

VOL. 1

FEBRUARY, 1940

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# AFTER THE PLAGUE

By **Martin Vaeth**

Jim Gleeson disappeared and a new man, the Titan Garth, was born. And after eleven years Jim Gleeson returned, to find a hemisphere devastated by the awful Red Plague, peopled by fugitives and savages.



A New Author to  
Science Fiction —  
With a Classic  
Story



**J**IM GLEESON, throttling the little seaplane's motor to a lazy drone, peered through his bomb-sight at the blue waters beneath. No tell-tale oil-streaks marred the sparkling sunlit waves. Jim grunted disgustedly. The chances of German subs in the Mediterranean were practically null and void, what with British destroyers keeping so close a watch at Gibraltar. This grinding back and forth between Algiers and Marseilles was worse than transport flying at home in the U. S. And he had joined the French air force for adventure! Perhaps his age was to blame. Eighteen was pretty young for a front line pilot, no matter how urgently

the French needed them. When he'd been in the Mediterranean patrol long enough to prove his ability, no doubt they'd shift him to the western front. Meanwhile . . .

Jim glanced down. A strip of the Spanish coast was visible. He could make out a flat sandy beach, green fields, semi-tropical cork and olive trees. Jim swung seaward. No good violating Spanish neutrality. He'd drifted off his course while day-dreaming . . .

At that instant a sudden coughing of the motor broke into Jim's reverie. Frowning, he leaned forward to adjust the carburetor mixture. The sputter, however, grew worse, then abruptly the motor died. The

sea, five thousand feet below, rushed up to meet the plane. For perhaps thirty precious seconds Jim tried to revive the balky motor, then resigned himself to a glider landing off the Spanish coast.

A touch of the bomb release sent the four fifty pound missiles seaward, and four dull explosions churned the water. No danger of being blown to bits, now, if the landing was a crash. Jim nosed the plane down, attempting to glide, but the stubby wings gave little support. Face tense, the American watched the waves leap up toward him. And he had wanted the adventure, the excitement of the western front!

Faster and faster the plane dropped, as it lost forward momentum. Jim Gleeson unbuckled his safety belt. Too low now for a 'chute jump. But if he could make some sort of a landing near the coast, he might be able to reach the broad flat stretch of beach. In desperation, he swung the plane's nose shoreward. Groves of olive trees, grassy plains, distant villages . . . The wind was screaming through the sea-plane's struts. Two hundred feet . . . a hundred . . . fifty . . . Nerves taut, Jim braced himself for the shock.

All at once there was a sickening jolt, a tearing, crunching sound, and a cloud of spray. One instant's recollection, Jim had, of trying to leap from the cockpit, then the world dissolved into wet darkness.

**T**HE water, Jim realized dimly, was cold. Gasping, half-conscious, he struck out for shore. He had swum only a minute or so when his feet struck bottom. Dazed, he dragged himself out onto the sand, rubbed the water from his eyes.

And then Jim Gleeson had his first staggering shock. The sun-swept olive groves, the flat shore he had seen before the crash, were gone; he was standing at the base of a dark, frowning cliff . . . a cliff of gaunt, jagged rock, shadowy in the light of a pale, gibbous moon!

Like a run-down robot Jim stared up at the towering crags. Cliffs . . . moonlight . . . chilling cold . . . this was not the sunlit Spanish coast he had seen a moment before. He swung about, seaward, but there was no sign of the wrecked seaplane among the grey, dashing breakers. Had he been carried by some strange current, while unconscious, to this place? Jim swayed unsteadily. His head ached, and he could feel warm blood seeping down his face.

Still groggy, he stepped from the shadows into a patch of moonlight. He thought he heard voices . . . hoarse, inhuman voices . . . echoing from the bluff far above. But he wasn't sure. He wasn't sure of anything, except that he had miraculously survived the crash, was alive. Or, he wondered, was he?

Maybe he had been killed, and this place was . . .

"Garth! Oh, Garth! I . . . I thought they had killed you!" It was a girl's voice, vibrant with anxiety.

Jim wheeled. A lithe, slender figure was running toward him over the strip of sand at the base of the crags. A girl . . . but a girl the like of whom he had never before imagined. Slim, burnt to a golden brown, she was like some wild young Valkyr, hair streaming, a rude spear clutched in one hand. A curious garment, a sort of tunic woven from grasses, clung to her body; her legs and feet both were bare.

Jim drew a quick breath. Mad . . . he must be mad. And this must be a hallucination of his numbed mind. Then the girl's hand touched his arm in a swift possessive gesture and he knew she was flesh and blood.

"Garth! You're hurt!" Her gaze swung to the rocky crags. Red torches flickered at the top of the cliff. In their ruddy light Jim could see a horde of ungainly figures scrambling from ledge to ledge as they descended the precipitous wall of rock.

"Strang! And the rest of the Unclean Ones!" The girl cried. "Quick!"

Jim Gleeson squared his shoulders.

"I don't know which one of us is crazy," he said. "But I don't know you, my name isn't Garth, I never heard of Strang or the Unclean Ones, and I never saw this place before in my life! If you'll kindly explain just what this is all about . . ."

