

THRILLING WONDER STORIES

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TENTH ANNIVERSARY
NUMBER NEXT
ISSUE!

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CATALYST

A Novelet of Laboratory
Magic

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•
ROBOT NEMESIS

An Interplanetary
Novelet

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HULBERT
BURROUGHS

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—and others!

EVERY STORY BRAND-NEW

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• ON THE COVER

Artist Brown has depicted a scene from the novelet
MEN MUST DIE, by Ward Hawkins, which appears
in this issue.

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An Earthman and Earthwoman Are Hurled Through Worlds
Within Worlds by a Diabolical Weapon!



The blue ray touched me

BEYOND ANNIHILATION

By **HENRY KUTTNER**

Author of "Power of the Snake," "The Devil Rides," etc.

WHEN I heard the footsteps pause at my cell door, I knew that my month-long imprisonment beneath Administration House was over at last. The realization brought me no elation. I knew too well the fate of prisoners in the "guinea-pig" gallery—human specimens, reserved for scientific experimentation.

As the door slid noiselessly into the opaque glassite wall I saw Orsa, my

jailer, flanked by two guards. His red-lidded eyes were blinking rapidly, a trick of his whenever he was inordinately pleased.

"Come out, Falcon," he said softly. "Degg wants to clip your wings."

Degg was a renegade scientist, vassal of Marlin, the overlord who had overthrown the government and seized the reins of power on that fateful day of March 4th, 2203 A.D., only a few

months ago. And Marlin's legions, armed with new and powerful weapons of destruction perfected by Degg, had scattered my fleet of air pirates and made me, Paul Dent, the Falcon, a captive.

As I came out of the room blazing agony raced through my arm, and I swung about angrily. Orsa's heavy-jawed face was twisted in a grin, and the muzzle of the electrogun in his hand glowed redly. This wasn't the first time he'd tried such a trick. My body bore more than one scar attributable to Orsa.

Orsa barked a command. The guards hustled me the length of the corridor, into an elevator, and along another passage to a bare, metal-lined chamber, obviously an experimental laboratory. The walls were splashed with rusty stains and discolorations; manacled to one of them was a girl.

From televiser portraits I had seen I recognized her as Jan Kenworthy, daughter of President Kenworthy, whom Marlin had killed in his *coup d'état*. There was the bronze hair, falling in soft ringlets to her leather-uniformed shoulders, the level blue gaze, the stubborn little chin. She knew me, too, I saw, but after a brief glance paid me no attention.

TWO men were in the room: Degg and Marlin. Marlin was strongly-built, bull-throated, with an unruly thatch of stiff, red hair. Degg's hair was silver; he was thin and hollow-cheeked and feral-eyed. In his hand was a curiously-constructed weapon with a bell-shaped muzzle.

"Good-by, Falcon," Orsa called. "Remember me!"

Suddenly I went limp, sagging laxly against the arms that held me. As I had expected, the grip loosened momentarily, and I wrenched free, whirling and leaping away. Fear sprang into Orsa's red-lidded eyes, and he thrust up a warding arm. My first brushed it aside and smashed home against his heavy jaw.

By Algol, it was good to feel the bone splintering beneath my knuckles! Smiling, I let the guards take me. As they pulled me toward the far wall I saw a

curious light in Jan Kenworthy's blue eyes.

Marlin was bellowing laughter. "So the Falcon can still strike, eh?" he roared. "A good blow, Dent! A good blow!"

They chained me to the wall near the girl. The guards were alert now, their electroguns in their hands.

As the groaning Orsa went out, Marlin eyed me, rubbing his chin.

"I'm sorry you've got to go, Dent," he said in his gruff voice. "I'd like to have you on my side. But I don't dare have anybody around that I can't handle."

"Thanks for the compliment," I said. "What about Jan Kenworthy here? Why kill her?"

The girl turned her face toward me.

"I need no air pirate to defend me!" she said hotly. I felt blood creeping up to my face.

"You see, Falcon?" Marlin said. "I can't free her. She'd rouse the country against me in a week. No, you're both dangerous—and Degg will deal with you."

The lean scientist had been fumbling impatiently with his curious weapon. "Good," he said. "This will be the final test. I've tried it on inanimate objects, and cats and dogs. Now I'll use it for the purpose for which it was designed. With this in our hands there'll be no chance of revolt."

I eyed the strange gun, vividly imprinting on my mind the miniature coils and oscillators clustering about its barrel.

