

of both those galaxies became possessed of planets.

There is much evidence to support the belief that it was not merely a coincidence that so many planets came into being at about the same time as the galactic inter- passage. Another school of thought holds that it was pure coincidence; that all suns have planets as naturally and as inevitably as cats have kittens.

Be that as it may, Arisian records are clear upon the point that before the two galaxies began to coalesce, there were never more than three solar systems present in either; and usually only one. Thus, when the sun of the planet upon which their race originated grew old and cool, the Arisians were hard put to it to preserve their culture, since they had to work against time in solving the engineering problems associated with moving a planet from an older to a younger sun.

Since nothing material was destroyed when the Eddorians were forced into the next plane of existence, their historical records also have become available. Those records-folios and tapes and playable discs of platinum alloy, resistant indefinitely even to Eddore's noxious atmosphere agree with those of the Arisians upon this point. Immediately before the Coalescence began there was one, and only one, planetary solar system in the Second Galaxy; and, until the advent of Eddore, the Second Galaxy was entirely devoid of intelligent life.

atmosphere a foul and corrosive fog. Eddore was and is unique; so different from any other world of either galaxy that its very existence was inexplicable until its own records revealed the fact that it did not originate in normal space-time at all, but came to our universe from some aliens and horribly different other.

As differed the planets, so differed the peoples. The Arisians went through the usual stages of savagery and barbarism on they way to Civilization. The Age of Stone. The Ages of Bronze, of Iron, of Steel, and of Electricity. Indeed, it is probable that it is because the Arisians went through these various stages that all subsequent Civilizations have done so, since the spores which burgeoned into life upon the cooling surfaces, of all the planets of the commingling galaxies were Arisian, not Eddorian, in origin. Eddorian spores, while undoubtedly present, must have been so alien that they could not develop in any one of the environments, widely variant although they are, existing naturally or coming naturally into being in. normal space and time.

The Arisians - especially after atomic energy freed them from physical labor- devoted themselves more and ever more intensively to the exploration of the limitless possibilities of the mind.

Even before the Coalescence, then, the Arisians had need neither of space-ships nor of telescopes. By power of mind alone they watched the

their perfect memories every detail of everything that happened; in the hope that, as ages passed, either they or their decedents would be able to develop a symbology and a methodology capable of explaining the then inexplicable phenomenon. Carefree, busy, absorbedly intent, the Arisian mentalities roamed throughout space-until one of them struck an Eddorian mind.

* * *

While any Eddorian could, if it chose, assume the form of a man, they were in no sense man-like. Nor, since the term implies a softness and a lack of organization, can they be described as being amoeboid. They were both versatile and variant. Each Eddorian changed, not only its shape, but also its texture, in accordance with the requirements of the moment. Each produced extruded members whenever and wherever it needed them; members uniquely appropriate to the task then in work. If hardness was indicated, the members were hard; if softness, they were soft. Small or large, rigid or flexible; joined or tentacular - all one. Filaments or cables; fingers or feet; needles or mauls - equally simple. One thought and the body fitted the job.

memories of their one "parent".

And if it is difficult to describe in words the physical aspects of the Eddorians, it is virtually impossible to write or to draw, in any symbology of Civilization, a true picture of an Eddorian's - any Eddorian's mind. They were intolerant, domineering, rapacious, insatiable, cold, callous, and brutal. They were keen, capable, persevering, analytical, and efficient. They had no trace of any of the softer emotions or sensibilities possessed by races adherent to Civilization. No Eddorian ever had anything even remotely resembling a sense of humor.

While not essentially bloodthirsty - that is, not loving bloodshed for its own sweet sake - they were no more averse to blood-letting than they were in favor of it. Any amount of killing which would or which might advance an Eddorian toward his goal was commendable; useless slaughter was frowned upon, not because it was slaughter, but because it was useless and hence inefficient.

And, instead of the multiplicity of goals sought by the various entities of any race of Civilization, each and every Eddorian had only one. The same one: power. Power! P-O-W-E-R!!

Since Eddore was peopled originally by various races, perhaps as similar to each other as are the various human races of Earth, it is understandable that the early history of the planet while it was still in its own

"push-button" was employing engines of destruction against which the only possible defense was a fantastic thickness of planetary bed-rock.

Finally, unable either to kill or to enslave each other, the comparatively few survivors made a peace of sorts. Since their own space was practically barren of planetary systems, they would move their planet from space to space until they found one which so teemed with planets that each living Eddorian could become the sole Master of an ever increasing number of worlds. This was a program very much worthwhile, promising as it did an outlet for even the recognizedly insatiable Eddorian craving for power. Therefore the Eddorians, for the first time in their prodigiously long history of fanatical non-cooperation, decided to pool their resources of mind and of material and to work as a group.

Union of a sort was accomplished eventually; neither peaceably nor without highly lethal friction. They knew that a democracy, by its very nature, was inefficient; hence a democratic form of government was not even considered. An efficient government must of necessity be dictatorial. Nor were they all exactly alike or of exactly equal ability; perfect identity of any two such complex structures was in fact impossible, and any difference, however slight, was ample justification for stratification in such a society as theirs.

There resulted, among other things, the hyper-spatial tube and the fully inertialess drive - the drive which was, millions of years later, to be given to Civilization by an Arisian operating under the name of Bergenholm. Another result, which occurred shortly after the galactic interpassage had begun, was the eruption into normal space of the planet Eddore.

"I must now decide whether to make this space our permanent headquarters or to search farther," the All-Highest radiated harshly to his Council. "On the one hand, it will take some time for even those planets which have already formed to cool. Still more will be required far life to develop sufficiently to form a part of the empire which we have planned or to occupy our abilities to any great degree. On the other, we have already spent millions of years in surveying hundreds of millions of continua, without having found anywhere such a profusion of planets as will, in all probability, soon fill both of these galaxies. There may also be certain advantages inherent in the fact that these planets are not yet populated. As life develops, we can mold it as we please. Krongenes, what are your findings in regard to the planetary possibilities of other spaces?"

The term "Krongenes" was not, in the accepted sense, a name. Or, rather, it was more than a name. It was a key thought, in mental shorthand - a condensation and abbreviation of the life-pattern or ego of that particular Eddorian. "Not at all promising, Your Supremacy," Krongenes replied

under any circumstances admit that any race, anywhere, had ever approached or ever would approach the Eddorians in any quality whatever; and second, because, as is routine in all dictatorships, disagreement with the All-Highest did not operate to lengthen the span of life.

"Very well. We will now confer as to . . . but hold! That thought is not one of ours! Who are you, stranger, to dare to intrude thus upon a conference of the Innermost Circle?"

"I am Enphilistor, a younger student, of the planet Arisia." This name; too, was a symbol. Nor was the young Arisian yet a Watchman, as he and so many of his fellows were so soon to become, for before Eddore's arrival Arisia had no need of Watchmen. "I am not intruding, as you know. I have not touched any one of your minds; have not read any one of your thoughts. I have been waiting for you to notice my presence, so that we could become acquainted with each other. A surprising development, truly—we have thought for many cycles of time that we were the only highly advanced life in this universe . . ."

"Be silent, worm, in the presence of the Masters. Land your ship and surrender, and your planet will be allowed to serve us. Refuse, or even hesitate, and every individual of your race shall die."

"Worm? Masters? Land my ship?" The young Arisian's thought was pure curiosity, with no tinge of fear, dismay, or awe. "Surrender? Serve

peculiar - what an extraordinary-psychology!"

"Die, then, worm, if you must have it so!" the All-Highest snarled, and launched a mental bolt whose energies were calculated to slay any living thing.

Enphilistor, however, parried the vicious attack without apparent effort. His manner did not change. He did not strike back.

The Eddorian then drove in with an analyzing probe, only to be surprised again - the Arisian's thought could not be traced! And Enphilistor, while warding off the raging Eddorian, directed a quiet thought as though he were addressing someone close by his side

"Come in, please, one or more of the Elders: There is a situation here which I am not qualified to handle."

"We, the Elders of Arisia in fusion, are here." A grave, deeply resonant pseudo-voice filled the Eddorians' minds; each perceived in three-dimensional fidelity an aged, white bearded human face. "You of Eddore have been expected. The course of action which we must take has been determined long since. You will forget this incident completely. For cycles upon cycles of time to come no Eddorian shall know that we Arisians exist."

Even before the thought was issued the fused Elders had gone quietly and smoothly to work. The Eddorians forgot utterly the incident which

even I can perceive..." He paused, overcome by his thought.

"That which you perceive, youth, is but a very small fraction of the whole. We did not attempt to slay them because we could not have done so. Not because of squeamishness, as you intimate, but from sheer inability. The Eddorian tenacity of life is a thing far beyond your present understanding; to have attempted to kill them would have rendered it impossible to make them forget us. We must have time . . . cycles and cycles of time." The fusion broke off, pondered for minutes, then addressed the group as a whole:

"We, the Elder Thinkers, have not shared fully with you our visualization of the Cosmic All, because until the Eddorians actually appeared there was always the possibility that our findings might have been in error. Now, however, there is no doubt. The Civilization which has been pictured as developing peacefully upon all the teeming planets of two galaxies will not now of itself come into being. We of Arisia should be able to bring it eventually to full fruition, but the task will be long and difficult.

"The Eddorians' minds are of tremendous latent power. Were they to know of us now, it is practically certain that they would be able to develop powers and mechanisms by the use of which they would negate our every effort - they would hurl us out of this, our native space and time. We must have time . . . given time, we shall succeed. There shall be Lenses . . . and

to solidity and stability. Life formed and grew and developed. And as life evolved it was subjected to, and strongly if subtly affected by, the diametrically opposed forces of Arisia and Eddore.

our delegates have not been or may not be able to control properly: Sol III, Rigel IV, Velantia III, and Palain VII. All four, you will observe, are in the other galaxy. No trouble whatever has developed in our own.

"Of these four, the first requires drastic and immediate personal attention. Its people, in the brief interval since our previous general survey, have developed nuclear energy and have fallen into a cultural pattern which does not conform in any respect to the basic principles laid down by us long since. Our deputies there, thinking erroneously that they could handle matters without reporting fully to or calling for help upon the next higher operating echelon, must be disciplined sharply. Failure, from whatever cause, can not be tolerated.

"Gharlane, as Master Number Two, you will assume control of Sol III immediately. This Circle now authorizes and instructs you to take whatever steps may prove necessary to restore order upon that planet. Examine carefully this data concerning the other three worlds which may very shortly become troublesome. Is it your thought that one or more others of this Circle should be assigned to work with you, to be sure that these untoward developments are suppressed?"

"It is not, Your Supremacy," that worthy decided, after a time of study. "Since the peoples in question are as yet of low intelligence; since one form of flesh at a time is all that will have to be energized; and since

"I go, All-Highest. I shall render a complete and conclusive report."

2. ARISIA

"We, the Elder Thinkers in fusion, are spreading in public view, for study and full discussion, a visualization of the relationships existing and to exist between Civilization and its irreconcilable and implacable foe. Several - of our younger members, particularly Eukonidor, who has just attained Watchmanship, have requested instruction in this matter. Being as yet immature, their visualizations do not show clearly why Nedanillor, Kriedigan, Drounli, and Broleenteen, either singly or in fusion, have in the past performed certain acts and have not performed certain others; or that the future actions of those Moulders of Civilization will be similarly constrained.

"This visualization, while more complex, more complete, and more detailed than the one set up by our forefathers at the time of the Coalescence, agrees with it in every essential. The five basics remain unchanged. First: the Eddorians can be overcome only by mental force. Second: the magnitude of the required force is such that its only possible generator is such an organization as the Galactic Patrol toward which we have been and are working. Third: since no Arisian or any fusion of Arisians will ever be able to spear-head that force, it was and is necessary to develop a race

thinking is loose and turbid. When that time comes, every Arisian will be ready for the change. We know the way. We do not know to what that way leads; but the Arisian purpose in this phase of existence - this space-time: continuum - will have been fulfilled and we will go eagerly and joyfully on to the next. Are there any more questions?"

There were none.

"Study this material, then, each of you, with exceeding care. It may be that some one of you, even a child, will perceive some facet of the truth which we have missed or have not examined fully; some fact or implication which may be made to operate to shorten the time of conflict or to lessen the number of budding Civilizations whose destruction seems to us at present to be sheerly unavoidable."

Hours passed. Days. No criticisms or suggestions were offered.

"We take it, then; that this visualization is the fullest and most accurate one possible for the massed intellect of Arisia to construct from the information available at the moment. The Moulders therefore, after describing briefly what they have already done, will inform us as to what they deem it necessary to do in the near future."

"We have observed, and at times have guided, the evolution of intelligent life upon many planets," the fusion began. "We have, to the best of our ability, directed the energies of these entities into the channels of Civili-

strength and dissipate those of weakness. While no very great departure from the norm, either physically or mentally, will take place until after the penultimates have been allowed to meet and to mate, a definite general improvement of each race has been unavoidable.

""Thus the Eddorians have already interested themselves in our budding Civilization upon the planet Tellus, and it is inevitable that they will very shortly interfere with our work upon the other three. These four young Civilizations must be allowed to fall. It is to warn every Arisian against well meant but inconsidered action that this conference was called. We ourselves will operate through forms of flesh of no higher intelligence than, and indistinguishable from, the natives of the planets affected. No traceable connection will exist between those forms and us. No other Arisians will operate within extreme range of any one of those four planets; they will from now on be given the same status as has been so long accorded Eddore itself. The Eddorians must not learn of us until after it is too late for them to act effectively upon that knowledge. Any chance bit of information obtained by any Eddorian must be obliterated at once. It is to guard against and to negate such accidental disclosures that our Watchmen have been trained."

"But if all of our Civilizations go down . . ." Eukonidor began to protest.

that the Eddorians may at any time visualize us. Granted that the Elders of long ago did not merely visualize the Eddorians, but perceived them in timespace surveys; that they and subsequent Elders were able to maintain the status quo; and that the Eddorian way of thought is essentially mechanistic, rather than philosophic, in nature. There is still a possibility that the enemy may be able to deduce us by processes of logic alone. This thought is particularly disturbing to me at the present time because a rigid statistical analysis of the occurrences upon those four planets shows that they cannot possibly have been due to chance. With such an analysis as a starting point, a mind of even moderate ability could visualize us practically in toto. I assume, however, that this possibility has been taken into consideration, and suggest that the membership be informed."

"The point is well taken. The possibility exists. While the probability is very great that such an analysis will not be made until after we have declared ourselves, it is not a certainty. Immediately upon deducing our existence, however, the Eddorians would begin to build against us, upon the four planets and elsewhere. Since there is only one effective counter-structure possible, and since we Elders have long been alert to detect the first indications of that particular activity, we know that the situation remains unchanged. If it changes, we will call at once another full meeting of minds.

expanse of quiet ocean, nor the bustling harbor, nor the metropolis spread out so magnificently and so busily beneath him. He stood there, motionless, until a subtle vibration warned him that visitors were approaching his door.

"Come in, gentlemen . . . Please be seated." He sat down at one end of a table molded of transparent plastic. "Psychologist Talmonides, Statesman Cleto, Minister Philamon, Minister Marxes and Officer Artomenes, I have asked you to come here personally because I have every reason to believe that the shielding of this room is proof against eavesdroppers; a thing which can no longer be said of our supposedly private television channels. We must discuss, and if possible come to some decision concerning, the state in which our nation now finds itself.

"Each of us knows within himself exactly what he is. Of our own powers, we cannot surely know each others' inward selves. The tools and techniques of psychology, however, are potent and exact; and Talmonides, after exhaustive and rigorous examination of each one of us, has certified that no taint of disloyalty exists among us."

"Which certification is not worth a damn," the burly Officer declared. "What assurance do we have that Talmonides himself is not one of the ringleaders? Mind you, I have no reason to believe that he is not completely loyal. In fact, since he has been one of my best friends for over

of us others would be the real operator."

"And the fact that our Officer is the one who is splitting hairs so finely could be taken to indicate which one of us the real operator could be," Marxes pointed out, cuttingly.

"Gentlemen! Gentlemen!" Aripontides protested. "While absolute certainty is of course impossible to any finite mind, you all know how Talmonides was tested; you know that in his case there is - no reasonable doubt. Such chance as exists, however, must be taken, for if we do not trust each other fully in this undertaking, failure is inevitable. With this word of warning I will get on with my report.

"This world-wide frenzy of unrest followed closely upon the controlled liberation of atomic energy and may be - probably is - traceable to it. It is in no part due to imperialistic aims or acts on the part of Atlantis. This fact cannot be stressed too strongly. We never have been and are not now interested in Empire. It is true that the other nations began as Atlantean colonies, but no attempt was ever made to hold any one of them in colonial status against the wish of its electorate. All nations were and are sister states. We gain or lose together. Atlantis, the parent, was and is a clearing-house, a co-ordinator of effort, but has never claimed or sought authority to rule; all decisions being based upon free debate and free and secret ballot.

nations of Earth to vassalage.

"This is a bald statement of the present condition of the world as I see it. Since I can see no other course possible, within the constituted framework of our democratic government, I recommend that we continue our present activities, such as the international treaties and agreements upon which we are now at work, intensifying our effort wherever possible. We will now hear from Statesman Cleto."

"You have outlined the situation clearly enough, Faros. My thought, however, is that the principal cause of the trouble is the coming into being of this multiplicity of political parties, particularly those composed principally of crackpots and extremists. The connection with atomic energy is clear: since the atomic bomb gives a small group of people the power to destroy the world, they reason that it thereby confers upon them the authority to dictate to the world. My recommendation is merely a special case of yours; that every effort be made to influence the electorates of Norheim and of Uighar into supporting an effective international control of atomic energy."

"You have your data tabulated in Symbolics?" asked Talmonides, from his seat at the keyboard of a calculating machine.

"Yes. Here they are."

"Thanks."

"Minister Philamon," the Faros announced.

be made to listen to reason. This feather-bedding, this protected loafing, this . . ."

"I protest!" Marxes, Minister of Work, leaped to his feet. "The blame lies squarely with the capitalists. Their greed, their rapacity, their exploitation of . . ."

"One moment, please!" Aripionides rapped the table sharply. "It is highly significant of the deplorable condition of the that two Ministers of State should speak as you two have just spoken. I take it that neither of you has anything new to contribute to this symposium?"

Both claimed the floor, but both were refused it by vote.

"Hand your tabulated data to Talmonides," the Faros directed. "Officer Artomenes?"

"You, our Faros, have more than intimated that our defense program, for which I am primarily responsible, has been largely to blame for what has happened," the grizzled warrior began. "In part, perhaps it was - one must be blind indeed not to see the connection, and biased indeed not to admit it. But what should I have done, knowing that there is no practical defense against the atomic bomb? Every nation has them, and is manufacturing more and more. Every nation is infested with the agents of every other. Should I have tried to keep Atlantis toothless in a world bristling with fangs? And could I - or anyone else - have succeed in doing so?"

Intelligence line a while back, but I'm sending over another operative - my best man, too - tonight. If he finds out that we have enough advantage in speed and I'm pretty sure that we have, I say hit both Norheim and Uighar right then, while we can, before they hit us. And hit them hard - pulverize them. Then set up a world government strong enough to knock out any nation - including Atlantis - that will not cooperate with it. This course of action is flagrantly against all international law and all the principles of democracy, I know; and even it might not work. It is, however, as far as I can see, the only course which can work."

"You we all perceive its weaknesses." The Faros thought for minutes. "You cannot be sure that your Intelligence has located all of the danger points, and many of them must be so far underground as to be safe from even our heaviest missiles. We all, including you; believe that the Psychologist is right in holding that the reaction of the other nations to such action would be both unfavorable and violent. Your report, please, Talmonides."

"I have already put my data into the integrator." The Psychologist punched a button and the mechanism began whirl and to click. "I have only one new fact of any importance; the name of one of the higher-ups and its corollary implication that there may be some degree of operation between Norheim and Uighar . . . "

ing lack of coherence was due to insufficient data - that back of this whole movement there is a carefully-set-up and completely-integrated plan - except for the fact that the factions and the nations are so evenly matched. But the data are sufficient. It is shown conclusively that no one of the other nations can possibly win, even by totally destroying Atlantis. They would merely destroy each other and our entire Civilization. According to this forecast, in arriving at which the data furnished by our Officer were prime determinants, that will surely be the outcome unless remedial measures be taken at once. You are of course sure of your facts, Artomenes?"

"I am sure. But you said you had a name, and that it indicated a No-rheim-Uighar hookup. What is that name?"

"An old friend of yours . . ."

"Lo Sung!" The words as spoken were a curse of fury.

"None other. And, unfortunately, there is as yet no course of action indicated which is at all promising of success."

"Use mine, then!" Artomenes jumped up and banged the table with his fist. "Let me send two flights of rockets over right now that will blow Uigharstoy and Norgrad into radioactive dust and make a thousand square miles around each of them uninhabitable for ten thousand years! If that's the only way they can learn anything, let them learn!"

will by now have decided upon the basis of our pooled knowledge, what must be done."

"The outlook is not good: not good at all, "the Psychologist announced, gloomily." The only course of action which carries any promise whatever of success - and its probability is only point one eight - is the one recommended by the Faros, modified slightly to include Artomenes' suggestion of sending his best operative on the indicated mission. For highest morale, by the way, the Faros should also interview this agent before he sets out. Ordinarily I would not advocate a course of action having so little likelihood of success; but since it is simply a continuation and intensification of what we are already doing, I do not see how we can adopt any other."

"Are we agreed?" Aripionides asked, after a short silence.

They were agreed. Four of the conferees filed out and a brisk young man strode in. Although he did not look at the Faros his eyes asked questions.

"Reporting for orders, sir." He saluted the Officer punctiliously.

"At ease, sir." Artomenes returned the salute. "You were called here for a word from the Faros. Sir, I present Captain Phryges."

"Not orders, son . . . no." Aripionides' right hand rested in greeting upon the captain's left shoulder, wise old eyes probed deeply into gold-flecked, tawny eyes of youth; the Faros saw, without really noticing, a

"Th . . . thank you, sir." Phryges gulped twice to steady his voice. "I'll do my best, sir."

And later, in a wingless craft flying toward the airfield, young Phryges broke a long silence. "So that is the Faros . . . I like him, Officer . . . I have never seen him close up before . . . there's something about him . . . He isn't like my father, much, but it seems as though I have known him for a thousand years!"

"Hm . . . m . . . m. Peculiar. You two are a lot alike, at that, even though you don't look anything like each other . . . Can't put a finger on exactly what it is, but it's there."

Although Artomenes nor any other of his time could place it, the resemblance was indeed there. It was in and back of the eyes; it was the "look of eagles" which was long later to become associated with the wearers of Arisia's Lens. "But here we are, and your ship's ready. Luck, son."

"Thanks, sir. But one more thing. If it should - if I don't get back - will you see that my wife and the baby are . . . ?"

"I will, son. They will leave for North Maya tomorrow morning. They will live, whether you and I do or not. Anything else?"

"No, sir. Thanks. Goodbye."

The ship was a tremendous flying wing. A standard commercial job. Empty - passengers, even crewmen, were never subjected to the brutal

The vessel seemed to pause momentarily; paused and bucked viciously. She shuddered and shivered, tried to tear herself into shreds and chunks; but Phryges in his tank was unconcerned. Earlier, weaker ships went to pieces against the solid-seeming wall of atmospheric incompressibility at the velocity of sound; but this one was built solidly enough, and powered to hit that wall hard enough, to go through unharmed. The hellish vibration ceased; the fantastic violence of the drive subsided to a mere shove; Phryges knew that the vessel had leveled off at its cruising speed of two thousand miles per hour. He emerged, spilling the least possible amount of water upon the polished steel floor. He took off his coverall and stuffed it back through the valve into the tank. He mopped and polished the floor with towels, which likewise went into the tank.

He drew on a pair of soft gloves and, by manual control, jettisoned the acceleration tank and all the apparatus which had made that unloading possible. This junk would fall into the ocean; would sink; would never be found. He examined the compartment and the hatch minutely. No scratches, no scars, no mars; no tell-tale marks or prints of any kind. Let the Norskies search. So far; so good.

Back toward the trailing edge then, to a small escape hatch beside which was fastened a dual black ball. The anchoring devices went out first. He gasped as the air rushed out into near-vacuum, but he had been trained

tinuously from the moment of entering Norheiman radar range. Since the ball would be invisible on any radar screen, no suspicion would be aroused; particularly since - as far as Atlantean Intelligence had been able to discover - the Norheimans had not yet succeeded in perfecting any device by the use of which a living man could bail out of a super-sonic plane.

Phryges waited - and waited - until the second hand of his watch marked the arrival of zero time. He curled up into one half of the ball; the other half closed over him and locked. The hatch opened. Ball and closely-prisoned man plummeted downward; slowing abruptly, with a horrible deceleration, to terminal velocity. Had the air been any trifle thicker the Atlantean captain would have died then and there; but that, too, had been computed accurately and Phryges lived.

And as the ball bulleted downward on a screaming slant, it shrank!

This, too, the Atlanteans hoped, was new - a synthetic which air-friction would erode away, molecule by molecule, so rapidly that no perceptible fragment of it would reach ground.

The casing disappeared, and the yielding porous lining. And Phryges, still at an altitude of over thirty thousand feet, kicked away the remaining fragments of his cocoon and, by judicious planning, turned himself so that he could see the ground, now dimly visible in the first dull gray

That was close-too close! He was white and shaking, but unhurt, as he gathered in the billowing, fighting sheet and rolled it, together with his harness, into a wad. He broke open a tiny ampule, and as the drops of liquid touched it the stout fabric began to disappear. It did not burn; it simply disintegrated and vanished. In less than a minute there remained only a few steel snaps and rings, which the Atlantean buried under a meticulously-replaced circle of sod.

He was still on schedule. In less than three minutes the signals would be on the air and he would know where he was - unless the Norsks had succeeded in finding and eliminating the whole Atlantean under-cover group. He pressed a stud on a small instrument; held it down. A line burned green across the dial flared red-vanished. "Damn!" he breathed, explosively. The strength of the signal told him that he was within a mile or so of the hideout-first-class computation - but the red flash warned him to keep away. Kinnexa - it had better be Kinnexa! - would come to him.

How? By air? Along the road? Through the woods on foot? He had no way of knowing-talking, even on a tight beam, was out of the question. He made his way to the highway and crouched behind a tree. Here she could come at him by any route of the three.

Again he waited, pressing infrequently a stud of his sender.

straightened up, and looked down the road, straight at Phryges' hiding place. This time the binoculars brought her up to little more than arm's length. Tall, blonde, beautifully built; the slightly crooked left eyebrow. The threadline of gold betraying a one-tooth bridge and the tiny scar on her upper lip, for both of which he had been responsible -she always did insist on playing cops-and-robbers with boys older and bigger than herself-it was Kinnexa! Not even Norheim's science could imitate so perfectly every personalizing characteristic of a girl he had known ever since she was knee-high to a duck!

The girl slid back into her seat and the heavy car began to move. Open-handed, Phryges stepped out into its way. The car stopped.

"Turn around. Back up to me, hands behind you," she directed, crisply.

The man, although surprised, obeyed. Not until he felt a finger exploring the short hair at the back of his neck did he realize what she was seeking-the almost imperceptible scar marking the place where she bit him when she was seven years old!

"Oh, Fry! It is you! Really you! Thank the gods! I've been ashamed of that all my life, but now. . ."

He whirled and caught her as she slumped, but she did not quite faint.

"Didn't hold-over here they add such trimmings as skinning and salt to the regular psycho routine. But none of them knew anything about me, nor about how their reports were picked up, or I'd have been dead, too. But it doesn't make any difference, Fry we're just one week too late."

"What do you mean, too late? Speed it up!" His tone was rough, but the hand he placed on her arm was gentleness itself.

"I'm telling you as fast as I can. I picked up his last report day before yesterday. They have missiles just as big and just as fast as ours-maybe more so-and they are going to fire one at Atlantis tonight at exactly seven o'clock."

"Tonight! Holy gods!" The man's mind raced.

"Yes." Kinnexa's voice was low, uninflected. "And there was nothing in the world that I could do about it. If I approached any one of our places, or tried to use a beam strong enough to reach anywhere, I would simply have got picked up, too. I've thought and thought, but could figure out only one thing that might possibly be of any use, and I couldn't do that alone. But two of us, perhaps . . ."

"Go on. Brief me. Nobody ever accused you of not having a brain, and you know this whole country like the palm of your hand."

"Steal a ship. Be over the ramp at exactly Seven Pay Emma. When the lid opens, go into a full-power dive, beam Artomenes-if I had a second

coat or a cloak now, so I can't either. And just look at this dress! Do you see any place where I could hide even one?"

He looked, appreciatively, and she had the grace to blush.

"Can't say that I do," he admitted. "But I'd rather have one of our own ships, if we could make the approach. Could both of us make it, do you suppose?"

"Not a chance. They'd keep at least one man inside all the time. Even if we killed everybody outside, the ship would take off before we could get close enough to open the port with the outside controls."

"Probably. Go on. But first, are you sure that you're in the clear?"

"Positive." She grinned mirthlessly. "The fact that I am still alive is conclusive evidence that they didn't find out anything about me. But I don't want you to work on that idea if you can think of a better one. I've got passports and so on for you to be anything you want to be, from a tube man up to an Ekoptian banker. Ditto for me, and for us both, as Mr. and Mrs."

"Smart girl." He thought for minutes, then shook his head. "No possible way out that I can see. The sneak-boat isn't due for a week, and from what you've said it probably won't get here. But you might make it, at that. I'll drop you somewhere . . ."

"You will not," she interrupted, quietly but definitely. "Which would you rather-go out in a blast like that one will be, beside a good Atlantean,

get out of that leather and into a suit that matches this passport photo."

"Right. Straight road for miles, and nothing in sight either way. Give me the suit and I'll change now. Keep on going or stop?"

"Better stop, I think," the girl decided. "Quicker, and we'll have to find a place to hide or bury this evidence."

While the man changed clothes, Kinnexa collected the contraband, wrapping it up in the discarded jacket. She looked up just as Phryges was adjusting his coat. She glanced at his armpits, then stared.

"Where are your blusters?" she demanded. "They ought to show, at least a little, and even I can't see a sign of them."

He showed her.

"But they're so tiny! I never saw blusters like that!"

"I've got a blaster, but it's in the tail pocket. These aren't. They're air-guns. Poisoned needles. Not worth a damn beyond a hundred feet, but deadly close up. One touch anywhere and the guy dies right then. Two seconds max."

"Nice!" She was no shrinking violet this young Atlantean spy. "You have spares, of course, and I can hide two of them easily enough in leg-holsters. Gimme, and show me how they work."

"Oh! Of course! Forgive me, Fry - it slipped my mind completely that you didn't know where it was. Area six; pinpoint four seven three dash six oh five."

"Got it." He repeated the figures.

But neither of the Atlanteans was "scragged", and at six P. M. an allegedly honeymooning couple parked their big roadster in the garage at Norgrad Field and went through the gates. Their papers, tickets included, were in perfect order; they were as inconspicuous and as undemonstrative as newlyweds are wont to be. No more so, and no less.

Strolling idly, gazing eagerly at each new thing, they made their circuitous way toward a certain small hangar. As the girl had said, this field boasted hundreds of super-sonic fighters, so many that servicing was a round-the-clock routine. In that hangar was a sharp-nosed, stubby-V'd flyer, one of Norheim's fastest. It was serviced and ready.

It was too much to hope, of course, that the visitors could actually get into the building unchallenged. Nor did they.

"Back, you!" A guard waved them away. "Get back to the Concourse, where you belong - no visitors allowed out here!"

F-f-t! F-f-t! Phryges' air-gun broke into soft but deadly coughing. Kin-nexa whirled - hands flashing down, skirt flying up - and ran. Guards tried

She fell against him. He tossed her clear, slammed and dogged the door. He looked at her then, and swore bitterly. A small, round hole marred the bridge of her nose: the back of her head was gone.

He leaped to the controls and the fleet little ship screamed skyward. He cut in transmitter and receiver, keyed and twiddled briefly. No soap. He had been afraid of that. They were already blanketing every frequency he could employ; using power through which he could not drive even a tight beam a hundred miles.

But he could still crash that missile in its tube. Or could he? He was not afraid of other Norheiman fighters; he had a long lead and he rode one of their very fastest. But since they were already so suspicious, wouldn't they launch the bomb before seven o'clock? He tried vainly to coax another knot out of his wide-open engines.

With all his speed, he neared the pin-point just in time to see a trail of super-heated vapor extending up into and disappearing beyond the stratosphere. He nosed his flyer upward, locked the missile into his sights, and leveled off. Although his ship did not have the giant rocket's acceleration, he could catch it before it got to Atlantis, since he did not need its altitude and since most of its journey would be made without power. What he could do about it after he caught it he did not know, but he'd do something.

But there was still a way. He didn't need to call Artomenes now, even if he could get through the interference which the fast-approaching pursuers were still sending out. Atlantean observers would have lined this stuff up long since; the Officer would know exactly what was going on.

Driving ahead and downward, at maximum power, Phryges swung his ship slowly into a right-angle collision course. The fighter's needle nose struck the war-head within a foot of the Atlantean's point of aim, and as he died Phryges knew that he had accomplished his mission. Norheim's missile would not strike Atlantis, but would fall at least ten miles short, and the water there was very deep. Very, very deep. Atlantis would not be harmed.

It might have been better, however, if Phryges had died with Kinnexa on Norgrad Field; in which case the continent would probably have endured. As it was, while that one missile did not reach the city, its frightful atomic charge exploded under six hundred fathoms of water, ten scant miles from Atlantis' harbor, and very close to an ancient geological fault.

Artomenes, as Phryges had surmised, had had time in which to act, and he knew much more than Phryges did about what was coming toward Atlantis. Too late, he knew that not one missile, but seven, had been launched from Norheim, and at least five from Uighar. The retaliatory rockets which were to wipe out Norgrad, Uigharstoy, and thousands of square

"You did a nice job on Tellus," the All-Highest commended. "On the other three, too, of course, but Tellus was so far and away the worst of the lot that the excellence of the work stands out. When the Atlantean nations destroyed each other so thoroughly I thought that this thing called 'democracy' was done away with forever, but it seems to be mighty hard to kill. However, I take it that you have this Rome situation entirely under control?"

"Definitely. Mithradates of Pontus was mine. So were both Sulla and Marius. Through them and others I killed practically all of the brains and ability of Rome, and reduced that so-called 'democracy' to a howling, aimless mob. My Nero will end it. Rome will go on by momentum - outwardly, will even appear to grow - for a few generations, but what Nero will do can never be undone."

"Good. A difficult task, truly."

"Not difficult, exactly . . . but it's so damned steady." Gharlane's thought was bitter. "But that's the hell of working with such short-lived races. Since each creature lives only a minute or so, they change so fast that a man can't take his mind off of them for a second. I've been wanting to take a little vacation trip back to our old time-space but it doesn't look as though I'll be able to do it until after they get some age and settle down."

"That won't be too long. Life-spans lengthen, you know, as races approach their norms."

do, the findings of the Integrator."

"Yes, but I am wondering more and more as to whether to believe them unreservedly or not. Spores from an extinct life-form - suitable environments - operation of the laws of chance - Tommyrot! I am beginning to suspect that chance is being strained beyond its elastic limit, for my particular benefit, and as soon as I can find out who is doing that straining there will be one empty place in the Innermost Circle."

"Have a care, Gharlane!" All levity, all casualness disappeared. "Whom do you suspect? Whom do you accuse?"

"Nobody, as yet. The true angle never occurred to me until just now, while I have been discussing the thing with you. Nor shall I either suspect or accuse, ever. I shall determine, then I shall act."

"In defiance of me? Of my orders?" the All-Highest demanded, his short temper flaring.

"Say, rather, in support," the lieutenant shot back, unabashed. "If some one is working on me through my job, what position are you probably already in, without knowing it? Assume that I am right, that these four planets of mine got the way they are because of monkey business inside the Circle. Who would be next? And how sure are you that there isn't something similar, but not so far advanced, already aimed at you? It seems to me that serious thought is in order." "Perhaps so ... You may be right ...

If either of the two had been less suspicious, less jealous, less arrogant and domineering, in other words, had not been Eddorians - this History of Civilization might never have been written; or written very differently and by another hand.

Both were, however, Eddorians.

2. ARISIA

In the brief interval between the fall of Atlantis and the rise of Rome to the summit of her power, Eukonidor of Arisia had aged scarcely at all. He was still a youth. He was, and would be for many centuries to come, a Watchman. Although his mind was powerful enough to understand the Elders' visualization of the course of Civilization - in fact, he had already made significant progress in his own visualization of the Cosmic All - he was not sufficiently mature to contemplate unmoved the events which, according to all Arisian visualizations, were bound to occur.

"Your feeling is but natural, Eukonidor." Drounli, the Moulder principally concerned with the planet Tellus, meshed his mind smoothly with that of the young Watchman. "We do not enjoy it ourselves, as you know. It is, however, necessary. In no other way can the ultimate triumph of Civilization be assured."

and the

others - will do whatever they can; but their powers will be exactly the same as those of

other human beings of their time. They must be and will be constrained, since any show

of unusual powers, either mental or physical, would be detected instantly and would be

far too revealing. On the other hand, Nero - that is, Gharlane of Eddore - will be

operating much more freely."

"Very much so. Practically unhampered, except in purely physical matters. But, if

nothing can be done to stop it . . . If Nero must be allowed to sow his seeds of ruin . . ."

And upon that cheerless note the conference ended.

3. ROME

"But what have you, Livius, or any of us, for that matter, got to live for?"

and comes soon. I had a wife and children once. So did you. Is there any chance,

however slight, that either of us will ever know them again; or learn even whether they

live or die? None. At this price, is your life worth living? Mine is not."

Livius the Bithynian, who had been staring out past the bars of the cubicle and

over the smooth sand of the arena toward Nero's garlanded and purple-bannered

throne, turned and studied his fellow gladiator from toe to crown. The heavily-muscled

legs, the narrow waist, the sharply-tapering torso, the enormous shoulders. The leonine

head, surmounted by an unkempt shock of red-bronze-auburn hair. And, lastly, the

eyes-gold-flecked, tawny eyes - hard and cold now with a ferocity and a purpose not to

be concealed.

"I have been more or less expecting something of this sort," Livius said then,

thanks, for I am

wholly with you. Not that I have any hope. Although your tribe breeds men - from your

build and hair and eyes you descend from Spartacus himself, you know that even he

did not succeed. Things now are worse, infinitely worse, than they were in his day. No

one who has ever plotted against Nero has had any measure of success; not even his

scheming slut of a mother. All have died, in what fashions you know. Nero is vile, the

basest of the base. Nevertheless, his spies are the most efficient that the world has

ever known. In spite of that, I feel as you do. If I can take with me two or three of the

Praetorians, I die content. But by your look, your plan is not what I thought, to storm

vainly Nero's podium yonder. Have you, by any chance, some trace of hope of

success?"

man kills a better man than he is; but Glatius has done it six times in a row, without

getting a scratch. But the next time he fights, in spite of Nero's protection, Glatius dies.

Word has gone out, and there are gladiators' tricks that Nero never heard of."

