

PLANET STORIES



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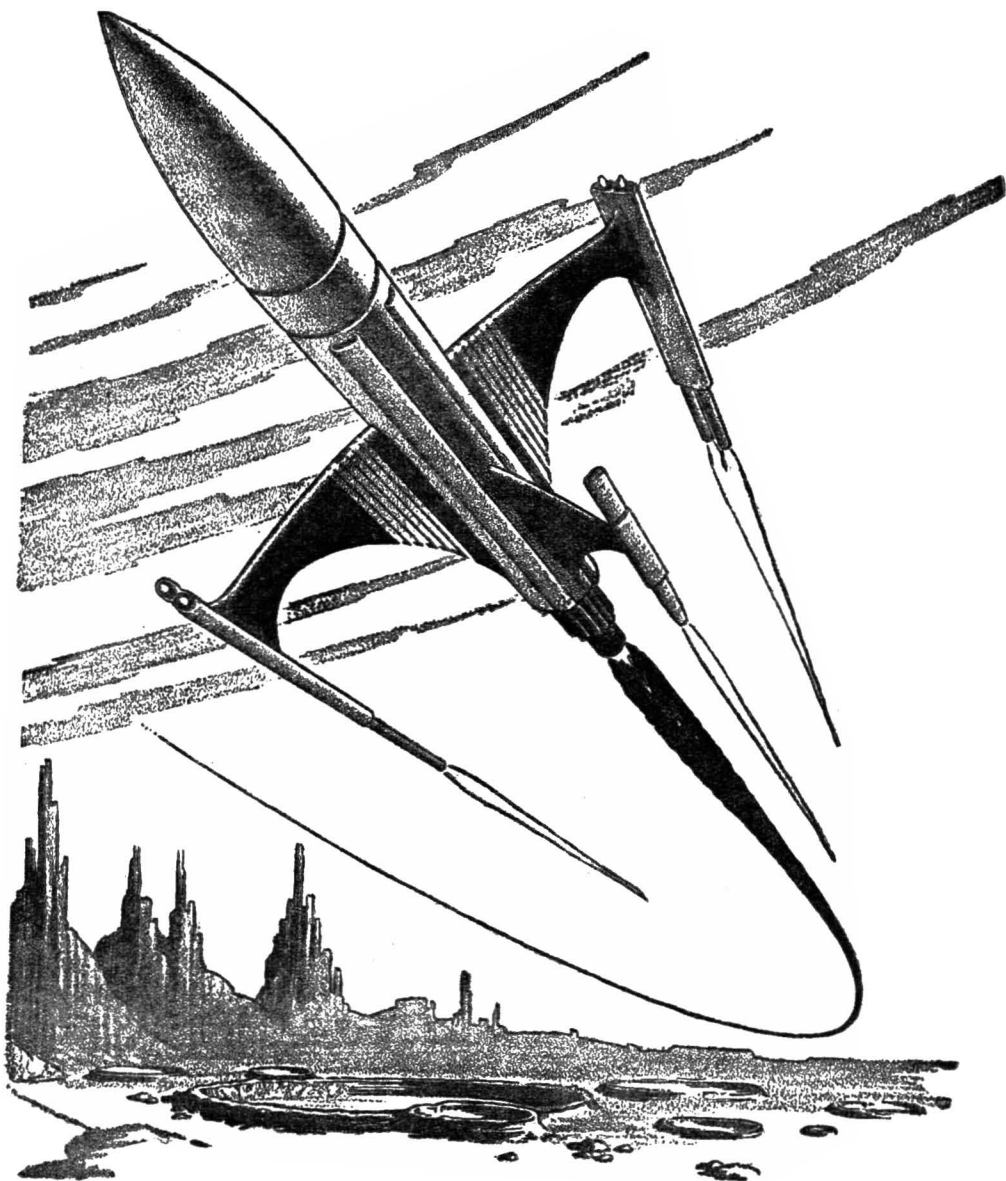
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Calling World-4 of Kithgol!

By H. B. FYFE

*Accidentally, Yorgh sent whirling off into space a grim,
200-year-old message . . . and lived to see his
dead world meet the vibrant future.*





THE Star was obscured by blowing sand, and Yorgh could not see much of The World either. The wolly he rode snorted in panic at the howl of the sandstorm. Finally, the big hunter swung down to the ground and dragged the six-legged beast by the guide rope.

"Where are those trees I passed this morning?" he muttered.

He longed for a drink from the water-skin slung at his shoulder with his rolled cloak, but there was so much sand in his

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short, golden beard that he would probably choke himself.

The sand whipped against his gray pants of coarse wool and the dark red tunic for which he had given the Sea People two dozen copper arrowheads, and swirled loosely beneath his calf-high leather boots. Yorgh squinted his eyes till they were mere gleams of bright blue among the laughter wrinkles.

"And I didn't even find the copper rocks!" he growled. "I should have stayed in the flatlands, hunting with the others."

He discovered that he was heading into a gully where the ripping winds had scooped sand from between ridges of dark rocks. Yorgh was not sure whether it offered shelter or the chance to be buried alive, but he plunged ahead to investigate. Within fifty paces, the howl at his back diminished.

"Not the rocks; it's a lull," he exclaimed, peering upward.

The sky was an ugly reddish brown, dark and menacing. He wondered how soon more tons of sand would sweep down to refill the gully. As he gazed upward, a round stone rolled under his foot and he sprawled forward. Even as he dropped, it seemed that he was falling further than he should be.

He brushed sand from his eyes and looked up. From the edge of a hollow whirled from the floor of the gully by opposing winds, the wolly stared down at him with an expression of scared idiocy. The ends of his horn bow and copper-tipped lance thrust up beside the saddle.

As Yorgh scrambled up and his head came above ground level, he saw that the hollow was at the junction of his gully with another. Sand was already beginning to collect again as the wind shifted. Behind a worn rock at his side, Yorgh glimpsed a glint of metal.

Copper? he wondered, stepping forward.

It was not copper, nor any other metal he had ever seen.

To judge from what protruded above the sand, the thing was shaped slightly like the wagons the people of the Hunter tribe used in their migrations. Every part of it was smoothly rounded, even the skeleton sitting in the front seat.

Yorgh stared, feeling the prickle of rising hairs on his neck.

The moan of rising wind made him shiver. At least, he told himself it was the wind. It sounded uncomfortably like a wailing spirit.

Any skins or leather padding on the seat had long since crumbled. Only sand-scoured bones and metal remained. Except—

Something gleamed from the small deposit of sand remaining about the feet of the skeleton. Yorgh reached out cautiously and touched the end of a whitish metal

cylinder as thick as his thumb. It was loose enough to pull out. He did, and it lay in his palm, about six inches long.

Yorgh could see no mark of any kind on the surface. He wondered if it would stand sharpening as a spearhead.

"Must have been one of the Old Ones," he muttered uneasily. "It is said they had strange and wonderful powers. I wonder if this was one of the wagons that skimmed over the ground with nothing pulling them, as are told of in the legends."

He had been turning the cylinder over in his hands as he considered. One end moved beneath his fingers and the opposite extreme abruptly flashed a bluish green light at him.

"Gaaghk!" choked Yorgh, and flung the thing from him.

It arched over the edge of the hollow, and its flight was followed by the thud of hooves as the wolly scampered away. The growing wind was again raising stinging flurries of sand.

"Ho! Come back here, you knob-headed idiot!" roared the man, scrambling up the side of the hole to give chase.

THE animal, stung by the flying sand, ran faster. Yorgh stooped, groping for a stone to throw ahead of it, so as to turn it back in his direction. His fingers grasped upon something hard, but the shape felt wrong and he looked down.

It was the white metal cylinder.

I never should have touched it, he thought. Naturally, it would have a curse on it. I must put it back!

Glancing over his shoulder, he saw there would be little time. Sand was heaping up again all along the gully. But the wolly had disappeared up a slope to the surface of the desert.

"I'll come right back!" said Yorgh aloud, with an uneasy feeling that there just might be someone to hear him.

He thrust the object into the leather pouch on his belt beside his bronze knife, and ran up the slope with long-legged strides, even in the sliding sand. The wolly was out of sight.

The moan of wind rose to a shriek from the blackening sky.

Yorgh staggered blindly ahead. Once,

peering between his fingers, he thought he caught a glimpse of the animal, but a gust whirled him around and he lost the direction. He floundered onward, wishing he had stayed in the gully. Then he remembered the company he would have had, and wondered if the Old One had been trapped by a similar false hope of shelter there.

With fumbling fingers, Yorgh unslung the cloak that hung behind his shoulder and wrapped it about his head. It gave some relief, and he plodded forward, afraid to stop in one spot.

Something jarred his shoulder roughly. Yorgh reached out, but his wild grab did not find the woolly fur of his mount.