"I've not seen those experiments," Marlin said. "You say it's a—a vibrator?"

Degg grunted. "Marlin, you're no scientist, but at least you know what vibration is. You know that everything vibrates—solids, liquids, gases—at a certain fixed rate; that the atoms in your body are vibrating at this moment. You've seen objects vibrate rapidly, and noticed how they seem to blur—to become partially invisible. That's unitary vibration—vibration of the whole. It's incomplete. I've completed my process by developing a ray that'll increase atomic vibration."

"I see." Marlin's brow furrowed.

"Look here," Degg continued. "Suppose the atomic vibration of your body is a thousand times a second—an arbitrary number, that is. I increase it, double it. What happens?"

I FELT a little shudder crawl down my back. I knew my fate now.

"You'd be annihilated," Degg finished flatly. "I've proved it. You've not seen the preliminary experiments, Marlin, but look at this!"

He leveled the weapon at a chromium-metal chair. There was an almost inaudible hissing and a beam of ghastly bluish radiance crawled out from the bell-shaped muzzle. It fingered out, slowly, until it touched the chair. The azure light crept over the metal's surface. The chromium shimmered, a play of dancing radiance flickering over it. For a moment the chair was bathed in cold blue light.

Suddenly it hurt my eyes to look at it. The chromium seemed to be shaking—not the chair, but the atoms of the metal seemed to dissolve. Even as I watched the chair vanished!

Involuntary exclamations of fear and awe burst from the guards' lips. Marlin's breath came explosively.

"God, Degg! I hadn't realized—what a weapon that is!"

A dry smile twitched the scientist's colorless lips. "It isn't perfected yet. This is the only specimen. It takes some time to manufacture them at present, but later we'll make improvements. Shall we complete the test now?"

Marlin's face was no longer ruddy. He nodded. "All right, Degg. Get it over."

Still smiling, Degg lifted the weapon. The beam sprang out straight for me. Oddly I could see it creeping forward. It didn't behave like ordinary light.

The blue ray touched me.

My muscles jerked convulsively. I saw the room through a flickering azure curtain. A strange shock went through every atom of my being, not painful, but—unexpected. The room flashed out and vanished in a curtain of darkness.

Grinding, shaking metamorphosis, akin, perhaps, to death . . . flight through blackness . . .

And the dark curtain seemed to shimmer, to flow back. Grey light crept in. For a moment the landscape shook and wavered unsubstantially; then it steadied. I stood silent with amazement.

Degg's laboratory—was gone! Gone the intent faces of Marlin and the scientist, the white face of Jan Kenworthy, the frightened faces of the two guards. My chains had vanished. I was in another world!

Thick grey fog hemmed me in. It seemed to possess some menace. Yet there was nothing tangible. Merely the sensation of unseen eyes watching—and the abnormally dense fog.

Crystalline rock slabs comprised the ground beneath my feet. Greyish, rounded stones lay half embedded in the crystal here and there. Surprisingly, a few feet away was a chair.

A chromium-metal chair. And I had last seen it bathed in the blue glow of Degg's weapon!

Abruptly a little shimmering light sprang out in empty air beside me. Wonder flooded me as a colorless shadow leaped into existence—the slender shadow of a girl. Then, quite suddenly, I understood what had happened.

The shadow grew thick. It became three-dimensional; real. It was Jan Kenworthy, her eyes wide, staring at me in bewilderment.

I moved closer, took her hands in mine. The touch of warm, living flesh reassured her. She clung to me for a moment; then her glance swept around this strange world of grey mist.

DON'T be frightened," I said. "We're still alive. Degg's guess was wrong."

She shivered. Then she drew away from me, eyeing the chair. I smiled.

"Sit down. Go ahead; make sure it's real. It was thoughtful of Degg to provide the chair for us."

She sank down gratefully. I didn't know how long she had been standing chained to the wall in Degg's laboratory.

"Falcon," she said, "we're not annihilated." As though she couldn't believe it.

"Degg saw his subjects vanish as

their vibration was speeded up," I told her. "And it's quite true that they were annihilated—from Degg's viewpoint. But what's to prevent another world, coexistent with our earth, lying on the same space-plane but separated by a difference in vibration?"

She frowned. "I don't quite—"

"Well, a world whose atoms vibrate much faster than earthly atoms—the world we're in now, apparently. Invisible to earthly eyes, just as a tuning-fork is partially invisible when it's vibrating. The theory isn't new. Degg simply increased our vibration-rate, and enabled us to perceive this world."