"Quite true. One question, and I too may begin to hope. This is not the first time

that gladiators have plotted against Ahenobarbus. Before the plotters could accomplish

anything, however, they found themselves matched against each other and the signal

was always for death, never for mercy. Has this . . .?" Livius paused.

"It has not. It is that which gives me the hope I have. Nor are we gladiators alone

in this. We have powerful friends at court; one of whom has for days been carrying a

knife sharpened especially to slip between Nero's ribs. That he still carries that knife

and that we still live are proofs enough for me that Ahenobarbus, the matricide and

Livius asked.

"Several. The prisons and the pits are so crowded with Christians that they die

and stink, and a pestilence threatens. To mend matters, some scores of hundreds of

them are to be crucified here tomorrow."

"Why not? Everyone knows that they are poisoners of wells and murderers of

children, and practitioners of magic. Wizards and witches."

"True enough." Patroclus shrugged his massive shoulders. "But to get on,

tomorrow night, at full dark, the remaining hundreds who have not been crucified are to

be - have you ever seen sarmentitii and semaxii?"

"Once only. A gorgeous spectacle, truly, almost as thrilling as to feel a man die

on your sword. Men and women, wrapped in oil-soaked garments smeared with pitch

and chained to posts, make splendid torches indeed. You mean, then, that . . .?"

take the palace and kill every man, woman, and child adherent to Nero."

"Very nice - in theory." The Bithynian was frankly skeptical. "But just how are we

going to get there? A few gladiators - such champions as Patroclus of Thrace - are at

times allowed to do pretty much as they please in their free time, and hence could

possibly be on hand to take part in such a brawl, but most of us will be under lock and

guard."

"That too, has been arranged. Our allies near the throne and certain other nobles

and citizens of Rome, who have been winning large sums by our victories, have

prevailed upon our masters to give a grand banquet to all gladiators tomorrow night,

immediately following the mass crucifixion. It is going to be held in the Claudian Grove,

just across from Caesar's Gardens."

"Ah!" Livius breathed deep; his eyes flashed. "By Baal and Bacchus! By the

going to cut his
heart out."

"Granted. I heard that he had your wife for a time. But you seem quite confident

that you will still be alive tomorrow night. By Baal and Ishtar, I wish I could feel so! With

something to live for at last, I can feel my guts turning to water - I can hear Charon's

oars. Like as not, now, some toe-dancing stripling of a retiarius will entangle me in his

net this very afternoon, and no mercy signal has been or will be given this day. Such is

the crowd's temper, from Caesar down, that even you will get 'Pollice verso' if you fall."

"True enough. But you had better get over that feeling, if you want to live. As for

me, I'm safe enough. I have made a vow to Jupiter, and he who has protected me so

long will not desert me now. Any man or any thing who faces me during these games,

dies."

what you

have got to do today?"

"Not particularly," Patroclus replied, indifferently. "Except to dress to fit. Why?

Something special?"

"Extra special. The sensation of the year. Fermius himself. Unlimited. Free

choice of weapons and armor."

"Fermius!" Livius exclaimed. "Fermius the Gaul? May Athene cover you with her shield!"

"You can say that for me, too," the lanista agreed, callously. "Before I knew who

was entered, like a fool, I bet a hundred sesterces on Patroclus here, at odds of only

one to two, against the field. But listen, Bronze-head. If you get the best of Fermius, I'll

give you a full third of my winnings."

"Thanks. You'll collect. A good man, Fermius, and smart. I've heard a lot about

Samnite. Do you know?"

"No. They didn't say. He may not decide until the last moment."

"Unlimited, against me, he'll go Samnite. He'll have to. These unlimiteds are

tough, but it gives me a chance to use a new trick I've been working on. I'll take that

sword there - no scabbard - and two daggers, besides my gladius. Get me a mace; the

lightest real mace they've got in their armory."

"A mace! Fighting Thracian, against a Samnite?"

"Exactly. A mace. Am I going to fight Fermius, or do you want to do it yourself?"

The mace was brought and Patroclus banged it, with a two-handed roundhouse

swing, against a stone of the wall. The head remained solid upon the shaft. Good. They

waited.

Trumpets blared; the roar of the vast assemblage subsided almost to silence.

"Grand Champion Fermius versus Grand Champion Patroclus," came the

plainly that

armor was for use and had been used. On the other hand, the Samnite half-armor of

the Gaul was resplendent with the decorations affected by his race. Fermius' helmet

sported three brilliantly-colored plumes, his shield and cuirass, enameled in half the

colors of the spectrum, looked as though they were being worn for the first time.

Five yards apart, the gladiators stopped and wheeled to face the podium upon

which Nero lolled. The buzz of conversation - the mace had excited no little comment

and speculation - ceased. Patroclus heaved his ponderous weapon into the air; the

Gaul whirled up his long, sharp sword. They chanted in unison:

"Ave, Caesar Imperator!

Morituri to salutant!"

air directly toward the middle of his body! It did not strike its goal Patroclus hoped that

he was the only one there who suspected that he had not expected it to touch his

opponent - but in order to dodge the missile Fermius had to break his stride; lost

momentarily the fine coordination of his attack. And in that moment Patroclus struck.

Struck, and struck again.

But, as has been said, Fermius was both strong and fast.

The first blow, aimed backhand at his bare right leg, struck his shield instead.

The left-handed stab, shield-encumbered as the left arm was, ditto. So did the next trial,

a vicious forehand cut. The third of the mad flurry of sword-cuts, only partially deflected

by the sword which Fermius could only then get into play, sheared down and a red, a

green, and a white plume floated toward the ground. The two fighters sprang apart and

studied each other briefly.

knowledge affected either man, the other could not perceive it.

But the crowd went wild. Nothing like that first terrific passage-at-arms had ever

before been seen. Death, sudden and violent, had been in the air. The arena was

saturated with it. Hearts had been ecstatically in throats. Each person there, man or

woman, had felt the indescribable thrill of death - vicariously, safely - and every fiber of

their lusts demanded more. More! Each spectator knew that one of those men would

die that afternoon. None wanted, or would permit them both to live. This was to the

death, and death there would be.

Women, their faces blotched and purple with emotion, shrieked and screamed.

Men, stamping their feet and waving their arms, yelled and swore. And many, men and

women alike, laid wagers.

"Five hundred sesterces on Fermius!" one shouted, tablet and stylus in air.

"Ten!"

The fighters closed - swung - stabbed. Shields clanged vibrantly under the

impact of fended strokes, swords whined and snarled. Back and forth - circling - giving

and taking ground - for minute after endless minute that desperately furious exhibition

of skill, of speed and of power and of endurance went on. And as it went on, longer and

longer past

the time expected by even the most optimistic, tension mounted higher and

higher.

Blood flowed crimson down the Gaul's bare leg and the crowd screamed its

approval. Blood trickled out of the joints of the Thracian's armor and it became a

frenzied mob.

No human body could stand that pace for long. Both men were tiring fast, and

broke, its

length whining viciously away. Fermius, although staggered by the sheer brute force of

the abortive stroke, recovered almost instantly; dropping his sword and snatching at his

gladius to take advantage of the wonderful opportunity thus given him.

But that breaking had not been accidental; Patroclus made no attempt to recover

his balance. Instead, he ducked past the surprised and shaken Gaul. Still stooping, he

seized the mace, which everyone except he had forgotten, and swung; swung with all

the totalized and synchronized power of hands, wrists, arms, shoulders, and

magnificent body.

The iron head of the ponderous weapon struck the center of the Gaul's cuirass,

which crunched inward like so much cardboard. Fermius seemed to leave the ground

and, folded around the mace, to fly briefly through the air. As he struck the ground,

thought of mercy

could or did exist in that insanely bloodthirsty throng; no thought of clemency for the

man who had fought such a magnificent fight. In cooler moments they would have

wanted him to live, to thrill them again and yet again; but now, for almost half an hour,

they had been loving the hot, the suffocating thrill of death in their throats. Now they

wanted, and would have, the ultimate thrill.

"Death!" The solid structure rocked to the crescendo roar of the demand. "Death!

DEATH!"

Nero's right thumb pressed horizontally against his chest. Every vestal was

making the same sign. Pollice verso. Death. The strained and strident yelling of the

mob grew even louder.

Patroclus lowered his dagger and delivered the unnecessary and unfelt thrust;

and-

am!" that

worthy exclaimed, when the two met, the following day. Patroclus had never seen the

Bithynian so buoyant. "Pallas Athene covered you, like I asked her to. But by the red

beak of Thoth and the sacred Zaimph of Tanit, it gave me the horrors when you made

that throw so quick and missed it, and I went as crazy as the rest of them when you

pulled the real coup. But now, curse it, I suppose that we'll all have to be on the lookout

for it - or no, unlimiteds aren't common, thank Ninib the Smiter and his scarlet spears!"

"I hear you didn't do so badly, yourself," Patroclus interrupted his friend's

loquacity. "I missed your first two, but I saw you take Kalendios. He's a high-rater - one

of the best of the locals - and I was afraid he might snare you, but from the looks of

you, you got only a couple of stabs. Nice work."

"So I figured. So did she, probably, because after a while she came around behind with a lanista and made eyes at me. I must have the next best shape to you here, I guess. What a wench! Anyway, I felt better and better, and before she left I knew that no damn retiarius that ever waved a trident could put a net past my guard. And they couldn't either. A couple more like that and I'll be a Grand Champion myself. But they're digging holes for the crosses and there's the horn that the feast is ready. This show is going to be really good." They ate, hugely and with unmarred appetite, of the heaped food which Nero had provided. They returned to their assigned places to see crosses, standing as close together as they could be placed and each bearing a suffering Christian, filling the whole vast expanse of the arena.

can not be judged by the higher, finer standards of a softer, gentler day.

The afternoon passed; evening approached. All the gladiators then in Rome

assembled in the Claudian Grove, around tables creaking under their loads of food and

wine. Women, too, were there in profusion; women for the taking and yearning to be

taken; and the tide of revelry ran open, wide, and high. Although all ate and apparently

drank with abandon, most of the wine was in fact wasted. And as the sky darkened,

most of the gladiators, one by one, began to get rid of their female companions upon

one pretext or another and to drift toward the road which separated the festivities from

the cloaked and curious throng of lookers-on.

At full dark, a red glare flared into the sky from Caesar's garden and the

gladiators, deployed now along the highway, dashed across it and seemed to wrestle

finding a cuirass

big enough for him to get into. He had been delayed further by the fact that he had had

to kill three strange lanistae before he could get at his owner, the man he really wanted

to slay. He was therefore some little distance behind the other gladiators when

Petronius rushed up to him and seized him by the arm.

White and trembling, the noble was not now the exquisite Arbiter Elegantiae; nor

the imperturbable Augustian.

"Patroclus! In the name of Bacchus, Patroclus, why do the men go there now?

No signal was given - I could not get to Nero!"

"What?" the Thracian blazed. "Vulcan and his fiends! It was given - I heard it

myself! What went wrong?"

"Everything." Petronius licked his lips. "I was standing right beside him. No one

else was near enough to interfere. It was - should have been - easy. But after I got my

were. But what are we - you - going to do?"

Patroclus' mind raced. He believed implicitly that Jupiter guarded him personally.

He believed in the other gods and goddesses of Rome. He more than half believed in

the multitudinous deities of Greece, of Egypt, and even of Babylon. The other world

was real and close; the evil eye only one of the many inexplicable facts of every-day

life. Nevertheless, in spite of his credulity - or perhaps in part because of it - he also

believed firmly in himself; in his own powers. Wherefore he soon came to a decision.

"Jupiter, ward from me Ahenobarbus' evil eye!" he called aloud, and turned.

"Where are you going?" Petronius, still shaking, demanded.

"To do the job you swore to do, of course - to kill that bloated toad. And then to

give Tigellinus what I have owed him so long."

At full run, he soon overtook his fellows, and waded resistlessly into the fray. He

tiful harlot at

his left, gazed appreciatively through his emerald lens at the flaming torches; the while,

with a very small fraction of his Eddorian mind, he mused upon the matter of Patroclus

and Tigellinus.

Should he let the Thracian kill the Commander of his Guard? Or not?

It didn't

really matter, one way or the other. In fact, nothing about this whole foul planet - This

ultramicroscopic, if offensive, speck of cosmic dust in the Eddorian Scheme of Things -

really mattered at all. It would be mildly amusing to watch the gladiator consummate his

vengeance by carving the Roman to bits. But, on the other hand, there was such a thing

as pride of workmanship. Viewed in that light, the Thracian could not kill Tigellinus,

because that bit of corruption had a few more jobs to do. He must descend lower and

clus' head and

a mace crashed down, spattering his brains abroad.

* * *

Thus ended the last significant attempt to save the civilization of Rome;
in a fiasco so

complete that even such meticulous historians as Tacitus and Suetonius
mention it

merely as a minor disturbance of Nero's garden party.

The planet Tellus circled its sun twenty hundred times. Sixty-odd gen-
erations of men

were born and died, but that was not enough. The Arasian program of
genetics required

more. Therefore the Elders, after due deliberation, agreed that that Civi-
lization, too,

control surfaces shot away the crate was hellishly lousy. He could step out, of course, all the while saluting the victorious Jerries, but he wasn't on fire yet-and hadn't been hit-yet. He ducked and flinched sidewise as another burst of bullets stitched another seam along his riddled fuselage and whanged against his dead engine. Afire? Not yet-good! Maybe he could land the heap, after all! Slowly-oh, so sluggishly-the Spad began to level off, toward the edge of the wheatfield and that friendly, inviting ditch. If the krauts didn't get him with their next pass . . . He heard a chattering beneath him-Brownings, by God!-and the expected burst did not come. He knew that he had been just about over the front when they conked his engine; it was a toss-up whether he would come down in enemy territory or not. But

struck ground

he curled up and rolled—he had been a motorcycle racer for years—feeling as he did so a

wash of heat: a tracer had found his gas-tank at last! Bullets were thudding into the

ground; one shrieked past his head as, stooping over, folded into the smallest possible

target, he galloped awkwardly toward the ditch.

The Brownings still yammered, filling the sky with cupronickeled lead; and while

Kinnison was flinging himself full length into the protecting water and mud, he heard a

tremendous crash. One of those Huns had been too intent on murder; had stayed a few

seconds too long; had come a few meters too close.

The clamor of the guns stopped abruptly.

"We got one! We got one!" a yell of exultation.

"Stay down! Keep low, you boneheads!" roared a voice of authority, quite

evidently a sergeant's. "Wanna get your blocks shot off? Take down them guns; we

ditch right now-sounds mighty hot out there!"

"You said it, brother. It's hotter than the hinges of hell, from behind that ridge

over there. But ooze down that ditch a piece, around the first bend. It's pretty well in the

clear there, and besides, you'll find a ledge of rocks running straight across the fiat.

Cross over there and climb the hill-join us by that dead snag up there. We got to get out

of here. That sausage over there must have seen this shindig and they'll blow this

whole damn area off the map. Snap it up! And you, you goldbricks, get the lead out of

your pants!"

Kinnison followed directions. He found the ledge and emerged, scraping thick

and sticky mud from his uniform. He crawled across the little plain. An occasional bullet

whined through the air, far above him; but, as the sergeant had said, this bit of terrain

we?"

"B R R O O M!" The earth trembled, the air vibrated. Below and to the north,

almost exactly where the machineguns had been, an awe-inspiring cloud billowed

majestically into the air; a cloud composed of smoke, vapor, pulverized earth, chunks of

rock, and debris of what had been trees. Nor was it alone.

"Crack! Bang! Tweet! Boom! Wham!" Shells of all calibers, high explosive and

gas, came down in droves. The landscape disappeared. The little company of

Americans, in complete silence and with one mind, devoted themselves to

accumulating distance. Finally, when they had to stop for breath:

"Section B, attached to the 76th Field Artillery," the sergeant answered the

question as though it had just been asked. "As to where we are, somewhere between

Berlin and Paris is about all I can tell you. We got hell knocked out of us yesterday, and

on a dog."

They approached the summit, were challenged, were accepted. They saw a

gray-haired man-an old man, for such a location-seated calmly upon a rock, smoking a

cigarette. His smartly-tailored uniform, which fitted perfectly his not-so-slender figure,

was muddy and tattered. One leg of his breeches was torn half away, revealing a blood-

soaked bandage. Although he was very evidently an officer, no insignia were visible. As

Kinnison and the gunners approached, a first lieutenant-practically spic-and-span-spoke

to the man on the rock.

"First thing to do is to settle the matter of rank," he announced, crisply. "I'm First

Lieutenant Randolph, of . . ."

"Rank, eh?" The seated one grinned and spat out the butt of his cigarette. "But

then, it was important to me, too, when I was a first lieutenant-about the time that you

sergeant.

"Have you got any ammunition, sergeant?"

"Yes, sir. About thirty belts."

"Thank God! We can use it, and you. As for you, Captain, I don't know . . ."

The wire came up. The general seized the instrument and cranked.

"Get me Spearmint . . . Spearmint? Slayton-give me Weatherby . . .

This is

Slayton . . . yes, but . . . No, but I want . . . Hellanddamnation, Weatherby, shut up and

let me talk - don't you know that this wire's apt to be cut my any second?

We're on top

of Hill Fo-wer, Ni-yun, Sev-en - that's right - about two hundred men: maybe three.

Composite - somebody, apparently, from half the outfits in France. Too fast and too far

- both flanks wide open - cut off . . . Hello! Hello! Hello!" He dropped the instrument and

turned to Kinnison. "You want to go back, Captain, and I need a runner - bad. Want to

try to get through?"

minutely.

"Wells, sir."

"What would you say ought to be done with the machine-guns?"

"Cover that ravine, there, fast. Then set up to enfilade if they try to come up over

there. Then, if I could find any more guns, I'd . . ."

"Enough. Second Lieutenant Wells, from now. GHQ will confirm. Take charge of

all the guns we have. Report when you have made disposition. Now, Kinnison, listen. I

can probably hold out until tonight. The enemy doesn't know yet that we're here, but we

are due for some action pretty quick now, and when they locate us - if there aren't too

many of their own units here, too - they'll flatten this hill like a table. So tell Weatherby

to throw a column in here as soon as it gets dark, and to advance Eight and Sixty, so as

to consolidate this whole area. Got it?"

"Yes, Sir."

"Got a compass?"

Post - you'll

know it by the motorcycles and such. Phone from there. Luck!"

Bullets began to whine and the general dropped to the ground and crawled

toward a coppice, bellowing orders as he went. Kinnison crawled, too, straight west,

availing himself of all possible cover, until he encountered a sergeant-major reclining

against the south side of a great tree.

"Cigarette, buddy?" that wright demanded.

"Sure. Take the pack. I've got another that'll last me - maybe more.

But what the

hell goes on here? Who ever heard of a major general getting far enough up front to get

shot in the leg, and he talks as though he were figuring on licking the whole German

army. Is the old bird nuts, or what?"

"Not so you would notice it. Didn'cha ever hear of 'Hell-and-damnation' Slayton?

You will, buddy, you will. If Pershing doesn't give him three stars after this, he's crazier

getting worse. We'd better duck-over there!"

Bullets whistled and stormed, breaking more twigs and branches from the

already shattered, practically denuded trees. The two slid precipitately into the indicated

shell-hole, into stinking mud. Wells' guns burst into action.

"Damn! I hated to do this," the sergeant grumbled, "On accounts, I just got half

dry."

"Wise me up," Kinnison directed. "The more I know about things, the more apt I

am to get through."

"This is what is left of two battalions, and a lot of casualties. They made objective,

but it turns out the outfits on their right and left couldn't, leaving their flanks right out in

the open air. Orders come in by blinker to rectify the line by falling back, but by then it

couldn't be done. Under observation."

Kinnison nodded. He knew what a barrage would have done to a force trying to

sticking out from under some blankets?'

"Yes. I get you." Kinnison knew that combat officers did not wear hobnails, and

usually carried binoculars. "How come so many at once?"

"Just about all the officers that got this far. Conniving, my guess is, behind old

Slayton's back. Anyway, a kraut aviator spots 'em and dives. Our machine-guns got

him, but not until after he heaved a bomb. Dead center. Christ, what a mess! But

there's six - seven good glasses in there. I'd grab one myself, but the general would see

it - he can see right through the lid of a mess-kit. Well, the boys have shut those krauts

up, so I'll hunt the old man up and tell him what I found out. Damn this mud!"

Kinnison emerged sinuously and snaked his way to a row of blanket covered

forms. He lifted a blanket and gasped: then vomited up everything, it seemed, that he

had eaten for days. But he had to have the binoculars.

it was by resounding echoes, made it impossible to locate at all exactly
the weapon's
position. Kinnison crept forward inchwise; scanning every foot of visible
terrain through
his powerful glass. He knew by the sound that it was German. More,
since what he did
not know about machine-guns could have been printed in bill-poster
type upon the back
of his hand, he knew that it was a Maxim, Model 1907 - a mean, mean
gun. He
deduced that it was doing plenty of damage to his fellows back on the
hill, and that they
had not been able to do much of anything about it. And it was beautifully
hidden; even
he, close as he must be, couldn't see it. But damn it, there had to be a...
Minute after minute, unmoving save for the traverse of his binoculars,
he
searched, and finally he found. A tiny plume - the veriest wisp of vapor,
rising from the
surface of the brook. Steam! Steam from the cooling jacket of that
Maxim 1907! And

hill already.

And there were grenades available, right close . . .

He crept up to one of the gruesome objects he had been avoiding, and when he

crept away he half-carried, half-dragged three grenades in a canvas bag. He wormed

his way to a certain boulder. He straightened up, pulled three pins, swung his arm three

times.

Bang! Bam! Pow! The camouflage disappeared; so did the shrubbery for yards

around. Kinnison had ducked behind the rock, but he ducked still deeper as a chunk of

something, its force pretty well spent, clanged against his steel helmet. Another object

thudded beside him - a leg, grayclad and wearing a heavy field boot!

Kinnison wanted to be sick again, but he had neither the time nor the contents.

And damn! What lousy throwing! He had never been any good at baseball, but

dead. One

of them sprawled on the parapet, right in his way. He gave the body a shove, watched it

roll down the slope. As it rolled, however, it came to life and yelled; and at that yell there

occurred a thing at which young Kinnison's hair stood straight up inside his iron helmet.

On the gray of the blasted hillside hitherto unseen gray forms moved; moved toward

their howling comrade. And Kinnison, blessing for the first time in his life his inept

throwing arm, hoped fervently that the Maxim was still in good working order.

A few seconds of inspection showed him that it was. The gun had practically a

full belt and there was plenty more. He placed a box - he would have no Number Two to

help him here - took hold of the grips, shoved off the safety, and squeezed the trip. The

gun roared - what a gorgeous, what a heavenly racket that Maxim made! He traversed

Germans

came very soon, nobody would ever know who had done what, or to whom.

He slithered away; resumed earnestly his westward course: going as fast as -

sometimes a trifle faster than - caution would permit. But there were no more alarms.

He crossed the dangerously open ground; sulked rapidly, through the frightfully

shattered wood. He reached the road, strode along it around the first bend and

stopped, appalled. He had heard of such things, but he had never seen one; and mere

description has always been, and always will be, completely inadequate. Now he was

walking right into it - the thing he was to see in nightmares for all the rest of his ninety-

six years of life.

Actually, there was very little to see. The road ended abruptly. What had been a

wood, riven chunks of metal, a few scrapes of bloody flesh. Kinnison screamed, then, and ran; ran back and around that blasted acreage. And as he ran, his mind built up pictures; pictures which became only the more vivid because of his frantic efforts to wipe them out.

That road, the night before, had been one of the world's most heavily traveled highways. Motorcycles, trucks, bicycles. Ambulances, Kitchens. Staff-cars and other automobiles. Guns; from seventy-fives up to the big boys, whose tremendous weight drove their wide caterpillar treads inches deep into solid ground. Horses. Mules. And people - especially people - like himself. Solid columns of men, marching as fast as they could step - there weren't trucks enough to haul them all. That road had been crowded - jammed. Like State and Madison at noon, only more so. Over-jammed with

hundreds, or perhaps thousands, of German guns, in a micrometrically-synchronized

symphony of firepower, had pulverized it. Just that Literally. Precisely. No road

remained; no farm, no field, no building, no tree or shrub. The bits of flesh might have

come from horse or man or mule; few indeed were the scraps of metal which retained

enough of their original shape to show what they had once been.

Kinnison ran - or staggered - around that obscene blot and struggled back to the

road. It was shell-pocked, but passable.

He hoped that the shell-holes would decrease in number as he went along, but

they did not The enemy had put this whole road out of service. And that farm, the P.C.,

ought to be around the next bend.

It was, but it was no longer a Post of Command. Either by directed fire - star-

shell illumination - or by uncannily accurate chart-work, they had put some heavy shells

Kinnison saw with rising horror, hung the limp and shattered naked torso
of a man;
blown completely out of his clothes.

Shells were - had been, right along - coming over occasionally. Big
ones, but

high; headed for targets well to the west. Nothing close enough to worry
about. Two

ambulances, a couple of hundred meters apart, were coming; working
their way along

the road, between the holes. The first one slowed . . . stopped.

"Seen anybody - Look out! Duck!"

Kinnison had already heard that unmistakable, unforgettable
screech, was

already diving headlong into the nearest hole. There was a crash as
though the world

were falling apart. Something smote him; seemed to drive him bodily
into the ground.

His light went out. When he recovered consciousness he was lying upon
a stretcher;

two men were bending over him.

bunged up a little and something - maybe shrapnel, though - poked you in the guts. But

we've got you all fixed up, so take it easy and. . ."

"What we want to know is," his partner interrupted, "Is there anybody else alive

up here?"

"Uh-huh," Kinnison shook his head.

"O.K. Just wanted to be sure. Lots of business back there, and it won't do any

harm to have a doctor look at you".

"Get me to a phone, as fast as you can," Kinnison directed, in a voice which he

thought was strong and full of authority, but which in fact was neither.

"I've got an

important message for General Weatherby, at Spearmint."

"Better tell us what it is, hadn't you?" The ambulance was now jolting along what

had been the road. "They've got phones at the hospital where we're going, but you

might faint or something before we get there."

sulphurous assurance that relief would be sent and that that quadruply-qualified line

would be rectified that night.

Then someone jabbed him with a needle and he lapsed into a dizzy, fuzzy coma,

from which he did not emerge completely for weeks. He had lucid intervals at times, but

he did not, at the time or ever, know surely what was real and what was fantasy.

There were doctors, doctors, doctors; operations, operations, operations. There

were hospital tents, into which quiet men were carried; from which still quieter men were

removed. There was a larger hospital, built of wood. There was a machine that buzzed

and white-clad men who studied films and papers. There were scraps of conversation.

"Belly wounds are bad," Kinnison thought - he was never sure - that he heard

one of them say. "And such contusions and multiple and compound fractures as those

learning!"

Another interlude, and another. Another. And others. Until finally, orders were

given which Kinnison did not hear at all.

"Adrenalin! Massage! Massage hell out of him!"

Kinnison again came to - partially to, rather - anguished in every fiber, of his

being. Somebody was sticking barbed arrows into every square inch of his skin;

somebody else was pounding and mauling him all over, taking particular pains to

pummel and to wrench at all the places where he hurt the worst. He yelled at the top of

his voice; yelled and swore bitterly: "QUIT IT!" being the expurgated gist of his luridly

profane protests. He did not make nearly as much noise as he supposed, but he made

enough.

"Thank God!" Kinnison heard a lighter, softer voice. Surprised, he stopped

was by turns sullen, angry, and morose.'

In short, he was convalescent.

For Captain Ralph K. Kinnison, THE WAR was over.

STORIES

against an unheard background of music. Mentally, he was far from
Tellus, flitting in his
super-dreadnaught through parsec after parsec of vacuous space.

The music broke off without warning and there blared out an an-
nouncement

which yanked Ralph Kinnison back to Earth with a violence almost
physical. He jumped

up, jammed his hands into his pockets.

"Pearl Harbor!" he blurted. "How in . . . How could they have let them
get that

far?"

"But Frank!" the woman gasped. She had not worried much about
her husband;

but Frank, her son . . . "He'll have to go . . ." Her voice died away.

"Not a chance in the world." Kinnison did not speak to soothe, but as
though

from sure knowledge. "Designing Engineer for Lockwood? He'll want to,
all right, but

anyone who was ever even exposed to a course in aeronautical engi-
neering will sit this

haven't said anything, so I thought, perhaps . . . "

I know I didn't. There was always the chance that we wouldn't get drawn into it. If

you say so, though, I'll stay home."

"Am I apt to? I let you go when you were really in danger. . ."

"What do you mean by that crack?" he interrupted.

"Regulations. One year too old - Thank Heaven!"

'So what? They'll need technical experts, bad. They'll make exceptions."

"Possibly. Desk jobs. Desk officers don't get killed in action - or even wounded.

Why, perhaps, with the children all grown up and married, we won't even have to be separated."

"Another angle - financial."

"Pooh! Who cares about that? Besides, for a man out of a job . . ."

"From you, I'll let that one pass. Thanks, Eunie - you're an ace. I'll shoot 'em a wire."

The telegram was sent. The Kinnisons waited. And waited. Until, about the

Form 191A . . .

Form 170 in duplicate . . . Form 315 . . . Impossible to forecast the extent to which the

War Department may ultimately utilize the services which you and thousands of others

have so generously offered . . . Form . . . Form . . . Not to be construed as meaning that

you have been permanently rejected . . . Form . . . Advise you that while at the present

time the War Department is unable to use you . . ."

"Wouldn't that fry you to a crisp?" Kinnison demanded. - What in hell have they

got in their heads - sawdust? They think that because I'm fifty one years old I've got one

foot in the grave - I'll bet four dollars that I'm in better shape than that cursed Major

General and his whole damned staff!"

"I don't doubt it, dear." Eunice's smile was, however, mostly of relief. "But here's

an ad -it's been running for a week."

organic chemistry and technology. If I don't know something about explosives I did a

smart job of fooling Dean Montrose, back at Gosh Whatta University. I'll write 'em a letter."

He wrote. He filled out a form. The telephone rang. "Kinnison speaking . . . yes . . .

. Dr. Sumner? Oh, yes, Chief Chemist . . . That's it - one year over age, so I thought . . .

Oh, that's a minor matter. We won't starve. If you cant pay a hundred and fifty I'll come

for a hundred, or seventy five, or fifty . . . That's all right, too. I'm well enough known in

my own field so that a title of Junior Chemical Engineer wouldn't hurt me a bit . . . O.K.,

I'll see you about one o'clock . . . Stoner and Black, Inc., Operators, Entwhistle

Ordnance Plant, Entwhistle, Missikota . . . What! Well, maybe I could, at that . . .

Goodbye."

ways say just

before or just after kicking somebody's teeth down their throats; that you're so meek

and mild - a regular Milquetoast. Do you really think that they'll want you back, after the

war?" It was clear that Eunice was somewhat concerned concerning Kinnison's

joblessness but Kinnison was not.

"Probably. That's the gossip. And I'll come back - when hell freezes over." His

square jaw tightened. "I've heard of outfits stupid enough to let their technical brains go

because they could sell - for a while - anything they produced, but I didn't know that I

was working for one. Maybe I'm not exactly a Timid Soul, but you'll have to admit that I

never kicked anybody's teeth out unless they tried to kick mine out first."

* * *

Those structures were built of concrete, steel, glass, transite, and tile.

"Outside the Fence" was different. This was the Administration Area.

Its buildings

were tremendous wooden barracks, relatively close together, packed with the

executive, clerical, and professional personnel appropriate to an organization employing

over twenty thousand men and women.

Well inside the fence but a safety-distance short of the One Line - Loading Line

Number One - was a long, low building, quite inadequately named the Chemical

Laboratory. "Inadequately" in that the Chief Chemist, a highly capable if more than a

little cantankerous - Explosives Engineer, had already gathered into his Chemical

Section most of Development, most of Engineering, and all of Physics, Weights and

Measures, and Weather.

One room of the Chemical Laboratory - in the corner most distant from

Laboratory proper or its personnel.

Entwhistle's main roads were paved; but in February of 1942 such minor items

as sidewalks existed only on the blueprints Entwhistle's soil contained much clay, and

at that time the mud was approximately six inches deep. Hence, since there were

neither inside doors nor sidewalks, it was only natural that the technologists did not visit

at all frequently the polished - tile cleanliness of the Laboratory. It was also natural

enough for the far larger group to refer to the segregated ones as exiles and outcasts;

and that some witty chemist applied to that isolated place the name "Siberia."

The name stuck. More the Engineers seized it and acclaimed it. They were

Siberians, and proud of it, and Siberians they remained; long after Entwhistle's mud

turned into dust. And within the year the Siberians were to become well and favorably

Sumner kept

on building. He hired extravagantly and fired ruthlessly - to the minds of some,

senselessly. But he knew what he was doing. He knew explosives, and he knew men.

He was not liked, but he was respected. His building was good.

Being one of the only two "old" men there - and the other did not stay long -

Kinnison, as a Junior Chemical Engineer, was not at first accepted without reserve.

Apparently he did not notice that fact, but went quietly about his assigned duties. He

was meticulously careful with, but very evidently not in any fear of, the materials with

which he worked. He pelleted and tested tracer, igniter, and incendiary compositions;

he took his turn at burning out rejects. Whenever asked, he went out on the lines with

any one of them.

His experimental tetryls always "miked" to size, his TNT melt-pours - introductory

either helped them directly or helped them to help themselves. His stature grew.

Black-haired, black-eyed "Tug" Tugwell, two hundred pounds of ex-football-

player in charge of tracer on the Seven Line, called him "Uncle" Ralph, and the habit

spread. And in a couple of weeks - at about the same time that "Injun" Abernathy was

slightly injured by being blown through a door by a minor explosion of his igniter on the

Eight Line - he was promoted to full Chemical Engineer; a promotion which went

unnoticed, since it involved only changes in title and salary.

Three weeks later, however, he was made Senior Chemical Engineer, in charge

of Melt-Pour. At this there was a celebration, led by "Blondie" Wanacek, a sulphuric-

acid expert handling tetryl on the Two. Kinnison searched minutely for signs of jealousy

or antagonism, but could find none. He went blithely to work on the Six line, where they

the other newcomer, "Charley" Charlevoix, a prematurely gray paint-and-lacquer expert who had also made the Siberian grade.

A few months later, Sumner called Kinnison into the office. The latter went,

wondering what the old hard-shell was going to cry about now; for to be called into that

office meant only one thing - censure.

"Kinnison, I like your work," the Chief Chemist began, gruffly, and Kinnison's

mouth almost dropped open. "Anybody who ever got a Ph.D. under Montrose would

have to know explosives, and the F.B.I. report on you showed that you had brains,

ability, and guts. But none of that explains how you can get along so well with those

damned Siberians. I want to make you Assistant Chief and put you in charge of Siberia.

Formally, I mean - actually, you have been for months."

"Why, no . . . I didn't . . . Besides, how about Barton? He's too good a man to

Tugwell, Wanacek

and Charlevoix work straight through for seventy two hours, napping now and then on

benches and grabbing coffee and sandwiches when they could, until they got that frag

bomb straightened out."

Sumner did not mention the fact that Kinnison had worked straight through, too.

That was taken for granted.

"Well, I don't know." Kinnison's head was spinning. "I'd like to check with Barton

first. O.K.?"

"I expected that. O.K."

Kinnison found Barton and led him out behind the testing shed.

"Bart, Cappy tells me that he figures on kicking you in the face by making me

Assistant and that you O.K.'d it. One word and I'll tell the old buzzard just where to stick

the job and exactly where to go to do it."

"Reaction, perfect. Yield, one hundred percent." Barton stuck out his hand.

about the only man working for Stoner and Black who can get a release any time a

good permanent job breaks. I'll stick until then. O.K.?" It was unnecessary for Barton to

add that as long as he was there he would really work.

"I'll say it's O.K.!" and Kinnison reported to Sumner.

"All right, Chief, I'll try it - if you can square it with the Siberians."

"That will not be too difficult."

Nor was it. The Siberians' reaction brought a lump to Kinnison's throat.

"Ralph the First, Czar of Siberia!" they yelled. "Long live the Czar! Kowtow, serfs

and vassals, to Czar Ralph the First!"

Kinnison was still glowing when he got home that night, to the Government

Housing Project and to the three-room "mansionette" in which he and Eunice lived. He

would never forget the events of that day.

"What a gang! What a gang! But listen, ace - they work under their own power -

More months passed. Work went on. Absorbing work, and highly varied; the details of which are of no importance here. Paul Jones, a big, hard, top-drawer chicle technologist, set up the Four line to pour demolition blocks. Frederick Hinton came in, qualified as a Siberian, and went to work on AntiPersonnel mines. Kinnison was promoted again: to Chief Chemist. He and Sumner had never been friendly; he made no effort to find out why Cappy had quit, or had been terminated, whichever it was. This promotion made no difference. Barton, now Assistant, ran the whole Chemical Section save for one unit - Siberia - and did a superlative job. The Chief Chemist's secretary worked for Barton, not for Kinnison. Kinnison was the Czar of Siberia. The Anti-Personnel mines had been giving trouble. Too many men were being

Meeting. Hinton relieved him. He had not reached the gate, however, when a guard car flagged him down.

"Sorry, sir, but there has been an accident at Pit Five and you are needed out there."

"Accident! Fred Hinton!" Is he . . . ?"

"I'm afraid so, sir."

It is a harrowing thing to have to help gather up what fragments can be found of

one of your best friends. Kinnison was white and sick as he got back to the firing

station, just in time to hear the Chief Safety Officer say:

"Must have been carelessness - rank carelessness. I warned this man Hinton myself, on one occasion."

"Carelessness, hell!" Kinnison blazed. "You had the guts to warn me once, too,

and I've forgotten more about safety in explosives than you ever will know. Fred Hinton

was not careless - if I hadn't been called in, that would have been me."

be, but it is."

"What is what?" Kinnison demanded.

"Firing pin. Brittle. When you pull the safety, the force of the spring must break it

off at this constricted section here."

"But damn it, Tug, it doesn't make sense. It's tension . . . but wait - there'd be

some horizontal component, at that. But they'd have to be brittle as glass."

"I know it. It doesn't seem to make much sense. But we were there, you know -

and I assembled every one of those God damned mines myself. Nothing else could

possibly have made that mine go off just when it did."

"O.K., Tug. We'll test 'em. Call Bart in - he can have the scale-lab boys rig us up

a gadget by the time we can get some more of those pins in off the line."

They tested a hundred, under the normal tension of the spring, and three of

them broke. They tested another hundred. Five broke. They stared at each other.

Major Moulton was, as usual, "in conference," but Kinnison was in no mood to wait.

"Tell him," he instructed the Major's private secretary, who had barred his way,

"that either he will talk to me right now or I will call District Safety over his head. I'll give him sixty seconds to decide which."

Moulton decided to see him. "I'm very busy, Doctor Kinnison, but . . ."

"I don't give a swivel-eyed tinker's damn how busy you are. I told you that the

minute I found out what was the matter with the M2 mine I'd talk to you again. Here I

am. Brittle firing pins. Three and two-tenths percent defective. So I'm . . ."

"Very irregular, Doctor. The matter will have to go through channels . . ."

