atoms of their bodies shrieked in rebellion against a reversal of the change.

And the way up, when they returned, had not been difficult. They had had visions of a back-breaking climb up interminable curves, but again the uncanny difference of those angles from those they knew was manifested. In a queer way they seemed to defy gravity, or perhaps led through some way outside the power of it. They had been sick and dizzy on the return, as on the way down, but through the clouds of that confusion it had seemed to them that they slipped as easily up the shaft as they had gone down; or perhaps that, once in the tunnel, there was neither up nor down.

The passage leveled gradually. This was the worst part for a human to travel, though it must have eased the speed of whatever beings the shaft was made for. It was too narrow for her to turn in, and she had to lever herself face down and feet first, along the horizontal smoothness of the floor, pushing with her hands. She was glad when her questing heels met open space and she slid from the mouth of the shaft and stood upright in the dark.

Here she paused to collect herself. Yes, this was the beginning of the long passage she and Father Gervase had traveled on that long-ago journey of exploration. By the veriest accident they had found the place, and only the veriest bravado had brought them thus far. He had gone on a greater distance than she--she was younger then, and more amenable to authority--and had come back white-faced in the torchlight and hurried her up the shaft again.

She went on carefully, feeling her way, remembering what she herself had seen in the darkness a little farther on, wondering in spite of herself, and with a tiny catch at her heart, what it was that had sent Father Gervase so hastily back. She had never been entirely satisfied with his explanations. It had been about here--or was it a little farther on? The stillness was like a roaring in her ears.

Then ahead of her the darkness moved. It was just that--a vast, imponderable shifting of the solid dark. Jesu! This was new! She gripped the cross at her throat with one hand and her sword-hilt with the other. Then it was upon her, striking like a hurricane, whirling her against the walls and shrieking in her ears like a thousand wind-devils--a wild cyclone of the dark that buffeted her mercilessly and tore at her flying hair and raved in her ears with the myriad voices of all lost things crying in the night. The voices were piteous in their terror and loneliness. Tears came to her eyes even as she shivered with nameless dread, for the whirlwind was alive with a dreadful instinct, an inanimate thing sweeping through the dark of the

underground; an unholy thing that made her flesh crawl even though it touched her to heart with its pitiful little lost voices wailing in the wind where no wind could possibly be.

And then it was gone. In that one flash of an instant it vanished, leaving no whisper to commemorate its passage. Only in the heart of it could one hear the sad little voices wailing or the wild shriek of the wind. She found herself standing stunned, her sword yet gripped futilely in one hand and the tears running down her face. Poor little lost voices, wailing. She wiped the tears away with a shaking hand and set her teeth hard against the weakness of reaction that flooded her. Yet it was a good five minutes before she could force herself on. After a few steps her knees ceased to tremble.

The floor was dry and smooth underfoot. It sloped a little downward, and she wondered into what unplumbed deeps she had descended by now. The silence had fallen heavily again, and she found herself straining for some other sound than the soft padding of her own boots. Then her foot slipped in sudden wetness. She bent, exploring fingers outstretched, feeling without reason that the wetness would be red if she could see it. But her fingers traced the immense outline of a footprint--splayed and three-toed like a frog's, but of monster size. It was a fresh footprint. She had a vivid flash of memory--that thing she had glimpsed in the torchlight on the other trip down. But she had had light then, and now she was blind in the dark, the creature's natural habitat....

For a moment she was not Jirel of Joiry, vengeful fury on the trail of a devilish weapon, but a frightened woman alone in the unholy dark. That memory had been so vivid.... Then she saw Guillaume's scornful, laughing face again, the little beard dark along the line of his jaw, the strong teeth white with his laughter; and something hot and sustaining swept over her like a thin flame, and she was Joiry again, vengeful and resolute. She went on more slowly, her sword swinging

in a semicircle before every third step, that she might not be surprised too suddenly by some nightmare monster clasping her in smothering arms. But the flesh crept upon her unprotected back.

The smooth passage went on and on. She could feel the cold walls on either hand and her upswung sword grazed the roof. It was like crawling through some worm's tunnel, blindly under the weight of countless tons of earth. She felt the pressure of it above and about her, overwhelming, and found herself praying that the end of this tunnel-crawling might come soon, whatever the end might bring.

But when it came it was a stranger thing than she had ever dreamed. Abruptly she felt the immense, imponderable oppression cease. No longer was she conscious of the tons of earth pressing about her. The walls had fallen away and her feet struck a sudden rubble instead of the smooth floor. But the darkness that had bandaged her eyes was changed too, indescribably. It was no longer darkness, but void; not an absence of light, but simple nothingness. Abysses opened around her, yet she could see nothing. She only knew that she stood at the threshold of some immense space, and sensed nameless things about her, and battled vainly against that nothingness which was all her straining eyes could see. And at her throat something constricted painfully.

She lifted her hand and found the chain of her crucifix taut and vibrant around her neck. At that she smiled a little grimly, for she began to understand. The crucifix. She found her hand shaking despite herself, but she unfastened the chain and dropped the cross to the ground. Then she gasped.

All about her, as suddenly as the awakening from a dream, the nothingness had opened out into undreamed-of distances. She stood high on a hilltop under a sky spangled with strange stars. Below she caught glimpses of misty plains and valleys with mountain

peaks rising far away. And at her feet a ravening circle of small, slavering, blind things leaped with clashing teeth.

They were obscene and hard to distinguish against the darkness of the hillside, and the noise they made was revolting. Her sword swung up of itself, almost, and slashed furiously at the little dark horrors leaping up around her legs. They died squashily, splattering her bare thighs with unpleasantness, and after a few had gone silent under the blade the rest fled into the dark with quick, frightened pantings, their feet making a queer splashing on the stones.

Jirel gathered a handful of the coarse grass which grew there and wiped her legs of the obscene splatters, looking about with quickened breath upon this land so unholy that one who bore a cross might not even see it. Here, if anywhere, one might find a weapon such as she sought. Behind her in the hillside was the low tunnel opening from which she had emerged. Overhead the strange stars shone. She did not recognize a single constellation, and if the brighter sparks were planets they were strange ones, tinged with violet and green and yellow. One was vividly crimson, like a point of fire. Far out over the rolling land below she could discern a column of light. It did not blaze, nor illuminate the dark about. It cast no shadows. It simply was a great pillar of luminance towering high in the night. It seemed artificial--perhaps man-made, though she scarcely dared hope for men here.

She had half expected, despite her brave words, to come out upon the storied and familiar red-hot pave of hell, and this pleasant, starlit land surprised her and made her more wary. The things that built the tunnel could not have been human. She had no right to expect men here. She was a little stunned by finding open sky so far underground, though she was intelligent enough to realize that however she had come, she was not underground now. No cavity in the earth could contain this starry sky. She came of a credulous age,

and she accepted her surroundings without too much questioning though she was a little disappointed, if the truth be known, in the pleasantness of the mistily starlit place. The fiery streets of hell would have been a likelier locality in which to find a weapon against Guillaume.

When she had cleansed her sword on the grass and wiped her legs clean, she turned slowly down the hill. The distant column beckoned her, and after a moment of indecision she turned toward it. She had no time to waste, and this was the likeliest place to find what she sought.

The coarse grass brushed her legs and whispered round her feet. She stumbled now and then on the rubble, for the hill was steep, but she reached the bottom without mishap, and struck out across the meadows toward that blaze of faraway brilliance. It seemed to her that she walked more lightly, somehow. The grass scarcely bent underfoot and she found she could take long sailing strides like one who runs with wings on his heels. It felt like a dream. The gravity pull of the place must have been less than she was accustomed to, but she only knew that she was skimming over the ground with amazing speed.

Traveling so, she passed through the meadows over the strange, coarse grass, over a brook or two that spoke endlessly to itself in a curious language that was almost speech, certainly not the usual gurgle of earth's running water. Once she ran into a blotch of darkness, like some pocket of void in the air and struggled through gasping and blinking outraged eyes. She was beginning to realize that the land was not so innocently normal as it looked.

On and on she went, at that surprising speed, while the meadows skimmed past beneath her flying feet and gradually the light drew nearer. She saw now that it was a round tower of sheeted luminance,

as if walls of solid flame rose up from the ground. Yet it seemed to be steady, nor did it cast any illumination upon the sky.

Before much time had elapsed, with her dreamlike speed she had almost reached her goal. The ground was becoming marshy underfoot, and presently the smell of swamps rose in her nostrils and she saw that between her and the light stretched a belt of unstable ground with black reedy grass. Here and there she could see dim white blotches moving. They might be beasts, or only wisps of mist. The starlight was not very illuminating.

She began to pick her way carefully across the black, quaking morasses. Where the tufts of grass rose she found firmer ground, and she leaped from clump to clump with that amazing lightness, so that her feet barely touched the black ooze. Here and there slow bubbles rose through the mud and broke thickly. She did not like the place.

Half-way across, she saw one of the white blotches approaching her with slow, erratic movements. It bumped along unevenly, and at first she thought it might be inanimate, its approach was so indirect and purposeless. Then it blundered nearer, with that queer bumpy gait, making sucking noises in the ooze and splashing as it came. In the starlight she saw suddenly what it was, and for an instant her heart paused and sickness rose overwhelmingly in her throat. It was a woman--a beautiful woman whose white bare body had the curves and loveliness of some marble statue. She was crouching like a frog and as Jirel watched in stupefaction she straightened her legs abruptly and leaped as a frog leaps, only more clumsily, falling forward into the ooze a little distance beyond the watching woman. She did not seem to see Jirel. The mud-spattered face was blank. She blundered on through the mud in awkward leaps. Jirel watched until the woman was no more than a white wandering blur in the dark and above the shock of that sight pity was rising, and

uncomprehending resentment against whatever had brought so lovely a creature into this--into blundering in frog leaps aimlessly through the mud, with empty mind and blind, staring eyes. For the second time that night she knew the sting of unaccustomed tears as she went on.

The sight, though, had given her reassurance. The human form was not unknown here. There might be leathery devils with hoofs and horns, such as she still half expected, but she would not be alone in her humanity; though if all the rest were as piteously mindless as the one she had seen--she did not follow that thought. It was too unpleasant. She was glad when the marsh was past and she need not see any longer the awkward white shapes bumping along through the dark.

She struck out across the narrow space which lay between her and the tower. She saw now that it was a building, and that the light composed it. She could not understand that, but she saw it. Walls and columns outlined the tower, solid sheets of light with definite boundaries, not radiant. As she came nearer she saw that it was in motion, apparently spurting up from some source underground as if the light illuminated sheets of water rushing upward under great pressure. Yet she felt intuitively that it was not water, but incarnate light.

She came forward hesitantly, gripping her sword. The area around the tremendous pillar was paved with something black and smooth that did not reflect the light. Out of it sprang the uprushing walls of brilliance with their sharply defined edges. The magnitude of the thing dwarfed her to infinitesimal size. She stared upward with undazzled eyes, trying to understand. If there could be such a thing as solid, non-radiating light, this was it.

She was very near under the mighty tower before she could see the details of the building clearly. They were strange to her—great pillars and arches around the base, and one stupendous portal, all molded out of the rushing, prisoned light. She turned toward the opening after a moment, for the light had a tangible look. She did not believe she could have walked through it even had she dared.

When that tremendous portal arched over her she peered in, affrighted by the very size of the place. She thought she could hear the hiss and spurt of the light surging upward. She was looking into a mighty globe inside, a hall shaped like the interior of a bubble, though the curve was so vast she was scarcely aware of it. And in the very center of the globe floated a light. Jirel blinked. A light, dwelling in a bubble of light. It glowed there in midair with a pale, steady flame that was somehow alive and animate, and brighter than the serene illumination of the building, for it hurt her eyes to look at it directly.

She stood on the threshold and stared, not quite daring to venture in. And as she hesitated a change came over the light. A flash of rose tinged its pallor. The rose deepened and darkened until it took on the color of blood. And the shape underwent strange changes. It lengthened, drew itself out narrowly, split at the bottom into two branches, put out two tendrils from the top. The blood-red paled again, and the light somehow lost its brilliance, receded into the depths of the thing that was forming. Jirel clutched her sword and forgot to breathe, watching. The light was taking on the shape of a human being—of a woman—of a tall woman in mail, her red hair tousled and her eyes staring straight into the eyes at the portal...

"Welcome," said the Jirel suspended in the center of the globe, her voice deep and resonant and clear in spite of the distance between

them. Jirel at the door held her breath, wondering and afraid. This was herself, in every detail, a mirrored Jirel—that was it, a Jirel mirrored upon a surface which blazed and smoldered with barely repressed light, so that the eyes gleamed with it and the whole figure seemed to hold its shape by an effort, only by that effort restraining itself from resolving into pure, formless light again. But the voice was not her own. It shook and resounded with a knowledge as alien as the light-built walls. It mocked her. It said,

"Welcome! Enter into the portals, woman!"

She looked up warily at the rushing walls about her. Instinctively she drew back.

"Enter, enter!" urged that mocking voice from her own mirrored lips. And there was a note in it she did not like.

"Enter!" cried the voice again, this time a command.

Jirel's eyes narrowed. Something intuitive warned her back, and yet—she drew the dagger she had thrust in her belt and with a quick motion she tossed it into the great globe-shaped hall. It struck the floor without a sound, and a brilliant light flared up around it, so brilliant she could not look upon what was happening; but it seemed to her that the knife expanded, grew large and nebulous and ringed with dazzling light. In less time than it takes to tell, it had faded out of sight as if the very atoms which composed it had flown apart and dispersed in the golden glow of that mighty bubble. The dazzle faded with the knife, leaving Jirel staring dazedly at a bare floor.

That other Jirel laughed, a rich, resonant laugh of scorn and malice.

"Stay out, then," said the voice. "You've more intelligence than I thought. Well, what would you here?"

Jirel found her voice with an effort.

"I seek a weapon," she said, "a weapon against a man I so hate that upon earth there is none terrible enough for my need."

"You so hate him, eh?" mused the voice.

"With all my heart!"

"With all your heart!" echoed the voice, and there was an undertone of laughter in it that she did not understand. The echoes of that mirth ran round and round the great globe. Jirel felt her cheeks burn with resentment against some implication in the derision which she could not put a name to. When the echoes of the laugh had faded the voice said indifferently,

"Give the man what you find at the black temple in the lake. I make you a gift of it."

The lips that were Jirel's twisted into a laugh of purest mockery; then all about that figure so perfectly her own the light flared out. She saw the outlines melting fluidly as she turned her dazzled eyes away. Before the echoes of that derision had died, a blinding, formless light burned once more in the midst of the bubble.

Jirel turned and stumbled away under the mighty column of the tower, a hand to her dazzled eyes. Not until she had reached the edge of the black, unreflecting circle that paved the ground around the pillar did she realize that she knew no way of finding the lake where her weapon lay. And not until then did she remember how fatal it is said to be to accept a gift from a demon. Buy it, or earn it, but never accept the gift. Well—she shrugged and stepped out upon the grass. She must surely be damned by now, for having ventured down of her will into this curious place for such a purpose as hers. The soul can

be lost but once.

She turned her face up to the strange stars and wondered in what direction her course lay. The sky looked blankly down upon her with its myriad meaningless eyes. A star fell as she watched, and in her superstitious soul, she took it for an omen, and set off boldly over the dark meadows in the direction where the bright streak had faded. No swamps guarded the way here, and she was soon skimming along over the grass with that strange, dancing gait that the lightness of the place allowed her. And as she went she was remembering, as from long ago in some other far world, a man's arrogant mirth and the press of his mouth on hers. Hatred bubbled up hotly within her and broke from her lips in a little savage laugh of anticipation. What dreadful thing awaited her in the temple in the lake, what punishment from hell to be loosed by her own hands upon Guillaume? And though her soul was the price it cost her, she would count it a fair bargain if she could drive the laughter from his mouth and bring terror into the eyes that mocked her.

Thoughts like these kept her company for a long way upon her journey. She did not think to be lonely or afraid in the uncanny darkness across which no shadows fell from that mighty column behind her. The unchanging meadows flew past underfoot lightly as meadows in a dream. It might almost have been that the earth moved instead of herself, so effortlessly did she go. She was sure now that she was heading in the right direction, for two more stars had fallen in the same arc across the sky.

The meadows were not untenanted. Sometimes, she felt presences near her in the dark, and once she ran full-tilt into a nest of little yapping horrors like those on the hilltop. They lunged up about her with clicking teeth, mad with a blind ferocity, and she swung her sword in frantic circles, sickened by the noise of them lunging splashily through the grass and splattering her sword with their

deaths. She beat them off and went on, fighting her own sickness, for she had never known anything quite so nauseating as these little monstrosities.

She crossed a brook that talked to itself in the darkness with that queer murmuring which came so near to speech, and a few strides beyond it she paused suddenly, feeling the ground tremble with the rolling thunder of hoofbeats approaching. She stood stiff, searching the dark anxiously, and presently the earth-shaking beat grew louder and she saw a white blur flung wide across the dimness to her left, and the sound of hoofs deepened and grew. Then out of the night swept a herd of snow-white horses. Magnificently they ran, manes tossing, tails streaming, feet pounding a rhythmic, heart-stirring roll along the ground. She caught her breath at the beauty of their motion. They swept by a little distance away, tossing their heads, spurning the ground with scornful feet.

But as they came abreast of her she saw one blunder a little and stumble against the next, and that one shook his head bewilderedly; and suddenly she realized that they were blind--all running so splendidly in a deeper dark than even she groped through. And she saw, too, their coats were roughened with sweat, and foam dripped from their lips, and their nostrils were flaring pools of scarlet. Now and again one stumbled from pure exhaustion. Yet they ran, frantically, blindly through the dark, driven by something outside their comprehension.

As the last one of all swept by her, sweat-crust and staggering, she saw him toss his head high, spattering foam, and whinny shrilly to the stars. And it seemed to her that the sound was strangely articulate. Almost she heard the echoes of a name--"Julienne, Julienne!"--in that high, despairing sound. And the incongruity of it, the bitter despair, clutched at her heart so sharply that for the third time that night she knew the sting of tears.

The dreadful humanity of that cry echoed in her ears as the thunder died away. She went on, blinking back the tears for that beautiful blind creature, staggering with exhaustion, calling a girl's name hopelessly from a beast's throat into the blank darkness wherein it was forever lost.

Then another star fell across the sky, and she hurried ahead, closing her mind to the strange, incomprehensible pathos that made an undernote of tears to the starry dark of this land. And the thought was growing in her mind that, though she had come into no brimstone pit where horned devils pranced over flames, yet perhaps it was after all a sort of hell through which she ran.

Presently, in the distance she caught a glimmer of something bright. The ground dipped after that and she lost it, and skimmed through a hollow where pale things wavered away from her into the deeper dark. She never knew what they were, and was glad. When she came up onto higher ground again she saw it more clearly, an expanse of dim brilliance ahead. She hoped it was a lake, and ran more swiftly.

It was a lake--a lake that could never have existed outside some obscure hell like this. She stood on the brink doubtfully, wondering if this could be the place the light devil had meant. Black, shining water stretched out before her, heaving gently with a motion unlike that of any water she had ever seen before. And in the depths of it, like fireflies caught in ice, gleamed myriad small lights. They were fixed there immovably, not stirring with the motion of the water. As she watched, something hissed above her and a streak of light split the dark air. She looked up in time to see something bright curving across the sky to fall without a splash into the water, and small ripples of phosphorescence spread sluggishly toward the shore, where they broke at her feet with the queerest whispering sound, as

if each succeeding ripple spoke the syllable of a word.

She looked up, trying to locate the origin of the falling lights, but the strange stars looked down upon her blankly. She bent and stared down into the center of the spreading ripples, and where the thing had fallen she thought a new light twinkled through the water. She could not determine what it was, and after a curious moment she gave the question up and began to cast about for the temple the light-devil had spoken of.

After a moment she thought she saw something dark in the center of the lake, and when she had stared for a few minutes it gradually became clearer, an arch of darkness against the starry background of the water. It might be a temple. She strolled slowly along the brim of the lake, trying to get a closer view of it, for the thing was no more than a darkness against the spangles of light, like some void in the sky where no stars shine. And presently she stumbled over something in the grass.

She looked down with startled yellow eyes, and saw a strange, indistinguishable darkness. It had solidity to the feel but scarcely to the eye, for she could not quite focus upon it. It was like trying to see something that did not exist save as a void, a darkness in the grass. It had the shape of a step, and when she followed with her eyes she saw that it was the beginning of a dim bridge stretching out over the lake, narrow and curved and made out of nothingness. It seemed to have no surface, and its edges were difficult to distinguish from the lesser gloom surrounding it. But the thing was tangible--an arch carved out of the solid dark--and it led out in the direction she wished to go. For she was naively sure now that the dim blot in the center of the lake was the temple she was searching for. The falling stars had guided her, and she could not have gone astray.

So she set her teeth and gripped her sword and put her foot upon the

bridge. It was rock-firm under her, but scarcely more than a foot or so wide, and without rails. When she had gone a step or two she began to feel dizzy; for under her the water heaved with a motion that made her head swim, and the stars twinkled eerily in its depths. She dared not look away for fear of missing her footing on the narrow arch of darkness. It was like walking a bridge flung across the void, with stars underfoot and nothing but an unstable strip of nothingness to bear her up. Half-way across, the heaving of the water and the illusion of vast, constellated spaces beneath and the look her bridge had of being no more than empty space ahead, combined to send her head reeling; and as she stumbled on, the bridge seemed to be wavering with her, swinging in gigantic arcs across the starry void below.

Now she could see the temple more closely, though scarcely more clearly than from the shore. It looked to be no more than an outlined emptiness against the star-crowded brilliance behind it, etching its arches and columns of blankness upon the twinkling waters. The bridge came down in a long dim swoop to its doorway. Jirel took the last few yards at a reckless run and stopped breathless under the arch that made the temple's vague doorway. She stood there panting and staring about narrow-eyed, sword poised in her hand. For though the place was empty and very still she felt a presence even as she set her foot upon the floor of it.

She was staring about a little space of blankness in the starry lake. It seemed to be no more than that. She could see the walls and columns, where they were outlined against the water and where they made darkneses in the star-flecked sky, but where there was only dark behind them she could see nothing. It was a tiny place, no more than a few square yards of emptiness upon the face of the twinkling waters. And in its center an image stood.

She stared at it in silence, feeling a curious compulsion growing

within her, like a vague command from something outside herself. The image was of some substance of nameless black, unlike the material which composed the building, for even in the dark she could see it clearly. It was a semi-human figure, crouching forward with out-thrust head, sexless and strange. Its one central eye was closed as if in rapture, and its mouth was pursed for a kiss. And though it was but an image without even the semblance of life, she felt unmistakably the presence of something alive in the temple, something so alien and innominate that instinctively she drew away.

She stood there for a full minute, reluctant to enter the place where so alien a being dwelt, half-conscious of that voiceless compulsion growing up within her. And slowly she became aware that all the lines and angles of the half-seen building were curved to make the image their center and focus. The very bridge swooped its long arc to complete the centering. As she watched, it seemed to her that through the arches of the columns even the stars in lake and sky were grouped in patterns which took the image for their focus. Every line and curve in the dim world seemed to sweep round toward the squatting thing before her with its closed eye and expectant mouth.

Gradually the universal focusing of lines began to exert its influence upon her. She took a hesitant step forward without realizing the motion. But that step was all the dormant urge within her needed. With her one motion forward the compulsion closed down upon her with whirlwind impetuosity. Helplessly she felt herself advancing, helplessly with one small, sane portion of her mind she realized the madness that was gripping her, the blind, irresistible urge to do what every visible line in the temple's construction was made to compel. With stars swirling around her she advanced across the floor and laid her hands upon the rounded shoulders of the image--the sword, forgotten, making a sort of accolade against its hunched neck--and lifted her red head and laid her mouth blindly against the pursed lips of the image.

In a dream she took that kiss. In a dream of dizziness and confusion she seemed to feel the iron-cold lips stirring under hers. And through the union of that kiss--warm-blooded woman with image of nameless stone--through the meeting of their mouths something entered into her very soul; something cold and stunning; something alien beyond any words. It lay upon her shuddering soul like some frigid weight from the void, a bubble holding something unthinkably alien and dreadful. She could feel the heaviness of it upon some intangible part of her that shrank from the torch. It was like the weight of remorse or despair, only far colder and stranger and--somehow--more ominous, as if this weight were but the egg from which things might hatch too dreadful to put even into thoughts.

The moment of the kiss could have been no longer than a breath's space, but to her it was timeless. In a dream she felt the compulsion falling from her at last. In a dim dream she dropped her hands from its shoulders, finding the sword heavy in her grasp and staring dully at it for a while before clarity began its return to her cloudy mind. When she became completely aware of herself once more she was standing with slack body and dragging head before the blind, rapturous image, that dead weight upon her heart as dreary as an old sorrow, and more coldly ominous than anything she could find words for.

And with returning clarity the most staggering terror came over her, swiftly and suddenly--terror of the image and the temple of darkness, and the coldly spangled lake and of the whole, wide, dim, dreadful world about her. Desperately she longed for home again, even the red fury of hatred and the press of Guillaume's mouth and the hot arrogance of his eyes again. Anything but this. She found herself running without knowing why. Her feet skimmed over the narrow bridge lightly as a gull's wings dipping the water. In a brief instant the starry void of the lake flashed by beneath her and the solid earth was

underfoot. She saw the great column of light far away across the dark meadows and beyond it a hilltop rising against the stars. And she ran.

She ran with terror at her heels and devils howling in the wind her own speed made. She ran from her own curiously alien body, heavy with its weight of inexplicable doom. She passed through the hollow where pale things wavered away, she fled over the uneven meadows in a frenzy of terror. She ran and ran, in those long light bounds the lesser gravity allowed her, fleetier than a deer, and her own panic choked in her throat and that weight upon her soul dragged at her too drearily for tears. She fled to escape it, and could not; and the ominous certainty that she carried something too dreadful to think of grew and grew.

For a long while she skimmed over the grass, tirelessly, wing-heeled, her red hair flying. The panic died after a while, but that sense of heavy disaster did not die. She felt somehow that tears would ease her, but something in the frigid darkness of her soul froze her tears in the ice of that gray and alien chill.

And gradually, through the inner dark, a fierce anticipation took form in her mind. Revenge upon Guillaume! She had taken from the temple only a kiss, so it was that which she must deliver to him. And savagely she exulted in the thought of what that kiss would release upon him, unsuspecting. She did not know, but it filled her with fierce joy to guess.

She had passed the column and skirted the morass where the white, blundering forms still bumped along awkwardly through the ooze, and was crossing the coarse grass toward the nearing hill when the sky began to pale along the horizon. And with that pallor a fresh terror took hold upon her, a wild horror of daylight in this unholy land. She was not sure if it was the light itself she so dreaded, or what that light

would reveal in the dark stretches she had traversed so blindly--what unknown horrors she had skirted in the night. But she knew instinctively that if she valued her sanity she must be gone before the light had risen over the land. And she redoubled her efforts, spurring her wearying limbs to yet more skimming speed. But it would be a close race, for already the stars were blurring out, and a flush of curious green was broadening along the sky, and around her the air was turning to a vague, unpleasant gray.

She toiled up the steep hillside breathlessly. When she was halfway up, her own shadow began to take form upon the rocks, and it was unfamiliar and dreadfully significant of something just outside her range of understanding. She averted her eyes from it, afraid that at any moment the meaning might break upon her outraged brain.

She could see the top of the hill above her, dark against the paling sky, and she toiled up in frantic haste, clutching her sword and feeling that if she had to look in the full light upon the dreadful little abominations that had snapped around her feet when she first emerged she would collapse into screaming hysteria.

The cave-mouth yawned before her, invitingly black, a refuge from the dawning light behind her. She knew an almost irresistible desire to turn and look back from this vantage-point across the land she had traversed, and gripped her sword hard to conquer the perverse longing. There was a scuffling in the rocks at her feet, and she set her teeth in her underlip and swung viciously in brief arcs, without looking down. She heard small squeakings and the splashy sound of feet upon the stones, and felt her blade shear thrice through semi-solidity, to the click of little vicious teeth. Then they broke and ran off over the hillside, and she stumbled on, choking back the scream that wanted so fiercely to break from her lips.

She fought that growing desire all the way up to the cave-mouth, for

she knew that if she gave way she would never cease shrieking until her throat went raw.

Blood was trickling from her bitten lip with the effort at silence when she reached the cave. And there, twinkling upon the stones, lay something small and bright and dearly familiar. With a sob of relief she bent and snatched up the crucifix she had torn from her throat when she came out into this land. And as her fingers shut upon it a vast, protecting darkness swooped around her. Gasping with relief, she groped her way the step or two that separated her from the cave.

Dark lay like a blanket over her eyes, and she welcomed it gladly, remembering how her shadow had lain so awfully upon the hillside as she climbed, remembering the first rays of savage sunlight beating upon her shoulders. She stumbled through the blackness, slowly getting control again over her shaking body and laboring lungs, slowly stilling the panic that the dawning day had roused so inexplicably within her. And as that terror died, the dull weight upon her spirit became strong again. She had all but forgotten it in her panic, but now the impending and unknown dreadfulness grew heavier and more oppressive in the darkness of the underground, and she groped along in a dull stupor of her own depression, slow with the weight of the strange doom she carried.

Nothing barred her way. In the dullness of her stupor she scarcely realized it, or expected any of the vague horrors that peopled the place to leap out upon her. Empty and unmenacing, the way stretched before her blindly stumbling feet. Only once did she hear the sound of another presence--the rasp of hoarse breathing and the scrape of a scaly hide against the stone--but it must have been outside the range of her own passage, for she encountered nothing.

When she had come to the end and a cold wall rose up before her, it was scarcely more than automatic habit that made her search along

it with groping hand until she came to the mouth of the shaft. It sloped gently up into the dark. She crawled in, trailing her sword, until the rising incline and lowering roof forced her down upon her face. Then with toes and fingers she began to force herself up the spiral, slippery way.

Before she had gone very far she was advancing without effort, scarcely realizing that it was against gravity she moved. The curious dizziness of the shaft had come over her, the strange feeling of change in the very substance of her body, and through the cloudy numbness of it she felt herself sliding round and round the spirals, without effort. Again, obscurely, she had the feeling that in the peculiar angles of this shaft was neither up nor down. And for a long while the dizzy circling went on.

When the end came at last, and she felt her fingers gripping the edge of that upper opening which lay beneath the floor of Joiry's lowest dungeons, she heaved herself up warily and lay for a while on the cold floor in the dark, while slowly the clouds of dizziness passed from her mind, leaving only that ominous weight within. When the darkness had ceased to circle about her, and the floor steadied, she got up dully and swung the cover back over the opening, her hands shuddering from the feel of the cold, smooth ring which had never seen daylight.

When she turned from this task she was aware of the reason for the lessening in the gloom around her. A guttering light outlined the hole in the wall from which she had pulled the stones--was it a century ago? The brilliance all but blinded her after her long sojourn through blackness, and she stood there awhile, swaying a little, one hand to her eyes, before she went out into the familiar torchlight she knew waited her beyond. Father Gervase, she was sure, anxiously waiting her return. But even he had not dared to follow her through the hole in the wall, down to the brink of the shaft.

Somehow she felt that she should be giddy with relief at this safe homecoming, back to humanity again. But as she stumbled over the upward slope toward light and safety she was conscious of no more than the dullness of whatever unreleased horror it was which still lay so ominously upon her stunned soul.

She came through the gaping hole in the masonry into the full glare of torches awaiting her, remembering with inward smile how wide she had made the opening in anticipation of flight from something dreadful when she came back that way. Well, there was no flight from the horror she bore within her. It seemed to her that her heart was slowing, too, missing a beat now and then and staggering like a weary runner.

She came out into the torchlight, stumbling with exhaustion, her mouth scarlet from the blood of her bitten lip and her bare greaved legs and bare sword-blade foul with the deaths of those little horrors that swarmed the cave-mouth. From the tangle of red hair her eyes stared out with a bleak, frozen, inward look, as of one who has seen nameless things. That keen, steel-bright beauty which had been hers was as dull and fouled as her swordblade, and at the look in her eyes Father Gervase shuddered and crossed himself.

5

They were waiting for her in an uneasy group--the priest anxious and dark, Guillaume splendid in the torchlight, tall and arrogant, a handful of men-at-arms holding the guttering lights and shifting uneasily from one foot to the other. When she saw Guillaume the light that flared up in her eyes blotted out for a moment the dreadfulness behind them, and her slowing heart leaped like a spurred horse, sending the blood riotously through her veins. Guillaume, magnificent in his armor,

leaning upon his sword and staring down at her from his scornful height, the little black beard jutting. Guillaume, to whom Joiry had fallen. Guillaume.

That which she carried at the core of her being was heavier than anything else in the world, so heavy she could scarcely keep her knees from bending, so heavy her heart labored under its weight. Almost irresistibly she wanted to give way beneath it, to sink down and down under the crushing load, to lie prone and vanquished in the ice-gray, bleak place she was so dimly aware of through the clouds that were rising about her. But there was Guillaume, grim and grinning, and she hated him so very bitterly--she must make the effort. She must, at whatever cost, for she was coming to know that death lay in wait for her if she bore this burden long, that it was a two-edged weapon which could strike at its wielder if the blow were delayed too long. She knew this through the dim mists that were thickening in her brain, and she put all her strength into the immense effort it cost to cross the floor toward him. She stumbled a little, and made one faltering step and then another, and dropped her sword with a clang as she lifted her arms to him.

He caught her strongly, in a hard, warm clasp, and she heard his laugh triumphant and hateful as he bent his head to take the kiss she was raising her mouth to offer. He must have seen, in that last moment before their lips met, the savage glare of victory in her eyes, and been startled. But he did not hesitate. His mouth was heavy upon hers.

It was a long kiss. She felt him stiffen in her arms. She felt a coldness in the lips upon hers, and slowly the dark weight of what she bore lightened, lifted, cleared away from her cloudy mind. Strength flowed back through her richly. The whole world came alive to her once more. Presently she loosed his slack arms and stepped away, looking up into his face with a keen and dreadful triumph upon her

own.

She saw the ruddiness of him draining away, and the rigidity of stone coming over his scarred features. Only his eyes remained alive, and there was torment in them, and understanding. She was glad--she had wanted him to understand what it cost to take Joiry's kiss unbidden. She smiled thinly into his tortured eyes, watching. And she saw something cold and alien seeping through him, permeating him slowly with some unnameable emotion which no man could ever have experienced before. She could not name it, but she saw it in his eyes--some emotion never made for flesh and blood to know, some iron despair such as only an unguessable being from the gray, formless void could ever have felt before--too hideously alien for any human creature to endure. Even she shuddered from the dreadful, cold bleakness looking out of his eyes, and knew as she watched that there must be many emotions and many fears and joys too far outside man's comprehension for any being of flesh to undergo, and live. Grayly she saw it spreading through him, and the very substance of his body shuddered under that iron weight.