"Garth!" The girl's face went pale. "Oh! The blow from Strang's club, the fall from the top of the cliff, must have stunned you! Don't you remember me, Garth? I'm . . . Freya! Don't you remember we left the castle, came along the cliffs seeking game? And Strang and his men trapped us. You fought them off to give me a chance to escape. And when I reached the beach here, I saw you fall . . ." She gripped his arm, impatiently. "Hurry! They're coming! See!"

Jim followed her gaze to the cliff's face. The strange figures, torches waving, were swarming down the wall of rock. He could hear hoarse howls, furious shouts. Whoever or whatever they were, they seemed hardly pleasant company. Jim shot a glance at the strange girl, made a quick decision.

"Right!" he said. "Let's go!"

"Ah!" The girl Freya nodded. "That sounds like you once more! I was afraid perhaps . . ." She set out along the beach in a swift loping run. "We can follow the sea's edge until we reach the patch leading to the castle. Once we join the others, we'll be safe . . ."

**T**O JIM this was all meaningless, but he attempted to keep pace with the girl. The wound on his head, the loss of blood, however, had weakened him. After a few steps he began to stagger, gasp for breath. Behind them, the weird figures, their torches casting strange sprawling shadows, had reached the foot of the cliff, were racing across the sand with harsh cries of triumph.

"Garth!" Freya turned in time to see Jim stumble, fall. "You must go on! Must! They'll take us to the ruins, and we'll become like them . . . unclean!" She bent, tried to lift Gleeson, but his weight was too much for her.

Jim shook his head. Things got madder every instant. These dark, desolate crags, the slim, wild girl, the howling band running toward them . . .

"Thanks for trying to help me, kid," he muttered. "Whoever you are, you're tops! Better light out, save yourself. Those guys look like they mean business."

For a long moment the girl stood motionless, spear in hand, hair flowing over her shoulder, like some legendary goddess of the wood. The Unclean Ones were scarcely a hundred yards away. Suddenly Freya turned.

"I had thought to stay and fight for you, Garth," she murmured. "But it is wiser to tell the others, bring them to your aid. Remember, so long as you are in Strang's hands, eat or drink nothing! And above all, beware of the red moss! I will bring the others as soon as I can!" She bent, touched Jim's forehead with soft, caressing lips, then sprang to her feet, ran lightly, swiftly, along the beach.

As the girl took to her heels, shouts of rage broke from the advancing horde. Spears, arrows, a rain of missiles flew after her. A stone struck her shoulder; she stumbled, but kept on, heading for a break in the cliffs some distance away. Gaining the gorge-like opening in the wall of stone, she turned to the right. An instant later she had left the pale moonlight of the beach, disappeared in the darkness.

**A**S THE girl vanished, the crowd of wild figures gave up the pursuit, straggled back to where Jim lay. In the flickering light of the torches they seemed weird phantoms, hardly human. Tattered nondescript clothing, partly rags, partly skins of beasts; weapons ranging from

clubs to rusty knives; drawn, parchment-yellow faces obscured by beards, matted hair. Nightmare creatures, Jim thought, with their saffron-colored skins, their wild feverish eyes; their bodies, he noticed, were covered with festering, running sores.

One of the strange figures, exuding a terrible stench of decay, prodded Jim with his spear.

"Garth!" he grunted. "Garth who has cost us so many men! Let us kill, Strang! Now!" He drew back the rude weapon.

"No!" A tall, powerful man, seemingly less eaten by disease than the others, thrust the spear aside with a hairy fist. "I have other plans." He turned to Jim. "What have you to say?"

"I—I don't know what you're talking about." Jim gazed in horrified fascination at the grotesque, hideous group. "My name's Gleeson. And if you'd only tell me where I am, and why . . ."

"Hah!" Strang's yellow face broke into a savage grin. "He hopes to save himself by tricks! No use, Garth. We know you. Many of us bear the scars of your arrows. And now you are ours!"

A murmur went up from the others, standing like shaggy apes in the moonlight.

"Let us kill! Kill!"

"Listen first to my plan." Strang laughed harshly. "Garth is a great hunter and finds much game. Let us take him to the ruins, inland where the red moss grows. Soon, then, he will become like us, unclean, and his own people will not allow him to return to them, for he would bring the slow death to their highlands. He will be forced to join us, hunt with us, and his cunning will bring us much food."

At mention of food a low growl of assent went round the circle of wild faces.

"Strang is right! He is wise! Let us take Garth to the ruins!"

Jim shook a dazed head, wondering when he would wake up. But roughened hands, dragging him erect, told him that this was no dream. Prodded forward by

spears, he stumbled along with his captors.

The mad band followed the beach for a short distance, then turned into the break in the cliffs that the girl had entered. Here was a deep gully, the bed of an ancient river, leading inland. As the sea disappeared behind them, the country became rolling, fertile, dotted by clumps of trees, small streams. Traces of human life were evident . . . hedge rows, all but buried beneath weeds and vines; cleared fields, where in times past crops must have been planted; crumbling, blackened walls, that marked some ruined cottage. Jim stared, wondering. The lush new masses of vegetation, the growth of young saplings, showed that no great length of time had elapsed since this was peaceful farm land.