"Not this one. The formal report is going through channels, but as I started to tell

you, this is an emergency report to you as Chief of Safety. Since the defect is not

longer than an operator's, I am reporting it direct to the Head of the Safety Division; and

I am telling you that if you don't do something about it damned quick - stop production

and slap a HOLD order on all the M2AP's you can reach - I'll call District and make you

personally responsible for every premature that occurs from now on."

Since any safety man, anywhere, would much rather stop a process than

authorize one, and since this particular safety man loved to throw his weight around,

Kinnison was surprised that Moulton did not act instantly. The fact that he did not so act

should have, but did not, give the naive Kinnison much information as to conditions

existing Outside the Fence.

"But they need those mines very badly; they are an item of very heavy

production. If we stop them . . . how long? Have you any suggestions?"

"Yes. Call District and have them rush through a change of spec - include heat-

to the

Laboratory.

Tempus fugited.

Orders came to get ready to load M67 H.E.A.T. (105 m/m High Explosive, Armor

Tearing) shell on the Nine, and the Siberians went joyously to work upon the new load.

The explosive was to be a mixture of TNT and a polysyllabic compound, everything

about which was highly confidential and restricted.

"But what the hell's so hush-hush about that stuff?" demanded Blondie, who,

with five or six others, was crowding around the Czar's desk. Unlike the days of Cappy

Sumner, the private office of the Chief Chemist was now as much Siberia as Siberia

itself. "The Germans developed it originally, didn't they?"

"Yes, and the Italians used it against the Ethiopians which was why their bombs

were so effective. But it says 'hush-hush,' so that's the way it will be. And if you talk in

was formally
acknowledged.

General Somebody-or-other, Entwhistle's Commanding Officer,
whom none of
the Siberians had ever met, was transferred to more active duty, and a
colonel -

Snodgrass or some such name took his place. Ordnance got a new
Chief Inspector.

An M67, Entwhistle loaded, prematured in a gun-barrel, killing twenty
seven men.

Kinnison protested again, verbally this time, at a staff meeting. He was
assured -

verbally - that a formal and thorough investigation was being made.
Later he was

informed - verbally and without witnesses that the investigation had
been completed

and that the loading was not at fault. A new Commanding Officer -
Lieutenant-Colonel

Franklin - appeared.

The Siberians, too busy to do more than glance at newspapers, paid
very little

abroad that Stillman, then Head of the Inspection Division, was not a big enough man

for the job. Thus it was an entirely unsuspecting Kinnison who was called into the

innermost private office of Thomas Keller, the Superintendent of Production.

"Kinnison, how in hell do you handle those Siberians? I never saw anything like

them before in my life."

"No, and you never will again. Nothing on Earth except a war could get them

together or hold them together. I don't 'handle' them - they can't be 'handled.' I give

them a job to do and let them do it. I back them up. That's all."

"Umngpf." Keller grunted. "That's a hell of a formula - if I want anything done

right I've got to do it myself. But whatever your system is, it works. But what I wanted to

talk to you about is, how'd you like to be Head of the Inspection Division, which would

be enlarged to include your present Chemical Section?"

and have their

approval. Perhaps you are curious to know why?"

"I certainly am."

"For two reasons. First, because you have developed a crew of technical experts

that is the envy of every technical man in the country. Second, you and your Siberians

have done every job I ever asked you to, and done it fast. As a Division Head, you will

no longer be under me, but I am right, I think, in assuming that you will work with me

just as efficiently as you do now?"

"I can't think of any reason why I wouldn't" This reply was made in all honesty;

but later, when he came to understand what Keller had meant, how bitterly Kinnison

was to regret its making!

He moved into Stillman's office, and found there what he thought was ample

reason for his predecessor's failure to make good. To his way of thinking it was

They reported to the Assistants, who reported to Stillman, who handed down his Jovian pronouncements.

Kinnison set out, deliberately this time, to mold his key Chief Line Inspectors into

just such a group as the Siberians already were. He released the Assistants to more

productive work; retaining of Stillman's office staff only a few clerks and his private

secretary, one Celeste de St. Aubin, a dynamic, vivacious - at times explosive -

brunette. He gave the boys on the Lines full authority; the few who could not handle the

load he replaced with men who could. At first the Chief Line Inspectors simply could not

believe; but after the affair of the forty millimeter, in which Kinnison rammed the

decision of his subordinate past Keller, past the General, past Stoner and Black, and

clear up to the Commanding Officer before he made it stick, they were his to a man.

secretary hung out the "In Conference" sign and went into Kinnison's private office.

"There isn't a reference to any such Investigation anywhere in Central Files." She

paused, as if to add something, then turned to leave.

"As you were, Celeste. Sit down. I expected that. Suppressed - if made at all.

You're a smart girl, Celeste, and you know the ropes. You know that you can talk to me, don't you?"

"Yes, but this is . . . well, the word is going around that they are going to break you, just as they have broken every other good man on the Reservation."

"I expected that, too." The words were quiet enough, but the man's jaw

tightened. "Also, I know how they are going to do it"

"How?"

"This speed-up on the Nine. They know that I won't stand still for the kind of

much of a man to do the dir . . ."

"Dirty work," dryly. "Exactly. Go on."

"And Stoner, the New York half - ninety five percent, really - of Stoner and Black,

Inc., is a Big Time Operator. So we get this damned nincompoop of a major, who

doesn't know a f-u-s-e from a f-u-z-e, direct from a Wall Street desk."

"So what?" One must have heard Ralph Kinnison say those two words to realize

how much meaning they can be made to carry.

"So what!" the girl blazed, wringing her hands. "Ever since you have been over

here I have been expecting you to blow up - to smash something - in spite of the

dozens of times you have told me a fighter can not slug effectively, Celeste, until he

gets both feet firmly planted.' When - when - are you going to get your feet planted?"

"Never, I'm afraid," he said glumly, and she stared. "So I'll have to start slugging

with at least one foot in the air."

that crowd. How I hate those slimy snakes! I wish that you could smash Tom Keller, the poisonous moron!"

"Not so much moron - although he acts like one at times - as an ignorant puppet with a head swelled three sizes too big for his hat. But you can quit yapping about slugging - fireworks are due to start at two o'clock tomorrow afternoon, when Drake is going to reject tonight's run of shell."

"Really? But I don't see how either Pettier or Wilson come in."

"They don't. A fight with those small fry - even smashing them wouldn't make enough noise. Keller."

"Keller!" Celeste squealed. "But you'll . . ."

"I know I'll get fired. So what? By tackling him I can raise enough hell so that the Big Shots will have to cut out at least some of the rough stuff. You'll probably get fired too, you know - you've been too close to me for your own good."

every one!"

"They won't release them; and what Stoner and Black will do to them, even after

the war, if they quit without releases, shouldn't be done to a dog. They won't quit, either

- at least if they don't try to push them around too much. Keller's mouth is watering to

get hold of Siberia, but he'll never make it, nor any one of his stooges . . . I'd better

dictate a memorandum to Black on that now, while I'm calm and collected; telling him

what he'll have to do to keep my boys from tearing Entwhistle apart."

"But do you think he will pay any attention to it?"

"I'll say he will!" Kinnison snorted. "Don't kid yourself about Black, Celeste. He's a

smart man, and before this is done he'll know that he'll have to keep his nose clean."

"But you - how can you do it?" Celeste marveled. "Me, I would urge them on.

Few would have the patriotism . . ."

velopments.

"Is it still O.K. with you," he concluded, "for me to get myself fired off of this high-

salaried job of mine?"

"Certainly. Being you, how can you do anything else? Oh, how I wish I could

wring their necks!" That conversation went on and on, but additional details are not

necessary here.

Shortly after two o'clock of the following afternoon, Celeste took a call; and

listened shamelessly.

"Kinnison speaking."

"Tug, Uncle Ralph. The casts sectioned just like we thought they would. Dead

ringers for Plate D. So Drake hung a red ticket on every tray. Piddy was right there,

waiting, and started to raise hell. So I chipped in, and he beat it so fast that I looked to

see his coat-tail catch fire. Drake didn't quite like to call you, so I did. If Piddy keeps on

"I certainly do. If I can keep Tug from blowing his top, the rest of the boys will stay in line."

A few minutes later Tugwell strode in, bringing with him Drake, the Chief Line

Inspector of the Nine Line. Shortly thereafter the office door was wrenched open. Kelley

had come to Kinnison, accompanied by the Superintendent whom the Siberians

referred to, somewhat contemptuously, as "Piddy."

"Damn your soul, Kinnison, come out here - I want to talk to you!" Kelley roared, and doors snapped open up and down the long corridor.

"Shut up, you God damned louse!" This from Tugwell, who, black eyes almost

emitting sparks, was striding purpose fully forward. "I'll sock you so damned hard that . .

."

"Pipe down, Tug, I'll handle this." Kinnison's voice was not loud, but it had then a

you would have had this conference in private. Since you started it in public, however,

I'll finish it in public. How you came to pick me for a yes-man I'll never know - just one

more measure of your stupidity, I suppose."

"Those shell are perfect!" Kelley shouted. "Tell Drake here to pass them, right

now. If you don't, by God I'll . . ."

"Shut up!" Kinnison's voice cut. "I'll do the talking - you listen. The spec says

quote shall be free from objectionable cavitation unquote. The Line Inspectors, who

know their stuff, say that those cavitations are objectionable. So do the Chemical

Engineers. Therefore, as far as I am concerned, they are objectionable. Those shell are

rejected, and they will stay rejected."

"That's what you think," Kelley raged. "But there'll be a new Head of Inspection,

who will pass them, tomorrow morning!"

that bunch of crap through, and then. . ."

"Will you promise not to quit until they do?" Kinnison asked, quietly.

"Huh?" "What?" Tugwell's eyes - and Celeste's - were pools of astonishment.

Celeste, being on the inside, understood first.

"Oh - to keep his nose clean - I see!" she exclaimed.

"Exactly. Those shells will not be accepted, nor any like them. On the surface, we

got licked. I will get fired. You will find, however, that we won this particular battle. And if

you boys stay here and hang together and keep on slugging you can win a lot more."

"Maybe, if we raise enough hell, we can make them fire us, too?"

Drake

suggested.

"I doubt it. But unless I'm wrong, you can just about write your own ticket from

now on, if you play it straight." Kinnison grinned to himself, at something which the

young people could not see.

So beat it back

to the Nine, you kids, and hang red tickets on everything that doesn't cross-section up

to standard. Tell the gang goodbye for me - I'll keep you posted."

In less than an hour Kinnison was called into the Office of the President. He was

completely at ease; Black was not.

"It has been decided to . . . uh . . . ask for your resignation," the President

announced at last.

"Save your breath," Kinnison advised. "I came down here to do a job, and the

only way you can keep me from doing that job is to fire me."

"That was not . . . uh . . . entirely unexpected. A difficulty arose, however, in

deciding what reason to put on your termination papers."

"I can well believe that. You can put down anything you like," Kinnison shrugged,

"with one exception. Any implication of incompetence and you'll have to prove it in

court."

you don't."

"Certainly not! Ridiculous!" Black blustered, but his eyes wavered.

"Where did

you get such a preposterous idea? What do you mean?"

"If you ram those sub-standard H.E.A.T. shell through, you are going to have

some more prematures. Not many - the stuff is actually almost good enough - one in

ten thousand, say: perhaps one in fifty thousand. But you know damned well that you

can't afford any. What my Siberians and Inspectors know about you and Keller and

Piddy and the Nine Line would be enough; but to cap the climax that brainless jackal of

yours let the cat completely out of the bag this afternoon, and everybody in Building

One was listening. One more premature would blow Entwhistle wide open - would start

something that not all the politicians in Washington could stop. On the other hand, if

away, you won't dare to. In fact, I told some of my people that you wouldn't; that you are a smart enough operator to keep your nose clean."

"You told them!" Black shouted, in anger and dismay.

"Yes? Why not?" The words were innocent enough, but Kinnison's expression

was full of meaning. "I don't want to seem trite, but you are just beginning to find out

that honesty and loyalty are a hell of a hard team to beat."

"Get out! Take these termination papers and GET OUT!"

And Doctor Ralph K. Kinnison, head high, strode out of President Black's office

and out of Entwhistle Ordnance Plant.

pressed an inconspicuous button.

"Theodore K. Kinnison acknowledging!" The plate remained dark, but he knew

that he was being scanned.

"Operation Bullfinch!" the speaker blatted.

Kinnison gulped. "Operation Bullfinch - Off!" he managed to say.

"Off!"

He pushed the button again and turned to face the tall, trim honey-blond who

stood tensely poised in the archway. Her eyes were wide and protesting; both hands

clutched at her throat.

"Uh-huh, sweets, they're coming - over the Pole," he gritted. "Two hours, more or less."

"Oh, Ted!" She threw herself into his arms. They kissed, then broke away.

The man picked up two large suitcases, already packed - everything else,

including food and water, had been in the car for weeks - and made strides. The girl

heap has got

the legs of a centipede and you've got plenty of gas and oil. Eleven hundred miles from

anywhere and a population of one-tenth per square mile - you'll be safe there if

anybody is."

"It isn't us I'm worried about - it's you!" she panted.

"Technos' wives get a few minutes' notice ahead of the Hblast - I'll be ahead of

the rush and I'll stay ahead. It's you, Ted - you!"

"Don't worry, keed. That popcycle of mine has got legs, too, and there won't be

so much traffic, the way I'm going."

"Oh, blast! I didn't mean that, and you know it!"

They were at the car. While he jammed the two bags into an exactly-fitting

space, she tossed the children into the front seat, slid lithely under the wheel, and

started the engine.

"I know you didn't, sweetheart. I'll be back." He kissed her and the little girl, the

Kinnison galloped across the alley and opened the door of a small garage,

revealing a long, squat motorcycle. Two deft passes of his hands and two of his three

spotlights were no longer white - one flashed a brilliant purple, the other a searing blue.

He dropped a perforated metal box into a hanger and flipped a switch - a peculiarly-

toned siren began its ululating shriek. He took the alley turn at an angle of forty-five

degrees; burned the pavement toward Diversey.

The light was red. No matter - everybody had stopped - that siren could be heard

for miles. He barreled into the intersection; his step-plate ground the concrete as he

made a screaming left turn.

A siren - creeping up from behind. City tone. Two red spots - city cop - so soon -

good! He cut his gun a trifle, the other bike came alongside.

"Is this IT?" the uniformed rider yelled, over the coughing thunder of the

traffic was

so heavy that he had to slow down; at Pulaski two policemen waved him through a red.

Beyond Sacramento nothing moved on wheels.

Seventy . . . seventy five . . . he took the bridge at eighty, both wheels in air for

forty feet. Eighty five . . . ninety . . . that was about all he could do and keep the heap on

so rough a road. Also, he did not have Diversey all to himself any more; blue-and-

purple-flashing bikes were coming in from every side-street. He slowed to a

conservative fifty and went into close formation with the other riders.

The H-blast - the city-wide warning for the planned and supposedly orderly

evacuation of all Chicago - sounded, but Kinnison did not hear it.

Across the Park, edging over to the left so that the boys going south would have

room to make the turn - even such riders as those need some room to make a turn at

fifty miles per hour!

had a long way

to go; and if they did not get there in time to stop those trans-polar atomic missiles, all

hell would be out for noon.

Why was all this necessary? This organization, this haste, this split-second

timing, this city-wide exhibition of insane hippodrome riding? Why were not all these

motorcycle-racers stationed permanently at their posts, so as to be ready for any

emergency? Because America, being a democracy, could not strike first, but had to wait

- wait in instant readiness - until she was actually attacked. Because every good

Techno in America had his assigned place in some American Defense Plan; of which

Operation Bullfinch was only one. Because without the presence of those Technos at

their everyday jobs, all ordinary technological work in America would perforce have

stopped.

soon as Kinnison jumped off, mounted the motorcycle and drove it away.

Kinnison dashed up to an apparently blank wall, turned his back upon four

commissioned officers holding cocked forty-fives at the ready, and fitted his right eye

into a cup. Unlike fingerprints, retinal patterns cannot be imitated, duplicated, or altered;

any imposter would have died instantly, without arrest or question. For every man who

belonged aboard that rocket had been checked and tested - how he had been checked

and tested! - since one spy, in any one of those Technos' chairs, could wreak damage

untellable.

The port snapped open. Madison climbed a ladder into the large, but crowded.

Operations Room.

"Hi, Teddy!" a yell arose.

"Hi, Walt! Hi-ya, Red! What-ho, Baldy!" and so on. These men were friends of

a hundred

miles upon that map was a small distance - northward over Canada; a closer-packed,

less numerous group of yellowish-greens, already on the American side of the Pole,

was coming south.

As had been expected, the Americans had more missiles than did the enemy.

the other belief, that America had more adequate defenses and better-trained, more

highly skilled defenders, would soon be put to test.

A string of blue lights blazed across the continent, from Nome through Skagway

and Wallaston and Churchill and Kaniapiskau to Belle Isle; America's First Line of

Defense. Regulars all. Ambers almost blanketed those blues; their combat rockets were

already grabbing altitude. The Second Line, from Portland, Seattle, and Vancouver

across to Halifax, also showed solid green - with some flashes of amber. Part Regulars;

was occupied. Combat Rocket Number One Oh Six Eight Five, full-powered by the disintegrating nuclei of unstable isotopes, took off with a whooshing roar which even her thick walls could not mute.

The Technos, crushed down into their form-fitting cushions by three G's of acceleration, clenched their teeth and took it.

Higher! Faster! The rocket shivered and trembled as it hit the wall at the velocity of sound, but it did not pause.

Higher! Faster! Higher! Fifty miles high. One hundred . . . five hundred . . . a thousand . . . fifteen hundred . . . two thousand! Half a radius - the designated altitude at which the Chicago Contingent would go into action.

Acceleration was cut to zero. The Technos, breathing deeply in relief, donned peculiarly-goggled helmets and set up their panels.

Kinnison stared into his plate with everything he could put into his optic nerve.

per hour!

Nor was this like the practice cruises, in which the targets had been harmless

barrels or equally harmless dirigible rockets. This was the real thing; the targets today

would be lethal objects indeed. Practice gunnery, with only a place in the Proficiency

List at stake, had been exciting enough: this was too exciting - much too exciting - for

the keenness of brain and the quickness and steadiness of eye and of hand so soon to

be required.

A target? Or was it? Yes - three or four of them!

"Target One - Zone Ten," a quiet voice spoke into Kinnison's ear and one of the

white specks upon his plate turned yellowish-green. The same words, the same lights,

were heard and seen by the eleven other Technos of Sector A, of which Kinnison, by

virtue of standing at the top of his Combat Rocket's Proficiency List, was Sector Chief.

the sky. Fire Control's "Zone Ten" had informed him that the object was at extreme

range and hence there would be plenty of time. Nevertheless:

"Lawrence-two! Doyle-one! Drummond-stand by with three!" he snapped, at the first word.

In the instant of hearing his name each Techno stabbed down a series of studs

and there flowed into his ears a rapid stream of figures - the up-to-the-second data from

every point of observation as to every element of motion of his target. He punched the

figures into his calculator, which would correct automatically for the motion of his own

vessel - glanced once at the printed solution of the problem - tramped down upon a

pedal once, twice, or three times, depending upon the number of projectiles he had

been directed to handle.

Kinnison had ordered Lawrence, a better shot than Doyle, to launch two

unless

Doyle missed. Nor could both Drummond and Harper, Kinnison's Number Two, be "out"

at once. One of the two had to be "in" at all times, to take Kinnison's place in charge of

the Sector if the Chief were ordered out. For while Kinnison could order either Harper or

Drummond on target, he could not send himself. He could go out only when ordered to

do so by Fire Control: Sector Chiefs were reserved for emergency use only.

"Target Two - Zone Nine," Fire Control said.

"Carney, two. French, one. Day, stand by with three!" Kinnison ordered.

"Damn it - missed!" This from Doyle. "Buck fever - no end."

"O.K., boy - that's why we're starting so soon. I'm shaking like a vibrator myself.

We'll get over it . . . "

The point of light which represented Target One bulged slightly and went out.

Drummond had connected and was back "in".

"Target Forty-one-six," said Fire Control; and:

"Lawrence, two. Doyle, two," ordered Kinnison. This was routine enough, but in a moment:

"Ted!" Lawrence snapped. "Missed - wide - both barrels. Forty-one's dodging - manned or directed - coming like hell - watch it, Doyle - WATCH IT!"

"Kinnison, take it!" Fire Control barked, voice now neither low nor steady, and without waiting to see whether Doyle would hit or miss. "It's in Zone Three already - collision course!"

"Harper! Take over!"

Kinnison got the data, solved the equations, launched five torpedoes at fifty

gravities of acceleration. One . . . two - three-four-five; the last three as close together as they could fly without setting off their proximity fuzes.

Communications and mathematics and the electronic brains of calculating

rotation varied the intensities of two mutually perpendicular components of his

torpedoes' drives. He listened attentively to the reports of triangulating observers now

giving him data covering his own missiles, as well as the target object. The fingers of his

right hand punched almost constantly the keys of his computer; he corrected almost

constantly his torpedoes' course.

"Up a hair," he decided. "Left about a point."

The target moved away from its predicted path.

Down two - left three - down a hair - Right! The thing was almost through Zone

Two; was blasting into Zone One.

He thought for a second that his first torp was going to connect. It almost did -

only a last-instant, full-powered side thrust enabled the target to evade it. Two numbers

flashed white upon his plate; his actual error, exact to the foot of distance and to the

the cyclonite-

packed warhead. Morison knew that his third went off, because the error-figures

vanished, almost in the instant of their coming into being, as its detecting and

transmitting instruments were destroyed. That one detonation might have been enough;

but Morison had had one glimpse of his error - how small it was! - and had a fraction of

a second of time. Hence Four and Five slammed home; dead center. Whatever that

target had been, it was no longer a threat.

"Kinnison, in," he reported briefly to Fire Control, and took over from Harper the

direction of the activities of Sector A.

The battle went on. Morison sent Harper and Drummond out time after time. He

himself was given three more targets.

The first wave of the enemy - what was left of it - passed. Sector A went into

Some enemy

stuff had got through, of course; and the observatories, both on the ground and above it

- the eye of the whole American Defense - had suffered heavily.

Nevertheless, Kinnison and his fellows were not too perturbed. Such a condition

was not entirely unexpected. They were now veterans; they had been tried and had not

been found wanting. They had come unscathed through a bath of fire the like of which

the world had never before known. Give them any kind of computation at all - or no

computation at all except old CR10685's own radar and their own torps, of which they

still had plenty - and they could and would take care of anything that could be thrown at them.

The third wave passed. Targets became fewer and fewer. Action slowed down . . .

. stopped.

since upon their plates all targets looked alike - small, bright, greenish-yellow, spots.

Hence:

"Give us the dope, Pete, if we've got a minute to spare," Kinnison begged of his

Fire Control Officer. "You know more than we do - give!"

"It's coming in now," came the prompt reply. "Six of those targets that did such

fancy dodging were atomics, aimed at the Lines. Five were dirigibles, with our number

on em. You fellows did a swell job. Very little of their stuff got through - not enough, they

say, to do much damage to a country as big as the U.S.A. On the other hand they

stopped scarcely any of ours - they apparently didn't have anything to compete with you

Technos.

"But all hell seems to be busting loose, all over the world.

Our east and west coasts are both being attacked, they say; but are holding.

than

anticipated, only seven percent. The First Line - as you know already - took a God-

awful shellacking; in fact, the Churchill-Belcher section was practically wiped out, which

was what lost us about all of our Observation . .

We are now just about over the southern end of Hudson Bay, heading down and

south to join in making a vertical Fleet Formation . . . no more waves coming, but they

say to expect attacks from low-flying combat rockets - there goes the alert! On your

toes, fellows - but there isn't a thing on Sector A's screen . . ."

There wasn't. Since the CR10685 was diving downward and southward, there

wouldn't be. Nevertheless, some observer aboard that rocket saw that atomic missile

coming. Some Fire Control Officer yelled orders; some Technos did their best - and

failed.

Gharlane, of Eddore looked upon ruined Earth, his handiwork, and found it good.

Knowing that it would be many of hundreds of Tellurian years before that planet would

again require his personal attention, he went elsewhere; to Rigel Four, to Palain Seven,

and to the solar system of Velantia, where he found that his creatures the Overlords

were not progressing according to schedule. He spent quite a little time there, then

searched minutely and fruitlessly for evidence of inimical activity within the Innermost

Circle.

And upon far Arista a momentous decision was made: the time had come to curb

sharply the hitherto unhampered Eddorians.

"We are ready, then, to war openly upon them?" Eukonidor asked, somewhat

doubtfully. "Again to cleanse the planet Tellus of dangerous radioractives and of too-

Jupiter, the seeds of the Jovian Wars . . ."

"Your visualization is sound, youth. Think on."

"Those interplanetary wars are of course inevitable, and will serve to strengthen

and to unify the government of the Inner Planets . . . provided that Gharlane does not

interfere . . . Oh, I see. Gharlane will not at first know; since a zone of compulsion will

be held upon him. When he or some Eddorian fusion perceives that compulsion and

breaks it - at some such time of high stress as the Nevin, incident - it will be too late.

Our fusions will be operating. Roger will be allowed to perform only such acts as will be

for Civilization's eventual good. Nevis was selected as Prime Operator because of its

location in a small region of the galaxy which is almost devoid of solid iron and because

of its watery nature; its aquatic forms of life being precisely those in which the

Hundreds of Tellurian years passed. The aftermath. Reconstruction.

Advancement. One world - two worlds - three worlds - united, harmonious, friendly. The

Jovian Wars. A solid, unshakeable union.

Nor did any Eddorian know that such fantastically rapid progress was being

made. Indeed, Gharlane knew, as he drove his immense ship of space toward Sol, that

he would find Tellus inhabited by peoples little above savagery.

And it should be noted in passing that not once, throughout all those centuries,

did a man named Kinnison marry a girl with red-bronze-auburn hair and gold-flecked,

tawny eyes.

Hyperion bored serenely onward through Space at normal acceleration.
In the railed-off
sanctum in one corner of the control room a bell tinkled, a smothered
whirr was heard,
and Captain Bradley frowned as he studied the brief message upon the
tape of the
recorder - a message flashed to his desk from the operator's panel. He
beckoned, and
the second officer, whose watch it now was, read aloud:
"Reports of scout patrols Still negative."
"Still negative." The officer scowled in thought. "They've already
searched
beyond the widest possible location of wreckage, too. Two unexplained
disappearances
inside a month - first the Dione, then the Rhea - and not a plate nor a
lifeboat
recovered. Looks bad, sir. One might be an accident; two might possibly
be a
coincidence . . ." His voice died away.
"But at three it would get to be a habit" the captain finished the
thought. "And

"Yes, sir. Detectors full out, all three courses of defensive screen on the trips, projectors manned, suit, on the hooks. Every object detected to be investigated immediately - if vessels, they are to be warned to stay beyond extreme range. Anything entering the fourth zone is to be rayed."

"Right - we are going through"

"But no known type of vessel could have made away with them without detection," the second officer argued. "I wonder if there isn't something in those wild rumors we've been hearing lately?"

"Bah! Of course not" snorted the captain. "Pirates in ships faster than light - sub-ethereal rays - nullification of gravity mass without inertia - ridiculous! Proved impossible, over and over again. No, sir if pirates are operating in space - and it looks very much like it - they won't get far against a good big battery full of kilowatt-hours

great lookout plates into which the alert observers peered were blank,
their far-flung

ultra-sensitive detector screens encountering no obstacle - the ether
was empty for

thousands upon thousands of kilometers. The signal lamps upon the
pilot's panel were

dark, its warning bells were silent. A brilliant point of white light in the
center of the pilots

closely ruled micrometer grating, exactly upon the cross-hairs of his di-
rectors, showed

that the immense vessel was precisely upon the calculated course, as
laid down by the

automatic integrating course plotters. Everything was quiet and in order.

"All's well, sir," he reported briefly to Captain Bradley - but all was not
well.

Danger - more serious by far in that it was not external was even
then, all

unsuspected, gnawing at the great ship's vitals. In a locked and shielded
compartment,

deep down in the interior of the liner, was the great air purifier. Now a
man leaned

tightly fitting rubber Tube. The tube terminated in a heavy rubber balloon, which surrounded a frail glass bulb. The man stood tense, one hand holding before his silica- and-steel-helmeted head a large pocket chronometer, the other lightly grasping the balloon. A sneering grin was upon his face as he waited the exact second of action - the carefully predetermined instant when his right hand, closing, would shatter the fragile flask and force its contents into the primary air stream of the Hyperion!

* * *

Far above, in the main saloon, the regular evening dance was in full swing. The ship's orchestra crashed into silence, there was a patter of applause, and Clio Marsden, radiant belle of the voyage, led her partner out onto the promenade and up to one of

ahead."

Earth was a brilliantly shining crescent far beneath the flying vessel.

Above her,

ruddy Mars and silvery Jupiter blazed in splendor ineffable against a background of

utterly

indescribable blackness - a background thickly besprinkled with dimensionless points of

dazzling brilliance which were the stars.

"Oh, isn't it wonderful!" breathed the girl, awed. "Of course, I suppose that it's old

stuff to you, but I'm a groundgripper, you know, and I could look at it forever, I think.

That's why I want to come out here after every dance. You know, I . . ."

Her voice broke off suddenly, with a queer, rasping catch, as she seized his arm

in a frantic clutch and as quickly went limp. He stared at her sharply, and understood

instantly the message written in her eyes - eyes now enlarged, staring, hard, brilliant,

of the void blared out the warning as he forced his already evacuated lungs to absolute emptiness. "Vee-Two Gas! Get tight!"

Writhing and twisting in his fierce struggle to keep his lungs from gulping in a draft of that noxious atmosphere, and with the unconscious form of the girl draped

limply over his left arm, Costigan leaped toward the portal of the nearest lifeboat.

Orchestra instruments crashed to the floor and dancing couples fell and sprawled inertly

while the tortured First Officer swung the door of the lifeboat open and dashed across

the tiny room to the air-valves. Throwing them wide open, he put his mouth to the orifice

and let his laboring lungs gasp their eager fill of the cold blast roaring from the tanks.

Then air - hunger partially assuaged, he again held his breath, broke open the

emergency locker, donned one of the space-suits always kept there and opened its

spasmodic breath, choking and coughing, and he again changed the gaseous stream to

one of pure air, speaking urgently as she showed signs of returning consciousness.

"Stand up!" he snapped. "Hang onto this brace and keep your face in this air-

stream until I get a suit around you! Got me?"

She nodded weakly, and, assured that she could hold herself at the valve, it was

the work of only a minute to encase her in one of the protective coverings. Then, as she

sat upon a bench, recovering her strength, he flipped on the lifeboat's visiphone

projector and shot its invisible beam up into the control room, where he saw space-

armored figures furiously busy at the panels.

"Dirty work at the cross-roads!" he blazed to his captain, man to man - formality

disregarded, as it so often was in the Triplanetary service. "There's skulduggery afoot

up there."

"What was it?" the shaken girl asked. "I think that I remember your saying "Vee-

Two gas.' That's forbidden! Anyway, I owe you my life, Conway, and I'll never forget it -

never. Thanks - but the others - how about all the rest of us?"

"It was Vee-Two, and it is forbidden," Costigan replied grimly, eyes fast upon the

flashing plate, whose point of projection was now deep in the bowels of the vessel. "The

penalty for using it or having it is death on sight. Gangsters and pirates use it, since

they have nothing to lose, being on the death list already. As for your life, I haven't

saved it yet - you may wish I'd let it ride before we get done. The others are too far

gone for oxygen - couldn't have brought even you around in a few more seconds, quick

as I got to you. But there's a sure antidote - we all carry it in a lock-box in our armor -

isn't Franklin that's in it. Some passenger - disguised - slugged the Chief
- took his suit
and projectors - hole in duct - p-s-s-t! All washed out! Maybe that's all he
was scheduled
to do to us in this performance, but he'll do nothing else in his life!"
"Don't go down there!" protested the girl. "His armor is so much bet-
ter than that
emergency suit you are wearing, and he's got Mr. Franklin's Lewiston,
besides!"
"Don't be an idiot!" he snapped. "We Can't have a live pirate aboard -
we're
going to be altogether too busy with outsiders directly. Don't worry, I'm
not going to give
him a break. I'll take a Standish - I'll rub him out like a blot. Stay right
here until I come
back after you," he commanded, and the heavy door of the lifeboat
clanged shut behind
him as he leaped out into the promenade.
Straight across the saloon he made his way, paying no attention to
the inert

opaque condensing lenses and parabolic reflectors. Laboring under the weight of the thing, he strode along corridors and clambered heavily down short stairways. Finally he came to the purifier room, and grinned savagely as he saw the greenish haze of light obscuring the door and walls - the shield was still in place; the pirate was still inside, still flooding with the terrible Vee-Two the Hyperion's primary air.

He set his peculiar weapon down, unfolded its three massive legs, crouched down behind it, and threw in a switch. Dull red beams of frightful intensity shot from the reflectors and sparks, almost of lightning proportions, leaped from the shielding screen under their impact. Roaring and snapping, the conflict went on for seconds, then, under the superior force of the Standish, the greenish radiance gave way. Behind it the metal of the door ran the gamut of color - red, yellow, blinding white - then literally exploded;

of incandescence leaped from his Lewiston, to spend its force in spitting, crackling

pyrotechnics against the ether-wall of the squat and monstrous Standish. But

Costigan's infernal engine did not rely only upon vibratory destruction. At almost the first

flash of the pirate's weapon the officer touched a trigger, there was a double report, ear-

shattering in that narrowly confined space, and the pirate's body literally flew into mist

as a half-kilogram shell tore through his armor and exploded. Costigan shut off his

beam, and with not the slightest softening of one hard lineament stared around the air-

room; making sure that no serious damage had been done to the vital machinery of the

air-purifier - the very lungs of the great spaceship.

Dismounting the Standish, he lugged it back up to the main saloon, replaced it in

its safe, and again set the combination lock. Thence to the lifeboat, where Clio cried out

normal?"

"All right, I think, except for being scared to death and just about out of control. I

don't suppose that I'll be good for anything, but whatever I can do, count me in on."

"Fine - you may be needed, at that. Everybody's out, apparently, except those

like me, who had a warning and could hold their breath until they got to their suits."

"But how did you know what it was? You can't see it, nor smell it, nor anything."

"You inhaled a second before I did, and I saw your eyes. I've been in it before -

and when you see a man get a jolt of that stuff just once, you never forget it. The

engineers down below got it first, of course - it must have wiped them out. Then we got

it in the saloon. Your passing out warned me, and luckily I had enough breath left to

give the word. Quite a few of the fellows up above should have had time to get away -

dozen armored figures; not now rushing about, but seated at their instruments, tense
and ready. Fortunate it was that Costigan - veteran of space as he was, though young
in years - had been down in the saloon; fortunate that he had been familiar with that
horrible outlawed gas; fortunate that he had had presence of mind enough and sheer
physical stamina enough to send his warning without allowing one paralyzing trace to
enter his own lungs. Captain Bradley, the men on watch, and several other officers in
their quarters or in the wardrooms - space-hardened veterans all - had obeyed instantly
and without question the amplifiers' gasped command to "get tight". Exhaling or
inhaling, their air-passages had snapped shut as that dread "Vee-Two" was heard, and
they had literally jumped into their armored suits of space - flushing them out with

started something

before this."

"They've started, but we can't locate them. We tried to send out a general sector

alarm, but had hardly started when they blanketed our wave. Look at that!"

Following the captain's eyes, Costigan stared at the high powered set of the ship's

operator. Upon the plate, instead of a moving, living, three-dimensional picture, there

was a flashing glare of blinding white light; from the speaker, instead of intelligible

speech, was issuing a roaring, crackling stream of noise.

"It's impossible!" Bradley burst out, violently. "There's not a gram of metal inside

the fourth zone - within a hundred thousand kilometers - and yet they must be close to

send

such a wave as that. But the Second thinks not - what do you think, Costigan?" The

haven't."

Costigan's voice was bitter. "But why shouldn't they have? Service ships never get

anything until it's been experimented with for years, but pirates and such always get the

new stuff as soon as it's discovered. The only good thing I can see is that we got part of

a message away, and the scouts can trace that interference out there. But the pirates

know that, too - it won't be long now," he concluded, grimly.

He spoke truly. Before another word was said the outer screen flared white

under a beam of terrific power, and simultaneously there appeared upon one of the

lookout plates a vivid picture of the pirate vessel - a huge, black torpedo of steel, now

emitting flaring offensive beams of force.

Instantly the powerful weapons of the Hyperion were brought to bear, and in the

blast of full-driven beams the stranger's screens flamed incandescent. Heavy guns,

exploded harmlessly in midspace, miles from their objective. And suddenly a frightful pencil of flame stabbed brilliantly from the black hulk of the enemy. Through the empty ether it tore, through the mighty defensive screens, through the tough metal of the outer and inner walls. Every ether-defense of the Hyperion vanished, and her acceleration dropped to a quarter of its normal value.

"Right through the battery room!" Bradley groaned. "We're on the emergency drive now. Our rays are done for, and we can't seem to put a shell anywhere near her with our guns!"

But ineffective as the guns were, they were silenced forever as a frightful beam of destruction stabbed relentlessly through the control room, whiffing out of existence the pilot, gunnery, and lookout panels and the men before them. The air rushed into

helmets automatically taking up the duty of transmitting speech as the sound disks

refused to function. "They can't see us - our ether wall is still up and their spy-rays can't

get through it from the outside, you know. They're working from blue-prints, and they'll

probably take your desk next," and even as they bounded toward the door, now

become the outer seal of an airlock, the pirates' beam tore through the space which

they had just quitted.

Through the airlock, down through several levels of passengers' quarters they

hurried, and into a lifeboat, whose one doorway commanded the full length of the third

lounge - an ideal spot, either for defense or for escape outward by means of the

miniature cruiser. As they entered their retreat they felt their weight begin to increase.

More and more force was applied to the helpless liner, until it was moving at normal

two formidable

engines of destruction. Then the first officer made another and longer trip, returning

with a complete suit of Triplanetary space armor, exactly like those worn by the two

men, but considerably smaller.

"Just as an added factor of safety, you'd better put this on, Clio - those

emergency suits aren't good for much in a battle. I don't suppose that you ever fired a

Standish, did you?"

"No, but I can soon learn how to do it," she replied pluckily.

"Two is all that can work here at once, but you should know how to take hold in

case one of us goes out. And while you're changing suits you'd better put on some stuff

I've got here - Service Special phones and detectors. Stick this little disk onto your

chest with this bit of tape; low down, out of sight. Just under your wish-bone is the best

as outside. It is the most important thing of all - you can get along with it alone if you

lose everything else, but without that capsule the whole system's shot to pieces. With

that outfit, if we should get separated, you can talk to us - we're both wearing 'em,

although in some what different forms. You don't need to talk loud - just a mutter will be

enough. They're handy little outfits - almost impossible to find, and capable of a lot of things."

"Thanks, Conway - I'll remember that, too," Clio replied, as she turned toward the

tiny locker to follow his instructions. "But won't the scouts and patrols be catching us

pretty quick? The operator sent a warning."

"Afraid the ether's empty, as far as we're concerned."

Captain Bradley had stood by in silent astonishment during this conversation. His

eyes had bulged slightly at Costigan's "we're both wearing 'em," - but he had held his

Service, did

you?"