And now came a visible, physical change. Watching, she was aghast to think that in her own body and upon own soul she had borne the seed of this dreadful flowering, and did not wonder that her heart had slowed under the unbearable weight of it. He was standing rigidly with arms half bent, just as he stood when she slid from his embrace. And now great shudders began to go over him, as if he were wavering in the torchlight, some gray-faced wraith in armor with torment in his eyes. She saw the sweat beading his forehead. She saw a trickle of blood from his mouth, as if he had bitten through his lip in the agony of this new, incomprehensible emotion. Then a last shiver went over him violently, and he flung up his head, the little curling beard jutting ceilingward and the muscles of his strong throat corded, and from his lips broke a long, low cry of such utter, inhuman strangeness that Jirel felt coldness rippling through her veins and she

put up her hands to her ears to shut it out. It meant something--it expressed some dreadful emotion that was neither sorrow nor despair nor anger, but alien and infinitely sad. Then his long legs buckled at the knees and he dropped with a clatter of mail and lay still on the stone floor.

They knew he was dead. That was unmistakable in the way he lay. Jirel stood very still, looking down upon him, and strangely it seemed to her that all the lights in the world had gone out. A moment before he had been so big and vital, so magnificent in the torchlight--she could still feel his kiss upon her mouth, and the hard warmth of his arms....

Suddenly and blindingly it came upon her what she had done. She knew now why such heady violence had flooded her whenever she thought of him--knew why the light-devil in her own form had laughed so derisively--knew the price she must pay for taking a gift from a demon. She knew that there was no light anywhere in the world, now that Guillaume was gone.

Father Gervase took her arm gently. She shook him off with an impatient shrug and dropped to one knee beside Guillaume's body, bending her head so that the red hair fell forward to hide her tears.

Home There's No Returning

Published in No Boundaries, Ballantine: 1955. One of my source texts also contained a brief introduction to the story. Judging from its wording ("the last [story] in the book") it seems this introduction was taken from the 1956 collection, either the Dell paperback S-F: The Year's Greatest Science-Fiction and Fantasy or the Gnome Press hard cover edition SF: The Year's Greatest Science Fiction and Fantasy, both edited by Judith Merrill (well, it's the same book after all, despite Dell using a hyphen in S-F).

If the last story was uncomfortably close to home, be warned that this is even closer. But don't quit now. It's the last one in the book, so you may be certain it will have a happy ending—of sorts. And, being the work of science-fantasy's foremost collaborators, Mr. and Mrs. Henry Kuttner, you may be equally certain that the background of the fable will be painted in clear glowing colors; that the action of the story will move at a pulse-beat pace; and that the moral, when it comes, will be stated with an appropriate question mark.

[Ballantine, 1955, paperback] [Ballantine, 1955, hard cover]

The General opened the door and came softly into the big, bright underground room. There by the wall under the winking control panels lay the insulated box, nine feet long, four feet wide, just as it always lay, just as he always saw it—day or night, waking or sleeping, eyes open or closed. The box shaped like a tomb. But out of it, if they were lucky, something would be born.

The General was tall and gaunt. He had stopped looking at himself in the mirror because his own face had begun to frighten him with its exhaustion, and he hated to meet the look of his own sunken eyes. He stood there feeling the beat of unseen machinery throb through the rock all around him. His nerves secretly changed each rhythmic pulse into some vast explosion, some new missile against which all defenses would be useless.

He called sharply in the empty laboratory, "Broome!" No answer. The

General walked forward and stood above the box. Over it on the control panel lights winked softly on and off, and now and then a needle quivered. Suddenly the General folded up his fist and smashed the knuckles down hard on the reverberant metal of the box. A sound like hollow thunder boomed out of it.

"Easy, easy," somebody said. Abraham Broome was standing in the doorway, a very old man, small and wrinkled, with bright, doubtful eyes. He shuffled hastily to the box and laid a soothing hand on it, as if the box might be sentient for all he knew.

"Where the hell were you?" the General asked.

Broome said, "Resting. Letting some ideas incubate. Why?"

"You were resting?" The General sounded like a man who had never heard the word before. Even to himself he sounded strange. He pressed his eyelids with finger and thumb, because the room seemed to be dwindling all around him, and the face of Broome receded thinly into gray distances. But even with shut eyes he could still see the box and the sleeping steel giant inside, waiting patiently to be born. Without opening his eyes, he said, "Wake it up, Broome."

Broome's voice cracked a little. "But I haven't fin--"

"Wake it up."

"Something's gone wrong, General?"

General Conway pressed his eyelids until the darkness inside reddened--as all this darkness underground would redden when the last explosions came. Perhaps tomorrow. Not later than the day after. He was almost sure of that. He opened his eyes quickly. Broome was looking at him with a bright, dubious gaze, his lids

sagging at the outer corners with the weight of unregarded years.

"I can't wait any longer," Conway said carefully. "None of us can wait. This war is too much for human beings to handle any more." He paused and let the rest of his breath go out in a sigh, not caring--perhaps not daring--to say the thing aloud that kept reverberating in his head like steadily approaching thunder. Tomorrow, or the day after--that was the deadline. The enemy was going to launch an all-out attack on the Pacific Front Sector within the next forty-eight hours.

The computers said so. The computers had ingested every available factor from the state of the weather to the conditions of the opposing general's childhood years, and this was what they said. They could be wrong. Now and then they were wrong, when the data they received was incomplete. But you couldn't go on the assumption that they would be. You had to assume an attack would come before day after tomorrow.

General Conway had not--he thought--slept since the last attack a week ago, and that was a minor thing compared to what the computers predicted now. He was amazed in a remote, unwondering way, that the general who preceded him had lasted so long. He felt a sort of gray malice toward the man who would come after him. But there wasn't much satisfaction in that thought, either. His next in command was an incompetent fool. Conway had taken up responsibility a long time ago, and he could no more lay it down now than he would detach his painfully swimming head for a while and set it gently aside on some quiet shelf to rest. No, he would have to carry his head on his shoulders and his responsibilities on his back until--

"Either the robot can take over the job or it can't," he said. "But we can't wait any longer to find out."

He stooped suddenly and with a single powerful heave tore the box-lid open and sent it crashing back. Broome stepped up beside him and the two of them looked down on the thing that lay placidly inside, face up, passionless, its single eye unlit and as blank as Adam's before he tasted the fruit. The front panel of its chest was open upon a maze of transistors, infinitely miniature components, thin silver lines of printed circuits. A maze of fine wiring nested around the robot, but most of it was disconnected by now. The robot was almost ready to be born.

"What are we waiting for?" Conway demanded harshly. "I said wake it up!"

"Not yet, General. It isn't safe--yet. I can't predict what might happen--"

"Won't it work?"

Broome looked down at the steel mask winking with reflected lights from the panel boards above it. His face wrinkled up with hesitation. He bent to touch one finger to a wire that led into the massive opened chest at a circuit labeled "In-Put."

"It's programmed," he said very doubtfully. "And yet--"

"Then it's ready," Conway's voice was flat. "You heard me, Broome. I can't wait any longer. Wake it up."

"I'm afraid to wake it up," Broome said....

The General's ears played a familiar trick on him. I'm afraid--I'm afraid.... He couldn't make the voice stop echoing. But fear is what all flesh is heir to, he thought. Flesh knows its limitations. It was time for steel to take over.

Pushbutton warfare used to look like the easy way to fight. Now man knows better. Man knows what the weakest link is--himself. Flesh and blood. Man has the hardest job of all, the job of making decisions on incomplete data. Until now, no machine could do that. The computers were the very heartbeat and brain-pulse of pushbutton war, but they were limited thinkers. And they could shrug off responsibility with an easy, "No answer--insufficient data." After which it was up to man to give them what more they needed. The right information, the right questions, the right commands. No wonder the turnover in generals was so high.

So the Electronic Guidance Operator was conceived. The General looked down at it, lying quietly waiting for birth. Ego was its name. And it would have free will, after a fashion. The real complexity of the fabulous computers lies not in the machines themselves, but in the programming fed into them. The memory banks are no good at all without instructions about how to use the data. And instructions are extremely complex to work out.

That was going to be Ego's job from now on. Ego had been designed to act like the human brain, on only partial knowledge, as no machine before had ever done. Flesh and blood had reached their limits, Conway thought. Now was the hour for steel to take over. So Ego lay ready to taste the first bite of the apple Adam bit. Tireless like steel, resourceful like flesh, munching the apple mankind was so tired of munching....

"What do you mean, afraid?" Conway asked.

"It's got free will," Broome said. "Don't you see? I can't set up free will and controls. I can only give it one basic order--win the war. But I can't tell it how. I don't know how? I can't even tell it what not to do. Ego will simply wake like--well, like a man educated and matured in his sleep, waking for the first time. It will feel needs, and act on its

wants. I can't control it. And that scares me, General."

Conway stood still, blinking, feeling exhaustion vibrate shrilly in his nerve ends. He sighed and touched the switch on his lapel microphone. "Conway here. Send Colonel Garden to Operation Christmas. And a couple of mps."

Broome burst into very rapid speech. "No, General! Give me another week. Give me just a few days--"

"You've got about two minutes," Conway said. He thought, See how you like quick decisions. And this is only one. I've had five years of it. How long since I slept last? Well, never mind, never mind that. Make Broome decide. Push him. Resting!

Broome said, "I won't do it. No. I can't take the responsibility. I need more time to test--"

"You'll go on testing till doomsday. You'll never activate it," Conway said.

The door opened. The two mps followed Colonel Garden into the room. Garden's uniform looked sloppy, as usual. The man wasn't built for a uniform. But the dark pouches under his eyes tempered Conway's contempt. Garden hadn't slept much lately, either. It was past time for all of them now--Ego must pick up the burden and justify its name.

"Arrest Broome," Conway said. He ignored their startled looks. "Colonel, can you wake up this robot?"

"Wake it up, sir?"

Conway gestured impatiently. "Activate it, start it going."

"Well, yes, sir, I do know how, but--"

Conway didn't bother to listen. He pointed to the robot, and whatever else Garden was saying became a meaningless yammer in his ears. Forty-eight hours, he thought--time enough to test it before the attack comes, if we're lucky. And it had better work. He pressed thumb and finger to his eyes again to keep the room from swinging in slow, balancing circles around him.

Broome from the far end of nowhere said, "Wait, General! Give me just one day more! It isn't--"

Conway waved his hand, not opening his eyes. He heard one of the mps say something, and there was a brief scuffle. Then the door closed. The General sighed and opened his eyes.

Garden was looking at him with the same doubt Broome had shown. Conway scowled and the other man turned quickly to the box where the robot lay. He stooped as Broome had done and touched with one finger the wire cord still leading into the spot marked "In-Put."

"Once this is detached, sir, he's on his own," he said.

"The thing has its orders," the General said briefly. "Go on, do something."

There was a little pinging noise as Garden neatly detached the cord. He closed the steel plate that sealed Ego's inwards. He ran his hands around the steel limbs to make sure all the nest of wires was clear. Then he got up and crossed to the instrument panel.

"Sir," he said.

Conway didn't answer for a moment. He was rocking just perceptibly to and fro, heel and toe, like a tower beginning to totter. He said,

"Don't tell me anything I don't want to hear."

Garden said composedly, "I don't know just what to expect, sir. Will you tell me as soon as the robot starts to respond? Even the slightest--"

"I'll tell you." Conway looked down at the placid blind face. Wake up, he thought. Or else don't. It doesn't really matter. Because we can't go on like this. Wake up. Then I can sleep. Or don't wake up. Then I can die.

The round, flat cyclopean lens of the robot's eye began to glow softly. In the same moment a rising hum of power from the instrument panel made the lights dim, and all the reflections shimmering from Ego's steel surfaces paled and then burned strong again as auxiliary switches kicked in. One by one the lights on the panel went out. The quivering needles rocked to and fro at zero and quieted.

The robot stared blankly up at the ceiling, not moving.

Conway, looking down, thought, Now it's your turn. I've gone as far as a man can go. Take over, robot. Move!

The robot's whole body shivered very, very slightly. The eye brightened until it sent a cone of light straight up at the ceiling. Without the slightest warning it lifted both arms at once out of the box and smashed its metal hands together with a clang that made both men jump. Conway gasped with surprise and released tension. Uselessly he said, "Garden!"

Garden opened a switch and the singing whine of power died. The robot was motionless again, but this time, like an effigy on a tomb, it lay with palms pressed together hard. The shivering began again and rhythmic clicking sounds like many clocks ticking out of phase

could be heard faintly from deep inside the big steel cylinder of the body.

"What's happening?" Conway asked, whispering without knowing why. "What made it do that?"

"Activation," Garden said, also whispering. "It--" He paused, cleared his throat self-consciously, and spoke aloud. "I'm not too familiar with this, Sir. I suppose the basic tensions are setting up. They'll be relieved through energy transformation of some kind or other, depending on the homeostatic principle that Broome--"

From the box and the supine robot a strange, hollow voice spoke in a kind of howl. "Want...." it said painfully, and then seemed to stop itself short. "Want...." it said again, and ceased abruptly.

"What is it?" Conway wasn't sure whether he was addressing Ego or Garden. The sound of the voice frightened him. It was so mindless, like a ghost's, flat and hollow.

"There's a speaker in its chest," Garden said, his own voice a little shaken. "I'd forgotten. But it ought to communicate better than this. It--he--Ego--" Garden gestured helplessly. "Some kind of block, I should think." He stepped forward and bent over the box, looking down. "You--want something?" he asked awkwardly, sounding foolish. Conway thought what an ineffectual man he was. But at least the robot was awake now. Surely in a little while it would be adjusted, ready to take over....

Well, maybe they could all relax a little, after that. Maybe Conway could even sleep. A sudden panic shook him briefly as he thought, What if I've forgotten how to sleep? And exhaustion rolled up over him like water washing over a man of sand, relaxing and crumbling away the very components of his limbs. In just a moment I'll be free,

Conway thought. When Ego takes over. I've made it. I haven't gone mad or killed myself. And now I won't have to think any more. I'll just stand here, without moving. I won't even lie down. If gravity wants to pull me down, that's up to gravity....

Garden, bending over the box, said again, "What is it you want?"

"Want...." Ego said. And suddenly the prayerful hands flashed apart, the four-foot arms flung wide like shining flails. Then it lay motionless again, but Colonel Garden was no longer leaning over the box. Conway saw, with hazy detachment, that Garden was crumpling down against the wall. The flail had caught him across the side of the neck, and he lay with his head at an angle like a jointed doll, more motionless now than the robot.

Moving slowly, Conway touched the switch of his lapel microphone. The silence hummed receptively. There was a long interval while he couldn't quite remember his name. But presently he spoke.

"General Conway here. Bring Broome back to Operation Christmas."

He looked down at the robot. "Wait a while," he said. "Broome will know."

The robot's arms bent. The steel hands closed upon the sides of the box, and with a shriek of metal parting from metal it ripped the box apart.

Now it was born. Born? Untimely ripped, Conway thought. Untimely ripped.... I suppose I was wrong. What next?

Ego rose upright, eight feet tall, solid as a tower, and like a walking tower it moved. It moved straight forward until the wall stopped it. Slowly it turned, its cone of vision sweeping the room, its motions at

first jerky and uneven, but becoming smoother and surer with the warming-up process of the newly activated machine. It was still trembling just perceptibly, and the ticking rose and fell inside it, drew out in slow series, quickened, burst into rapid chatter, slowed again. Sorting, accepting, rejecting, evaluating the new-found world which was now the robot's burden....

It saw the wall of control panels which had activated it. The beam of its sight swept the panels briefly, and then with a burst of surprising speed it rushed across the room toward the panels. Its hands danced over the plugboard, the switches, the dials.

Nothing happened. The panels were dead.

"Want..." said the hollow, inhuman cry from Ego's reverberating chest. And with two sweeps of the steel hands it sheared cleanly off the board all the projecting globes and dials and switches. It sank steel fingers into the sockets and ripped the plating off. It wound both hands deep into the colored wiring inside and ripped great handfuls out in a sort of measured frenzy.

"Ego!" Conway said.

It heard him. It turned, very fast. The bright gaze bathed him for a moment. He felt cold as it held him in its focus, as if a mind the temperature of steel were locked with his. He could almost feel the touch of the newfledged, infinitely resourceful brain.

The light of its gaze passed him and saw the door. It dismissed Conway. It surged forward like a tank and hit the door flatly with its chest, cracking the panels in two. With a single motion it swept the wreckage away on both sides and rolled forward through the splintered frame.

By the time reached the door the robot was a long way off down the underground corridor, moving faster and faster, dwindling toward the vanishing point like a shrinking drop of quicksilver. Going-somewhere.

"General Conway, sir," somebody said.

He turned. The two mps flanked Abraham Broome who was craning forward trying to see the wrecked instrument panel from between them.

"Dismissed," Conway said. "Come in, Broome."

The old man went past him obliviously, stooped over Garden's body, shook his head.

"I was afraid of something like this," he said.

Conway felt a moment of intense envy for the motionless Garden. He said, "Yes. I'm sorry. One casualty. We'll all be casualties if Ego doesn't work. How do we know what the other side's doing now? Maybe they've got an Ego too. I made a mistake, Broome. I should have looked ahead a little further. What do we do now?"

"What happened?" Broome was looking incredulously at the shattered wall where the instrument panels had been. "Where's the robot now? I've got to know the details."

A communicator high on the wall coughed and then called Conway's name. Slowly and heavily Conway's mind tried to accept the new demands. But what the communicator said was a jumble of meaningless sounds until one word sprang out at him. Emergency.

Attack? An alarm rang shrilly deep in his head. "Repeat," he said wearily.

"General Conway? A robot is destroying equipment in Sector Sub-Five. Attempts to immobilize it are failing. General Conway? A robot is destroying--"

"All right," Conway said. At least, this wasn't an attack, then. Or anyway, not an attack from the enemy. "Conway here. Orders. Don't harm the robot. Instructions follow. Stand by."

He looked at Broome inquiringly, realizing that the old man had been buzzing at him anxiously in meaningless words. "General, General, I've got to know exactly what happened--"

"Shut up and I'll tell you," Conway said. "Wait."

He walked over to a hand basin at the wall, drew a glass of chemical-tasting water and found the tube of benzedrine pills in his pocket. It wouldn't help much. He had been living on the stuff too long. But this ought to be the last push--had to be the last--and every extra ounce of stimulus helped. He could let go soon, but not yet.

He gave Broome a concise, thirty-second summary in a falsely brisk voice. The old man stood silent, pinching his lip and gazing at Conway with a blank face, his mind obviously ranging around the abstract regions inside his head.

"Well?" Conway asked. "What do you think? Is it running wild or isn't it?" He wanted to reach out and shake Broome awake, but he pushed the impulse down. Once already he had forced the issue over Broome's protest, and he had been wrong. Perhaps fatally wrong. Now he must let the old man think.

"I believe it's on the job," Broome said with maddening deliberation. "I was afraid of something like this--uncontrolled reaction. But the program's built into it and I think it's operating toward the goal we set

it. One thing's wrong, of course. It ought to communicate better. There shouldn't be that speech block. We'll have to find out what it wants and why it can't tell us." He paused and blinked up at the com-box on the wall. "Sub-Five, didn't they say? What's in Sub-Five?"

"The library," Conway said, and they looked at each other in silence for a second. Then Conway sighed another of his deep, collapsing sighs and said, "Well, we've got to stop it, somehow, and fast. Ego's the most important thing we've got, but if it tears the whole base up--"

"Not quite the most important," Broome said. "Have you thought what it may do next? Since the library was its first goal?"

"What? Don't make me guess."

"It seems to be hunting information. The next stop after the library might be the computers, don't you think?"

Conway said, "Good God," in a flat, exhausted tone. Then he laughed a little without making a sound. He would have to jump into action in the next few moments, and he wasn't sure he could do it. He'd been a fool, of course, pushing action on the robot too soon. Without precautions. He'd gambled, and maybe he had lost. But he knew he'd still do the same if he had it to do over. The gamble wasn't lost yet. And what alternative had he?

"Yes," he said. "The computers. You're right. If it goes after them we'll have to smash it."

"If we can," Broome said soberly. "It thinks fast."

Wearily Conway straightened his shoulders, wondering whether the benzedrine was going to take hold this time. He didn't feel it yet, but he couldn't wait.

"All right," he said. "Let's get going. We know our jobs. Mine's to immobilize Ego, unless he goes for the computers. Yours--find out what he wants. Get it from him before he smashes himself and us. Come on. We've wasted enough time." He gripped Broome's thin arm and hurried him toward the door. On the way he touched his lapel switch and said into the receptive hum at his shoulder, "Conway here. I'm on my way in. Where's the robot?"

The thin little voice of the mike started to say, "Just leaving Sub-Five, sir--through the wall. We--" But then the com-box in the laboratory behind them coughed loudly and shouted out in a metallic bellow, "Robot broke through the wall into Sub-Seventeen!" There was a tinny astonishment in its voice. "Destroying equipment in storage files--" All of this was funneled through the Communications Room, and the echoes of the complaint from Sub-Seventeen could be heard mingling confusedly through the lapel mike. Conway clicked it on and off several times.

"Com Room!" he said into the noisy turmoil. "Find out which way the robot's heading."

There was a brief pause, during which the com box behind them roared out its diminishing report of damage. Then, "It's heading inward, sir," the mike said thinly. "Toward Sub-Thirty."

Conway glanced down at Broome, who nodded and shaped a silent word with his lips. "Computers." Conway set his jaw.

"Start sending up heavy-duty robots to head it off." he told the mike crisply. "Immobilize the robot if you can but don't damage him without my orders." He laid his hand over the lapel mike to deafen it, hearing a small, distant uproar filtering out from under his palm as he urged Broome to a trot down the long corridor where the robot had dwindled to a shining dot such a short time ago. But he was hearing

his own last words repeating over and over in undiminishing echoes inside his head, "My orders--my orders--my orders--"

He thought he could go on giving orders--up to a point. Just long enough to get Ego under control. No longer.

"Broome," he said abruptly, "can the robot take over?" And he held his breath waiting for the answer, wondering what he would do if it was no.

"I never doubted it," Broome said. Conway let his breath out with a feeling of luxury in the sigh. But Broome went on, "If we can find out why he went wrong, of course. I have an idea, but I don't see how I can test it--"

"What?"

"Maybe an iteration loop. A closed series of steps that repeat themselves over and over. But I don't know what's involved. He says 'want' and then blocks completely. I don't know why. Some compulsion is driving him so powerfully he doesn't even bother to open doors to get at what it is he wants. I don't know what. My job's to find out."

Conway thought to himself, "Maybe I know what." But he didn't explore the thought. It was too chilly in the mind, and yet so simple he wondered why Broome hadn't thought of it. Or maybe he had....

Ego's goal was winning the war. But suppose it was not possible to win the war?...

Conway shook his head sharply and put that idea firmly away.

"Okay, you know your job," he said. "Now about mine--how can we stop him without harming him?" With a small fraction of his mind he

noticed that he was personalizing the robot now. Ego had begun to assume an identity.

Broome shook his head unhappily as he trotted beside Conway. "That's one reason I was afraid to activate him." Broome was doing it too. "He's complex, General. I've got him pretty well cushioned against normal jolts, but an artificial brain isn't like a human brain. One little injury means malfunction. And besides, he's so fast I'm not sure what would stop him even if we didn't have to worry about damage."

"There's a limit to what I can bring up in time, anyhow," Conway said. "What about ultrasonics? We could cripple him, maybe--" "Let me think about it. Ultrasonics that close might scramble something." Broome was panting heavily from their rapid pace.

Conway uncovered the mike. "Com Room? Get a supersonic squad in the computer room corridor fast. But wait orders. If the robot shows up don't open fire until--"

He broke off abruptly, having overshot the usefulness of the mike without realizing it. He was at the Com Room door and his own voice was crackling at him out of a box hanging low in the greenish gloom over the communications officer's chair about ten feet away.

He let the door swing shut behind him and was engulfed in noise and darkness. The big glass information panels and the colored circles of the com screens glowed bright and the faces of the men swam dimly in the gloom, high-lights picked out on their cheekbones and foreheads in gold and red, green and faint blue reflected from the instruments they tended. General Conway automatically flashed a tired glance around the boards and screens that told him what was happening on the entire Pacific Front. He saw the radar shadows of the fleet, checked the code board for wind and weather, the status

panel for plane assignments. But the information meant nothing. His brain refused to accept the burden. He had only one problem now.

"Where's the robot?" he asked. He had to shout to make himself heard, because to the normal noise of the room with its complex of relayed voices was now added a crashing uproar Conway failed to identify for a moment.

The communications officer nodded toward a bluish television screen at his left, part of a long row. Small and bright upon it a doll-sized robot could be seen, raging through a doll-sized storeroom. But the noise it made was life-size. It seemed to be hunting for something, and its method was frantic. It didn't open drawers--it ripped the whole side off cabinets and swept the contents out with great, rhythmic, scything motions, sending them spinning through the air. Now and then the bright cone of its glance would swerve to follow the fall of some object briefly, and twice the robot paused to snatch up items and turn them tentatively over. But clearly, whatever it wanted was not here. And as clearly, it operated on true egoism--whatever it found useless it destroyed furiously. It had no referent but its own immediate need.

"And maybe he's right," Conway thought. "Maybe if we can't get him whatever he needs nothing down here is worth keeping."

Behind him he heard Broome and the communications officer conferring in strained voices above the tumult.

"I don't know," the officer was shouting. "It tore up the library so fast we couldn't tell what it had read and what it hadn't. You see how it's going now. It moves so fast--"

Broome leaned over the communications officer's shoulder and punched the two-way button on the intercom for Sub-Seventeen

where the robot was raging.

"Ego," he said into the mike. "Do you hear me?"

The robot ripped down the side of the last cabinet, swept its contents out in a rhythmic shower. Amplified over the screen they heard Broome's voice echo back to them from the tiny greenish storeroom on the wall. The robot paused very briefly. Then it stood up straight, turned around once in a very rapid circuit that swept its cone of light across the walls.

"Want--" its hollow voice howled, and instantly shut itself off into silence again. It crashed its hands together like something in the last extremity of desperation, and then walked straight for the wall at the corner of the room.

The wall bent, cracked and opened. The robot stalked through and out of sight.

It seemed to Conway that every face in the room swung around toward his, pale ovals glistening with drops of gold and red and greenish sweat in the darkness. It was up to him now. They waited for instructions.

He wanted to lash out as the robot had lashed, tear these floating luminous screens down and smash the glowing panels with them, silence the yammering voices from the walls. Responsibilities he could not handle buzzed like hot bees around his head. It was too much, too much. A deep wave of exhaustion washed over him, followed by a wave of hysteric exhilaration, both so ghostly and so far away they hardly seemed to touch Conway at all. He was somebody else entirely, infinite distances off, with ghostly problems that had no relation to the vacuum of the here and now....

"General?" Broome's voice said. "General?"

Conway coughed. "The robot," he said briskly. "We've got to stop him. You plotting his course so far, Sergeant?"

"Yes, sir. Screen Twelve."

Twelve was one of the hanging panels, transparent in the dark, a net of luminous gold lines on it marking the corridors, with the sectors showing in dim blue numerals. "The red dots are the robot, sir," the sergeant told him.

They watched a disembodied hand float forward from behind the screen and add fluorescent grease-dots to the lengthening red line which had started in Broome's lab, crossed the library and storeroom and gone out by the solid wall. They stalked now across the next three sectors, wading through the walls, as they went in an elongating luminous chain of red.

Their goal was obvious to everyone. About seven inches ahead in the heart of the map lay a round room with bright green squares glowing around its walls. They all knew what the green squares were. They all knew how intimately their own survival hinged upon the blizzard of electronic impulses storming through those incredibly complex calculations in the computers. Every mind in the room clicked over like the computers themselves, considering what would happen when the robot reached that room.

"The supersonic team," Conway said crisply. "The heavy-duty robots. Where are they?"

"The supersonics are coming up from level six, sir. About five minutes for them. The hd robots should intersect in about three minutes. You can see them in--what is it? purple?--on the plot panel."

A slow line of purple dots was moving inward down a gold-lined corridor from the periphery of the chart.

"Too slow," Conway said, watching the red dots which marked the footsteps of the thinking robot. Or was it thinking, now? "Anybody know if those walls between are plaster or stone?" There was a silence. Nobody did. But as they watched, the red dots paused at a gold line, rebounded twice, reversed themselves and made for a break in the line that indicated a door.

"Stone," Conway said. "That one, anyhow. I hope he didn't jar anything loose trying."

"Maybe we'd better hope he did," Broome said.

Conway looked at the old man. "I'm going to stop him," he said. "Understand? We're not going to junk Ego. We need him too badly. I'm sorry we weren't better prepared to handle him, but I'd do it again if I had to. We can't wait."

"He's moving fast, sir," the communications officer said.

Conway looked at the screen. He bit his lip painfully and then said, "Volunteers. I want somebody to jump in there and delay him. I don't care how. Trip him. Wave a red rag in his face. Anything to gain time. Every second counts. All right, Corporal. Lieutenant, that's two."

"We can't spare any more from here," the communications officer said.

"All right, on your way," Conway snapped. "Get him on the screens, sergeant."

Three round television screens clicked into bluish life, showing a trail of wrecked desks and smashed equipment. In the third screen Ego,

looking very small and remote and innocent, was smashing himself head-on against a too-narrow door. On the last smash the door-frame gave way and Ego surged through and stalked off down the tiny, diminishing corridor beyond. On the plot board the red dots showed him only about five inches away from the calculator room.

"But what do you want with the calculators?" Broome was murmuring as he stared after the vanishing figure on the screen. He tapped irritatingly with his nails on the metal table. "Maybe," he said, and paused. He looked up at Conway. "I'm no good here, General. I'm going to the calculator room. I have some ideas, but the analogue computer thinks a lot faster than I do. Ego moves too fast. It may take machines to figure out machines. Anyhow, I'll try."

"Go on, go on then," Conway said. "You've got between five and ten minutes. After that--" He didn't finish, but in his mind he said, "--I can rest. One way or the other, I can rest."

The communications officer had been clicking television screens on and off, hunting. Now he said, "Look, sir! The volunteer team--God, he's tall!" The observation was spontaneous; until now the communications room hadn't seen Ego alongside human figures.

Ego was a stalking giant in a dimly lit corridor on the screen. The volunteers had just burst out of a corridor door ten paces ahead of him, and he towered mightily over them. You could see their tiny, scared faces no bigger than peas turned up toward the oblivious, striding giant as he followed the searchlight splash of his single eye down the hall.

The two men must have moved at a dead run from here to there. They hadn't had time to pick and choose, and their instructions had been ambiguous, but somewhere on the way they had snatched up a stout steel beam which now showed like a bright thread across the

corridor. One man darted across the hall just ahead of the robot, and the two of them braced the beam shoulder high from opposite doorways, making a barrier across the path.

The robot didn't even glance at the obstacle. He struck the beam squarely, the clang echoing through the corridor and reverberating from the screen into the communications room. Ego bounced a little, recovered his balance, measured the situation and then stooped to pass under the bar. Hastily the two men lowered their burden. Again a clang and a recoil, and this time the bar bent into a deep v at the point of impact. Over the screen they heard one of the men yell as the end of the bar caught him. Ego heaved upward with both hands, stepped under the bar and stalked off down the hall.

"Thirty seconds saved," Conway said bitterly. "And one man down. Where are the hds now?"

"About a minute and a half away, sir. Coming along corridor eight. They ought to intersect just outside the calculator room door. See, on the board?"

Slowly and heavily, it seemed to Conway, the purple dots moved against the darkness, ploddingly. A floating hand materialized and added two more red dots to the chain of Ego's footsteps moving toward the heart of the citadel. The red dots were ahead. They were going to outstrip the purple.

"I'm going to fail," Conway said to himself. He thought of all the human lives here underground, wholly dependent upon him, and all the lives outside, confident that the Pacific Front was in good hands. He wondered what the commanding general on the other side was doing now, and what he would do if he knew....

"Look, sir," the communications officer said.

There was still one man of the volunteer team left on his feet. He hadn't given up yet. Ego's last heave had apparently snapped the steel bar off short at the v, leaving one end like a bent club. It must have been very heavy, but the man in the corridor was operating on a drive too intense to notice the weight. Club on shoulder, he was sprinting after Ego down the hall.

They saw him lessen the distance between them. They saw him at the robot's heels. Distantly they heard him shout.

"Ego!" he called, as he had heard Broome call the name. And in answer, as the robot had answered before, Ego paused, turned, bathed the man in the cold one-eyed beam of its searchlight.

"Want--" the strangled; metallic voice said hollowly, and stopped.

The man with the club jumped high and smashed for the single bright eye in the robot's forehead.

"Is it safe?" Conway asked. "Will he hurt him, Broome?" But he got no answer. Broome had disappeared.

On the screen the robot struck upward furiously with both hands, parrying the club just in time. The crash of impact made the screen shiver. The man had time and strength for one more swing, and this time at the height of its arc Ego seized the club and plucked it almost casually out of the man's hands. Over his enormous steel shoulder he sent it clanging down the corridor behind him.

Conway glanced quickly at the chart. The purple dots were gaining. The red dot at the end of Ego's chain wavered left and right as Ego dodged the two blows of the club. Conway looked back at the screen.

The disarmed man hesitated only briefly. Then he gathered himself and sprang straight up toward the blank steel face with its single eye. By some miracle he passed between the closing arms and locked his own arms around the steel neck. His body blinded the torch-lens of the robot's eye, and he clung desperately, legs and arms clenched around the lurching steel tower of Ego's body.

From the darkness beyond their struggling figures a heavy, rhythmic thudding began to be heard, making the television screen vibrate a little.

"The heavy-duties," Conway breathed. He glanced again at the chart, not needing it to see the line of purple dots almost at the corridor intersection now, and the red dot of Ego wavering erratically.

The robot didn't depend on vision alone. You could tell that by his motion. But the clinging man disturbed him. The heaving weight pulled him off balance. Ego plucked futilely at the man for an instant, staggering thirty degrees off course toward the left-hand wall. Then the steel hands got a grip on the clinging man, and the robot ripped him away easily and smoothly, with a gesture like tearing a shirt off his chest, and flung him with casual force against the wall.

Beyond Ego, at the far end of the corridor, you could see the tall double doors of the calculator room. Ego stood for a moment as if he were collecting himself. The screen seemed to be wavering, and Conway made a futile, steady motion toward it. The vibration was so strong now that vision blurred upon it.

"What's the matter?" Conway asked irritably. "Is it out of focus, or--"

"Look, sir," the communications officer said. "Here they come."

Like a walking wall the heavy robots wheeled out of the darkness at

the edge of the screen, their ponderous tread making the whole scene shudder. Heavily they ground to a halt facing Ego, and stood there shoulder to shoulder across the corridor, their backs to the calculator doors.

Ego stood for a moment quite still, but shivering all over, his single eye sweeping from left to right and back again over them, infinitely fast. Something about these units of his own kind seemed to kindle a new and compelling drive, and Ego gathered himself together and lowered his shoulders and head a little, and surged forward as if eager for battle. The hds, locked together in an unswerving row, braced themselves and stood firm.