"But—it's the end, isn't it? We can't get back."

I shrugged. Abruptly there was a movement near by. Something small and dark was approaching through the fog. I reached down to pick up one of the stones that dotted the crystalline soil.

Involuntarily a surprised oath was jerked from me. My fingers sank into the rock, sank into soft grey pulp that clung to my fingers. Camouflage! Plants or fungi masquerading as stones!

I stood up to face the visitor. But Jan had already recognized it.

"It's a cat," she said. "But how it got here—"

"Don't you remember Degg's other experiments?" I asked. "He tried out his weapon on dogs and cats. Probably there'll be a lot of them around here."

The cat came closer. The fog above it seemed to thicken. I'd flown blind through many a fog, but never one like that. Jan got up quickly, caught her breath in a little gasp of horror.

The fog around the cat was cottony, viscid—half solid. It writhed inward. The cat paused, looked up—and was engulfed.

The cat's harsh, grating scream ripped out horribly. Through whirling fog I saw the little creature lifted, and the greyness closed in—hungrily. Little crimson drops spattered.

Jan was very white. "Falcon," she whispered, what sort of world is this? Maybe it would have been better if Degg had had his way."

"Don't say that, Jan," I said, tonelessly. "We're still alive—"

"But for how long?"

I had no answer. I picked up the metal chair. It was a light but serviceable weapon.

"We'd better stay here till the fog lifts," I told the girl.

"Will it lift?" she said. "That's not ordinary fog."

It wasn't. It reminded me horribly of amoebas I'd seen under microscopes. Half-solid, capable of coalescing to capture its victims and devour them.

"The chair and the cat were the only earthly things waiting for us," I said, after awhile. "Degg must have used his blue ray on plenty of other things. What happened to them?"

"This fog-thing may have—" She didn't finish.

"I doubt it. Living things, yes. But not indigestible objects." I broke off, sorry I had spoken.

WE had been in a little circle clear of the strange fog. Now it was narrowing, the greyness closing in.

The fog seemed to rush in and overwhelm us, choking us with its thick greasiness. It was like being engulfed by a giant amoeba, feeling moist tentacles and folds pressing down with fearful force. My chair whirled through the air. But it was like battling under water; and ever the horrible thing pressed heavier and heavier upon us.

I was almost lifted from my feet once by a dank fold of gelatinous stuff that wrapped itself about me. I heard Jan cry out, and caught her about the waist just in time to prevent her from being swept away.

It was a hopeless battle. Yet I fought on, bitterly, vainly, until I saw a great black bulk floating down toward me through the murk. Was this new menace the nucleus of the fog-monster?

Light came; cold, white, vivid radiance. The bulk came to a stop not three feet away. It was an airship.

Not an earthly airship. It was like a conical bullet, tapered and rounded at both ends, twenty feet high and twice as long. From a circular port the cold light streamed out.

Hope came suddenly, and somehow I battled my way across that three feet of grey, coiling death. I stumbled over a metal threshold, dragging Jan with me. We collapsed on the floor of a small cubicle, while a door clanged shut behind us, shutting out the grey cloudy billows.

Jan was scrubbing weakly at an odorless, greasy-looking slime that covered her. I, too, was smeared from head to foot.

"Quite a world," I said, with a feeble grin. She tried to smile, glanced up quickly at a quiet rustling sound.

Another door had opened. A figure was standing in the portal. I stared in amazement.

He was man-shaped—but not human. A scanty harness of some kind of leather comprised his clothing, permitting a view of the amazing structure of his body. He was translucent!

Light shone through his body! Like cloudy glass, his flesh glowed milky and semi-transparent, and within his body—like an X-ray photograph—I could trace the glowing outlines of unfamiliar-looking organs.

A curious phenomenon puzzled me. There was a heart, although an abnormally large one, and other organs clearly discernible, but apparently there were no bones, or else they were quite transparent.

His face was masklike, rigid and whitely translucent. He was hairless; his eyes were large and black. His jaws seemed hinged like mandibles, the only part of his face, I was to learn, that ever moved. His face was without muscles, covered with a chitinous translucent exoskeleton.

HE said something in a language that was all vowels. I shook my head, and he beckoned.

"Come on, Jan," I said. "He seems friendly, although he looks like a freak."

"I be not freak," the translucent man said. He said it in English!

Jan and I stared at each other. "You speak English?" I got out rather shapily.