"Now that you mention it, I don't believe that I did," Costigan grinned.

"That explains several things about you - particularly your recognition of Vee-

Two and your uncanny control and speed of reaction. But aren't you . . ."

"No," Costigan interrupted. "This situation is apt to get altogether too serious to

overlook any bets. If we get away, I'll take them away from her and she'll never know

that they aren't routine equipment. As for you, I know that you can and do keep your

mouth shut. That's why I'm hanging this junk on you - I had a lot of stuff in my kit, but I

flashed it all with the Standish except what I brought in here for us three. Whether you

think so or not, we're in a real jam - our chance of getting away is mighty close to zero .

. . ."

He broke off as the girl came back, now to all appearances a small Triplanetary

opposite to that in which he knew the pirate vessel must be. All three stared into the plate, seeing only an infinity of emptiness, marked only by the infinitely remote and coldly brilliant stars. While they stared into space a vast area of the heavens was blotted out and they saw, faintly illuminated by a peculiar blue luminescence, a vast ball - a sphere so large and so close that they seemed to be dropping downward toward it as though it were a world! They came to a stop - paused, weightless - a vast door slid smoothly aside they were drawn upward through an airlock and floated quietly in the air above a small, but brightly-lighted and orderly city of metallic buildings! Gently the Hyperion was lowered, to come to rest in the embracing arms of a regulation landing cradle.

"Well, wherever it is, we're here," remarked Captain Bradley, grimly, and:

weapons; the girl prone behind them.

They had not long to wait. A group of human beings - men and to all appearances Americans - appeared unarmed in the little lounge. As soon as they were

well inside the room, Bradley and Costigan released upon them without compunction

the full power of their frightful projectors. From the reflectors, through the doorway,

there tore a concentrated double beam of pure destruction - but that beam did not

reach its goal. Yards from the men it met a screen of impenetrable density. Instantly the

gunners pressed their triggers and a stream of high-explosive shells issued from the

roaring weapons. But shells, also, were futile. They struck the shield and vanished -

vanished without exploding and without leaving a trace to show that they had ever

existed.

Costigan sprang to his feet, but before he could launch his intended attack a vast

door of a great high-towered structure. Doors opened before them and closed behind

them, until at last they stood upright in a room which was evidently the office of a busy

executive. They faced a desk which, in addition to the usual equipment of the business

man, carried also a bewilderingly complete switchboard and instrument panel.

Seated impassively at the desk there was a gray man. Not only was he dressed

entirely in gray, but his heavy hair was gray, his eyes were gray, and even his tanned

skin seemed to give the impression of grayness in disguise. His overwhelming

personality radiated an aura of grayness - not the gentle gray of the dove, but the

resistless, driving gray of the super-dreadnought the hard, inflexible, brittle gray of the

fracture of high-carbon steel.

"Captain Bradley, First Officer Costigan, Miss Marsden," the man spoke quietly,

choose between re-

moving those suits and dying in them, here and now."

Costigan moved over to Clio and slowly took off her armor. Then, after a flashing

exchange of glances and a muttered word, the two officers threw off their suits simul-

taneously and fired at the same instant; Bradley with his Lewiston, Costigan with a

heavy automatic pistol whose bullets were explosive shells of tremendous power. But

the man in gray, surrounded by an impenetrable wall of force, only smiled at the

fusillade, tolerantly and maddeningly. Costigan leaped fiercely, only to be hurled

backward as he struck that unyielding, invisible wall. A vicious beam snapped him back

into place, the weapons were snatched away, and all three captives were held to their

former positions.

something of a student of men, I fear that you will both die shortly. Able and resourceful

as you have just shown yourselves to be, you could be valuable to me, but you probably will not - in which case you shall, of course, cease to exist. That, however, in its proper time - you shall be of some slight service to me in the process of being eliminated. In your case, Miss Marsden, I find myself undecided between two courses of action; each highly desirable, but unfortunately mutually exclusive. Your father will be glad to ransom you at an exceedingly high figure, but in spite of that fact I may decide to use you in a research upon sex."

"Yes?" Clio rose magnificently to the occasion. Fear forgotten, her courageous spirit flashed from her clear young eyes and emanated from her taut young body, erect in defiance. "You may think that you can do anything with me that you please, but you

and paradoxical.

Most baffling - decidedly, this research on sex must go on."

Roger pressed a button and a tall, comely woman appeared - a woman of

indefinite age and of uncertain nationality.

"Show Miss Marsden to her apartment," he directed, and as the two women went

out a man came in. "The cargo is unloaded, sir," the newcomer reported. "The two men

and the five women indicated have been taken to the hospital."

"Very well, dispose of the others in the usual fashion." The minion went out, and

Roger continued, emotionlessly:

"Collectively, the other passengers may be worth a million or so, but it would not

be worthwhile to waste time upon them."

"What are you, anyway?" blazed Costigan, helpless but enraged beyond caution.

"I have heard of mad scientists who tried to destroy the Earth, and of equally mad

"Yes, particularly the artificial gravity and those screens. An ordinary ether-wall is opaque in one direction, and doesn't bar matter - yours are transparent both ways and something more than impenetrable to matter. How do you do it?"

"You could not understand them if I explained them to you, and they are merely two of our smaller developments. I do not intend to destroy your planet Earth; I have no desire to rule over masses of futile and brainless men. I have, however, certain ends of my own in view. To accomplish my plans I require hundreds of millions in gold and other hundreds of millions in uranium, thorium, and radium; all of which I shall take from the planets of this Solar System before I leave it. I shall take them in spite of the puerile efforts of the fleets of your Triplanetary League.

"This structure was designed by me and built under my direction. It is protected

fit?" demanded

Costigan, venomously.

"Many things," Roger's cold tone betrayed no emotion, no recognition of

Costigan's open and bitter contempt. "I have under me many men, bound to me by

many ties. Needs, wants, longings, and desires differ from man to man, and I can

satisfy practically any of them. Many men take delight in the society of young and

beautiful women, but there are other urges which I have found quite efficient. Greed,

thirst for fame, longing for power, and so on, including many qualities usually regarded

as 'noble.' And what I promise, I deliver. I demand only loyalty to me, and that only in

certain things and for a relatively short period. In all else, my men do as they please. In

conclusion, I can use you two conveniently, but I do not need you. Therefore you may

choose now between my service and - the alternative."

classification, but was rudely interrupted.

"Hold on a minute!" snapped Costigan. "How about Miss Marsden?"

"She has nothing to do with this discussion," returned Roger, icily. "I do not

bargain - in fact, I believe that I shall keep her for a time. She has it in mind to destroy

herself if I do not allow her to be ransomed, but she will find that door closed to her until

I permit it to open."

"In that case, I string along with the Chief - take what he started to say about you

and run it clear across the board for me!" barked Costigan.

"Very well. That decision was to be expected from men of your type."

The gray

man touched two buttons and two of his creatures entered the room.

"Put these men

into two separate cells on the second level," he ordered. "Search them; all their

weapons may not have been in their armor. Seal the doors and mount special guards,

tuned to me here."

detectors, and spy-ray-instruments of minute size and of infinitesimal power, but yet

instruments which, working as they were below the level of the ether, were effective at

great distances and caused no vibrations in the ether by which their use could be

detected. And what could be more innocent than the regulation personal equipment of

every officer of space? The heavy goggles, the wrist-watch and its supplementary

pocket chronometer, the flash-lamp, the automatic lighter, the sender, the money-belt?

All these items of equipment were examined with due care; but the cleverest

minds of the Triplanetary Service had designed those communicators to pass any

ordinary search, however careful, and when Costigan and Bradley were finally locked

into the designated cells they still possessed their ultra-instruments.

CHAPTER 8

Roger wishes,"

the guide informed her somberly, snapping off the instrument in her hand and thus

restoring to the thoroughly cowed girl her freedom of motion.

"His lightest wish is law," she continued as they walked down a long corridor.

"The sooner you realize that you must do exactly as he pleases, in all things, the easier your life will be."

"But I wouldn't want to keep on living!" Clio declared, with a flash of spirit. "And I

can always die, you know."

"You will find that you cannot," the passionless creature returned, monotonously.

"If you do not yield, you will long and pray for death, but you will not die unless Roger

wills it. Look at me: I cannot die. Here is your apartment. You will stay here until Roger

gives further orders concerning you."

The living automaton opened a door and stood silent and impassive while Clio,

there in that magnificent room, fighting an almost overwhelming impulse to scream.

Suddenly she heard the cold voice of Roger, speaking from the empty air.

"You are over-wrought, Miss Marsden. You can be of no use to yourself or to me

in that condition. I command you to rest; and, to insure that rest, you may pull that cord,

which will establish about this room an ether wall: a wall to cut off even this my voice . .

."

The voice ceased as she pulled the cord savagely and threw herself upon a

divan in a torrent of gasping, strangling, but rebellious sobs. Then again came a voice,

but not to her ears. Deep within her, pervading every bone and muscle, it made itself

felt rather than heard.

"Clio?" it asked. "Don't talk yet . . ."

"Conway!" she gasped in relief, every fiber of her being thrilled into new hope at

anything like that

under the wrist-watch, breathe deeply, twice. If you don't feel anything there, it's safe for

you to talk, as loud as you please."

"I don't feel anything, Conway!" she rejoiced. Tears forgotten, she was her old,

buoyant self again. "So that wall is real, after all? I only about half believed it."

"Don't trust it too much, because he can cut it off from the outside any time he

wants to. Remember what I told you: that necklace will warn you of any spy-ray in the

ether, and the watch will detect anything below the level of the ether. It's dead now, of

course, since our three phones are direct-connected; I'm in touch with Bradley, too.

Don't be too scared; we've got a lot better chance than I thought we had."

"What? You don't mean it!"

"Absolutely. I'm beginning to think that maybe we've got something he doesn't

spy-ray . . . I'm looking at you now - feel it?"

"Yes, the watch feels that way, now."

"Fine! Not a sign of interference over here, either. I can't find a trace of ultra-wave -

anything below ether-level, you know - anywhere in the whole place. He's got so much

stuff that we've never heard of that I supposed of course he'd have ultra-wave, too; but

if he hasn't, that gives us the edge. Well, Bradley and I've got a lot of work to do . . .

Wait a minute, I just had a thought. I'll be back in about a second."

There was a brief pause, then the soundless, but clear voice went on:

"Good hunting! That woman that gave you the blue willies isn't alive - she's full of

the prettiest machinery and circuits you ever saw!"

"Oh, Conway!" and the girl's voice broke in an engulfing wave of thanksgiving

and relief. "It was so unutterably horrible, thinking of what must have happened to her

and to others like her!"

an

unobtrusive timepiece, and Costigan, in his solitary cell far below her tower room,

turned his peculiarly goggled eyes toward other scenes. His hands, apparently idle in

his pockets, manipulated tiny controls; his keen, highly-trained eyes studied every

concealed detail of mechanism of the great globe. Finally, he took off the goggles and

spoke in a low voice to Bradley, confined in another windowless room across the hall.

"I think I've got dope enough, Captain. I've found out where he put our armor and

guns, and I've located all the main leads, controls, and generators. There are no

etherwalls around us here, but every door is shielded, and there are guards outside our

doors - one to each of us. They're robots, not men. That makes it harder, since they're

undoubtedly connected direct to Roger's desk and will give an alarm at the first hint of

only one of these ultra-wave spies, but once we're together it won't be so bad. Here's

what I thought we could do," and he went over in detail the only course of action which

his survey had shown to be possible.

"There, he's left his desk!" Costigan exclaimed after the conversation had

continued for almost an hour. "Now as soon as we find out where he's going, we'll start

something . . . he's going to see Clio, the swine! This changes things, Bradley!" His

hard voice was a curse.

"Somewhat!" blazed the captain. "I know how you two have been getting on all

during the cruise. I'm with you, but what can we do?"

"We'll do something," Costigan declared grimly. "If he makes a pass at her I'll get

him if I have to blow this whole sphere out of space, with us in it!"

"Don't do that, Conway," Clio's low voice, trembling but determined, was felt by

and we're going to

do plenty of damage right soon now. Roger probably isn't a fast worker - more the cat-

and-mouse type, I'd say - and after we get started he'll have something on his mind

besides you. Think you can stall him off and keep him interested for about fifteen

minutes?"

"I'm sure I can - I'll do anything to help us, or you, get away from this horrible . . ."

Her voice ceased as Roger broke the ether-wall of her apartment and walked toward

the divan, upon which she crouched in wide-eyed, helpless, trembling terror.

"Get ready, Bradley!" Costigan directed tersely. "He left Clio's ether-wall off, so

that any abnormal signals would be relayed to him from his desk - he knows that there's

no chance of anyone disturbing him in that room. But I'm holding a beam on that switch,

ever he's doing

and send out distress calls . . . Got 'em both. Now what?"

"Open my door - the shield switch is to the right."

Costigan's door flew open and the Triplanetary captain leaped into the room.

"Now for our armor!" he cried.

"Not yet!" snapped Costigan. He was standing rigid, goggled eyes staring

immovably at a spot on the ceiling. "I can't move a millimeter until you've closed Clio's

etherwall switch. If I take this ray off it for a second we're sunk. Five floors up, straight

ahead down a corridor - fourth door on right. When you're at the switch you'll feel my

ray on your watch. Snap it up!"

"Right," and the captain leaped away at a pace to be equaled by few men of half

his years.

Soon he was back, and after Costigan had tested the ether-wall of the "bridal

"I doubt it - with so many robots around, they've probably got signals that we couldn't understand anyway. If we meet anybody it'll mean a battle. Hold it!" Peering through walls with his spy-ray, Costigan had seen two men approaching, blocking an intersecting corridor into which they must turn. "Two of 'em, a man and a robot - the robot's on your side. We'll wait here, right at the corner - when they round it take 'em!" and Costigan put away his goggles in readiness for strife.

All unsuspecting, the two pirates came into view, and as they appeared the two officers struck. Costigan, on the inside, drove a short, hard right low into the human pirate's abdomen. The fiercely-driven fist sank to the wrist into the soft tissues and the stricken man collapsed. But even as the blow landed Costigan had seen that there was a third enemy, following close behind the two he had been watching, a pirate who was

corpse straight at the flaming mouth of the projector. The weapon crashed to the floor

and dead pirate and living went down in a heap. Upon that heap Costigan hurled

himself, feeling for the pirate's throat. But the fellow had wriggled clear, and countered

with a gouging thrust that would have torn out the eyes of a slower man, following it up

instantly with a savage kick for the groin. No automaton this, geared and set to perform

certain fixed duties with mechanical precision, but a lithe, strong man in hard training,

fighting with every foul trick known to his murderous ilk.

But Costigan was no tyro in the art of dirty fighting. Few indeed were the

maiming tricks of foul combat unknown to even the rank and file of the highly efficient

under-cover branch of the Triplanetary Service; and Costigan, a Sector Chief, knew

them all. Not for pleasure, sportsmanship, nor million-dollar purses did those secret

Costigan avoided by a lightning shift. It was a slight shift, barely enough to make the

kicker miss, and two powerful hands closed upon that flying foot in mid-air like the

sprung jaws of a bear-trap. Closed and twisted viciously, in the same fleeting instant.

There was a shriek, smothered as a heavy boot crashed to its carefully predetermined

mark - the pirate was out, definitely and permanently.

The struggle had lasted scarcely ten seconds, coming to its close just as Bradley

finished blinding and deafening the robot. Costigan picked up the projector, again

donned his spy-ray goggles, and the two hurried on.

"Nice work, Chief - it must be a gift to rough-house the way you do," Bradley

exclaimed. "That's why you took the live one?"

"Practice helps some, too - I've been in brawls before, and I'm a lot younger and

maybe a bit faster than you are," Costigan explained briefly, penetrant gaze rigidly to

afar. The three

suits of Triplanetary space armor had been locked up in a cabinet; a cabinet whose

doors Costigan literally blew off with a blast of force rather than consume time in tracing

the power leads.

"I feel like something now!" Costigan, once more encased in his own armor,

heaved a great sigh of relief. "Rough-and-tumble's all right with one or two, but that

generator room is full of grief, and we won't have any too much stuff as it is. We've got

to take Clio's suit along - we'll - carry it down to the door of the power room, drop it

there, and pick it up on the way back."

Contemptuous now of possible guards, the armored pair strode toward the

power plant - the very heart of the immense fortress of space. Guards were

encountered, and captains - officers who signaled frantically to their chief, since he

before the door of the power room, both men felt Clio's voice raised in her first and last

appeal, an appeal wrung from her against her will by the extremity of her position.

"Conway! Hurry! His eyes - they're tearing me apart! Hurry, dear!" In the horror-

filled tones both men read clearly - however inaccurately - the girl's dire extremity. Each

saw plainly a happy, carefree young Earth-girl, upon her first trip into space, locked

inside an ether-wall with an over-brained, under-conscienced human machine - a

super-intelligent, but lecherous and unmoral mechanism of flesh and blood,

acknowledging no authority, ruled by nothing save his own scientific drivings and the

almost equally powerful urges of his desires and passions! She must have fought with

every resource at her command. She must have wept and pleaded, stormed and raged,

hideous face with the fury of a tigress.

Costigan bit off a bitter imprecation. "Hold him just a second longer, sweetheart!"

he cried, and the power room door vanished.

Through the great room the two Lewistons swept at full aperture and at

maximum power, two rapidly-opening fans of death and destruction. Here and there a

guard, more rapid than his fellows, trained a futile projector - a projector whose

magazine exploded at the touch of that frightful field of force, liberating instantaneously

its thousands upon thousands of kilowatt-hours of stored-up energy. Through the

delicately adjusted, complex mechanisms the destroying beams tore. At their touch

armatures burned out, high-tension leads volatilized in crashing, high-voltage arcs,

masses of metal smoked and burned in the path of vast forces now seeking the easiest

Bradley

would follow more slowly, bringing the girl's armor and taking care of any possible

pursuit. As he sailed through the air he spoke.

"Coming, Clio! All right, girl?" Questioningly, half fearfully.

"All right, Conway." Her voice was almost unrecognizable, broken in retching

agony. "When everything went crazy he . . . found out that the ether-wall was up and . . .

. . . forgot all about me. He shut it off . . . and seemed to go crazy too . . . he is floundering

around like a wild man now . . . I'm trying to keep . . . him from . . . going downstairs."

"Good girl - keep him busy one minute more - he's getting all the warnings at

once and wants to get back to his board. But what's the matter with you? Did he . . .

hurt you, after all?"

"Oh, no, not that - he didn't do anything but look at me - but that was bad enough

body. "I forgot

that you're a ground-gripper - that's just a little touch of space-sickness.

It'll wear off

directly . . . All right, I'm coming! Let go of him and get as far away from him as you

can!"

He was now in the street. Perhaps two hundred feet distant and a hundred feet

above him was the tower room in which were Clio and Roger. He sprang directly toward

its large window, and as he floated "upward" he corrected his course and accelerated

his pace by firing backward at various angles with his heavy service pistol, uncaring that

at the point of impact of each of those shells a small blast of destruction erupted. He

missed the window a trifle, but that did not matter - his flaming Lewiston opened a way

for him, partly through the window, partly through the wall. As he soared through the

shield whose generator was always upon his person.

* * *

When Clio reported that Roger seemed to go crazy and was floundering around

like a wild man, she had no idea of how she was understanding the actual situation; for

Gharlane of Eddore, then energizing the form of flesh that was Roger, had for the first

time in his prodigiously long life met in direct conflict with an overwhelming superior force.

Roger had been sublimely confident that he could detect the use, anywhere in or

around his planetoid, of ultra-wave. He had been equally sure that he could control

directly and absolutely the physical activities of any number of these semi-intelligent

"human beings".

this supposedly

human female, but no more could he touch her. His fiercest mental bolts spent

themselves harmlessly three millimeters away from her skin; she gazed into his eyes

completely unaware of the torrents of energy pouring from them. He could not even aim

a weapon at her! His third was to call for help to Eddore. He could not. The sub-ether

was closed; nor could he either discover the manner of its closing or trace the power

which was keeping it closed!

His Eddorian body, even if he could recreate it here, could not withstand the

environment - this Roger-thing would have to do whatever it could, unaided by

Gharlane's mental powers. And, physically, it was a very capable body indeed. Also, it

was armed and armored with mechanisms of Gharlane's own devising; and Eddore's

second-in-command was in no sense a coward.

long, slender pedestal of metal - launched himself past the pirate chief.
With all the
momentum of his mass and velocity and all the power of his good right
arm he swung
the bar at the pirate's head. That fiercely-driven mass of metal should
have taken head
from shoulders, but it did not. Roger's shield of force was utterly rigid
and impenetrable;
the only effect of the frightful blow was to set him spinning, end over
end, like the flying
baton of an acrobatic drum-major. As the spinning form crashed against
the opposite
wall of the room Bradley floated in, carrying Clio's armor. Without a word
the captain
loosened the helpless girl's grip upon the bracket and encased her in
the suit. Then,
supporting her at the window, he held his Lewiston upon the captive's
head while
Costigan propelled him toward the opening. Both men knew that
Roger's shield of force

feet and the

three armored forms darted away toward their only hope of escape - an emergency

boat which could be launched through the shell of the great globe. To attempt to reach

the Hyperion and to escape in one of her lifeboats would have been useless; they could

not have forced the great gates of the main airlocks and no other exits existed. As they

sailed onward through the air, Costigan keeping the slowly-floating form of Roger

enveloped in his beam, Clio began to recover.

"Suppose they get their gravity fixed?" she asked, apprehensively.

"And they're

raying us and shooting at us!"

"They may have it fixed already. They undoubtedly have spare parts and

duplicate generators, but if they turn it on the fall will kill Roger too; and he wouldn't like

that. They'll have to get him down with a helicopter or something, and they know that

capturing a

wildcat. My Lewiston's about done right now, and there can't be much left of yours -

what he'd do to us would be a sin and a shame."

Now at the great wall, the two men heaved mightily upon a lever, the gate of the

emergency port swung slowly open, and they entered the miniature cruiser of the void.

Costigan, familiar with the mechanism of the craft from careful study from his prison

cell, manipulated the controls. Through gate after massive gate they went, until finally

they were out in open space, shooting toward distant Tellus at the maximum

acceleration of which their small craft was capable.

Costigan cut the other two phones out of circuit and spoke, his attention fixed

upon some extremely distant point.

"Samms!" he called sharply. "Costigan. We're out . . . all right . . . yes . . . sure . .

. absolutely . . you tell 'em, Sammy, I've got company here."

powerful head of the space-pervading Service of the Triplanetary League!

"You've turned in a general call-out," Bradley stated, rather than asked.

"Long ago - I've been in touch right along," Costigan answered. "Now that they

know what to look for and know that ether-wave detectors are useless, they can find it.

Every vessel in seven sectors, clear down to the scout patrols, is concentrating on this

point, and the call is out for all battleships and cruisers afloat. There are enough

operatives out there with ultra-waves to locate that globe, and once they spot it they'll

point it out to all the other vessels."

"But how about the other prisoners?" asked the girl. "They'll be killed, won't

they?"

"Hard telling," Costigan shrugged. "Depends on how things turn out. We lack a

lot of being safe ourselves yet."

seat upon

which she was reclining, white and stricken - worn out by the horrible and terrifying

ordeals of the last few hours. As he seated himself beside her she blushed vividly, but

her deep blue eyes met his gray ones steadily.

"Clio, I . . . we . . . you . . . that is," he flushed hotly and stopped. This secret

agent, whose clear, keen brain no physical danger could cloud; who had proved over

and over again that he was never at a loss in any emergency, however desperate - this

quick-witted officer floundered in embarrassment like any schoolboy; but continued,

doggedly: "I'm afraid that I gave myself away back there, but . . . "

"We gave ourselves away, you mean," she filled in the pause. "I did my share,

but I won't hold you to it if you don't want - but I know that you love me, Conway!"

"Love you!" the man groaned, his face lined and hard, his whole body rigid. "That

hands met and tightly clasped, and her low voice thrilled with feeling as she went on:

"You love me and I love you. That is all that matters."

"I wish it were," Costigan returned bitterly, "but you don't know what you'd be

letting yourself in for. It's who and what you are and who and what I am that's griping

me. You, Clio Marsden, Curtis Marsden's daughter. Nineteen years old. You think

you've been places and done things. You haven't. You haven't seen or done anything -

you don't know what it's all about. And whom am I to love a girl like you? A homeless

spacehound who hasn't been on any planet three weeks in three years. A hard-boiled

egg. A trouble-shooter and a brawler by instinct and training. A sp . . ." he bit off the

word and went on quickly: "Why, you don't know me at all, and there's a lot of me that

you never will know - that I can't let you know! You'd better lay off me, girl, while you

could, and you

know that, too. I don't know very much, I admit, but I do know what you thought you'd

have to keep from me, and I admire you all the more for it. We all honor the Service,

Conway dearest - it is only you men who have made and are keeping the Three Planets

fit places to live in - and I know that any one of Virgil Samms' assistants would have to

be a man in a thousand million . . ."

"What makes you think that?" he demanded sharply.

"You told me so yourself, indirectly. Who else in the three worlds could possibly

call him 'Sammy?' You are hard, of course, but you must be so - and I never did like

soft men, anyway. And you brawl in a good cause. You are very much a man, my

Conway; a real, real man, and I love you! Now, if they catch us, all right - we'll die

together, at least!" she finished, intensely.

with you in keeping your shields off. Snap 'em on again - they ought to be getting fairly close by this time."

Hands released and armor again tight, Costigan went over to join Bradley at the control board.

"How are they coming, Captain?" he asked.

"Not so good. Quite a ways off yet. At least an hour, I'd say, before a cruiser can get within range."

"I'll see if I can locate any of the pirates chasing us. If I do it'll be by accident; this

little spy-ray isn't good for much except close work. I'm afraid the first warning we'll have

will be when they take hold of us with a tractor or spear us with a needle. Probably a

beam, though; this is one of their emergency lifeboats and they wouldn't want to destroy

it unless they have to. Also, I imagine that Roger wants us alive pretty badly. He has

say nothing of

what else he might do, while I'm alive."

"He won't," Costigan assured her, narrow of eye and grim of jaw. He was, as she

had said, hard. "But you don't want a gun. You might get nervous and use it too soon.

I'll take care of you at the last possible moment, because if he gets hold of us we won't

stand a chance of getting away again."

For minutes there was silence, Costigan surveying the ether in all directions with

his ultra-wave device. Suddenly he laughed, and the others stared at him in surprise.

"No, I'm not crazy," he told them. "This is really funny; it had never occurred to

me that the ether-walls of all these ships make them invisible. I can see them, of

course, with this sub-ether spy, but they can't see us! I knew that they should have

overtaken us before this. I've finally found them. They've passed us, and are now

lost its

invisibility and was starkly outlined upon the lookout plates of the three fugitives. For a

few seconds the pirate craft seemed unchanged, then it began to glow redly, with a red

that seemed to become darker as it grew stronger. Then the sharp outlines blurred,

puffs of air burst outward, and the metal of the hull became a viscous, fluid-like

something, flowing away in a long, red streamer into seemingly empty space. Costigan

turned his ultra-gaze into that space and saw that it was actually far from empty. There

lay a vast something, formless and indefinite even to his sub-etheral vision; a

something into which the viscid stream of transformed metal plunged. Plunged and

vanished.

Powerful interference blanketed his ultra-wave and howled throughout his body;

shot through that veil and he found himself unable to move. He was
conscious, he was
breathing normally, his heart was beating; but not a voluntary muscle
would obey his
will!

had patrolled

her allotted volume of space. In another week she would report back to the city whose

name she bore, where her space-weary crew, worn by their long "tour" in the

awesomely oppressive depths of the limitless void, would enjoy to the full their fortnight

of refreshing planetary leave.

She was performing certain routine tasks - charting meteorites, watching for

derelicts and other obstructions to navigation, checking in constantly with all scheduled

spaceships in case of need, and so on - but primarily she was a war-ship. She was a

mighty engine of destruction, hunting for the unauthorized vessels of whatever power or

planet it was that had not only defied the Triplanetary League, but was evidently

attempting to overthrow it; attempting to plunge the Three Planets back into the ghastly

System.

A brilliantly intense red light flared upon a panel and a bell clanged brazenly the furious signals of the sector alarm. Simultaneously a speaker roared forth its message of a ship in dire peril.

"Sector alarm! N. A. T. Hyperion gassed with Vee-Two. Nothing detectable in space, but . . ."

The half-uttered message was drowned out in a crackling roar of meaningless noise, the orderly signals of the bell became a hideous clamor, and the two points of light which had marked the location of the liner disappeared in widely spreading flashes - of the same high-powered interference. Observers, navigators, and control officers were alike dumbfounded. Even the captain, in the shell-proof, shock-proof, and doubly ray-proof retreat of his conning compartment, was equally at a loss. No ship or thing

instantly the

emergency call-out came roaring in - every vessel of the Sector, of whatever class or

tonnage, was to concentrate upon the point in space where the ill-fated liner had last

been known to be.

Hour after hour the great globe drove on at maximum acceleration, captain and

every control officer alert and at high tension. But in Quartermasters' Department, deep

down below the generator rooms, no thought was given to such minor matters as the

disappearance of a Hyperion. The inventory did not balance, and two Q.M. privates

were trying, profanely and without success, to find the discrepancy.

"Charged calls for Mark Twelve Lewistons, none requisitioned, on hand eighteen

thous . . . " The droning voice broke off short in the middle of a word and the private

stood rigid, in the act of reaching for another slip, every faculty concentrated upon

vate stared

after him in amazement as he strode over to the desk of the officer in charge. That

officer also stared as the hitherto easy-going and gold-bricking Cleve saluted crisply,

showed him something flat in the palm of his left hand, and spoke.

"I've just got some of the funniest orders ever put out, lieutenant, but they came

from 'way, 'way up. I'm to join the brass hats in the Center. You'll know all about it

directly, I imagine. Cover me up as much as you can, will you?" and he was gone.

Unchallenged he made his way to the control room, and his curt "urgent report

for the Captain" admitted him there without question. But when he approached the

sacred precincts of the captain's own and inviolate room, he was stopped in no

uncertain fashion by no less a personage than the Officer of the Day.

". . . and report yourself under arrest immediately" the O.D. concluded his brief

reveal a tiny

golden meteor, at the sight of which the officer's truculent manner altered markedly.

"I've heard of them, of course, but I never saw one before," and the officer

touched the shining symbol lightly with his finger, jerking backward as there shot

through his whole body a thrilling surge of power, shouting into his very bones an

unpronounceable syllable - the password of the Triplanetary Service. "Genuine or not, it

gets you to the Captain. He'll know, and if it's a fake you'll be breathing space in five minutes."

Projector at the ready, the Officer of the Day followed Cleve into the Holy of

Holies. There the grizzled four-striper touched the golden meteor lightly, then drove his

piercing gaze deep into the unflinching eyes of the younger man. But that captain had

ders to reveal

himself to his commanding officer and to anyone else, if necessary to reach that officer

at once - orders never before issued. The enemy have been located. They have built a

base, and have ships better than our best. Base and ships cannot be seen or detected

by any ether wave. However, the Service has been experimenting for years with a new

type of communicator beam; and, while pretty crude yet, it was given to us when the

Dione went out without leaving a trace. One of our men was in the Hyperion, managed

to stay alive, and has been sending data. I am instructed to attach my new phone set to

one of the universal plates in your conning room, and to see what I can find."

"Go to it!" The captain waved his hand and the operative bent to his task.

"Commanders of all vessels of the Fleet!" The Headquarters speaker, receiver

marked will act as temporary flagships. Unmarked vessels will proceed at maximum to the nearest flagship, grouping about it in the regulation squadron cone in order of arrival. Squadrons most distant from objective point designated by flagship observers will proceed toward it at maximum; squadrons nearest it will decelerate or reverse velocity - that point must not be approached until full Fleet formation has been accomplished. Heavy and light cruisers of all other sectors inside the orbit of Mars . . ."

The orders went on, directing the mobilization of the stupendous forces of the League, so that they would be in readiness in the highly improbable event of the failure of the massed power of seven sectors to reduce the pirate base.

In those seven sectors perhaps a dozen vessels threw out enormous spherical screens of intense red light, and as they did so their tracer points upon all the

space, sweeping the neighborhood of the computed position of the pirate's stronghold.

But the object sought was so far away that the small spy-ray sets of the Service

men, intended as they were for close range work, were unable to make contact with the

invisible planetoid for which they were seeking. In the captain's sanctum of the Chicago,

the operative studied his plate for only a minute or two, then shut off his power and fell

into a brown study, from which he was rudely aroused.

"Aren't you even going to try to find them?" demanded the captain.

"No," Cleve returned shortly. "No use - not half enough power or control. I'm

trying to think . . . maybe . . . say, Captain, will you please have the Chief Electrician

and a couple of radio men come in here?"

They came, and for hours, while the other ultra-wave men searched the

apparently empty ether with their ineffective beams, the three technical experts and the

beam of ultra-vibration.

"There it is, sir," Cleve reported, after some ten minutes of manipulation, and the

vast structure of the miniature world flashed into being upon his plate.

"You may notify

the fleet - coordinates H 11.62, RA 124-31-16, and Dx about 173.2."

The report made and the assistants out of the room, the captain turned to the

observer and saluted gravely.

"We have always known, sir, that the Service had men; but I had no idea that

any one man could possibly do, on the spur of the moment, what you have just done -

unless that man' happened to be Lyman Cleveland."

"Oh, it doesn't . . ." the observer began, but broke off, muttering unintelligibly at

intervals; then swung the visiray beam toward the Earth. Soon a face appeared upon

the plate;! the keen, but careworn face of Virgil Samms!

"Hello, Lyman," his voice came clearly from the speaker,' and the Captain

affair, made

of gunny sacks and hay-wire. I'm holding it together by main strength
and

awkwardness, and even at that, it's apt to go to pieces any minute."

"Can you rig it up for photography?"

"I think so. Just a minute - yes, I can. Why?"

"Because there's something going on out there that neither we nor
apparently

the pirates know anything about. The Admiralty seems to think that it's
the Jovians

again, but we don't see how it can be - if it is, they have developed a lot
of stuff; that

none of our agents has even suspected," and he recounted briefly what
Costigan had

reported to him, concluding: "Then there was a burst of interference - on
the ultra-band,

mind you - and I've heard nothing from him since. Therefore I want you
to stay out of

the battle entirely. Stay as far away ' from it as you can and still get
good pictures of

If the fleet

wins, nothing will be lost. If the fleet loses - and I am not half as confident of success as

the Admiral is - the Chicago doesn't carry enough power to decide the issue, and we

will have the pictures to study, which is all-important. Besides, we have probably lost

Conway Costigan today, and we don't want to lose you, too."

Cleveland remained silent, pondering this startling news, but the grizzled

Captain, veteran of the Fourth Jovian War that he was, was not convinced.

"We'll blow them out of space, Mr. Samms!" he declared.

"You just think you will, Captain. I have suggested, as forcibly as possible, that

the general attack be withheld until after a thorough investigation is made, but the

Admiralty will not listen. They see the advisability of withdrawing a camera ship, but that

is as far as they will go."

stepped up to the plate and, upon being recognized, he received the exact orders which had been requested by the Chief of the Triplanetary Service.

Thus it was that the Chicago reversed her acceleration, cut off her red screen,

and fell rapidly behind, while the vessels following her shot away toward another

crimson-flaring loader. Farther and farther back she dropped, back to the limiting range

of the mechanism upon which Cleveland and his highly-trained assistants were hard at

work. And during all this time the forces of the seven sectors had been concentrating.

The pilot vessels, with their flaming red screens, each followed by a cone of space-

ships, drew closer and closer together, approaching the Fearless - the British super-

dreadnought which was to be the flagship of the Fleet - the mightiest and heaviest

space-ship which had yet lifted her stupendous mass into the ether.

The mouth of that enormous hollow cone was a ring of scout patrols, the smallest and most agile vessels of the fleet. Behind them came a somewhat smaller ring of light cruisers, then rings of heavy cruisers and of light battleships, and finally of heavy battleships. At the apex of the cone, protected by all the other vessels of the formation and in best position to direct the battle, was the flagship. In this formation every vessel was free to use her every weapon, with a minimum of danger to her sister ships; and yet, when the gigantic main projectors were operated along the axis of the formation, from the entire vast circle of the cone's mouth there flamed a cylindrical field of force of such intolerable intensity that in it no conceivable substance could endure for a moment!

The artificial planet of metal was now close enough so that it was visible to the

presence of the fleet was the result of mathematical calculations, and was convinced that his mighty vessels of the void would destroy even that vast fleet without themselves becoming known. He was wrong. The foremost vessels were allowed actually to enter the mouth of that conical trap before an offensive move was made. Then the vice-admiral in command of the fleet touched a button, and simultaneously every generator in every Triplanetary vessel burst into furious activity. Instantly the hollow volume of the immense cone became a coruscating hell of resistless energy, an inferno which with the velocity of light extended itself into a far-reaching cylinder of rapacious destruction. Ether-waves they were, it is true, but vibrations driven with such fierce intensity that the screens of deflection surrounding the pirate vessels could not handle even a fraction of

briefly, then went down; their great hulls first glowing red, then shining white, then in a brief moment exploding into flying masses of red hot, molten, and gaseous metal.

A full two-thirds of Roger's force was caught in that raging, incandescent beam; caught and obliterated: but the remainder did not retreat to the planetoid. Darting out around the edge of the cone at a stupendous acceleration, they attacked its flanks and the engagement became general. But now, since enough beams were kept upon each ship of the enemy so that invisibility could not be restored, each Triplanetary war vessel could attack with full efficiency. Magnesium flares and starshells illuminated space for a thousand miles, and from every unit of both fleets was being hurled every item of solid, explosive and vibratory destruction known to the warfare of that age. Offensive beams,

could not be controlled, but darted madly and erratically hither and thither, finally to be exploded or volatilized harmlessly in mid-space by the touch of some fiercely insistent, probing beam of force.

Individually, however, the pirate vessels were far more powerful than those of the fleet, and that superiority soon began to make itself felt. The power of the smaller ships began to fail as their accumulators became discharged under the awful drain of the battle, and vessel after vessel of the Triplanetary fleet was hurled into nothingness by the concentrated blasts of the pirates' rays. But the Triplanetary forces had one great advantage. In furious haste the Service men had been altering the controls of the dirigible atomic torpedoes, so that they would respond to ultra-wave control; and, few in number though they were, each was highly effective.

signals. Through a pirate screen it went, and under the terrific blast of its detonation the entire midsection of the stricken battleship vanished. It should have been out, cold - but to the amazement of the observers, both ends kept on fighting with scarcely lessened power! Two more of the frightful bombs had to be launched - each remaining section had to be blown to bits - before those terrible beams went out! Not a man in that great fleet had even an inkling of the truth; that those great vessels, those awful engines of destruction, did not contain a single living creature: that they were manned and fought by automatons; robots controlled by keen-eyed, space-hardened veterans inside the pirates' planetoid!