"The trees!" he gasped in relief.

It was the only shelter this side of the hills that separated the desert from the grassy plain. Yorgh pulled off his cloak, tied one corner to the tree with the strap of his water-skin, and set about making as good an imitation of a tent as possible. It might at least give him breathing room till the storm ended.

The Star shone hotly at noon the next day before Yorgh tramped wearily into the shade of the tree-lined creek that would lead him to his people's camp on the plain. He was lured to this route partly by the promised coolness and partly by the sight of a herd of kromp out on the open flat. These were six-legged, like every animal on The World except man. There were eighty or a hundred, and a few of the ill-tempered bulls were already sniffing the air and aiming their four horns about.

Yorgh splashed water over his face and neck. He wished he could stop for a swim, but he had walked all night after the sandstorm died down to get through the hills and out of the desert. The only thing which could have kept him from the camp, where he could hope for badly needed sleep, was a chance to find the gully again. When the sand had settled, however, he had found—not entirely to his surprise—that he had completely lost the direction.

"It's like the old legends," he murmured, standing up and taking the cylinder out of his pouch to look at it again. "Things like this always happened to the ancient heroes. They even flew among the stars—huh! That's a likely tale! But this . . .?"

Once again, as he had learned, he twisted the end of the cylinder. The other end glowed with a blue-green light.

Yorgh shook his head in wonder, and returned the object to his pouch. He went ahead at a relaxed but steady pace. In a few minutes, the sound of voices through the undergrowth brought his head up sharply. He went on, parting the bushes silently. Presently, he grinned as he peered out at a wide pool.

Five of the younger women were swimming or splashing in the shallows. Piles of wet clothing on the bank indicated the task that had brought them to this sheltered eddy in the creek. Yorgh looked hopefully for the red-gold tresses of Vaneen, the shapely—if too haughty—daughter of Chief Tefior, but vainly.

Let me see, he pondered, shall I be a clumsy kromp snorting through the trees, or a meat-eating ponadu?

Raising his hands to his mouth, he emitted a wailing cry that was the trademark of the only prowling killer on The World large enough to hunt a man. The splashing in the creek ceased immediately.

YORGH ducked his head lower and wailed again. For good measure, he added a few guttural coughs, as if the animal had scented game. The splashing resumed for a second amid low cries of alarm, then was replaced by the hasty pat-pat-pat of bare feet along the bank. Yorgh peered after the wetly gleaming figures, and doubled up with one hand firmly across his mouth.

Taking time only to refill his water-skin, he followed the trail along the creek at a good pace. Just as he sighted the outlines of tents through the thinning trees, a handful of hunters ran pell-mell up the trail toward him.

"Hold! What's this?" snapped Chief Tefior, raising his spear to halt those trotting behind him. His gray-streaked beard bristled as he eyed Yorgh suspiciously.

"Yorgh, your best hunter," answered Yorgh, casting his eyes modestly downward. "I would have returned last night, had not my woolly run off in a sandstorm."

"About you, I do not worry!" retorted Tefior, fingering the haft of his spear. "The

girls just ran into camp shrieking that a ponadu was stalking the woods."

"Panting, wide-eyed, and in all the glory of their rather damp tresses," added a dark young bowman named Kwint, hiding a grin behind his hand as he examined Yorgh's innocent features.

"I thought I heard something," admitted the latter.

"Come then, Father!" half-grown Puko urked. "You'll help, won't you, Yorgh? Here, take my spear!"

Yorgh was half-inclined to let them go. He liked the sort of joke that brewed a while, gaining savor, like the time last spring when he had the luck to knock a ponadu unconscious with the butt of his broken spear. He still dreamed of having another such inspiration as that which impelled him to tie a dead log to the creature's hind legs, and then lead a group of young hunters into that part of the woods on the way to their nightly courting.

They had been enraged at spending half the night up trees, not daring to venture down in the dark with only their bronze knives. But they had been unable to prove that Yorgh had done anything worse than run faster than they, and he had enjoyed a unique evening being wined and fed and listened to with respect due the only man present, while the others waited for the disgruntled beast to free itself and slink unhappily off.

Yes, it would be good fun to let them go on, but Yorgh could not think of a quick excuse to separate Puko from the band. The boy was his favorite, perhaps because he so admired Yorgh's feats of fun and strength, or perhaps because his brown eyes so resembled those of his older sister.

"Well, truthfully," said Yorgh, "having only a knife in my belt, I broke off a branch and yelled aloud to scare the slinking thing. I distinctly heard it run off up the creek."

Some stared at him; other glanced side-long at each other.

Yorgh grinned good-naturedly, until he saw Tefior's scowl.

"Well," growled the chief, "I think we are too late to catch whatever it was, much as I would have liked to!"

Yorgh widened his eyes to their most innocent expression at the pointed emphasis

of the last phrase.

"You, Puko!" added Tefior. "Run back to camp ahead of us and find the fathers of those silly wenches. Tell them I said two or three are to go back with the girls to get the wash, and to smack their bottoms for going so far without even small bows!"

The tramp back to camp was made in silence, save for subdued snickering at the rear of the file, where Kwint and others whispered of the winter camp. The Sea People there still told stories of sea monsters, remembering the great, black, slippery thing that had been shot full of arrows and hauled up on the river bank before it was seen to be a kromp skin mounted on a frame of boughs. No one had admitted creating the "monster," but Kwint thought he knew the maker.

Despite Tefior's disapproving glare when Yorgh appeared before the chief's tent at suppertime, the customs of hospitality suffered no greater breach than that the tribal leader stamped off to inspect the picket line of wollies below the camp immediately after finishing his bowl of stew. Yorgh allowed Puko to shame Vaneen into offering a fourth helping, on grounds that he had not eaten during his desperate trek through the burning sands. He watched her move about the fire.

II

SHE wore a dress of blue wool, dyed and woven by the Sea People into finer material than was made by the Hunter tribe. It tended to cling as she moved; and once Yorgh considered complimenting her on the way it revealed the curve of her breast, but decided she might not laugh like some of the other girls.

"And then," he finished telling his story to Puko, "when the sand stopped blowing, I pulled myself out and came home."

"And the Old One is still there in his gully!" exclaimed the wide-eyed boy. "Will you take me out to see, Yorgh?"

"I doubt he will," said his sister, reaching out to place Yorgh's bowl with the others. "Yorgh will do no riding till he earns a new wolly. Moyt says he caught a saddled animal trotting out of the hills this morning, and that it belongs to him now."

"That Moyt!" Puko sprang up indignant-ly. "Why do you let him come to our fire, Vaneen? I have heard him say he courts you only because Tefior is chief."

"Moyt is a good hunter," retorted Vaneen, frowning, "and more trustworthy than some I could name. Maybe if Yorgh could borrow a bow, he could bring down a kromp tomorrow and earn a new woolly."

"He can borrow mine," cried Puko, "and I'll help him. Then he can make a new bow of the horns."

Vaneen laughed.

"Yorgh, naturally, would never have the bad luck to get a kromp without perfect horns. Well, anyway, he would be safer out of camp. Ahnee and some of the other girls are angry."

"With me?" demanded Yorgh. "I must stay and hear their complaints, since Moyt has already given me back my things. As I pointed out, my bow would be too strong for him to draw, especially with a broken arm."

"He has a broken arm?" cried Puko, leaping up in delight.

"Well, no. But he would have, had he not persuaded me to let go by turning temporarily honest."

Yorgh's laugh trailed off when Vaneen gave no sign of being amused, but Puko continued to crow for some minutes.

"Then we can go tomorrow," he said at last.

He sobered at the expression on Yorgh's face.

"Don't say it was just one of your stories, Yorgh! That the sand blew in till it filled the gully again!"

The big hunter nodded sadly.

"This morning, on the crest of the hills, I even climbed a tree to look back, but the sand is like waves of the sea."

The firelight glinted in Vaneen's hair as she laughed scornfully.

"You don't believe me?" he asked.

"There are over three hundred men, women, and children in the tribe," said the girl, stretching nonchalantly and smoothing the blue dress over her hips, "and even the tiniest babes in their mothers' arms will tell you that Yorgh seldom speaks in earnest!"

"That was unkind!" said Yorgh, pulling down the corners of his mouth. "But you

always were too proud to be considerate, as is common with beautiful women. Will you bet a kiss that I lie?"

"A hundred!" Vaneen waved a hand contemptuously. "And that is a bet I would not make lightly with an honest man!"

Yorgh fumbled in his pouch for the shiny metal stick and held it up. Puko watched eagerly.

"Well?" challenged Vaneen, watching him warily.

"As I told you, I picked up the thing that lay shining between the feet of the skeleton. After chasing the woolly, I found it still in my hand. Here is my proof!"