He nodded. "Yes. Enter."

Questions teeming in my mind, I

followed him into what was probably the control room, a room obviously furnished for utility only. A few stools and chairs, a table or two, a metal-mesh hammock dangling from the ceiling, some paraphernalia in a corner, and an instrument panel set in the wall.

The translucent man pointed to chairs.

"Hello—sit down," he said, accenting the words wrongly. "How is it that you speak English?" I said.

He picked up two books from a table and held them out to me. A scientific textbook and a popular novel. Then I saw the heterogenous collection in the corner and realized the truth. There were several chromium chairs, some small blocks of stone, specimens of metals and fabrics, familiar earthly things.

"Jan," I said. "Degg tried his blue ray on these books, among other things, and our friend here found them. He's learned English from them."

"My name be Ruug," our host said. He waited expectantly, and I introduced Jan and myself, with a mad feeling of unreality.

"The man must have a remarkable brain!" I said to Jan.

Ruug stared at me uncomprehendingly. "Brain machine," he said. "You wonder many things. I shall tell you."

He went on in a flat, emotionless, mechanical voice. I will not attempt to reproduce his curious phrases, his garbled English, but it was a fantastic history I learned. This was a world utterly alien to ours. Evolution had created here an anthropoid ruling race, although it differed from the human race in many particulars. Ruug was the last of his kind.

Ages ago Ruug's race had developed an exoskeleton—a shell outside the body, like earthly crustacea, instead of the human endoskeleton. In time this shell had softened, sloughed off, and become unnecessary as the body beneath it had become a mass of tough gristle and tendon.

Ruug was actually boneless; he needed no skeleton, for his flesh was incredibly hard; akin, I think, to the tough human heart-muscle fibers. His mind was, as he had said, a brain

machine. Through the eons emotion had been bred out, leaving a highly trained machine of flesh and blood.

He wasn't a super-scientific genius, but he was practically a mechanical thinking machine. With two books in his hands, he had been able to learn our language, even approximating the correct pronunciation. He was a human robot—a thinking robot.

He spoke of the fog-thing we had encountered. It was, as I had guessed, a living entity. It had come, Ruug thought, from space.

A hundred years ago this world had been thickly populated with beings like Ruug. Then the fog-creature had come, Cyclopean, terrible—and hungry. Life had been wiped out.

A few survivors had fled to underground retreats, or to airships like this. But one by one they had died, until Ruug was the last survivor. Nor could he escape, for his race had not conquered space travel.

I glanced at Jan and realized that she was asleep. I turned to awaken her.

"Let her be," Ruug said. "I made her thus. Purposely." He pointed to a tiny orifice in the wall beside her head. "A sleep gas I released. She will awaken not long."

He read the anger in my face, put up a restraining hand. "Wait. I saw enmity in her eyes. We can help each other, I think. But she would cause trouble."

Resentment was rising within me, but I fought it down. After all, this man had saved our lives.

"Well?" I said.

"First tell me what happened to you."

I gave him my story. He sat there motionless, his huge black eyes brooding. When I had finished he spoke again, and I was surprised at his increased fluency. That amazing machine-mind of his had learned much from listening to my narrative.

"It is as I supposed," he said. "A vibration world. When I first found those objects—he pointed to the pile in the corner—"I suspected something of the truth. So I kept watch in this spot. Your science-man should have guessed. There are not only two, but innumer-

able worlds, different in vibration, lying on the same plane. By increasing or decreasing one's vibration rate it is possible to move from one of these worlds to another."

"You're able to do this?"

"Not yet. One advantage of your type of brain, swayed by emotion, is that you have imagination, which I have not. Given the factors of an equation I can accurately compute the solution. But the initial step—there I am handicapped."

Hope faded. "Then there's nothing—"

"Wait. You have given me the factors of the equation. I want to leave this world. So do you. We can do it in the same manner in which Degg sent you here—by vibration. Will you picture again exactly what happened in your earthly laboratory and describe the weapon which projected the blue ray?"

I EXPLAINED Degg's weapon as well as I was able.

At last Ruug nodded.

"It is well. There are not many factors, but I can find the missing ones. We shall go to your world—" He paused, eyeing me. "Degg and the other—Marlin—would destroy you, would they not? And me also they would kill. They must go. That will leave your world without a ruler." The great black eyes were glowing. "Shall we rule it ourselves?"