But they were to receive an inkling of it. As ship after ship of the pirate fleet was destroyed, Roger realized that his navy was beaten, and forthwith all his surviving

well. But the ranking officer assumed command, the war-cone was reformed, and, yawning maw to the fore, the great formation shot toward the pirate stronghold, now near at hand. It again launched its stupendous cylinder of annihilation, but even as the mighty defensive screens of the planetoid flared into incandescently furious defense, the battle was interrupted and pirates and Triplanetarians learned alike that they were not alone in the ether.

Space became suffused with a redly impenetrable opacity, and through that indescribable pall there came reaching huge arms of force incredible; writhing, coruscating beams of power which glowed a baleful, although almost imperceptible, red. A vessel of unheard-of armament and power, hailing from the then unknown solar system of Nevia, had come to rest in that space. For months her commander had been

a cloud was to

be seen in that flaming sky, and through that dustless atmosphere the eye could see

the horizon - a horizon three times as distant as the one to which we are accustomed -

with a distinctness and clarity impossible in our Terra's dust-filled air. As that mighty sun

dropped below the horizon the sky would fill suddenly with clouds and rain would fall

violently and steadily until midnight. Then the clouds would vanish as suddenly as they

had come into being, the torrential downpour would cease, and through that huge

world's wonderfully transparent gaseous envelope the full glory of the firmament would

be revealed. Not the firmament as we know it - for that hot blue sun and Nevia, her one

planet-child, were light-years distant from Old Sol and his numerous brood - but a

strange and glorious firmament containing few constellations familiar to Earthly eyes.

mighty globe was traversed before the velocity of the craft could be reduced sufficiently
to make a landing possible: Then, approaching the twilight zone, the vessel dived
vertically downward, and it became evident that Nevia was neither entirely aqueous nor
devoid of intelligent life. For the blunt nose of the space-ship was pointing toward what
was evidently a half-submerged city, a city whose buildings were flat-topped, hexagonal
towers, exactly alike in size, shape, color, and material. These buildings were arranged
as the cells of a honeycomb would be if each cell were separated from its neighbors by
a relatively narrow channel of water, and all were built of the same white metal. Many
bridges and more tubes extended through the air from building to building, and the
watery "streets" teemed with swimmers, with surface craft, and with submarines.

instruments, the others scanned narrowly the immense, swelling curve of the ship's belly, the water upon which his vessel was to land, and the floating dock to which it was to be moored. Four hands - if hands they could be called - manipulated levers and wheels with infinite delicacy of touch, and with scarcely a splash the immense mass of the Nevian vessel struck the water and glided to a stop within a foot of its exact berth.

Four mooring bars dropped neatly into their sockets and the captain-pilot, after locking his controls in neutral, released his safety straps and leaped lightly from his padded bench to the floor. Scuttling across the floor and down a runway upon his four short, powerful, heavily scaled legs, he slipped smoothly into the water and flashed away, far below the surface. For Nevians are true amphibians. Their blood is cold; they

course

accurately by means of his short, vaned tail. Through an opening in a wall he sped and

along a submarine hallway, emerging upon a broad ramp. He scurried up the incline

and into an elevator which lifted him to the top of the hexagon, directly into the office of

the Secretary of Commerce of all Nevia.

"Welcome, Captain Nerado!" The Secretary waved a tentacular arm and the

visitor sprang lightly upon a softly cushioned bench, where he lay at ease, facing the

official across his low, flat "desk." "We congratulate you upon the success of your final

trial flight. We received all your reports, even while you were traveling at ten times the

velocity of light. With the last difficulties overcome, you are now ready to start?"

"We are ready," the captain-scientist replied, soberly. "Mechanically, the ship is

"Ten pounds! Why, the securities we left with you could not have bought two pounds, even at the price then prevailing!"

"No, but you have friends. Many of us believe in you, and have dipped into our own resources. You and your fellow scientists of the expedition have each contributed his entire personal fortune; why should not some of the rest of us also contribute, as private citizens?"

"Wonderful - we thank you. Ten pounds!" The captain's great triangular eyes glowed with an intense violet light. "At least a year of cruising. But . . . what if, after all, we should be wrong?"

"In that case you shall have consumed ten pounds of irreplaceable metal." The Secretary was unmoved. "That is the viewpoint of the Council and of almost everyone else. It is not the waste of treasure they object to; it is the fact that ten pounds of iron

thousands of light-years of our own has a planet. In all probability Nevia is the only planet in the entire Universe. We are very probably the only intelligent life in the Universe. There is only one chance in numberless millions that anywhere within the cruising range of your newly perfected space-ship there may be an iron-bearing planet upon which you can effect a landing. There is a larger chance, however, that you may be able to find a small, cold, iron-bearing cosmic body - small enough so that you can capture it. Although there are no mathematics by which to evaluate the probability of such an occurrence, it is upon that larger chance that some of us are staking a portion of our wealth. We expect no return whatever, but if you should by some miracle happen to succeed, what then? Deep seas being made shallow, civilization extending itself over

". . . I will keep in touch with you on the ultra-wave," the Captain concluded.

"After all, I do not blame the Council for refusing to allow the other ship to go out. Ten

pounds of iron will be a fearful loss to the world. If we should find iron, however, see to

it that she loses no time in following us."

"No fear of that! If you find iron she will set out at once, and all space will soon

be full of vessels. Good-bye."

The last opening was sealed and Nerado shot the great vessel into the air. Up

and up, out beyond the last tenuous trace of atmosphere, on and on through space it

flew with ever-increasing velocity until Nevia's gigantic blue sun had been left so far

behind that it became a splendid blue-white star. Then, projectors cut off to save the

precious iron whose disintegration furnished them power, for week after week Captain

centers of attraction around which were circling one or more worldlets!

Nerado thrilled

with joy as he applied a full retarding force, and every creature aboard that great vessel

had to peer into a plate or through a telescope before he could believe that planets

other than Nevia did in reality exist!

Velocity checked to the merest crawl, as space-speeds go, and with electro-

magnetic detector screens full out, the Nevian vessel crept toward our sun. Finally the

detectors encountered an obstacle, a conductive substance which the patterns showed

conclusively to be practically pure iron. Iron - an enormous mass of it - floating alone

out in space! Without waiting to investigate the nature, appearance, or structure of the

precious mass, Nerado ordered power into the converters and drove an enormous

softening field of force upon the object - a force of such a nature that it would condense

detectable; in another a great number of smaller masses; in a third an isolated mass,

comparatively small in size. Space seemed to be full of iron, and Nerado drove his most

powerful beam toward distant Nevia and sent an exultant message.

"We have found iron - easily obtained and in unthinkable quantity - not in

fractions of milligrams, but in millions upon unmeasured millions of tons! Send our sister

ship here at once!"

"Nerado!" The captain was called to one of the observation plates as soon as he

had opened his key. "I have been investigating the mass of iron now nearest us, the

small one. It is an artificial structure, a small space-boat, and there are three creatures

in it - monstrosities certainly, but they must possess some intelligence or they could not

be navigating space."

"What? Impossible!" exclaimed the chief explorer. "Probably, then, the other was

and silenced

Costigan's ultra-beam communicator., "Not, however, as intelligent as I had supposed,"

he went on, after studying the peculiar creatures and their tiny spaceship more in detail.

"They have immense stores of iron, yet use it for nothing other than building material.

They make little and inefficient use of atomic energy. They apparently have a

rudimentary knowledge of ultra-waves, but do not use them intelligently - they cannot

neutralize even these ordinary forces we are now employing. They are of course more

intelligent than the lower ganoids, or even than some of the higher fishes, but by no

stretch of the imagination can they be compared to us. I am quite relieved - I was afraid

that in my haste I might have slain members of a highly developed race."

The helpless boat, all her forces neutralized, was brought up close to the

space-suits of the Terrestrials, then carefully removed the protective coverings of the captives.

Costigan - fully conscious through it all and now able to move a little, since the

peculiar temporary paralysis was wearing off - braced himself for he knew not what

shock, but it was needless; their grotesque captors were not torturers. The air, while

somewhat more dense than Earth's and of a peculiar odor, was eminently breathable,

and even though the vessel was motionless in space an almost-normal gravitation gave

them a large fraction of their usual weight.

After the three had been relieved of their pistols and other articles which the

Nevians thought might prove to be weapons, the strange paralysis was lifted entirely.

The Earthly clothing puzzled the captors immensely, but so strenuous were the

als regarded the

unmoving, expressionless "faces" - if those coned heads could be said to possess such

a thing - with horror and disgust, as well as with other emotions, each according to his

type and training. For to human eyes the Nevian is a fearful thing. Even today there are

few Terrestrials - or Solarians, for that matter - who can look at a Nevian, eye to eye,

without feeling a creeping of the skin and experiencing a "gone" sensation in the pit of

the stomach. The horny, wrinkled, drought resisting Martian, whom we all know and

rather like, is a hideous being indeed. The bat-eyed, colorless, hairless, practically

skinless Venerian is worse. But they both are, after all, remote cousins of Terra's

humanity, and we get along with them quite well whenever we are compelled to visit

Mars or Venus. But the Nevians -

convenient or ornamental at the time. Even the smell of a Nevian - a malodorous reek of over-ripe fish - does in time become tolerable, especially if sufficiently disguised with creosote, which purely Terrestrial chemical is the most highly prized perfume of Nevia.

But the head! It is that member that makes the Nevian so appalling to Earthly eyes, for it is a thing utterly foreign to all Solarian history or experience. As most Tellurians already know, it is fundamentally a massive cone, covered with scales, based spearhead-like upon the neck. Four great sea-green, triangular eyes are spaced equidistant from each other about half way up the cone. The pupils are contractile at will, like the eyes of the cat, permitting the Nevian to see equally well in any ordinary extreme of light or darkness. Immediately below each eye springs out a long, jointless,

and lungs, as may be desired. To other Nevians the eyes and other features are highly

expressive, but to us they appear utterly cold and unmoving. Terrestrial senses can

detect no changes of expression in a Nevian's "face." Such were the frightful beings at

whom the three prisoners stared with sinking hearts.

But if we human beings have always considered Nevians grotesque and

repulsive, the feeling has always been mutual. For those "monstrous" beings are a

highly intelligent and extremely sensitive race, and our - to us - trim and graceful human

forms seem to them the very quintessence of malformation and hideousness.

"Good Heavens, Conway!" Clio exclaimed, shrinking against Costigan as his left

arm flashed around her. "What horrible monstrosities! And they can't talk - not one of

them has made a sound - suppose they can be deaf and dumb?"

But at the same time Nerado was addressing his fellows.

Thus both sides, neither realizing that the other had spoken. For the Nevian

voice is pitched so high that the lowest note audible to them is far above our limit of

hearing. The shrillest note of a Terrestrial piccolo is to them so profoundly low that it cannot be heard.

"We have much to do." Nerado turned away from the captives. "We must

postpone further study of the specimens until we have taken aboard a full cargo of the

iron which is so plentiful here."

"What shall we do with them, sir?" asked one of the Nevian officers. "Lock them

in one of the storage rooms?"

"Oh, no! They might die there, and we must by all means keep them in good

condition, to be studied most carefully by the fellows of the College of Science. What a

commotion there will be when we bring in this group of strange creatures, living proof

be together or apart, as they choose. Since the smallest one, the female, stays so close

to the larger male, it may be that they are mates. But since we know nothing of their

habits or customs, it will be best to give them all possible freedom compatible with safety."

Nerado turned back to his instruments and three of the frightful crew came up to

the human beings. One walked away, waving a couple of arms in an unmistakable

signal that the prisoners were to follow him. The three obediently set out after him, the

other two guards falling behind.

"Now's our best chance!" Costigan muttered, as they passed through a low

doorway and entered a narrow corridor. "Watch that one ahead of you, Clio - hold him

for a second if you can. Bradley, you and I will take the two behind us - now!"

paralyzed. For the Nevian leader had been alert, his four eyes covering the entire circle of vision, and he had acted rapidly. Not in time to stop Costigan's first berserk attack - the First Officer's reactions were practically instantaneous and he moved fast - but in time to retain command of the situation. Another Nevian appeared, and while the stricken guard was recovering, all four arms wrapped tightly around his convulsively looping, writhing neck, the three helpless Terrestrials were lifted into the air and carried bodily into the quarters to which Nerado had assigned them. Not until they had been placed upon cushions in the middle room and the heavy metal doors had been locked upon them did they again find themselves able to use arms or legs.

"Well, that's another round we lose," Costigan commented, cheerfully. "A guy can't mix it very well when he can neither kick, strike, nor bite. I expected those lizards

"I think you have the right idea, Miss Marsden," Bradley rumbled.

"That's it,
exactly. I feel like a bear in a cage. I should think you'd feel worse than
ever. What
chance has an animal of escaping from a menagerie?"

"These animals, lots. I'm feeling better and better all the time," Clio
declared, and
her serene bearing bore out her words. "You two got us out of that hor-
rible place of
Roger's, and I'm pretty sure that you will get us away from here, some-
how or other.

They may think we're stupid animals, but before you two and the
Triplanetary Patrol
and the Service get done with them they'll have another think coming."

"That's the old fight, Clio!" cheered Costigan. "I haven't got it figured
out as close
as you have, but I get about the same answer. These four-legged fish
carry
considerably heavier stuff than Roger did., I'm thinking; but they'll be up
against
something themselves pretty quick that is no light-weight, believe me!"

new atomic

power, new armament, new everything. Only bad thing about it is that it doesn't work so

good yet - it's fuller of bugs than a Venerian's kitchen. It has blown up five times that I

know of, and has killed twenty-nine men. But when they get it licked they'll have

something!"

"When, or if?" asked Bradley, pessimistically.

"I said when!" snapped Costigan, his voice cutting. "When the Service goes after

anything they get it, and when they get it it stays . . ." He broke off abruptly and his

voice lost its edge. "Sorry. Didn't mean to get high, but I think we'll have help, if we can

keep our heads up a while. And it looks good - these are first-class cages they've given

us. All the comforts of home, even to lookout plates. Let's see what's going on, shall

we?"

that epic battle to its savagely sacrificial end. And that same battle was being watched,

also with the most intense interest, by the Nevians in their control room.

"It is indeed a bloodthirsty combat," mused Nerado at his observation plate. "And

it is peculiar - or rather, probably only to be expected from a race of such a low stage of

development - that they employ only ether-borne forces. Warfare seems universal

among primitive types - indeed, it is not so long ago that our own cities, few in number

though they are, ceased fighting each other and combined against the semicivilized

fishes of the greater deeps."

He fell silent, and for many minutes watched the furious battle between the two

navies of the void. That conflict ended, he watched the Triplanetary fleet reform its

battle cone and rush upon the planetoid.

"Destruction, always destruction," he sighed, adjusting his power switches.

stream of

allotropic iron. The fleet, abandoning its attack upon the planetoid, swung its cone

around, to bring the flame-erupting axis to bear upon the formless something dimly

perceptible to the ultra-vision of Samms' observers. Furiously the gigantic composite

beam of the massed fleet was hurled, nor was it alone.

For Gharlane had known, ever since the easy escape of his human prisoners,

that something was occurring which was completely beyond his experience, although

not beyond his theoretical knowledge. He had found the sub-ether closed; he had been

unable to make his sub-ethereal weapons operative against either the three captives or

the war-vessels of the Triplanetary Patrol. Now, however, he could work in the sub-

ethereal murk of the newcomers; a light trial showed him that if he so wished he could

could possibly have developed them without his knowledge. What, then? To do what

had been done necessitated the existence of a race as old and as capable as the

Eddorians, but of an entirely different nature; and, according to Eddore's vast

Information Center, no such race existed or ever had existed.

Those visitors, possessing mechanisms supposedly known only to the science of

Eddore, would also be expected to possess the mental powers which had been

exhibited. Were they recent arrivals from some other space-time continuum? Probably

not - Eddorian surveys had found no trace of any such life in any reachable plenum.

Since it would be utterly fantastic to postulate the unheralded appearance of two such

racers at practically the same moment, the conclusion seemed unavoidable that these

as yet unknown beings were the protectors - the activators, rather - of the two

with weapons no more dangerous to them than Triplanetary's own - the while preparing

his real attack, which would come later. Roger issued orders; and waited; and thought

more and more intensely upon one point which remained obscure - why, when the

strangers themselves destroyed Triplanetary's fleet, had Roger been unable to use his

most potent weapons against that fleet?

Thus, then, for the first time in Triplanetary's history, the forces of law and order

joined hands with those of piracy and banditry against a common foe. Rods, beams,

planes, and stilettos of unbearable energy the doomed fleet launched, in addition to its

terrifically destructive main beam: Roger hurled every material weapon at his command.

But bombs, high-explosive shells, even the ultra-deadly atomic torpedoes, alike were

ineffective; alike simply vanished in the redly murky veil of nothingness. And the fleet

resulting

metal stored away, the Nevians - as Roger had anticipated - turned their attention

toward the planetoid. But that structure was no feeble warship. It had been designed

by, and built under the personal supervision of, Gharlane of Eddore. It was powered,

equipped, and armed to meet any emergency which Gharlane's tremendous mind had

been able to envision. Its entire bulk was protected by the shield whose qualities had so

surprised Costigan; a shield far more effective than any Tellurian scientist or engineer

would have believed possible.

The voracious converting beam of the Nevians, below the level of the ether

though it was, struck that shield and rebounded; defeated and futile. Struck again,

again rebounded; then struck and clung hungrily, licking out over that impermeable

was now

swung up to become a panel of massed and tiered instruments and controls. He could

carry this load forever - but unless he was very wrong, this load would change shortly.

What then? The essence that was Gharlane could not be killed - could not even be hurt

- by any physical, chemical, or nuclear force. Should he stay with the planetoid to its

end, and thus perforce return to Eddore with no material evidence whatever? He would

not. Too much remained undone. Any report based upon his present information could

be neither complete nor conclusive, and reports submitted by Gharlane of Eddore to the

coldly cynical and ruthlessly analytical innermost Circle had always been and always

would be both.

It was a fact that there existed at least one non-Eddorian mind which was the

completeness, denied the existence of such a race, was wrong. It was not complete.

Why was it not complete? The only possible reason for two such races

remaining unaware of the existence of each other would be the deliberate intent of one

of them. Therefore, at some time in the past, the two races had been in contact for at

least an instant of time. All Eddorian knowledge of that meeting had been suppressed

and no more contacts had been allowed to occur.

The conclusion reached by Gharlane was a disturbing thing indeed; but, being

an Eddorian, he faced it squarely. He did not have to wonder how such a suppression

could have been accomplished - he knew. He also knew that his own mind contained

everything known to his every ancestor since the first Eddorian was: the probability was

exceedingly great that if any such contact had ever been made his mind would still

unplumbed recesses of his mind.

"Ah . . . so you do not want me to remember?" Roger asked aloud,
with no

change in any lineament of his hard, gray face. "I wonder . . . do you
really believe that

you can keep me from remembering? I must abandon this search for the
moment, but

rest assured that I shall finish it very shortly."

* * *

"Here is the analysis of his screen, sir." A Nevian computer handed
his chief a

sheet of metal, bearing rows of symbols.

"Ah, a polycyclic . . . complete coverage . . . a screen of that type
was scarcely to

have been expected from such a low form of life," Nerado commented,
and began to

adjust dials and controls.

As he did so the character of the clinging mantle of force changed.
From red it

expected,

they were prepared for that. He summoned a few of the ablest of his scientist-slaves

and issued instructions. For minutes a host of robots toiled mightily, then a portion of

the shield bulged out and became a tube extending beyond the attacking layers of

force; a tube from which there erupted a beam of violence incredible. A beam behind

which was every erg of energy that the gigantic mechanisms of the planetoid could

yield. A beam that tore a hole through the redly impenetrable Nevian field and hurled

itself upon the inner screen of the fish-shaped cruiser in frenzied incandescence. And

was there, or was there not, a lesser eruption upon the other side - an almost

imperceptible flash, as though something had shot from the doomed planetoid out into

space?

Soon there was a terrific explosion as the pent-up air of the planetoid broke through its weakening container, and the sluggish river of allotropic iron flowed in an ever larger stream, ever faster.

"It is well that we had an unlimited supply of iron." Nerado almost tied a knot in his neck as he spoke in huge relief. "With but the seven pounds remaining of our original supply, I fear that it would have been difficult to parry that last thrust."

"Difficult?" asked the second in command. "We would now be free atoms in space. But what shall I do with this iron? Our reservoirs will not hold more than half of it.

And how about that one ship which remains untouched?"

"Jettison enough supplies from the lower holds to make room for this lot. As for that one ship, let it go. We will be overloaded as it is, and it is of the utmost importance that we get back to Nevia as soon as possible."

Triplanetary's fleet.

The Nevian space-ship moved away, sluggishly now because of its prodigious

load. In their quarters in the fourth section the three Terrestrials, who had watched with

strained attention the downfall and absorption of the planetoid, stared at each other with

drawn faces. Clio broke the silence.

"Oh, Conway, this is ghastly! It's . . . it's just simply too damned perfectly

horrible!" she gasped, then recovered a measure of her customary spirit as she stared

in surprise at Costigan's face. For it was thoughtful, his eyes were bright and keen - no

trace of fear or disorganization was visible in any line of his hard young face.

"It's not so good," he admitted frankly. "I wish I wasn't such a dumb cluck - if

Lyman Cleveland or Fred Rodebush were here they could help a lot, but I don't know

Bradley argued.

"I don't know what to think. I've never seen anything material sent out so fast that

I couldn't trace it with an ultrawave - but on the other hand, Roger's got a lot of stuff that

I never saw anywhere else. However, I don't see that it has anything to do with the fix

we're in right now - but at that, we might be worse off. We're still breathing sir, you

notice, and if they don't blanket my wave I can still talk."

He put both hands into his pockets and spoke.

"Samms? Costigan. Put me on a recorder, quick - I probably haven't got much

time," and for ten minutes he talked, concisely and as rapidly as he could utter words,

reporting clearly and exactly everything that had transpired. Suddenly he broke off,

writhing in agony. Frantically he tore his shirt open and hurled a tiny object across the room.

"No," he answered flatly, looking deep into her steadfast eyes. "No use lying to you - if I know you at all you'd rather take it standing up. That talk of Jovians or Neptunians is the bunk - nothing like that ever grew in our Solarian system. All the signs say that we're going for a long ride."

at a high rate, even though to them it seemed stationary - they could feel only a gravitational force somewhat less than that of their native Earth.

Bradley, seasoned old campaigner that he was, had retired promptly as soon as

he had completed a series of observations, and was sleeping soundly upon a pile of

cushions in the first of the three inter-connecting rooms. In the middle room, which was

to be Clio's, Costigan was standing very close to the girl, but was not touching her. His

body was rigid, his face was tense and drawn.

"You are wrong, Conway; all wrong," Clio was saying, very seriously.

"I know how

you feel, but it's false chivalry."

"That isn't it, at all," he insisted, stubbornly. "It isn't only that I've got you out here

in space, in danger and alone, that's stopping me. I know you and I know myself well

enough to know that what we start now we'll go through with for life. It doesn't make any

"But nothing!" he interrupted. "Can't you get it into your skull what you'll be letting yourself in for if you marry me? Assume that we get back, which isn't sure, by any means. But even if we do, some day - and maybe soon, too, you can't tell - somebody is going to collect fifty grams of radium for my head."

"Fifty grams - and everybody knows that Samms himself is rated at only sixty? I knew that you were somebody, Conway!" Clio exclaimed, undeterred. "But at that, something tells me that any pirate will earn even that much reward several times over before he collects it. Don't be silly, my dear - goodnight."

She tipped her hand back, holding up to him her red, sweetly curved, smiling lips, and his arms swept around her. Her arms went up around his neck and they stood, clasped together in the motionless ecstasy of love's first embrace.

"Girl, girl, how I love you!" Costigan's voice was husky, his usually hard eyes

Well, goodnight,

sweetheart, I'd better beat it - you need some sleep."

The lovers' parting was not as simple and straightforward a procedure as

Costigan's speech would indicate, but finally he did seek his own room and relaxed

upon a pile of cushions, his stern visage transformed. Instead of the low metal ceiling

he saw a beautiful, oval, tanned young face, framed in a golden-blond corona of hair.

His gaze sank into the depths of loyal, honest, dark blue eyes; and looking deeper and

deeper into those blue wells he fell asleep. Upon his face, too set and grim by far for a

man of his years - the lives of Sector Chiefs of the Triplanetary Service were not easy,

nor as a rule were they long - there lingered as he slept that newly-acquired softness of

expression, the reflection of his transcendent happiness.

For eight hours he slept soundly, as was his wont, then, also according to his

just as though you
were home in bed."

"You've got to learn to sleep anywhere if you expect to keep in . . . "

Costigan

broke off as he opened the door and saw Clio's wan face. She had evidently spent a

sleepless and wracking eight hours. "Good Lord, Clio, why didn't you call me?" ,

"Oh, I'm all right, except for being a little jittery. No need of asking how you feel,

is there?"

"No - I feel hungry," he answered cheerfully. "I'm going to see what we can do

about it - or say, guess I'll see whether they're still interfering on Samms' wave."

He took out the small, insulated case and touched the contact stud lightly with

his finger. His arm jerked away powerfully.

"Still at it," he gave the unnecessary explanation. "They don't seem to want us to

eye and an

arm toward his own small observation plate. Knowing that they were now in visual

communication, Costigan beckoned an invitation and pointed to his mouth in what he

hoped was the universal sign of hunger. The Nevian waved an arm and fingered

controls, and as he did so a wide section of the floor of Clio's room slid aside. The

opening thus made revealed a table which rose upon its low pedestal, a table equipped

with three softly-cushioned benches and spread with a glittering array of silver and

glassware.

Bowls and platters of a dazzlingly white metal, narrow-waisted goblets of

sheerest crystal; all were hexagonal, beautifully and intricately carved or etched in

apparently conventional marine designs. And the table utensils of this strange race

fingers of the Nevians.

But if the table and its appointments were surprising to the Terrestrials, revealing

as they did a degree of culture which none of them had expected to find in a race of

beings so monstrous, the food was even more surprising, although in another sense.

For the wonderful crystal goblets were filled with a grayish-green slime of a nauseous

and over-powering odor, the smaller bowls were full of living sea spiders and other such

delicacies; and each large platter contained a fish fully a foot long, raw and whole,

garnished tastefully with red, purple, and green strands of seaweed!

Clio looked once, then gasped, shutting her eyes and turning away from the

table, but Costigan flipped the three fish into a platter and set it aside before he turned

back to the visiplate.

"They'll go good fried," he remarked to Bradley, signaling vigorously to Nerado

ley of the pirate's

lifeboat, suggesting that they should be allowed to live there. For some time the

argument of arms and fingers raged - though not exactly fluent conversation, both sides

managed to convey their meanings quite clearly. Nerado would not allow the

Terrestrials to visit their own ship - he was taking no chances - but after a thorough

ultra-ray inspection he did finally order some of his men to bring into the middle room

the electric range and a supply of Terrestrial food. Soon the Nevian fish were sizzling in

a pan and the appetizing odors of coffee and browning biscuit permeated the room. But

at the first appearance of those odors the Nevians departed hastily, content to watch

the remainder of the curious and repulsive procedure in their visiray plates.

Breakfast over and everything made tidy and ship-shape, Costigan turned to

and you'll lie down here and sleep until noon."

"Oh, no, don't bother. I'll sleep tonight. I'm quite . . .!"

"You'll sleep now," he informed her, levelly. "I never thought of you being

nervous, with Bradley and me on each side of you. We're both right here now, though,

and we'll stay here. We'll watch over you like a couple of old hens with one chick

between them. Come on; lie down and go bye-bye."

Clio laughed at the simile, but lay down obediently. Costigan sat upon the edge

of the great divan holding her hand, and they chatted idly. The silences grew longer,

Clio's remarks became fewer, and soon her long-lashed eyelids fell and her deep,

regular breathing showed that she was sound asleep. The man stared at her, his very

heart in his eyes. So young, so beautiful, so lovely - and how he did love her! He was

not formally religious, but his every thought was a prayer. If he could only get her out of

still holding her

hand, he sank down into the soft cushions beside her and into oblivion.

Thus sleeping hand in hand like two children Bradley found them, and a tender,

fatherly expression came over his face as he looked down at them.

"Nice little girl, Clio," he mused, "and when they made Costigan they broke the

mold. They'll do - about as fine a couple of kids as old Tellus ever produced. I could do

with some more sleep myself." He yawned prodigiously, lay down at Clio's left, and in

minutes was himself asleep.

Hours later, both men were awakened by a merry peal of laughter. Clio was

sitting up, regarding them with sparkling eyes. She was refreshed, buoyant, ravenously

hungry and highly amused. Costigan was amazed and annoyed at what he considered

a failure in a self-appointed task; Bradley was calm and matter-of-fact.

"Thanks for being such a nice body-guard, you two." Clio laughed again, but

and refreshed, they had - begun to discuss possibilities of escape when Nerado and his three armed guards entered the room. The Nevian scientist placed a box upon a table and began to make adjustments upon its panels, eyeing the Terrestrials attentively after each setting. After a time a staccato burst of articulate speech issued from the box, and Costigan saw a great light.

"You've got it - hold it!" he exclaimed, waving his arms excitedly. "You see, Clio, their voices are pitched either higher or lower than ours - probably higher - and they've built an audio-frequency changer. He's nobody's fool, that lizard!"

Nerado heard Costigan's voice, there was no doubt of that. His long neck looped and twisted in Nevian gratification; and although neither side could understand the other, both knew that intelligent speech and hearing were attributes common to the two

been able to

figure out any possible way of getting away from them. They can talk and hear, and we

can learn their language in time. Maybe we can make some kind of a deal with them to

take us back to our own system, if we can't make a break."

The Nevians being as eager as the Terrestrials to establish communication,

Nerado kept the newly devised frequency changer in constant use. There is no need of

describing at length the details of that interchange of languages. Suffice it to say that

starting at the very bottom they learned as babies learn, but with the great advantage

over babies of possessing fully developed and capable brains. And while the human

beings were learning the tongue of Nevia, several of the amphibians (and incidentally

Clio Marsden) were learning Triplanetarian; the two officers knowing well that it would

worn collar-like

by the Terrestrials, and the captives were allowed to roam at will throughout the great

vessel; only the compartment in which was stored the dismembered pirate lifeboat

being sealed to them. Thus it was that they were not left long in doubt when another

fish-shaped cruiser of the void was revealed upon their lookout plates in the awful

emptiness of interstellar space.

"This is our sister-ship going to your Solarian system for a cargo of the iron which

is so plentiful there," Nerado explained to his involuntary guests.

"I hope the gang has got the bugs worked out of our super-ship!" Costigan

muttered savagely to his companions as Nerado turned away. "If they have, that outfit

will get something more than a load of iron when they get there!"

More time passed, during which a blue-white star separated itself from the

Nevian city.

That bit of open water was devoid of life, for this was to be no ordinary landing. Under

the terrific power of the beams braking the descent of that unimaginable load of

allotropic iron the water seethed and boiled; and instead of floating gracefully upon the

surface of the sea, this time the huge ship of space sank like a plummet to the bottom.

Having accomplished the delicate feat of docking the vessel safely in the immense

cradle prepared for her, Nerado turned to the Tellurians, who, now under guard, had

been brought before him.

"While our cargo of iron is being discharged, I am to take you three specimens to

the College of Science, where you are to undergo a thorough physical and

psychological examination. Follow me."

"Wait a minute!" protested Costigan, with a quick and furtive wink at his

'swimming'

you mean propelling yourself in or through the water, we know nothing of it. In water

over our heads we drown helplessly in a minute or two, and the pressure at this depth

would kill us instantly."

"Well, I- could take a lifeboat, of course, but that . . ." the Nevian Captain began,

doubtfully, but broke off at the sound of a staccato call from his signal panel.

"Captain Nerado, attention!"

"Nerado," he acknowledged into a microphone.

"The Third City is being attacked by the fishes of the greater deeps.

They have

developed new and powerful mobile fortresses mounting unheard-of weapons and the

city reports that it cannot long withstand their attack. They are asking for all possible

help. Your vessel not only has vast stores of iron, but also mounts weapons of power.

attained a slight buoyancy the ports snapped shut and Nerado threw on the power.

"Go back to your own quarters and stay there until I send for you," the Nevian

directed, and as the Terrestrials obeyed the curt orders the cruiser tore herself from the

water and flashed up into the crimson sky.

"What a barefaced liar!" Bradley exclaimed. The three, transformers cut off, were

back in the middle room of their suite. "You can out-swim an otter, and I happen to

know that you came up out of the old DZ83 from a depth of . . ."

"Maybe I did exaggerate a trifle," Costigan interrupted, "but the more helpless he

thinks we are the better for us. And we want to stay out of any of their cities as long as

we can, because they may be hard places to get out of. I've got a couple of ideas, but

they aren't ripe enough to pick yet

"Wow! How this bird's been traveling! We're there already! If he hits the water

millions of

men. For the Third City was sore pressed indeed. Around it was one unbroken ring of

boiling, exploding water - water billowing upward in searing, blinding bursts of super-

heated steam, or being hurled bodily in all directions in solid masses by the cataclysmic

forces being released by the embattled fishes of the greater deeps. Her outer defenses

were already down, and even as the Terrestrials stared in amazement another of the

immense hexagonal buildings burst into fragments; its upper structure flying wildly into

scrap metal, its lower half subsiding drunkenly below the surface of the boiling sea.

The three Earth-people seized whatever supports were at hand as the Nevian

space-ship struck the water with undiminished speed, but the precaution was needless

- Nerado knew thoroughly his vessel, its strength and its capabilities. There was a

implacably upon immense caterpillar treads. And as they crawled they
destroyed, and
Costigan, exploring the strange submarine with his visiray beam,
watched and
marveled. For the fortresses were full of water; water artificially cooled
and aerated,
entirely separate from the boiling flood through which they moved. They
were manned
by fish some five feet in length. Fish with huge, goggling eyes; fish
plentifully equipped
with long, armlike tentacles; fish poised before control panels or darting
about intent
upon their various duties. Fish with brains, waging war!
Nor was their warfare ineffectual. Their heat-rays boiled the water for
hundreds
of yards before them and their torpedoes were exploding against the
Nevian defenses
in one appallingly continuous concussion. But most potent of all was a
weapon
unknown to Triplanetary warfare. From a fortress there would shoot out,
with the speed

shining and potent.

Nerado, apparently as unfamiliar with the peculiar weapon as were the

Terrestrials, attacked cautiously; sending out far to the fore his murkily impenetrable

screens of red. But the submarine was entirely non-ferrous, and its officers were

apparently quite familiar with Nevian beams which licked at and clung to the green walls

in impotent fury. Through the red veil came stabbing ball after ball, and only the most

frantic dodging saved the space-ship from destruction in those first few furious seconds.

And now the Nevian defenders of the Third City had seemed and were employing the

vast store of allotropic iron so opportunely delivered by Nerado.

From the city there pushed out immense nets of metal, extending from the

surface of the ocean to its bottom; nets radiating such terrific forces that the very water

explosion water was hurled for miles. The bed of the ocean was not only exposed, but

in it there was blown a crater at whose dimensions the Terrestrials dared not even

guess. The crawling fortresses themselves were thrown backward violently and the very

world was racked to its core by the concussion, but that iron-driven wall held. The

massive nets swayed and gave back, and tidal waves hurled their mountainously

destructive masses through the Third City, but the mighty barrier remained intact. And

Nerado, still attacking two of the powerful tanks with his every weapon, was still dodging

those flashing balls charged with the quintessence of destruction. The fishes could not

see through the subethereal veil, but all the gunners of the two fortresses were combing

it thoroughly with ever-lengthening, ever-thrusting rods, in a desperate attempt to wipe

"But what can we possibly do?" asked Clio.

"Whatever it is, we'll try it!" Bradley exclaimed.

"Anything's better than staying here and letting them analyze us - no telling what

they'd do to us," Costigan went on.

"I know a lot more about things than they think I do. They never did catch me

using my spy-ray - it's on an awfully narrow beam, you know, and uses almost no power

at all - so I've been able to dope out quite a lot of stuff. I can open most of their locks,

and I know how to run their small boats. This battle, fantastic as it is, is deadly stuff, and

it isn't one-sided by any means, either, so that every one of them, from Nerado down,

seems to be on emergency duty. There are no guards watching us, or stationed where

we want to go - our way out is open. And once out, this battle is giving us our best

possible chance to get away from them. There's so much emission out there already

food, water,

and air - would we ever get there?"

"You know as much about that as I do. I think so, but of course anything might

happen. This ship is none too big, is considerably slower than the big space-ship, and

we're a long ways from home. Another bad thing is the food question. The boat is well

stocked according to Nevian ideas, but it's pretty foul stuff for us to eat. However, it's

nourishing, and we'll have to eat it, since we can't carry enough of our own supplies to

the boat to last long. Even so, we may have to go on short rations, but I think first we'll

be able to make it. On the other hand, what happens if we stay here? They will find us

sooner or later, and we don't know any too much about these ultra-weapons. We are

land-dwellers, and there is little if any land on this planet. Then, too, we don't know

Stepping up to the locked and shielded door, he took out a peculiarly built torch and pointed it at the Neviaan lock.

There was no light, no noise, but the massive portal swung smoothly open. They stepped out and Costigan relocked and reshielded the entrance.

"How . . . what . . ." Clio demanded.

"I've been going to school for the last few weeks," Costigan grinned, "and I've picked up quite a few things here and there - literally, as well as figuratively. Snap it up, guys! Our armor is stored with the pieces of the pirates' lifeboat, and I'll feel a lot better when we've got it on and have hold of a few Lewistons."

They hurried down corridors, up ramps, and along hallways, with Costigan's spy-ray investigating the course ahead for chance Nevians. Bradley and Clio were unarmed, but the operative had found a piece of flat metal and had ground it to a razor edge.

the greater

deeps. Their path was open; they were neither molested nor detected as they ran

toward the compartment within which was sealed all their belongings. The door of that

room opened, as had the other, to Costigan's knowing beam; and all three set hastily to

work. They made up packs of food, filled their capacious pockets with emergency

rations, buckled on Lewistons and automatics, donned their armor, and clamped into

their external holsters a full complement of additional weapons.

"Now comes the ticklish part of the business," Costigan informed the others. His

helmet was slowly turning this way and that, and the others knew that through his spy-

ray goggles he was studying their route. "There's only one boat we stand a chance of

reaching, and somebody's mighty apt to see us. There's a lot of detectors up there, and

than waist high - right there's the lowest one. Watch me do it, and when I give you the word, one at a time, you do the same. Keep low - don't let an arm or a leg get up into a ray or they may see us."

He threw himself flat, rolled upon the floor a yard or so, and scrambled to his feet. He gazed intently at the blank wall for a space.

"Bradley - now!" he snapped, and the captain duplicated his performance.

But Clio, unused to the heavy and cumbersome space-armor she was wearing, could not roll in it with any degree of success. When Costigan barked his order she tried, but stopped, floundering almost directly below the network of invisible beams. As she struggled one mailed arm went up, and Costigan saw in his ultra-goggles the faint flash as the beam encountered the interfering field. But already he had acted.

start an organized

search we're sunk. But even if they did get a warning by touching your glove, Clio, they

probably won't suspect us. Our rooms are still shielded, and the chances are that

they're too busy to bother much about us, anyway."