The crash made every screen in the communications room flicker in distant sympathy. Sparks sprang out and steel plates groaned. Ego hung for an instant motionless upon the steel wall that opposed him, then fell back, staggered, braced himself to crash again.

But he did not charge. He stood there sweeping his bright scanner over the line, and the clicking in his chest rose and fell so loudly the listeners in the communications room could hear it plainly. A storm of alternate choices seemed to be pouring through the electronic mind of the thinker.

While Ego hesitated, the steel wall he confronted moved, curving outward at both ends toward the solitary figure. It was clear what the intention of the operators was. If these ponderous shapes could be made to close Ego in they could immobilize him by sheer massiveness, like tame elephants immobilizing a wild one.

But Ego saw the trap in the instant before the line began to move. His backward step and quick spin showed it. Conway thought his eye flashed brighter, and his whirl was incongruously light-footed. In contrast to the heavy-duty machines he looked like a steel dancer in

his light, keen balance. He made a quick feint toward one end of the line, and the robots massed sluggishly together to receive him. They opened a gap in their line when they moved, and Ego darted for the gap. But instead of passing through it he put out both arms and pushed delicately and fiercely at the two sides of the opening, in exactly the right spots. The two robots leaned ponderously outward, tipped just barely off their balance. They leaned, leaned, inexorably leaned and fell. Each carried its next companion down with it. The corridor thundered with the crash.

Trampling on the fallen machines, the line closed up and moved ponderously forward. Ego ran at it with a clear illusion of joyous motion, stooped, struck two robots at once with the same delicate, exact precision, knowing before he struck at just what hidden fulcrum point their balance rested. The corridor thundered again with the tumult of their collapse. As the line tried to close once more over the fallen warriors Ego's hands shot out and helped them heavily together, smashing two more into one another with unexpected momentum. This time as he touched them his touches were sharp blows, and the steel plating buckled in like tin.

In less than two minutes the walking wall was a mass of staggering leviathans, half of them out of commission, the rest stumbling ponderously over their fallen comrades trying to reform a line already too short to work.

So much for that try, Conway thought. Then the super-sonics were their last hope. There wouldn't be time for more. Maybe there wasn't even time for that.

"Where's the supersonic squad?" he asked, impressed at the false briskness of his own voice. The communications officer looked up at the luminous chart.

"Almost there, General. Half a minute away."

Conway glanced once at the television screen, which now showed Ego standing over the prostrate metal giants and swaying rather oddly as he looked down. It wasn't like his behavior pattern to hesitate like this. There seemed to be something on his mind. Whatever it was, it might mean a few moments'leeway.

"I'm going out there myself, sergeant," Conway said. "I—I want to be on the spot when—" He paused, realizing that he was saying aloud what was really a private soliloquy, Conway to Conway, with no eavesdroppers. What he meant was that he wanted to be there when the end came—one way or the other. He had envied the robot, he had hoped infinite things for it. He had begun to identify with the powerful and tireless steel. Win or lose, he wanted to be on the spot at the payoff.

Running down the corridor was like running in a dream, floating, almost, his legs numb and the sound of his footfalls echoing from feathery distances. Each time his weight jolted down he wondered if that knee could take it, whether it wouldn't fold and let him fall, let him lie there and rest... But no, he wanted to stand beside Ego and see the steel face and hear the mindless voice when they destroyed the robot, or the robot destroyed them all. The third chance--success--seemed too remote to consider.

When he got there he hardly knew it. He was dimly aware that he had stopped running, so there must be a reason. He was standing with his hand on a doorknob, his back leaning against the panels, gasping for breath. To the left stretched the narrow corridor down which he had run. Before him the broad hall loomed where men had fought Ego and failed, and machines had fought him and now lay almost still, or staggered futilely, out of control.

No matter how clearly you see a scene on television screens, you never really experience it until you get there. Conway had forgotten, in this brief while, how tall Ego really was. There was a smell of machine oil and hot metal in the air, and dust motes danced in the cone of Ego's searchlight as he stooped over the fallen robots. He was about to do something. Conway couldn't guess what.

Running footsteps and the clank of equipment sounded down the corridor to the left. Conway turned his head a little and saw the supersonic squad pounding toward him. He thought, maybe there's still a chance. If Ego delays another two minutes....

On the floor the fallen robots still twitched and stirred in response to the distant commands of their operators. But a heavy-duty robot, fallen, isn't easy to set upright again. Ego stooped over the nearest, seeming almost puzzled.

Then with sudden, rather horrifying violence, he reached out and ripped the front plate off his victim with one rending motion. His gaze plunged shining into the entrails of the thing, glancing in bright reflections off the tubes and the wiring so coarse in comparison with his own transistors and printed circuits. He put out one steel hand, sank his fingers deep and ripped again, gazing, engrossed, at the havoc he made. There was something frightful about this act of murder, one robot deliberately disemboweling another on his own initiative, with what seemed the coolest scientific interest.

But whatever Ego sought wasn't there. He straightened and went on to the next, ripped, stooped, studied the ticking and flashing entrails intently, his own inward ticking quite loud as if he were muttering to himself.

Conway, beckoning the supersonic squad on, thought to himself, "In the old days they used to tell fortunes that way. Maybe he's doing it

now...." And once more the chilly thought swam up to the surface of his consciousness that perhaps he knew what drove the robot to desperation. Perhaps he too knew the future, and the knowledge and the pressure made the two of them kin. Win the war was what Ego's ticking entrails commanded, just as the more complex neurons of Conway's brain commanded him. But what if winning was impossible, and Ego knew....

The supersonic squad, running hard, burst out of the side corridor and pulled up short at their first sight of Ego in the--no, not flesh. In the shining steel, giant-tall, with the cyclops eye glaring. The sergeant panted something at Conway, trying to salute, forgetting that both his hands were full of equipment.

Conway with his pointing finger drew a semicircle in front of him before the calculator room door.

"Set the guns up, quick--along here. We've got to stop him if he tries to get in."

Ego straightened from his second victim and moved on to a third, hesitating over it, looking down.

The squad had, after all, only about thirty seconds to spare. They had been assembling their equipment as they ran, and now with speed as precise as machinery they took up positions along the line Conway had assigned them. He stood against the door, looking down at their stooping backs as they drew up the last line of defense with their own bodies and their guns between Ego and the calculators. Or no, Conway thought, maybe I'm the last line. For some remote and despairing thought was shaping itself in his mind as he looked at Ego....

In exactly the same second that the first ultrasonic gun swung its

snout toward the corridor, Ego straightened and faced the double doors and the circle of men kneeling behind their guns. It seemed to Conway that over their heads he and Ego looked at each other challengingly for a moment.

"Sergeant," Conway said in a tense voice. "Cut him off at the leg, halfway to the knee. And pinpoint it fine. He's full of precision stuff and he's worth a lot more than you or me."

Ego bathed them in his cold headlight beam. Conway, wondering if the robot had understood, said quickly, "Fire."

You could hear the faintest possible hissing, nothing more. But a spot of heat glowed cherry-red and then blinding white upon Ego's left leg just below the knee.

Conway thought, "It's hopeless. If he charges us now he'll break through before we can--"

But Ego had another defense. The searchlight glance blinked once, and then Conway felt a sudden, violent discomfort he couldn't place, and the heat-spot went red again and faded. The sergeant dropped the gun nozzle and swore, shaking his hand.

"Fire on six," he said. "Eight, stand by."

Ego stood motionless, and the discomfort Conway felt deepened in rhythm with a subtle, visible vibration that pulsed through the steel tower before him.

A second sonic gun hissed faintly. A spot of red sprang out on the robot's leg. The vibration deepened, the discomfort grew worse. The heat-spot faded to nothing.

"Interference, sir," the sergeant said. "He's blanketing the sound-

wave with a frequency of his own--something he's giving out himself. Feel it?"

"But why doesn't he charge?" Conway asked himself, not aloud, for fear the robot could really understand. And he thought, maybe he can't charge and broadcast the protecting frequency at the same time. Or maybe he hasn't thought yet that he could wade right through before we could hurt him much. And Conway tried to picture to himself the world as it must look to Ego, less than an hour old, with impossible conflicts raging in the electronic complexities of his chest.

Conway said, "The eight-gun's on another frequency? Keep trying, sergeant. Maybe he can't blanket them all at once. Hold out as long as you can."

He opened the door behind him quickly and softly and went into the computer room.

This was another world. For a moment he forgot everything that lay outside the double doors and stood there taking in the feel and smell and sight of the room. It was a good place. He had always liked to be here. He could forget what stood eight feet tall and poised for destruction outside the door, and what lay waiting in the future, no farther away than day after tomorrow. He looked up at the high, flat faces of the computers, liking the way the lights winked, the sound of tape feeding through drums, the steady, pouring sound of typewriter keys, the orderly, dedicated feel of the place.

Broome looked up from the group around the typewriter of the analogue computer. All the men in the room had left their jobs and were clustering here, where the broad tape flowed out from under the keys and the columns of print poured smoothly, like water, onto the paper.

"Anything?" Conway asked.

Broome straightened painfully, easing his back.

"I'm not sure."

"Tell me," Conway said. "Quick. He'll be here in seconds."

"He's set up a block, accidentally. That's pretty sure. But how and why we still don't--"

"Then you don't know anything," Conway said flatly. "Well, I think I may have a--"

On the other side of the door sudden tumult broke out. Steel feet thudded, men shouted, equipment crackled and spat. The shouting rose to a crescendo and fell silent. The double doors crashed open and Ego stood on the threshold, facing the calculators. Here and there on his steel body spots of dull heat were fading. He was smeared with stains of oil and blood, and his searchlight eye swept around the room with a controlled speed that yet had something frantic in it. Ego looked at the calculators and the calculators placidly ticked on, rolling out unheeded data under the jaws of their typewriters as every man in the room faced the robot.

In the open doorway behind Ego the squad sergeant stumbled into sight, blood across his face, the nozzle of a sonic-gun in his hand.

"No," Conway said. "Wait. Stand aside, Broome. Let Ego get to the calculators."

He paid no attention to the buzz of shocked response. He was looking at Ego with almost hypnotized attention, trying to force the cogs of his own thinking to mesh faster. There was still a chance.

Just a shadow of a chance, he knew that. And if he let Ego at the calculators and Ego failed, he wasn't sure he could interfere in time to save anything. But he had to try. A line of dialogue out of something he couldn't identify floated through his mind. Yet I will try the last. Some other desperate commander in his last battle, indomitable in the face of defeat. Conway grinned a little, knowing himself anything but indomitable. And yet--I will try the last.

Ego still stood motionless in the doorway. Time moves so much slower than thought. The robot still scanned the computers and thought with complex tickings to himself. Conway stepped aside, leaving the way clear. As he moved he saw his own image swim up at him from the stained surfaces of the robot body, his own gaunt face and hollow eyes reflected as if from a moving mirror smeared with oil and blood, as if it were he himself who lived inside the robot's body, activating it with his own drives.

Ego's pause on the threshold lasted only a fraction of a second. His glance flicked the calculators and dismissed them one by one, infinitely fast. Then, as Broome had done, Ego wheeled to the analogue computer and crossed the floor in three enormous strides. Almost contemptuously, without even scanning it, he ripped out the programming tape. He slapped a blank tape into the punching device and his fingers flickered too fast to watch as he stamped his own questions into the wire. In seconds he was back at the computer.

Nobody moved. The mind was dazzled, trying to follow his speed. Only the computer seemed fast enough to keep pace with him, and he bent over the typewriter of the machine tautly, one machine communing with its kinsman, and the two of them so infinitely faster than flesh and blood that the men could only stand staring.

Nobody breathed. Conway--because thought is so fast--had time to say to himself with enormous hopefulness, "He'll find out the answer.

He'll take over now. When the new assault starts he'll handle it and win, and I can stop trying any more...."

The stream of printed answers began to pour out under the typewriter bar, and Ego bent to read. The bright cone of his sight bathed the paper. Then with a gesture that was savage as a man's, he ripped off the tape as if he were tearing out a tongue that had spoken intolerable words. And Conway knew the computer had failed them, Ego had failed, Conway had gambled and lost.

The robot straightened up and faced the machines. His steel hands shot out in a furious, punishing motion, ready to rip the computers apart as he had already ripped the other machines which had failed him.

Conway in a voice of infinite disillusion said, "Ego, wait. It's all right."

As always when you spoke its name, the robot paused and turned. And faster than data through the computers there poured through Conway's mind a torrent of linking thoughts. He saw his own image reflected upon the robot's body, himself imprisoned in the reflection as Ego was jailed in a task impossible to achieve.

He realized that he understood the robot as no one else alive could do, because only he knew the same tensions. It was something the computers couldn't deduce. But it was something Conway had partly guessed all along, and forbidden himself to recognize until the last alternative failed and he had to think for himself.

Win the war was the robot's basic drive. But he had to act on incomplete information, like Conway himself, and that meant that Ego had to assume responsibility for making wrong decisions that might lose the war, which he was not allowed to do. Neither could he shift responsibility as the computers could, saying, "No answer--

insufficient data." Nor could he take refuge in neurosis or madness or surrender. Nor in passing the duty on to someone else, as Conway had tried to do. So all he could do was seek more knowledge furiously, almost at random, and all he could want was--

"I know what you want," Conway said. "You can have it. I'll take over, Ego. You can stop wanting, now."

"Want--" the robot howled inhumanly, and paused as usual, and then rushed on for the first time to finish his statement, "--to stop wanting!"

"Yes," Conway said. "I know. So do I. But now you can stop, Ego. Turn yourself off. You did your best."

The hollow voice said much more softly, "Want to stop...." And then hovering on the brink of silence, "... stop want..." It ceased. The shivering stopped. A feel of violence seemed to die upon the air around the robot, as if intolerable tensions had relaxed at last inside it. There was a series of clear, deliberate clickings from the steel chest, as of metallic decisions irrevocably reached, one after another. And then something seemed to go out of the thing. It stood differently. It was a machine again. Nothing more than a machine.

Conway looked at his own face in the motionless reflection. The robot couldn't take it, he thought. No wonder. He couldn't even speak to ask for relief, because the opposite of want is not want, and when he said the first word, its negative forced him to want nothing, and so to be silent. No, we asked too much. He couldn't take it. Meeting his own eyes in the reflection, he wondered if he was speaking to the Conway of a long minute ago. Perhaps he was. That Conway couldn't take it either. But this one had to, and could.

Ego couldn't act on partial knowledge. No machine could. You can't expect machines to face the unknown. Only human beings can do

that. Steel isn't strong enough. Only flesh and blood can do it, and go on.

"Well, now I know," he thought. And it seemed strange, but he wasn't as tired as he had been before. Always until now there had been Ego to fall back on if he had to, but something he must not try until he reached the last gasp. Well, now he had reached it. And Ego couldn't carry the load.

He laughed gently to himself. The thought that had chilled him came back and he looked at it calmly. Maybe win the war was impossible. Maybe that paradox was what had stopped Ego. But Conway was human. It didn't stop him. He could accept the thought and push it aside, knowing that sometimes humans really do achieve the impossible. Maybe that was all that had kept them going this long.

Conway turned his head slowly and looked at Broome.

"Know what I'm going to do?" he asked.

Broome shook his head, the bright eyes watchful.

"I'm going to bed," Conway said. "I'm going to sleep. I know my limitations now. The other side's only flesh and blood too. They have the same problems we have. They have to sleep too. You can wake me up when the next attack starts. Then I'll handle it--or I won't. But I'll do my best and that's all anybody can do."

He moved stiffly past Ego toward the door, pausing for a moment to touch his palm against the motionless steel chest. It felt cold and not very steady against his hand.

"What do I mean, only flesh and blood?" he asked.

The Hothouse Planet

by Arthur K. Barnes

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Chapter I.

The Ark

Day again—one hundred and seventy dragging hours of throttling, humid heat. An interminable period of monotony lived in the eternal mists, swirling with sluggish dankness, enervating, miasmatic, pulsant with the secret whisperings of mephitic lifeforms. That accounted for the dull existence of the Venusian trader, safe in the protection of his stilt-legged trading post twenty feet above the spongy earth—but bored to the point of madness.

Tommy Strike stepped out from under the needle-spray antiseptic shower that was the Earthman's chief defense against the myriad

malignant bacterial infections swarming the hothouse that is Venus. He grabbed a towel, made a pass at the lever to turn on the refrigeration unit that preserved them during the hot days, shut off the night heating system and yelled:

"Roy! Awake! Arise! Today's the great day! The British are coming! Wake up for the event!"

Roy Ransom, Strike's assistant staggered into view, rubbing the sleep from his eyes.

"British?" he mumbled. "What British?"

"Why, Gerry Carlyle! The great Carlyle is coming today. In his special ship, with his trained crew, straight from the Interplanetary Zoo in London. The famous 'Catch-'em-alive Carlyle' is on his way and we're the lucky guys chosen to guide him on his expedition on Venus!"

Ransom scratched one thick hairy leg and stepped under the shower with a sour expression. "Ain't that somethin'?" he inquired.

"You don't look with favor on Mister Carlyle?" Strike chuckled.

"No, I don't. I've heard all I want to hear about him. Capturing animals from different planets and bringing them back alive to the Zoo in London is all right. I'd like the job myself. But any guy that rates the sickening amount of publicity he does must have something phony about 'im." He kicked toward the short-wave radio in one corner of the living room.

"Bein'so close to the sun, we're lucky if we bring in a couple of Earth programs a day through the interference. An'it seems to me every damn'one of 'em has somethin'about the famous Carlyle. Gerry Carlyle eats Lowden's Vita-cubes on expedition. Gerry Carlyle

smokes germ-free Suaves. Gerry Carlyle drinks refreshen'Alkalager. Pfui!

"An'now we're ordered to slog around this drippin'planet for 'im, doin'all the work of baggin'a bunch of weird specimens for the yokels t'gape at, while he gets all the glory back home!"

Tommy Strike laughed good naturedly.

"You're all bark and not much bite, Roy. You're just as glad as I am something's turned up to relieve the monotony." He brought out his daytime clothes, singlet and trousers of thin rubberized material and the inevitable broad-soled boots for traversing the treacherous soft spots on Venus'surface.

"Yeah?" retorted Ransom. "I can tell you one thing this visit'll turn up, an'that's trouble. Sure as you're born, Tommy, that guy's comin'here to get two or three Murris--he hopes! An'you know what that'll mean!"

Strike's eyes clouded. There was truth in Ransom's remarks. Hunting for the strange little creatures called Murris never had resulted in anything but trouble since the day Sidney Murray, co-leader of the first great Venusian exploration party, the Cecil Stanhope-Sidney Murray Expedition, first set eyes upon them.

"Well," he shrugged, "we can stall until just before he's ready to leave and have some fun at least. Maybe he'll listen to reason."

Ransom snorted in wordless disgust at this fantastic hope.

"Anyhow," insisted Strike, determined to see the cheerful side, "even if there is any disturbance, it always blows over in a few days. I'm heading for the landing field. They're just about due."

Tommy stepped outside into the breathlessly hot blinding mist, thick

with the stench of rot and decay. Earthly eyes could not penetrate this eternal shroud for more than a hundred feet at a time, even when a wind stirred the stuff up to resemble the churning of a weak solution of dirty milk. Strike grimaced and thoughtlessly filled and lit his pipe.

Thirty seconds later the air was filled with the thin screams and bangings of dozens of the fabulous whiz-bang beetles as they hurtled their armored bodies blindly against the metal walls of the station, attracted by the odor of tobacco. Strike flinched and hurriedly doused the pipe. A man couldn't even have the solace of a smoke on this damned planet. His life would be endangered by the terrific speed of those whiz-bangs.

A few steps took him to the safety of the rear of the station, where abandoned calcium carbonate tanks loomed like metal giants in the fog. There was a time when it had been necessary to pump the stuff to the miniature space-port a safe distance away whenever a ship was about to land.

There, sprayed forth from thousands of tiny nozzles high into the air, its tremendous affinity for water carved a clear vertical tunnel in the fog for the approaching spaceship pilot. New telescopic developments, however, rendered the device obsolete.

Strike paced deliberately along the trail that paralleled the ancient pipeline--Earthlings soon learn not to overexert in that atmosphere--and before he had covered half of it his quick ears caught the shrill whine of a spacecraft plunging recklessly into the Venusian air-envelope.

It rose to a nerve-rasping pitch, then dropped sharply away to silence. Presently, sounding curiously muffled and distorted through the clouds, came the noise of opening ports, the clang of metal upon metal, voices. Gerry Carlyle and company had arrived.

He increased his pace somewhat and shortly entered the clearing that served as space-port. He paused to let amazed eyes roam over the unaccustomed sight. Gerry Carlyle's famous expeditionary ship was an incredible monster of gleaming metal, occupying almost the entire field, towering into the air further than the eye could reach in that atmosphere. Its green glass portholes were glowing weirdly from the ship's lights as they looked down upon the stranger.

The craft was immense, approaching in size the giant clipper ships that traveled to the furthest reaches of the System. Strike had never before been so close to a ship of such proportions. He smiled at the sight of the name on her bow--The Ark.

The Ark, of course, was one of the new centrifugal flyers, containing in her stem a centrifuge of unbelievable power with millions of tiny rotors running in blasts of compressed air, generating sufficient energy to hurl the ship through space at tremendous speeds. The equipment of The Ark, too, was the talk of the System.

Carlyle, backed by the resources of the Interplanetary Zoo, had turned the ship into a floating laboratory, with a compartment for the captured specimens arranged to duplicate exactly the life conditions of their native planets. All the newer scientific inventions were included in her operating apparatus--the paralysis ray, antigravity, electronic telescope, a dozen other things the trader knew by name only.

His musings were interrupted by the approach of a snappily uniformed man who saluted, smiling.

"Are you Mr. Strike?" he asked. "I'm sub-pilot Barrows of The Ark and very glad to meet you. Gerry Carlyle will see you at once. We're anxious to get to work immediately."

This day was to be one of many surprises for Tommy Strike and perhaps the greatest shock of all came when he stood beside the sloping runway leading into the brightly lighted bow of the ship. For, awaiting him there, one hand outstretched and a cool little smile on her lips, stood the most beautiful woman he had ever seen.

"Mr. Strike," said Barrows, "this is Miss Gerry Carlyle."

The trader stared, thunderstruck. In those days of advanced plastic surgery, feminine beauty wasn't rare but even Strike's unpracticed eye knew that here was the real thing. No synthetic blonde baby-doll here but a natural beauty untouched by the surgeon's knife--spun-gold hair, intelligence lighting dark eyes, a hint of passion and temper in the curve of mouth and arch of nostrils. In short, a woman.

But Miss Carlyle's voice was an ice-water jet to remind the trader of earthside manners.

"You don't seem enthusiastic over meeting your temporary employer, Mr. Strike. Something wrong about me?"

Strike flushed, angry at himself and his own embarrassment. "Oh... oh, no." He fumbled for words. "That is, I'm surprised that you're a woman. I--we expected to find a man in--well, in your position. It's more like a man's job."

Sub-pilot Barrows could have warned the trader that this was a touchy point with Gerry Carlyle but he had no chance. The young woman drew herself up and spoke coldly.

"There isn't a man in the business who has done nearly as well as I. Name a half-dozen hunters. Rogers, Camden, Potter--they aren't in the same class with me. Man's job? I think you needn't worry about me, Mr. Strike. You'll find I'm man enough to face anything this planet

has to offer."

Strike's eyebrow twitched. An arrogant female, withal. Terrific sense of her own importance, willful, selfish. He decided he didn't like her and rather hoped she had come looking for Murriss. If so, she would learn one or two bitter lessons.

There followed a five-minute interlude of scurrying about and shouting and unloading, all done to the tune of Gerry Carlyle's voice, which could crack like a whiplash when issuing commands.

Then Strike found himself leading a small party back to the trading post. Now surprisingly Miss Carlyle showed a flattering attention to him.

First she wished to know about the business of the trading post.

"It isn't very exciting," its proprietor told her. "Mostly we sit around being bored stiff, playing cards or fiddling with the bum radio. Several times during a Venusian day our natives bring in a load of some of the medicinal plants we want. Occasion a rough gem of one kind or another, though Venus is very poor in minerals. The only stone really worth much to be found here is the emerald."

"Surely there isn't enough profit in medicinal plants, considering transportation costs, to persuade a young man like you to bury himself here." She waved her hand around disparagingly.

"There's profit all right." Strike shrugged. "The drugs distilled from some of the Venusian growths are plenty valuable. And then there's the adventure angle." He smiled wryly.

"Plenty of young bucks are willing to sign a three-year contract for the thrills of living on Venus--if they don't know a thing about it beforehand. But it does take an awful lot of stuff to bring a freighter our

way. We seldom see a ship more often than three or four Earth-months apart!"

"What in the world—or in Venus are those?" She directed his attention to the thousands of fungi now springing up through moist soil with almost visible movement. They were shaped somewhat like the human body and so pale that they might be a host of tiny corpses rising from their graves.

The trader grimaced. He had never liked those things. Reminded him constantly that battle and destruction were watchwords in this hellhole, where the fang of every creature was turned upon its neighbor and even the plants had poison thorns while the flowers gave off noxious gases to snare the unwary.

"Fungi mostly," he answered. "They grow and propagate amazingly fast. Many of the smaller life-forms here exist on a single day—they are born, live and die in one hundred seventy hours. Naturally their life cycle is speeded up. In hours all these puffballs will begin popping at once to spread their spores around. It's a funny sight. During the long night, of course, the spores lie dormant. And most of the larger creatures hibernate from the intense cold. Our night life up here is nil. This is strictly a nine-o'clock planet."

She sniffed, noting what all newcomers to Venus learn. Although the view is a drab almost colorless one, an incredible multiplicity of odors assails the nostrils—sweet, sharp, musklike, pungent, spicy, with many unfamiliar olfactory sensations to boot.

Strike explained. On Earth flowering plants are fertilized by the passage of insects from one bloom to another, they develop petals of vivid colors to attract bees and butterflies and other insects. But on Venus, where perpetual mist renders impotent any appeal to sight, plants have adapted themselves to appeal to the sense of smell,

therefore give off all sorts of enticing odors.

So it went, question and answer, the pleasant business of getting acquainted, until the all-too-short walk to the station was over. But Strike was not deceived by the woman's sudden change of attitude.

He knew that an interplanetary hunter of Gerry Carlyle's experience would certainly have read up on Venus before ever coming there. And he suspected she knew the answers already to every question she asked.

She must have noticed Strike's disapproving eyebrow during the first moments of their meeting and had deliberately set out to ingratiate herself to promote harmony during her brief stay on the cloudy planet. The trader was willing to be friendly but he looked upon the woman with caution and distaste. Her aggressiveness was not to his taste.

Chapter II.

The Huntress

Gerry Carlyle was decidedly a woman of action.

"No time to waste," she declared incisively as they reached the post. "Earth and Venus are nearing conjunction and I want to be ready to take off as soon after that date as possible. I've no wish to bang around in space waiting for Earth to catch up to us with a cargo of weird specimens raising Hades in the hold. If you've no objections, Mr. Strike, we'll make our first foray at once."

Strike nodded, staring at this disturbing young woman, who could be one instant so warm and friendly, the next imperious and dominating.

"Sure," he agreed. "Be with you in a moment."

He ran up the metal stairway to where Roy Ransom's face hung over the porch rail like an amazed bearded balloon and the two vanished into the house. Strike returned shortly with a tiny two-way radio.

"Ransom sends out a radio beam for us to travel on. I tell him which way to turn it in case we deviate from a straight line. It's the only possible way to cover any distance in this murk." He adjusted a single earphone, slipped receiver and broadcaster unit into a capacious pocket.

Next he insisted on painting the insides of everyone's nostrils with a tarry aromatic substance.

"Germ-killer," he smiled. "For each dangerous animal on this planet there are a hundred vicious bacteria to knock off an Earthman in twenty hours. I guess that finishes the preliminaries. Shall we go? I ought to warn you that the sense of hearing is well developed up here, so it'll help if you move as quietly as possible."

"One moment." Gerry Carlyle's cool voice struck in abruptly. "I want two things thoroughly understood. First, I'm the sole leader of this party and what I say goes." She smiled with icy sweetness. "No complaints, of course, Mr. Strike, but it's just as well to forestall future misunderstandings.

"Secondly, you must know that the main object of this expedition is to catch one or more Murris and return with them alive. We'll take a number of other interesting specimens, of course, but the Murri is our real goal."

She looked around challengingly, as if expecting a dissenting reaction. And she was not disappointed. Strike glanced up at the porch to exchange a significant look with Ransom.

When he smiled wryly, Gerry Carlyle's temper flared.

"What is the mystery about this Murri, anyhow? Everywhere I go, on Venus, back on Earth among members of my own profession, if the word Murri is mentioned everyone scowls and tries to change the subject. Why?"

No one answered. The Carlyle party shifted uneasily, their boots making shucking sounds. Presently Strike offered, "The fact is, you'll never take back a Murri alive. But you wouldn't believe me if I told you the reason, Miss Carlyle. I--"

"Why not? What's the matter with them? Is their presence fatal to a human in some way?"

"Oh. no."

"Are they so rare or so shy they can't be found?"

"No, I think I can find you some before you take off."

"Then are they so delicate they can't stand the trip? If so, I can tell you we've done everything to make hold number three an exact duplicate of living conditions here!"

"No, it isn't that either," the trader sighed.

"Then what is it?" she cried. "Why all the evasions and secretive looks? You're acting just like Hank Rogers when I caught him one day in the Explorers' Club."

"He came up here awhile back to get a good Murri specimen. But he returned empty-handed. I asked him why, and he refused to tell me. Actually acted embarrassed about something. What's it all about?"

Tommy Strike shook his head firmly.

"It can't be explained, Miss Carlyle. It's just something you'll find out for yourself."

And on that note of dissatisfaction the party struck off through the mist. The half-dozen crew members from The Ark were surprised to find the going comparatively easy.

Although the great amount of water on Venus would presuppose profuse jungle growth, there is insufficient sunlight to support much more than the tallest varieties of trees, which shoot hundreds of feet up into the curtain of the mist, their broad-bladed leaves spread wide to treasure every stray sunbeam that filters through.

Undergrowth—which is confined to a sprawling, cactuslike shrub with poisonous spines and to a great many species of drably flowering plants with innumerable odors and perfume—is laid out almost geometrically in order to catch the dilute sunshine without interference from the occasional lon trees.

"The main danger in travel," as Strike explained, "is in losing the radio beam. Sometimes we have to circle a bog and we've got to be pretty careful not to let the signal fade."

The party, with Strike and Gerry Carlyle in the lead, hadn't been five minutes away from the station when the restless quiet was shattered by a terrific grunting and coughing like that of a thousand hogs at feeding time. The noise was intermittent, rumbling for a few seconds somewhere ahead, then stopping abruptly to be succeeded by slopping and smacking sounds.

The entire party paused for an instant at that blast of strange thunder. Startled by the sound out of nowhere.

The trader grinned. "Shovel-mouth," he explained. "Not very dangerous."

Gerry Carlyle glanced at her guide catching his implication. "We prefer 'em dangerous, as a matter of fact. Though I hardly expected to find anything interesting this close to--er--civilization."

Strike grinned at the thrust and a little prickle of excitement crawled up his spine as he watched the Carlyle party slip into their smooth routine. Her crisp commands detailed one man to remain with the bulky equipment. Two more loaded a pair of cathode-bolt guns, baby cannons beside the pistol the trader carried for emergencies.

Two of the others, including Gerry, selected weapons resembling the old-fashioned rifles--now to be seen only in museums. Barrows was to work the camera.

"Allen," Gerry snapped, "you circle around to the left. Kranz to the right. As usual, hold your fire unless it's absolutely necessary to prevent the specimen's escape. We'll give you three minutes to get into position."

The two flankers were already moving off into the mist when Strike woke up.

"Wait!" he cracked out. "Come back here. No one must get out of visual touch with me! It's too easy to get permanently lost. Sounds carry far, naturally, but it's impossible for an untrained ear to tell which direction they're coming from in this fog."

Gerry Carlyle's eyes flashed in momentary anger as her commands were countermanded but the plan of action was amended to permit the two flankers to remain within sight of the main body.

Strike had thought that Miss Carlyle's assistants were rather a colorless lot, stooges automatically going through letter-perfect roles, and wondered if they'd be any good if they found themselves suddenly without a leader. But when the party spread out with military precision for the stalk Tommy Strike had to admit to himself that he had never witnessed a more competent movement.

Not a single unnatural sound broke the quiet. Not a stick snapped, not a fungus squelched beneath an incautious heel. Even the sucking noises from marshy spots were missing. In sixty seconds they slipped into a little clearing and stood gazing with professional curiosity at the doomed shovel-mouth.

The creature was worth a second look. Fifty feet long and nearly twenty feet wide, it had three pairs of squat powerful legs ending in enormously spatulate discs. Its hide was a thick, tough gray stuff that gleamed dully with a wet slickness in the half light.

But the most surprising feature was the creature's head which, instead of tapering to a point, broadened into a mammoth snout extending several feet horizontally from mouth-corner to mouth-corner. Flattened against the ground it had a ludicrous similarity to a fan-tail vacuum cleaner attachment.

The shovel-mouth stared at the party disinterestedly out of muddy eyes, then lowered his head and waddled across the clearing. Its mouth plowed up a wide shallow furrow as it ate indiscriminately the numerous fungi, low-lying bushes, sticks and mud.

"Herbivorous," Strike murmured. "Its main article of diet is fungus growths but it takes so much for a meal that the creature has to spend most of its waking hours eating everything it can get its mouth on."

Evidently the animal had been dining for some time, for the clearing looked as if a drunken farmer had been trying to plow it up. Gerry signaled, and her crew moved into position like soldiers. She slipped up on the creature's blind side and aimed her curious rifle at the soft, inner portion of the shovel-mouth's leg.

Plop! The beast jerked, nipped at the wound momentarily, then continued to feed. Twenty seconds later it reeled dizzily about and fell to the ground, unconscious.

Just like that--simple, efficient, no fuss at all. Tommy Strike felt a sense of anticlimax.

"What a disappointment," he said ruefully. "I expected a terrific battle and a lot of excitement with maybe one or two of us half killed for the sake of the movies!"

"With Mr. Strike heroically rescuing Gerry Carlyle from the jaws of death?" She smiled as the trader winced. "Sorry, but this is a business, Mr. Strike, and I find it pays to play safe and sane and preserve my crew intact.

"I value them too much to risk their lives for the sake of a bunch of cheap thrill seekers back home. No. We have excitement and adventure only when someone makes a mistake. Carlyle parties make a minimum of mistakes."

That was the arrogant and cocksure Gerry Carlyle speaking and Strike did not try to dispute her. "I suppose you used a sort of hypodermic bullet in that rifle of yours. But I thought you'd be using more scientific weapons than that. It seems sort of--sort of primitive."

Gerry smiled.

"I know. You're wondering about the anesthetic gases. Or the

wonderful new paralysis ray. Well, there're a lot of inventions that work fine under controlled lab conditions that are flops in the field.