There was a sound behind me. Jan was on her feet facing us as I swung about. "I heard what you're planning, Falcon!" she blazed. "You don't intend to—"

Ruug's chitin-masked face was expressionless. "Well, why not?" I said.

Her lips were a white line. "You'd give Earth to this creature? You—a human being?"

"What has Earth done for me—a hunted outlaw with a price on his head?"

"No one drove you to become a pirate."

I felt myself flushing. "Well, I am a pirate. To the devil with Earth!"

"You swine!" Jan's eyes were wet. "You—"

I TURNED to Ruug. "Can you put her to sleep again?"

Swiftly he touched a button set in the wall. Abruptly the light went from Jan's eyes. I caught her as she fell.

"You've not hurt her?" I asked Ruug, my voice uneven.

He shook his head. "Asleep. She'll wake after a time. Put her down in this hammock. You, too, had better sleep for awhile. I will need your help presently, perhaps, and wake you then."

He touched the wall; another hammock dropped from the ceiling. I put Jan's limp form into it and climbed into the other one myself. A little breath of sweet-smelling perfume brushed my face—and I was asleep. . . .

* * * *

"It is ready."

Ruug's hand was on my shoulder, shaking me. I blinked, climbed out of the hammock. Ruug gestured.

"I did not need your help. The equation was not too difficult."

A square block stood near by. But only the square floor-platform was of solid metal; the sides and top were a grille of fine-meshed wire. There was an oblong opening in the side facing me. The platform was perhaps fifteen feet square. A lever protruded from the floor in one corner. That was all.

"An improvement," Ruug said, "over Degg's device."

"This will take us back to our world?" I asked.

He nodded, said, "Come."

"Wait," I said. "Jan—the girl."

"Leave her here."

Our eyes clashed. "She's going with me," I said.

I lifted Jan's unconscious form, carried her into the cage, put her down gently. Ruug handed me a tube that looked like an old-fashioned Twentieth Century flashlight.

"It kills by destroying the nerve tissues," he said. "Simply squeeze the sides."

He held one of the tubes in a translucent, glassy hand as he moved to the lever, swung it over. The mesh walls of the cage began to glow with a soft blue radiance. I felt a tingling go

through me.

Blackness . . . shuddering, unstable void. . . .

Light came again. Through the mesh of the cage I saw that the walls of Ruug's ship were no longer around us. Instead there were the stained metal walls of Degg's laboratory.

A man was chained where I had stood hours before. A dozen guards stood rigidly at attention. Degg was lifting his vibration weapon.

I shouted, leaped out of the cage, Ruug at my heels. Their backs were turned to me, but Falcon had never killed an unwarned enemy.

I leveled my ray-tube, snapped, "Lift 'em! Quick!"

Before either the guards or Degg could move a blinding beam of white brilliance flashed over my shoulder. I dared not turn to strike down Ruug's weapon, with the guards swinging to face me.

They died. Bathed in Ruug's white ray, they slumped like bags of meal and dropped, their nerve tissues burned out by the dreadful power of the beam. Degg had leaped aside, his vibrator weapon leveled at me. The blue beam fingered out from the bell-shaped muzzle while amazement still contorted his gaunt face.

RUGG'S white ray caught him. He fell. His face went blank, and his weapon clattered to the floor, exploding with a hiss of burned-out wires.

The white ray clicked out. "There remains the other—Marlin," Ruug said.

"Damn you!" I cried hoarsely. "You gave them no chance!"

He looked at me blankly. Before he could speak Jan appeared in the door of the cage. There was loathing on her face.

"You butcher—Falcon!" She spat out at me.

Ruug kicked at the smoking remnants of Degg's weapon. "It is destroyed," he said tonelessly. "You said it was the only one. We must get rid of this, too." He pointed to the vibration cage. "With so many worlds, so many dangers like the fog entity in my own, the gate should be kept locked. This is a good world of yours, Falcon.

We must keep it isolated."

I heard Jan cry out. Even in that flashing second I wondered why she warned me if she hated me so. I spun about, saw Marlin standing in the doorway, flanked by guards, electro-guns blazing.

My shoulder flamed with blazing agony. Ruug said something incoherent, his ray-tube clattering on the floor. I flung my own tube up, squeezed it desperately.

The white beam sprang out, blinding, deadly. The three in the doorway stiffened. Bathed in the blazing glare, they crumpled nervelessly. Marlin's ruddy face stared up, an angry grin frozen on it.