He was right. A few beams darted here and there, but the Nevians saw nothing

amiss and ascribed the interference to the falling into the beam of some chance bit of

charged metal. With no further misadventures the fugitives gained entrance to the

Nevian lifeboat, where Costigan's first act was to disconnect one steel boot from his

armor of space. With a sigh of relief he pulled his foot out of it, and from it carefully

poured into the small power-tank of the craft fully thirty pounds of allotropic iron!

"I pinched it off them," he explained, in answer to amazed and inquiring looks,

on, though, we could go to Andromeda, fighting all the way. Well, we'd better break away."

Costigan watched his plate closely; and, when the maneuvering of the great

vessel brought his exit port as far away as possible from the Third City and the warring

tanks, he shot the little cruiser out and away. Straight out into the ocean it sped,

through the murky red veil, and darted upward toward the surface. The three wanderers

sat tense, hardly daring to breathe, staring into the plates - Clio and Bradley pushing at

mental levers and stepping down hard upon mental brakes in unconscious efforts to

help Costigan dodge the beams and rods of death flashing so appallingly close upon all

sides. Out of the water and into the air the darting, dodging lifeboat flashed in safety;

but in the air, supposedly free from menace, came disaster. There was a crunching,

"Pretty bad, but better than I thought," the captain reported. "Outer and inner plates broken away on a seam. We wouldn't hold cotton waste, let alone air. Any tools aboard?"

"Some - and what we haven't got we'll make," Costigan declared. "We'll put a lot of distance behind us, then we'll fix her up and get away from here."

"What are those fish, anyway, Conway?" Clio asked, as the lifeboat tore along.

"The Nevians are bad enough, Heaven knows, but the very idea of intelligent and educated fish is enough to drive one mad!"

"You know Nerado mentioned several times the 'semicivilized fishes of the

greater deeps'?" he reminded her. "I gather that there are at least three intelligent races

here. We know two - the Nevians, who are amphibians, and the fishes of the greater

deeps. The fishes of the lesser deeps are also intelligent. As I get it, the Nevian cities

and plantations, and do all kinds of work for the Nevians. Those so-called 'lesser deeps' were conquered first, of course, and all their races of fish are docile enough now. But the deep-sea breeds, who live in water so deep that the Nevians can hardly stand the pressure down there, were more intelligent to start with, and more stubborn besides. But the most valuable metal, here are deep down - this planet is very light for its size, you know - so the Nevians kept at it until they conquered some of the deep-sea fish, too, and put 'em to work. But those high-pressure boys were nobody's fools. They realized that as time went on the amphibians would get further and further ahead of them in development, so they let themselves be conquered, learned how to use the Nevians' tools and everything else they could get hold of, developed a lot of new stuff of

nearly enough distance now, Costigan?"

"There isn't enough distance on the planet to suit me," Costigan replied. "We'll

need all we can get. A full diameter away from that crew of amphibians is too close for

comfort their detectors are keen."

"Then they can detect us?" Clio asked. "Oh, I wish they hadn't hit us - we'd have

been away from here long ago."

"So do I," Costigan agreed, feelingly. "But they did - no use squawking. We can

rivet and weld Those seams, and things could be a lot worse - we are still breathing air!"

In silence the lifeboat flashed onward, and half of Nevia's mighty globe was

traversed before it was brought to a halt. Then in furious haste the two officers set to

work, again to make their small craft sound and spaceworthy.

of course

carried full repair equipment; and to such good purpose did the two officers labor that

even before their air-tanks were fully charged, all the damage had been repaired.

The lifeboat lay motionless upon the mirror-smooth surface of the ocean.

Captain Bradley had opened the upper port and the three stood in the opening, gazing

in silence toward the incredibly distant horizon, while powerful pumps were forcing the

last possible ounces of air into the storage cylinders. Mile upon strangely flat mile

stretched that waveless, unbroken expanse of water, merging finally into the violent

redness of the Nevian sky. The sun was setting; a vast ball of purple flame dropping

rapidly toward the horizon. Darkness came suddenly as that seething ball disappeared,

and the air became bitterly cold, in sharp contrast to the pleasant warmth of a moment

Almost before the girl had spoken Costigan had leaped to the controls, and not
an instant too soon; for the tip of that horrible tentacle flashed into the rapidly narrowing
crack just before the door clanged shut. As the powerful toggles forced the heavy
wedges into engagement and drove the massive disk home, that grisly tip fell severed
to the floor of the compartment and lay there, twitching and writhing with a loathsome
and unearthly vigor. Two feet long the piece was, and larger than a strong man's leg. It
was armed with spiked and jointed metallic scales, and instead of sucking disks it was
equipped with a series of mouths - mouths filled with sharp metallic teeth which
gnashed and ground together furiously, even though sundered from the horrible
organism which they were designed to feed.

The little submarine shuddered in every plate and member as monstrous coils

upon the controls. Due to the artificial gravity of the lifeboat it seemed perfectly

stationary to its occupants. Only the weird gyrations of the pictures upon the lookout

screens showed that the craft was being shaken and thrown about like a rat in the jaws

of a terrier; only the gauges revealed that they were almost a mile below the surface of

the ocean already, and were still going downward at an appalling rate. Finally Clio could

stand no more.

"Aren't you going to do something, Conway?" she cried.

"Not unless I have to," he replied, composedly. "I don't believe that he can really

hurt us, and if I use force of any kind I'm afraid that it will kick up enough disturbance to

bring Nerado down on us like a hawk onto a chicken. However, if he takes us much

deeper I'll have to go to work on him. We're getting down pretty close to our limit, and

the bottom's a long ways down yet."

surface. The pilot then turned on his beams, but found that they were ineffective. So

closely was the creature wrapped around the submarine that his weapons could not be

brought to bear upon it.

"What can it possibly be, anyway, and what can we do about it?" Clio asked.

"I thought at first it was something like a devilfish, or possibly an overgrown

starfish, but it isn't," Costigan made answer. "It must be a kind of flat worm. That

doesn't sound reasonable - the thing must be all of a hundred meters long - but there it

is. The only thing left to do that I can think of is to try to boil him alive."

He closed other circuits, diffusing a terrific beam of pure heat, and the water all

about them burst into furious clouds of steam. The boat leaped upward as the metallic

fins of the gigantic worm fanned vapor instead of water, but the creature neither

Nerado could trace

us, but I didn't have any idea that they could!"

Staring with Costigan into the plate, Bradley and the girl saw, not the Nevian sky-

rover they had expected, but a fast submarine cruiser, manned by the frightful fishes of

the greater deeps. It was coming directly toward the lifeboat, and even as Costigan

hurled the little vessel off at an angle and then sped upward into the air, one of the

deadly offensive rods, tipped with its glowing ball of pure destruction, flashed through

the spot where they would have been had they held their former course.

But powerful us were the propellant forces of the life boat and fiercely though

Costigan applied then,, the denizens of the deep clamped a tractor beam upon the

flying vessel before it had gained a mile of altitude. Costigan aligned his every driving

projector as his vessel came to an abrupt halt in the invisible grip of the beam, then

them right now."

He frowned as he studied the flaring defensive screens, now radiating an

incandescent violet under the concentration of forces being hurled against them by the

warlike fishes, then stiffened suddenly.

"I thought so - they can shot 'em!" he exclaimed, throwing the lifeboat into a

furious corkscrew turn, and the very air blazed into flaming splendor as a dazzlingly

scintillating ball of energy sped past them and high into the air beyond.

Then for minutes a spectacular battle raged. The twisting, turning, leaping

airship, small as she was and agile, kept on eluding the explosive projectiles of the

fishes, and her screens neutralized and re-radiated the full power of the attacking

beams. More since Costigan did not need to think of sparing his iron, the ocean around

the great submarine began furiously to boil under the full-driven offensive beams of the

and generator; and Clio and Bradley, sick at heart, looked once at each other. Then

they looked at Costigan, who, jaw hard set and eyes unflinchingly upon his plate, was

concentrating his attack upon one turret of the green monster as they settled lower and

lower.

"If this is . . . if our number is going up, Conway," Clio began, unsteadily.

"Not yet, it isn't!" he snapped. "Keep a stiff upper lip, girl. We're still breathing air,

and the battle's not over yet!"

Nor was it but it was not Costigan's efforts, mighty though they were, that ended

the attack of me fishes of the greater deeps. The tractor beams snapped without

warning, and so prodigious were the forces being exerted by the lifeboat that as it

hurled itself away the three passengers were thrown violently to the floor, in spite of the

atmosphere through which it had been tearing with such an insane acceleration!

"Oh, I see - Nerado to the rescue," Costigan commented, after a glance into the

plate. "I hope that those fish blow him clear out of the Galaxy!"

"Why?" demanded Clio. "I should think that you'd . . ."

"Think again," he advised her. "The worse Nerado gets licked the better for us. I

don't really expect that, but if they can keep him busy long enough, we can get far

enough away so that he won't bother about us any more."

As the lifeboat tore upward through the air at the highest permissible atmospheric velocity Bradley and Clio peered over Costigan's shoulders into the plate,

watching in fascinated interest the scene which was being kept in focus upon it. The

Nevian ship of space was plunging downward in a long, slanting dive, her terrific beams

of force screaming out ahead of her. The beams of the little lifeboat bad boiled the

gas the enormous mass of the submarine fell like a plummet, her defensive screens

flaming an almost invisible violet, her every offensive weapon vomiting forth solid and

vibratory destruction toward the Nevian cruiser so high in the angry, scarlet heavens.

For miles the submarine dropped, until the frightful pressure of the depth drove

water into Nerado's beam faster than his forces could volatilize it. Then in that seething

funnel there was waged a starkly fantastic conflict. At its wildly turbulent bottom lay the

submarine, now apparently trying to escape, but held fast by the tractors of the

spaceship; at its top, smothered almost to the point of invisibility by billowing masses of

steam, hung poised the Nevian cruiser.

As the atmosphere had grown thinner and thinner with increasing altitude

Costigan had regulated his velocity accordingly, keeping the outer shell of the vessel at

great vessel of the void had long since plunged beneath the surface of the sea, to come more closely to grips with the vessel of the fishes; for a long time nothing of the battle had been visible save immense clouds of steam, blanketing hundreds of square miles of the ocean's surface. But just before the picture became too small to reveal details a few tiny dark spots appeared above the banks of cloud, now brilliantly illuminated by the rays of the rising sun - dots which might have been fragments of either vessel, blown bodily from the depths of the ocean and, riven asunder, buffed high into the air by the incredible forces at the command of the other.

Nevia a tiny moon and the fierce blue sun rapidly growing smaller in the distance, Costigan swung his visiray beam into the line of travel and turned to his companions.

They'll chase us, of course; and I'm afraid that with their power, they'll catch us."

"But what can we do, Conway?" asked Clio.

"Several things;" he grinned. "I managed to get quite a lot of dope off that

paralyzing ray and some of their other stuff, and we can install the necessary

equipment in our suits easily enough"

They removed their armor, and Costigan explained in detail the changes which

must be made in the Triplanetary field generators. All three set vigorously to work - the

two officers deftly and surely; Clio uncertainly and with many questions, but with

moderated spirit. Finally, having done everything they could do to strengthen their

position, they settled down to the watchful routine of the flight, with every possible

instrument set to detect any sign of the pursuit they so feared.

tensely above

his ultracameras, his sensitive fingers touching lightly their micrometric dials. His body

was rigid, his face was set and drawn. Only his eyes moved; flashing back and forth

between his instruments and the smoothly-running strands of spring-steel wire upon

which were being recorded the frightful scenes of carnage and destruction.

Silent and bitterly absorbed, though surrounded by staring officers whose

fervent, almost unconscious cursing was prayerful in its intensity, the visiray expert kept

his ultrainstruments upon that awful struggle to its dire conclusion. Flawlessly those

instruments noted every detail of the destruction of Roger's fleet, of the transformation

of the armada of Triplanetary into an unknown fluid, and finally of the dissolution of the

gigantic planetoid itself, Then furiously Cleveland drove his beam against the crimsonly

to pierce that impenetrable murk, it disappeared instantly and without warning: the

illimitable infinity of space once more lay revealed upon his plates and his beams

flashed unimpeded through the void.

"Back to Tellus, sir?" The Chicago's captain broke the strained silence.

"I wouldn't say so, if I had the say." Cleveland, baffled and frustrated, straightened up and shut off his cameras. "We should report back as soon as possible,

of course, but there seems to be a lot of wreckage out there yet that we can't

photograph in detail at this distance. A close study of it might help us a lot in

understanding what they did and how they did it. I'd say that we should get close-ups of

whatever is left, and do it right away, before it gets scattered all over space; but of

course I can't give you orders,"

"You can, though," the captain made surprising answer. "My orders are that you

As the scene of the disaster was approached there was revealed upon the plates a confused mass of debris; a mass whose individual units were apparently moving at random, yet which was as a whole still following the orbit of Roger's Planetoid. Space was full of machine parts. structural members, furniture, flotsam of all kinds; and everywhere were the bodies of men. Some were encased in space-suits, and it was to these that the rescuers turned first - space-hardened veterans though the men of the Chicago were, they did not care even to look at the others. Strangely enough, however, not one of the floating figures spoke or moved, and space-line men were hurriedly sent out to investigate.

"All dead:" Quickly the dread report came back. "Been dead a long time. The armor is all stripped off the suits, and all the generators and other apparatus are all

pened, but it's so

new that I'd have to have some evidence before I'll believe it myself.

You might have

them bring in a few of the armored bodes, a couple of those switch-boards and panels

floating around out there, and half a dozen miscellaneous pieces of junk - the nearest

things they get hold of, whatever they happen to be."

"Then back to Tellus at maximum?"

"Right - back to Tellus, as fast as we can possibly get there.

While the Chicago hurtled through space at full power, Cleveland and the

ranking officers of the vessel grouped themselves about the salvaged wreckage.

Familiar with space wrecks as were they all, none of them had ever seen anything like

the material before them. For every part and instrument was weirdly and meaninglessly

disintegrated. There were no breaks, no marks of violence, and yet nothing was intact.

"I want you to notice something first," the expert replied. "But don't look for what's there - look for what isn't there."

"Well, the armor is gone. So are the shielding cases, shafts, spindles, the

housings and stems . . ." the captain's voice died away as his eyes raced over the

collection. "Why everything that was made of wood, bakelite, copper, aluminum, silver,

bronze, or anything but steel hasn't been touched, and every bit of that is gone. But that

doesn't make sense - what does it mean?"

"I don't know yet," Cleveland replied, slowly. "But I'm afraid that there's more,

and worse." He opened a space-suit reverently, revealing the face; a face calm and

peaceful, but utterly, sickeningly white. Still reverently, he made a deep incision in the

brawny neck, severing the jugular vein, then went on, soberly:

"You never imagined such a thing as white blood, either, but it all checks up.

somebody wanted

iron badly enough to wipe out the fleet and the planetoid to get it. But anyway, whoever

they were, they carried enough power so that our armament didn't bother them at all.

They simply took the metal they wanted and went away with it - so fast that I couldn't

trace them with an ultra-beam. There's only one thing plain; but that's so plain that it

scares me still. This whole affair spells intelligence, with a capital 'I', and that intelligent

is anything but friendly. I want to put Fred Rodenbush at work on this just as fast as I

can get him."

He stepped over to his ultra-projector and put in a call for Virgil Samms, whose

face soon appeared upon his screen.

"We got it all, Virgil," he reported. "It's something extraordinary - bigger, wider,

and deeper than any of us dreamed. It may be urgent, too, so I think I had better shoot

detail of that

calamitous battle of the void was being screened and recorded in the innermost private

laboratory of the Triplanetary Service.

Eager though he naturally was to join his fellow-scientists, Cleveland was not

impatient during the long, but uneventful journey back to Earth. There was much to

study, many improvements to be made in his comparatively crude first ultracamera.

Then, too, there were long conferences with Samms, and particularly with Rodebush,

the nuclear physicist, who would have to do much of the work involved in solving the

riddles of the energies and weapons of the Nevians. Thus it did not seem long before

green Terra grew large beneath the flying sphere of the Chicago.

"Going to have to circle it once, aren't you?" Cleveland asked the chief pilot. He

had been watching that officer closely for minutes, admiring the delicacy and precision

a rocket-plane

come out to meet us somewhere around fifteen or twenty thousand kilometers,

depending upon where you want to land. With their drives they can match our velocity

and still make the drop direct."

"Guess I'll do that - thanks," and the operative called his chief, only to learn that

his suggestion had already been acted upon.

"We beat you to it, Lyman," Samms smiled. "The Silver Sliver is out there now,

looping to match your course, acceleration, and velocity at twenty two thousand

kilometers. You'll be ready to transfer?"

"I'll be ready," and the Quartermaster's ex-clerk went to his quarters and packed

his dunnage-bag.

In due time the long, slender body of the rocket-plane came into view, creeping

"down" upon the space-ship from "above," and Cleveland bade his friends goodbye.

pointed fore and aft, with ultra-stubby wings and vanes, with flush-set rocket ports

everywhere, built of a lustrous, silvery alloy of noble and almost infusible metals - such

was the private speedboat of Triplanetary's head man. The fastest thing known,

whether in planetary air, the stratosphere, or the vacuous depth of inter-planetary space,

her first flashing trial spins had won her the nickname of the Silver Sliver. She had had

a more formal name, but that title had long since been buried in the Departmental files.

Lower and lower dropped the speed-boat, her rockets flaming ever brighter, until

her slender length lay level with the airlock door. Then her blasting discharges subsided

to the power necessary to match exactly the Chicago's acceleration.

"Ready to cut, Chicago! Give me a three-second call!" snapped from the pilot

room of the Sliver.

ing exhausts

ceased Cleveland swung out his heavy bag and stepped lightly off into space, and in a

right line he floated directly into the open port of the rocket-plane. The door clanged

shut behind him and in a matter of moments he stood in the control room of the racer,

divested of his armor and shaking hands with his friend and co-laborer, Frederick

Rodebush.

"Well, Fritz, what do you know?" Cleveland asked, as soon as greetings had

been exchanged. "How do the various reports dovetail together? I know that you

couldn't tell me anything on the wave, but there's no danger of eavesdroppers here."

"You can't tell," Rodebush soberly replied. "We're just beginning to wake up to

the fact that there are a lot of things we don't know anything about. Better wait until

Sliver. Strap yourself solid in that shock-absorber there, and here's a pair of ear-plugs."

"When the Sliver really cuts loose it means a rough party, all right."

Cleveland

assented, snapping about his body the heavy spring-straps of his deeply cushioned

seat, "but I'm just as anxious to get back to the Hill as anybody can be to get me there.

All set."

Rodebush waved his hand at the pilot and the purring whisper of the exhausts

changed instantly to a deafening, continuous explosion. The men were pressed deeply

into their shock-absorbing chairs as the Silver Sliver spun around her longitudinal axis

and darted away from the Chicago with such a tremendous acceleration that the

spherical warship seemed to be standing still in space. In due time the calculated

midpoint was reached, the slim space-plane rolled over again, and, mad acceleration

yellow, blinding white; but it neither melted nor burned. The pilot's calculations had been sound, and though the limiting point of safety of temperature was reached and steadily held, it was not exceeded. As the density of the air increased so decreased the velocity of the man-made meteorite. So it was that a dazzling lance of fire sped high over Seattle, lower over Spokane, and hurled itself eastward, a furiously flaming arrow; slanting downward in a long, screaming dive toward the heart of the Rockies. As the now rapidly cooling greyhound of the skies passed over the western ranges of the Bitter Roots it became apparent that her goal was a vast, flat-topped, conical mountain, shrouded in violet light; a mountain whose height awed even its stupendous neighbors.

While not artificial, the Hill had been altered markedly by the engineers who had

no known craft could even approach the Hill without detection. Could not approach it at

all, in fact, for it was constantly inclosed in a vast hemisphere of lambent violet flame

through which neither material substance nor destructive ray could pass.

As the Silver Sliver, crawling along at a bare five hundred miles an hour,

approached that transparent, brilliantly violet wall of destruction, a light of the same

color filled her control room and as suddenly went out; flashing on and off again and again.

"Giving us the once-over, eh?" Cleveland asked. "That's something new, isn't it?"

"Yes, it's a high-powered ultra-wave spy," Rodebush returned. "The light is

simply a warning, which can be carried if desired. It can also carry voice and vision . . . : "

"Like this," Samms' voice interrupted from a speaker upon the pilot's panel and

as soon as the plane had darted through it; and at the same time her
landing-cradle
rose into the air through a great trap-door. Slowly and gracefully the
space-plane settled
downward into that cushioned embrace. Then cradle and nestled Sliver
sank from view
and, turning smoothly upon mighty trunnions, the plug of armor drove
solidly back into
its place in the metal pavement of the mountain's lofty summit. The cra-
dle-elevator
dropped rapidly, coming to rest many levels down in the heart of the Hill,
and Cleveland
and Rodebush leaped lightly out of their transport, through her still hot
outer walls. A
door opened before them and they found themselves in a large room of
unshadowed
daylight illumination; the office of the Chief of the Triplanetary Service.
Calmly efficient
executives sat at their desks, concentrating upon problems or at ease,
according to the

"Right of way, Norma?" Rodebush paused before the desk of Virgil Samms' private secretary. She pressed a button and the door behind her swung wide.

"You two do not need to be announced," the attractive young woman smiled. "Go right in."

Samms met them at the door eagerly, shaking hands particularly vigorously with Cleveland.

"Congratulations on that camera, Lyman!" he exclaimed. "You did a wonderful piece of work on that. Help yourselves to smokes and sit down - there are a lot of things we want to talk over. Your pictures carried most of the story, but they would have left us pretty much at sea without Costigan's reports. But as it was, Fred here and his crew worked out most of the answers from the dope the two of you got; and what few they haven't got yet they soon will have."

"Yes, that's a hopeful sign," Samms went on. "I hate to think of
Conway Costigan
checking out. There, fellows, was a real observer. He was the only man
I have ever
known who combined the two qualities of the perfect witness. He could
actually see
everything he looked at, and could report it truly, to the last, least detail.
Take all this
stuff, for instance; especially their ability to transform iron into a fluid al-
lotrope, and in
that form to use its atomic - nuclear? - energy as power. Something
brand new, and yet
he described their converters and projectors so minutely that Fred was
able to work out
the underlying theory in three days, and to tie it in with our own super-
ship. My first
thought was that we'd have to rebuild it iron-free, but Fred showed me
my error you
found it first yourself, of course."
"It wouldn't do any good to make the ship non-ferrous unless you
could so

debrush said,

"and we're beginning to see light. And in that same connection it's no wonder that we

couldn't handle our super-ship. We had some good ideas, but they were wrongly

applied. However, things look quite promising now. We have the transformation of iron

all worked out in theory, and as soon as we get a generator going we can straightened

out everything else in short order. And think what that unlimited power means! All the

power we want - power enough even to try out such hitherto purely theoretical

possibilities as the neutralization of the inertia of matter!"

"Hold on!" protested Samms. "You certainly can't do that! Inertia is - must be - a

basic attribute of matter, and surely cannot be done away with without destroying the

matter itself. Don't start anything like that, Fred - I don't want to lose you and Lyman,

too."

errupted by

the voice of the secretary.

"Sorry to disturb you, Mr. Samms, but some things have come up that you will

have to handle. Knobos is calling from Mars. He has caught the Endymion, and has

killed about half her crew doing it. Milton has finally reported from Venus, after being

out of touch for five days. He trailed the Wintons into Thalleron swamp. They crashed

him there, and he won out and has what he went after. And just now I got a flash from

Fletcher, in the asteroid belt. I think that he has finally traced that dope line. But Knobos

is on now - what do you want him to do about the Endymion?"

"Tell him to - no, put him on here, I'd better tell him myself," Samms directed,

and his face hardened in ruthless decision as the horny, misshapen face of the Martian

lieutenant appeared upon the screen. "What do you think, Knobos? Shall they come to

and Fletcher on whenever they come in." He turned to his guests.
"We've covered the
ground quite thoroughly. Goodbye - I wish I could go with you, but I'll be
pretty well tied
up for the next week or two."

"`Tied up' doesn't half express it," Rodebush remarked as the two
scientists
walked along a corridor toward an elevator. "He probably is the busiest
man on three
planets."

"As well as the most powerful," Cleveland supplemented. "And very
few men
could use his power as fairly - but he's welcome to it, as far as I'm con-
cerned. I'd have
the pink fantods for a month if I had to do only once what he's just done
- and to him it's
just part of a day's work."

"You mean the Endymion? What else could he do?"

"Nothing - that's the hell of it. It had to be done, since bringing them
to trial would

to every man

chosen for it THE SERVICE was everything, himself nothing.

"But enough of that, we'll have plenty of grief of our own right here."

Rodebush

changed the subject abruptly as they stepped into a vast room, almost filled by the

immense bulk of the Boise - the sinister space-ship which, although never flown, had

already lined with black so many pages of Triplanetary's roster. She was now, however,

the center of a furious activity. Men swarmed over her and through her, in the orderly

confusion of a fiercely driven but carefully planned program of reconstruction.

"I hope your dope is right, Fritz!" Cleveland called, as the two scientists

separated to go to their respective laboratories. "If it is, we'll make a perfect lady out of

this unmanageable man-killer yet!"

could make her.

Rodebush and Cleveland had finished their last rigid inspection of the aircraft and,

standing beside the center door of the main airlock, were talking with their chief.

"You say that you think that it's safe, and yet you won't take a crew," Samms

argued. "In that case it isn't safe enough for you two, either. We need you too badly to

permit you to take such chances."

"You've got to let us go, because we are the only ones who are at all familiar with

her theory," Rodebush insisted. "I said, and I still say, that I think it is safe. I can't prove

it, however, even mathematically; because she's altogether too full of too many new

and untried mechanisms, too many extrapolations beyond all existing or possible data.

Theoretically, she is sound, but you know that theory can go only so far, and that

and take it

easy."

"In a way, so do I, but she wasn't designed to neutralize half of gravity, nor half of

the inertia of matter - it's got to be everything or nothing, as soon as the neutralizers go

on. We could start out on the projectors, of course, instead of on the neutralizers, but

that wouldn't prove anything and would only prolong the agony."

"Well, then, be as careful as you can."

"We'll do that, Chief," Cleveland put in. "We think as much of us as anybody else

does - maybe more - and we aren't committing suicide if we can help it.

And remember

about everybody staying inside when we take off - it's barely possible that we'll take up

a lot of room. Goodbye!"

"Goodbye, fellows!"

The massive insulating doors were shut, the metal side of the mountain opened,

was staring

intently into his plate, upon which was revealed the control room of the untried super-

ship. He heard Rodebush speak to Cleveland; heard the observer's brief reply; saw the

navigator push the switch - button - then the communicator plate went blank. Not the

ordinary blankness of a cut-off, but a peculiarly disquieting fading out into darkness.

And where the great space-ship had rested there was for an instant nothing. Exactly

nothing - a vacuum. Vessel, falsework, rollers, trucks, the enormous steel I-beams of

the tracks, even the deep-set concrete piers and foundations and a vast hemisphere of

the solid ground; all disappeared utterly and instantaneously. But almost as suddenly as

it had been formed the vacuum was filled by a cyclonic rush of air. There was a

detonation as of a hundred vicious thunderclaps made one, and through the howling,

had a vastly greater radius of action, than the calculations of their designers had shown;

and for a moment everything within a hundred yards or so of the Boise behaved as

though it were an integral part of the vessel. Then, left behind immediately by the

super-ship's almost infinite velocity, all this material had again become subject to all of

Nature's everyday laws and had crashed back to the ground.

"Could you hold your beam, Randolph?" Samms' voice cut sharply through the

daze of stupefaction which held spellbound most of the denizens of the Hill. But all were

not so held - no conceivable emergency could take the attention of the chief ultra-wave

operator from his instruments.

"No, sir," Radio Center shot back. "It faded out and I couldn't recover it. I put

everything I've got behind a tracer on that beam, but haven't been able to lift a single

needle off the pin."

space-ship? Reason told him that they were gone. They must be gone, or else the ultra-
beams - energies of such unthinkable velocity of propagation that man's most sensitive
instruments had never been able even to estimate it - would have held the ship's
transmitter in spite of any velocity attainable by matter under any conceivable
conditions. The ship must have been disintegrated as soon as Rodebush released his
forces. And yet, had not the physicist dimly foreseen the possibility of such an actual
velocity - or had he? However, individuals could come and go, but the Service went on.
Samms squared his shoulders unconsciously; and slowly, grimly, made his way back to
his private office.
"Mr. Fairchild would like to have a moment as soon as possible, sir," his
secretary informed him even before he sat down. "Senator Morgan has been here all

self, as

usual?"

"He wants to lay down the law to you, personally. He's a Big Shot, you know, and

his group is kicking up quite a row, so it might be better to have it come straight from

the top. Besides, you've got a unique knack - when you throw a harpoon, the

harpoonee doesn't forget it."

"All right. He's the uplifter and leveler-off. Down with Triplanetary, up with

National Sovereignty. We're power-mad dictators - iron-heel-on-the-necks-of-the-

people, and so on. But what's he like, personally? Thick-skinned, of course - got a

brain?"

"Rhinoceros. He's got a brain, but it's definitely weaseloid. Bear down - sink it in

full length, and then twist it."

"O.K. You've got a harpoon, of course?"

Mackenzie River power deal. Triple play, you might say - Clander to Morgan to le Bay."

"Nice. Bring him in."

"Senator Morgan, Mr. Samms," Fairchild made the introduction and the two men

sized each other up in lightning glances. Samms saw a big man, florid, somewhat

inclined toward corpulence, with the surface geniality - and the shrewd calculating eyes

- of the successful politician. The senator saw a tall, hard-trained man in his forties; a

lean, keen, smooth-shaven face; a shock of red-bronze-auburn hair a couple of weeks

overdue for a cutting; a pair of gold-flecked tawny eyes too penetrant for comfort.

"I trust, Senator, that Fairchild has taken care of you satisfactorily?"

"With one or two exceptions, yes." Since Samms did not ask what the exceptions

could be, Morgan was forced to continue. "I am here, as you know, in my official

could not have been ignorant of them. Therefore it has been decided to make a first-

hand and comprehensive investigation, in which matter your Mr. Fairchild has not been

at all cooperative."

"Who decided to make this investigation?"

"Why, the North American Senate, of course, through its Pernicious Activities . .

."

"I thought so." Samms interrupted. "Don't you know, Senator, that the Hill is not a

part of the North American Continent? That the Triplanetary Service is responsible only

to the Triplanetary Council?"

"Quibbling, sir, and outmoded! This, sir, is a democracy!" the Senator began to

orate. "All that will be changed very shortly, and if you are as smart as you are believed

to be,

I need only say that you and those of your staff who cooperate . . ."

life and which is the supreme authority in any matter, small or large, affecting more than

one Continental Government. The Council has two principal operating agencies; the

Triplanetary Patrol, which enforces its decisions, rules, and regulations, and the

Triplanetary Service, which performs such other tasks as the Council directs. We have

no interest in the purely internal affairs of North America. Have you any information to

the contrary?"

"More quibbling!" the Senator thundered. "This is not the first time in history that

a ruthless dictatorship has operated in the disguise of a democracy. Sir, I demand full

access to your files, so that I can spread before the North American Senate the full

facts of the various matters which I mentioned to Fairchild - one of which was the affair

of the Pelarion. In a democracy, sir, facts should not be hidden; the people must and

box N469T414?

For it is common knowledge, in the Council at least, that there is a certain amount of -

shall we say turbidity? - in the supposedly pellucid reaches of North American politics."

"What? Preposterous!" Morgan made a heroic effort, but Could not quite

maintain his poise. "Private papers only, sir!"

"Perhaps. Certain of the Councillors believe, however mistakenly, that there are

several things of interest there: such as the record of certain transactions involving one

James F. Towne; references to and details concerning dealings - not to say deals - with

Mackenzie Power, specifically with Mackenzie Power's Mr. Clander; and perhaps a juicy

bit or two concerning a person known as le Bay and a tekkyl coat. Of interest no end,

don't you think, to the dear people of North America?"

As Samms drove the harpoon in and twisted it, the big man suffered visibly.

not mention to anybody - except in self-defense."

"I am holding Fletcher, Mr. Samms. Shall I put him on now?" Norma asked, as

the completely deflated Morgan went out.

"Yes, please . . . Hello, Sid; mighty glad to see you - we were scared for a while.

How did you make out, and what was it?"

"Hi, Chief! Mostly hadive. Some heroin, and quite a bit of Martian lardolian. Lousy job, though - three of the gang got away, and took about a quarter of the loot with them.

That was what I want to talk to you about in such a hurry - fake meteors; the first I ever saw."

Samms straightened up in his chair.

"Just a second. Norma, put Redmond on here with us . . . Listen, Harry. Now,

Fletcher, did you see that fake meteor yourself? Touch it?"

"Both. In fact, I've still got it. One of the runners, pretending to be a Service man,

lab. Chances

are, though, that they have caught up with us again. After all, that was to be expected -

anything that science can synthesize, science can analyze; and whatever the morals

and ethics of the pirates may be, they have got brains."

"And you haven't been able to devise anything better?"

"Variations only, which wouldn't take much time to solve. Fundamentally, the

present meteor is the best we know."

"Got anybody you would like to put on it, immediately?"

"Of course. One of the new boys will be perfect for the job, I think.

Name of

Bergenheim. Quite a character. Brilliant, erratic, flashes of sheer genius that he can't

explain, even to us. I'll put him on it right away."

"Thanks a lot. And now, Norma, please keep everybody off my neck that you

can. I want to think."

And think he did; keen eyes clouded, staring unseeingly at the papers littering his

better yet, something that no one not of Tri planetary could even wear . .

Samms grinned fleetingly at that thought. A tall order one calling for a deus ex

machina with a vengeance . . .

But damn it, there ought to be some way to . . .

"Excuse me, sir." His secretary's voice, usually so calm and cool, trembled as

she broke in on his thinking. "Commissioner Kinnison is calling. Something terrible is

going on again, out toward Orion. Here he is, and there appeared ,upon Samms' screen

the face of the Commissioner of Public Safety, the commander-in-chief of Triplanetary's

every armed force; whether of land or of water, of air or of empty space.

"They've come back, Virgil!" The Commissioner rapped out without preliminary or

greeting. "Four vessels gone - a freighter and a passenger liner, with her escort of two

heavy cruisers. All in Sector M, Dx about 151. I have ordered all traffic out of space for

not," and

Samms described briefly the beginning - and very probably the ending - of the trial

flight, concluding: "It looks bad, but if there was any possible way of handling her,

Rodebush and Cleveland did it. All our tracers are negative yet, so nothing definite has .

. . "

He broke off as a frantic call came in from the Pittsburgh station for the

Commissioner; a call which Samms both heard and saw.

"The city is being attacked!" came the urgent message. "We need all the

reinforcements you can send us!" and a picture of the beleaguered city appeared in

ghastly detail upon the screens of the observers; a view being recorded from the air. It

required only seconds for the commissioner to order every available man and engine of

war to the seat of conflict; then, having done everything they could do, Kinnison and

wielded by man, she

hung there, her sinister beauty of line sharply defined against the cloudless sky. From

her shining hull there reached down a tenuous but rigid rod of crimson energy; a rod

which slowly swept hither and thither as the Nevians searched out the richest deposits

of the precious metal for which they had come so far. Iron, once solid, now a viscous

red liquid, was sluggishly flowing in an ever-thickening stream up that intangible

crimson duct and into the capacious storage tanks of the Nevian raider; and wherever

that flaming beam went there went also ruin, destruction and death. Office buildings,

skyscrapers towering majestically in their architectural symmetry and beauty, collapsed

into heaps of debris as their steel skeletons were abstracted. Deep into the ground the

beam bored; flood, fire, and explosion following in its wake as the mazes of

absorbed. The

district planes of Triplanetary, newly armed with iron-driven ultrabeams, had assembled

hurriedly and had attacked the invader in formation, with but little more success. Under

the impact of their beams, the stranger's screens had flared white, then poised ship and

flying squadron had alike been lost to view in a murkily opaque shroud of crimson

flame. The cloud had soon dissolved, and from the place where the planes had been

there floated or crashed down a litter of non-ferrous wreckage. And now the cone of

space-ships from the Buffalo base of Triplanetary was approaching Pittsburgh hurling

itself toward the Nevian plunderer and toward known, gruesome, and hopeless defeat.

"Stop them, Rod!" Samms cried. "It's sheer slaughter! They haven't got a thing -

they aren't even equipped yet with the iron drive!"

the

detachments from the other bases arrived.

The cone was formed and, iron-driven vessels in the van, the old-type craft far in

the rear, it bore down upon the Nevian, vomiting from its hollow front a solid cylinder of

annihilation. Once more the screens of the Nevian flared into brilliance, once more the

red cloud of destruction was flung abroad. But these vessels were not entirely

defenseless. Their iron-driven ultra-generators threw out screens of the Nevians' own

formulae, screens of prodigious power to which the energies of the amphibians clung

and at which they clawed and tore in baffled, wildly coruscant displays of power

unthinkable. For minutes the furious conflict raged, while the inconceivable energy

being dissipated by those straining screens hurled itself in terribly destructive bolts of

lightning upon the city far beneath.

the overloaded defensive screens of the war-vessels; and one by one
the supposedly
invincible space-ships of humanity dropped in horribly dismembered ruin
upon the ruins
of what had once been Pittsburgh.

For days the Nevian lifeboat with its three Terrestrial passengers hurtled through the interstellar void without incident, but finally the operative's fears were realized - his far flung detector screens reacted; upon his observation plate they could see Nerado's mammoth space-ship, in full pursuit of its fleeing life-boat!

"On your toes, folks - it won't be long now!" Costigan called, and Bradley and Clio hurried into the tiny control room.

Armor donned and tested, the three Terrestrials stared into the observation plates, watching the rapidly-enlarging picture of the Nevian space-ship. Nerado had traced them and was following them, and such was the power of the great vessel that the now inconceivable velocity of the lifeboat was the veriest crawl in comparison to that of the pursuing cruiser.

"And we've hardly started to cover the distance back to Tellus. Of course you

but it isn't, of course. Here they are!"

Reaching out to the control panel, Costigan viciously shot out against the great

vessel wave after wave of lethal vibrations, under whose fiercely clinging impacts the

Nevian defensive screens flared white; but, strangely enough, their own screens did not

radiate. As if contemptuous of any weapons the lifeboat might wield, the mother ship

simply defended herself from the attacking beams, in much the same fashion as a

wildcat mother wards off the claws and teeth of her spitting, snarling kitten who is

resenting a touch of needed maternal discipline.

"They probably wouldn't fight us, at that," Clio first understood the situation. "This

is their own lifeboat, and they want us alive, you know."

"There's one more thing we can try - hang on!" Costigan snapped, as he

released his screens and threw all his power into one enormous presser beam.

shell and brought it slowly to a halt. Furiously then Costigan set and re-set his controls,

launching his every driving force and his every weapon, but no beam could penetrate

that red murk, and the lifeboat remained motionless in space. No, not motionless - the

red rod was shortening, drawing the truant craft back toward the launching port from

which she had so hopefully emerged a few days before. Back and back it was drawn;

Costigan's utmost efforts futile to affect by a hair's breadth its line of motion. Through

the open port the boat slipped neatly, and as it came to a halt in its original position

within the mufti-layered skin of the monster, the prisoners heard the heavy doors clang

shut behind them, one after another.