Strang and his nightmare band had extinguished their torches, were glancing warily from side to side as they advanced. In spite of their sore-ridden yellowish skins, their matted hair and beards, Jim could see that they were of every European type. Here a broad-faced Slav, here a sharp Latin profile, here stolid Teuton features. Yet all seemed bound together by a common bond of disease and savagery. Again he went back in his mind to the sea-plane crash, but it offered no explanation. If he only knew where he was, who these people were! And this Garth, for whom they had mistaken him . . . and then there was the girl, Freya . . .

A shout of excitement from the Unclean Ones interrupted Jim's reflections. They had quickened their stride, were pointing ahead. Jim followed their gaze. Before them, in the moonlight, lay a great mound, a heap of rubble. As they drew nearer, Jim drew a quick breath. The great mound was the ruins of a city!

AS AN aviator Jim Gleeson was not entirely unfamiliar with ruined cities . . . but he had never even imagined such destruction as this. It seemed as though

the city had been picked up and then thrown down again. Piles of brick-dust, splintered wooden beams, fragments of glass and slate, bit of plaster and iron. Streets, homes, public buildings . . . all were obliterated. Nothing remained but pulverized wreckage.

Stranger even than the desolated city was the growth that covered the debris. From a distance it seemed almost as though the city had been drenched in blood. On closer inspection, however, it proved to be a fine, fungus-like stuff, brilliant crimson in the moonlight, that clung in great patches to the ruins. Suddenly the unknown girl's words crossed Jim's mind. "So long as you are in Strang's hands, eat and drink nothing. And above all, beware of the red moss!" The red moss! Jim glanced at the patches of crimson fungus, began to walk warily, avoid touching the queer growth.

His captors seemed heedless of the stuff, trampling through it with bare feet, disregarding the crimson clouds they stirred up with every step. After perhaps ten minutes clambering over the heaps of rubble, firelight gleamed ahead. Jim could see a cleared space in the ruins. Before the fire were wild figures, women for the most part, as parchment-skinned and sore-ridden as the men. At Strang's call they ran forward.

"Garth!" they whispered. "Garth the great hunter! Captured!" Hatred and triumph gleamed in their sunken eyes.

Strang turned to his captive.

"Listen to me, Garth," he said. "For years you and your band have despised us because we were unclean, while on your highlands the strong winds from the sea keep the red spores from reaching you. Now you shall become one of us, and your own people, even Freya herself, will fear you, make you an outcast. Sooner or later hunger and thirst will force you to eat and drink! And when you do, Garth, you will be our comrade!"

Strang laughed, waved Jim away.

Two of the wild creatures stepped forward, led their captive toward the ruins of a house. Completely gutted, four ragged walls remained upright to form a rude enclosure. Its door had been destroyed, but the guards drew a battered metal grating across the opening, lashed it into place with strips of rawhide. Head aching, stunned by the strangeness of it all, Jim Gleeson crouched upon the ground, peered through the grating at his savage captors. He could see them, men and women, grouped about the fire, roasting squirrels, birds, on sticks. Jim shook a weary head. There had to be an answer to all this. Had to be! What had Strang meant by saying he would soon be their comrade? Jim studied their yellow skins, their leprous bodies, uneasily. Could it be that he, Jim Gleeson, was to become like that?

One of his captors was approaching the ruined house, carrying a rusty pan filled with water, two partly-cooked pheasants. These he thrust beneath the grating. Jim eyed the food and water ravenously. The girl had warned him not to eat or drink. Tiny flecks of the everpresent red fungus were visible on the meat and on the surface of the water. But what difference did it make? In the end hunger and thirst would drive him to taste the food and drink. Why torture himself when he was bound to yield in the end? Jim lifted the pan of water . . . and then almost dropped it in amazement. Brilliant moonlight poured through the open roof of his prison, making a mirror of the water. And the face reflected in the water was not his own! The rounded, rosy face that had peered back at him from the shaving glass in the barracks at Marseilles was gone . . . in its place was a strong, bronzed countenance, with hair and beard almost equalling that of Strang's followers. The features of a man of twenty-eight or thirty, rugged, determined, with no hint of Jim Gleeson about them.

"Good God!" Jim whispered. For the

first time since emerging from the waves, he glanced at his clothing. Rags, pieced together by woven grass, similar to that which Freya had worn. All desire for food and drink suddenly left Jim. He slumped to the floor, head between his hands. One question kept hammering through his brain. Who was he? Was he Jim Gleeson, American aviator in the service of France? Or was he the mysterious Garth, mighty warrior in this mad, desolate land? For long minutes he sat there, stunned, trying in vain to piece together this insane tangle of thoughts.

Outside he could hear the Unclean Ones talking, in a series of grunts and slurred monosyllables. Now and then he thought he could make out words of French, German, and what sounded like Russian. Strang alone seemed familiar with English; the others communicated by means of gestures and a few simple words in the language of their leader.