Vaneen peered at it suspiciously, being careful not to come too close to Yorgh.

"Where did you really get it?" she asked.

"Have you no ears, woman? I just now told you that—"

"It's one of your tricks," said Vaneen, putting the fire between them.

"Look, then!" said Yorgh. "Come around a little, so you can watch the stick against the dark."

She moved reluctantly, and Yorgh twisted the end of the metal cylinder. The other end suddenly glowed blue-green, bringing breathless exclamations from Puko and Vaneen.

With an air of mastery, Yorgh turned the light off and on several times before yielding to Puko's awed plea to be allowed to touch it. Even when the boy, at Yorgh's instructions, also worked the light, his sister remained dubious.

"Enough!" declared Yorgh, grinning in anticipation. "You questioned me once too often, Vaneen. Come here!"

He reached out one huge arm and swept her to him, but it suddenly seemed he had taken hold of an untamed woolly. A hard little elbow thudded into his stomach and he let go. That was his second mistake, he saw a second later as he staggered back with his left ear ringing from a man-sized slap.

Vaneen, with a swirl of blue skirt about her tanned knees, reached for the wood-pile. Yorgh changed his mind about grabbing her again to exact his "winnings" when he saw the billet of wood in her hand.

"Your sister is a poor loser," he told Puko, rubbing his ear tenderly.

"I don't know how you made it light

up," snapped Vaneen, "but as far as I'm concerned, you haven't proved anything yet!"

"Here, you try it!" offered Yorgh. "There is no trick."

"I don't want the thing. Put it back in your belt and go show it to the simple-minded!"

"All right," said Yorgh, with dignity. "Here—you may keep it, until you believe me."

He tossed the metal object to the ground at her feet.

"One hundred—remember!" he warned. "Or I'll tell every young hunter in the tribe that you are a cheat!"

He loved the way her eyes flashed at that, but did not let the sight bemuse him when the billet of wood came whipping across the fire at his head. He reached up one big hand and plucked it out of the air, to Puko's admiring grunt.

"Well, if that's the way you feel . . ." said Yorgh. "I'll go see just how angry Ahnee is with me. I believe you made that up, out of jealousy!"

He tossed the wood airily into the fire and walked away as Vaneen clenched her fists in wordless rage.

Which, in a woman, means she's really mad, he reflected.

He turned sharply into the shadows of the nearest tent, lest another length of wood come spinning past his ear to ruin the dignified impression he had left behind him. Then he made for the two-wheeled carts shared by the unmarried men, located his own tent bundle among the baggage, and made himself comfortable for the night.

THE next day, he rode out with Kwint, Puko, and two others. They headed toward where the kromp herd had been reported, hoping for horn trophies that might be traded to the Raydower tribe of the great mountains. As with the Sea People, the Hunters relied largely upon wool from their wollies for trading, but other items helped. The Raydowers were sometimes difficult to get along with because of their bent toward mysticism, but they made knives and buckles of hard bronze.

Toward noon, they brought down a loppa, a fleet animal smaller than a wolly

but excellent eating. Yorgh lost when they drew straws, and stayed to do the skinning as the others hunted back along a brook toward camp, having promised to send him the first cart. The plain thereabouts was dotted by clumps of thick brush, and Yorgh decided to have a steak after he had ridden over to the brook, two hundred yards away, to wash up. He got out his sparking stones from the mountains and made a fire.

He had just wiped his mouth on his wrist, careful not to soil the sleeves of his prized crimson tunic, when a drumming thunder rolled across the flatland. He leaped to his feet.

"Kromps!" he exclaimed.

It was the herd he had seen the day before. Something had aroused them, and they pounded across the grassland in a black mass studded with sweeping horns. They would go for miles, leaving a trail like a dozen tribes on the march with all their wagons.

They're heading for the brook, Yorgh thought. If they don't cross, but swing and follow it down to the creek and the camp—

He reached his grazing wolly in three bounds and vaulted into the saddle. The animal protested bleatingly at the impact.

As Yorgh grabbed the end of the guide rope he saw the frenzied kromps swerve away from the glint of water and turn parallel to the brook.

"Can't gain fast enough to ride ahead," he muttered. "Why in the name of the Three Moons do they act so scary, when every other thing on The World is scared of them?"

Reaching down from the saddle, he pulled up a handful of the long grass already turning brown from the summer rays of The Star. When he held it over the fire, it flared into ashes too quickly.

With one hand, Yorgh tore loose the cloak rolled at the back of his saddle; with the other he unslung the spear hanging down beside his mount's first pair of shoulders.

The cloak took fire and burned well as he forced the reluctant wolly into a dash for the brook. With fifty yards to spare, he crossed in front of the kromp herd and rode ahead of it.

Occasional branches of trees growing

along the brook whipped across his chest or face, but Yorgh hardly felt them. He was trying to judge how long his cloak would last. He slowed the wolly, which now displayed commendable willingness to run.

The kromp leading the side of the charge nearest the brook was a young bull whose rear pair of horns had not yet grown to sweep out and forward around the smaller pair. Yorgh hoped that he might not be as stubborn as an older specimen.

He held the flaming cloak out on the head of his spear as the animals came up with him.

The young bull snarled at him, almost like a ponadu. Kromps did not bleat like the loppas and wollies they resembled in many other ways.

Too mean, decided Yorgh. He doesn't like this, though!

The young bull edged away from the flame. A branch snapped across Yorgh's leading shoulder, and he almost lost his grip on the spear. Then he missed the rustle of the bushes, and realized that the herd had swerved very slightly away from the brook.

He waved his disintegrating cloak before the eyes of the young bull again, and was sure the direction of the charge shifted a bit more. The kromp rolled reddened eyes at him and snarled again.

Seeing that the last shreds of the cloak were slipping from the spearhead, Yorgh wiped them off across the muzzle of the beast, and let the kromp have a smart jab behind the second pair of legs as it passed him.

He started to pull up, but suddenly saw that he was not entirely in the clear. An old bull, lumbering among the dust to the rear, had veered wide of the herd and was outside Yorgh. It panted up alongside, and the hunter's wolly lost its head and tried to run with the kromp.

Yorgh gripped the point of the rough, battle-chipped horn that suddenly appeared beside his ribs, and leaned his weight upon it in hopes of guiding the bigger animal past. Then he caught a fleeting glimpse of a dense clump of scrub growth thrusting out from the vegetation screening the brook.

Before he could shift his weight, his wolly swerved to the right. Yorgh found

himself supported in the air by only a one-handed grip on the kromp's horn.

He let his feet bounce against the ground once, reaching for the horn with his other hand. Then the bull tossed his heavy head, and the man sailed high into the air.

TIME hung motionless for an instant, during which there floated to his ears the irritable sounds made by the kromp as it blundered at full speed through the brush.

Then Yorgh crashed into the dense thicket on his back, with a ripping and tearing of cloth and a loud yell as some thorny shrub raked his ribs. He thudded straight through to the ground, but with his speed fortunately reduced.

"By Kloto, by Lax, and by the seldom-seen Atrop of legend!" he swore. "And if The World has any more moons, by them too! I had done better to stand squarely in their path!"

He wiped blood from his left cheek and wriggled about until he thought all his clothing was free. The dark red tunic was shredded, and the heavier wool of his pants was gashed and torn.

He loosed a pronged burr from his beard, pulled out a long splinter lodged in the back of his right thigh, and squirmed through the undergrowth on hands and knees until he came to an open swath trampled straight through the hundred-foot clump.

The kromp bull had not permitted a little jungle to hinder him.

Yorgh pulled himself to his feet and limped back along the freshly made trail to the open. In the distance, he could hear the herd still stampeding. He hoped he had turned it enough so that the kromps' propensity for straight-line charges would cause them to miss the camp.

"Well, I'd better see to myself," he sighed. "Left on foot twice in three days! Some will have a good time with me over that. Ouch! That knee feels skinned."

He made his way to the brook, where he stripped and bathed. As the water stung them, he discovered nicks and scratches he had not known he had, but he felt better after dressing again.

He patched the worst slashes in his pants with a long thorn and a bit of vine, but the

proud crimson tunic was a tattered wreck. It fluttered on his shoulders as he walked out into the open again.

On the ground, his sharp eye noticed trampled splinters of wood.

"The spear!" he muttered. "Funny—I can't even remember when I dropped it."

He searched the area, and finally dug up the copper spearhead with the toe of his boot. He put it in his belt and walked out to his fire beside the carcass of the loppa, feeling fairly fit although he knew he would be stiff and sore the next day. His fire still smouldered, and he piled on some dry sticks.

As The Star drifted lower on the sky, he began to worry.

"Someone should have come for me by now," he told himself. "Unless—"

He finally banked the fire with turf and started out on foot for the junction of the brook and the creek. Walking made it seem quite a distance, and The Star was still lower, painting the eastern mountains gold and red, before he came in sight of the camp.