"The paralysis ray is just a toy, totally impracticable. It's unreliable because each species of animal requires a different amount of the ray to subdue him and we seldom have time to fool around experimenting in my work.

"It may also prove fatal if the victim gets too much of a jolt. As for knockout gas, it necessitates the hunters wearing masks and it is difficult to control in the proper dosages between unconsciousness and death."

Strike nodded understanding and turned to be surprised by the activity behind him. While he and the woman talked, the party had prepared the motionless shovel-mouth for transportation back to The Ark. Broad bands of bluish metal had been fastened around legs and neck and the crew had even managed to slide two or three underneath the huge body and encircle it.

Wires led from each piece of metal to a common source, a compact boxlike affair vaguely resembling a battery case with two dials on its face. A throw of a switch energized the metal and gradually the mighty bulk of the shovel-mouth rose from the ground. It hung in the air, suspended like a grotesque toy balloon. To tow it back to the ship would be a simple matter.

"Anti-gravity," explained Gerry. "We give the metal bands a gravity charge of slightly more than one. Like repelling magnetic charges, they rise from the ground and carry the animal with them."

The equipment-bearer simply lashed a rope round his waist to pull the shovel-mouth along behind and the party resumed the hunt.

"I think," said Gerry Carlyle, "that we're too likely to bump into something without warning in this mist. If you'll bring out the electronic telescope, Mr. Barrows--"

Barrows at once produced one of the most interesting gadgets that Strike had yet seen, a portable model of the apparatus used on all the modern centrifugal flyers. It consisted of a power unit carried by one of the men, and a long glass tube to be carried by the observer.

The front of it presented a convex surface covered with photoelectric material, to capture the electron streams of all kinds of light, from ultra-violet to infra-red.

As the light particles entered the tube, they passed through a series of three electrostatic fields for focusing, and then through another field for magnification. At the rear of the tube they struck a fluorescent screen and reproduced the image. Looking through the baby telescope gave the impression of gazing down a tunnel in the mist for as far as the eye could reach.

By keeping in constant touch with Ransom at the post, who kept the beam moving slowly around like the spoke of a wheel, Strike enabled the party to move laterally.

Through the telescope they picked up many of the smaller and shyer life-forms not ordinarily seen--lizards, crawling shapes, crablike forms, even two or three of the scaly man-things native to Venus, slithering silently through the fog with sulky expressions on their not-too-intelligent fishlike faces.

Strike and Gerry became so interested in watching this teeming life through the 'scope that they walked into real danger.

Without warning a rushing sound filled the air at their left, and a round

gray ball rolled swiftly into view. It crossed their path dead ahead--propelling itself with dozens of stout cilia sprouting indiscriminately from all sides--then paused abruptly.

The miniature forest of arms waved delicately and exploringly in the air as if trying to locate the source of a new disturbance. Then the fantastic thing rushed unerringly at the Carlyle party.

All the hunters leaped for cover and let the juggernaut roll past. It stopped a few yards beyond with another waving of cilia, as if listening intently. Gerry pumped a hypodermic bullet at it, but the charge ripped glancingly off the armourlike lorica.

"Rotifer," said Strike shortly. "Something like the tiny animalcules back on Earth, magnified many times and adapted for land travel. Venus is largely aqueous and was even more so at one time. Much of its terrestrial life developed from lifeforms originally dwelling in the water--"

He stepped aside again casually as the rotifer rumbled by. "They have their uses, though. That half-hidden mouth of theirs takes in everything it contacts. They're the scavengers of this planet. We call 'em Venusian buzzards."

The party scattered for a third time as the blind devourer sought to catch them once more. Barrows looked appealingly at his leader.

"They may have their uses," admitted the sub-pilot, "but this baby'll be a nuisance if we have to spend the rest of the trip dodging him."

There was truth in that, so the rotifer was dispatched with a cathode bolt. But as they crowded around to examine this curious bit of protoplasmic phenomena, a shrill scream as shocking as the shriek of a wounded horse tore through from the upper air. They swiveled

about to gaze upon the most terrifying of all products of Venusian vertebrate evolution.

Fully fifty feet the monster towered into the mist, standing upright on two massive legs reminiscent of the extinct terrestrial Tyrannosaurus rex. A set of short forelegs were equipped with hideously lethal claws. The head was long and narrow resembling a wolf's snout, with large ears and slavering fangs.

Everything about the nightmare creature was constructed for efficient annihilation, particularly of those animals who mistakenly sought safety in the tops of the tall trees.

"A whip!" yelled Strike, turning to the cathode-gun carriers, sudden apprehension stabbing him deep. "It's a whip! Let him have it, quick!"

The crew looked uncertainly to Gerry Carlyle, who promptly countermanded the order.

"Not so fast. I want this one alive. They've nothing like him in London."

She flipped up her rifle, fired at a likely spot. Strike groaned as the monstrous whip squealed shrilly again and again, staring down at the tiny Earthlings from fiery eyes.

Then from that wolfish snout uncurled an amazing fifty-foot length of razor-edged tongue, like that of a terran anteater. Straight at Gerry Carlyle it lashed out, cracking sharply. Strike's rush caught her from behind sprawling her on the spongy earth.

"Curl up in a ball," he yelled in her ear, "so it can't get any purchase with that tongue!"

Gerry obeyed and Strike turned to warn the others as the whip swished over her ducking head.

"Scatter!" he cried. "Don't--"

But too late. That coiling sweep of flesh rope struck Barrows glancingly across the head, shearing off the lobe of one ear. Blood spurted as the sub-pilot staggered away, one hand to his face.

The rest of the bearers darted alertly away in all directions, seeking the shelter of the fog. But the man who was burdened with the heavy equipment paused momentarily to shed himself of it. It cost him his life. Straight and sure that incredible tongue snaked out to wind itself around the man's twisting form. Instantly he shot into the air toward the gaping fanged jaws.

The fellow struggled, screaming. In vain. One arm was pinioned. He hadn't a chance to defend himself. Before his surprised companions could bring their guns to bear on the whip, there was a swift crunch, a hideous splattering of crimson stuff bright and horrible against the drab background, and it was all over. The expeditionary force was reduced by one.

All possibility of rescue being gone, the reserve gunners lowered their deadly guns and allowed the hunters to go about the job of subduing the monster.

Little snapping reports sounded in rapid succession--three, four, five.

And presently the whip reeled like a tower in an earthquake. It swayed. A few wavering steps described a short half circle. Then quietly it flopped awkwardly down and passed into insensibility.

Strike stood upright and pulled Gerry to her feet. He wiped cold sweat from his brow.

"Whew! That was too close for comfort!"

The woman brushed herself off and stared the trader in the eye. "Hereafter, Mr. Strike, please remember that in a real emergency such as this, one of our cardinal rules is every man for himself. The principle of throwing away two lives in a futile effort to save one is not encouraged among us. No more heroics, if you please!"

Strike's face flamed. No one likes to be bawled out when he's expecting warm gratitude. But even more Strike was angry at the apparent callousness.

"Then you don't think much of your assistants," he snapped, looking significantly at the bloody muzzle of the whip.

No emotion disturbed the serenity of her face.

"On the contrary. I regret Blair's passing very much. He was a well-trained and valuable man. But he can be replaced."

"Good God, woman!" cried Strike. "Haven't you any feelings. A friend of yours has just been done to death horribly on an alien planet, far from his home and family. And you--" He stopped, suddenly ashamed of his outburst of sentiment.

Gerry said simply, "We never sign on family men."

Then she turned her back on Strike and snapped orders to prepare the whip for transportation back to The Ark. But in the last tiny instant as she turned away Strike glimpsed something in her eye which provided him with sudden and complete revelation.

It explained at once the reason for Gerry Carlyle's shell of impersonal reserve and callousness. She was a woman walking in a man's

world, speaking man's language, using man's tools.

As a constant companion of men she had to train herself to live their life, meet them on their own terms. To command their respect she felt she had no right to use the natural endowments of charm and beauty which nature had given her.

Indeed, she dared not use them, for fear of the consequences. To give way to feminine emotion would be, she feared, to lose her domination over her male subordinates. She was, in short, that most beleaguered of beings--a woman who dared not let herself be a woman.

All this Tommy Strike guessed and his feelings toward Gerry Carlyle began to change from dislike to pity and perhaps to something warmer. For he was certain he had seen real tears unshed.

Chapter III.

The Murris

The succeeding days passed swiftly as specimen after weird specimen was subdued and carried to the rapidly filling hold of The Ark.

Strike's only worry was the ever-approaching hour when he must produce a Murri or face Gerry's wrath. And although he knew it was coming, still the demand arrived too suddenly for him on the morning of the sixth day.

"Mr. Strike." Not once had the young woman dropped her shield of formality. "I've been pretty patient with your repeated sidetracking of my request for a Murri. But our visit here is almost over. We leave in forty-eight hours. To remain grounded during a Venusian night would

mean a tiresome and dangerous journey home. Come on--no more stalling."

Strike looked at her. "What if I refuse?"

Gerry smiled glacially. "Your company would hear about it at once. You were ordered to assist us in every way, you know."

The trader nodded, shrugged.

"All right. Just a second while I--"

The rest of his sentence was lost in a clatter of footsteps as Ransom came down the metal stairs with a curious piece of apparatus in his hands.

"Thought you'd be needing this, Tommy," he said significantly with a disgusted glance at Gerry.

"Yeah, I sure do." Strike fitted the contrivance to his body by shoulder straps.

"Now what?" Gerry wanted to know. "Do you need special equipment to find a Murri? What's that contraption for, anyhow?"

Strike was willing to explain.

"The power unit of this 'contraption' consists of a vacuum tube oscillator and amplifier and the receiver unit of an inductance bridge and vacuum-tube amplifier. There's also a set of headphones"--he held them up in classroom style--" and an exploring coil.

"The bridge is energized by a sinusoidal current, brought to balance by appropriate resistance and inductance controls. If a conductive body comes within the artificially created magnetic field of the coil,

eddy currents set up in the conductive mass will reduce the effective inductance of the exploring coil, serving to unbalance the bridge. This condition is indicated in the headphones--"

"Stop! Stop!" Gerry covered her ears with her hands. "I know an ore-finding doodle-bug when I see one! I just wanted to know why you're carrying it with you now."

"Oh, for protection."

"Protection against what?"

"The natives."

Gerry stared. "Natives. Those scaly, fish-faced things that skulk around just out of sight in the fog? Why, those timid little creatures wouldn't hurt us--they couldn't. Besides, how'll your doodle-bug protect us against them?"

"Why, they're very clever at hiding in the mist and this metal indicator will reveal their presence if they get too close. You see, all the natives in this sector wear gold teeth!"

Someone tittered and Gerry flushed. "If you please, Mr. Strike, let's stick to business and keep the conversation on an intellectual plane. A good joke has its place but--"

"That's no joke," Strike said with a touch of bitterness. "It's a fact. Ever since Murray made his first trip to Venus the natives have gone for gold teeth in a big way. They took Murray for a god, you know, and emulated him in many ways.

"He had several gold teeth, relics of childhood dentistry, so the natives promptly scraped up some of the cheaply impure gold that's found around here and made caps for their teeth. As for their not

hurting us, Miss Carlyle, that remains to be seen.

"It has always meant trouble when one of you animal-catchers tries to mess around with the Murris. You'll understand me better in a few minutes." He shrugged and twitched his eyebrows. "I'm just being prepared."

"Rats! Mystery, generalities, trouble--but no explanations. Your evasive hints of reasons not to touch the Murris just fascinate me all the more. I wouldn't drop the hunt now for all the radium on Callisto!"

"All right," Strike capitulated curtly. "Let's go." He struck off straight through the mist as if knowing exactly where he meant to go. In five minutes he halted before a mighty cycad peppered with twelve-inch holes which housed a colony of at least fifty of the famous Murris.

"There you are," said Strike with resignation. "Pseudo-simia Murri."

Gerry completely forgot to be indignant at Strike's holdout. She was swept away in a gale of merriment that overcame the party at sight of the strange creatures.

Perhaps half of the colony was in constant motion, scrambling round and round the huge bole of the tree, up and down, popping in and out of their holes out along the mighty frondlike branches and back frantically. The others simply sat watching in solemn indifference, occasionally opening their pouting lips to ask sorrowfully--"Murri? Murri? Murri?"

They were well named. Though soft and grayish-brown, with scanty hair growth on their backs, their size and antics did resemble terrestrial simians. With their tremendous nasal development, they looked much like the Proboscis monkey.

And this very de Berquerac beak of a nose made their name even

more appropriate, for Sidney Murray, Stanhope's co-explorer, was famous throughout the System for having the hugest and ugliest nose extant.

The Pseudo-simia Murri colony presented to the eyes of the fascinated watchers a hundred facial replicas of Sidney Murray, spinning and dancing fantastically around the tree.

"Oh!" gasped Gerry finally, wiping laughter's tears from her cheeks. "Oh, but this is wonderful! Who--who named them?"

Strike looked solemnly at her. "Murray himself named 'em. He has quite a sense of humor."

"Sense of humor! Oh, it's colossal!" She took a deep breath. "What a sensation a dozen of these cute little butterballs will make in London. What a prize!"

"You haven't got them in London yet," Strike pointed out, keeping one uneasy eye on the indicator of his "doodle-bug."

"If you think anything's going to stop me now you don't yet know Gerry Carlyle." Again she was the arrogant, self-willed expedition commander.

They moved up to the cycad and examined the Murris at close quarters. They were quite tame. The close inspection revealed three facts of interest.

The first was the presence of short, prehensile tail equipped with a vicious-appearing sting near the tip. "Only a weak defensive mechanism," Strike explained, "as Murris live almost exclusively on the datelike fruits of the tree they live in. The sting's no worse than a bee sting." He extended one knotty forearm, showing a small

pockmark where he had once been stung.

The second was the large brown eyes possessed by the Murri which stared at the intruders unblinkingly with a heart-wringing hypnotic expression of sorrow. "They look as if they'd seen all the trouble and woe in the Universe," Barrows said. "Makes me feel like a louse to take them away from their home!"

The third was a heap of strangely incongruous junk piled at the base of the big tree. There were cheap clocks, gewgaws, matches, children's fireworks, odds and ends. "Offerings by the natives," explained Strike. "That's the legal tender up here. Medicinal weeds and rough gems in exchange for those things." He gestured at the pile of trash. "Anything fire-producing is especially valuable. The Murri is the natives' god--because of his resemblance to Sidney Murray, the First God."

There was more laughter, but subdued this time as the party realized that removing one or more Murris would be to commit Venusian sacrilege.

"I see now what you meant by 'causing trouble,'" Gerry said. "But it can't be too much for you to handle. It's happened before, I assume, and always blew over. These primitives--if that's your only reason for dissuading us to capture a few--"

"That's not the only reason." But Strike would explain no further.

"More mystery!" Gerry snorted and supervised the set-up of a big net under one of the longer overhanging branches.

Then two well-directed shots snapped the limb and catapulted a half dozen astonished Murris into the net. With incredible agility most of them bounced into the air and scrambled to safety. But one was

caught in the tricky meshes. The ends of the net were quickly folded together to form a bag.

"Got him!" exulted Gerry. "Why, that was easy!"

"Sure. But he isn't in London Zoo yet nor even back to the ship."

Gerry gave Strike a withering look, then peered into the net. The Murri lay quiescent, staring up with enormously round-eyed amazement.

"Murri-murri-murri?"

Gerry laughed again at this fantastic miniature of the great Murray, mumbling earnestly to himself. "Back to The Ark, boys," she cried. "We'll have a lot of fun with this little dickens!"

The party turned to retrace its steps and then trouble broke out for fair. When the Murri had been removed about ten yards from its home tree a violent fit of trembling seized him. He screamed shrilly two or three times and from the Murri tree came a hideous shrieking clamor in response.

The little captive burst into a flurry of wild activity, struggling with unbelievable fury to escape. He twisted, clawed, spat, bit. As the carriers bore him inevitably further away from his home he seemed to go absolutely mad, stinging himself repeatedly with barbed tail in an outburst of insane terror.

After a series of heart-rending cries of despair he gave a final frenzied outburst that ended with a gout of pale straw-colored blood from his mouth.

The entire party stopped to stare appalled at the little creature. Gerry Carlyle's shell of reserve was punctured. She looked badly shaken. It

was some moments before she could force herself to open the net and examine the quiet little body.

"Dead," she pronounced though everyone knew it. "Internal hemorrhage. Burst a blood vessel."

Strike answered her bewildered glance with melancholy triumph.

"Agoraphobia. Murrises are the most pronounced agoraphobes in the System. They spend their whole lives on and around the particular tree in which they're born. Take 'em a few yards away and they have a nervous breakdown ending in convulsion and death."

He indicated the dead body in the net. "I could have told you but you wouldn't have believed me. You'd have come to find out for yourself anyhow."

Gerry shook herself like a fluffy dog that has just received an unexpected ice-water shower.

"So that's what you meant when you said I'd never bring one back alive, is it?"

"Partly."

"Partly! You mean there's something else queer about these--"

Strike nodded gloomily. "You'll find out before long. I know what you're going to do. Capture another. Cut off his tail so he can't sting himself. Tie him up like a Christmas package so he can't move hand or foot. Anything to keep him from killing himself by struggling. Right?"

"Right!" Gerry determined.

Rogers tried all that when he was here, yet he failed."

"And so?"

The trader shrugged. "So you'll fail, too. But don't let me stop--"

"You won't stop me, Mr. Strike. Don't ever think it."

Together with Kranz, the woman rigged up two makeshift straight jackets to hold the captive Murriss rigidly unmoving. Meanwhile, the other hunters spread the big net again and shot down another branch full of the curious Murriss. The healthiest pair were quickly strapped up tightly and the party left to the accompaniment of a terrific yapping and hissing and yammering from the survivors of the colony.

Strike and Ransom spent the remainder of the lingering Venusian day resting from their exertions. Activity in that vicious climate quickly sapped the most rugged strength and Strike particularly felt that he had been drained of all energy.

As the light imperceptibly faded Ransom suggested, "I guess The Ark will be leaving soon. Now's the best time for 'em to take off. Conjunction."

Strike shook his head.

"No. That tough little Carlyle is over there in her ship learning a mighty bitter lesson. She won't leave now. She won't leave for some time," he predicted. "Wait and see."

But only to himself did he admit that he wanted badly to see that incredible woman again.

Chapter IV.

The Stolen Shrine

Strike was right. As the absolute darkness of Venusian night dragged its black cloak over the trading post light footsteps ran up the stairs outside. Knuckles beat on the metal door which Ransom opened. Gerry Carlyle pushed in.

"Mr. Strike," she said and there was a worried crease between her eyes, "neither of the Murris will eat. We can't force anything down their throats. And if we free them they immediately have one of those terrible fits!"

The trader shrugged. "So why come to me?"

"Can't you suggest anything to do? They'll starve themselves to death. And dead Murris have no market value. I've sworn I wouldn't return without at least one healthy Murri, so you've got to help me!"

"Nobody can do anything. You'll never take them back alive. I told you that before. Presently you'll believe it. If there's any mercy in you you'll return those two to their home while they're well."

Gerry's eyes flashed blue fire.

"I'm trying to be merciful without compromising my conscience. If humanly possible I'm taking those Murris home alive. Now--if you'll only help--we're going to try feeding through a stomach tube. If that fails, with injections. I thought you'd be able to help us in the food selection."

"It's hopeless. Rogers tried that too. When you take a Murri away from its home he undergoes such a nervous shock that his metabolism goes haywire. He just can't assimilate anything."

Gerry went away furious but was back within twenty-four hours. She was beginning to show the strain. Her hair was awry, her eyes blood-shot from lack of sleep.

"Strike," she begged, "can't you suggest anything? They're growing thinner by the hour. You can see them waste away. If you've been holding something back just to--to discipline me I'll say, 'Uncle.' Only please--"

Strike seized the chance to turn the knife in the wound.

"You flatter yourself if you think I'd sacrifice even a couple of Murriss for the sake of softening you a little."

But the thrust missed its mark. Gerry was lost within herself, absorbed in her battle to bend two insignificant caricatures to her will. "Drat them!" she flared. "They're doing this to spite me. But I'll make them live. I'll make them live!"

Forty-eight hours later she was back again, banging frantically to Strike's sturdy arm. The Murri silent martyrdom had broken her completely. She was a nervous wreck.

"Tommy," she wailed. "I can't stand it any longer. They just sit there, so helpless, so frail, without a sound, and stare at me. Those pathetic brown eyes follow me wherever I go.

"They--they're mesmerizing me. I see them in darkness--I see them in my dreams when I manage to get to sleep. It's pitiful--and horrible. Even the crew goes around now with silent accusation in their faces. I can't stand it."

Strike's heart went out to this bewildered woman.

"You see now why Rogers and the others wouldn't talk about their

experience with the Murriss? Why I said you wouldn't believe me even if I told you?"

"Yes. I understand. Rogers was ashamed to admit what he thought was a weakness. Embarrassed to have anyone think a funny little Venusian monkey could soften him up by just staring at him with those hypnotic brown eyes.

"I--I sent the boys out to find that tree and dig it up whole, Murriss and all to transport back to earth. I thought that might solve the difficulty. But I see now it wouldn't."

"What!" Strike roared in sudden apprehension. The fools! Not content with stealing the natives' local gods, now they intended to desecrate the whole shrine! "Out there in the darkness? It's suicide!"

The trader leaped for his furs and heating pads, dressing quickly for a sortie into the bitter Venusian night. Gerry looked surprised.

"How do you mean? Are they in danger?"

"The natives have brought nothing here for trading in the last seventy hours," he returned grimly. "That means trouble. Plenty!"

"But surely they're not out at night! The temperatures!"

"Doesn't affect them. They evolved from an aqueous lifeform and like it cold. Fewer natural dangers for them at night too."

He strapped on the gold-detector and radio receiver, strode for the door. "You stay here. Roy! Get the beam working!" He seized a light and barged out.

Gerry's mouth thinned out as she slipped her fur cape over her head and determinedly followed Strike down the stairway. There was a

brief argument ending with the trader's angry capitulation.

"We can't debate it now. At least make yourself useful. Carry this." He handed her the powerful searchlight and they moved off together.

A new world was revealed in the gleaming swath of the light, everything covered with a thick frost, utterly lifeless and still. Each breath was a chill knife in their lungs. In the intense quiet they heard the faint sounds of the work party hard at the task of removing the Murri tree.

A quick run brought them to the clearing. Stationary lights made a ring about the workers, who had already fastened antigravity plates to the tree and were loosening the frozen soil. Strike's voice rang out.

"Stop work, men! Grab your tools and beat it back—" He paused. The needle on the detectors dial was jerking spasmodically.

"Quick!" yelled Strike. "The natives are close by! Run for it!"

But the work party, blinded by the lights, gaped stupidly about and called out questions. Strike ran at them, shouting furiously, but his words were lost as he witnessed an incredible sight. One by one the members of the digging party were falling, wriggling and twisting amazingly.

One of them thrust his feet straight into the air and made grotesque walking motions. Another dug his face into the dirt trying to walk right down through the earth. The only one remaining upright turned round and round in tight little circles like a pirouetting ice-skater.

"Good heavens!" cried Gerry unsteadily. "What's wrong with them?"

Strike seized her about the waist. "Gas! Don't breathe! The natives get it from one of these devilish Venusian plants. Gets into the

nervous system. Localizes in the semi-circular-canal. Destroys the sense of balance!" He started back through the mist toward the station.

But with the third step Strike's world reeled sickeningly about him. He dropped Gerry, fighting desperately with outstretched arms for balance. The ground heaved beneath him. Wherever he strove to put his feet it seemed successively to be the sky, the perpendicular bole of a tree, nothingness.

His eyes began to throb intolerably. Terrible nausea shook him and he retched violently several times. He thrashed about so wildly in his efforts to stand upright that his equipment was scattered about the clearing, much of it smashed.

Strike forced himself to lie quietly while the visible world rocked like a storm-lashed ship. He was conscious of the frightened yells of the stricken workmen, a rush of feet, the monosyllabic squeaks and rasps of the Venusians, whose gill-like breathing system filtered out all the poisonous elements of the atmosphere.

Then Gerry's startled scream knifed his consciousness. Just one outcry, no begging for help. But the sounds of her struggle were plain as she was carried away.

Strike sat up. His smarting eyes took in a confused blur of moving figures. The man who had been standing was down now, a literal pin-cushion, bristling with poison-dipped native spears. Already the body was bloating. None of the others, apparently, were injured. Then a horrid vomiting welled up in Strike's throat, and he rolled over to be sick again.

But Strike, on the extreme edge of the clearing, had inhaled only a little of the gas. He lay with his face close to the frozen earth,

breathing cautiously, testing every lungful for tell-tale odors, then exhaling vigorously.

Gradually the earth slowed its spinning as the stuff worked off. Strike became conscious of a splitting headache as if every nerve-end in his skull were raw and throbbing. But as he took in the scene before him all thought of his own discomfort vanished in a wave of horror. The natives were out for revenge and Gerry Carlyle was their intended victim!

Strike had underestimated the natives' intelligence. Smarter than he thought, they had recognized somehow in the antigravity plates fastened to the tree trunk the greatest threat to the Murris. Further, their sluggish wits had puzzled out cause and effect and had gone unerringly to the control unit with its deadly switch, ready to unleash its power with the touch of a finger.

Gerry lay in a limp bundle on the ground, jerking now and then. About her slim body were clumsily fixed at least a half dozen of the anti-gravity plates. And the leader of the Venusians was bending over the switch.

Strike started up in a frenzy, yelling. Rubbery knees promptly sent him to the ground again. Not yet. No strength. He whispered a prayer for something to delay that outstretched native finger hovering over the power unit.

Perhaps he would move it the wrong way and--but Strike went cold all over at the thought. He wasn't sure, but wouldn't that smash Gerry into a bloody pulp, grind her into a shapeless mess?

Strike began to crawl grimly toward the lighted circle and the pile of weapons belonging to the disarmed work party. It was far, too far. He'd never make it. He paused to be sick again, less violently this

time. His head was clearing rapidly but too late. He had to delay things somehow.

Strike's hand bumped against his pocket, dipped in and swiftly out again holding his pipe. Still half full of tobacco. He snatched out a lighter and applied the flame, sucking vigorously, fighting the giddiness, blowing great clouds of pungent smoke all about him. The pipe dropped from nerveless fingers and he hunched down in a prayerful attitude, hoping, waiting tensely. Had he failed?

Zin-n-ng! Plock! It worked! Strike ducked and curled up into as small a ball as possible. In a split second the air resounded with the shrill whines of hundreds of the tiny whiz-bang beetles, armor-protected against the cold, as they hurtled in a cloud to the source of their favorite scent.

Few flew low enough to hit Strike and those were glancing blows that simply left red welts across his back. He saw perfectly the entire scene as his unwitting allies, the whiz-bangs, stormed into the clearing.

It was as if someone had loosed a series of shotgun charges at the natives. The leader of the Venusians dropped as if cathoded when several of the armored beetles rifled into his most vulnerable spot, the throat.

The natives set up a hideous thin wailing. They ducked. They flailed about them with vigorous futility. Finally they broke and ran wildly away into the dark, dropping even their weapons.

For awhile the whiz-bangs zoomed back and forth across the clearing but eventually they too vanished as Strike's now buried pipe gave forth no more enticing scents. Presently Strike stood up, brushed himself off and grinned. This was his moment! Like a

conquering hero he strode into the clearing to gaze on the devastation wrought.

The workmen were still prone, sensibly waiting for the effects of the gas to wear off. Gerry leaned like an old rag against the tree, staring with dazed eyes at her deliverer. Her fingers trembled so that Strike had to help her unfasten the anti-gravity plates.

She tried to stand erect but her knees betrayed her and she fell into the trader's ready embrace. He tried to look stern.

"Well, young lady, I trust you've learned two lessons this night. One, that even a Gerry Carlyle can't always have her way--especially with the Murris. Two, that a mere man, even if only to make an occasional unwanted sacrifice, can sometimes come in pretty handy."

Gerry became acutely conscious of her position and she tried to free herself with no great earnestness. Strike laughed. She turned a furious crimson and he laughed at her again.

"Simply a vaso-motor disturbance," she explained frigidly.

"Is that what you call it? I rather like it. I want to see more." Strike kissed her and Gerry's vaso-motor system went completely haywire.

From far up in the invisible branches of the Murri-tree one of its inhabitants, disturbed by the night's hullabaloo, leaned out and inquired sleepily through his nose--"Murri? Murri-murri-murri?"

The Dark Land

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In her great bed in the tower room of Joiry Castle, Jirel of Joiry lay very near to death. Her red hair was a blaze upon the pillow above the bone-whiteness of her face, and the lids lay heavily over the yellow fire of her eyes. Life had gushed out of her in great scarlet spurts from the pike-wound deep in her side, and the whispering women who hovered at the door were telling one another in hushed murmurs that the Lady Jirel had led her last battle charge. Never again would she gallop at the head of her shouting men, swinging her sword with all the ferocity that had given her name such weight among the savage warrior barons whose lands ringed hers. Jirel of Joiry lay very still upon her pillow.

The great two-edged sword which she wielded so recklessly in the heat of combat hung on the wall now where her yellow eyes could find it if they opened, and her hacked and battered armor lay in a heap in one corner of the room just as the women had flung it as they stripped her when the grave-faced men-at-arms came shuffling up the stairs bearing the limp form of their lady, heavy in her mail. The room held the hush of death. Nothing in it stirred. On the bed Jirel's white face lay motionless among the pillows.

Presently one of the women moved forward and gently pulled the door to against their watching.

"It is unseemly to stare so," she reproved the others. "Our lady would not desire us to behold her thus until Father Gervase has shriven her sins away."

And the coifed heads nodded assent, murmurous among

themselves. In a moment or two more a commotion on the stairs forced the massed watchers apart, and Jirel's serving-maid came up the steps holding a kerchief to her reddened eyes and leading Father Gervase. Someone pushed open the door for them, and the crowd parted to let them through.

The serving-maid stumbled forward to the bedside, mopping her eyes blindly. Behind her something obscurely wrong was happening. After a moment she realized what it was. A great stillness had fallen stunningly upon the crowd. She lifted a bewildered gaze toward the door. Gervase was staring at the bed in the blankest amazement.

"My child," he stammered, "where is your lady?"

The girl's head jerked round toward the bed. It was empty.

The sheets still lay exactly as they had covered Jirel, not pushed back as one pushes the blankets on arising. The hollow where her body had lain still held its shape among the yet warm sheets, and no fresh blood spattered the floor; but of the Lady of Joiry there was no sign.

Gervase's hands closed hard on his silver crucifix and under the fringe of gray hair his face crumpled suddenly into grief.

"Our dear lady has dabbled too often in forbidden things," he murmured to himself above the crucifix. "Too often--"

Behind him trembling hands signed the cross, and awed whispers were already passing the word back down the crowded stairs: "The devil himself has snatched Jirel of Joiry body and soul out of her death-bed."

Jirel remembered shouts and screams and the din of battle, and that stunning impact in her side. Afterward nothing but dimness floating

thickly above a bedrock of savage pain, and the murmur of voices from very far away. She drifted bodiless and serene upon a dark tide that was ebbing seaward, pulling her out and away while the voices and the pain receded to infinite distances, and faded and ceased.

Then somewhere a light was shining. She fought the realization weakly, for the dark tide pulled seaward and her soul desired the peace it seemed to promise with a longing beyond any words to tell. But the light would not let her go. Rebellious, struggling, at last she opened her eyes. The lids responded sluggishly, as if they had already forgotten obedience to her will. But she could see under the fringe of lashes and she lay motionless, staring quietly while life flowed back by slow degrees into the body it had so nearly left.

The light was a ring of flames, leaping golden against the dark beyond them. For a while she could see no more than that circlet of fire. Gradually perception returned behind her eyes, and reluctantly the body that had hovered so near to death took up the business of living again. With full comprehension she stared, and as she realized what it was she looked upon, incredulity warred with blank amazement in her dazed mind.

Before her a great image sat, monstrous and majestic upon a throne. Throne and image were black and shining. The figure was that of a huge man, wide-shouldered, tremendous, many times life size. His face was bearded, harsh, with power and savagery, and very regal, haughty as Lucifer's might have been. He sat upon his enormous black throne staring arrogantly into nothingness. About his head the flames were leaping. She looked harder, unbelieving. How could she have come here? What was it, and where? Blank-eyed, she stared at that flaming crown that circled the huge head, flaring and leaping and casting queer bright shadows over the majestic face below them.

Without surprise, she found that she was sitting up. In her stupor she had not known the magnitude of her hurt, and it did not seem strange to her that no pain attended the motion, or that her pike-torn side was whole again beneath the doeskin tunic which was all she wore. She could not have known that the steel point of the pike had driven the leather into her flesh so deeply that her women had not dared to remove the garment lest they open the wound afresh and their lady die before absolution came to her. She only knew that she sat here naked in her doeskin tunic, her bare feet on a fur rug and cushions heaped about her. And all this was so strange and inexplicable that she made no attempt, to understand.

The couch on which she sat was low and broad and black, and that fur rug in whose richness her toes were rubbing luxuriously was black too, and huger than any beast's pelt could be outside dreams.

Before her, across an expanse of gleaming black floor the mighty image rose, crowned with flame. For the rest, this great, black, dim-lighted room was empty. The flame-reflections danced eerily in the shining floor. She lifted her eyes, and saw with a little start of surprise that there was no ceiling. The walls rose immensely overhead, terminating in jagged abruptness above which a dark sky arched, sown with dim stars.

This much she had seen and realized before a queer glittering in the air in front of the image drew her roving eyes back. It was a shimmer and dance like the dance of dust motes in sunshine, save that the particles which glittered in the darkness were multicolored, dazzling. They swirled and swarmed before her puzzled eyes in a queer dance that was somehow taking shape in the light of the flames upon the image's head. A figure was forming in the midst of the rainbow shimmer. A man's figure, a tall, dark-visaged, heavy-shouldered man whose outlines among the dancing-motes took on rapid form and solidarity, strengthening by moments until in a last swirl the gaily

colored dazzle dissipated and the man himself stood wide-legged before her, fists planted on his hips, grinning darkly down upon the spell bound Jirel.

He was the image. Save that he was of flesh and blood, life size, and the statue was of black stone and gigantic, there was no difference. The same harsh, arrogant, majestic face turned its grim smile upon Jirel. From under scowling black brows, eyes that glittered blackly with little red points of intolerable brilliance blazed down upon her. She could not meet that gaze. A short black beard outlined the harshness of his jaw, and through it the white flash of his smile dazzled her.

This much about the face penetrated even Jirel's dazed amazement, and she caught her breath in a sudden gasp, sitting up straighter among her cushions and staring. The dark stranger's eyes were eager upon the long, lithe lines of her upon the couch. Red sparkles quickened in their deeps, and his grin widened.

"Welcome," he said, in a voice so deep and rich that involuntarily a little burr of answer rippled along Jirel's nerves. "Welcome to the dark land of Romne."

"Who brought me here?" Jirel found her voice at last. "And why?"