Then, without warning, a sickly sweet perfume was strong in my nostrils. My brain shrieked warning. Involuntarily I held my breath, but I had already inhaled some of the anesthetic gas. The floor seemed to be drifting up toward me. I hit it, but there was no pain.

I was partially conscious, but unable to move. Presently I felt myself being tugged toward the vibrator cage. Desperately I struggled to move, felt life seeping back into my veins. I saw Ruug's clouded-glass face bending over me, felt something cold snap about my ankle. Prone on the floor of the cage I saw Jan lying limp and unconscious.

Ruug was fumbling with the lever in the corner. Instantly I realized his plan.

He would not share the rule of earth with me—no. I had served his purpose, like the vibrator cage. And, like the cage, I was to be destroyed—sent with Jan into endless vibration-worlds from which there would be no return.

Chained as I was, I could not reach the control lever, but I tensed, waiting for my chance. Ruug swung over the lever, turned hastily to hurry from the cage.

As he passed me I lunged at him, felt his bare legs sliding through my fingers. I wrenched desperately and he toppled back.

I grappled with him.

The meshes of the cage glowed. The warning blueness shimmered over them. Blackness took us . . .

THREE was that familiar, terrible feeling of unstable shaking; then around us rose the walls of Ruug's airship. This time the blueness did not fade; it glowed even brighter. Handicapped as I was by my chained leg, I was at a fearfull disadvantage. Ruug's inhuman body was strong, but one thing was in my favor; he knew nothing of modern wrestling—and the Falcon was a master of it.

It was like battling a giant reptile. I think the most horrible part of it was the utter lack of expression on Ruug's chitin-masked face. The blue fire flamed weirdly and there was no sound but the harsh rasping of my breath. The blackness of the metamorphosis closed around us.

I almost lost my grip in that second of trembling nothingness. Somehow I locked my legs about Ruug's as he was slipping away, gripped his throat with murderous fingers.

Through the blue glow, I caught a glimpse of this amazing new vibration-world into which we had been hurled. World of ice! Polar world of white desolation and death! Yet there was life here, for I saw blazing streaks of red light flashing outside in ordered formations.

I lost sight of them in a maelstrom of battle-mad conflict with Ruug. We clawed at each other, slugging and tearing, while the blueness flamed brighter. There came the shock of disorientation, the nerve-racking trembling—and still another world sprang into existence about us.

Cyclopean towers, jet black, reared toward a sky aflame with battle. Fantastically shaped airships raced and fought and fell in the great canyons between the colossal piles of masonry.

There was time for but a flashing glimpse; iron fingers were at my throat. I strove to break them, then remembered that Ruug had no bones. But I tore his hands away at last.

Blackness, shuddering void, and yet another world as we raced on through the vibrations. A dead world this time. Ebony glass stretched beneath a red moon. With a desperate twist I got my legs locked about Ruug's torso and strained desperately.

I fought to hold back his hands as they fumbled toward my eyes. His stomach-muscles were rigid as metal. Abruptly his hand swept to his belt, brought out something. He tried to throw it out of the cage. As I struck down his arm a key-shaped bit of metal clinked on the floor near Jan, out of my reach.

The void took us again; then another new world was about us. The ground, of a uniform pink color, heaved and billowed; it seemed to be alive. Without warning the rigid muscles of Ruug's torso caved in. His jaw fell, he shouted something unintelligible and went limp.

His eyes glazed. Colorless froth bubbled from his nostrils. Ruug was dead.

AGAIN the metamorphosis came—and this new world was the most dreadful of all. It was utterly dark, as though underground. A moist, hot wind, blew on my face, laden with acrid odors that made me shudder.

"Jan!" I called. "Wake up, Jan!" She opened her eyes, staring at me.

In swift obedience to my command she picked up the key, hurriedly she freed me. I got to my feet, staggered to the control lever. The premonitory shuddering was already racking me as I reversed it.

From the shaking nothingness we emerged into the world where the ground was pink and billowing with strange life. Then came the dead world of the hurtling red moon.

Jan was at my side. "We're going back," I said hoarsely.

The Cyclopean city sprang up outside the cage.

"You could rule Earth now, Falcon," Jan said.

The polar world sent its icy breath into the cage. Almost immediately the interior of Ruug's airship took its place.

"I don't want to rule Earth," I told her. "There are other things more important to me. Jan, the Falcon is dead. There's only Paul Dent now."

She did not answer, but her hand was warm in mine as the walls of Degg's laboratory swam into reality outside the cage.