**A**BRUPTLY Jim stood up, began to poke about the heaps of rotting wood and plaster that lay upon the floor, in hopes of finding something that might serve as a weapon. If he could get free of this place, find the girl Freya, who seemed so devoted to him, he might learn something that would explain this crazy nightmare.

All at once Jim noticed a dark object in the wreckage. Clearing away the dust, he saw that it was a worm-eaten wooden box. As he lifted it, the box fell apart, and a mass of mouldering paper fell out. A book . . . a diary! Brown, stained, hopelessly obliterated in spots, parts of the writing were nevertheless legible. Fingers trembling, Jim picked up the papers, began to decipher their blurred script.

" . . . end of civilization," he read. "But how could we have known? How? We'd been through the war of 1914. That had been a terrible barrier, but we'd hurdled it. This one of 1939 seemed a higher bar-

rier, but we didn't dream of falling. Now, as I crouch here in the ruins of Perth, my body a mass of sores, half-starved, I can see nature triumphing over all our great works. Weeds covering the rubbish, earth returning to earth."

"I do not know why I write all this. The last defiant gesture of a civilized mind, perhaps, before I become a savage, hunting, fishing, for my food. Some archaeologist of the future may discover this record, learn our history. And to think I can remember cinemas, radios, automobiles . . . it seems ages ago. I can even remember the cause of the war. Most of the others have forgotten that. I recall how the madness spread to engulf four continents . . . Europe, Asia, Africa, Australia. Spreading, spreading, like a disease. Mary and the boys, gone . . ." Mildew blotted out the rest of the paragraph like a shroud.

" . . . from Germany the first of the terrible inventions that ravaged the world—the so-called neutron rockets. Rockets with a range of a thousand miles, carrying great loads of uranium, which, touched off by a stream of slow neutrons, disintegrated. The breakdown of the atoms of uranium released forces the like of which the world had never conceived. The first day thousands of them fell on Scotland alone. Cities levelled, millions killed, entire areas devastated. Whoe rows of buildings flying apart, raid shelters turned into slaughter houses . . . And we who fled to the hills could see it before our eyes. Watched, stunned, deafened, helpless, as our world fell victim of the science which had made it great.

"We became furious beasts, mad for revenge. And when we found one of their rockets, a dud, learned the secret, we had vengeance. How we manufactured them under the rain of death. I do not see. Then came our own rain of rockets, released on the enemy. I saw the soldiers carrying them to the cliffs—long cylindrical things, big as airplanes—firing them in a burst of



flame toward Germany. And I cheered! Cheered, hoping the family of the man who had fired the rocket that killed Mary and the boys, would also be killed. Beasts—that's what war made of us. Perhaps it is only right we should now be reduced to the level of beasts. But even beasts only to kill to eat.

"Then the enemy, madder even than we, sent over rockets filled with the red spores; the fungus spread like wildfire, entering the human system, inducing insanity, slow, revolting death. Even in peacetime the plague would have been difficult, perhaps impossible, to check; all that's deadly in the microbe world was in that one terrible culture. With our hospitals blown to bits, our civilization broken down, what chance had we? At Inverness I saw three hundred corpses, soaked with gasoline, burned. It did not shock me. I have felt nothing these past years."

"Such folly! They must have known we would fire the red spores back at them. The funeral pyres at Berlin and Vienna were even higher than ours. And men were praying, praying before the Prince of Peace, for victory! How could there have been victory? Civilization caught in its own machines, destroyed by its own inventions. Cities, factories, mines . . . all the works of man, wiped out by the neutron bombs. Engineers, doctors, scientists, killed or scattered about the wilderness of four continents."

"We know now that the war stopped months ago. There are only armed bands, mad from starvation and disease, ravaging, pillaging. No one won—everyone lost. There is nothing left—nothing. Ruins and unburned corpses. Groups of men Teutons. Slavs, Mongols, all races—wander about the barren wastes. Some have crossed the channel in fishing boats, seeking food. Europe, Asia, Africa, Australia are all the same. Savage, bestial, scraps of humanity, rotten with disease, roaming the ruins. We few scattered survivors of the

civilian populace can offer no resistance to them. In a year or so all life will have yielded to the plague, and there will be only forests, wilderness."

"There were rumors, months ago, that the Americas still survived, untouched by this horror. When the red spores first appeared, many persons seized such ships as remained, tried to reach the western hemisphere. But the Americans had heard of the plague, and their fleet, 300 miles off shore, intercepted all refugee ships, warning them to turn back or be sunk. Heartless! But necessary if civilization as we knew it is to survive."

"As I write, I can see the ruins of Perth, fires still raging among the debris. The earth seems to have been razed, swept clean. The red fungus lies like great splotches of blood upon the rubble. The smell of decay is unbearable. A few half-starved, plague-eaten figures paw hopelessly among the wreckage, just as I do, in search of food. This is civilization in 1948. What might it have been if science had worked to create, rather than destroy? God grant that America . . ."