"Ho! It's still there!" he exclaimed in relief.

Someone had seen him, for when he had gone a little way further, a figure showed against the dark tents, walking toward Yorgh. He wondered where all the carts were.

He was still a quarter of a mile from camp when the lone figure met him. It was Kwint, and he had changed somewhat in the four hours or so since they had parted. He wore a discolored swelling beneath his left eye, over which he peered at Yorgh.

"You can't come back!" he said glumly. "What?"

"Tefior sent me out to say they don't think your latest joke was funny. They won't let you come back."

"Joke? What do you talk of, man?" demanded Yorgh.

"I suppose you meant just a little scare with that stampede, but it passed right below camp—where the wollies were kept!"

Yorgh realized then why Kwint had walked out to meet him. The tribe's animals must have run their best as soon as the picket line went down, and it would take time to catch them.

He explained what had happened.

"Well . . . seeing the condition of you," admitted Kwint, examining the tattered giant before him, "I myself believe it was really that way. But you know, Yorgh, it is said of you—"

"That I seldom speak in earnest," Yorgh finished for him. "But I did what I could! Look at me! I am practically naked to the rays of The Star!"

Kwint was silent.

"Well, say something!" roared Yorgh.

The other kicked at the ground with the toe of his boot.

"Even so," he murmured, "it would be best to stay out a few days, till we can tell your side of it around. They wanted to kill you!"

"Kill me!" gasped Yorgh.

It was a rough life they led, with brawling and even wounds when tribes mingled, but the one strict taboo was that no human might kill another—at least, not completely. It was the law of all tribes, handed down with legends that they had come to The World from the stars and were once as numerous as the stars.

"I tried to quiet Moyt with my spear butt," said Kwint, "for he was talking for hanging; but he is almost as big as you and knocked me down, as you can see. Then the boy came charging out of his father's tent and pushed the cooking pot over on Moyt, for which Tefior beat him and tied him to the tent pole. And—this hurts me to say—the water wasn't even hot!"

"And they all believed it of me?" said Yorgh despondently.

"Not all. Vaneen, I must say, tried to speak for you with others of us. But we were few to the numbers whose saddles you have greased or whose girls you have frightened out of swimming holes. Besides, we can't find the wollies."

"So they sent you to tell me not to come back?"

"Yes. I tried to bring my bow and a quiver of arrows for you when I saw how things were, but Tefior had them taken away."

Yorgh's face flushed, and he tugged angrily at his beard.

"I will go in and knock the old man's jaw loose from his head!" he growled.

"Even if it does lose me all hope of his daughter. He has no right!"

In the end, however, Kwint dissuaded him. Yorgh was touched to find that his friend had brought his own cloak together with a bag of salt and a water-skin. They parted, and Yorgh trudged out to his fire again. On the way, he cut a tall, straight sapling by the brook, about two inches thick, which he trimmed with his knife as he walked.

III

AFTER uncovering the embers and building up the fire again, he rigged sticks to roast as much meat as he thought he could carry, and carved the end of the pole to fit his copper spearhead. The Star had set and it was nearly dark by the time he got the metal tip fitted on and secured with the narrow strip of leather that had bound Kwint's cloak.

With the alert senses of one who lives in the open, Yorgh looked up before the girl came within a hundred yards.

He watched wonderingly as she plodded out of the dusk and up to his fire. The flames put copper glints in her hair, like rays of The Star on water, but her features were set in a harsh expression.

"You walked out?" asked Yorgh cautiously.

Vaneen curled her lip at him.

"Thanks to *you!*" she said, and the "you" was like a blow.

"Some meat?" invited Yorgh, trying not to show his hurt.

"No."

He considered. On the whole, even putting the best possible interpretation on it, he did not think he could call the girl's visit friendly.

"They didn't chase you out too, did they?" he asked mildly.

"My father sent me!" she all but spat at him. "He found me with something of yours, and nothing would do but I must get the accursed thing out of camp to fling in your face before nightfall!"

She took her hand from the belt of the blue dress, and Yorgh saw the gleam of the metal stick from the desert.

"It's already dark," he said hastily.

Vaneen sneered and dropped the object at his feet. Yorgh showed no resentment, thinking that she was beautiful even with a sneer. He could think of any number of girls whose faces became twisted and ugly with anger, but not Vaneen.

"Are you going back?" he asked.

"What do you think?"

"I think you ought to sit down and make yourself comfortable with a steak."

Vaneen glared at him.

"I can't sit down and be comfortable, if you must know!"

"Why not?"

"My father took a stick to me when he found out that thing belonged to you."

Yorgh peered at her, and saw that she did not joke.

"If Moyt hadn't been there to stop him, I probably couldn't have even walked out here. You made a fine, merry day, Yorgh!"

The hunter rested his chin on his hand and looked down at the aimless patterns he was tracing in the dust with the end of the metal cylinder.

Time had been, he reflected, that he would have thought it funny to hear of Vaneen's being turned upside down and having some of the haughtiness knocked out of her. Once, even, he might have felt sorry for her afterward, or been enraged at the thought of Moyt's being there to ogle—or, worse, to intercede.

At the moment, he merely felt weary and discouraged.

"As you like," he said, "but it's dark out there, and a long way back."

He drew a circle in the dust and sliced it into quarters. After a moment, Vaneen turned back to the fire from staring across the dark plain. The long grass looked light gray in the dim light of Kloto, largest of The World's three moons. Lax would not rise till early morning, and tiny Atropo was so seldom seen that walking in its "light" was proverbial.

"Here," said Yorgh, "you can have my cloak for a cushion."

Vaneen stared expressionlessly at the tatters of his fine red tunic, and he could not tell what she thought.

"I have my own," she said, and unslung it from the back of her belt.

She threw the cloak about her shoulders

and eased herself to the ground with just a hint of extra care.

Maybe the old fish did beat her, thought Yorgh. I'll pull his straggly beard for him one of these days!

He cut off a portion of juicy loppa meat for her, and placed Kwint's water-skin and salt between them. Then he went back to peeling the remaining bark from his crude spear.

He caught Vaneen watching him with her hand close to the small knife in her belt. Yorgh snorted.

"Go to sleep!" he said.

I can recall when she'd have needed a spear, Yorgh thought, but I just don't have any spirit tonight.

He rolled himself in his cloak and stretched out. Something dug into his ribs, and he found the metal cylinder under him.

YORGH held it up before his eyes a moment, and muttered a few obscenities. He could remember nothing but bad luck since the moment he had found it.

A twig snapping in the flames caught his attention. He hefted the metal instrument in his palm, then tossed it into the fire.

He slept better than he expected. Once or twice, instinct awakened him in time to replenish the fire.

The last time he awoke, he found himself already halfway to his feet in the mist of dawn as Vaneen's scream was choked off by a hairy hand slapped across her mouth.

Yorgh groped for his spear. All he could see, at first, were legs of wollies surrounding the fire.

The spear was not where he had left it; it was in the hands of a slim, black-bearded man in a fur cap who sat on the nearest wolly. He watched Vaneen's writhings with amused admiration, but kept one eye on Yorgh.

The big hunter sensed men behind him, and leaped forward. The dark man looked surprised, and slid backwards off his mount just in time to escape the clutch of Yorgh's big hands on his leg. Two bodies thudded into Yorgh from the rear, pinning him momentarily against the animal.

Then the wolly sidestepped and Yorgh reached around to grasp the men holding him.

Raydowers from the mountains, he thought, and swung them off balance, around in front of him, and together with a soggy crunch. Then he dropped them.

The man in the fur cap was just bouncing to his feet, the wolly having shuffled over his head. Yorgh snarled and drove at him, pulling out his bronze knife. More men came from behind, not in time to stop him, but in time for one to hang on his arm. The dark man swung the butt of the spear, and it cracked on the side of Yorgh's skull.

When he came to, all he could see was long, oily wool. He squirmed, and found that he was tied face down across a wolly. Someone was telling someone else to be careful about kicking dirt over the fire.

Twisting his head, Yorgh found that he could see the fire, and some of the mountain men sitting their wollies beyond it. Vaneen was among them, not bound, but looking disheveled and resentful.

"Ah, coming around?" asked a voice.

The legs of a wolly moved into Yorgh's sight.

"I am Ueln, of the Raydower tribe," said the man in the fur cap. "I didn't expect you back so soon. You have a hard head."

Yorgh looked up at him painfully and grunted.

"We are going over to the brook to water the wollies," said Ueln, "and to attend to other things before we start for the mountains. If you behave I will let you ride in the saddle."

"All right," said Yorgh, feeling he ought to make some answer to disguise the fact that he was not yet thinking very clearly.