And then sheets of blue fire snapped and crackled about the three suits of

Triplanetary armor - the two large human figures and the small ones were outlined

"Even if they can't paralyze us, we can't hurt them, and we are heading back for Nevia."

"I think Nerado will come in for a conference, and we'll be able to make terms of

some kind. He must know what these Lewistons will do, and he knows that we'll get a

chance to use them, some way or other, before he gets to us again," Costigan

asserted, confidently - but again he was wrong.

The door opened, and through it there waddled, rolled, or crawled a metal-clad

monstrosity - a thing with wheels, legs and writhing tentacles of jointed bronze; a thing

possessed of defensive screens sufficiently powerful to absorb the full blast of the

Triplanetary projectors without effort. Three brazen tentacles reached out through the

ravaging beams of the Lewistons, smashed them to bits, and wrapped themselves in

unbreakable shackles about the armored forms of the three human beings. Through the

without rancor.

"The desire for freedom is perhaps common to all forms of animate life," he

commented, through the transformer. "As I told you before, however, you are

specimens to be studied by the College of Science, and you shall be so studied in spite

of anything you may do. Resign yourselves to that."

"Well, say that we don't try to make any more trouble; that we cooperate in the

examination and give you whatever information we can," Costigan suggested. "Then

you will probably be willing to give us a ship and let us go back to our own world?"

"You will not be allowed to cause any more trouble," the amphibian declared,

coldly. "Your cooperation will not be required. We will take from you whatever

knowledge and information we wish. In all probability you will never be allowed to return

and in

manacles the Terrestrials were taken to the College of Science, there to undergo the

physical and psychical examinations which Nerado had promised them.

Nor had the Nevian scientist-captain erred in stating that their cooperation was

neither needed nor desired. Furious but impotent, the human beings were studied in

laboratory after laboratory by the coldly analytical, unfeeling scientists of Nevia, to

whom they were nothing more or less than specimens; and in full measure they came

to know what it meant to play the part of an unknown, lowly organism in a biological

research. They were photographed, externally and internally. Every bone, muscle,

organ, vessel, and nerve was studied and charted. Every reflex and reaction was noted

and discussed. Meters registered every impulse and recorders filmed every thought,

an outburst of berserk fury.

The man's struggles and the girl's shrieks were alike futile, but the surprised

Nevians, after a consultation, decided to give the specimens a vacation. To that end

they were installed, together with their Earthly belongings, in a three-roomed structure

of transparent metal, floating in the large central lagoon of the city. There they were left

undisturbed for a time - undisturbed, that is, except by the continuous gaze of the crowd

of hundreds of amphibians which constantly surrounded the floating cottage.

"First we're bugs under a microscope," Bradley growled, "then we're goldfish in a

bowl. I don't know that . . . : "

He broke off as two of their jailers entered the room. Without a word into the

transformers they seized Bradley and Clio. As those tentacular arms stretched out

friend.

"Something, whatever it is, is about to occur. The Boise is about to take off.

Ready, Cleve?"

"Shoot!" laconically. Cleveland also was constitutionally unable to voice his

deeper sentiments in time of stress.

Rodebush drove his finger down, and instantly over both men there came a

sensation akin to a tremendously intensified vertigo; but a vertigo as far beyond the

space-sickness of weightlessness as that horrible sensation is beyond mere Earthly

dizziness. The pilot reached weakly toward the board, but his leaden hands refused

utterly to obey the dictates of his reeling mind. His brain was a writhing, convulsive

mass of torment indescribable; expanding, exploding, swelling out with an unendurable

pressure against its confining skull. Fiery spirals, laced with streaming, darting lances of

the thick steel wall. The hp of one hair of his unruly thatch touched the wall, and the

slim length of that single hair did not even bend as its slight strength brought to an

instant halt the hundred-and-eighty-odd pounds of mass - mass now entirely without

inertia - that was his body.

But finally the sheer brain power of the man began to triumph over his physical

torture. By force of will he compelled his grasping hands to seize a life-line, almost

meaningless to his dazed intelligence; and through that nightmare incarnate of hellish

torture he fought his way back to the control board. Hooking one leg around a standard,

he made a seemingly enormous effort and depressed a red button; then fell flat upon

the floor, weakly but in a wave of relief and thankfulness, as his racked body felt again

the wonted phenomena of weight and of inertia. White, trembling, frankly and openly

the main observation plate and scanned the heavens. "However, it's not as bad as I was afraid it might be. I can still recognize a few of the constellations, even though they are all pretty badly distorted. That means that we can't be more than a couple of light-years or so away from the Solar System. Of course, since we had so little thrust on, practically all of our energy and time was taken up in getting out of the atmosphere. Even at that, though, it's a good thing that space isn't a perfect vacuum, or we would have been clear out of the Universe by this time."

"Huh? What are you talking about? Impossible! Where are we, anyway? Then we must be making mil . . . Oh, I see!" Cleveland exclaimed, somewhat incoherently, as he also stared into the plate.

"Right. We aren't traveling at all - now." Rodebush replied. "We are perfectly

suppose we could call it? - is going to introduce plenty of complications, but we don't

have to worry about them right now. Also, it isn't where we are that is worrying me - we

can get fixes on enough recognizable stars to find that out in short order - it's when."

"That's right, too. Say we're two light years away from home. You think maybe

that we're two years older now than we were ten minutes ago? Interesting no end - and

distinctly possible. Maybe even probable - I wouldn't know - there's been a lot of

discussion on that theory, and as far as I know we're the first ones who ever had a

chance to prove or disprove it absolutely. Let's snap back to Tellus and find out, right now."

"We'll do that, after a little more experimenting. You see, I had no intention of

giving us such a long push. I was going to throw the switches in and out, but you know

report. Out

here's a fine place to try the ship out - nothing in the way."

"All right with me. But I would like to find out whether I'm two years older than I

think I am, or not!"

Then for four hours they put the great super-ship through her paces, just as test-

pilots check up on every detail of performance of an airplane of new and radical design.

They found that the horrible vertigo could be endured, perhaps in time even conquered

as space-sickness could be conquered, by a strong will in a sound body; and that their

new conveyance had possibilities of which even Rodebush had never dreamed. Finally,

their most pressing questions answered, they turned their most powerful ultra-beam

communicator toward the yellowish star which they knew to be Old Sol.

"Samms . . . Samms." Cleveland spoke slowly and distinctly. "Rodebush and

than either of us dared to believe. There's something we want to know right away - have

we been gone four hours and some odd minutes, or better than two years?"

He turned to Rodebush and went on:

"Nobody knows how fast this ultra-wave travels, but if it goes as fast as we did

coming out it's no creeper. I'll give him about thirty minutes, then shoot in another . . ."

But, interrupting Cleveland's remark, the care-ravaged face of Virgil Samms

appeared sharp and clear upon the plate and his voice snapped curtly from the speaker.

"Thank God you're alive, and twice that that the ship works!" he exclaimed.

"You've been gone four hours, eleven minutes, and forty one seconds, but never mind

about abstract theorizing. Get back here, to Pittsburgh, as fast as you can drive. That

Don't need

anybody else. Ship, equipment, and armament are ready!"

"Two minutes to atmosphere? Think you can do it?" Cleveland asked, as

Rodebush flipped off the power and leaped to the control panel. "You might, though, at that."

"We could do it - in less than that if we had to. We used scarcely any power at all

coming out, and I'm going to use quite a lot going back," the physicist explained rapidly,

as he set the dials which would determine their flashing course.

The master switches were thrown and the pangs of inertialessness again

assailed them - but weaker far this time than ever before - and upon their lookout plates

they beheld a spectacle never before seen by eye of man. For the ultra-beam, with its

heterodyned vision, is not distorted by any velocity yet attained, as are the ether-borne

incandescence. And toward them also flung the Earth, enlarging with such

indescribable rapidity that Cleveland protested involuntarily, in spite of his knowledge

of the peculiar mechanics of the vessel in which they were.

"Hold it, Fred, hold it! Way 'nuff!" he exclaimed.

"I'm using only a few thousand kilograms of thrust, and I'll cut that as soon as we

touch atmosphere, long before she can even begin to heat," Rodebush explained.

"Looks bad, but we'll stop without a jar."

"What would you call this kind of flight, Fritz?" Cleveland asked. "What's the

opposite of 'inert'?"

"Damned if I know. Isn't any, I guess. Light? No . . . how would 'free' be?"

"Not bad. 'Free' and 'Inert' maneuvering, eh? O.K."

Flying "free", then, the super-ship came from her practically infinite velocity to an

almost instantaneous halt in the outermost, most tenuous layer of the Earth's

which she

had torn her way, the Boise slowed abruptly as she neared the ground, plunging toward

the surface of the small but deep artificial lake below the Hill's steel apron. Into the cold

waters the space-ship dove, and even before they could close over her, furious geysers

of steam and boiling water erupted as the stubborn alloy gave up its heat to the cooling

liquid. Endlessly the three necessary minutes dragged their slow way into time, but

finally the water ceased boiling and Rodebush tore the ship from the lake and hurled

her into the gaping doorway of her dock. The massive doors of the airlocks opened,

and while the full crew of picked men hurried aboard with their personal equipment,

Samms talked earnestly - to the two scientists in the control room.

". . . and about half the fleet is still in the air. They aren't attacking; they are just

though, the same

as we brought her in - she handles like a bicycle. The projector blast tears things up a

little, but nothing serious. Have you got that Pittsburgh beam for me yet? We're about

ready to go.

"Here it is, Doctor Rodebush," came Norma's voice, and upon the screen there

flashed into being the view of the events transpiring above that doomed city. "The dock

is empty and sealed against your blast."

"Goodbye, and power to your tubes!" came Samms' ringing voice.

As the words were being spoken mighty blasts of power raved from the driving

projectors, and the immense mass of the super-ship shot out through the portals and

upward into the stratosphere. Through the tenuous atmosphere the huge globe rushed

with ever-mounting speed, and while the hope of Triplanetary drove eastward

and the ultra-

screen of the Hill had already been noted by the invaders as the Earth's only possible

source of trouble. Thus the departure of the Boise had not gone unnoticed, and the fact

that not even with his most penetrant rays could he see into her interior had already

given the Nevian commander some slight concern. Therefore as soon as it was

determined that the great globe was being directed toward Pittsburgh the fish-shaped

cruiser of the void went into action.

High in the stratosphere, speeding eastward, the immense mass of the Boise

slowed abruptly, although no projector had slackened its effort. Cleveland, eyes upon

interferometer grating and spectrophotometer charts, fingers flying over calculator keys,

grinned as he turned toward Rodebush.

"Just as you thought, Skipper; an ultra-band pusher. C4V63L29. Shall I give him

Soon, however, the advance was again checked, and both scientists read the reason upon their plates. The enemy had put down reenforcing rods of tremendous power. Three compression members spread out fanwise behind her, bracing her against a low mountainside, while one huge tractor beam was thrust directly downward, holding in an unbreakable grip a cylinder of earth extending deep down into bedrock. "Two can play at that game!" and Rodebush drove down similar beams, and forward-reaching tractors as well. "Strap yourselves in solid, everybody!" he sounded in general warning. "Something is going to give way somewhere soon, and when it does we'll get a jolt!" And the promised jolt did indeed come soon. Prodigiously massive and powerful as the Nevian was, the Boise was even more massive and more powerful; and as the

cylinders of solid rock that had formed their anchorages.

"Grab him now!" Rodebush yelled, and even while an avalanche of falling rock

was burying the countryside Cleveland snapped a tractor ray upon the flying fish and pulled tentatively.

Nor did the Nevian now seem averse to coming to grips. The two warring super-

dreadnoughts darted toward each other, and from the invader there flooded out the

dread crimson opacity which had theretofore meant the doom of all things Solarian.

Flooded out and engulfed the immense globe of humanity's hope in its spreading cloud

of redly impenetrable murk. But not for long. Triplanetary's super-ship boasted no

ordinary Terrestrial defense, but was sheathed in screen after screen of ultra-vibrations:

imponderable walls, it is true, but barriers impenetrable to any unfriendly wave. To the

trial admiral; for

the surviving warships of the fleet - its most powerful units - were hurling themselves

forward, to plunge into that red destruction. "None of you will last a second in this red

field. And watch out for a violet field pretty soon - it'll be worse than this. We can handle

them alone, I think; but if we can't, there's nothing in the System that can help us!"

And now the hitherto passive screen of the super-ship became active. At first

invisible, it began to glow in fierce violet light, and as the glow brightened to unbearable

intensity the entire spherical shield began to increase in size. Driven outward from the

super-ship as a center, its advancing surface of seething energy consumed the crimson

murk as a billow of blast-furnace heat consumes the cloud of snowflakes in the air

above its cupola. Nor was the red death-mist all that was consumed. Between that

gether from all

space as the violet tide engulfed the enemy vessel; but the flying fish did not disappear.

Her triple screens flashed into furiously incandescent splendor and she entered

unscathed that vacuous sphere, which collapsed instantly into an enormously elongated

ellipsoid, at each focus a madly warring ship of space.

Then in that tube of vacuum was waged a spectacular duel of ultra-weapons -

weapons impotent in air, but deadly in empty space. Beams, rays, and rods of Titanic

power smote crackingly against ultra-screens equally capable. Time after time each

contestant ran the gamut of the spectrum with his every available ultra-force, only to

find all channels closed. For minutes the terrible struggle went on, then:

"Cooper, Adlington, Spencer, Dutton!" Rodebush called into his transmitter.

"Ready? Can't touch him on the ultra, so I'm going onto the macro-bands. Give him

forms of material

destruction known to man. Cooper hurled his canisters of penetrating gas, Adlington his

allotropic-iron atomic bombs, Spencer his indestructible armor-piercing projectiles, and

Dutton his shatterable flasks of the quintessence of corrosion - a sticky, tacky liquid of

such dire potency that only one rare Solarian element could contain it. Ten, twenty, fifty,

a hundred were thrown as fast as the automatic machinery could launch them; and the

Nevians found them adversaries not to be despised. Size for size, their screens were

quite as capable as those of the Boise. The Nevians' destructive rays glanced

harmlessly from their shields, and the Nevians' elaborate screens, neutralized at impact

by those of the torpedoes, were impotent to impede their progress. Each projectile must

needs be caught and crushed individually by beams of the most prodigious power; and

fangs, driven with

such power and velocity that they were biting into the very walls of the enemy vessel

before the amphibians knew that their defensive shells of force had been punctured!

And the emergency screens of the invaders were equally futile. Course after course

was sent out, only to flare viciously through the spectrum and to go black.

Outfought at every turn, the now frantically dodging Nevian leaped away in

headlong flight, only to be brought to a staggering, crashing halt as Cleveland nailed

her with a tractor beam. But the Tellurians were to learn that the Nevians held in

reserve a means of retreat. The tractor snapped - sheared off squarely by a sizzling

plane of force - and the fish-shaped cruiser faded from Cleveland's sight, just as the

Boise had disappeared from the communicator plates of Radio Center, back in the Hill,

Nevian fled Randolph's spy-ray held her, automatically behind it as there was the full output of twelve special banks of iron-driven power tubes; and thus it was that the vengeful Earthmen flashed immediately along the Nevians' line of flight. Inertialess now, pausing briefly from time to time to enable the crew to accustom themselves to the new sensations, Triplanetary's super-ship pursued the invader; hurtling through the void with a velocity unthinkable.

"He was easier to take than I thought he would be," Cleveland grunted, staring into the plate.

"I thought he had more stuff, too," Rodebush assented, "but I guess Costigan got almost everything they had. If so, with all our own stuff and most of theirs besides, we should be able to take them. Conway's data indicated that they have only partial

Space-hardened veterans, all, the other Tellurian officers had fought off the
horrible nausea of inertialessness, just as Rodebush and Cleveland had done. Again
the ravening green macro-beams tore at the flying cruiser, again the mighty frames of
the two space-ships shuddered sickeningly as Cleveland clamped on his tractor rod,
again the highly dirigible torpedoes dashed out with their freights of death and
destruction. And again the Nevian shear-plane of force slashed at the Boise's tractor
beam; but this time the mighty puller did not give way. Sparkling and spitting high-
tension sparks, the plane bit deeply into the stubborn rod of energy. Brighter, thicker,
and longer grew the discharges as the gnawing plane drew more and more power; but
in direct ratio to that power the rod grew larger, denser, and ever harder to cut. More

bush

demanded. He was the first to realize what had happened.

"Running - fast!"

"Just as well, perhaps, but get their line. Adlington!"

"Here!"

"Good! Was afraid you were gone - that was one of your bombs, wasn't it?"

"Yes. Well launched, just inside the screens. Don't see how it could have

detonated unless something hot and hard struck it in the tube; it would need about that

much time to explode. Good thing it didn't go off any sooner, or none of us would have

been here. As it is, Area Six is pretty well done in, but the bulkheads held the damage

to Six. What happened?"

"We don't know, exactly. Both generators on the tractor beam went out. At first, I

thought that was all, but my neutralizers are dead and I don't know what else. When the

and inner walls of alloy armor had been blown away by the awful force of the explosion.

Jagged plates hung awry; bent, twisted and broken. The great torpedo tube, with all its

intricate automatic machinery, had been driven violently backward and lay piled in

hideous confusion against the backing bulkheads. Practically nothing remained whole in

the entire compartment.

"Nothing much we can do here," Rodebush said finally, through his transmitter.

"Let's go see what number four generator looks like."

That room, although not affected by the explosion from without, had been quite

as effectively wrecked from within. It was still stiflingly hot; its air was still reeking with

the stench of burning lubricant, insulation, and metal; its floor was half covered by a

semi-molten mass of what had once been vital machinery. For with the burning out of

here, though -

that hole in the hull is something else again."

"I'll say it's something else," the grizzled Chief Engineer agreed.

"She's lost all

her spherical strength - anchoring a tractor with this ship now would turn her inside out.

Back to the nearest Triplanetary shop for us, I would say."

"Come again, Chief!" Cleveland advised the engineer. "None of us would live

long enough to get there. We can't travel inertialess until the repairs are made, so if

they can't be made without very much traveling, it's just too bad."

"I don't see how we could support our jacks . . . " the engineer paused, then went

on: "If you can't give me Mars or Tellus, how about some other planet? I don't care

about

atmosphere, or about anything but mass. I can stiffen her up in three or four days if I

can sit down on something heavy enough to hold our jacks and presses; but if we have

they should be

fairly close somewhere - yes, there's the sun, right over there. Rather pale and small;

but it's close, comparatively speaking. We'll go back up into the control room and find

out about the planets."

The strange sun was found to have three large and easily located children, and

observation showed that the crippled space-ship could reach the nearest of these in

about five days. Power was therefore fed to the driving projectors, and each scientist,

electrician, and mechanic bent to the task of repairing the ruined generators; rebuilding

them to handle any load which the converters could possibly put upon them. For two

days the Boise drove on, then her acceleration was reversed, and finally a landing was

effected upon the forbidding, rocky soil of the strange world.

It was larger than the Earth, and of a somewhat stronger gravitation. Although its

or to scenery and without waiting for chemical analysis of the air, the space-suited

mechanics leaped to their tasks; and in only a little more time than had been mentioned

by the chief engineer the hull and giant frame of the super-ship were as staunch as of yore.

"All right, Skipper!" came finally the welcome word. "You might try her out with a fast hop around this world before you shove off in earnest."

Under the fierce blast of her projectors the vessel leaped ahead, and time after time, as Rodebush hurled her mass upon tractor beam or presser, the engineers

sought in vain for any sign of weakness. The strange planet half girdled and the severest tests passed flawlessly, Rodebush reached for his neutralizer switches.

Reached and paused, dumbfounded, for a brilliant purple light had sprung into being upon his panel and a bell rang out insistently.

driving into his

defensive screens he sat impassive and immobile at his desk, his hard gray eyes

moving methodically over his instruments and recorders.

When the clinging mantle of force changed from deep red into shorter and even

shorter wave-lengths, however:

"Baxter, Hartkopf, Chatelier, Anandrusung, Penrose, Nishimura, Mirsky . . ." he

called off a list of names. "Report to me here at once!"

"The planetoid is lost," he informed his select group of scientists when they had

assembled, "and we must abandon it in exactly fifteen minutes, which will be the time

required for the robots to fill this first section with our most necessary machinery and

instruments. Pack each of you one box of the things he most wishes to take with him,

and report back here in not more than thirteen minutes. Say nothing to anyone else."

"You suppose correctly." Bland and heartless Nishimura filled in the pause. "A

small part of the planetoid may be able to escape; which, to me at least, is pleasantly

surprising news. It cannot carry all our men and mechanisms, therefore only the most

important of both are saved. What would you? For the rest it is simply what you call 'the

fortune of war,' no?"

"But the beautiful . . ." began the amorous Chatelier.

"Hush, fool!" snorted Hartkopf. "One word of that to the ear of Roger and you too

left behind are. Of such nonessentials the Universe full is, to be collected in times of

ease, but in times hard to be disregarded. Und this is a time of schrecklichkeit indeed!"

The group broke up, each man going to his own quarters; to meet again in the

First Section a minute or so before the zero time. Roger's "office" was now packed so

mystery that

they have held so long, and certainly this single section will not be permitted to leave

the planetoid without being destroyed."

"There are many things you do not know, Mirsky," came the cold and level

answer. "Our screens, which you think are of your own devising, have several

improvements of my own in the formulae, and would hold forever had I the power to

drive them. The screens of this section, being smaller, can be held as long as will be

found necessary."

"Power!" the dumbfounded Russian exclaimed. "Why, we have almost infinite

power - unlimited - sufficient for a lifetime of high expenditure!"

But Roger made no reply, for the time of departure was at hand. He pressed

down a tiny lever, and a mechanism in the power room threw in the gigantic plunger

maximum possible power output was being devoted to the neutralization of that last desperate thrust, the metal wall of the planetoid opened and the First Section shot out into space. Full-driven as they were, Roger's screens flared white as he drove through the temporarily lessened attack of the Nevians; but in their preoccupation the amphibians did not notice the additional disturbance and the section tore on, unobserved and undetected.

Far out in space, Roger raised his eyes from the instrument panel and continued the conversation as though it had not been interrupted.

"Everything is relative, Mirsky, and you have misused gravely the term 'unlimited.' Our power was, and is, very definitely limited. True, it then seemed ample for our needs, and is far superior to that possessed by the inhabitants of any solar

taneous

questions and exclamations.

"Their source of power is the intra-atomic energy of iron. Complete;
not the

partial liberation incidental to the nuclear fission of such unstable iso-
topes as those of

thorium, uranium, plutonium, and so on. Therefore much remains to be
done before I

can proceed with my plan - I must have the most powerful structure in
the macrocosmic
universe."

Roger thought for minutes, nor did any one of his minions break the
silence.

Gharlane of Eddore did not have to wonder why such incredible ad-
vancement could

have been made without his knowledge: after the fact, he knew. He had
been and was

still being hampered by a mind of power; a mind with which, in due time,
he would come

to grips.

force, and from that point it is only a step to their method of liberating the energy. We

shall build robots. They shall build other robots, who shall in turn construct another

planetoid; one this time that, wielding the theoretical maximum of power, will be suited

to my needs."

"And where will you build it? We are marked. Invisibility now is useless.

Triplanetary will find us, even if we take up an orbit beyond that of Pluto!"

"We have already left your Solarian system far behind. We are going to another

system; one far enough removed so that the spy-rays of Triplanetary will never find us,

and yet one that we can reach in a reasonable length of time with the energies at our

command. Some five days will be required for the journey, however, and our quarters

are cramped. Therefore make places for yourselves wherever you can, and lessen the

his way to the

furthest cubicle of the section.

"I say, Penrose, I'd like to ask you a couple of questions, if you don't mind?"

"Go ahead. Ordinarily it's dangerous to be a cackling hen anywhere around him,

but I don't imagine that he can hear anything here now. His system must be pretty well

shot to pieces. You want to know all I know about Roger?"

"Exactly so. You have been with him so much longer than I have, you know. In

some ways he impresses one as being scarcely human, if you know what I mean.

Ridiculous, of course, but of late I have been wondering whether he really is human. He

knows too much, about too many things. He seems to be acquainted with many solar

systems, to visit which would require lifetimes. Then, too, he has dropped remarks

which would imply that he actually saw things that happened long before any living man

that was part of the agreement, you know - we will get what we sold out for. You will

become a belted earl. I have already made millions, and shall make many more.

Similarly, Chatelier has had and will have his women, Anandrusung and Nishimura their

cherished revenges, Hartkopf his power, and so on." He eyed the other speculatively,

then went on:

"I might as well spill it all, since I'll never have a better chance and since you

should know as much as the rest of us do. You're in the same boat with us and tarred

with the same brush. There's a lot of gossip, that may or may not be true, but I know

one very startling fact. Here it is. My great - great - grandfather left some notes which,

taken in connection with certain things I myself saw on the planetoid, prove beyond

question that our Roger went to Harvard University at the same time he did. Roger was

"But I say, Penrose, that's really a bit thick. When they were wiped out it was proved a lot of hocus-pocus . . ."

"If they were wiped out," Penrose interrupted in turn. "Some of it may have been hocus-pocus, but most of it certainly was not. I'm not asking you to believe anything except that one fact; I'm just telling you the rest of it. But it is also a fact that those adepts knew things and did things that take a lot of explaining. Now for the gossip, none of which is guaranteed. Roger is supposed to be of Tellurian parent age, and the story is that his father was a moon-pirate, his mother a Greek adventuress. When the pirates were chased off the moon they went to Ganymede, you know, and some of them were captured by the Jovians. It seems that Roger was born at an instant of time sacred to the adepts, so they took him on. He worked his way up through the Forbidden Society

cut away then in

a space-ship, and ever since then he has been working - and working hard - on some

stupendous plan of his own that nobody else has ever got even an inkling of. That's the

story. True or not, it explains a lot of things that no other theory can touch. And now I

think you'd better shuffle along; enough of this is a great plenty!"

Baxter went to his own cubby, and each man of gray Roger's cold-blooded crew

methodically took up his task. True to prediction, in five days a planet loomed beneath

them and their vessel settled through a reeking atmosphere toward a rocky and

forbidding plain. Then for hours they plunged along, a few thousand feet above the

surface of that strange world, while Roger with his analytical detectors sought the most

favorable location from which to wrest the materials necessary for his program of

construction.

consumed by a fellow creature equally monstrous. This flora was of a uniform color, a lurid, sickly yellow. In form some of it was fern-like, some cactus-like, some vaguely treelike; but it was all outrageous, inherently repulsive to all Solarian senses. And no less hideous were the animal-like forms of life which slithered and slunk rapaciously through that fantastic pseudo-vegetation. Snake-like, reptile-like, bat-like, the creatures squirmed, crawled, and flew; each covered with a dankly oozing yellow hide and each motivated by twin common impulses - to kill and insatiably and indiscriminately to devour. Over this reeking wilderness Roger drove his vessel, untouched by its disgusting, its appalling ferocity and horror.

"There should be intelligence, of a kind," he mused, and swept the surface of the planet with an exploring beam. Ah, yes, there is a city, of sorts," and in a few minutes

metal-studded mass of leathery substance. Of eyes, ears, limbs, or organs it apparently

had none, yet it radiated an intensely hostile aura; a mental effluvium concentrated of

rage and of hatred.

"Apparently the ruling intelligence of the planet," Roger commented.

"Such

creatures are useless to us; we can build machines in half the time that would be

required for their subjugation and training. Still, it should not be permitted to carry back

what it may have learned of us." As he spoke the adept threw the peculiar being out

into the air and dispassionately rayed it out of existence.

"That thing reminds me of a man I used to know, back in Penobscot."

Penrose

was as coldly callous as his unfeeling master. "The evenest-tempered man in town -

mad all the time!"

Eventually Roger found a location which satisfied his requirements of raw

easily, nor

were they to hold it without effort. Through the weird vegetation of the circle's bare edge

there scuttled and poured along a horde of the metal-studded men - if "men" they might

be called - who, ferocity incarnate, rushed the robot line. Mowed down by hundreds, still

they came on; willing, it seemed to spend any number of lives in order that one living

creature might once touch a robot with one out-thrust metallic stud. Whenever that

happened there was a flash of lightning, the heavy smoke of burning insulation, grease,

and metal, and the robot went down out of control. Recalling his remaining automatons,

Roger sent out a shielding screen, against which the defenders of their planet raged in

impotent fury. For days they hurled themselves and their every force against that

impenetrable barrier, then withdrew: temporarily stopped, but by no means

sulphurous fumes,

rolling mills and machine shops were built and were equipped; and as fast as new

enterprises were completed additional robots were ready to man them. In record time

the heavy work of girders, members, and plates was well under way; and shortly

thereafter light, deft, multi-fingered mechanisms began to build and to install the

prodigious amount of precise machinery required by the vastness of the structure.

As soon as he was sure that he would be completely free for a sufficient length

of time, Roger-Gharlane assembled, boiled down and concentrated, his every mental

force. He probed then, very gently, for whatever it was that had been and was still

blocking him. He found it - synchronized with it - and in the instant hurled against it the

fiercest thrust possible for his Eddorian mind to generate: a bolt whose twin had slain

quire for its

parrying everything that Gharlane had. He parried it, however barely, and directed a

thought at his unknown opponent.

"You, whoever you may be, have found out that you cannot kill me. No more can

I kill you. So be it. Do you still believe that you can keep me from remembering

whatever it was that my ancestor was compelled to forget?"

"Now that you have obtained a focal point we cannot prevent you from

remembering; and merely to hinder you would be pointless. You may remember in

peace."

Back and back went Gharlane's mind. Centuries . . . millennia . . . cycles . . .

eons. The trace grew dim, almost imperceptible, deeply buried beneath layer upon layer

of accretions of knowledge, experience, and sensation which no one of many hundreds

Arisian spoke directly to him; as though the fused Elders of Arisia tried -
vainly now - to
erase from his own mind all knowledge of Arisia's existence. The fact
that such a race
as the Arisians had existed so long ago was bad enough. That the Ari-
sians had been
aware throughout all those ages of the Eddorians, and had been able to
keep their own
existence secret, was worse. The crowning fact that the Arisians had
had all this time in
which to work unopposed against his own race made even Gharlane's
indomitable ego
quail.

This was important. Such minor matters as the wiping out of non-
conforming
cultures - the extraordinarily rapid growth of which was now explained -
must wait.

Eddore must revise its thinking completely; the pooled and integrated
mind of the

Innermost Circle must scrutinize every fact, every implication and con-
notation, of this

to suspect

that there was anything physically dangerous within hundreds of millions of miles.

Nevertheless, since he knew that he could no longer depend upon his own mental

powers to keep him informed as to all that was going on around him, it was his custom

to scan, from time to time, all nearby space by means of ether-borne detectors. Thus it

came about that one day, as he sent out his beam, his hard gray eyes grew even

harder.

"Mirsky! Nishimura! Penrose! Come here!" he ordered, and showed them upon

his plate an enormous sphere of steel, its offensive beams flaming viciously. "Is there

any doubt whatever in your minds as to the System to which that ship belongs?"

"None at all - Solarian," replied the Russian. "To narrow it still further, Triplanetarian. While larger than any I have ever seen before, its construction is

picked up the three

who escaped me . . . I have never been balked for long. Yes, we shall take that vessel.

And those three sooner or later. Except for the fact that their escape from me is a

matter which should be corrected, I care nothing whatever about either Bradley or the

woman. Costigan, however, is in a different category . . . Costigan handled me . . ."

Diamond-hard eyes glared balefully at the urge of thoughts to a clean and normal mind

unthinkable.

"To your posts," he ordered. "The machines will continue to function under their

automatic controls during the short time it will require to abate this nuisance."

"One moment!" A strange voice roared from the speakers. "Consider yourselves

under arrest, by order of the Triplanetary Council! Surrender and you shall receive

announced, disdaining any reply to the challenge of the Boise. "Any such, however, will not be allowed inside the planetoid area after the rest of us return from wiping out that patrol. We attack in one minute."

"Would not one do better by stopping on?" Baxter, in the quarters of the American, was in doubt as to the most profitable course to pursue. "I should leave immediately if I thought that that ship could win; but I do not fancy that it can, do you?"

"That ship? One Triplanetary ship against us?" Penrose laughed raucously. "Do as you please. I'd go in a minute if I thought that there was any chance of us losing; but there isn't, so I'm staying. I know which side my bread's buttered on. Those cops are bluffing, that's all. Not bluffing exactly, either, because they'll go through with it as long as they last. Foolish, but it's a way they have - they'll die trying every time instead of

Toward the poised Boise Roger steered. Within range, he flung out a
weapon
new-learned and supposedly irresistible to any ferrous thing or creature,
the red
converter-field of the Nevians. For Roger's analytical detector had stood
him in good
stead during those frightful minutes in the course of which the planetoid
had borne the
brunt of Nerado's superhuman attack; in such good stead that from the
records of those
ingenious instruments he and his scientists had been able to reconstruct
not only the
generators of the attacking forces, but also the screens employed by the
amphibians in
the neutralization of similar beams. With a vastly inferior armament the
smallest of
Roger's vessels had defeated the most powerful battleships of
Triplanetary; what had
he to fear in such a heavy craft as the one he now was driving, one so
superlatively

thanks to that hated Costigan, with Roger's own every worth-while idea,
as well as with
every weapon and defense known to that arch-Nevian, Nerado!
Unknowing and contemptuous, Roger launched his converter field,
and instantly
found himself fighting for his very life. For from Rodebush at the controls
down, the men
of the Boise countered with wave after wave and with salvo after salvo
of vibratory and
material destruction. No thought of mercy for the men of the pirate ship
could enter their
minds. The outlaws had each been given a chance to surrender, and
each had refused
it. Refusing, they knew, as the Triplanetarians knew and as all modern
readers know,
meant that they were staking their lives upon victory. For with modern
armaments few
indeed are the men who live through the defeat in battle of a war-vessel
of space.
Roger launched his field of red opacity, but it did not reach even the
Boise's

frequency stuff in whose paths the most stubborn metals would be volatilized instantly,

all iron-driven; every deadly and torturing vibration known was hurled against that

screen: but it, too,, was iron-driven, and it held. Even the awful force of the macro-beam

was dissipated by it - reflected, hurled away on all sides in coruscating torrents of

blinding, dazzling energy. Cooper, Adlington, Spencer, and Dutton hurled against it their

bombs and torpedoes - and still it held. But Roger's fiercest blasts and heaviest

projectiles were equally impotent against the force-shields of the super-ship. The adept,

having no liking for a battle upon equal terms, then sought safety in flight, only to be

brought to a crashing, stunning halt by a massive tractor beam.

"That must be that polycyclic screen that Conway reported on."
Cleveland

frowned in thought. "I've been doing a lot of work on that, and I think I've calculated an

diamond drill cutting out a core. You won't be able to shove anything into the hole from outside the beam, so you'll have to steer your cans out through the central orifice of number ten projector - that'll be cold, since I'm going to use only the outer ring. I don't know how long I'll be able to hold the hole open, though, so shoot them along as fast as you can. Ready? Here goes!"

He pressed a series of contacts. Far below, in number ten converter room, massive switches drove home and the enormous mass of the vessel quivered under the terrific reaction of the newly-calculated, semi-material beam of energy that was hurled out, backed by the mightiest of all the mighty converters and generators of Triplanetary's superdreadnaught. That beam, a pipe-like hollow cylinder of intolerable energy, flashed out, and there was a rending, tearing crash as it struck Roger's hitherto

Pierced Roger's

polycyclic screen; exposed the bare metal of Roger's walls! And now, concentrated

upon one point, flamed out in seemingly redoubled fury Triplanetary's raging beams in

vain. For even as they could not penetrate the screen, neither could they penetrate the

wall of Cleveland's drill, but rebounded from it in the cascaded brilliance of thwarted

lightning.

"Oh, what a dumb-bell I am!" groaned Cleveland. "Why, oh why didn't I have

somebody rig up a secondary SX7 beam on Ten's inner rings? Hop to it, will you, Blake,

so that we'll have it in case they are able to stop the cans?"

But the pirates could not stop all of Triplanetary's projectiles, now hurrying along

inside the pipe as fast as they could be driven. In fact, for a few minutes gray Roger,

knowing that he faced the first real defeat of his long life, paid no attention to them at

in more frenzied displays of incandescence along the curved surface of contact of that penetrant cylinder. And through that terrific conduit came speeding package after package of destruction. Bombs, armor-piercing shells, gas shells of poisonous and corrosive fluids followed each other in close succession. The surviving scientists of the planetoid, expert gunners and ray-men all, destroyed many of the projectiles, but it was not humanly possible to cope with them all. And the breach could not be forced shut against the all but irresistible force of Cleveland's "opener". And with all his power Roger could not shift his vessel's position in the grip of Triplanetary's tractors sufficiently to bring a projector to bear upon the super-ship along the now unprotected axis of that narrow, but deadly tube.

Thus it was that the end came soon. A war-head touched steel plating and there

into dripping corruption. Reeking gasses filled every cranny of circum-ambient space as

what was left of Roger's battle cruiser began the long plunge to the ground. The super-

ship followed the wreckage down, and Rodebush sent out an exploring spy-ray.

". . . resistance was such that it was necessary to employ corrosive, and ship and

contents were completely disintegrated," he dictated, a little later, into his vessel's log.

"While there were of course no remains recognizable as human, it is certain that Roger

and his last eleven men died; since it is clear that the circumstances and conditions

were such that no life could possibly have survived."

* * *

It is true that the form of flesh which had been known as Roger was destroyed.

even before Rodebush completed his study of what was left of the pirates' vessel.

The Innermost Circle met, and for a space of time which would have been very

long indeed for any Earthly mind those monstrous being considered as one multi-ply

intelligence every newly-exposed phase and facet of the truth. At the end, they knew

the Arisians as well as the Arisians knew them. The All-Highest then called a meeting of

all the minds of Eddore.

". . . hence it is clear that these Arisians, while possessing minds of tremendous

latent capability, are basically soft, and therefore inefficient," he concluded. "Not weak,

mind you, but scrupulous and unrealistic; and it is by taking advantage of these

characteristics that we shall ultimately triumph."

"A few details, All-Highest, if Your Ultimate Supremacy would deign," a lesser

elements and

obstructive minorities, will prove much more useful. Most productive of all, however, will

be the operations of relatively small but highly organized groups whose functions will be

to negate, to tear down and destroy, every bulwark of what the weak and spineless

adherents of Civilization consider the finest things in life - love, truth, honor, loyalty,

purity, altruism, decency, and so on."

"Ah, love . . . extremely interesting. Supremacy, this thing they call sex,"

Gharlane offered. "What a silly, what a meaningless thing it is! I have studied it

intensively, but am not yet fully enough informed to submit a complete and conclusive

report. I do know, however, that we can and will use it. In our hands, vice will become a

potent weapon indeed. Vice . . . drugs . . . greed . . . gambling. . . extortion . . .

blackmail . . . lust . . . abduction . . . assassination . . . ah-h-h!"

of billions of operators which we must and will have at work. Each echelon of control will be vastly greater in number than the one immediately above it, but correspondingly lower in the individual power of its component personnel. The sphere of activity of each supervisor, however small or great, will be clearly and sharply defined. Rank, from the operators at planetary-population levels up to and including the Ed-dorian Directorate, will be a linear function of ability. Absolute authority will be delegated. Full responsibility will be assumed. Those who succeed will receive advancement and satisfaction of desire; those who fail will die.