THE diary fell from Jim Gleeson's nerveless fingers. Nineteen-forty-eight! And the book, from its appearance, must be at least two years old! Which would make this the year 1950! Somehow he, Jim, had gone forward in time? Or had he? Memory of that bronzed, bearded face reflected in the water-bowl assailed him. The face of a man of twenty-nine, rather than that of a boy of eighteen. Eleven years . . . ! To have gone forward in time would have brought no such changes . . .

Again Jim's eyes turned to the faded papers. Bands of soldiers of all nations, reverting to barbarism . . . that would account for Strang and his followers. And the plague, the deadly culture of the totalitarian laboratories! Yellow skin, crazed minds, rotting flesh! When hunger and

thirst had become too strong for him, and he partook of the spore-laden food and water, he, Jim Gleeson, would become one with those leprous, mad creatures!

In desperation Jim hurled himself against the grating. The rawhide that held it in place did not give, while the stolid guard, leaning on his spear, gave only a grunt of derision. The ruined city was pallid in the moonlight; the Unclean Ones, having eaten, now lay before the fire, asleep. Jim clung hopelessly to the grating. Already, perhaps, he had breathed in the deadly spores . . .

A swift hissing sound brought Jim to his feet. The guard, an arrow projecting from between his shoulder blades, toppled silently to the ground. A moment later a slim, dark-haired figure had emerged from behind a pile of rubble, ran softly toward his prison.

"Garth!" she whispered. "Fear of the red moss keeps the others from entering the city! They wait beyond the edge of the ruins! If we can reach them, we will be safe!" She drew a knife-like fragment of glass from her belt, began to saw away at the rawhide that held the grating in place. Jim, watching her, suddenly squared his shoulders.

"You're crazy!" he muttered. "Any minute now you'll breathe in the spores, swallow them! I'm probably infected with the plague already. Beat it, kid, while you can! I'm not worth all this!"

The girl paused a moment, looked long at him.

"Have you forgotten, Garth?" she murmured. "Forgotten that I have promised to be your mate?"

Jim stared at her hopelessly. This girl—promised to be his mate! He shot a glance at the fallen guard, the snoring figures about the dying fire, then returned his gaze to Freya once more. Sight of her slender body, etched in moonlight as she bent over the fastenings of the rude door, set his heart leaping. Why try to be Jim Gleeson,

quiet young aviator of 1939? Why not be the Garth of this primitive, war-ruined land—Garth, the great hunter, the mate of Freya, the enemy of Strang? A swift exultation swept over him. He watched the severed strands of rawhide part, thrust the heavy grating aside with his shoulder. With a clang it fell to the ground. At once the figures about the fire sprang to their feet, Strang's voice, thick with sleep, roared angry questions.

Jim snatched up the fallen sentry's spear. A deep-throated shout of defiance broke from his lips. Freya, glancing at him, smiled.

"It is again Garth who speaks," she exclaimed. "Garth the warrior! Before this, I was afraid . . ."

THREE of the wild-eyed figures had hurled themselves upon Jim, clubs raised. He drew back the spear, surprised to find that he handled it with the ease of long experience. Like a striking snake it licked out, and one of his enemies fell, transfixed. In almost the same instant Jim had wrenched the spear free, lunged at the second of his opponents, ripping up the man's yellowed arm. Quick as he had been, however, the third of the Unclean Ones had had time to aim a murderous blow at his head. Just as the club was about to descend, Freya's bow twanged, and the hideous figure slumped to the ground, clawing with blood-stained fingers at the arrow that projected from his chest.

"So," the girl murmured, "they will hesitate before they attack again. Quick, Garth! Follow me!"

Then they were running over the heaps of debris that made up the ruined city. In the brilliant moonlight Jim could see pathetic reminders of the past scattered among the mounds of shattered stone. Here a pair of spectacles, miraculously unbroken, here a smashed doll, here a skeleton fist, still clutching a faded banknote. No chance, now, to study the ruins of Perth.

Strang's men were racing furiously in pursuit. From time to time Freya turned, sped an arrow at the Unclean Ones, and in most instances her shots were greeted by renewed shouts of rage. Desperately the fugitives ran onward, avoiding the patches of red fungus, keeping as much as possible in the shadows.

Jim's momentary burst of strength, however, faded fast as the effects of the past few hours began to take their toll. Strang and his motley crew were gaining rapidly. Freya, her supply of arrows exhausted,

called words of encouragement, but the rough going over the litter of stones and rubble, the eternal side-stepping to avoid the omnipresent red spores, slowed their flight. As they reached the outskirts of the ruined city, the Unclean Ones were scarcely a dozen yards behind. Jim could hear their heavy breathing, the thud of their feet. He felt himself stagger.

"Only a little further!" Freya panted. "In the darkness beyond the city . . ."

Jim shook a hopeless head. They'd never make it. In another moment . . .



But at that instant something happened. Shadows flickered in the underbrush ahead, bows hummed. Two of their pursuers fell, wounded, the rest dove for shelter in the ruins. Stumbling onward, Jim and Freya reached the grove of trees beyond the ruins. Four figures ran forward to meet them.