"I did it," he told her. "I—Pav, king of Romne. Thank me for it, Jirel of Joiry. But for Pav you had lain among the worms tonight. It was out of your death-bed I took you, and no power but mine could have mended the pike-hole in your side or put back into you the blood you spilled on Triste battlefield. Thank me, Jirel!"

She looked at him levelly, her yellow eyes kindling a little in rising anger as she met the laughter in his.

"Tell me why you brought me here."

At that he threw back his head and laughed hugely, a bull bellow of savage amusement that rang in deep echoes from the walls and beat upon her ears with the sound of organ notes. The room shook with his laughter; the little flames around the image's head danced to it.

"To be my bride, Joiry!" he roared. "That look of defiance ill becomes you, Jirel! Blush, lady, before your bridegroom!"

The blankness of the girl's amazement was all that saved her for the moment from the upsurge of murderous fury which was beginning to seethe below the surface of her consciousness. She could only stare as he laughed down at her, enjoying to the full her mute amaze.

"Yes," he said at last, "you have traveled too often in forbidden lands, Jirel of Joiry, to be ignored by us who live in them. And there is in you a hot and savage strength which no other woman in any land I know possesses. A force to match my own, Lady Jirel. None but you is fit to be my queen. So I have taken you for my own."

Jirel gasped in a choke of fury and found her voice again.

"Hell-dwelling madman!" she spluttered. "Black beast out of nightmares! Let me waken from this crazy dream!"

"It is no dream," he smiled infuriatingly. "As you died in Joiry Castle I seized you out of your bed and snatched you body and soul over the space-curve that parts this land from yours. You have awakened in your own dark kingdom, O Queen of Romne!" And he swept her an ironical salute, his teeth glittering in the darkness of his beard.

"By what right--" blazed Jirel.

"By a lover's right," he mocked her. "Is it not better to share Romne with me than to reign among the worms, my lady? For death was very near to you just now. I have saved your lovely flesh from a cold bed, Jirel, and kept your hot soul rooted there for you. Do I get no thanks for that?"

Yellow fury blazed in her eyes.

"The thanks of a sword-edge, if I had one," she flared. "Do you think to take Joiry like some peasant wench to answer to your whims? I'm Joiry, man! You must be mad!"

"I'm Pav," he answered her somberly, all mirth vanishing in a breath from his heavy voice. "I'm king of Romne and lord of all who dwell therein. For your savageness I chose you, but do not try me too far, Lady Jirel!"

She looked up into the swart, harsh face staring down on her, and quite suddenly the nearest thing she had ever known to fear of a human being came coldly over her; perhaps the fear that if any man alive could tame her fierceness, this man could. The red prickles had gone out of his eyes, and something in her shuddered a little from that black, unpupiled stare. She veiled the hawk-yellow of her own gaze and set her lips in a straight line.

"I shall call your servants," said Pav heavily. "You must be clothed as befits a queen, and then I shall show you your land of Romne."

She saw the black glare of his eyes flick sidewise as if in search, and in the instant that his gaze sought them there appeared about her in the empty air the most curious phenomenon she had ever seen. Queer, shimmering blue-nesses swam shoulder-high all around her, blue and translucent like hot flames, and like flames their outlines flickered. She never saw them clearly, but their touch upon

her was like the caress a flame might give if it bore no heat: swift, brushing, light.

All about her they seethed, moving too quickly for the eyes to follow; all over her the quick, flickering caress ran. And she felt queerly exhausted as they moved, as if strength were somehow draining out of her while the blue flames danced. When their bewildering ministrations ceased the strange weariness abated too, and Jirel in blank surprise looked down at her own long, lovely body sheathed in the most exquisite velvet she had ever dreamed of. It was black as a starless night, softer than down, rich and lustrous as it molded her shining curves into sculptured beauty. There was a sensuous delight in the soft swirl of it around her feet as she moved, in the dark caress of it upon her flesh when motion stirred the silken surfaces against her skin. For an instant she was lost in pure feminine ecstasy.

But that lasted only for an instant. Then she heard Pav's deep voice saying, "Look!" and she lifted her eyes to a room whose outlines were melting away like smoke. The great image faded, the gleaming floor and the jagged, roofless walls turned translucent and misty, and through their melting surfaces mountains began to loom in the distance, dark trees and rough, uneven land. Before the echoes of Pav's deeply vibrant "Look!" had shivered wholly into silence along her answering nerves, the room had vanished and they two stood alone in the midst of the dark land of Romne.

It was a dark land indeed. As far as she could see, the air swallowed up every trace of color, so that in somber grays and blacks the landscape stretched away under her eyes. But it had a curious clarity, too, in the dark, translucent air. She could see the distant mountains black and clear beyond the black trees. Beyond them, too, she caught a gleam of still black water, and under her feet the ground was black and rocky. And there was a curiously circumscribed air about the place. Somehow she felt closed in as

she stared, for the horizon seemed nearer than it should be, and its dark circle bound the little world of grayness and blackness and clear, dark air into a closeness she could not account for.

She felt prisoned in and a little breathless, for all the wide country spreading so clearly, so darkly about her. Perhaps it was because even out at the far edge of the sky everything was as distinct in the transparent darkness of the air as the rocks at her very feet, so that there was no sense of distance here at all.

Yes, it was a dark land, and a strange land, forbidding, faintly nightmarish in the color-swallowing clarity of its air, the horizons too near and too clear in the narrowness of their circle.

"This," said Pav beside her, in his nerve-tingling voice that sent unconquerable little shudders of answer along her resounding nerves, "this is your land of Romne, O Queen! A land wider than it looks, and one well befitted to your strength and loveliness, my Jirel. A strange land, too, by all earthly standards. Later you must learn how strange. The illusion of it--"

"Save your breath, King of Romne," Jirel broke in upon his deep-voiced speech. "This is no land of mine, and holds no interest for me save in its way out. Show me the gate back into my own world, and I shall be content never to see Romne or you again."

Pav's big hand shot out and gripped her shoulder un-gently. He swung her round in a swirl of velvet skirts and a toss of fire-colored hair, and his dark, bearded face was savage with anger. The little red dazzles danced in his unpupiled black eyes until she could not focus her own hot yellow gaze upon them, and dropped her eyes from his in helpless fury.

"You are mine!" he told her in a voice so deep and low that her whole

body tingled to this vibration. "I took you out of Joiry and your death-bed and the world you knew, and you are mine from this moment on. Strong you may be, but not so strong as I, Jirel of Joiry, and when I command, henceforth obey!"

Blind with fury, Jirel ripped his hand away and fell back one step in a swirl of black skirts. She tossed her head up until the curls upon it leaped like flames, and the scorching anger in her voice licked up in matching flames, so hotly that her speech was broken and breathless as she choked in a half-whisper.

"Never touch me again, you black hell-dweller! Before God, you'd never have dared if you'd left me a knife to defend myself with! I swear I'll tear the eyes out of your head if I feel the weight of your hand on me again! Yours, you filthy wizard? You'll never have me--never, if I must die to escape you! By my name I swear it!"

She choked into silence, not for lack of words but because the mounting fury that seethed up in her throat drowned out all further sound. Her eyes were blazing yellow with scorching heat, and her fingers flexed like claws eager for blood.

The King of Romne grinned down at her, thumbs hooked in his belt and derision gleaming whitely in the whiteness of his smile. The little beard jutted along his jaw, and red lights were flickering in the fathomless darkness of his eyes.

"You think so, eh, Joiry!" he mocked her, deep-voiced. "See what I could do!"

He did not shift a muscle, but even through her blinding fury she was aware of a sudden altering in him, a new power and command. His red-gleaming eyes were hot upon hers, and with sick anger she realized anew that she could not sustain that gaze. There was

something frightening in the unpupiled blackness of it, the blazing, unbearable strength that beat out from it in heavy command. It was a command all out of proportion to his moveless silence, a command that wrenched at her intolerably. She must obey--she must....

Suddenly a fresh wave of soul-scorching heat surged over her, blindingly, terribly, in such a burst that the whole dark land of Romne blazed into nothingness and she lost all grip upon reality. The rocky ground swirled sidewise and vanished. The dark world dissolved around her. She was not flesh and blood but a white-hot incandescence of pure rage. Through the furnace heat of it, as through a shimmer of flame, she saw the body that her own violence had wrenched her out of. It stood straight in its gown of velvety blackness, facing Pav's unmoving figure defiantly. But as she watched, a weakening came over it. The stiffness went out of its poise, the high red head drooped. Helplessly she watched her own forsaken body moving forward step by reluctant step, as if the deserted flesh itself resented the subjection so forced upon it. She saw herself come to Pav's feet. She saw her black-sheathed body bend submissively, ripple pliantly to its knees. In a stillness beyond any ultimate climax of incarnate fury, she saw herself abased before Pav, her head bowed, her body curving into lines of warm surrender at his feet.

And she was afraid. For from somewhere a power was beating of such intolerable magnitude that even the inferno of her fury was abashed before it. Her body's obedience lost all significance in the rush of that terrible force. She would have thought that it radiated from Pav had it been possible for any human creature to sustain such an incredible force as that she was so fleetingly aware of.

For the briefest instant the knowledge of that power was all around her, terrifyingly, thunderously. It was too tremendous a thing to endure in her state of unbodied vulnerability. It scorched her like strong

flame. And she was afraid--for Pav was the center of that inferno's might, and he could be no human thing who radiated such an infinity of power. What was he? What could he be?

In that instant she was horribly afraid--soul-naked in the furnace blast of something too tremendous... too terrible....

Then the moment of separation ceased. With a rush and a dazzle she was back in her kneeling body, and the knowledge of that power faded from about her and the humiliation of her pose burned again hotly in her throat.

Like a spring released she leaped to her feet, starting back and blazing into Pav's smiling face so hotly that her whole body seemed incandescent with the rage that flooded back into it. That moment of terror was fuel to feed the blaze, for she was not naked now, not bodiless and undefended from the force she had so briefly sensed, and anger that she had been exposed to it, that she had felt terror of it, swelled with the fury of her abasement before Pav. She turned eyes like two pits of hell-blaze upon her tormenter. But before she could speak:

"I admit your power," said Pav in a somewhat surprised voice. "I could conquer your body thus, but only by driving out the blaze that is yourself. I have never known before a mortal creature so compounded that my will could not conquer his. It proves you a fit mate for Pav of Romne. But though I could force you to my command, I shall not. I desire no woman against her will. You are a little human thing, Jirel, and your fullest strength against mine is like a candle in the sun--but in these last few minutes I have learned respect for you. Will you bargain with me?"

"I'd bargain sooner with the Devil," she whispered hotly. "Will you let me go, or must I die to be free?"

Somberly he looked down at her. The smile had vanished from his bearded mouth, and a dark majesty was brooding upon the swarthy face turned down to hers. His eyes flashed red no longer. They were black with so deep a blackness that they seemed two holes of fathomless space--two windows into infinity. To look into them sent something in Jirel sick with sudden vertigo. Somehow, as she stared, her white-blazing fury cooled a little. Again she felt subtly that here was no human thing into whose eyes she gazed. A quiver of fright struggled up through her fading anger. At last he spoke.

"What I take I do not lightly give up. No, there is in you a heady violence that I desire, and will not surrender. But I do not wish you against your will."

"Give me a chance then, at escape," said Jirel. Her boiling anger had died almost wholly away under his somber, dizzying gaze, in the memory of that instant when inferno itself had seemed to beat upon her from the power of his command. But there had not abated in her by any fraction of lessening purpose the determination not to yield. Indeed, she was strengthened against him by the very knowledge of his more than human power--the thing which in her unbodied nakedness had burned like a furnace blast against the defenseless soul of her was terrible enough even in retrospect to steel all her resolution against surrender. She said in a steady voice,

"Let me seek through your land of Romne the gateway back into my own world. If I fail--"

"You cannot but fail. There is no gateway by which you could pass."

"I am unarmed," she said desperately, grasping at straws in her determination to find some excuse to leave him. "You have taken me helpless and weaponless into--your power, and I shall not surrender. Not until you have shown yourself my roaster--and I do not think you

can. Give me a weapon and let me prove that!"

Pav smiled down on her as a man smiles on a rebellious child.

"You have no idea what you ask," he said. "I am not"--he hesitated--"perhaps not wholly as I seem to you. Your greatest skill could not prevail against me."

"Then let me find a weapon!" Her voice trembled a little with the anxiety to be free of him, to find somehow an escape from the intolerable blackness of his eyes, the compulsion of his presence. For every moment that those terrible eyes beat so hotly upon her she felt her resistance weaken more, until she knew that if she did not leave him soon all strength would melt away in her and her body of its own will sink once more into surrender at his feet. To cover her terror she blustered, but her voice was thick. "Give me a weapon! There is no man alive who is not somehow vulnerable. I shall learn your weakness, Pav of Romne, and slay you with it. And if I fail--then take me."

The smile faded slowly from Pav's bearded lips. He stood in silence, looking down at her, and the fathomless darkness of his eyes radiated power like heat in such insupportable strength that her own gaze fell before it and she stared down at her velvet skirt-hem on the rocks. At last he said,

"Go, then. If that will content you, seek some means to slay me. But when you fail, remember--you have promised to acknowledge me your lord."

"If I fail!" Relief surged up in Jirel's throat. "If I fail!"

He smiled again briefly, and then somehow all about his magnificent dark figure a swirl of rainbow dazzle was dancing. She stared, half

afraid, half in awe, watching the tall, black tangibility of him melting easily into that multicolored whirling she had seen before, until nothing was left but the dazzling swirl that slowed and faded and dissipated upon the dark air--and she was alone.

She drew a deep breath as the last of the rainbow shimmer faded into nothing. It was a heavenly relief not to feel the unbearable power of him beating unceasingly against her resistance, not to keep tense to the breaking-point all the strength that was in her. She turned away from the spot where he had vanished and scanned the dark land of Romne, telling herself resolutely that if she found no gateway, no weapon, then death itself must open the way out of Romne. There was about Pav's terrible strength something that set the nerves of her humanity shuddering against it. In her moment of soul-nakedness she had sensed that too fully ever to surrender. The inferno of the thing that was Pav burning upon her unbodied consciousness had been the burning of something so alien that she knew with every instinct in her that she would die if she must, rather than submit. Pav's body was the body of a man, but it was not--she sensed it intuitively--as a man alone that he desired her, and from surrender to the dark intensity of what lay beyond the flesh her whole soul shuddered away.

She looked about helplessly. She was standing upon stones, her velvet skirts sweeping black jagged rock that sloped down toward the distant line of trees. She could see the shimmer of dark water between them, and above and beyond their swaying tops the black mountains loomed. Nowhere was there any sign of the great chamber where the image sat. Nowhere could she see anything but deserted rocks, empty meadows, trees where no birds sang. Over the world of grayness and blackness she stood staring.

And again she felt that sense of imprisonment in the horizon's dark, close bounds. It was a curiously narrow land, this Romne. She felt it

intuitively, though there was no visible barrier closing her in. In the clear, dark air even the mountains' distant heights were distinct and colorless and black.

She faced them speculatively, wondering how far away their peaks lay. A dark thought was shadowing her mind, for it came to her that if she found no escape from Romne and from Pav the mountains alone offered that final escape which she was determined to take if she must. From one of those high, sheer cliffs she could leap....

It was not tears that blurred the black heights suddenly. She stared in bewilderment, lifted dazed hands to rub her eyes, and then stared again. Yes, no mistake about it, the whole panorama of the land of Romne was melting like mist about her. The dark trees with their glint of lake beyond, the rocky foreground, everything faded and thinned smokily, while through the vanishing contours those far mountains loomed up near and clear overhead. Dizzy with incomprehension, she found herself standing amid the shreds of dissipating landscape at the very foot of those mountains which a moment before had loomed high and far on the edge of the horizon. Pav had been right indeed--Romne was a strange land. What had he said--about the illusion of it?

She looked up, trying to remember, seeing the dark slopes tilting over her head. High above, on a ledge of outcropping stone, she could see gray creepers dropping down the rocky sides, the tips of tall trees waving. She stared upward toward the ledge whose face she could not see, wondering what lay beyond the vine-festooned edges. And:

In a thin, dark fog the mountainside melted to her gaze. Through it, looming darkly and more darkly as the fog thinned, a level plateau edged with vines and thick with heavy trees came into being before her. She stood at the very edge of it, the dizzy drop of the mountain

falling sheer behind her. By no path that feet can tread could she have come to this forested plateau.

One glance she cast backward and down from her airy vantage above the dark land of Romne. It spread out below her in a wide horizon-circle of black rock and black waving tree-tops and colorless hills, clear in the clear, dark air of Romne. Nowhere was anything but rock and hills and trees, clear and distinct out to the horizon in the color-swallowing darkness of the air. No sight of man's occupancy anywhere broke the somberness of its landscape. The great black hall where the image burned might never have existed save in dreams. A prison land it was, narrowly bound by the tight circle of the sky.

Something insistent and inexplicable tugged at her attention then, breaking off abruptly that scanning of the land below. Not understanding why, she answered the compulsion to turn. And when she had turned she stiffened into rigidity, one hand halting in a little futile reach after the knife that no longer swung at her side; for among the trees a figure was approaching.

It was a woman--or could it be? White as leprosy against the blackness of the trees, with a whiteness that no shadows touched, so that she seemed like some creature out of another world reflecting in dazzling pallor upon the background of the dark, she paced slowly forward. She was thin--deathly thin, and wrapped in a white robe like a winding-sheet. The black hair lay upon her shoulders as snakes might lie.

But it was her face that caught Jirel's eyes and sent a chill of sheer terror down her back. It was the face of Death itself, a skull across which the white, white flesh was tightly drawn. And yet it was not without a certain stark beauty of its own, the beauty of bone so finely formed that even in its death's-head nakedness it was lovely.

There was no color upon that face anywhere; White-lipped, eyes shadowed, the creature approached with a leisured swaying of the long robe, a leisured swinging of the long black hair lying in snake-strands across the thin white shoulders. And the nearer the--the woman?--came the more queerly apart from the land about her she seemed. Bone-white, untouched by any shadow save in the sockets of her eyes, she was shockingly detached from even the darkness of the air. Not all of Romne's dim, color-veiling atmosphere could mask the staring whiteness of her, almost blinding in its unshadowed purity.

As she came nearer, Jirel sought instinctively for the eyes that should be fixed upon her from those murky hollows in the scarcely fleshed skull. If they were there, she could not see them. An obscurity clouded the dim sockets where alone shadows clung, so that the face was abstract and sightless--not blind, but more as if the woman's thoughts were far away and intent upon something so absorbing that her surroundings held nothing for the hidden eyes to dwell on.

She paused a few paces from the waiting Jirel and stood quietly, not moving. Jirel had the feeling that from behind those shadowy hollows where the darkness clung like cobwebs a close and critical gaze was analyzing her, from red head to velvet-hidden toes. At last the bloodless lips of the creature parted and from them a voice as cool and hollow as a tomb fell upon Jirel's ears in queer, reverberating echoes, as if the woman spoke from far away in deep caverns underground, coming in echo upon echo out of the depths of unseen vaults, though the air was clear and empty about her. Just as her shadowless whiteness gave the illusion of a reflection from some other world, so the voice seemed also to come from echoing distances. Its hollowness said slowly,

"So here is the mate Pav chose. A red woman, eh? Red as his own flame. What are you doing here, bride, so far from your bridegroom's arms?"

"Seeking a weapon to slay him with!" said Jirel hotly. "I am not a woman to be taken against her will, and Pav is no choice of mine."

Again she felt that hidden scrutiny from the pits of the veiled eyes. When the cool voice spoke it held a note of incredulity that sounded clearly even in the hollowness of its echo from the deeps of invisible tombs.

"Are you mad? Do you not know what Pav is? You actually seek to destroy him?"

"Either him or myself," said Jirel angrily. "I know only that I shall never yield to him, whatever he may be."

"And you came--here. Why? How did you know? How did you dare?" The voice faded and echoes whispered down vaults and caverns of unseen depth ghostily, "--did you dare--did you dare--you dare...."

"Dare what?" demanded Jirel uneasily. "I came here because--because when I gazed upon the mountains, suddenly the world dissolved around me and I was--was here."

This time she was quite sure that a long, deep scrutiny swept her from head to feet, boring into her eyes as if it would read her very thoughts, though the cloudy pits that hid the woman's eyes revealed nothing. When her voice sounded again it held a queer mingling of relief and amusement and stark incredulity as it reverberated out of its hollow, underground places.

"Is this ignorance or guile, woman? Can it be that you do not understand even the secret of the land of Romne, or why, when you

gazed at the mountains, you found yourself here? Surely even you must not have imagined Romne to be--as it seems. Can you possibly have come here unarmed and alone, to my very mountain--to my very grove--to my very face? You say you seek destruction?" The cool voice murmured into laughter that echoed softly from unseen walls and caverns in diminishing sounds, so that when the woman spoke again it was to the echoes of her own fading mirth. "How well you have found your way! Here is death for you--here at my hands! For you must have known that I shall surely kill you!"

Jirel's heart leaped thickly under her velvet gown. Death she had sought, but not death at the hands of such a thing as this. She hesitated for words, but curiosity was stronger even than her sudden jerk of reflexive terror, and after a moment she contrived to ask, in a voice of rigid steadiness,

"Why?"

Again the long, deep scrutiny from eyeless sockets. Under it Jirel shuddered, somehow not daring to take her gaze from that leprously white, skull-shaped face, though the sight of it sent little shivers of revulsion along her nerves. Then the bloodless lips parted again and the cool, hollow voice fell echoing on her ears,

"I can scarcely believe that you do not know. Surely Pav must be wise enough in the ways of women--even such as I--to know what happens when rivals meet. No, Pav shall not see his bride again, and the white witch will be queen once more. Are you ready for death, Jirel of Joiry?"

The last words hung hollowly upon the dark air, echoing and re-echoing from invisible vaults. Slowly the arms of the corpse-creature lifted, trailing the white robe in great pale wings, and the hair stirred upon her shoulders like living things. It seemed to Jirel that a light

was beginning to glimmer through the shadows that clung like cobwebs to the skull-face's sockets, and somehow she knew chokingly that she could not bear to gaze upon what was dawning there if she must throw herself backward off the cliff to escape it. In a voice that strangled with terror she cried,

"Wait!"

The pale-winged arms hesitated in their lifting; the light which was dawning behind the shadowed eye-sockets for a moment ceased to brighten through the veiling. Jirel plunged on desperately,

"There is no need to slay me. I would very gladly go if I knew the way out."

"No," the cold voice echoed from reverberant distances. "There would be the peril of you always, existing and waiting. No, you must die or my sovereignty is at an end."

"Is it sovereignty or Pav's love that I peril, then?" demanded Jirel, the words tumbling over one another in her breathless eagerness lest unknown magic silence her before she could finish.

The corpse-witch laughed a cold little echo of sheer scorn.

"There is no such thing as love," she said, "--for such as I."

"Then," said Jirel quickly, a feverish hope beginning to rise behind her terror, "then let me be the one to slay. Let me slay Pav as I set out to do, and leave this land kingless, for your rule alone."

For a dreadful moment the half-lifted arms of the figure that faced her so terribly hesitated in midair; the light behind the shadows of her eyes flickered. Then slowly the winged arms fell, the eyes dimmed into cloud-filled hollows again. Blind-faced, impersonal, the skull

turned toward Jirel. And curiously, she had the idea that calculation and malice and a dawning idea that spelled danger for her were forming behind that expressionless mask of white-fleshed bone. She could feel tensivity and peril in the air--a subtler danger than the frank threat of killing. Yet when the white witch spoke there was nothing threatening in her words. The hollow voice sounded as coolly from its echoing caverns as if it had not a moment before been threatening death.

"There is only one way in which Pav can be destroyed," she said slowly. "It is a way I dare not attempt, nor would any not already under the shadow of death. I think not even Pav knows of it. If you...." The hollow tones hesitated for the briefest instant, and Jirel felt, like the breath of a cold wind past her face, the certainty that there was a deeper danger here, in this unspoken offer, than even in the witch's scarcely stayed death-magic. The cool voice went on, with a tingle of malice in its echoing.

"If you dare risk this way of clearing my path to the throne of Romne, you may go free."

Jirel hesitated, so strong had been that breath of warning to the danger-accustomed keenness of her senses. It was not a genuine offer--not a true path of escape. She was sure of that, though she could not put her finger on the flaw she sensed so strongly. But she knew she had no choice.

"I accept, whatever it is," she said, "my only hope of winning back to my own land again. What is this thing you speak of?"

"The--the flame," said the witch half hesitantly, and again Jirel felt a sidelong scrutiny from the cobwebbed sockets, almost as if the woman scarcely expected to be believed. "The flame that crowns Pav's image. If it can be quenched, Pav--dies." And queerly she

laughed as she said it, a cool little ripple of scornful amusement. It was somehow like a blow in the face, and Jirel felt the blood rising to her cheeks as if in answer to a tangible slap. For she knew that the scorn was directed at herself, though she could not guess why.

"But how?" she asked, striving to keep bewilderment out of her voice.

"With flame," said the white witch quickly. "Only with flame can that flame be quenched. I think Pav must at least once have made use of those little blue fires that flicker through the air about your body. Do you know them?"

Jirel nodded mutely.

"They are the manifestations of your own strength, called up by him. I can explain it no more clearly to you than that. You must have felt a momentary exhaustion as they moved. But because they are essentially a part of your own human violence, here in this land of Romne, which is stranger and more alien than you know, they have the ability to quench Pav's flame. You will not understand that now. But when it happens, you will know why. I cannot tell you.

"You must trick Pav into calling forth the blue fire of your own strength, for only he can do that. And then you must concentrate all your forces upon the flame that burns around the image. Once it is in existence, you can control the blue fire, send it out to the image. You must do this. Will you? Will you?"

The tall figure of the witch leaned forward eagerly, her white skull-face thrusting nearer in an urgency that not even the veiled, impersonal eye-sockets could keep from showing. And though she had imparted the information that the flame held Pav's secret life in a voice of hollow reverberant mockery, as if the statement were a

contemptuous lie, she told of its quenching with an intensity of purpose that proclaimed it unmistakable truth. "Will you?" she demanded again in a voice that shook a little with nameless violence.

Jirel stared at the white-fleshed skull in growing disquiet. There was a danger here that she could feel almost tangibly. And somehow it centered upon this thing which the corpse-witch was trying to force her into promising. Somehow she was increasingly sure of that. And rebellion suddenly flamed within her. If she must die, then let her do it now, meeting death face to face and not in some obscurity of cat's-paw witchcraft in the attempt to destroy Pav. She would not promise.

"No," she heard her own voice saying in sudden violence. "No, I will not!"

Across the skull-white face of the witch convulsive fury swept. It was the rage of thwarted malice, not the disappointment of a plotter. The hollow voice choked behind grinning lips, but she lifted her arms like great pale wings again, and a glare of hell-fire leaped into being among the shadows that clung like cobwebs to her eye-sockets. For a moment she stood towering, white and terrible, above the earthwoman, in a tableau against the black woods of unshadowed bone-whiteness, dazzling in the dark air of Romne, terrible beyond words in the power of her gathering magic.

Then Jirel, rigid with horror at the light brightening so ominously among the shadows of these eyeless sockets, saw terror sweep suddenly across the convulsed face, quenching the anger in a cold tide of deadly fear.

"Pav!" gasped the chill voice hollowly. "Pav comes!"

Jirel swung round toward the far horizon, seeking what had struck

such fear into the leprously white-face, and with a little gasp of reprieve saw the black figure of her abductor enormous on the distant skyline. Through the clear dark air she could see him plainly, even to the sneering arrogance upon his bearded face, and a flicker of hot rebellion went through her. Even in the knowledge of his black and terrible power, the human insolence of him struck flame from the flint of her resolution, and she began to burn with a deep-seated anger again which not even his terror could quench, not even her amazement at the incredible size of him.

For he strode among the tree-tops like a colossus, gigantic, heaven-shouldering, swinging in league-long strides across the dark land spread out panorama-like under that high ledge where the two women stood. He was nearing in great distance-devouring steps, and it seemed to Jirel that he diminished in stature as the space between them lessened. Now the treetops were creaming like black surf about his thighs. She saw anger on his face, and she heard a little gasp behind her. She whirled in quick terror, for surely now the witch would slay her with no more delay, before Pav could come near enough to prevent.

But when she turned she saw that the pale corpse-creature had forgotten her in the frantic effort to save herself. And she was working a magic that for an instant wiped out from Jirel's wondering mind even her own peril, even the miraculous oncoming of Pav. She had poised on her toes, and now in a swirl of shroud-like robes and snaky hair she began to spin. At first she revolved laboriously, but in a few moments the jerky whirling began to smooth out and quicken and she was revolving without effort, as if she utilized a force outside Jirel's understanding, as if some invisible whirlwind spun her faster and faster in its vortex, until she was a blur of shining, unshadowed whiteness wrapped in the dark snakes of her hair--until she was nothing but a pale mist against the forest darkness--until she had vanished utterly.

Then, as Jirel stared in dumb bewilderment, a little chill wind that somehow seemed to blow from immeasurably far distances, from cool, hollow, underground places, brushed her cheek briefly, without ruffling a single red curl. It was not a tangible wind. And from empty air a hand that was bone-hard dealt her a stinging blow in the face. An incredibly tiny, thin, far-away voice sang in her ear as if over gulfs of measureless vastness,

"That for watching my spell, red woman! And if you do not keep our bargain, you shall feel the weight of my magic. Remember!"

Then in a great gush of wind and a trample of booted feet Pav was on the ledge beside her, and no more than life-size now, tall, black, magnificent as before, radiant with arrogance and power. He stared hotly, with fathomless blackness in his eyes, at the place where the mist that was the witch had faded. Then he laughed contemptuously.

"She is safe enough--there," he said. "Let her stay. You should not have come here, Jirel of Joiry."

"I didn't come," she said in sudden, childish indignation against everything that had so mystified her, against his insolent voice and the arrogance and power of him, against the necessity for owing to him her rescue from the witch's magic. "I didn't come. The--the mountain came! All I did was look at it, and suddenly it was here."

His deep bull-bellow of laughter brought the blood angrily to her cheeks.

"You must learn that secret of your land of Romne," he said indulgently. "It is not constructed on the lines of your old world. And only by slow degrees, as you grow stronger in the magic which I shall teach you, can you learn the full measure of Romne's strangeness. It

is enough for you to know now that distances here are measured in different terms from those you know. Space and matter are subordinated to the power of the mind, so that when you desire to reach a place you need only concentrate upon it to bring it into focus about you, succeeding the old landscape in which you stood.

"Later you must see Romne in its true reality, walk through Romne as Romne really is. Later, when you are my queen."

The old hot anger choked up in Jirel's throat. She was not so afraid of him now, for a weapon was in her hands which even he did not suspect. She knew his vulnerability. She cried defiantly,

"Never, then! I'd kill you first."

His scornful laughter broke into her threat.

"You could not do that," he told her, deep-voiced: "I have said before that there is no way. Do you think I could be mistaken about that?"

She glared at him with hot, yellow eyes, indiscretion hovering on her lips. Almost she blurted it out, but not quite. In a choke of anger she turned her face away, going prickly and hot at the deep laughter behind her.

"Have you had your fill of seeking weapons against me?" he went on, still in that voice of mingling condescension and arrogance.

She hesitated a moment. Somehow she must get them both back into the hall of the image. In a voice that trembled she said at last,

"Yes."

"Shall we go back then, to my palace, and prepare for the ceremony which will make you queen?"

The deep voice was still shuddering along her nerves as the mountain behind them and the great dark world below melted together in a mirage through which, as through a veil, a flame began to glow; the flame about an image's head--an image gigantic in a great black hall whose unroofed walls closed round them in magical swiftness. Jirel stared, realizing bewilderedly that without stirring a step she had somehow come again into the black hall where she had first opened her eyes.

A qualm of remembrance came over her as she recalled how fervently she had sworn to herself to die somehow, rather than return here into Pav's power. But now she was armed. She need have no fear now. She looked about her.

Black and enormous, the great image loomed up above them both. She lifted a gaze of new respect to that leaping diadem of flame which crowned the face that was Pav's. She did not understand what it was she must do now, or clearly how to do it, but the resolve was hot in her to take any way out that might lie open rather than submit to the dark power that dwelt in the big, black man at her side.

Hands fell upon her shoulders then, heavily. She whirled in a swirl of velvet skirts into Pav's arms, tight against his broad breast. His breath was hot in her face, and upon her life the beating of savage suns burned the intolerable blackness of his eyes. She could no more meet their heat than she could have stared into a sun. A sob of pure rage choked up in her throat as she thrust hard with both hands against the broad black chest to which she was crushed. He loosed her without a struggle. She staggered with the suddenness of it, and then he had seized her wrist in an iron grip, twisting savagely. Jirel gasped in a wrench of pain and dropped helplessly to one knee. Above her the heavy and ominous voice of Romne's king said in its deepest, most velvety burr, so that she shook to the very depths in

that drum-beat of savage power,

"Resist me again and--things can happen here too dreadful for your brain to grasp even if I told you. Beware of me, Jirel, for Pav's anger is a terrible thing. You have found no weapon to conquer me, and now you must submit to the bargain you yourself proposed. Are you ready, Jirel of Joiry?"

She bent her head so that her face was hidden, and her mouth curved into a twist of fiercely smiling anticipation.

"Yes," she said softly.

Then abruptly, amazingly, upon her face a cold wind blew, heavy with the odor of chill hollowness underground, and in her ears was the thin and tiny coldness of a voice she knew, echoing from reverberant vaults over gulfs unthinkable,

"Ask him to clothe you in bridal dress. Ask him! Ask him now!"

Across the screen of her memory flashed a face like a white-fleshed skull to whose eye-sockets cobwebby shadows clung, whose pale mouth curled in a smile of bitter scorn, maliciously urging her on. But she dared not disobey, for she had staked everything now on the accomplishment of the witch's bargain. Dangerous it might be, but there was worse danger waiting here and now, in Pav's space-black eyes. The thin shrill ceased and the tomb-smelling wind faded, and she heard her own voice saying,

"Let me up, then. Let me up--I am ready. Only am I to have no bridal dress for my wedding? For black ill becomes a bride."

He could not have heard that thin, far-calling echo of a voice, for his dark face did not change and there was no suspicion in his eyes. The iron clutch of his fingers loosened. Jirel swung to her feet lithely

and faced him with downcast eyes, not daring to unveil the yellow triumph that blazed behind her lashes.

"My wedding gown," she reminded him, still in that voice of strangled gentleness.

He laughed, and his eyes sought in empty air. It was the most imperiously regal thing conceivable, that assured glance into emptiness for what, by sheer knowledge of his own power, must materialize in answer to the king of Romne's questing. And all about her, glowing into existence under the sun-hot blackness of Pav's eyes, the soft blue flames were suddenly licking.

Weakness crawled over her as the blueness seethed about her body, brushing, caressing, light as fire-tongues upon her, murmurous with the soft flickering sounds of quiet flame. A weariness like death was settling into her very bones, as if life itself were draining away into the caressing ministrations of those blue and heatless flames. She exulted in her very weakness, knowing how much of her strength must be incarnate, then, in the flames which were to quench Pav's flame. And they would need strength--all she had.