"You promise not to try to ride away?"

"Where would I ride to?" grumbled the hunter.

As soon as he realized the explanation that remark would entail, he wished he had remained silent. Further questioning, however, was forestalled by a cry from the man at the fire.

He ran to Ueln, holding up a gleaming object.

"What's this?" asked the Raydower leader.

Yorgh grimaced, and let his head drop.

"Keep it," he said. "I make you a gift of it."

Ueln hesitated. He moved his woolly forward a pace to call to Vaneen.

"It's his good luck charm," said the girl sourly.

"So?" Ueln hefted the metal cylinder in his hand thoughtfully. "What kind of luck has he been having?"

When no one answered him, Ueln leaned back, tossed a leg over the woolly's front shoulders, and slid gracefully to the ground as if to search the fire more thoroughly. Unfortunately, his foot landed upon a thick piece of dust-covered fat discarded from the roast of the night before.

Yorgh looked up to see the Raydower sitting on the ground with much the same expression as when the hunter had lunged at him. This time, he held the metal stick instead of Yorgh's spear.

After a moment, he climbed to his feet and looked around at his men. None of them laughed.

The dark man stepped over to Yorgh, and the latter felt the metal object thrust into the pouch on his belt before Ueln cut him loose so he could sit astride the saddle.

"I'll let you keep your precious charm," said the Raydower. "I like my questions answered by people, or things, I can see."

Although the mountains thrust far out into the grasslands at that point, it took the better part of the day to pass through the foothills. Yorgh soon found out why the band was in a hurry when Ueln admitted to him that the long strings of wollies led at the rear had been "found" on the plain.

"But what could we do?" asked the Raydower. "Jayn sent us out to see what you had worth trading or stealing."

"Jayn?"

"She is our chief, since her father died and she will not marry lest she lose the title to her husband."

"Couldn't you persuade her? You look like a man."

"I am her cousin," said Ueln stiffly.

"Oh," said Yorgh, and rode on in silence.

They rode out of a narrow pass to see cultivated fields in a long valley. Yorgh's eyes was caught by the village nearby. It was built of rock and had the most permanent look he had ever seen.

He dismounted stiffly when ordered, before one of the houses. Bruises unnoticed

after the kromp had tossed him had made themselves felt during the ride. Two of Ueln's riders pushed Yorgh through the open doorway on the heels of their leader.

They entered a hall evidently used for meals and other gatherings. From the smell of the flambeaux on the stone walls, Yorgh judged that the Raydowers traded with the Sea People for fish oil.

THEN he looked at the woman sitting in the big, carved chair on the dais along one wall. She was attended by several men, armed, and a few women who were very obviously chosen for being less beautiful.

She was dark of hair and eye, and bore a certain resemblance to Ueln. Yorgh thought she must be a year or two older than himself. Then, as he was led closer, he saw that it was more likely five.

Jayn swept Vaneen up and down with a cold glance, but let her frank stare linger on Yorgh's broad shoulders and golden beard. Ueln fidgeted impatiently.

"Is this what you were sent to get?" Jayn asked him.

Her voice was not as musical as Vaneen's, Yorgh reflected, but it had a husky undertone that promised much. He saw that she took great care with her person, as befitted her position. Her long robe was dark and cleverly sewn to boast of every curve of her handsome body. It was belted at the waist by a girdle of the polished, light-blue stones for which the mountain people were famous. Yorgh wondered if her lips were naturally as red as they appeared.

Ueln had been explaining why he had not liked to leave behind two who might talk, especially as one was a hunter who could have trailed him. Jayn shrugged.

"I will decide how well you have done, Ueln, when we have counted the wollies. As for this pair, I am not entirely displeased."

She rose and walked across the dais to look down on them. Following her glance, Yorgh saw that the blue dress which had looked so well on Vaneen two nights ago was much the worse for rough treatment. Jayn stared contemptuously at the rents in it.

"Well, girl," she asked, "what can you do to make yourself useful?"

Vaneen gave her back stare for stare, saying nothing. Jayn tapped a small foot impatiently. Then she said something to make the men behind her grin.

"Come, come!" she snapped. "Where would you earn your keep—in my kitchen, or in one of the buildings housing our young men?"

Right there, Yorgh decided, was where he would have reached up and struck her, had she been a man and speaking to him. Women, it seemed, were wiser, especially in judging each other.

"Your kitchen," said Vaneen evenly, but Yorgh knew that the day might come when Jayn would regret the affair.

So did the Raydower woman, apparently, for there was a hard look in her eye as she watched the girl led away. Then it softened as she turned to Yorgh.

"Untie him and clean him up, Ueln," she directed. "And get him something to wear in place of that awful rag. You had no need to be so rough with him."

Ueln bit his lip, glaring at the remnants of Yorgh's crimson tunic. He turned on his heel and stalked toward the stairs flanking the entrance.

One of the riders touched Yorgh's elbow, and he followed, seething undecidably between the twin stings of being called ragged and of having it implied that a man the size of Ueln could have been rough with him.

He was led up one of the two flights of stone stairs which to him were a wonder, and to a small room with a straw-covered wooden bed. Ueln drew his knife and cut the cord on Yorgh's wrist.

"There's a pool along the trail a way," he said. "Tomorrow, you can swim and clean up in the morning with the other riders. I'll see if I can find a tunic big enough."

"I have nothing to give you for it," said Yorgh, unable to avoid feeling sorry for the man at being received so casually after his hard ride. "Unless you want to keep the knife you took from me as payment."

"Never mind," said Ueln. "You'll earn it before long, if I know Jayn."

"What do you mean?" asked Yorgh warily.

"She isn't a bad wench, in her way," Ueln muttered. "It's just that she tries so

hard to keep us all under her thumb because so many have been at her to marry. She would rather continue to be chief."

"I should think," suggested Yorgh, recalling the black hair and flashing eyes, "that one might be found who would wink at letting her keep the power."

"Well, yes . . . but she could never be sure," said Ueln. "Of course, if she married a man of another tribe—like you, for instance—it would make no difference. She would still rule, for he would be just a slave, with less rights than even the kitchen flunkies."

"So?" murmured Yorgh. "Still . . . just let her give me to choose between the kitchen and a house of her young women, and you will see a notable choice made, my friend!"

"Young women reside with their families," snapped Ueln.

He stared Yorgh up and down, his eyes black pools in the light cast by the flambeaux he carried.

"I admire your attitude," he sneered with heavy sarcasm. "Enjoy it while you can!"

He strode away down the hall, leaving Yorgh in the dark. The big hunter thought fleetingly of creeping quietly to the stairs, but a saner instinct convinced him that Ueln would not have left them unguarded.

He groped his way to the bed, found that a blanket had been left on the straw, and wrapped himself in it against the night chill of the mountains.

The next three days he spent "enjoying his attitude," as Ueln had bidden him. The Raydower gave him a tunic of dark blue which was only a trifle snug, having belonged to the old chief, and pants of gray Hunter wool. The tunic had a narrow fur collar. Bathed and refreshed, Yorgh regained some of his good nature with the new clothes.

He did not see Vaneen anywhere when he was invited to sit at the great table for meals and to entertain the black-haired Raydower ruler. With unusual insight, he decided that Jayn would probably not be pleased to hear him asking about the girl.

Instead, he told some of his stories, and at supper made bold to yank a bench from under one of Jayn's discouraged suitors. .

IV

THE roar of laughter died as the fellow scrambled up from the stone floor with a snarl, but Jayn's husky voice cut across the silence to avert trouble.

She keeps a tight guide-rope, thought Yorgh, and tried to smooth things over by telling one of his stories.

He thought the company about the table seemed impressed at the tale of his latest adventure in the desert, but it might have been the flickering light of the torches.

"I think you must have taken that from an old legend," said Ueln. "We, too, have half-remembered stories of people who rode out from the shrine in self-moving wagons, in the old days when there were more men in The World."

"What shrine?" asked Yorgh, for it was a tale he had not heard, although he knew it was widely told of the Raydowers that they held mysterious beliefs.

"On the mountain top," said Ueln. "You might have seen it any morning when you went with us to swim—"

He stopped abruptly, and Yorgh was aware of a peculiar hush around the table. Then Jayn quickly asked him to describe again how the Hunters made their powerful horn bows famous for their loud twang and swift arrows, and how they got such strength without making them as long as the wooden ones of the mountain people.

Yorgh answered sketchily, not failing to notice Ueln shrug defiantly under the severe stares of several diners near him at the great table.

After the dinner, Jayn called upon some of her girls to sing. Since the procedure had been much the same on previous nights, Yorgh deliberately showed little enthusiasm until he found an opportunity to beg Jayn herself to sing for them.