"Garth!" A lean bronzed youth, clad in woven grass, seized his arm. "Safe! Help him, there, you women! We must reach the castle under cover of darkness!"

Freya and a sturdy, yellow-haired girl ran to help Jim, while a third girl, a slim, tanned dryad, led the way. The two men, hardly more than boys, brought up the rear, spears ready in case of an attack by the dwellers of the ruins. Jim studied his companions. None of them seemed to be over nineteen, yet all were muscular, burned brown as though from a life of constant exposure. Both of the boys bore scars from old battles and carried their spears with the unconscious ease of long experience. Silent, treading carefully to leave no prints, they made their way through the thick woods.

**I**T WAS almost two hours later when Jim felt the salt air of the sea fanning his cheek. Emerging from the woods he found that they were on a high rock-strewn moor overlooking the ocean. For the first time since leaving the razed city, Freya spoke.

"See, Garth!" she said, pointing. "Now we shall be safe!"

Jim glanced up. Ahead lay a great ruined castle, its roof and upper towers gone, but its four stout walls still standing. The castle of some ancient feudal baron, Jim decided, eyeing the grey, hoary walls. Yet its destruction seemed recent, and there were evidences of modern furnishings.

Jim followed the others across the half-filled moat, found himself in an enclosure of four fire-blackened walls. Against one

of the walls a rough lean-to of charred beams had been constructed, under which several heaps of straw and a few battered pieces of crockery, lay.

"Safe!" One of the bronzed youths swung a rude timber barrier across the entrance. "Now let Strang come! How do you feel, Garth? We'd given you up for lost until Freya brought us the news."

Jim stared at the speaker. Somehow they seemed to know him. Once again the feeling of living a dream gripped him. Who were these lithe young pagans? And why did they insist on calling him Garth?

"I . . . I'm very grateful to you all," he said. "But if you'd only tell me who you are . . ."

Freya's face went white.

"Don't you remember, Garth?" she whispered. "Eric and Paul. And Mary, Elaine. Don't you remember nicknaming me Freya because, you said, I was like a goddess of the woods?"

Jim shook a hopeless head.

"I'm sorry," he said. "But it's all new to me. Tell me about it . . . tell me everything you can remember. Maybe then. . ."

The dark boy whom Freya had called Eric, frowned thoughtfully.

"I was the oldest," he murmured. "I remember big cities, and automobiles, and so many little things, like books, and toys, and tools, and ornaments. So many little things and different words for each, that I've forgotten most of them. Then one day there was a lot of excitement, people crying and cheering. All about a thing they called Hitler. And mother said I must go to the country because there might be 'raids'. So they brought me here to Lochgair Castle, with Freya and the others. There was old Lord Lochgair, and Jane, the cook, Martin, the chauffeur, Knott, the butler, and you. Remember, Garth? You worked in the garden . . ."

"Me?" Jim stared at the circle of faces. "But . . . but . . ."

"Jane, the cook, told us about you,"

Freya interrupted. "She said the people in Spain sent you here because you spoke English. And Lord Lochgair took you on because able-bodied men were scarce, with so many away at the place they called 'The Front'. They talked a lot about the 'Front'. Jane said you would be sent there, too, only you had something they called amnesia."

"Amnesia!" Jim straightened up. So that was it! The crash off Spain had wiped out his memory—and the blow from Strang's club, knocking him into the water at the foot of the cliffs, had restored it! Eleven years of his life blotted out! What had he done in that time?

"What . . . what happened next?" he muttered.

"We called you Garth because there was a 'G' on your belt buckle," the girl went on. "They said no one knew your real name, but Garth sounded sort of strong and rugged. Sometimes old Lord Lochgair blew a whistle and we put things over our faces and ran into the cellar, where the workmen were building a big cave. Jane said that was raid-practice. I was seven years old then, I remember, and the others, six. Except Eric. He was eight. Then one day Lord Lochgair blew the whistle and nobody laughed about it like they did before. That was the first time we heard the 'bangs'. But after that there were 'bangs' every day, sometimes loud, sometimes faint. We got used to them. Sometimes we would come out of the cellar and find big holes in the lawn that made fine wading pools when it rained. But we didn't get out much because there were 'bangs' every day. Then Martin, the chauffeur, and Lord Lochgair, left for town to buy food, and they never came back. A few nights later there was a 'bang' . . . an awful loud one . . . and the castle caught on fire. You got us out in time, Garth, but we never saw Jane or Knott, the butler, any more. And that left just the six of us."

"Good God!" Jim shook an unbelieving head. Air-raids, neutron rockets . . . and five children left in his care! "What next?"

"I . . . I'm not sure." Freya glanced appealingly at the others. "Sometimes there were a lot of 'bangs' and we stayed in the cellar and you told us stories. And once you tried to reach Perth, but found that the red moss was there. And you told us always to stay here on the highlands, where the wind from the ocean kept the spores from drifting. You hunted, set traps, fished, and taught us how to do the same. We managed to live well enough that way."