"Since the personnel of the lower echelons will be of small value and easy of replacement, it is of little moment whether or not they become involved in reverses affecting the still lower echelons whose activities they direct. The echelon immediately

that only in that way can our own safety remain assured, and must take pains to see to

it that any violator of this rule is put instantly to death.

"Those of you who are engineers will design ever more powerful mechanisms to

use against the Arisians. Psychologists will devise and put into practice new methods

and techniques, both to use against the able minds of the Arisians and to control the

activities of mentally weaker entities. Each Eddorian, whatever his field or his ability, will

be given the task he is best fitted to perform. That is all."

* * *

And upon Arisia, too, while there was no surprise, a general conference was

held. While some of the young Watchmen may have been glad that the open conflict

for which they had been preparing so long was now about to break, Arisia as a whole

stated, rather

than asked, after the Elders had again spread their Visualization for public inspection

and discussion. "This killing, it seems, must go on. This stumbling, falling, and rising;

this blind groping; this futility; this frustration; this welter of crime, disaster, and

bloodshed. Why? It seems to me that it would be much better - cleaner, simpler, faster,

more efficient, and involving infinitely less bloodshed and suffering - for us to take now

a direct and active part, as the Eddorians have done and will continue to do."

"Cleaner, youth, yes; and simpler. Easier; less bloody. It would not, however, be

better; or even good; because no end-point would ever be attained. Young civilizations

advance only by overcoming obstacles. Each obstacle surmounted, each step of

progress made, carries its suffering as well as its reward. We could negate the efforts of

Eddorians has made it necessary for them to become.

"From this it follows that we would never be able to overcome Eddore; nor would

our conflict with that race remain indefinitely at stalemate. Given sufficient time during

which to work against us, they will be able to win. However, if every Arisian follows his

line of action as it is laid out in this Visualization, all will be well. Are there any more

questions?"

"None. The blanks which you may have left can be filled in by a mind of very

moderate power."

* * *

"Look here, Fred." Cleveland called attention to the plate, upon which was

pictured a horde of the peculiar inhabitants of that ghastly planet, wreaking their

but we must get back onto the trail of the Nevians," and the Boise
leaped away into
space, toward the line of flight of the amphibians.

They reached that line and along it they traveled at full normal blast.
As they
traveled their detecting receivers and amplifiers were reaching out with
their utmost
power; ultra-instruments capable of rendering audible any signal origi-
nating within many
light-years of them, upon any possible communications band. And con-
stantly at least
two men, with every sense concentrated in their ears, were listening to
those
instruments.

Listening - straining to distinguish in the deafening roar of back-
ground noise from
the over-driven tubes any sign of voice or of signal:

Listening - while, millions upon millions of miles beyond even the
prodigious
reach of those ultra-instruments, three human beings were even then
sending out into

gan had been

able to keep in touch with his sweetheart and with Bradley. He learned that each had

been placed upon exhibition in a different Nevian city; that the three had been

separated in response to an insistent popular demand for such a distribution of the

peculiar, but highly interesting creatures from a distant solar system. They had not been

harmed. In fact, each was visited daily by a specialist, who made sure that his charge

was being kept in the pink of condition.

As soon as he became aware of this condition of things Costigan became

morose. He sat still, drooped, and pined away visibly. He refused to eat, and of the

worried specialist he demanded liberty. Then, failing in that as he knew he would fail, he

demanding something to do. They pointed out to him, reasonably enough, that in such a

sulked a little longer, then wavered. Finally he agreed to compromise.
He would eat and
exercise if they would fit up a laboratory in his apartment, so that he
could continue the
studies he had begun upon his own native planet. To this they agreed,
and thus it came
about that one day the following conversation was held:

"Clio? Bradley? I've got something to tell you this time. Haven't said
anything
before, for fear things might not work out, but they did. I went on a hun-
ger strike and
made them give me a complete laboratory. As a chemist I'm a damn
good electrician;
but luckily, with the sea-water they've got here, it's a very simple thing to
make . . ."

"Hold on!" snapped Bradley. "Somebody may be listening in on us!"

"They aren't. They can't, without my knowing it, and I'll cut off the
second
anybody tries to synchronize with my beam. To resume - making Vee-
Two is a very

they saw that I

didn't know anything about either one of them or what to do with them after I had them,

they gave me up in disgust as a plain dumb ape and haven't paid any attention to me

since. So I've got me plenty of kilograms of liquid Vee-Two, all ready to touch off. I'm

getting out of here in about three minutes and a half, and I'm coming over after you

folks, in a new, iron-powered space-speedster that they don't know I know anything

about. They've just given it its final tests, and it's the slickest thing you ever saw."

"But Conway, dearest, you can't possibly rescue me," Clio's voice broke. "Why,

there are thousands of them, all around here. If you can get away, go, dear, but don't . .

."

"I said I was coming after you, and if I get away I'll be there. A good whiff of this

out trying - there aren't enough amphibians between here and Andromeda to keep us

humans cooped up like menagerie animals forever! But here comes my specialist with

the keys to the city; time for the overture to start. See you later!"

The Nevian physician directed his key tube upon the transparent wall of the

chamber and an opening appeared, an opening which vanished as soon as he had

stepped through it; Costigan kicked a valve open; and from various innocent tubes

there belched forth into the water of the central lagoon and into the air over it a flood of

deadly vapor. As the Nevian turned toward the prisoner there was an almost inaudible

hiss and a tiny jet of the frightful, outlawed stuff struck his open gills, just below his

huge, conical head. He tensed momentarily, twitched convulsively just once, and fell

motionless to the floor. And outside, the streams of avidly soluble liquefied gas rushed

three and fiercely anxious for the success of his plan of escape, held his breath and,

grimly alert, watched the amphibians die. When he could see no more motion anywhere

he donned his gas-mask, strapped upon his back a large canister of the poison - his

capacious pockets were already full of smaller containers - and two savagely exultant

sentences escaped him.

"I am a poor, ignorant specimen of ape that can be let play with apparatus, am

I?" he rasped, as he picked up the key tube of the specialist and opened the door of his

prison. "They'll learn now that it ain't safe to judge by the looks of a flea how far he can

jump!"

He stepped out through the opening into the water, and, burdened as he was,

made shift to swim to the nearest ramp. Up it he ran, toward a main corridor. But ahead

the floor of that corridor were strewn Nevians, who had dropped in their tracks. Past or over their bodies Costigan strode, pausing only to direct a jet of lethal vapor into whatever branching corridor or open door caught his eye. He was going to the intake of the city's ventilation plant, and no unmasked creature dependent for life upon oxygen could bar his path. He reached the intake, tore the canister from his back, and released its full, vast volume of horrid contents into the primary air stream of the entire city.

And all throughout that doomed city Nevians dropped; quietly and without a struggle, unknowing. Busy executives dropped upon their cushioned, flat-topped desks; hurrying travelers and messengers dropped upon the floors of the corridors or relaxed in the noxious waters of the ways; lookouts and observers dropped before their flashing

room, where

with all due precaution he donned his own suit of Triplanetary armor.

Making an

ungainly bundle of the other Solarian equipment stored there, he dragged it along

behind him as he clanked back toward his prison, until he neared the dock at which was

moored the Nevian space-speedster which he was determined to take.

Here, he knew,

was the first of many critical points. The crew of the vessel was aboard, and, with its

independent air-supply, unharmed. They had weapons, were undoubtedly alarmed, and

were very probably highly suspicious. They, too, had ultrabeams and might see him, but

his very closeness to them would tend to protect him from ultra-beam observation.

Therefore he crouched tensely behind a buttress, staring through his spy-ray goggles,

waiting for a moment when none of the Nevians would be near the entrance, but grimly

key-tube, the entrance opened, and through that opening in the instant of its appearance there shot a brittle bulb of glass, whose breaking meant death. It crashed into fragments against a metallic wall and Costigan, entering the vessel, consigned its erstwhile crew one by one to the already crowded waters of the lagoon. He then leaped to the controls and drove the captured speedster through the air, to plunge it down upon the surface of the lagoon beside the door of the isolated structure which had for so long been his prison. Carefully he transferred to the vessel the motley assortment of containers of Vee-Two, and after a quick check-up to make sure that he had overlooked nothing, he shot his craft straight up into the air. Then only did he close his ultra-wave circuits and speak.

"Clio, Bradley - I got away clean, without a bit of trouble. Now I'm coming after

went on:

"You won't need to. You come first, Clio, of course. But you're too far away for

me to see you with my spy, and I don't want to use the high-powered beam of this boat

for fear of detection; so you'd better keep on talking, so that I can trace you."

"That's one thing I am good at!" Clio laughed in sheer relief. "If talking were

music, I'd be a full brass band!" and she kept up a flow of inconsequential chatter until

Costigan told her that it was no longer necessary; that he had established the line.

"Any excitement around there yet?" he asked her then.

"Nothing unusual that I can see," she replied. "Why? Should there be some?"

"I hope not, but when I made my getaway I couldn't kill them all, of course, and I

thought maybe they might connect things up with my jail-break and tell the other cities

certainly get conscious when I snatch you, maybe before . . . there, I see your city, I think."

"What are you going to do?"

"Same as I did back there, if I can. Poison their primary air and all the water I can reach . . ."

"Oh, Conway!" Her voice rose to a scream. "They must know - they're all getting out of the water and are rushing inside the buildings as fast as they possibly can!"

"I see they are," grimly. "I'm right over you now, 'way up. Been locating their

primary intake. They've got a dozen ships around it, and have guards posted all along

the corridors leading to it; and those guards are wearing masks! They're clever birds, all

right, those amphibians - they know what they got back there and how they got it. That

changes things, girl! If we use gas here we won't stand a chance in the world of getting

before I do they're traveling fools!"

He miscalculated slightly, so that instead of coming to a halt at the surface of the

liquid medium the speedster struck with a crash that hurled solid masses of water for

hundreds of yards. But no ordinary crash could harm that vessel's structure, her gravity

controls were not overloaded, and she shot back to the surface; gallant ship and

reckless pilot alike unharmed. Costigan trained his key-tube upon the doorway of Clio's

cell, then tossed it aside.

"Different combination over here!" he barked. "Got to cut you out - lie down in

that far corner!"

His hands flashed over the panel, and as Clio fell prone without hesitation or

question a heavy beam literally blasted away a large portion of the roof of the structure.

The speedster shot into the air and dropped down until she rested upon the tops of

Lewistons

and pistols - no telling what kind of jams we'll get into," he snapped, without turning.

"Bradley, start talking . . . all right, I've got your line. Better get your wet rags ready and

get organized generally - every second will count by the time we get there. We're

coming so fast that our outer plating's white hot, but it may not be fast enough, at that."

"It isn't fast enough, quite," Bradley announced, calmly. "They're coming out after

me now."

"Don't fight them and probably they won't paralyze you.

Keep on talking, so that I can find out where they take you."

"No good, Costigan." The voice of the old spacehound did not reveal a sign of

emotion as he made his dread announcement. "They have it all figured out. They're not

taking any chances at all - they're going to paral . . ." His voice broke off in the middle of

the word.

watch as they bore it into one of the largest buildings of the city. Up a series of ramps

they took the still form, placing it finally upon a soft couch in an enormous and heavily

guarded central hall. Costigan turned to his companion, and even through the helmets

she could see plainly the white agony of his expression. He moistened his lips and tried

twice to speak - tried and failed; but he made no move either to cut off their power or to

change their direction.

"Of course," she approved steadily. "We are going through. I know that you want

to run with me, but if you actually did it I would never want to see you or hear of you

again, and you would hate me forever."

"Hardly that." The anguish did not leave his eyes and his voice was hoarse and

strained, but his hands did not vary the course of the speedster by so much as a hair's

took you first - but as long as all three of us are alive it's all three or none."

"Of course," she said again, as steadily, thrilled this time to the depths of her

being by the sheer manhood of him who had thus simply voiced his Code; a man of

such fiber that neither love of life nor his infinitely greater love for her could make him

lower its high standard. "We are going through. Forget that I am a woman. We are

three human beings, fighting a world full of monsters. I am simply one of us three. I will

steer your ship, fire your projectors, or throw your bombs. What can I do best?"

"Throw bombs," he directed, briefly. He knew what must be done were they to

have even the slightest chance of winning clear. "I'm going to blast a hole down into

that auditorium, and when I do you stand by that port and start dropping bottles of

an hour.

That'll be lots of time - if we aren't gone in less than ten minutes we'll be staying here.

They're bringing in platoons of militia in full armor, and if we don't beat those boys to it

we're in for plenty of grief. All right - start throwing!"

The speedster had come to a halt directly over the imposing edifice within which

Bradley was incarcerated, and a mighty beam had flared downward, digging a fiery well

through floor after floor of stubborn metal. The ceiling of the amphitheater was pierced.

The beam expired. Down into that assembly hall there dropped two canisters of Vee-

Two, to crash and to fill its atmosphere with imperceptible death. Then the beam

flashed on again, this time at maximum power, and with it Costigan burned away half of

the entire building. Burned it away until room above room gaped open, shelf-like, to

customary

occupation or of equipment. Most of them had been ordinary watchmen, not even

wearing masks, and all such were already down. Many, however, were masked, and a

few were dressed in full armor. But no portable armor could mount defenses of

sufficient power to withstand the awful force of the speedster's weapons, and one

flashing swing of a projector swept the hall almost clear of life.

"Can't shoot very close to Bradley with this big beam, but I'll mop up on the rest

of them by hand. Stay here and cover me, Clio!" Costigan ordered, and went to open

the port.

"I can't - I won't!" Clio replied instantly. "I don't know the controls well enough. I'd

kill you or Captain Bradley, sure; but I can shoot, and I'm going to!" and she leaped out,

close upon his heels.

encountered six figures encased in armor fully as capable as their own.
The beams of
the Lewistons rebounded from that armor in futile pyrotechnics, the bullets of the
automatics spattered and exploded impotently against it. And behind that single line of
armored guards were massed perhaps twenty unarmored, but masked, soldiers; and
scuttling up the ramps leading into the hall were coming the platoons of heavily armored
figures which Costigan had previously seen.

Decision instantly made, Costigan ran back toward the speedster, but he was not
deserting his companions. "Keep the good work up!" he instructed the girl as he ran. "I'll
pick those jaspers off with a pencil and then stand off the bunch that's coming while you
rub out the rest of that crew there and drag Bradley back here."

Back at the control panel, he trained a narrow, but intensely dense beam - quasi-

not only Nevians - in the incredible energy of that beam's blast floor, walls, ramps, and every material thing vanished in clouds of thick and brilliant vapor. The room temporarily clear of foes, he sprang again to Clio's assistance, but her task was nearly done. She had "rubbed out" all opposition and, tugging lustily at Bradley's feet, had already dragged him almost to the side of the speedster.

"That-a-girl, Clio!" cheered Costigan, as he picked up the burly captain and tossed him through the doorway. "Highly useful, girl of my dreams, as well as ornamental. In with you, and we'll go places!"

But getting the speedster out of the now completely ruined hall proved to be much more of a task than driving it in had been, for scarcely had Costigan closed his locks than a section of the building collapsed behind them, cutting off their retreat.

and of metal from

every inimical weapon within range.

But not for nothing had Conway Costigan selected for his dash for liberty the

craft which, save only for the two immense interstellar cruisers, was the most powerful

vessel ever built upon red Nevia. And not for nothing had he studied minutely and to the

last, least detail every item of its controls and of its armament during wearily long days

and nights of solitary imprisonment. He had studied it under test, in action, and at rest;

studied it until he knew thoroughly its every possibility - and what a ship it was! The

atomic-powered generators of his shielding screens handled with ease the terrific load

of the Nevians' assault, his polycyclic screens were proof against any material

projectile, and the machines supplying his offensive weapons with power were more

resistant, could exist for a moment in the pathway of those iron-driven tornadoes of pure energy.

Ship after ship of the Nevians plunged toward the speedster in desperately

suicidal attempts to ram her down, but each met the same flaming fate before it could

reach its target. Then from the grouped submarines far below there reached up red

rods of force, which seized the space-ship and began relentlessly to draw her down.

"What are they doing that for, Conway? They can't fight us!"

"They don't want to fight us. They want to hold us, but I know what to do about

that, too," and the powerful tractor rods snapped as a plane of pure force knifed through

them. Upward now at the highest permissible velocity the speedster leaped, and past

the few ships remaining above her she dodged; nothing now between her and the

freedom of boundless space.

kilometers

behind us before he gets started."

"But do you think he will chase us?

"Think so? I know so! The mere facts that we are rare specimens
and that he

told us that we were going to stay there all the rest of our lives would
make him chase

us clear to Lundmark's Nebula. Besides that, we stepped on their toes
pretty heavily

before we left. We know altogether too much now to be let get back to
Tellus; and

finally, they'd all die of acute enlargement of the spleen if we get away
with this prize

ship of theirs. I hope to tell you they'll chase us!"

He fell silent, devoting his whole attention to his piloting, driving his
craft onward

at such velocity that its outer plating held steadily at the highest point of
temperature

compatible with safety. Soon they were out in open space, hurtling to-
ward the sun

the trick." He took from a locked compartment of his armor a small steel box, which housed a surgeon's hypodermic and three vials. One, two, three, he injected small, but precisely measured amounts of the fluids into the three vital localities, then placed the inert form upon a deeply cushioned couch.

"There! That'll take care of the gas in five or six hours. The paralysis will wear off long before that, so he'll be all right when he wakes up; and we're going away from here with everything we can put out. I've done everything I know how to do, for the present."

Then only did Costigan turn and look down, directly into Clio's eyes. Wide, eloquent blue eyes that gazed back up into his, tender and unafraid; eyes freighted with the oldest message of woman to chosen man. His hard young face softened wonderfully as he stared at her; there were two quick steps and they were in each

don't rate you, by

a million steps; but if I can just get you out of this mess, I swear by all
the gods of

interplanetary space . . . "

"You needn't, lover. Rate me? Good Heavens, Conway! It's just the
other way . .

."

"Stop it!" he commanded in her ear. "I'm still dizzy at the idea of your
loving me

at all, to say nothing of loving me this way! But you do, and that's all I
ask, here or

hereafter."

"Love you? Love you!" Their mutual embrace tightened and her low
voice thrilled

brokenly as she went on: "Conway dearest . . . I can't say a thing, but
you know . . . Oh,

Conway!"

After a time Clio drew a long and tremulous, but supremely happy
breath as the

realities of their predicament once more obtruded themselves upon her
consciousness.

fastest thing I ever saw, and if he strips her down and drives her - which he will - he'll catch us long before we can make Tellus. On the other hand, I gave Rodebush a lot of data, and if he and Lyman Cleveland can add it to their own stuff and get that super-ship of ours rebuilt in time, they'll be out here on the prow!; and they'll have what it takes to give even Nerado plenty of argument. No use worrying about it, anyway. We won't know anything until we can detect one or the other of them, and then will be the time to do something about it.

"If Nerado catches us, will you . . ." She paused.

"Rub you out? I will not. Even if he does catch us, and takes us back to Nevia, I won't. There's lots more time coming onto the clock. Nerado won't hurt either of us badly enough to leave scars, either physical, mental, or moral. I'd kill you in a second if

"So rank and fishy?" Costigan laughed deeply. "Details, girl; mere details. I've seen people who looked like money in the bank and who smelled like a bouquet of violets that you couldn't trust half the length of Nerado's neck."

"But look what he did to us!" she protested. "And they weren't trying to recapture us back there; they were trying to kill us."

"That was perfectly all right, what he did and what they did - what else could they have done?" he wanted to know. "And while you're looking, look at what we did to them plenty, I'd say. But we all had it to do, and neither side will blame the other for doing it. He's a square shooter, I tell you."

"Well, maybe, but I don't like him a bit, and let's not talk about him any more. Let's talk about us. Remember what you said once, when you advised me to 'let you lay,' or whatever it was?" Woman-like, she wished to dip again lightly into the waters of

out of those enchanted waters or plunge again. And he was afraid to
plunge - diffident,

still deeming himself unworthy of the miracle of this wonder-girl's love -
even though

every fiber of his being shrieked its demand to feel again that slender
body in his arms.

He did not consciously think those thoughts. He acted them without
thinking; they were

prime basics in that which made Conway Costigan what he was.

"I do remember, and I still think it's a sound idea, even though I am
too far gone

now to let you put it into effect," he assured her, half seriously. He
kissed her, tenderly

and reverently, then studied her carefully. "But you look as though you'd
been on a

Martian picnic. When did you eat last?"

"I don't remember, exactly. This morning, I think."

"Or maybe last night, or yesterday morning? I thought so! Bradley
and I can eat

anything that's chewable, and drink anything that will pour, but you can't.
I'll scout

not a bit

afraid any more. You will get us back to Earth some way, sometime; I just know that

you will. Good-night, Conway."

"Good-night, Clio . . . little sweetheart," he whispered, and went back to Bradley's side.

In due time the captain recovered consciousness, and slept. Then for days the speedster flashed on toward our distant solar system; days during which her wide-flung detector screens remained cold.

"I don't know whether I'm afraid they'll hit something or afraid that they won't,"

Costigan remarked more than once, but finally those tenuous sentinels did in fact

encounter an interfering vibration. Along the detector line a visibeam sped, and

Costigan's face hardened as he saw the unmistakable outline of Nerado's interstellar cruiser, far behind them.

nearing them at the incomprehensible rate of the sum of the two vessels' velocities,

came another cruiser of the Nevians!

"Must be the sister-ship, coming back from our System with a load of iron,"

Costigan deduced. "Heavily loaded as she is, we may be able to dodge her; and she's

coming so fast that if we can stay out of her range we'll be all right - he won't be able to

stop for probably three or four days. But if our super-ship is anywhere in these parts,

now's the time for her to rally 'round!"

He gave the speedster all the side-thrust she would take; then, putting every

available communicator tube behind a tight beam, he aimed it at Sol and began

sending out a long continued call to his fellows of the Triplanetary Service.

Nearer and nearer the Nevian flashed, trying with all her power to intercept the

alive at anything

like the relative velocities we've got now. I can't give her any more side thrust without

overloading the gravity controls, so overloaded they've got to be. Strap down, you two,

because they may go out entirely!"

"Do you think that you can pull away from them, Conway?" Clio was staring in

horrified fascination into the plate, watching the pictured vessel increase in size,

moment by moment.

"I don't know whether I can or not, but I'm going to try. Just in case we don't,

though, I'm going to keep on yelling for help. In solid? All right, boat, DO YOUR

STUFF!"

teners was to be

ended. Rodebush cut off his power, and through the crackling roar of tube noise an

almost inaudible voice made itself heard.

". . . all the help you can give us. Samms-Cleveland-Rodebush - anybody of

Triplanetary who can hear me, listen! This is Costigan, with Miss Marsden and Captain

Bradley, heading for where we think the sun is, from right ascension about six hours,

declination about plus fourteen degrees. Distance unknown, but probably a good many

light-years. Trace my call. One Nevian ship is overhauling us slowly, another is coming

toward us from the sun. We may or may not be able to dodge it, but we need all the

help you can give us. Samms-Rodebush-Cleveland - anybody of Triplanetary . . ."

Endlessly the faint, faint voice went on, but Rodebush and Cleveland were no

blast which would lift her stupendous normal tonnage against a gravity five times that of Earth. At the full frightful measure of that velocity the super-ship literally annihilated distance, while ahead of her the furiously driven spy-ray beam fanned out in quest of the three Triplanetarians who were calling for help.

"Got any idea how fast we're going?" Rodebush demanded, glancing up for an instant from the observation plate. "We should be able to see him, since we could hear him, and our range is certainly as great as anything he can have."

"No. Can't figure velocity without any reliable data on how many atoms of matter exist per cubic meter out here." Cleveland was staring at the calculator. "It's constant, of course, at the value at which the friction of the medium is equal to our thrust. Incidentally, we can't hold it too long. We're running a temperature, which shows that

the order of magnitude of ten to the twenty-seventh. Fast enough, anyway, so that

you'd better bend an eye on that plate. Even after you see them you won't know where

they really are, because we don't know any of the velocities involved - our own, theirs,

or that of the beam - and we may be right on top of them."

"Or, if we happen to be outrunning the beam, we won't see them at all. That

makes it nice piloting."

"How are you going to handle things when we get there?"

"Lock to them and take them aboard, if we're in time. If not, if they are fighting

already - there they are!"

The picture of the speedster's control room flashed upon the speaker.

"Hi, Fritz! Hi, Cleve! Welcome to our city! Where are you?"

"We don't know," Cleveland snapped back, "and we don't know where you are, either.

Can't figure anything without data. I see you're still breathing air. Where are the

Rodebush.

"Broadcast, Spud, BROADCAST!" the physicist had cried, as Costigan's image

had disappeared utterly from his plate.

He cut off the Boise's power, stopping her instantaneously in mid-space, but the

connection had been broken. Costigan could not possibly have heard the orders to

change his beam signal to a broadcast, so that they could pick it up; nor would it have

done any good if he had heard and had obeyed. So immeasurably great had been their

velocity that they had flashed past the speedster and were now unknown thousands - or

millions - of miles beyond the fugitives they had come so far to help; far beyond the

range of any possible broadcast. But Cleveland understood instantly what had

happened. He now had a little data upon which to work, and his hands flew over the

keys of the calculator.

limned upon the observation plates, was the Neviaan speedster.

"As a computer, you're good, Cleve," Rodebush applauded. "So close that we

can't use the neutralizers to catch him. If we use one dyne of drive we'll overshoot a

million kilometers before I could snap the switch."

"And yet he's so far away and going so fast that if we keep our inertia on it'll take

all day at full blast to overtake - no, wait a minute - we could never catch him."

Cleveland was puzzled. "What to do? Shunt in a potentiometer?"

"No, we don't need it." Rodebush turned to the transmitter. "Costigan! We are

going to take hold of you with a very light tractor - a tracer, really - and whatever you do,

DON'T CUT IT, or we can't reach you in time. It may look like a collision, but it won't be

- we'll just touch you, without even a jar."

"A tractor - inertialess?" Cleveland wondered.

"Sure. Why not?" Rodebush set up the beam at its absolute minimum of power

the automatic

focusing devices could scarcely function rapidly enough to keep them in place.

Cleveland flinched involuntarily and seized his arm-rests in a spasmodic clutch as he

watched this, the first inertialess space-approach; and even Rodebush, who knew

better than anyone else what to expect, held his breath and swallowed hard at the

unbelievable rate at which the two vessels were rushing together.

And if these two, who had rebuilt the super-ship, could hardly control themselves, what of the three in the speedster, who knew nothing whatever of the

wonder-craft's potentialities? Clio, staring into the plate with Costigan, uttered one

piercing shriek as she sank her fingers into his shoulders. Bradley swore a mighty deep-

space oath and braced himself against certain annihilation. Costigan stared for an

instant, unable to believe his eyes; then, in spite of the warning, his hand darted toward

detect the slightest shock as the enormous globe struck the comparatively tiny torpedo

and clung to it; accommodating - instantaneously and effortlessly her own terrific pace

to that of the smaller and infinitely slower craft. Clio sobbed in relief and Costigan, one

arm around her, sighed hugely.

"Hey, you spacelugs!" he cried. "Glad to see you, and all that, but you might as

well kill a man outright as scare him to death! So that's the super-ship, huh? Some

ship!"

"Hi-ya, Murf! Hi, Spud!" came from the speaker.

"Murf? Spud? How come?" Clio, practically recovered now, glanced upward

questioningly. It was plain that she did not quite know whether or not to like the

nicknames which the rescuers were calling her Conway.

"My middle name is Murphy, so they've called me things like that ever since I

what Rodebush was saying.

". . . realize myself that it would look so bad; it scared me as much as it did

anybody. Yes, this is IT. She really works - thanks more than somewhat to Conway

Costigan, by the way. But you had better transfer. If you'll get your things . . ."

"`Things' is good!" Costigan laughed, and Clio giggled sunnily.

"We've made so many transfers already that what you see is all we've got,"

Bradley explained. "We'll bring ourselves, and we'll hurry. That Nevian is coming up fast."

"Is there anything on this ship you fellows want?" Costigan asked.

"There may be, but we haven't any locks big enough to let her inside and we

haven't time to study her now. You might leave her controls in neutral, so that we can

calculate her position if we should want her later on."

"All right." The three armor-clad figures stepped into the Boise's open lock, the

coming up fast, and

if you don't already know it I can tell you that she's no light cruiser."

"That's so, too," Costigan agreed. "Have you fellows got enough stuff so that you

think you can take him? You've got the legs on him, anyway - you can certainly run if you want to!"

"Run?" Cleveland laughed. "We have a bone of our own to pick with that ship.

We licked her to a standstill once, until we burned out a set of generators, and since we

got them fixed we've been chasing her all over space. We were chasing her when we

picked up your call. See there? She's doing the running."

The Nevian was running, in truth. Her commander had seen and had recognized

the great vessel which had flashed out of nowhere to the rescue of the three fugitives

from Nevia; and, having once been at grips with that vengeful super-dreadnaught, he

her inertia and Cleveland brought the two vessels relatively to rest by increasing gradually his tractor's pull. And this time the Nevian could not cut the tractor. Again that shearing plane of force bit into it and tore at it, but it neither yielded nor broke. The rebuilt generators of Number Four were designed to carry the load, and they carried it. And again Triplanetary's every mighty weapon was brought into play. The "cans" were thrown, ultra- and infra-beams were driven, the furious macro-beam gnawed hungrily at the Nevian's defenses; and one by one those defenses went down. In desperation the enemy commander threw his every generator behind a polycyclic screen; only to see Cleveland's even more powerful drill bore relentlessly through it. After that puncturing, the end came soon. A secondary SX7 beam was now in place on mighty Ten's inner rings, and one fierce blast blew a hole completely

here and there a droplet or two of material which had been only liquified.

So'passed the sister-ship, and Rodebush turned his plates upon the vessel of

Nerado. But that highly intelligent amphibian had seen all that had occurred. He had

long since given over the pursuit of the speedster, and he did not rush in to do hopeless

battle beside his fellow Nevians against the Tellurians. His analytical detectors had

written down each detail of every weapon and of every screen employed; and even

while prodigious streamers of force were raving out from his vessel, braking her terrific

progress and swinging her around in an immense circle back toward far Nevia, his

scientists and mechanics were doubling and redoubling the power of his already Titanic

installations, to match and if possible to overmatch those of Triplanetary's super-

dreadnaught.

Solarian system

again they'll think it's twenty minutes too soon."

Thus it was that the Boise, increasing her few dynes of driving force at a rate just

sufficient to match her quarry's acceleration, pursued the Nevian ship.

Apparently

exerting every effort, she never came quite within range of the fleeing raider; yet never

was she so far behind that the Nevian space-ship was not in clear register upon her

observation plates.

Nor was Nerado alone in strengthening his vessel. Costigan knew well and

respected highly the Nevian scientist-captain, and at his suggestion much time was

spent in reenforcing the super-ship's armament to the iron-driven limit of theoretical and

mechanical possibility.

In mid-space, however, the Nevian slowed down.

"What gives?" Rodebush demanded of the group at large. "Not turn-over time

you're sure you

know which one of those stars up ahead is Nevia. Do you, Cleve?"

"Definitely."

"The only other thing is, then, shall we blow them out of the ether first?"

"You might try," Costigan remarked. "That is, if you're damned sure that you can

run if you have to."

"Huh? Run?" demanded Rodebush.

"Just that. It's spelled R-U-N, run. I know those freaks better than you do. Believe

me, Fritz, they've got what it takes."

"Could be, at that," Rodebush admitted. "We'll play it safe."

The Boise leaped upon the Nevian, every weapon aflame. But, as Costigan had

expected, Nerado's vessel was completely ready for any emergency. And, unlike her

sister-ship, she was manned by scientists well versed in the fundamental theory of the

weapons with which they fought. Beams, rods, and lances of energy flamed and flared;

mid-space, to be blasted into nothingness, or to disappear innocuously against

impenetrable polycyclic screens. Even Cleveland's drill was ineffective. Both vessels

were equipped completely with iron-driven mechanisms; both were manned by

scientists capable of wringing the highest possible measure of power from their

installations. Neither could harm the other.

The Boise flashed away; reached Nevia in minutes. Down into the crimson

atmosphere she dropped, down toward the city which Costigan knew was Nerado's

home port.

"Hold up a bit!" Costigan cautioned, sharply. "There's something down there that

I don't like!"

As he spoke there shot upward from the city a multitude of flashing balls. The

Nevians had mastered the secret of the explosive of the fishes of the greater deeps,

surrounded a group of buildings towering high above their neighbors.
"Neither those
high towers nor those screens were there the last time I was in this town. Nerado was
stalling for time, and that's what they're doing down there - that's all those fire-balls are
for. Good sign, too - they aren't ready for us yet. We'd better take 'em while the taking's
good. If they were ready for us, our play would be to get out of here while we're all in
one piece."

Nerado had been in touch with the scientists of his city; he had been instructing
them in the construction of converters and generators of such weight and power that
they could crush even the defenses of the super-ship. The mechanisms were not,
however, ready; the entirely unsuspected possibilities of speed inherent in absolute
inertialessness had not entered into Nerado's calculations.

water."

"I'll try it," Cleveland answered, at a nod from the physicist. "I couldn't drill

Nerado's polycyclics, but I couldn't use any momentum on him. Couldn't ram him - he

fell back with my thrust. But that screen down there can't back away from us, so maybe

I can work on it. Get your special ready. Hang on, everybody!"

The Boise looped upward, and from an altitude of miles dove straight down

through a storm of force-balls, beams, and shells; a dive checked abruptly as the hollow

tube of energy which was Cleveland's drill snarled savagely down ahead of her and

struck the shielding hemisphere with a grinding, lightning-spitting shock. As it struck,

backed by all the enormous momentum of the plunging space-ship and driven by the

full power of her prodigious generators it bored in, clawing and gouging viciously

generators had

been doubled and quadrupled in power on the long Nevian way! For that ocean -

girdled fortress was powered to withstand any conceivable assault - but the Boise's

power and momentum were now inconceivable; and every watt and every dyne was

solidly behind that hellishly flaming, that voraciously tearing, that irresistibly ravaging

cylinder of energy incredible!

Through the Nevian shield that cylinder gnawed its frightful way, and down its

protecting length there drove Adlington's "Special" bomb. "Special" it was indeed; so

great of girth that it could barely pass through the central orifice of Ten's mighty

projector, so heavily charged with sensitized atomic iron that its detonation upon any

planet would not have been considered for an instant if that planet's integrity meant

was all that was to be heard of a concussion that jarred red Nevia to her very center;

and all that could be seen was a slow heaving of the water. But that heaving did not

cease. Slowly, so slowly it seemed to the observers now high in the heavens, the

waters rose up and parted; revealing a vast chasm blown deep into the ocean's rocky

bed. Higher and higher the lazy mountains of water reared; effortlessly to pick up, to

smash, to grind into fragments, and finally to toss aside every building, every structure,

every scrap of material substance pertaining to the whole Nevian city.

Flattened out, driven backward for miles, the buffeted waters were pressed,

leaving exposed bare ground and broken rock where once had been the ocean's busy

floor. Tremendous blasts of incandescent gas raved upward, jarring even the enormous

mass of the super-ship poised so high above the site of the explosion. Then the

forever.

"MY . . . GOD!" Cleveland was the first to break the awed the stunned, silence.

He licked his lips. "But we had it to do . . . and at that, it's not as bad as what they did to

Pittsburgh - they would have evacuated all except military personnel."

"Of course . . . what next?" asked Rodebush. "Look around, I suppose, to see if

they have any more . . .

"Oh, no, Conway - no! Don't let them!" Clio was sobbing openly. "I'm going to my

room and crawl under the bed - I'll see that sight all the rest of my life!"

"Steady, Clio." Costigan's arm tightened around her. "We'll have to look, but we

won't find any more. One - if they could have finished it - would have been enough."

Again and again the Boise circled the world. No more super-powered installations were being built. And, surprisingly enough, the Nevians made no

demonstration of hostility.

troubled.

"We'll do something!" Costigan declared. "This thing has got to be settled, some

way or other, before we leave here. First, try talking. I've got an idea that . . . anyway, it

can't do any harm, and I know that he can hear and understand you."

Nerado arrived. Instead of attacking, his ship hung quietly poised, a mile or two

away from the equally undemonstrative Boise. Rodebush directed a beam.

"Captain Nerado, I am Rodebush of Triplanetary. What do you wish to do about

this situation?"

"I wish to talk to you." The Nevian's voice came clearly from the speaker. "You

are, I now perceive, a much higher form of life than any of us had thought possible; a

form perhaps as high in evolution as our own. It is a pity that we did not take the time

for a full meeting of minds when we first neared your planet, so that much life, both

upon your Earth; but, to reasoning minds, such a course would be sheerest stupidity."

Rodebush cut the communicator beam.

"Does he mean it?" he demanded of Costigan. "It sounds perfectly reasonable,

but . . ."

"But fishy!" Cleveland broke in. "Altogether too reasonable to be true!"

"He means it. He means every word of it," Costigan assured his fellows. "I had

an idea that he would take it that way. That's the way they are. Reasonable;

passionless. Funny - they lack a lot of things that we have; but they've got stuff that I

wish more of us Tellurians had, too. Give me the plate - I'll talk for Triplanetary," and the beam was restored.

"Captain Nerado," he greeted the Nevian commander. "Having been with you

and among your people, I know that you mean what you say and that you speak for

said, the past is past. Our two races have much to gain from each other by friendly

exchanges of materials and of ideas, while we can expect nothing except mutual

extermination if we elect to continue this warfare. I offer you the friendship of

Triplanetary. Will you release your screens and come aboard to sign a treaty?"

"My screens are down. I will come." Rodebush likewise cut off his power,

although somewhat apprehensively, and a Nevian lifeboat entered the main air-lock of

the Boise.

Then, at a table in the control room of Triplanetary's first super-ship, there was

written the first Inter-Systemic Treaty. Upon one side were the three Nevians;

amphibious, cone-headed, loop-necked, scaly, four-legged things to us monstrosities:

upon the other were human beings; air-breathing, round-headed, short-necked,

had wiped out a

Triplanetarian fleet; but Costigan had depopulated one Nevian city, had seriously

damaged another, and had beamed down many Nevian ships. Therefore loss of life

and material damage could be balanced off. The Solarian System was rich in iron, to

which the Nevians were welcome; red Nevia possessed abundant stores of substances

which upon Earth were either rare or of vital importance, or both. Therefore commerce

was to be encouraged. The Nevians had knowledges and skills unknown to Earthly

science, but were entirely ignorant of many things commonplace to us. Therefore

interchange of students and of books was highly desirable. And so on.

Thus was signed the Triplanetario-Nevian Treaty of Eternal Peace. Nerado and

his two companions were escorted ceremoniously to their vessel, and the Boise took off

them the least little bit. They give me goose-bumps all over. I suppose that they are

really estimable folks; talented, cultured, and everything; but just the same I'll bet that it

will be a long, long time before anybody on Earth will really, truly like them!"