The Raydower with the neatly curled brown mustache who had paid her this compliment on preceding evenings, as Yorgh had carefully noted, glared and muttered something about "nomad upstarts." Jayn smiled at Yorgh more warmly than he liked, but he had to admit to himself that she sang well.

The next morning, returning from the small lake in which the men swam, he asked

Ueln for permission to walk about the village.

"Jayn didn't act as if she would mind my seeing something of it," he jabbed the Raydower.

The latter grunted.

"I heard her whispering to you last night, after the singing, thank you," he growled. "She can be nice when she likes. Oh, all right! But don't let one of my riders catch you on the trail to the pass!"

Yorgh grinned and parted from the group to stroll through the narrow paths between the stone houses and their small gardens. After half an hour, by which time the heat of The Star was beginning to lend the alleys the least touch of fragrance, he had the outline of the village well in mind.

He strolled on casually, until he succeeded in coming up behind the shrubbery bordering the space in back of Jayn's big house. There he loitered for some time, until he saw a trio of kitchen maids carry out wooden buckets of dirty water. One of them wore a soiled and bedraggled blue dress.

Yorgh rustled the bushes hiding him. Vaneen looked sharply about, and he parted the branches an instant.

The girl said something to the other wenches, and they went inside, leaving her to empty the buckets. She carried one pair over toward Yorgh as if to water the shrubbery.

When these were empty, she brought the next pair closer, and stepped around the bush behind which he stood.

"How are you?" asked Yorgh, thinking that she looked like a fish-cleaning woman among the Sea People.

She stared hard at his fine new clothes, and scowled.

"Some people know how to wheedle the best side of the tent for themselves!" she said bitterly. "What did you do to get that pretty tunic from her?"

"Not what you would be jealous to think about," retorted Yorgh. "Yet," he added to tease her.

"You look funny in that fur collar," snapped Vaneen. "Does it have a copper ring under the fur—with a place to fasten on the chain?"

"Ueln gave it to me," said Yorgh, de-

ciding that it was time to smooth things over. "Listen—it may soon be time to get out of here. Do they lock you in at night?"

"No," said Vaneen. "They just told me what would happen to me if I went out on the streets at night, so I don't."

"Could you sneak out here tonight . . . say about the time Kloto sets?"

Vaneen peered hopefully at his expression, and nodded.

"I have thought of a place to run to," said Yorgh. "It might work."

The girl's brown eyes filled with sudden tears.

"Yorgh, if this is one of your stories—"

"Sssh!" he hushed her, slipping an arm about her shoulders. "You've been out too long already. Meet me tonight, here!"

He slipped back into the pathway and hurried off. Vaneen's tears made him uncomfortable and he tried hard not to feel guilty. She had been having a miserable time, no doubt, but had he any choice but to make himself pleasant to Jayn?

THAT evening he was careful to let himself be seen with Jayn whispering frequently in his ear during the story-telling. She was beginning to hint that he might like to stay in the village for good, but Yorgh's expressions suggested much more.

Later, after dark, he crept cautiously into the hall with a short length of bed slat tucked in his belt. He had not been allowed a knife except at meals. As he padded to the foot of the stone stairs, a shadow detached itself from the wall near the main door. Yorgh sensed rather than saw the spear that reached out a moment later to prod him just below the ribs.

"Sssh! Quietly!" he whispered. "Jayn expects me."

The guard grunted, but lowered his spear as if far from surprised. Before he could think the matter over further, Yorgh made a show of enlisting his aid.

"She teased by not saying which is her room," he claimed, snickering sheepishly. "She is having her joke with me because I said I would be man enough to find it."

"Such a joke is only the beginning, friend," the guard assured him. "Up the opposite stairs and to the end of the hall. Come, I will point the way."

"Slowly," pleaded Yorgh. "I don't see as well in the dark as you people."

He saw clearly enough, however, to note that the man wore only a woolen cap, with no leather to protect his head. Yorgh struck him a chopping blow with the piece of slat.

He caught the spear in one hand, though he almost fumbled it in the dark, and dropped his weapon as quietly as possible to catch the sagging body in his other arm.

I'd better store him out of the way, he thought, heaving the man onto his shoulder.

He crept back up the stairs with his burden, having one nervous moment when he opened the wrong door to the tune of several raucous snores. The sweat itched on his forehead by the time he got the door quietly closed and made sure the next was the one to his own room.

He left the guard comfortably bound, and gagged with a strip of blanket, and traversed the stairway for the third time, wearing a good bronze knife in his belt. Near the door, he groped about until he found the spear and his club. The latter he thrust again into his waistband.

The door made little noise, though it sounded to Yorgh like the bleating of a dozen wollies. Once in the dark street, he padded quickly around the corner of the building, moving with assurance gained from counting the steps in daylight. He left the spear in the grass there, lest it embarrass him later by rattling against something.

A hiss from the bushes halted him in his tracks, until Vaneen whispered his name.

"Good!" Yorgh whispered back, reaching out to touch her arm. "Are you cold? Then, let's move. Be very quiet till we get out of the village!"

He led the way through some of the narrower alleyways and they sneaked out of the sleeping village by way of someone's garden. When they had a little distance, Yorgh returned to the trail.

"Where are we going?" asked Vaneen.

"I saw the trail this morning, a little beyond the pond. It must lead to the shrine they talk of, up the mountain. I could see marks on the cliff like steps, when I looked through the trees."

"Oh! They talked about that shrine in the kitchen when they thought I wasn't

listening," volunteered the girl. "They said Ueln was wrong to mention it before you."

"Did they say what it is?"

"No, except that no one ever goes there, and the old stories say the Raydowers were set here to guard it."

"So no one goes there! Good! That's what I hoped for."

Yorgh set off briskly along the path, intent upon not missing the junction with the trail he wanted. Even so, in the dark, he would have gone past, had not a voice spoken out sharply.

"Who's there?"

Yorgh froze, so promptly that Vaneen bumped into him.

"Ueln," he answered with the first name that came to him.

Then he saw a darker patch move among the bushes.

Who'd have thought they'd be strict enough to keep a sentry on the trail? he thought.

"You lie!" charged the sentry, overcoming his hesitation. "You are twice Ueln's size—ah, I know you now, Hunter! Ho—Kansi!"

Yorgh drew his club and hurled it at where he thought the man's head would be. There was a smack of wood as the other instinctively raised the shaft of his spear before his face.

THEN Yorgh was upon him, bearing him savagely to the ground. One big hand seized the mountain man's throat. When he grabbed at it with both of his own, Yorgh's other fist rose and fell like a hammer.

The hunter stood up, listening. Then, stooping swiftly, he groped at the sentry's belt and handed the man's knife to Vaneen.

"We must move fast now," he warned her in an undertone. "I do not like the idea of this 'Kansi' he called to knowing where we are."

"I think someone shouted from the village also," whispered the girl.

"Come, then!" said Yorgh, and plunged into the entrance of the trail to the cliff.

Within a short distance, it became a steep grade. Yorgh prudently slowed to save their legs for the real climb ahead. A moment later, he congratulated himself for doing

this, for they came upon the other sentry leaning on his spear where the bushes opened to form a clearing at the foot of a stone stairway.

"Stay here!" Yorgh breathed with his lips touching Vaneen's ear. "I'll try to creep around behind him."

"I can do better than that," whispered the girl, pushing against his arm to force him behind a shrub.

Yorgh swore luridly to himself when he discovered that the plant was armed with sharp thorns the size of arrowheads, but it was too late to protest.

"Kansi . . ." called Vaneen softly.

The sentry straightened nervously and hissed, "Who is it?"

"Come and see," invited the girl, keeping her voice so low that it might have been any girl.

Kansi strode over with quick, worried steps, the picture of a man torn between opportunity and duty.

Yorgh's big fist shot out of the darkness to take him behind the ear with a solid thunk! He went down without a sound.

Back in the village, there were symptoms of a growing hue and cry. Torches began to move out along the trail.

"Hurry!" said Yorgh.

"What will you do when we reach the top?" asked Vaneen.

"That I will tell you when I see what is there. Perhaps, if we are in possession of their precious shrine, they will think twice before egging us on to destroy it!"

The steps led upward, then doubled back around a narrow turn to rise further. They were on the fourth such flight and still almost directly above the trail when the first Raydowers set up a howl of rage at discovering the unconscious sentries.

"Yorgh!" shouted a voice that sounded like Ueln's. "Come down! This is no joking matter!"

Yorgh reached back an arm to sweep Vaneen close to the rock out of which the steps were cut, and kept climbing. He guessed that they were more than a hundred feet up.

Then, they turned onto a flight that stretched upward without a landing as far as they had already come, and curled past a corner of the cliff out of sight.