Then again the cold wind blew from hollow tombs, as if through an opened door, and upon the intangible breath of it that did not stir one red curl upon her cheek, though she felt its keenness clearly, the thin, small echo of the corpse-witch's voice cried, tiny and far over spaces beyond measurement,

"Focus them on the Flame--now, now! Quickly! Ah--fool!"

And the ghost of a thin, cool laugh, stinging with scorn, drifting through the measureless voids. Reeling with weakness, Jirel obeyed. The derision in that tiny, far-away voice was like a spur to drive her, though ready anger surged up in her throat against that

strange scorn for which she could find no reason. As strongly as before she felt the breath of danger when the corpse-witch spoke, but she ignored it now, knowing in her heart that Pav must die if she were ever to know peace again, let his dying cost her what it might.

She set her teeth in her red underlip and in the pain of it drove all her strength into a strong focusing upon the flame that burned around the great imaged Pav's head. What would happen she did not know, but in the fog of her weakness, stabbed by her bitten lip's pain, she fought with all the force she had to drive those flames curling like caresses about her body straight toward the flame-crown on the image's majestic brow.

And presently, in little tentative thrusts, the blue tongues that licked her so softly began to turn away from the velvety curves of her own body and reach out toward the image. Sick with weakness as the strength drained out of her into the pulling flames, she fought on, and in an arc that lengthened and stretched away the flames began to forsake her and reach flickeringly out toward the great black statue that loomed overhead.

From far away she heard Pav's deep voice shouting on a note of sudden panic,

"Jirel, Jirel! Don't! Oh, little fool, don't do it!"

It seemed to her that his voice was not that of a man afraid for his own life, but rather as if it was peril to herself he would avert. But she could pay him no heed at all now. Nothing was real but the sharp necessity to quench the image's flame, and she poured all the strength that was left to her into the rainbow of flickering blueness that was arching up toward the image.

"Jirel, Jirel!" the deep voice of Pav was storming from somewhere in

the fog of her weakness. "Stop! You don't know--"

A blast of cold wind drowned the rest of his words, and:

"S-s-s! Go on!" hissed the corpse-witch's voice tinily in her ear. "Don't listen to him! Don't let him stop you! He can't touch you while the blue flames burn! Go on! Go on!"

And she went on. Half fainting, wholly blind now to everything but that stretching arc of blue, she fought. And it lengthened as she poured more and more of her strength into it, reached up and out and grew by leaping degrees until the blue flames were mingling with the red, and over that blazing crown a dimness began to fall. From somewhere in the blind mist of her exhaustion Pav's voice shouted with a note of despair in its shudderingly vibrant depths,

"Oh, Jirel, Jirel! What have you done?"

Exultation surged up in her. The hot reserves of her anger against him flooded over and strength like wine boiled up through her body. In one tremendous burst of fierce energy she hurled every ounce of her newly-won power against the flame. Triumphantly she saw it nicker. There was a moment of guttering twilight; then abruptly the light went out and red flame and blue vanished in a breath. A crashing darkness like the weight of falling skies dropped thunderously about her.

Sick to the very soul with reactionary weakness as the tremendous effort relaxed at last, she heard from reeling distances Pav's voice call wordlessly. All about her the dark was heavy, with a crushing weight that somehow made her whole body ache as if with the pressure of deep seas. In the heaviness of it she scarcely realized that the voice was shouting at all; but even through the dimness of her failing senses she knew that there was something tremendously

wrong with it. In a mighty effort she rallied herself, listening.

Yes--he was trying to speak, trying to tell her something that she knew intuitively was of infinite importance. But his voice was ceasing to be a human voice, becoming less and less articulate and more and more a mighty roaring like the voice of incalculable power. In such a voice a typhoon might speak, or a dynamo more tremendous than any man ever made.

"Jirel--Jirel--why did you..." So much she made out before the words rushed together and melted into that thunderous roar which was the very voice of infinity itself. The darkness was full of it--one with it--intolerable violence upon her ears, intolerable pressure of the black dark upon her body.

Through the roaring void a keen wind blew hollow with the smell of tombs. Jirel, trying to whirl to face it, found herself incapable of motion, a finite and agonized thing in the midst of crashing black thunder whose sound was torment in her brain, whose weight was crushing her very atoms in upon themselves until consciousness flickered within her like a guttering candle flame.

But there was no need to turn. Directions had ceased to be. The wind smote her turned cheek, but before her, as if through an opened door from which coldness streamed, she was aware of a white-shrouded figure floating upon the blackness; an unshadowed figure, staringly white, not touched by anything the blackness could muster against it. Even through the terrible roaring of pure power the corpse-witch's voice struck low and cool in its echo from reverberant caverns; even through the blinding dark her skull-face gleamed, the cobwebbed eyes lurid in the depths of their clinging shadows with a light that glowed from deep within the leprosy-white skull. The witch was laughing.

"O fool!" she lifted in a hollow ripple of scorn as cool as caverns underground. "Poor, presumptuous fool! Did you really think to bargain with us of the outer worlds? Did you really believe that Pav--Pav!--could die? No--in your little human brain how could you have known that all the Romne you saw was illusion, that Pav's human body was no real thing? Blind, hot, earthly woman, with your little hates and vengeance, how could you have reigned queen over a Romne that is Darkness itself--as you see it now? For this roaring night which engulfs you, without dimensions, without form, lightless, inchoate--this is Romne! And Romne is Pav. The land that you walked through, the mountains and plains you saw--all these were no less Pav than the human body he assumed. Nor was his height and black-bearded arrogance any more Pav himself than were the rocks and trees and black waters of Romne. Pav is Romne, and Romne is Pav--one terrible whole out of which all you saw was wrought.

"Yes, shudder, and presently, when I am through with you--die. For no human thing could live in the Romne that is real. When in your foolish vengeance you quenched the flame that burned on the image's head, you sealed your own doom. Only in the power of that flame could the illusion of the land of Romne hold itself steady about you. Only that flame in its tangible light held Romne and Pav in the semblance of reality to you, or kept the weight of the Dark from crushing your puny soul in the soft white flesh you call a body. Only the sound of my voice does it now. When I cease to speak, when the breath of my tomb-breeze ceases to blow around you--then you die."

The cool voice broke into soft and scornful laughter while darkness reeled about Jirel and the roaring was a tumult unbearable in her very brain. Was it indeed the voice of what had been Pav? Then the low, chill voice echoed on,

"But before you die I would have you look upon what you sought to slay. I would have you see the Darkness that is Pav and Romne,

clearly and visibly, so that you might understand what manner of lover I had. And you thought to rival me! Do you think, in your pride of human endurance, you could so much as gaze for one instant upon the inferno that is--Pav!"

In that one ringing word the chill wind ceased, the voice echoed into silence from its heights of scorn, and in the darkness, black upon the black, with no sense that human flesh possesses--neither sight nor hearing nor touch--yet with hideous clarity, she saw.

She saw the Darkness. It was tremendous beyond the power of any human perceptions to endure save in the brief flash she had of it. A thunderous Darkness whose roar was vaster than anything like mere sound. The inferno of it was too hot to bear. The human Pav's eyes had blazed like black suns, intolerably, but that had been only a reflection of this infinite might. This Darkness was the incarnate blaze, and all her consciousness reeled and was in agony before it.

She thought she could not endure to look--even to exist so near to that terrible heat of darkness, but no closing of eyes could shut it out. In the fleeting instant while she saw--through closed eyes and numbed senses, conscious in every fiber of the blaze so close--a vibration from the great Thing that was beyond shape and size and matter shivered through her in a scorch of heat too hot to touch her flesh, though her soul shuddered fainting away. It was not anything like a voice, but there was intelligence in it. And in her brain she received dimly what it said.

"Sorry--would have had you--could have loved you--but go now--go instantly, before you die...."

And somehow, in a way that left her mind blank with the tremendous power of it, that infinite force was commanding obedience even out of the stunning Dark. For the Darkness was Romne, and Romne was

Pav, and the command ran like a shudder of dark lightning from edge to edge, expelling her from its heart in an explosion of black inferno.

Instantly, blindingly, in the numbing shock of that thunderous power, the darkness ceased to engulf her. Light in a dazzle that stunned her very brain burst all around.

She was spun by forces so mighty that their very tremendousness saved her from destruction, as an insect might pass unharmed through a tornado. Infinity was a whirlpool around her, and--

Flagstones pressed cool and smooth against her bare feet. She blinked dizzily. Joiry's chapel walls were rising grayly about her, familiar and dun in the dim light of dawn. She stood here in her doeskin tunic upon the flagstones and breathed in deep gusts, staring about her with dazed eyes that dwelt like lingering caresses upon the familiar things of home.

The Tree of Life

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A gripping tale of the planet Mars and the terrible monstrosity that called its victims to it from afar—a tale of Northwest Smith

Over time-ruined Illar the searching planes swooped and circled. Northwest Smith, peering up at them with a steel-pale stare from the shelter of a half-collapsed temple, thought of vultures wheeling above carrion. All day long now they had been raking these ruins for him. Presently, he knew, thirst would begin to parch his throat and hunger to gnaw at him. There was neither food nor water in these ancient Martian ruins, and he knew that it could be only a matter of time before the urgencies of his own body would drive him out to signal those wheeling Patrol ships and trade his hard-won liberty for food and drink. He crouched lower under the shadow of the temple arch and cursed the accuracy of the Patrol gunner whose flame-blast had caught his dodging ship just at the edge of Illar's ruins.

Presently it occurred to him that in most Martian temples of the ancient days an ornamental well had stood in the outer court for the benefit of wayfarers. Of course all water in it would be a million years dry now, but for lack of anything better to do he rose from his seat at the edge of the collapsed central dome and made his cautious way by still intact corridors toward the front of the temple. He paused in a tangle of wreckage at the courtyard's edge and looked out across the sun-drenched expanse of pavement toward that ornate well that once had served travelers who passed by here in the days when Mars was a green planet.

It was an unusually elaborate well, and amazingly well preserved. Its rim had been inlaid with a mosaic pattern whose symbolism must

once have borne deep meaning, and above it in a great fan of time-defying bronze an elaborate grille-work portrayed the inevitable tree-of-life pattern which so often appears in the symbolism of the three worlds. Smith looked at it a bit incredulously from his shelter, it was so miraculously preserved amidst all this chaos of broken stone, casting a delicate tracery of shadow on the sunny pavement as perfectly as it must have done a million years ago when dusty travelers paused here to drink. He could picture them filing in at noontime through the great gates that--

The vision vanished abruptly as his questing eyes made the circle of the ruined walls. There had been no gate. He could not find a trace of it anywhere around the outer wall of the court. The only entrance here, as nearly as he could tell from the foundations that remained, had been the door in whose ruins he now stood. Queer. This must have been a private court, then, its great grille-crowned well reserved for the use of the priests. Or wait--had there not been a priest-king Illar after whom the city was named? A wizard-king, so legend said, who ruled temple as well as palace with an iron hand. This elaborately patterned well, of material royal enough to withstand the weight of ages, might well have been sacrosanct for the use of that long-dead monarch. It might--

Across the sun-bright pavement swept the shadow of a plane. Smith dodged back into deeper hiding while the ship circled low over the courtyard. And it was then, as he crouched against a crumbled wall and waited, motionless, for the danger to pass, that he became aware for the first time of a sound that startled him so he could scarcely credit his ears--a recurrent sound, choked and sorrowful--the sound of a woman sobbing.

The incongruity of it made him forgetful for a moment of the peril hovering overhead in the sun-hot outdoors. The dimness of the temple ruins became a living and vital place for that moment,

throbbing with the sound of tears. He looked about half in incredulity, wondering if hunger and thirst were playing tricks on him already, or if these broken halls might be haunted by a million-years-old sorrow that wept along the corridors to drive its hearers mad. There were tales of such haunters in some of Mars' older ruins. The hair prickled faintly at the back of his neck as he laid a hand on the butt of his force-gun and commenced a cautious prow toward the source of the muffled noise.

Presently he caught a flash of white, luminous in the gloom of these ruined walls, and went forward with soundless steps, eyes narrowed in the effort to make out what manner of creature this might be that wept alone in time-forgotten ruins. It was a woman. Or it had the dim outlines of a woman, huddled against an angle of fallen walls and veiled in a fabulous shower of long dark hair. But there was something uncannily odd about her. He could not focus his pale stare upon her outlines. She was scarcely more than a luminous blot of whiteness in the gloom, shimmering with a look of unreality which the sound of her sobs denied.

Before he could make up his mind just what to do, something must have warned the weeping girl that she was no longer alone, for the sound of her tears checked suddenly and she lifted her head, turning to him a face no more distinguishable than her body's outlines. He made no effort to resolve the blurred features into visibility, for out of that luminous mask burned two eyes that caught his with an almost perceptible impact and gripped them in a stare from which he could not have turned if he would.

They were the most amazing eyes he had ever met, colored like moonstone, milkily translucent, so that they looked almost blind. And that magnetic stare held him motionless. In the instant that she gripped him with that fixed, moonstone look he felt oddly as if a tangible bond were taut between them.

Then she spoke, and he wondered if his mind, after all, had begun to give way in the haunted loneliness of dead Illar; for though the words she spoke fell upon his ears in a gibberish of meaningless sounds, yet in his brain a message formed with a clarity that far transcended the halting communication of words. And her milkily colored eyes bored into his with a fierce intensity.

"I'm lost--I'm lost--" wailed the voice in his brain.

A rush of sudden tears brimmed the compelling eyes, veiling their brilliance. And he was free again with that clouding of the moonstone surfaces. Her voice wailed, but the words were meaningless and no knowledge formed in his brain to match them. Stiffly he stepped back a pace and looked down at her, a feeling of helpless incredulity rising within him. For he still could not focus directly upon the shining whiteness of her, and nothing save those moonstone eyes were clear to him.

The girl sprang to her feet and rose on tiptoe, gripping his shoulders with urgent hands. Again the blind intensity of her eyes took hold of his, with a force almost as tangible as the clutch of her hands; again that stream of intelligence poured into his brain, strongly, pleadingly.

"Please, please take me back! I'm so frightened--I can't find my way--oh, please!"

He blinked down at her, his dazed mind gradually realizing the basic facts of what was happening. Obviously her milky, unseeing eyes held a magnetic power that carried her thoughts to him without the need of a common speech. And they were the eyes of a powerful mind, the outlets from which a stream of fierce energy poured into his brain. Yet the words they conveyed were the words of a terrified and helpless girl. A strong sense of wariness was rising in him as he

considered the incongruity of speech and power, both of which were beating upon him more urgently with every breath. The mind of a forceful and strong-willed woman, carrying the sobs of a frightened girl. There was no sincerity in it.

"Please, please!" cried her impatience in his brain. "Help me! Guide me back!"

"Back where?" he heard his own voice asking.

"The Tree!" wailed that queer speech in his brain, while gibberish was all his ears heard and the moonstone stare transfixed him strongly. "The Tree of Life! Oh, take me back to the shadow of the Tree!"

A vision of the grille-ornamented well leaped into his memory. It was the only tree symbol he could think of just then. But what possible connection could there be between the well and the lost girl--if she was lost? Another wail in that unknown tongue, another anguished shake of his shoulders, brought a sudden resolution into his groping mind. There could be no harm in leading her back to the well, to whose grille she must surely be referring. And strong curiosity was growing in his mind. Much more than met the eye was concealed in this queer incident. And a wild guess had flashed through his mind that perhaps she might have come from some subterranean world into which the well descended. It would explain her luminous pallor, if not her blurriness; and, too, her eyes did not seem to function in the light. There was a much more incredible explanation of her presence, but he was not to know it for a few minutes yet.

"Come along," he said, taking the clutching hands gently from his shoulders. "I'll lead you to the well."

She sighed in a deep gust of relief and dropped her compelling eyes

from his, murmuring in that strange, gabbling tongue what must have been thanks. He took her by the hand and turned toward the ruined archway of the door.

Against his fingers her flesh was cool and firm. To the touch she was tangible, but even thus near, his eyes refused to focus upon the cloudy opacity of her body, the dark blur of her streaming hair. Nothing but those burning, blinded eyes were strong enough to pierce the veil that parted them.

She stumbled along at his side over the rough floor of the temple, saying nothing more, panting with eagerness to return to her incomprehensible "tree." How much of that eagerness was assumed Smith still could not be quite sure. When they reached the door he halted her for a moment, scanning the sky for danger. Apparently the ships had finished with this quarter of the city, for he could see two or three of them half a mile away, hovering low over Illar's northern section. He could risk it without much peril. He led the girl cautiously out into the sun-hot court.

She could not have known by sight that they neared the well, but when they were within twenty paces of it she flung up her blurred head suddenly and tugged at his hand. It was she who led him that last stretch which parted the two from the well. In the sun the shadow tracery of the grille's symbolic pattern lay vividly outlined on the ground. The girl gave a little gasp of delight. She dropped his hand and ran forward three short steps, and plunged into the very center of that shadowy pattern on the ground. And what happened then was too incredible to believe.

The pattern ran over her like a garment, curving to the curve of her body in the way all shadows do. But as she stood there striped and laced with the darkness of it, there came a queer shifting in the lines of black tracery, a subtle, inexplicable movement to one side. And

with that motion she vanished. It was exactly as if that shifting had moved her out of one world into another. Stupidly Smith stared at the spot from which she had disappeared.

Then several things happened almost simultaneously. The zoom of a plane broke suddenly into the quiet, a black shadow dipped low over the rooftops, and Smith, too late, realized that he stood defenseless in full view of the searching ships. There was only one way out, and that was too fantastic to put faith in, but he had no time to hesitate. With one leap he plunged full into the midst of the shadow of the tree of life.

Its tracery flowed round him, molding its pattern to his body. And outside the boundaries everything executed a queer little sidewise dip and slipped in the most extraordinary manner, like an optical illusion, into quite another scene. There was no intervention of blankness. It was as if he looked through the bars of a grille upon a picture which without warning slipped sidewise, while between the bars appeared another scene, a curious, dim landscape, gray as if with the twilight of early evening. The air had an oddly thickened look, through which he saw the quiet trees and the flower-spangled grass of the place with a queer, unreal blending, like the landscape in a tapestry, all its outlines blurred.

In the midst of this tapestried twilight the burning whiteness of the girl he had followed blazed like a flame. She had paused a few steps away and stood waiting, apparently quite sure that he would come after. He grinned a little to himself as he realized it, knowing that curiosity must almost certainly have driven him in her wake even if the necessity for shelter had not compelled his following.

She was clearly visible now, in this thickened dimness—visible, and very lovely, and a little unreal. She shone with a burning clarity, the only vivid thing in the whole twilit world. Eyes upon that blazing

whiteness, Smith stepped forward, scarcely realizing that he had moved.

Slowly he crossed the dark grass toward her. That grass was soft under-foot, and thick with small, low-blooming flowers of a shining pallor. Botticelli painted such spangled swards for the feet of his angels. Upon it the girl's bare feet gleamed whiter than the blossoms. She wore no garment but the royal mantle of her hair, sweeping about her in a cloak of shining darkness that had a queer, unreal tinge of purple in that low light. It brushed her ankles in its fabulous length. From the hood of it she watched Smith coming toward her, a smile on her pale mouth and a light blazing in the deeps of her moonstone eyes. She was not blind now, nor frightened. She stretched out her hand to him confidently.

"It is my turn now to lead you," she smiled. As before, the words were gibberish, but the penetrating stare of those strange white eyes gave them a meaning in the depths of his brain.

Automatically his hand went out to hers. He was a little dazed, and her eyes were very compelling. Her fingers twined in his and she set off over the flowery grass, pulling him beside her. He did not ask where they were going. Lost in the dreamy spell of the still, gray, enchanted place, he felt no need for words. He was beginning to see more clearly in the odd, blurring twilight that ran the outlines of things together in that queer, tapestried manner. And he puzzled in a futile, muddled way as he went on over what sort of land he had come into. Overhead was darkness, paling into twilight near the ground, so that when he looked up he was staring into bottomless deeps of starless night.

Trees and flowering shrubs and the flower-starred grass stretched emptily about them in the thick, confusing gloom of the place. He could see only a little distance through that dim air. It was as if they

walked a strip of tapestried twilight in some unlighted dream. And the girl, with her lovely, luminous body and richly colored robe of hair was like a woman in a tapestry too, unreal and magical.

After a while, when he had become a little adjusted to the queerness of the whole scene, he began to notice furtive movements in the shrubs and trees they passed. Things flickered too swiftly for him to catch their outlines, but from the tail of his eye he was aware of motion, and somehow of eyes that watched. That sensation was a familiar one to him, and he kept an uneasy gaze on those shiftings in the shrubbery as they went on. Presently he caught a watcher in full view between bush and tree, and saw that it was a man, a little, furtive, dark-skinned man who dodged hastily back into cover again before Smith's eyes could do more than take in the fact of his existence.

After that he knew what to expect and could make them out more easily: little, darting people with big eyes that shone with a queer, sorrowful darkness from their small, frightened faces as they scuttled through the bushes, dodging always just out of plain sight among the leaves. He could hear the soft rustle of their passage, and once or twice when they passed near a clump of shrubbery he thought he caught the echo of little whispering calls, gentle as the rustle of leaves and somehow full of a strange warning note so clear that he caught it even amid the murmur of their speech. Warning calls, and little furtive hidings in the leaves, and a landscape of tapestried blurring carpeted with Botticelli flower-strewn sward. It was all a dream. He felt quite sure of that.

It was a long while before curiosity awakened in him sufficiently to make him break the stillness. But at last he asked dreamily,

"Where are we going?"

The girl seemed to understand that without the necessity of the bond her hypnotic eyes made, for she turned and caught his eyes in a white stare and answered,

"To Thag. Thag desires you."

"What is Thag?"

In answer to that she launched without preliminary upon a little singsong monolog of explanation whose stereotyped formula made him faintly uneasy with the thought that it must have been made very often to attain the status of a set speech; made to many men, perhaps, whom Thag had desired. And what became of them afterward? he wondered. But the girl was speaking.

"Many ages ago there dwelt in Illar the great King Illar for whom the city was named. He was a magician of mighty power, but not mighty enough to fulfill all his ambitions. So by his arts he called up out of darkness the being known as Thag, and with him struck a bargain. By that bargain Thag was to give of his limitless power, serving Illar all the days of Illar's life, and in return the king was to create a land for Thag's dwelling-place and people it with slaves and furnish a priestess to tend Thag's needs. This is that land. I am that priestess, the latest of a long line of women born to serve Thag. The tree-people are his--his lesser servants.

"I have spoken softly so that the tree-people do not hear, for to them Thag is the center and focus of creation, the end and beginning of all life. But to you I have told the truth."

"But what does Thag want of me?"

"It is not for Thag's servants to question Thag."

"Then what becomes, afterward, of the men Thag desires?" he

pursued.

"You must ask Thag that."

She turned her eyes away as she spoke, snapping the mental bond that had flowed between them with a suddenness that left Smith dizzy. He went on at her side more slowly, pulling back a little on the tug of her fingers. By degrees the sense of dreaminess was fading, and alarm began to stir in the deeps of his mind. After all, there was no reason why he need let this blank-eyed priestess lead him up to the very maw of her god. She had lured him into this land by what he knew now to have been a trick; might she not have worse tricks than that in store for him?

She held him, after all, by nothing stronger than the clasp of her fingers, if he could keep his eyes turned from hers. Therein lay her real power, but he could fight it if he chose. And he began to hear more clearly than ever the queer note of warning in the rustling whispers of the tree-folk who still fluttered in and out of sight among the leaves. The twilight place had taken on menace and evil.

Suddenly he made up his mind. He stopped, breaking the clasp of the girl's hand.

"I'm not going," he said.

She swung round in a sweep of richly tinted hair, words jetting from her in a gush of incoherence. But he dared not meet her eyes, and they conveyed no meaning to him. Resolutely he turned away, ignoring her voice, and set out to retrace the way they had come. She called after him once, in a high, clear voice that somehow held a note as warning as that in the rustling voices of the tree-people, but he kept on doggedly, not looking back. She laughed then, sweetly and scornfully, a laugh that echoed uneasily in his mind long after the

sound of it had died upon the twilight air.

After a while he glanced back over one shoulder, half expecting to see the luminous dazzle of her body still glowing in the dim glade where he had left her; but the blurred tapestry-landscape was quite empty.

He went on in the midst of a silence so deep it hurt his ears, and in a solitude unhaunted even by the shy presences of the tree-folk. They had vanished with the fire-bright girl, and the whole twilight land was empty save for himself. He plodded on across the dark grass, crushing the upturned flower-faces under his boots and asking himself wearily if he could be mad. There seemed little other explanation for this hushed and tapestried solitude that had swallowed him up. In that thunderous quiet, in that deathly solitude, he went on.

When he had walked for what seemed to him much longer than it should have taken to reach his starting-point, and still no sign of an exit appeared, he began to wonder if there were any way out of the gray land of Thag. For the first time he realized that he had come through no tangible gateway. He had only stepped out of a shadow, and--now that he thought of it--there were no shadows here. The grayness swallowed everything up, leaving the landscape oddly flat, like a badly drawn picture. He looked about helplessly, quite lost now and not sure in what direction he should be facing, for there was nothing here by which to know directions. The trees and shrubs and the starry grass still stretched about him, uncertainly outlined in that changeless dusk. They seemed to go on for ever.

But he plodded ahead, unwilling to stop because of a queer tension in the air, somehow as if all the blurred trees and shrubs were waiting in breathless anticipation, centering upon his stumbling figure. But all trace of animate life had vanished with the

disappearance of the priestess'white-glowing figure. Head down, paying little heed to where he was going, he went on over the flowery sward.

An odd sense of voids about him startled Smith at last out of his lethargic plodding. He lifted his head. He stood just at the edge of a line of trees, dim and indistinct in the unchanging twilight. Beyond them--he came to himself with a jerk and stared incredulously. Beyond them the grass ran down to nothingness, merging by imperceptible degrees into a streaked and arching void--not the sort of emptiness into which a material body could fall, but a solid nothing, curving up toward the dark zenith as the inside of a sphere curves. No physical thing could have entered there. It was too utterly void, an inviolable emptiness which no force could invade.

He stared up along the inward arch of that curving, impassable wall. Here, then, was the edge of the queer land Illar had wrested out of space itself. This arch must be the curving of solid space which had been bent awry to enclose the magical land. There was no escape this way. He could not even bring himself to approach any nearer to that streaked and arching blank. He could not have said why, but it woke in him an inner disquiet so strong that after a moment's staring he turned his eyes away.

Presently he shrugged and set off along the inside of the line of trees which parted him from the space-wall. Perhaps there might be a break somewhere. It was a forlorn hope, but the best that offered. Wearily he stumbled on over the flowery grass.

How long he had gone on along that almost imperceptibly curving line of border he could not have said, but after a timeless interval of gray solitude he gradually became aware that a tiny rustling and whispering among the leaves had been growing louder by degrees for some time. He looked up. In and out among the trees which

bordered that solid wall of nothingness little, indistinguishable figures were flitting. The tree-men had returned. Queerly grateful for their presence, he went on a bit more cheerfully, paying no heed to their timid dartings to and fro, for Smith was wise in the ways of wild life.

Presently, when they saw how little heed he paid them, they began to grow bolder, their whispers louder. And among those rustling voices he thought he was beginning to catch threads of familiarity. Now and again a word reached his ears that he seemed to recognize, lost amidst the gibberish of their speech. He kept his head down and his hands quiet, plodding along with a cunning stillness that began to bear results.

From the corner of his eye he could see that a little dark tree-man had darted out from cover and paused midway between bush and tree to inspect the queer, tall stranger. Nothing happened to this daring venturer, and soon another risked a pause in the open to stare at the quiet walker among the trees. In a little while a small crowd of the tree-people was moving slowly parallel with his course, staring with all the avid curiosity of wild things at Smith's plodding figure. And among them the rustling whispers grew louder.

Presently the ground dipped down into a little hollow ringed with trees. It was a bit darker here than it had been on the higher level, and as he went down the slope of its side he saw that among the underbrush which filled it were cunningly hidden huts twined together out of the living bushes. Obviously the hollow was a tiny village where the tree-folk dwelt.

He was surer of this when they began to grow bolder as he went down into the dimness of the place. The whispers shrilled a little, and the boldest among his watchers ran almost at his elbow, twittering their queer, broken speech in hushed syllables whose familiarity still bothered him with its haunting echo of words he knew. When he had

reached the center of the hollow he became aware that the little folk had spread out in a ring to surround him. Wherever he looked their small, anxious faces and staring eyes confronted him. He grinned to himself and came to a halt, waiting gravely.

None of them seemed quite brave enough to constitute himself spokesman, but among several a hurried whispering broke out in which he caught the words "Thag" and "danger" and "beware." He recognized the meaning of these words without placing in his mind their origins in some tongue he knew. He knit his sun-bleached brows and concentrated harder, striving to wrest from that curious, murmuring whisper some hint of its original root. He had a smattering of more tongues than he could have counted offhand, and it was hard to place these scattered words among any one speech.

But the word "Thag" had a sound like that of the very ancient dryland tongue, which upon Mars is considered at once the oldest and the most uncouth of all the planet's languages. And with that clue to guide him he presently began to catch other syllables which were remotely like syllables from the dryland speech. They were almost unrecognizable, far, far more ancient than the very oldest versions of the tongue he had ever heard repeated, almost primitive in their crudity and simplicity. And for a moment the sheerest awe came over him, as he realized the significance of what he listened to.

The dryland race today is a handful of semi-brutes, degenerate from the ages of past time when they were a mighty people at the apex of an almost forgotten glory. That day is millions of years gone now, too far in the past to have record save in the vaguest folklore. Yet here was a people who spoke the rudiments of that race's tongue as it must have been spoken in the race's dim beginnings, perhaps a million years earlier even than that immemorial time of their triumph. The reeling of millenniums set Smith's mind awirl with the effort at compassing their span.

There was another connotation in the speaking of that tongue by these timid bush-dwellers, too. It must mean that the forgotten wizard king, Illar, had peopled his sinister, twilight land with the ancestors of today's dryland dwellers. If they shared the same tongue they must share the same lineage. And humanity's remorseless adaptability had done the rest.

It had been no kinder here than in the outside world, where the ancient plains-men who had roamed Mars'green prairies had dwindled with their dying plains, degenerating at last into a shrunken, leather-skinned bestiality. For here that same race root had declined into these tiny, slinking creatures with their dusky skins and great, staring eyes and their voices that never rose above a whisper. What tragedies must lie behind that gradual degeneration!

All about him the whispers still ran. He was beginning to suspect that through countless ages of hiding and murmuring those voices must have lost the ability to speak aloud. And he wondered with a little inward chill what terror it was which had transformed a free and fearless people into these tiny wild things whispering in the underbrush.

The little anxious voices had shrilled into vehemence now, all of them chattering together in their queer, soft, rustling whispers. Looking back later upon that timeless space he had passed in the hollow, Smith remembered it as some curious nightmare--dimness and tapestried blurring, and a hush like death over the whole twilight land, and the timid voices whispering, whispering, eloquent with terror and warning.

He groped back among his memories and brought forth a phrase or two remembered from long ago, an archaic rendering of the immemorial tongue they spoke. It was the simplest version he could

remember of the complex speech now used, but he knew that to them it must sound fantastically strange. Instinctively he whispered as he spoke it, feeling like an actor in a play as he mouthed the ancient idiom,

"I--I cannot understand. Speak--more slowly--"

A torrent of words greeted this rendering of their tongue. Then there was a great deal of hushing and hissing, and presently two or three between them began laboriously to recite an involved speech, one syllable at a time. Always two or more shared the task. Never in his converse with them did he address anyone directly. Ages of terror had bred all directness out of them.

"Thag," they said. "Thag, the terrible--Thag, the omnipotent--Thag, the unescapable. Beware of Thag."

For a moment Smith stood quiet, grinning down at them despite himself. There must not be too much of intelligence left among this branch of the race, either, for surely such a warning was superfluous. Yet they had mastered their agonies of timidity to give it. All virtue could not yet have been bred out of them, then. They still had kindness and a sort of desperate courage rooted deep in fear.

"What is Thag?" he managed to inquire, voicing the archaic syllables uncertainly. And they must have understood the meaning if not the phraseology, for another spate of whispered tumult burst from the clustering tribe. Then, as before, several took up the task of answering.

"Thag--Thag, the end and the beginning, the center of creation. When Thag breathes the world trembles. The earth was made for Thag's dwelling-place. All things are Thag's. Oh, beware! Beware!"

This much he pieced together out of their diffuse whisperings, catching up the fragments of words he knew and fitting them into the pattern.

"What--what is the danger?" he managed to ask.

"Thag--hungers. Thag must be fed. It is we who--feed--him, but there are times when he desires other food than us. It is then he sends his priestess forth to lure--food--in. Oh, beware of Thag!"

"You mean then, that she--the priestess--brought me in for--food?"

A chorus of grave, murmuring affirmatives.

"Then why did she leave me?"

"There is no escape from Thag. Thag is the center of creation. All things are Thag's. When he calls, you must answer. When he hungers, he will have you. Beware of Thag!"

Smith considered that for a moment in silence. In the main he felt confident that he had understood their warning correctly, and he had little reason to doubt that they knew whereof they spoke. Thag might not be the center of the universe, but if they said he could call a victim from anywhere in the land, Smith was not disposed to doubt it. The priestess's willingness to let him leave her unhindered, yes, even her scornful laughter as he looked back, told the same story. Whatever Thag might be, his power in this land could not be doubted. He made up his mind suddenly what he must do, and turned to the breathlessly waiting little folk.

"Which way--lies Thag?" he asked.

A score of dark, thin arms pointed. Smith turned his head speculatively toward the spot they indicated. In this changeless

twilight all sense of direction had long since left him, but he marked the line as well as he could by the formation of the trees, then turned to the little people with a ceremonious farewell rising to his lips.

"My thanks for--" he began, to be interrupted by a chorus of whispering cries of protest. They seemed to sense his intention, and their pleadings were frantic. A panic anxiety for him glowed upon every little terrified face turned up to his, and their eyes were wide with protest and terror. Helplessly he looked down.

"I--I must go," he tried stumblingly to say. "My only chance is to take Thag unawares, before he sends for me."

He could not know if they understood. Their chattering went on undiminished, and they even went so far as to lay tiny hands on him, as if they would prevent him by force from seeking out the terror of their lives.

"No, no, no!" they wailed murmuringly. "You do not know what it is you seek! You do not know Thag! Stay here! Beware of Thag!"

A little prickling of unease went down Smith's back as he listened. Thag must be very terrible indeed if even half this alarm had foundation. And to be quite frank with himself, he would greatly have preferred to remain here in the hidden quiet of the hollow, with its illusion of shelter, for as long as he was allowed to stay. But he was not of the stuff that yields very easily to its own terrors, and hope burned strongly in him still. So he squared his broad shoulders and turned resolutely in the direction the tree-folk had indicated.