"Yes," the boy Paul interrupted. "They were good times. We made bows and spears, hunted about the ashes here for knives. You taught us how to swim in the sea. There was always plenty of nuts and berries when we couldn't get fish or game. And we never left the cliffs because of the red moss. At last even the 'bangs' stopped, and we had nothing to worry us. Then one day Strang and the Unclean Ones came. They fought with us when we went out to hunt. So we stayed close to the castle here and ran for shelter when there were too many of them. But yesterday when you and Freya were out hunting, Strang surprised you, made you a prisoner. That was the first time in eleven winters that we did not have you to guide us. It is good to have you back."

WHEN they had finished speaking, Jim Gleeson stared with brooding eyes into the fire. Eleven years! He was now twenty-nine! And these youngsters . . . eighteen or nineteen. They had spent eleven years on this desolate Scottish headland, living like savages, under the tutelage of a man whose memory had been wiped clear. Europe, devastated by neutron bombs, sown with the deadly red spores, was a wilderness. Crops overgrown, buildings bombed or falling into

decay, all of man's proud inventions lost. The great war to give the world the blessings of totalitarian culture, or democratic teachings. And this was the result! In his imagination Jim could see the rich fields of Europe, the vast plains of Asia, desolate, except for a few disease-ridden nomad bands, more savage than the beasts. Africa in the hands of the fierce natives once more . . . Japan, Australia, devastated wastes where the red spores preyed upon the handful of barbarous survivors. Only the Americas, strictly protected by their cordon of ships, remained untouched. He, Jim Gleeson, the leader of this 'tribe'! What escape was possible for them? Sooner or later they must fall prey to Strang, or the terrible red fungus. Even should they escape death, they would be doomed to savagery . . .

A hoarse shout from outside the ruined castle broke into Jim's thoughts. The five refugees sprang to their feet, grasping bows, spears.

"Strang and the Unclean Ones!" Freya cried, running to the gate. Out on the moor, shadowy in the pallid light of dawn, stood a score of shaggy figures!

"Garth!" Their huge leader cried. "Let me speak with Garth!"

Jim mounted a heap of shattered stone, stood there, spear in hand. Eric and Paul, arrows fitted to their bows, stood beside him.

"What do you want, Strang?"

The leader of the renegade band raised his hand.

"Our women are old, eaten by the plague," he cried. "Give us Freya and the other two, and you'll not be harmed."

Jim stared at the yellowed, sore-ridden figures. Freya and the other two girls to become the mates of these spectres! He laughed harshly.

"Come and take them!" he cried.

A flight of missiles from Strang's followers was his answer. Jim leaped down just in time to avoid being hit.

"Let them waste their arrows!" Eric said scornfully. "These walls are strong enough . . ." He wheeled, staring.

An arrow had looped high over the wall, rattled upon the flags. Attached to it was a rude leather bag . . . a bag which, on landing, disgorged a cloud of red, feathery particles.

"The plague spores!" Jim cried, dragging Freya back.

AT THAT instant another of the queer "bombs" dropped into the castle, followed by another, and another. The high walls, their protection against Strang and his men, were fatal now, for they cut off the strong sea breeze which would have blown the spores away. A cloud of the crimson lint was rising, while swift-growing patches of it began to form on the damp stones. Jim glanced at Freya's vibrant young form, shuddered at recollection of those terrible, decaying women at Strang's camp.

They also might have been young and beautiful, before the red spores claimed them.

"Better to go out, die fighting," he exclaimed, moving toward the gate, "than to rot slowly away with the plague!"

"No!" Freya and Elaine were tugging at a ring set in the floor. "Have you forgotten the raid shelter, Garth?"

Under their efforts a square trap-door of massive oak beams swung open, revealing a flight of stone steps.

"Quick!" Eric dodged one of the spore-laden missiles, leaped for the opening. "Down!"

Blindly Jim followed the others down the stairs, lowered the trap door into place, slid home its massive bolt. Hardly had he done so when there were faint shouts above, a rain of blows upon the door. Then the six fugitives were racing downward, descending interminable stone steps.

Jim, groping through the darkness,

swore softly. These orphans of the war seemed to look to him for leadership. If he had remained Garth the primitive warrior of this blighted land, he might have had some plan to save them. But now, amnesia gone, he was only a bewildered aviator, with no knowledge of cave-man tactics of fighting. And the oaken trap-door must yield in time before Strang's assaults . . .

Suddenly Jim saw light ahead . . . pale, dawn-light. In the distance he could hear the slap of waves. Emerging from the corridor, he gave a sudden gasp of amazement. They were standing on a sort of rocky ledge at one end of a huge cave in the face of the cliffs. Except for the ledge, the entire floor of the cave was water, rolling through a broad, low opening from the sea beyond. The cave was thus a sort of covered harbor cut into the wall of rock.

**S**TRIKING as this grotto was, it received only the briefest attention from Jim Gleason. His gaze was fixed on a sleek, graceful shape moored against the ledge . . . a big, sports model seaplane!

"A plane!" he exclaimed. "How on earth . . ."