Some bowman below, with the eyes of a night-roaming ponadu, caught sight of the fleeing pair at a place where the stairway narrowed to a mere two feet. It seemed to Yorgh that a section of rock must have been broken away by a fall of stone from above, but he put aside his speculation as an arrow hissed up from below and snapped against the face of the cliff less than ten feet ahead.

"They're coming up the steps too!" Vaneen reported breathlessly.

"Hurry!" urged Yorgh, grabbing her hand. "They seem to think we're breaking a greater taboo than killing!"

He heard more twanging of bows below, but only two more arrows came close. Then they were past the narrow spot and protected by the bulge of rock around which the steps curved.

Yorgh groaned when he looked ahead.

"Have they been guarding steps that lead only to a place to jump from?"

Then he saw the dark hole in the rock where the stone footway ended.

"A cave!" gasped Vaneen. "Yorgh, must we go in?"

Little liking the idea himself, he said nothing. His exploring fingers found that the walls, near the entrance at least, were curiously smooth. He edged into the blackness, groping ahead cautiously. Guiding Vaneen's hand to a grip on his belt, he drew the bronze knife and held it—blade upward and ready—in his right hand.

About thirty feet straight into the mountain, he tripped.

"May the Three Moons sink into the sea!" he growled as he felt about in the dark. "More steps!"

"They're coming," said Vaneen.

"I know it," snapped Yorgh, wondering how patient a man had to be in the face of eating a sheaf of arrows.

Then it occurred to him that it would probably be worse for the girl if they were caught, and he decided that she was being reasonably patient too.

There were three short flights of steps, leading to a short corridor only a few feet wide. This ended in a blank wall, as Yorgh discovered by bumping his head against it.

As his exploring hands reached out on all sides and confirmed that the passage was squared off to a dead end, he growled

a particularly obscene oath he had heard among the Sea People. Then he hesitated.

"Vaneen," he whispered, "can you see anything?"

"Where?" came her whisper over his shoulder. Then he heard her gasp. "Oh, Yorgh, it doesn't look solid! I can see shadows!"

"It must be some kind of door," Yorgh declared. "If I only had a light! There's some kind of round bump but I can't find any handle."

He threw his weight against the smooth surface but it did not even quiver.

"Well," said Yorgh, "I was tired of letting that rabble chase me anyway."

It bothered him, however, not to know what had trapped him, what sort of barrier it was.

I wonder if I could see by sparks from my fire stones? he thought.

He sheathed his knife and thrust a hand into the pouch at his belt. His fingers touched something long and metallic.

Of course! he told himself. Although it probably won't work now that I need it!

He pulled out the metal cylinder and twisted at the ends. As he located the right one, the blue-green light flared out, brilliant to eyes adjusted to the blackness.

"It is a door!" Vaneen breathed. "Look, Yorgh! You can see through—"

She stopped as the door slowly swung open.

V

YORGH held the light in his left hand and dropped the other to the hilt of his knife, straining to see who or what was opening the door.

Then he decided to thrash that matter out on the inside and twisted the light off to avoid making himself a target.

He stepped forward . . . and smashed into the closing door.

At first, he thought someone had hit him. Then he heard the tiny click as the door shut.

"There are torches below the steps!" Vaneen warned.

Yorgh twisted the light on again, and held it out so he could examine the door closely. He saw the blue-green rays reflected

from the small, round bump on the portal, which immediately swung open again.

This time, Yorgh charged ahead without waiting. Vaneen was on his heels. As they passed the door, and their bodies shielded the light in his hand, it swung back and clicked shut again. They were alone in a large, shadowy chamber.

"Look!" Vaneen said.

He turned and found he could see the rest of the corridor plainly through the door, lit by the reflection of torches. It grew brighter as a young Raydower thrust a light and his head cautiously above the level of the floor.

Yorgh twisted the light off and drew Vaneen to one side.

"You know," he whispered, "when one follows a loppa trail to a waterhole, and finds only ponadu tracks going away, one asks no questions as to exactly how it came about. If they do not have a little light like mine, I think they will not get past that door."

It turned out that he was right.

The voices outside were almost inaudible, but the torch light shone in the corridor. Someone finally laid the palm of a sweating hand against the door. When he found that he could not push it open he quickly retreated.

After a while Yorgh peeped out in time to see the last of the pursuers descending the steps. Then it was dark again.

"I can see the stars," murmured Vaneen.

Yorgh looked up. It was true.

"And, Yorgh . . .?"

"Yes?" he asked, feeling light of heart at having succeeded in escaping the Raydowers for the time being.

"I . . . am beginning to believe your story about finding the metal stick in the desert. I'm sorry I said what I did."

Yorgh chuckled and reached out for her in the dark. He pulled her to him and found her soft lips with his. After the first instant, she slipped strong young arms about his waist and strained her body against his.

"That's ninety-nine you owe me," said Yorgh, taking a deep breath.

Vaneen pretended to pull back from him, with a low laugh.

Abruptly, following a quiet click, the

place was flooded by a white glare that was like a blow on his eyes. When he could see again, they were still the only ones there . . . except for a skeleton on a couch across the wide, cluttered chamber . . . and another on the floor beside a long table with many drawers.

"What is it?" gasped Yorgh.

"I don't know. My shoulder touched something on the wall beside the door, and—"

The place was filled with strange furnishings. Some were wooden and seemed to sag here and there; most were queer things of metal. Overhead, a transparent roof offered a good view of the stars.

Cautiously, with Vaneen crowding close, Yorgh walked around the chamber. There were other doors, and he tried his light at one of them. It obediently swung open to reveal what must have been sleeping quarters. Yorgh saw more bones, and let the door close again.

It was Vaneen who discovered the books. The writing and pictures on the smooth, pliable pages put to shame the few parchment records they had seen in the village of the Sea People.

Yorgh never remembered how many awed hours they spent looking at the strange instruments and colored maps and other curiosities. The sky, he did recall later, was showing light when he made his little mistake.

"This must be a place of the Old Ones of the legends," Vaneen was murmuring as Yorgh fingered a series of little studs on one of the machines.

Suddenly, there was whirring motion under his hand. He leaped back, startled. A humming grew from nowhere, followed by a scratching sound that culminated in a loud snap.

A tired voice spoke, sounding so near and natural that Yorgh dropped a hand to his knife and looked about.

"World Four of the Kithgol planetary system reporting on the hundred and sixty-first day of the plague. Urgently request the dropping of medical supplies detailed in last report, but advise against any attempt to land here. The plague is still uncontrollable, even animals, with few exceptions, being wiped out.

"Little hope for survival of this colony. Personnel of this station remain in strict quarantine, and will not venture out to mingle with other colonists in hopes of maintaining communication to the last . . ."

There was more, but Yorgh was satisfied.

He backed away from the talking thing, and saw that Vaneen's face was as white as his own felt.

"Let's go down again," he whispered through dry lips. "It's getting light."

He would have accepted a look of scorn for such a weak excuse, but the girl followed meekly. The door opened as soon as he got his light within a yard of it, and they crept guiltily down the stairs cut out of solid rock.

THERE were no Raydowers about until Yorgh and Vaneen came wearily down the last flight of steps on the face of the cliff. Jayn was waiting there in the little clearing, with Ueln and a crowd of villagers, spearmen prominently to the fore.

"The spirits let you return!" murmured Jayn, her face strained and pale.

There was a general air of shrinking back among the crowd, although Yorgh did not see anyone actually move his feet.

"I swear," said Ueln, "that they must have been all the way inside the shrine. I followed right to the Portal!"

"That is true enough," said Yorgh, waiting a few steps up to see what they would do.

He wondered if he could impress them with his light. He held it in his hands.

"Then, the sooner you go, the better!" said Jayn bitterly. "If the spirits let you go, we may not touch you. But I do not care to keep you around until you bring certain disaster upon the village."

An old woman whispered in her ear, and she looked sharply at Vaneen.

"And you took the girl with you?" she demanded.

"Of course," he replied. "And if you are really anxious to have us gone, I think you should give us wollies to ride."

"You can have all the animals my cousin took from the flatland!" she snapped. "But first, another matter!"

An old man was pushed to the forefront

of the crowd. He smoothed his white beard nervously and peered up at Yorgh and Vaneen with faded, short-sighted eyes.

Abruptly, he found his voice, and rattled off a brief, chanting patter. Then he stepped back behind a spearman who looked to Yorgh as if he would be poor protection.

"What was that, a curse?" demanded the Hunter, having had difficulty understanding the rapid words mumbled from the old man's toothless mouth.

To force an answer, he twisted the metal cylinder to flash the light at them.

"No," gulped Jayn, her eyes riveted upon the object in his hands. "He married you. It's the only thing that might possibly lessen the sacrilege. You were up there a long time."

She looked up at him bitterly.

"Oh, Yorgh! Why did you have to take that wench with you?"