When they saw that he meant to go, their protests sank to a wail of bitter grieving. With that sound moaning behind him he went up out of the hollow, like a man setting forth to the music of his own dirge. A few of the bravest went with him a little way, flitting through the

underbrush and darting from tree to tree in a timidity so deeply ingrained that even when no immediate peril threatened they dared not go openly through the twilight.

Their presence was comforting to Smith as he went on. A futile desire to help the little terror-ridden tribe was rising in him, a useless gratitude for their warning and their friendliness, their genuine grieving at his departure and their odd, paradoxical bravery even in the midst of hereditary terror. But he knew that he could do nothing for them, when he was not at all sure he could even save himself. Something of their panic had communicated itself to him, and he advanced with a sinking at the pit of his stomach. Fear of the unknown is so poignant a thing, feeding on its own terror, that he found his hands beginning to shake a little and his throat going dry as he went on.

The rustling and whispering among the bushes dwindled as his followers one by one dropped away, the bravest staying the longest, but even they failing in courage as Smith advanced steadily in that direction from which all their lives they had been taught to turn their faces. Presently he realized that he was alone once more. He went on more quickly, anxious to come face to face with this horror of the twilight and dispel at least the fearfulness of its mystery.

The silence was like death. Not a breeze stirred the leaves, and the only sound was his own breathing, the heavy thud of his own heart. Somehow he felt sure that he was coming nearer to his goal. The hush seemed to confirm it. He loosened the force-gun at his thigh.

In that changeless twilight the ground was sloping down once more into a broader hollow. He descended slowly, every sense alert for danger, not knowing if Thag was beast or human or elemental, visible or invisible. The trees were beginning to thin. He knew that he had almost reached his goal.

He paused at the edge of the last line of trees. A clearing spread out before him at the bottom of the hollow, quiet in the dim, translucent air. He could focus directly upon no outlines anywhere, for the tapestried blurring of the place. But when he saw what stood in the very center of the clearing he stopped dead-still, like one turned to stone, and a shock of utter cold went chilling through him. Yet he could not have said why.

For in the clearing's center stood the Tree of Life. He had met the symbol too often in patterns and designs not to recognize it, but here that fabulous thing was living, growing, actually springing up from a rooted firmness in the spangled grass as any tree might spring. Yet it could not be real. Its thin brown trunk, of no recognizable substance, smooth and gleaming, mounted in the traditional spiral; its twelve fantastically curving branches arched delicately outward from the central stem. It was bare of leaves. No foliage masked the serpentine brown spiral of the trunk. But at the tip of each symbolic branch flowered a blossom of bloody rose so vivid he could scarcely focus his dazzled eyes upon them.

This tree alone of all objects in the dim land was sharply distinct to the eye--terribly distinct, remorselessly clear. No words can describe the amazing menace that dwelt among its branches. Smith's flesh crept as he stared, yet he could not for all his staring make out why peril was so eloquent there. To all appearances here stood only a fabulous symbol miraculously come to life; yet danger breathed out from it so strongly that Smith felt the hair lifting on his neck as he stared.

It was no ordinary danger. A nameless, choking, paralyzed panic was swelling in his throat as he gazed upon the perilous beauty of the Tree. Somehow the arches and curves of its branches seemed to limn a pattern so dreadful that his heart beat faster as he gazed

upon it. But he could not guess why, though somehow the answer was hovering just out of reach of his conscious mind. From that first glimpse of it his instincts shuddered like a shying stallion, yet reason still looked in vain for an answer.

Nor was the Tree merely a vegetable growth. It was alive, terribly, ominously alive. He could not have said how he knew that, for it stood motionless in its empty clearing, not a branch trembling, yet in its immobility more awfully vital than any animate thing. The very sight of it woke in Smith an insane urging to flight, to put worlds between himself and this inexplicably dreadful thing.

Crazy impulses stirred in his brain, coming to insane birth at the calling of the Tree's peril—the desperate need to shut out the sight of that thing that was blasphemy, to put out his own sight rather than gaze longer upon the perilous grace of its branches, to slit his own throat that he might not need to dwell in the same world which housed so frightful a sight as the Tree.

All this was a mad battering in his brain. The strength of him was enough to isolate it in a far corner of his consciousness, where it seethed and shrieked half heeded while he turned the cool control which the spaceways life had taught him to the solution of this urgent question. But even so his hand was moist and shaking on his gun-butt, and the breath rasped in his dry throat.

Why—he asked himself in a determined groping after steadiness—should the mere sight of a tree, even so fabulous a one as this, rouse that insane panic in the gazer? What peril could dwell invisibly in a tree so frightful that the living horror of it could drive a man mad with the very fact of its unseen presence? He clenched his teeth hard and stared resolutely at that terrible beauty in the clearing, fighting down the sick panic that rose in his throat as his eyes forced themselves to dwell upon the Tree.

Gradually the revulsion subsided. After a nightmare of striving he mustered the strength to force it down far enough to allow reason's entry once more. Sternly holding down that frantic terror under the surface of consciousness, he stared resolutely at the Tree. And he knew that this was Thag.

It could be nothing else, for surely two such dreadful things could not dwell in one land. It must be Thag, and he could understand now the immemorial terror in which the tree-folk held it, but he did not yet grasp in what way it threatened them physically. The inexplicable dreadfulness of it was a menace to the mind's very existence, but surely a rooted tree, however terrible to look at, could wield little actual danger.

As he reasoned, his eyes were seeking restlessly among the branches, searching for the answer to their dreadfulness. After all, this thing wore the aspect of an old pattern, and in that pattern there was nothing dreadful. The tree of life had made up the design upon that well-top in Illar through whose shadow he had entered here, and nothing in that bronze grille-work had roused terror. Then why--? What living menace dwelt invisibly among these branches to twist them into curves of horror?

A fragment of old verse drifted through his mind as he stared in perplexity: What immortal hand or eye Could frame thy fearful symmetry?

And for the first time the true significance of a "fearful symmetry" broke upon him. Truly a more than human agency must have arched these subtle curves so delicately into dreadfulness, into such an awful beauty that the very sight of it made those atavistic terrors he was so sternly holding down leap in a gibbering terror.

A tremor rippled over the Tree. Smith froze rigid, staring with startled eyes. No breath of wind had stirred through the clearing, but the Tree was moving with a slow, serpentine grace, writhing its branches leisurely in a horrible travesty of voluptuous enjoyment. And upon their tips the blood-red flowers were spreading like cobra's hoods, swelling and stretching their petals out and glowing with a hue so eye-piercingly vivid that it transcended the bounds of color and blazed forth like pure light.

But it was not toward Smith that they stirred. They were arching out from the central trunk toward the far side of the clearing. After a moment Smith tore his eyes away from the indescribably dreadful flexibility of those branches and looked to see the cause of their writhing.

A blaze of luminous white had appeared among the trees across the clearing. The priestess had returned. He watched her pacing slowly toward the Tree, walking with a precise and delicate grace as liquidly lovely as the motion of the Tree. Her fabulous hair swung down about her in a swaying robe that rippled at every step away from the moon-white beauty of her body. Straight toward the Tree she paced, and all the blossoms glowed more vividly at her nearness, the branches stretching toward her, rippling with eagerness.

Priestess though she was, he could not believe that she was going to come within touch of that Tree the very sight of which roused such a panic instinct of revulsion in every fiber of him. But she did not swerve or slow in her advance. Walking delicately over the flowery grass, arrogantly luminous in the twilight, so that her body was the center and focus of any landscape she walked in, she neared her horribly eager god.

Now she was under the Tree, and its trunk had writhed down over her

and she was lifting her arms like a girl to her lover. With a gliding slowness the flame-tipped branches slid round her. In that incredible embrace she stood immobile for a long moment, the Tree arching down with all its curling limbs, the girl straining upward, her head thrown back and the mantle of her hair swinging free of her body as she lifted her face to the quivering blossoms. The branches gathered her closer in their embrace. Now the blossoms arched near, curving down all about her, touching her very gently, twisting their blazing faces toward the focus of her moon-white body. One poised directly above her face, trembled, brushed her mouth lightly. And the Tree's tremor ran unbroken through the body of the girl it clasped.

The incredible dreadfulness of that embrace was suddenly more than Smith could bear. All his terrors, crushed down with so stern a self-control, without warning burst all bounds and rushed over him in a flood of blind revulsion. A whimper choked up in his throat and quite involuntarily he swung round and plunged into the shielding trees, hands to his eyes in a futile effort to blot out the sight of lovely horror behind him whose vividness was burnt upon his very brain.

Heedlessly he blundered through the trees, no thought in his terror-blank mind save the necessity to run, run, run until he could run no more. He had given up all attempt at reason and rationality; he no longer cared why the beauty of the Tree was so dreadful. He only knew that until all space lay between him and its symmetry he must run and run and run.

What brought that frenzied madness to an end he never knew. When sanity returned to him he was lying face down on the flower-spangled sward in a silence so deep that his ears ached with its heaviness. The grass was cool against his cheek. For a moment he fought the back-flow of knowledge into his emptied mind. When it came, the memory of that horror he had fled from, he started up with a wild thing's swiftness and glared around pale-eyed into the unchanging

dusk. He was alone. Not even a rustle in the leaves spoke of the tree-folk's presence.

For a moment he stood there alert, wondering what had roused him, wondering what would come next. He was not left long in doubt. The answer was shrilling very, very faintly through that aching quiet, an infinitesimally tiny, unthinkable far-away murmur which yet pierced his ear-drums with the sharpness of tiny needles. Breathless, he strained in listening. Swiftly the sound grew louder. It deepened upon the silence, sharpened and shrilled until the thin blade of it was vibrating in the center of his innermost brain.

And still it grew, swelling louder and louder through the twilight world in cadences that were rounding into a queer sort of music and taking on such an unbearable sweetness that Smith pressed his hands over his ears in a futile attempt to shut the sound away. He could not. It rang in steadily deepening intensities through every fiber of his being, piercing him with thousands of tiny music-blades that quivered in his very soul with intolerable beauty. And he thought he sensed in the piercing strength of it a vibration of queer, unnamable power far mightier than anything ever generated by man, the dim echo of some cosmic dynamo's hum.

The sound grew sweeter as it strengthened, with a queer, inexplicable sweetness unlike any music he had ever heard before, rounder and fuller and more complete than any melody made up of separate notes. Stronger and stronger he felt the certainty that it was the song of some mighty power, humming and throbbing and deepening through the twilight until the whole dim land was one trembling reservoir of sound that filled his entire consciousness with its throbbing, driving out all other thoughts and realizations, until he was no more than a shell that vibrated in answer to the calling.

For it was a calling. No one could listen to that intolerable sweetness

without knowing the necessity to seek its source. Remotely in the back of his mind Smith remembered the tree-folk's warning, "When Thag calls, you must answer." Not consciously did he recall it, for all his consciousness was answering the siren humming in the air, and, scarcely realizing that he moved, he had turned toward the source of that calling, stumbling blindly over the flowery sward with no thought in his music-brimmed mind but the need to answer that lovely, power-vibrant summoning.

Past him as he went on moved other shapes, little and dark-skinned and ecstatic, gripped like himself in the hypnotic melody. The tree-folk had forgotten even their inbred fear at Thag's calling, and walked boldly through the open twilight, lost in the wonder of the song.

Smith went on with the rest, deaf and blind to the land around him, alive to one thing only, that summons from the siren tune. Unrealizingly, he retraced the course of his frenzied flight, past the trees and bushes he had blundered through, down the slope that led to the Tree's hollow, through the thinning of the underbrush to the very edge of the last line of foliage which marked the valley's rim.

By now the calling was so unbearably intense, so intolerably sweet that somehow in its very strength it set free a part of his dazed mind as it passed the limits of audible things and soared into ecstasies which no senses bound. And though it gripped him ever closer in its magic, a sane part of his brain was waking into realization. For the first time alarm came back into his mind, and by slow degrees the world returned about him. He stared stupidly at the grass moving by under his pacing feet. He lifted a dragging head and saw that the trees no longer rose about him, that a twilight clearing stretched away on all sides toward the forest rim which circled it, that the music was singing from some source so near that--that--

The Tree! Terror leaped within him like a wild thing. The Tree,

quivering with unbearable clarity in the thick, dim air, writhed above him, blossoms blazing with bloody radiance and every branch vibrant and undulant to the tune of that unholy song. Then he was aware of the lovely, luminous whiteness of the priestess swaying forward under the swaying limbs, her hair rippling back from the loveliness of her as she moved.

Choked and frenzied with unreasoning terror, he mustered every effort that was in him to turn, to run again like a mad-man out of that dreadful hollow, to hide himself under the weight of all space from the menace of the Tree. And all the while he fought, all the while panic drummed like mad in his brain, his relentless body plodded on straight toward the hideous loveliness of that siren singer towering above him. From the first he had felt subconsciously that it was Thag who called, and now, in the very center of that ocean of vibrant power, he knew. Gripped in the music's magic, he went on.

"The priestess led the rigid little creature forward under the fabulous tree."

All over the clearing other hypnotized victims were advancing slowly, with mechanical steps and wide, frantic eyes as the tree-folk came helplessly to their god's calling. He watched a group of little, dusky sacrifices pace step by step nearer to the Tree's vibrant branches. The priestess came forward to meet them with outstretched arms. He saw her take the foremost gently by the hands. Unbelieving, hypnotized with horrified incredulity, he watched her lead the rigid little creature forward under the fabulous Tree whose limbs yearned downward like hungry snakes, the great flowers glowing with avid color.

He saw the branches twist out and lengthen toward the sacrifice, quivering with eagerness. Then with a tiger's leap they darted, and the victim was swept out of the priestess's guiding hands up into the

branches that darted round like tangled snakes in a clot that hid him for an instant from view. Smith heard a high, shuddering wail ripple out from that knot of struggling branches, a dreadful cry that held such an infinity of purest horror and understanding that he could not but believe that Thag's victims in the moment of their doom must learn the secret of his horror. After that one frightful cry came silence. In an instant the limbs fell apart again from emptiness. The little savage had melted like smoke among their writhing, too quickly to have been devoured, more as if he had been snatched into another dimension in the instant the hungry limbs hid him. Flame-tipped, avid, they were dipping now toward another victim as the priestess paced serenely forward.

And still Smith's rebellious feet were carrying him on, nearer and nearer the writhing peril that towered over his head. The music shrilled like pain. Now he was so close that he could see the hungry flower-mouths in terrible detail as they faced round toward him. The limbs quivered and poised like cobras, reached out with a snakish lengthening, down inexorably toward his shuddering helplessness. The priestess was turning her calm white face toward his.

Those arcs and changing curves of the branches as they neared were sketching lines of pure horror whose meaning he still could not understand, save that they deepened in dreadfulness as he neared. For the last time that urgent wonder burned up in his mind why--why so simple a thing as this fabulous Tree should be infused with an indwelling terror strong enough to send his innermost soul frantic with revulsion. For the last time--because in that trembling instant as he waited for their touch, as the music brimmed up with unbearable, brain-wrenching intensity, in that one last moment before the flower-mouths seized him--he saw. He understood.

With eyes opened at last by the instant's ultimate horror, he saw the real Thag. Dimly he knew that until now the thing had been so frightful

that his eyes had refused to register its existence, his brain to acknowledge the possibility of such dreadfulness. It had literally been too terrible to see, though his instinct knew the presence of infinite horror. But now, in the grip of that mad, hypnotic song, in the instant before unbearable terror enfolded him, his eyes opened to full sight, and he saw.

That Tree was only Thag's outline, sketched three-dimensionally upon the twilight. Its dreadfully curving branches had been no more than Thag's barest contours, yet even they had made his very soul sick with intuitive revulsion. But now, seeing the true horror, his mind was too numb to do more than register its presence: Thag, hovering monstrously between earth and heaven, billowing and surging up there in the translucent twilight, tethered to the ground by the Tree's bending stem and reaching ravenously after the hypnotized fodder that his calling brought helpless into his clutches. One by one he snatched them up, one by one absorbed them into the great, unseeable horror of his being. That, then, was the reason why they vanished so instantaneously, sucked into the concealing folds of a thing too dreadful for normal eyes to see.

The priestess was pacing forward. Above her the branches arched and leaned. Caught in a timeless paralysis of horror, Smith stared upward into the enormous bulk of Thag while the music hummed intolerably in his shrinking brain--Thag, the monstrous thing from darkness, called up by Illar in those long-forgotten times when Mars was a green planet. Foolishly his brain wandered among the ramifications of what had happened so long ago that time itself had forgotten, refusing to recognize the fate that was upon himself. He knew a tingle of respect for the ages-dead wizard who had dared command a being like this to his services--this vast, blind, hovering thing, ravenous for human flesh, indistinguishable even now save in those terrible outlines that sent panic leaping through him with every motion of the Tree's fearful symmetry.

All this flashed through his dazed mind in the one blinding instant of understanding. Then the priestess'luminous whiteness swam up before his hypnotized stare. Her hands were upon him, gently guiding his mechanical footsteps, very gently leading him forward into--into--

The writhing branches struck downward, straight for his face. And in one flashing leap the moment's infinite horror galvanized him out of his paralysis. Why, he could not have said. It is not given to many men to know the ultimate essentials of all horror, concentrated into one fundamental unit. To most men it would have had that same paralyzing effect up to the very instant of destruction. But in Smith there must have been a bed-rock of subtle violence, an unyielding, inflexible vehemence upon which the structure of his whole life was reared. Few men have it. And when that ultimate intensity of terror struck the basic flint of him, reaching down through mind and soul into the deepest depths of his being, it struck a spark from that inflexible barbarian buried at the roots of him which had force enough to shock him out of his stupor.

In the instant of release his hand swept like an unloosed spring, of its own volition, straight for the butt of his power-gun. He was dragging it free as the Tree's branches snatched him from its priestess'hands. The fire-colored blossoms burnt his flesh as they closed round him, the hot branches gripping like the touch of ravenous fingers. The whole Tree was hot and throbbing with a dreadful travesty of fleshly life as it whipped him aloft into the hovering bulk of incarnate horror above.

In the instantaneous upward leap of the flower-tipped limbs Smith fought like a demon to free his gun-hand from the gripping coils. For the first time Thag knew rebellion in his very clutches, and the ecstasy of that music which had dinned in Smith's ears so strongly

that by now it seemed almost silence was swooping down a long arc into wrath, and the branches tightened with hot insistency, lifting the rebellious offering into Thag's monstrous, indescribable bulk.

But even as they rose, Smith was twisting in their clutch to maneuver his hand into a position from which he could blast that undulant tree trunk into nothingness. He knew intuitively the futility of firing up into Thag's imponderable mass. Thag was not of the world he knew; the flame blast might well be harmless to that mighty hoverer in the twilight. But at the Tree's root, where Thag's essential being merged from the imponderable to the material, rooting in earthly soil, he should be vulnerable if he were vulnerable at all. Struggling in the tight, hot coils, breathing the nameless essence of horror, Smith fought to free his hand.

The music that had rung so long in his ears was changing as the branches lifted him higher, losing its melody and merging by swift degrees into a hum of vast and vibrant power that deepened in intensity as the limbs drew him upward into Thag's monstrous bulk, the singing force of a thing mightier than any dynamo ever built. Blinded and dazed by the force thundering through every atom of his body, he twisted his hand in one last, convulsive effort, and fired.

He saw the flame leap in a dazzling gush straight for the trunk below. It struck. He heard the sizzle of annihilated matter. He saw the trunk quiver convulsively from the very roots, and the whole fabulous Tree shook once with an ominous tremor. But before that tremor could shiver up the branches to him the hum of the living dynamo which was closing round his body shrilled up arcs of pure intensity into a thundering silence.

Then without a moment's warning the world exploded. So instantaneously did all this happen that the gun-blast's roar had not yet echoed into silence before a mightier sound than the brain could

bear exploded outward from the very center of his own being. Before the awful power of it everything reeled into a shaken oblivion. He felt himself falling....

A queer, penetrating light shining upon his closed eyes roused Smith by degrees into wakefulness again. He lifted heavy lids and stared upward into the unwinking eye of Mars' racing nearer moon. He lay there blinking dazedly for a while before enough of memory returned to rouse him. Then he sat up painfully, for every fiber of him ached, and stared round on a scene of the wildest destruction. He lay in the midst of a wide, rough circle which held nothing but powdered stone. About it, rising raggedly in the moving moonlight, the blocks of time-forgotten Illar loomed.

But they were no longer piled one upon another in a rough travesty of the city they once had shaped. Some force mightier than any of man's explosives seemed to have hurled them with such violence from their beds that their very atoms had been disrupted by the force of it, crumbling them into dust. And in the very center of the havoc lay Smith, unhurt.

He stared in bewilderment about the moonlight ruins. In the silence it seemed to him that the very air still quivered in shocked vibrations. And as he stared he realized that no force save one could have wrought such destruction upon the ancient stones. Nor was there any explosive known to man which would have wrought this strange, pulverizing havoc upon the blocks of Illar. That force had hummed unbearably through the living dynamo of Thag, a force so powerful that space itself had bent to enclose it. Suddenly he realized what must have happened.

Not Illar, but Thag himself had warped the walls of space to enfold the twilight world, and nothing but Thag's living power could have held it so bent to segregate the little, terror-ridden land inviolate.

Then when the Tree's roots parted, Thag's anchorage in the material world failed and in one great gust of unthinkable energy the warped space-walls had ceased to bend. Those arches of solid space had snapped back into their original pattern, hurling the land and all its dwellers into--into-- His mind balked in the effort to picture what must have happened, into what ultimate dimension those denizens must have vanished.

Only himself, enfolded deep in Thag's very essence, the intolerable power of the explosion had not touched. So when the warped space-curve ceased to be, and Thag's hold upon reality failed, he must have been dropped back out of the dissolving folds upon the spot where the Tree had stood in the space-circled world, through that vanished world-floor into the spot he had been snatched from in the instant of the dim land's dissolution. It must have happened after the terrible force of the explosion had spent itself, before Thag dared move even himself through the walls of changing energy into his own far land again.

Smith sighed and lifted a hand to his throbbing head, rising slowly to his feet. What time had elapsed he could not guess, but he must assume that the Patrol still searched for him. Wearily he set out across the circle of havoc toward the nearest shelter which Illar offered. The dust rose in ghostly, moonlit clouds under his feet.

Cold War

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Chapter 1

Last of the Pughs

I'll never have a cold in the haid again without I think of little Junior Pugh. Now there was a repulsive brat if ever I saw one. Built like a little gorilla, he was. Fat, pasty face, mean look, eyes so close together you could poke 'em both out at once with one finger. His paw thought the world of him though. Maybe that was natural, seeing as how little Junior was the image of his pappy.

"The last of the Pughs," the old man used to say stickin'his chest out and beamin'down at the little gorilla. "Finest little lad that ever stepped."

It made my blood run cold sometimes to look at the two of 'em together. Kinda sad, now, to think back to those happy days when I didn't know either of 'em. You may not believe it but them two Pughs, father and son, between 'em came within that much of conquerin'the world.

Us Hoabens is quiet folks. We like to keep our heads down and lead

quiet lives in our own little valley, where nobody comes near withouten we say so. Our neighbors and the folks in the village are used to us by now. They know we try hard not to act conspicuous. They make allowances.

If Paw gets drunk, like last week, and flies down the middle of Main Street in his red underwear most people make out they don't notice, so's not to embarrass Maw. They know he'd walk like a decent Christian if he was sober.

The thing that druv Paw to drink that time was Little Sam, which is our baby we keep in a tank down-cellar, startin'to teethe again. First time since the War Between the States. We'd figgered he was through teething, but with Little Sam you never can tell. He was mighty restless, too.

A perfesser we keep in a bottle told us once Little Sam emitted sub-sonic somethings when he yells but that's just his way of talking. Don't mean a thing. It makes your nerves twiddle, that's all. Paw can't stand it. This time it even woke up Grandpaw in the attic and he hadn't stirred since Christmas. First thing after he got his eyes open he bust out madder'n a wet hen at Paw.

"I see ye, wittold knave that ye are!" he howled. "Flying again, is it? Oh, sic a reowfule sigte! I'll ground ye, ywis!" There was a far-away thump.

"You made me fall a good ten feet!" Paw hollered from away down the valley. "It ain't fair. I could of busted something!"

"Ye'll bust us all, with your dronken carelessness," Grandpaw said. "Flying in full sight of the neighbors! People get burned at the stake for less. You want mankind to find out all about us? Now shut up and let me tend to Baby."

Grandpaw can always quiet the baby if nobody else can. This time he sung him a little song in Sanskrit and after a bit they was snoring a duet.

I was fixing up a dingus for Maw to sour up some cream for sour-cream biscuits. I didn't have much to work with but an old sled and some pieces of wire but I didn't need much. I was trying to point the top end of the wire north-northeast when I seen a pair of checked pants rush by in the woods.

It was Uncle Lem. I could hear him thinking. "It ain't me!" he was saying, real loud, inside his haid. "Git back to yer work, Saunk. I ain't within a mile of you. Yer Uncle Lem's a fine old feller and never tells lies. Think I'd fool ye, Saunkie boy?"

"You shore would," I thunk back. "If you could. What's up, Uncle Lem?"

At that he slowed down and started to saunter back in a wide circle.

"Oh, I just had an idy yer Maw might like a mess of blackberries," he thunk, kicking a pebble very nonchalant. "If anybody asks you say you ain't seen me. It's no lie. You ain't."

"Uncle Lem," I thunk, real loud, "I gave Maw my bounden word I wouldn't let you out of range without me along, account of the last time you got away--"

"Now, now, my boy," Uncle Lem thunk fast. "Let bygones be bygones."

"You just can't say no to a friend, Uncle Lem," I reminded him, taking a last turn of the wire around the runner. "So you wait a shake till I get this cream soured and we'll both go together, wherever it is you have

in mind."

I saw the checked pants among the bushes and he come out in the open and give me a guilty smile. Uncle Lem's a fat little feller. He means well, I guess, but he can be talked into most anything by most anybody, which is why we have to keep a close eye on him.

"How you gonna do it?" he asked me, looking at the creamjug. "Make the little critters work faster?"

"Uncle Lem!" I said. "You know better'n that. Cruelty to dumb animals is something I can't abide. Them there little critters work hard enough souring milk the way it is. They're such teentsy-weentsy fellers I kinda feel sorry for 'em. Why, you can't even see 'em without you go kinda crosseyed when you look. Paw says they're enzymes. But they can't be. They're too teeny."

"Teeny is as teeny does," Uncle Lem said. "How you gonna do it, then?"

"This here gadget," I told him, kinda proud, "will send Maw's cream-jug ahead into next week some time. This weather, don't take cream more'n a couple of days but I'm giving it plenty of time. When I bring it back--bingo, it's sour." I set the jug on the sled.

"I never seen such a do-lass brat," Uncle Lem said, stepping forward and bending a wire crosswise. "You better do it thataway, on account of the thunderstorm next Tuesday. All right now, shoot her off."

So I shot her off. When she come back, sure enough, the cream was sour enough to walk a mouse. Crawling up the can there was a hornet from next week, which I squashed. Now that was a mistake. I knowed it the minute I touched the jug. Dang Uncle Lem, anyhow.

He jumped back into the underbrush, squealing real happy.

"Fooled you that time, you young stinker," he yelled back. "Let's see you get your thumb outa the middle of next week!"

It was the time-lag done it. I mighta knowed. When he crossed that wire he didn't have no thunderstorm in mind at all. Took me nigh onto ten minutes to work myself loose, account of some feller called Inertia, who mixes in if you ain't careful when you fiddle around with time. I don't understand much about it myself. I ain't got my growth yet. Uncle Lem says he's already forgot more'n I'll ever know.

With that head start I almost lost him. Didn't even have time to change into my store-bought clothes and I knowed by the way he was all dressed up fit to kill he was headed for somewheres fancy.

He was worried, too. I kept running into little stray worrisome thoughts he'd left behind him, hanging like teeny little mites of clouds on the bushes. Couldn't make out much on account of they was shredding away by the time I got there but he'd shore done something he shouldn't. That much anybody coulda told. They went something like this:

"Worry, worry--wish I hadn't done it--oh, heaven help me if Grandpaw ever finds out--oh, them nasty Pughs, how could I a-been such a fool? Worry, worry--pore ole feller, such a good soul, too, never done nobody no harm and look at me now.

"That Saunk, too big for his britches, teach him a thing or two, ha-ha. Oh, worry, worry--never mind, brace up, you good ole boy, everything's bound to turn out right in the end. You deserve the best, bless you, Lemuel. Grandpaw'll never find out."

Well, I seen his checkered britches high-tailing through the woods after a bit, but I didn't catch up to him until he was down the hill,

across the picnic grounds at the edge of town and pounding on the sill of the ticket-window at the railroad station with a Spanish dubloon he snatched from Paw's seachest.

It didn't surprise me none to hear him asking for a ticket to State Center. I let him think I hadn't caught up. He argued something turrible with the man behind the window but finally he dug down in his britches and fetched up a silver dollar, and the man calmed down.

The train was already puffing up smoke behind the station when Uncle Lem darted around the corner. Didn't leave me much time but I made it too--just. I had to fly a little over the last half-dozen yards but I don't think anybody noticed.

Once when I was just a little shaver there was a Great Plague in London, where we were living at the time, and all us Hogbens had to clear out. I remember the hullabaloo in the city but looking back now it don't seem a patch on the hullabaloo in State Center station when the train pulled in. Times have changed, I guess.

Whistles blowing, horns honking, radios yelling bloody murder--seems like every invention in the last two hundred years had been noisier than the one before it. Made my head ache until I fixed up something Paw once called a raised decibel threshold, which was pure showing-off.

Uncle Lem didn't know I was anywhere around. I took care to think real quiet but he was so wrapped up in his worries he wasn't paying no mind to nothing. I followed him through the crowds in the station and out onto a wide street full of traffic. It was a relief to get away from the trains.

I always hate to think what's going on inside the boiler, with all the little bitty critters so small you can't hardly see 'em, pore things, flying

around all hot and excited and bashing their heads together. It seems plumb pitiable.

Of course, it just don't do to think what's happening inside the automobiles that go by.

Uncle Lem knowed right where he was headed. He took off down the street so fast I had to keep reminding myself not to fly, trying to keep up. I kept thinking I ought to get in touch with the folks at home, in case this turned into something I couldn't handle, but I was plumb stopped everywhere I turned. Maw was at the church social that afternoon and she whopped me the last time I spoke to her outa thin air right in front of the Reverend Jones. He ain't used to us Hogbens yet.

Paw was daid drunk. No good trying to wake him up. And I was scared to death I would wake the baby if I tried to call on Grandpaw.

Uncle Lem scuttled right along, his checkered legs a-twinkling. He was worrying at the top of his mind, too. He'd caught sight of a crowd in a side-street gathered around a big truck, looking up at a man standing on it and waving bottles in both hands.

He seemed to be making a speech about headaches. I could hear him all the way to the corner. There was big banners tacked along the sides of the truck that said, Pugh Headache Cure.

"Oh, worry, worry!" Uncle Lem thunk. "Oh, bless my toes, what am I going to do? I never dreamed anybody'd marry Lily Lou Mutz. Oh, worry!"

Well, I reckon we'd all been surprised when Lily Lou Mutz up and got herself a husband awhile back--around ten years ago, I figgered. But what it had to do with Uncle Lem I couldn't think. Lily Lou was just

about the ugliest female that ever walked. Ugly ain't no word for her, pore gal.

Grandpaw said once she put him in mind of a family name of Gorgon he used to know. Not that she wasn't a goodhearted critter. Being so ugly, she put up with a lot in the way of rough acting-up from the folks in the village--the riff-raff lot, I mean.

She lived by herself in a little shack up the mountain and she musta been close onto forty when some feller from the other side of the river come along one day and rocked the whole valley back on its heels by asking her to marry up with him. Never saw the feller myself but I heard tell he wasn't no beauty-prize winner neither.

Come to think of it, I told myself right then, looking at the truck--come to think of it, feller's name was Pugh.

Chapter 2

A Fine Old Feller

Next thing I knowed, Uncle Lem had spotted somebody under a lamp-post on the sidewalk, at the edge of the crowd. He trotted over. It seemed to be a big gorilla and a little gorilla, standing there watching the feller on the truck selling bottles with both hands.

"Come and get it," he was yelling. "Come and get your bottle of Pugh's Old Reliable Headache Cure while they last!"

"Well, Pugh, here I am," Uncle Lem said, looking up at the big gorilla. "Hello, Junior," he said right afterward, glancing down at the little gorilla. I seen him shudder a little.

You shore couldn't blame him for that. Two nastier specimens of the

human race I never did see in all my born days. If they hadn't been quite so pasty-faced or just the least mite slimmer, maybe they wouldn't have put me so much in mind of two well-fed slugs, one growed-up and one baby-sized. The paw was all dressed up in a Sunday-meeting suit with a big gold watch-chain across his front and the way he strutted you'd a thought he'd never had a good look in a mirror.

"Howdy, Lem," he said, casual-like. "Right on time, I see. Junior, say howdy to Mister Lem Hogben. You owe Mister Hogben a lot, sonny." And he laughed a mighty nasty laugh.

Junior paid him no mind. He had his beady little eyes fixed on the crowd across the street. He looked about seven years old and mean as they come.

"Shall I do it now, paw?" he asked in a squeaky voice. "Can I let 'em have it now, paw? Huh, paw?" From the tone he used, I looked to see if he'd got a machine-gun handy. I didn't see none but if looks was ever mean enough to kill Junior Pugh could of mowed the crowd right down.

"Manly little feller, ain't he, Lem?" Paw Pugh said, real smug. "I tell you, I'm mighty proud of this youngster. Wish his dear grandpaw coulda lived to see him. A fine old family line, the Pughs is. Nothing like it anywhere. Only trouble is, Junior's the last of his race. You see why I got in touch with you, Lem."

Uncle Lem shuddered again. "Yep," he said. "I see, all right. But you're wasting your breath, Pugh. I ain't a-gonna do it."

Young Pugh spun around in his tracks.

"Shall I let him have it, paw?" he squeaked, real eager. "Shall I, paw?"

Now, paw? Huh?"

"Shaddup, sonny," the big feller said and he whammed the little feller across the side of the haid. Pugh's hands was like hams. He shore was built like a gorilla.

The way his great big arms swung down from them big hunched shoulders, you'd of thought the kid would go flying across the street when his paw whopped him one. But he was a burly little feller. He just staggered a mite and then shook his haid and went red in the face.

He yelled out, loud and squeaky, "Paw, I warned you! The last time you whammed me I warned you! Now I'm gonna let you have it!"

He drew a deep breath and his two little teeny eyes got so bright I coulda sworn they was gonna touch each other across the middle of his nose. His pasty face got bright red.

"Okay, Junior," Paw Pugh said, real hasty. "The crowd's ready for you. Don't waste your strength on me, sonny. Let the crowd have it!"

Now all this time I was standing at the edge of the crowd, listening and watching Uncle Lem. But just then somebody jiggled my arm and a thin kinda voice said to me, real polite, "Excuse me, but may I ask a question?"