"Don't you remember, Garth?" Freya said. "This was the machine Lord Lochgair had in case things got too bad and we had to leave. Martin, the chauffeur, ran it, but Martin was lost along with Lord Lochgair. And you didn't know how it worked . . ."

"Didn't know how it worked?" Jim cried. "But . . . I . . . I'm an aviator." Realization swept over him. The blow on the head, the amnesia, had knocked all knowledge of aviation out of him! Eleven years, with a plane at his disposal, and he'd forgotten how to fly! And now, his memory restored, it was doubtless too late . . . A burst of triumphant shouting echoed along the corridor.

"Strang! The Unclean Ones!" Eric shouted. "They've forced the door!"

"Quick!" Jim motioned to the entrance of the corridor. "See if you can hold them back! There's a chance . . ." He ran toward the bobbing seaplane.

Eric, Paul, and the three girls took up positions at either side of the doorway. Jim, climbing onto the seaplane, saw a yellow-skinned, wide-eyed figure dash forward, club raised, saw him fall before a spear-thrust. Another, following at his heels, met the same fate. Eric and Paul brandished their reddened spears with shouts of triumph.

Jim tore at the plane's motor cover, opened it. A heavy layer of grease had protected the engine; the wiring was badly corroded, the plugs fouled. There were rusty tools in the cabin, but the job promised to be a lengthy one. With a shout of encouragement to the defenders of the door, he commenced work. Plugs to be cleaned, fuel lines blown open, wiring checked. On the ledge beside the plane were several sealed drums of oil, gasoline. He opened one of the latter, used the gas to dissolve long-dried grease.

As Jim worked with Franzied haste, Strang's men tried two more rushes to force the doorway, both of which were in vain. The girls, fierce young Amazons, ran to the aid of the men, hurling stones at the attackers. Once, too, Strang had tried the trick of throwing the deadly spores, but Freya, scooping up handfuls of water, had washed the stuff into the rocky basin. Smeared with grease, fingers torn, Jim labored over the ancient motor.

After the attempt to force the entrance to the grotto by means of the fungus, the Unclean Ones had been quiet. Minute after minute slipped by and Jim began to see hope ahead. The wiring system was completed, most of the dried grease cleaned away. There remained only a half-hour's work. If they could hold off Strang that long . . .

A sudden cry from the passageway drew Jim's gaze. The Unclean Ones had re-

turned to the attack. And this time they were carrying before them rude shields of branches bound together by rawhide, each as tall as a man's head. In vain Paul and Eric stabbed at the shields; secure behind their bucklers, the attackers pushed out onto the ledge.

Shouts, cries of exultation, filled the grotto. Eric fell back, a gash across his shoulder. Elaine dropped as a stone struck her forehead. Jim could see Strang's leprous, brutal countenance peering above his shield. Stabbing, hacking, from behind their protective wall, the Unclean Ones crowded into the cavern.

"Garth!" Freya, retreating in desperation, shot a glance toward him. "Garth!"

Jim groaned. The defenders, falling back along the ledge, were now only a few feet from the plane. Even should he join them, his spear would be of no use against the shields. And before he could get the motor started, Strang's men would have followed them aboard. Paul was wounded, now, while the invaders, roaring in triumph, pressed along the stone causeway. Several of them, he noticed, emerging from the dark passage, carried torches. Jim stared. Torches . . .

**I**N ONE frantic moment he had snatched up a tin of gasoline, unscrewed its cap. Then, with all his strength, he hurled it at the attackers. Spouting gasoline, drenching the wild figures, it landed fairly among the torchbearers. A flash of light, howls of pain, of fear, and the Unclean Ones were hurling themselves into the water in a frenzied effort to quench the flame.

"Freya! Paul!" Jim sprang onto the causeway, dragged his companions aboard

the plane. A moment later he had cut the cable, pushed the craft out into the grotto.

Strang and his men, the blazing gasoline smothered in the water, were striking out toward the plane. Jim set the controls, then, with a prayer, ran forward to split the prop, for he had not had time to go over the starter. Three times he spun the propeller; at the fourth try, just as Strang's followers grasped the tail assembly, the motor broke into a roar. Jim swung into the cabin.

"Garth!" Eric burst out. "What is it? That noise . . . and the machine, moving . . ."

Jim slid under the controls.

"Don't worry," he chuckled. "Where we're going there's a lot of noise . . . and movement!"

He stepped up the motor. With cries of rage and terror, the Unclean Ones released their grip on the rudders. The plane roared from the cave, swept skyward.

"Garth!" Freya whispered. "We're in the air . . . like a great bird . . ."

"Flying, beautiful," he grinned. "You've a lot to learn! Wait'll you see New York!" He swung the seaplane to the west. "The U. S. patrol boats'll stop us three hundred miles off shore. But when they find out we haven't got the plague, they'll let us land. And maybe"—Jim glanced down at the ruined city and weed-grown fields, below—"maybe someday when American scientists have developed a way to defeat the red spores, we'll come back. Colonists, to the Old World, just as they came to the New. Colonists without the ancient hates, suspicions, and insane nationalism . . . to make a new and peaceful world in the American way!"