Vaneen, who had been so quiet behind his shoulder, spoke at last.

"And I didn't even give him a tunic with a fur collar," she said.

Jayn flushed, then paled as she bit her red lower lip; and Yorgh saw that the comment must have struck a deeper wound than could days of kitchen drudgery.

He didn't know what to say; but his silence must have seemed threatening, for Ueln spoke up.

"I will ride after him, and make plain to his people how we brought him and the girl to the mountains," he offered.

"A good idea!" said Jayn, with an undertone in her voice that made Yorgh think of a cornered ponadu. "Just to be safe, and to make sure they take him back, we'll all go!"

Yorgh and Vaneen glanced at each other, but soon found that the Raydowers were in earnest. Before noon, they found themselves leading the hastily assembled column from the village out onto the grassy plain beyond the foothills.

There, another surprise waited them.

The Hunters, mostly on foot, save for a dozen on half-tamed wollies, met them at the first clump of trees, where some of their dark tents were pitched.

"We were just about to follow your trail in," cried Kwint, riding up to Yorgh with a grin splitting his features. "Do I see our run-away wollies being herded along there?"

"You do," said Yorgh, conscious that Ueln had pulled up beside him, looking glum. "This is Ueln of the Raydowers. He . . . caught them for us."

Kwint looked hard at both of them, but held his peace. Vaneen had ridden straight to her father.

"I gave the metal stick to Yorgh as you told me, Father," she said, staring him levelly between the eyes. "I hope you have no more such errands."

She slipped down from her mount, and headed for their tent.

"She's tired," said Yorgh to Puko, whom he found at his knee.

Tefior looked about weakly, and finally thought to close his mouth.

"The least you could do," Yorgh told him, "is to offer our friends here meat, to show there are no grudges."

Tefior licked his lips and began to give orders, but there was a puzzled frown on his brow.

Anyone but me, thought Yorgh, grinning, he would ask, but he is timid of the answers I might give him.

Things went very well after that. With the returned wollies, it was easy to move back to the camp at the creek, where the Hunters had left their carts and most of their baggage. The Raydowers willingly traveled with them, and were loaned tents to set up a camp of their own.

For eleven days, the tribes camped there, exchanging feasts, hunting together, and finding things to trade. Yorgh was gratified at how his advice was accepted by both sides, even though in fear by one of them. The Raydowers looked uneasy whenever he casually talked of traveling back with them.

There was only one untoward incident, which was quickly hushed up. As Yorgh was told the tale, Vaneen had taken Jayn to swim in the secluded bend of the creek. Somehow or other it happened that only the Hunter girl had dressed when she shrieked that she heard a ponadu in the woods.

Yorgh remembered the way Jayn's dark robes had fitted over the hips, and wished he had been there to see. Then he thought of her kitchen in the mountain village, and said no more on the subject.

When some of the Raydowers became

friendly enough to talk, however, the story of his escapade with Vaneen got around.

Yorgh caught people glancing askance at him every time he turned around. He went to old Tefior.

"I suppose you have heard it all," he said. "If you do not think it best, I won't come to your fire to see Vaneen."

The chief looked over Yorgh's shoulder.

"Perhaps . . . for the time being . . ."

Don't know why I took that for an answer, thought Yorgh, staring across the flatland the next morning at dawn. Suppose I tell him the Raydowers call us married? Would he just say their law doesn't count? Vaneen looks kindly at me from a distance, but she hasn't spoken.

He chewed moodily on a blade of grass, thinking that he heard a distant herd of kromp moving.

Then his head jerked up as a great flame ripped across the sky.

VI

THERE were shouts behind him in the camp, and he saw motion about the borrowed tents of the Raydowers.

A huge, gleaming thing sank down to the plain on a cushion of smoke and flame. The fires disappeared as it touched ground. A moment later, the thunder died out.

Yorgh became aware of someone yanking his arm.

"Come on!" yelled little Puko. "I have a wolly for you. You can flee to the mountains!"

Yorgh looked around, and most of the talk and bustle ceased. People, finding themselves still alive, stopped to stare at Yorgh. He saw a group hurrying over from the Raydower camp.

Why don't they look to Tefior or Jayn? he wondered peevishly.

The first words Jayn spoke when she panted up with Ueln and others of her people were, "You were wrong to go up there!"

"I do not think well of it," Tefior agreed sadly.

"This is what comes of violating the shrine!" shouted one of the Raydowers. "The spirits of the Old Ones have come to avenge themselves upon us all!"

"No!" roared Yorgh.

He stared around at them, then out across the plain where the great, gleaming thing stood upright with wisps of smoke curling up from the grass at its base.

"I brought it upon us; I will go!"

Jayn and Ueln stared at him with pale, sorrowful faces. Kwint fingered his bow, and seemed about to step forward. Puko did, but Tefior grabbed him by the hair.

Yorgh turned and walked slowly away.

"Yorgh! Wait!"

Vaneen ran after him.

"We'll go together! I was there with you!"

"No!" he groaned. "Jayn, she went because I took her. Kwint! Ueln! Hold her!"

He broke away and ran toward the thing on the plain, not thinking, not even hoping. The voices behind him died away.

After he had covered a quarter of a mile, he noticed that the metal thing was like the ships of the Sea People in some ways. It was rounded, like a hull, and its upthrust bow—

To his amazement, there were four men standing under it when he arrived. Yorgh gaped at their queer clothes.

"Well, look at him!" said one of them with a strange accent. "Is that what's been sending out a repetitive message that's well over two hundred years old? I thought the plague wiped this planet clean."

"Man!" exclaimed the one with the close-cropped red hair. "If we can find out why not, maybe we can stop it wherever it still pops up in the galaxy!"

It was late afternoon when Yorgh ambled back into camp.

A great sigh went up from the waiting groups when they saw that he was smiling.

"They are men!" he shouted. "Sons of the Old Ones—as are we! Tefior, Jayn, when I have told you, this will be a night for a feast!"

He told them of the strange men who said they came from the Terran Colonial Patrol in answer to a message from The World, which had long been shunned as a dead colony, dead of a plague still known among the stars.

He told how the Terrans had taken blood from his arm and looked at it in a queer machine, whereupon they had grown talka-

tive and excited.

"They said they will send people to teach us the forgotten ways of the Old Ones, because we are the first they have found who do not die of the sickness," he concluded. "Just for bringing them kromps and other animals to help cure the sickness, they will see that we have all we need to stand beside them, as brothers."

And he told how one of the Terrans had knocked a kromp unconscious with a small machine in his hand, to get some of its blood.

"I will show you," he grinned, thinking of a tremendous joke. "Where is Moyt?"

The others pushed the tall, blond Moyt forward.

"Is there any reason why you would not like to marry Jayn, who is the first of the Raydower women?" Yorgh asked.

"I—" began Moyt suspiciously, and stiffened as Yorgh pressed the trigger of the Terran stunner he held inside his tunic.

Moyt got control of his knees and straightened up as Yorgh turned off the power.

He started to open his mouth angrily, and Yorgh stunned him again. Moyt slumped to his knees beside Jayn.

The Raydower woman's lips curved in a thoughtful smile, and she reached out to run a finger through Moyt's hair. The man had changed his mind about protesting by the time the second shock had worn off.

Then Yorgh sat down to answer question after question while preparations for the night's feast went on. The men gathered and voted that messengers should be sent to the Sea People to tell of what had happened. Someone shouted Yorgh's name to be chief of the three tribes, and the cry was taken up over his protests.

"Well, I'll take a walk and think about it," he said finally, and strolled up the creek for a breather.

In the quiet of the trees, he shook his head to see if he would wake from the dream, but the only result was that he heard voices.

He lengthened his stride and caught up with a group of the young women.

"Where are you going?" he asked amiably.

"We were going swimming before the

feast," answered pert Ahnee, "but if there is to be a ponadu named Yorgh in the woods—"

"I won't bother you," he grinned, "if you will tell me where Vaneen is."

"She went ahead alone when we stopped to hear what all the shouting was for. She is anxious to try the new dress of white wool that Jayn gave her."

"Oh," said Yorgh, wrinkling his brow. "Well, in that case, I must ask you girls to find another part of the creek."

"What!" cried Ahnee. "Yorgh, you oughtn't!"

"The Raydower elder said a marriage spell over us, didn't he? Now, will you go,

or must I show you what happened to Moyt?"

"We'll go!" squealed Ahnee hastily, as the other girls faded back from beside her. "But it was said that you did not mean to hold her to that foreign ceremony."

"I must obey everyone's laws," said Yorgh, "now that I am to be chief of all the tribes."

He thought he heard splashing a little way up the creek, and grinned to himself at the vision in his mind.

"But it is well known that you told Tefior—"

"Argh!" said Yorgh. "It is well known that I seldom speak in earnest!"