I looked down. It was a skinny man with a kind-hearted face. He had a notebook in his hand.

"It's all right with me," I told him, polite. "Ask away, mister."

"I just wondered how you feel, that's all," the skinny man said, holding his pencil over the notebook ready to write down something.

"Why, peart," I said. "Bight kind of you to inquire. Hope you're feeling well too, mister."

He shook his head, kind of dazed. "That's the trouble," he said. "I just don't understand it. I feel fine."

"Why not?" I asked. "Fine day."

"Everybody here feels fine," he went right on, just like I hadn't spoke. "Barring normal odds, everybody's in average good health in this crowd. But in about five minutes or less, as I figure it--" He looked at his wrist-watch.

Just then somebody hit me right on top of the haid with a red-hot sledge-hammer.

Now you shore can't hurt a Hogben by hitting him on the bald. Anybody's a fool to try. I felt my knees buckle a little but I was all right in a couple of seconds and I looked around to see who'd whammed me.

Wasn't a soul there. But oh my, the moaning and groaning that was going up from that there crowd! People was a-clutching at their foreheads and a-staggering around the street, clawing at each other to get to that truck where the man was handing out the bottles of headache cure as fast as he could take in the dollar bills.

The skinny man with the kind face rolled up his eyes like a duck in thunder.

"Oh, my head!" he groaned. "What did I tell you? Oh, my head!" Then he sort of tottered away, fishing in his pocket for money.

Well, the family always did say I was slow-witted but you'd have to be downright feeble-minded if you didn't know there was something

mighty peculiar going on around here. I'm no ninny, no matter what Maw says. I turned around and looked for Junior Pugh.

There he stood, the fat-faced little varmint, red as a turkey-gobbler, all swole up and his mean little eyes just a-flashing at the crowd.

"It's a hex," I thought to myself, perfectly calm. "I'd never have believed it but it's a real hex. Now how in the world--"

Then I remembered Lily Lou Mutz and what Uncle Lem had been thinking to himself. And I began to see the light.

The crowd had gone plumb crazy, fighting to get at the headache cure. I purty near had to bash my way over toward Uncle Lem. I figgered it was past time I took a hand, on account of him being so soft in the heart and likewise just about as soft in the haid.

"Nosirree," he was saying, firm-like. "I won't do it. Not by no manner of means I won't."

"Uncle Lem," I said.

I bet he jumped a yard into the air.

"Saunk!" he squeaked. He flushed up and grinned sheepish and then he looked mad, but I could tell he was kinda relieved, too. "I told you not to foller me," he said.

"Maw told me not to let you out of my sight," I said. "I promised Maw and us Hogbens never break a promise. What's going on here, Uncle Lem?"

"Oh, Saunk, everything's gone dead wrong!" Uncle Lem wailed out. "Here I am with a heart of gold and I'd just as soon be dead! Meet Mister Ed Pugh, Saunk. He's trying to get me kilt."

"Now Lem," Ed Pugh said. "You know that ain't so. I just want my rights, that's all. Pleased to meet you, young fellow. Another Hogben, I take it. Maybe you can talk your uncle into--"

"Excuse me for interrupting, Mister Pugh," I said, real polite. "But maybe you'd better explain. All this is purely a mystery to me."

He cleared his throat and threw his chest out, important-like. I could tell this was something he liked to talk about. Made him feel pretty big, I could see.

"I don't know if you was acquainted with my dear departed wife, Lily Lou Mutz that was," he said. "This here's our little child, Junior. A fine little lad he is too. What a pity we didn't have eight or ten more just like him." He sighed real deep.

"Well, that's life. I'd hoped to marry young and be blessed with a whole passel of younguns, being as how I'm the last of a fine old line. I don't mean to let it die out, neither." Here he gave Uncle Lem a mean look. Uncle Lem sorta whimpered.

"I ain't a-gonna do it," he said. "You can't make me do it."

"We'll see about that," Ed Pugh said, threatening. "Maybe your young relative here will be more reasonable. I'll have you know I'm getting to be a power in this state and what I says goes."

"Paw," little Junior squeaked out just then, "Paw, they're kinda slowing down. Kin I give it to 'em double-strength this time, Paw? Betcha I could kill a few if I let myself go. Hey, Paw--"

Ed Pugh made as if he was gonna clonk the little varmint again, but I guess he thought better of it.

"Don't interrupt your elders, sonny," he said. "Paw's busy. Just tend to your job and shut up." He glanced out over the moaning crowd. "Give that bunch over beyond the truck a little more treatment," he said. "They ain't buying fast enough. But no double-strength, Junior. You gotta save your energy. You're a growing boy."

He turned back to me. "Junior's a talented child," he said, very proud. "As you can see. He inherited it from his dear dead-and-gone mother, Lily Lou. I was telling you about Lily Lou. It was my hope to marry young, like I said, but the way things worked out, somehow I just didn't get around to wifin'till I'd got well along into the prime of life."

He blew out his chest like a toadfrog, looking down admiring. I never did see a man that thought better of himself. "Never found a woman who'd look at--I mean, never found the right woman," he went on, "till the day I met Lily Lou Mutz."

"I know what you mean," I said, polite. I did, too. He musta searched a long, long ways before he found somebody ugly enough herself to look twice at him. Even Lily Lou, pore soul, musta thunk a long time afore she said yes.

"And that," Ed Pugh went on, "is where your Uncle Lem comes in. It seems like he'd give Lily Lou a bewitchment quite some while back."

"I never!" Uncle Lem squealed. "And anyway, how'd I know she'd get married and pass it on to her child? Who'd ever think Lily Lou would--"

"He gave her a bewitchment," Ed Pugh went right on talking. "Only she never told me till she was a-layin'on her death-bed a year ago. Lordy, I sure woulda whopped her good if I'd knowed how she held out on me all them years! It was the hex Lemuel gave her and she

inherited it on to her little child."

"I only done it to protect her," Uncle Lem said, right quick. "You know I'm speaking the truth, Saunk boy. Pore Lily Lou was so pizon ugly, people used to up and heave a clod at her now and then afore they could help themselves. Just automatic-like. Couldn't blame 'em. I often fought down the impulse myself.

"But pore Lily Lou, I shore felt sorry for her. You'll never know how long I fought down my good impulses, Saunk. But my heart of gold does get me into messes. One day I felt so sorry for the pore hideous critter I gave her the hexpower. Anybody'd have done the same, Saunk."

"How'd you do it?" I asked, real interested, thinking it might come in handy someday to know. I'm young yet, and I got lots to learn.

Well, he started to tell me and it was kinda mixed up. Bight at first I got a notion some furrin feller named Gene Chromosome had done it for him and after I got straight on that part he'd gone cantering off into a rigamarole about the alpha waves of the brain.

Shucks, I knowed that much my own self. Everybody musta noticed the way them little waves go a-sweeping over the tops of people's haid when they're thinking. I've watched Grandpaw sometimes when he had as many as six hundred different thoughts follering each other up and down them little paths where his brain is. Hurts my eyes to look too close when Grandpaw's thinking.

"So that's how it is, Saunk," Uncle Lem wound up. "And this here little rattlesnake's inherited the whole shebang."

"Well, why don't you get this here Gene Chromosome feller to unscramble Junior and put him back the way other people are?" I

asked. "I can see how easy you could do it. Look here, Uncle Lem." I focused down real sharp on Junior and made my eyes go funny the way you have to when you want to look inside a person.

Sure enough, I seen just what Uncle Lem meant. There was teensy-weensy little chains of fellers, all hanging onto each other for dear life, and skinny little rods jiggling around inside them awful teensy cells everybody's made of--except maybe Little Sam, our baby.

"Look here, Uncle Lem," I said. "All you did when you gave Lily Lou the hex was to twitch these here little rods over that-away and patch 'em onto them little chains that wiggle so fast. Now why can't you switch 'em back again and make Junior behave himself? It oughta be easy."

"It would be easy," Uncle Lem kinda sighed at me. "Saunk, you're a scatterbrain. You wasn't listening to what I said. I can't switch 'em back without I kill Junior."

"The world would be a better place," I said.

"I know it would. But you know what we promised Grandpaw? No more killings."

"But Uncle Lem!" I bust out. "This is turrible! You mean this nasty little rattlesnake's gonna go on all his life hexing people?"

"Worse than that, Saunk," pore Uncle Lem said, almost crying. "He's gonna pass the power on to his descendants, just like Lily Lou passed it on to him."

For a minute it sure did look like a dark prospect for the human race. Then I laughed.

"Cheer up, Uncle Lem," I said. "Nothing to worry about. Look at the

little toad. There ain't a female critter alive who'd come within a mile of him. Already he's as repulsive as his daddy. And remember, he's Lily Lou Mutz's child, too. Maybe he'll get even horribler as he grows up. One thing's sure--he ain't never gonna get married."

"Now there's where you're wrong," Ed Pugh busted in, talking real loud. He was red in the face and he looked mad. "Don't think I ain't been listening," he said. "And don't think I'm gonna forget what you said about my child. I told you I was a power in this town. Junior and me can go a long way, using his talent to help us.

"Already I've got on to the board of aldermen here and there's gonna be a vacancy in the state senate come next week--unless the old coot I have in mind's a lot tougher than he looks. So I'm warning you, young Hogben, you and your family's gonna pay for them insults."

"Nobody oughta get mad when he hears the gospel truth about himself," I said. "Junior is a repulsive specimen."

"He just takes getting used to," his paw said. "All us Pughs is hard to understand. Deep, I guess. But we got our pride. And I'm gonna make sure the family line never dies out. Never, do you hear that, Lemuel?"

Uncle Lem just shut his eyes up tight and shook his head fast. "No-sirree," he said. "I'll never do it. Never, never, never, never--"

"Lemuel," Ed Pugh said, real sinister. "Lemuel, do you want me to set Junior on you?"

"Oh, there ain't no use in that," I said. "You seen him try to hex me along with the crowd, didn't you? No manner of use, Mister Pugh. Can't hex a Hogben."

"Well--" He looked around, searching his mind. "Hm-m. I'll think of

something. I'll--soft-hearted, aren't you? Promised your Grandpappy you wouldn't kill nobody, hey? Lemuel, open your eyes and look over there across the street. See that sweet old lady walking with the cane? How'd you like it if I had Junior drop her dead in her tracks?"

Uncle Lemuel just squeezed his eyes tighter shut.

"I won't look. I don't know the sweet old thing. If she's that old, she ain't got much longer anyhow. Maybe she'd be better off dead. Probably got rheumatiz something fierce."

"All right, then, how about that purty young girl with the baby in her arms? Look, Lemuel. Mighty sweet-looking little baby. Pink ribbon in its bonnet, see? Look at them dimples. Junior, get ready to blight them where they stand. Bubonic plague to start with maybe. And after that--"

"Uncle Lem," I said, feeling uneasy. "I dunno what Grandpaw would say to this. Maybe--"

Uncle Lem popped his eyes wide open for just a second. He glared at me, frantic.

"I can't help it if I've got a heart of gold," he said. "I'm a fine old feller and everybody picks on me. Well, I won't stand for it. You can push me just so far. Now I don't care if Ed Pugh kills off the whole human race. I don't care if Grandpaw does find out what I done. I don't care a hoot about nothing no more." He gave a kind of wild laugh.

"I'm gonna get out from under. I won't know nothing about nothing. I'm gonna snatch me a few winks, Saunk."

And with that he went rigid all over and fell flat on his face on the sidewalk, stiff as a poker.

Chapter 3

Over a Barrel

Well, worried as I was, I had to smile. Uncle Lem's kinda cute sometimes. I knowed he'd put hisself to sleep again, the way he always does when trouble catches up with him. Paw says it's catalepsy but cats sleep a lot lighter than that.

Uncle Lem hit the sidewalk flat and kinda bounced a little. Junior give a howl of joy. I guess maybe he figgered he'd had something to do with Uncle Lem falling over. Anyhow, seeing somebody down and helpless, Junior naturally rushed over and pulled his foot back and kicked Uncle Lem in the side of the haid.

Well, like I said, us Hogbens have got pretty tough haids. Junior let out a howl. He started dancing around nursing his foot in both hands.

"I'll hex you good!" he yelled at Uncle Lem. "I'll hex you good, you-- you ole Hogben, you!" He drew a deep breath and turned purple in the face and-- And then it happened.

It was like a flash of lightning. I don't take no stock in hexes, and I had a fair idea of what was happening, but it took me by surprise. Paw tried to explain to me later how it worked and he said it just stimulated the latent toxins inherent in the organism. It made Junior into a catalytoxic agent on account of the way the rearrangement of the desoxyribonucleic acid his genes was made of worked on the kappa waves of his nasty little brain, stepping them up as much as thirty microvolts. But shucks, you know Paw. He's too lazy to figger the thing out in English. He just steals them fool words out of other folks'brains when he needs 'em.

What really happened was that all the pizon that little varmint had

bottled up in him, ready to let go on the crowd, somehow seemed to r'ar back and smack Uncle Lem right in the face. I never seen such a hex. And the awful part was--it worked.

Because Uncle Lem wasn't resisting a mite now he was asleep. Red-hot pokers wouldn't have waked him up and I wouldn't put red-hot pokers past little Junior Pugh. But he didn't need 'em this time. The hex hit Uncle Lem like a thunderbolt.

He turned pale green right before our eyes.

Somehow it seemed to me a turrible silence fell as Uncle Lem went green. I looked up, surprised. Then I realized what was happening. All that pitiful moaning and groaning from the crowd had stopped.

People was swigging away at their bottles of headache cure, rubbing their foreheads and kinda laughing weak-like with relief. Junior's whole complete hex had gone into Uncle Lem and the crowd's headaches had naturally stopped right off.

"What's happened here?" somebody called out in a kinda familiar voice. "Has that man fainted? Why don't you help him? Here, let me by--I'm a doctor."

It was the skinny man with the kind-looking face. He was still drinking out of the headache bottle as he pushed his way through the crowd toward us but he'd put his notebook away. When he saw Ed Pugh he flushed up angrylike.

"So it's you, is it, Alderman Pugh?" he said. "How is it you're always around when trouble starts? What did you do to this poor man, anyhow? Maybe this time you've gone too far."

"I didn't do a thing," Ed Pugh said. "Never touched him. You watch

your tongue, Dr. Brown, or you'll regret it. I'm a powerful man in this here town."

"Look at that!" Dr. Brown yells, his voice going kinda squeaky as he stares down at Uncle Lem. "The man's dying! Call an ambulance, somebody, quick!"

Uncle Lem was changing color again. I had to laugh a little, inside my haid. I knowed what was happening and it was kinda funny. Everybody's got a whole herd of germs and viruses and suchlike critters swarming through them all the time, of course.

When Junior's hex hit Uncle Lem it stimulated the entire herd something turrible, and a flock of little bitty critters Paw calls antibodies had to get to work pronto. They ain't really as sick as they look, being white by nature.

Whenever a pizon starts chewing on you these pale little fellers grab up their shooting-irons and run like crazy to the battlefield in your insides. Such fighting and yelling and swearing you never seen. It's a regular Bull Run.

That was going on right then inside Uncle Lem. Only us Hogbens have got a special militia of our own inside us. And they got called up real fast.

They was swearing and kicking and whopping the enemy so hard Uncle Lem had gone from pale green to a sort of purplish color, and big yeller and blue spots was beginning to bug out all over him where it showed. He looked oncommon sick. Course it didn't do him no real harm. The Hogbens militia can lick any germ that breathes.

But he sure looked revolting.

The skinny doctor crouched down beside Uncle Lem and felt his

pulse.

"Now you've done it," he said, looking up at Ed Pugh. "I don't know how you've worked this, but for once you've gone too far. This man seems to have bubonic plague. I'll see you're put under control this time and that young Kallikak of yours, too."

Ed Pugh just laughed a little. But I could see he was mad.

"Don't you worry about me, Dr. Brown," he said, mean. "When I get to be governor--and I got my plans all made--that there hospital you're so proud of ain't gonna operate on state funds no more. A fine thing!

"Folks laying around in hospitals eating their fool heads off! Make 'em get out and plough, that's what I say. Us Pughs never gets sick. I got lots of better uses for state money than paying folks to lay around in bed when I'm governor."

All the doctor said was, "Where's that ambulance?"

"If you mean that big long car making such a noise," I said, "it's about three miles off but coming fast. Uncle Lem don't need no help, though. He's just having an attack. We get 'em in the family all the time. It don't mean nothing."

"Good heavens!" the doc said, staring down at Uncle Lem. "You mean he's had this before and lived?" Then he looked up at me and smiled all of a sudden. "Oh, I see," he said. "Afraid of hospitals, are you? Well, don't worry. We won't hurt him."

That surprised me some. He was a smart man. I'd fibbed a little for just that reason. Hospitals is no place for Hogbens. People in hospitals are too danged nosy. So I called Uncle Lem real loud,

inside my head.

"Uncle Lem," I hollered, only thinking it, not out loud. "Uncle Lem, wake up quick! Grandpaw'll nail your hide to the barn door if'n you let yourself get took to a hospital. You want 'em to find out about them two hearts you got in your chest? And the way your bones are fixed and the shape of your gizzard? Uncle Lem! Wake up!"

It wasn't no manner of use. He never even twitched.

Right then I began to get really scared. Uncle Lem had sure landed me in the soup. There I was with all that responsibility on my shoulders and I didn't have the least idea how to handle it. I'm just a young feller after all. I can hardly remember much farther back than the great fire of London, when Charles ii was king, with all them long curls a-hanging on his shoulders. On him, though, they looked good.

"Mister Pugh," I said, "you've got to call off Junior. I can't let Uncle Lem get took to the hospital. You know I can't."

"Junior, pour it on," Mister Pugh said, grinning real nasty. "I want a little talk with young Hogben here." The doctor looked up, puzzled, and Ed Pugh said, "Step over here a mite, Hogben. I want a private word with you. Junior, bear down!"

Uncle Lem's yellow and blue spots got green rings around their outside edges. The doctor sorta gasped and Ed Pugh took my arm and pulled me back. When we was out of earshot he said to me, confidential, fixing me with his tiny little eyes:

"I reckon you know what I want, Hogben. Lem never did say he couldn't, he only said he wouldn't, so I know you folks can do it for me."

"Just exactly what is it you want, Mister Pugh?" I asked him.

"You know. I want to make sure our fine old family line goes on. I want there should always be Pughs. I had so much trouble getting married off myself and I know Junior ain't going to be easy to wife. Women don't have no taste nowadays.

"Since Lily Lou went to glory there hasn't been a woman on earth ugly enough to marry a Pugh and I'm skeered Junior'll be the last of a great line. With his talent I can't bear the thought. You just fix it so our family won't never die out and I'll have Junior take the hex off Lemuel."

"If I fixed it so your line didn't die out," I said, "I'd be fixing it so everybody else's line would die out, just as soon as there was enough Pughs around."

"What's wrong with that?" Ed Pugh asked, grinning. "Way I see it we're good strong stock." He flexed his gorilla arms. He was taller than me, even. "No harm in populatin'the world with good stock, is there? I figger given time enough us Pughs could conquer the whole danged world. And you're gonna help us do it, young Hogben."

"Oh, no," I said. "Oh, no! Even if I knowed how--"

There was a turrible noise at the end of the street and the crowd scattered to make way for the ambulance, which drew up at the curb beside Uncle Lem. A couple of fellers in white coats jumped out with a sort of pallet on sticks. Dr. Brown stood up, looking real relieved.

"Thought you'd never get here," he said. "This man's a quarantine case, I think. Heaven knows what kind of results we'll find when we start running tests on him. Hand me my bag out of the back there, will you? I want my stethoscope. There's something funny about this

man's heart."

Well, my heart sunk right down into my boots. We was goners and I knowed it--the whole Hogben tribe. Once them doctors and scientists find out about us we'll never know a moment's peace again as long as we live. We won't have no more privacy than a corncob.

Ed Pugh was watching me with a nasty grin on his pasty face.

"Worried, huh?" he said. "You gotta right to be worried. I know about you Hogbens. All witches. Once they get Lem in the hospital, no telling what they'll find out. Against the law to be witches, probably. You've got about half a minute to make up your mind, young Hogben. What do you say?"

Well, what could I say? I couldn't give him a promise like he was asking, could I? Not and let the whole world be overrun by hexing Pughs. Us Hogbens live a long time. We've got some pretty important plans for the future when the rest of the world begins to catch up with us. But if by that time the rest of the world is all Pughs, it won't hardly seem worth while, somehow. I couldn't say yes.

But if I said no Uncle Lem was a goner. Us Hogbens was doomed either way, it seemed to me.

Looked like there was only one thing to do. I took a deep breath, shut my eyes, and let out a desperate yell inside my head.

"Grandpaw!" I hollered.

"Yes, my boy?" said a big deep voice in the middle of my brain. You'da thought he'd been right alongside me all the time, just waiting to be called. He was a hundred-odd miles off, and sound asleep. But when a Hogben calls in the tone of voice I called in he's got a right to expect an answer--quick. I got it.

Mostly Grandpaw woulda dithered around for fifteen minutes, asking cross questions and not listening to the answers, and talking in all kinds of queer old-fashioned dialects, like Sanskrit, he's picked up through the years. But this time he seen it was serious.

"Yes, my boy?" was all he said.

I flapped my mind wide open like a school-book in front of him. There wasn't no time for questions and answers. The doc was getting out his dingus to listen to Uncle Lem's two hearts beating out of tune and once he heard that the jig would be up for us Hogbens.

"Unless you let me kill 'em, Grandpaw," I added. Because by that time I knowed he'd read the whole situation from start to finish in one fast glance.

It seemed to me he was quiet an awful long time after that. The doc had got the dingus out and he was fitting its little black arms into his ears. Ed Pugh was watching me like a hawk. Junior stood there all swole up with pizon, blinking his mean little eyes around for somebody to shoot it at. I was half hoping he'd pick on me. I'd worked out a way to make it bounce back in his face and there was a chance it might even kill him.

I heard Grandpaw give a sorta sigh in my mind.

"They've got us over a barrel, Saunk," he said. I remember being a little surprised he could speak right plain English when he wanted to. "Tell Pugh we'll do it."

"But Grandpaw--" I said.

"Do as I say!" It gave me a headache, he spoke so firm. "Quick, Saunk! Tell Pugh we'll give him what he wants."

Well, I didn't dare disobey. But this once I really came close to defying Grandpaw.

It stands to reason even a Hogben has got to get senile someday, and I thought maybe old age had finally set in with Grandpaw at last.

What I thunk at him was, "All right, if you say so, but I sure hate to do it. Seems like if they've got us going and coming, the least we can do is take our medicine like Hogbens and keep all that pizon bottled up in Junior stead of spreading it around the world." But out loud I spoke to Mister Pugh.

"All right, Mister Pugh," I said, real humble. "You win. Only, call off your hex. Quick, before it's too late."

Chapter 4

Pughs A-Coming

Mister Pugh had a great big yellow automobile, low-slung, without no top. It went awful fast. And it was sure awful noisy. Once I'm pretty sure we run over a small boy in the road but Mister Pugh paid him no mind and I didn't dare say nothing. Like Grandpaw said, the Pughs had us over a barrel. It took quite a lot of palaver before I convinced 'em they'd have to come back to the homestead with me. That was part of Grandpaw's orders.

"How do I know you won't murder us in cold blood once you get us out there in the wilderness?" Mister Pugh asked.

"I could kill you right here if I wanted," I told him. "I would too but Grandpaw says no. You're safe if Grandpaw says so, Mister Pugh. The word of a Hogben ain't never been broken yet."

So he agreed, mostly because I said we couldn't work the spells except on home territory. We loaded Uncle Lem into the back of the car and took off for the hills. Had quite an argument with the doc, of course. Uncle Lem sure was stubborn.

He wouldn't wake up nohow but once Junior took the hex off Uncle Lem faded out fast to a good healthy color again. The doc just didn't believe it coulda happened, even when he saw it. Mister Pugh had to threaten quite a lot before we got away. We left the doc sitting on the curb, muttering to himself and rubbing his haid dazed like.

I could feel Grandpaw a-studying the Pughs through my mind all the way home. He seemed to be sighing and kinda shaking his haid--such as it is--and working out problems that didn't make no manner of sense to me.

When we drew up in front of the house there wasn't a soul in sight. I could hear Grandpaw stirring and muttering on his gunnysack in the attic but Paw seemed to have went invisible and he was too drunk to tell me where he was when I asked. The baby was asleep. Maw was still at the church sociable and Grandpaw said to leave her be.

"We can work this out together, Saunk," he said as soon as I got outa the car. "I've been thinking. You know that sled you fixed up to sour your Maw's cream this morning? Drag it out, son. Drag it out."

I seen in a flash what he had in mind. "Oh, no, Grandpaw!" I said, right out loud.

"Who you talking to?" Ed Pugh asked, lumbering down outa the car. "I don't see nobody. This your homestead? Ratty old dump, ain't it? Stay close to me, Junior. I don't trust these folks any farther'n I can see em.

"Get the sled, Saunk," Grandpaw said, very firm. "I got it all worked out. We're gonna send these two gorillas right back through time, to a place they'll really fit."

"But Grandpaw!" I hollered, only inside my head this time. "Let's talk this over. Lemme get Maw in on it anyhow. Paw's right smart when he's sober. Why not wait till he wakes up? I think we oughta get the Baby in on it too. I don't think sending 'em back through time's a good idea at all, Grandpaw."

"The Baby's asleep," Grandpaw said. "You leave him be. He read himself to sleep over his Einstein, bless his little soul."

I think the thing that worried me most was the way Grandpaw was talking plain English. He never does when he's feeling normal. I thought maybe his old age had all caught up with him at one bank, and knocked all the sense outa his--so to speak--haid.

"Grandpaw," I said, trying to keep calm. "Don't you see? If we send 'em back through time and give 'em what we promised it'll make everything a million times worse than before. You gonna strand 'em back there in the year one and break your promise to 'em?"

"Saunk!" Grandpaw said.

"I know. If we promised we'd make sure the Pugh line won't die out, then we gotta make sure. But if we send 'em back to the year one that'll mean all the time between then and now they'll spend spreading out and spreading out. More Pughs every generation.

"Grandpaw, five seconds after they hit the year one, I'm liable to feel my two eyes rush together in my haid and my face go all fat and pasty like Junior. Grandpaw, everybody in the world may be Pughs if we give 'em that much time to spread out in!"

"Cease thy chirring, thou chilce dolt," Grandpaw hollered. "Do my bidding, young fool!"

That made me feel a little better but not much. I went and dragged out the sled. Mister Pugh put up quite a argument about that.

"I ain't rid on a sled since I was so high," he said. "Why should I git on one now? This is some trick. I won't do it."

Junior tried to bite me.

"Now Mister Pugh," I said, "you gotta cooperate or we won't get nowheres. I know what I'm doing. Just step up here and set down. Junior, there's room for you in front. That's fine."

If he hadn't seen how worried I was I don't think he'd a-done it. But I couldn't hide how I was feeling.

"Where's your Grandpaw?" he asked, uneasy. "You're not going to do this whole trick by yourself, are you? Young ignorant feller like you? I don't like it. Suppose you made a mistake?"

"We give our word," I reminded him. "Now just kindly shut up and let me concentrate. Or maybe you don't want the Pugh line to last forever?"

"That was the promise," he says, settling himself down. "You gotta do it. Lemme know when you commence."

"All right, Saunk," Grandpaw says from the attic, right brisk. "Now you watch. Maybe you'll learn a thing or two. Look sharp. Focus your eyes down and pick out a gene. Any gene."

Bad as I felt about the whole thing I couldn't help being interested. When Grandpaw does a thing he does it up brown. Genes are

mighty slippery little critters, spindle-shaped and awful teeny. They're partners with some skinny guys called chromosomes, and the two of 'em show up everywhere you look, once you've got your eyes focused just right.

"A good dose of ultraviolet ought to do the trick," Grandpaw muttered. "Saunk, you're closer."

I said, "All right, Grandpaw," and sort of twiddled the light as it sifted down through the pines above the Pughs. Ultraviolet's the color at the other end of the line, where the colors stop having names for most people.

Grandpaw said, "Thanks, son. Hold it for a minute."

The genes began to twiddle right in time with the light waves. Junior said, "Paw, something's tickling me."

Ed Pugh said, "Shut up."

Grandpaw was muttering to himself. I'm pretty sure he stole the words from that perfesser we keep in the bottle, but you can't tell, with Grandpaw. Maybe he was the first person to make 'em up in the beginning.

"The euchromatin," he kept muttering. "That ought to fix it. Ultraviolet gives us hereditary mutation and the euchromatin contains the genes that transmit heredity. Now that other stuff's heterochromatin and that produces evolutionary change of the cataclysmic variety.

"Very good, very good. We can always use a new species. Hum-m-m. About six bursts of heterochromatinic activity ought to do it." He was quiet for a minute. Then he said, "Ich am eldre and ek magti! Okay, Saunk, take it away."

I let the ultraviolet go back where it came from.

"The year one, Grandpaw?" I asked, very doubtful.

"That's close enough," he said. "Wite thou the way?"

"Oh yes, Grandpaw," I said. And I bent over and give them the necessary push.

The last thing I heard was Mister Pugh's howl.

"What's that you're doin'?" he hollered at me. "What's the idea? Look out, there, young Hogben or--what's this? Where we goin'? Young Saunk, I warn you, if this is some trick I'll set Junior on you! I'll send you such a hex as even you-u....

Then the howl got real thin and small and far away until it wasn't no more than the noise a mosquito makes. After that it was mighty quiet in the dooryard.

I stood there all braced, ready to stop myself from turning into a Pugh if I could. Them little genes is tricky fellers.

I knowed Grandpaw had made a turrible mistake.

The minute them Pughs hit the year one and started to bounce back through time toward now I knowed what would happen.

I ain't sure how long ago the year one was, but there was plenty of time for the Pughs to populate the whole planet. I put two fingers against my nose to keep my eyes from banging each other when they started to rush together in the middle like all us Pughs'eyes do-- "You ain't a Pugh yet, son," Grandpaw said, chuckling. "Kin ye see 'em?"

"No," I said. "What's happening?"

"The sled's starting to slow down," he said. "Now it's stopped. Yep, it's the year one, all right. Look at all them men and women flockin' outa the caves to greet their new company! My, my, what great big shoulders the men have got. Bigger even than Paw Pugh's.

"An'ugh--just look at the women! I declare, little Junior's positively handsome alongside them folks! He won't have no trouble finding a wife when the time comes."

"But Grandpaw, that's turrible!" I said.

"Don't sass your elders, Saunk," Grandpaw chuckled. "Looka there now. Junior's just pulled a hex. Another little child fell over flat on his ugly face. Now the little child's mother is knocking Junior endwise. Now his pappy's sailing into Paw Pugh. Look at that fight! Just look at it! Oh, I guess the Pugh family's well took care of, Saunk."

"But what about our family?" I said, almost wailing.

"Don't you worry," Grandpaw said. "Time'll take care of that. Wait a minute, let me watch. Hm-m. A generation don't take long when you know how to look. My, my, what ugly little critters the ten baby Pughs was! They was just like their pappy and their grandpappy.

"I wish Lily Lou Mutz could see her grandbabies. I shorely do. Well, now, ain't that cute? Every one of them babies grewed up in a flash, seems like, and each of 'em has got ten babies of their own. I like to see my promises working out, Saunk. I said I'd do this, and I done it."

I just moaned.

"All right," Grandpaw said. "Let's jump ahead a couple of centuries. Yep, still there and spreading like crazy. Family likeness is still

strong, too. Hum-m. Another thousand years and--well, I declare! If it ain't Ancient Greece! Hasn't changed a bit, neither. What do you know, Saunk!" He cackled right out, tickled pink.

"Remember what I said once about Lily Lou putting me in mind of an old friend of mine named Gorgon? No wonder! Perfectly natural. You ought to see Lily Lou's great-great-great-grandbabies! No, on second thought, it's lucky you can't. Well, well, this is shore interesting."

He was still about three minutes. Then I heard him laugh.

"Bang," he said. "First heterochromatinic burst. Now the changes start."

"What changes, Grandpaw?" I asked, feeling pretty miserable.

"The changes," he said, "that show your old Grandpaw ain't such a fool as you thought. I know what I'm doing. They go fast, once they start. Look there now, that's the second change. Look at them little genes mutate!"

"You mean," I said, "I ain't gonna turn into a Pugh after all? But Grandpaw, I thought we'd promised the Pughs their line wouldn't die out."

"I'm keeping my promise," Grandpaw said, dignified. "The genes will carry the Pugh likeness right on to the toot of the judgment horn, just like I said. And the hex power goes right along with it."

Then he laughed.

"You better brace yourself, Saunk," he said. "When Paw Pugh went sailing off into the year one seems like he uttered a hex threat, didn't he? Well, he wasn't fooling. It's a-coming at you right now."

"Oh, Lordy!" I said. "There'll be a million of 'em by the time they get here! Grandpaw! What'll I do?"

"Just brace yourself," Grandpaw said, real unsympathetic. "A million, you think? Oh, no, lots more than a million."

"How many?" I asked him.

He started in to tell me. You may not believe it but he's still telling me. It takes that long. There's that many of 'em.

You see, it was like with that there Jukes family that lived down south of here. The bad ones was always a mite worse than their children and the same dang thing happened to Gene Chromosome and his kin, so to speak. The Pughs stayed Pughs and they kept the hex power--and I guess you might say the Pughs conquered the whole world, after all.

But it could of been worse. The Pughs could of stayed the same size down through the generations. Instead they got smaller--a whole lot smaller. When I knowed 'em they was bigger than most folks--Paw Pugh, anyhow.

But by the time they'd done filtering the generations from the year one, they'd shrunk so much them little pale fellers in the blood was about their size. And many a knock-down drag-out fight they have with 'em, too.

Them Pugh genes took such a beating from the heterochromatinic bursts Grandpaw told me about that they got whopped all outa their proper form. You might call 'em a virus now--and of course a virus is exactly the same thing as a gene, except the virus is friskier. But heavens above, that's like saying the Jukes boys is exactly the same as George Washington!

The hex hit me--hard.

I sneezed something tumble. Then I heard Uncle Lem sneezing in his sleep, lying back there in the yaller car. Grandpaw was still droning on about how many Pughs was a-coming at me right that minute, so there wasn't no use asking questions. I fixed my eyes different and looked right down into the middle of that sneeze to see what had tickled me-- Well, you never seen so many Junior Pughs in all your born days!

It was the hex, all right. Likewise, them Pughs is still busy, hexing everybody on earth, off and on. They'll do it for quite a time, too, since the Pugh line has got to go on forever, account of Grandpaw's promise.

They tell me even the microscopes ain't never yet got a good look at certain viruses. The scientists are sure in for a surprise someday when they focus down real close and see all them pasty-faced little devils, ugly as sin, with their eyes set real close together, wiggling around hexing everybody in sight.

It took a long time--since the year one, that is--but Gene Chromosome fixed it up, with Grandpaw's help. So Junior Pugh ain't a pain in the neck no more, so to speak.

But I got to admit he's an awful cold in the haid.