

On Sale Third Wednesday of Each Month

VOLUME XIX
Number 1

ASTOUNDING STORIES

MARCH
1937

A STREET & SMITH PUBLICATION

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Single Copy, 20 Cents



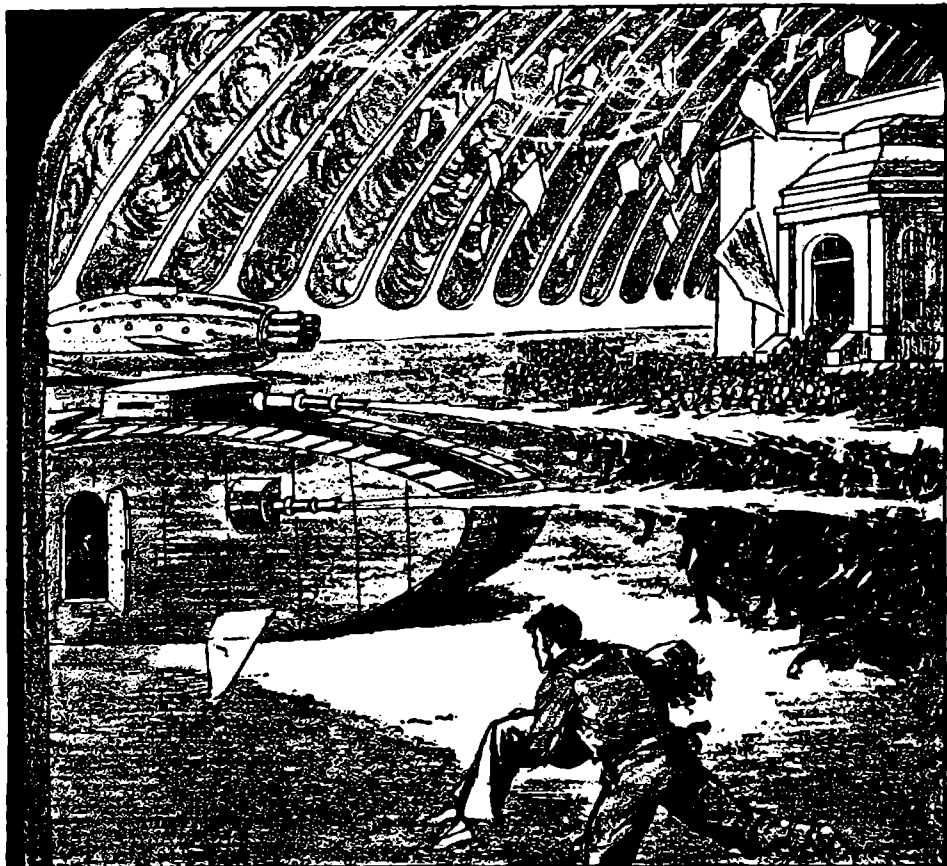
Yearly Subscription, \$2.00

Monthly publication issued by Street & Smith Publications, Inc., 79-89 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y. George C. Smith, Jr., President; Ormond V. Gould, Vice President and Treasurer; Artemas Holmes, Vice President and Secretary; Clarence C. Vernam, Vice President. Copyright, 1937, by Street & Smith Publications, Inc., New York. Copyright, 1937, by Street & Smith Publications, Inc., Great Britain. Entered as Second-class Matter September 13, 1933, at the Post Office at New York, N. Y., under Act of Congress of March 3, 1879. Subscriptions to Cuba, Dom. Republic, Haiti, Spain, Central and South American Countries except The Guianas and British Honduras, \$2.25 per year. To all other Foreign Countries, including The Guianas and British Honduras, \$2.75 per year.

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STREET & SMITH PUBLICATIONS, INC., 79 7th AVE., NEW YORK, N. Y.



Clouds Over Uranus

*And both Murder and Madness begin
with an "M."*

by R. R. Winterbotham

TWO FIGURES clad in the bundlesome, vacuum-lined garments so popular among traders and explorers on the outer planets, disembarked from a space schooner at the locks of the glass-inclosed Terrestrial outpost of Uranus.

The Sun, 19.7 times as far away from Uranus as it is from the Earth, was barely a disk. Still the brightness of

the father of the universe was about 1,800 times that of the full Moon shining upon the Earth, the Sun's favorite daughter.

But the Sun lacked heat, such as the two from Earth knew. Doug Fisher, whose hawklike visage was nearly hidden behind his transparent face covering, could feel the heat leaving his body radiated even through the vacuum lining

of his clothing. He was more accustomed to the warmth of Martian and Terrestrial laboratories than to the brittle frigidity of Uranian climate, ranging to 300 below zero and colder.

Even furs could not disguise his companion's feminine charm. Her figure, bundled like a Mongolian coolie in winter, was tall, straight and savagely lithe. Her eyes burned with a fierce determination. She was Kathryn Abbot, known throughout the Sun's universe as the sister of the man convicted of the most sensational murder ever to have split the pages of interplanetary history.

She seemed not to mind the atom-slowing chill that plunged icy daggers into every living cell. With head erect, she marched to the locks. She was followed by Doug, who carried two small satchels. She threw up her hand to intercept the infra-red rays that worked the electric-eyed mechanism to the outpost gate.

A section of the transparent wall rolled back and the warmth of the inner chamber rolled out upon the two. Doug followed the woman into the locks. The door closed behind them. Instantly the two were bathed in warmth. Kathryn removed the hood from her face and head. Her coal-black, glistening hair fell in waves over the collar of her suit, made of expensive Martian erlita fur.

Doug turned his eyes back for an instant to watch the schooner that had brought them from Mars rise into the dense Uranian atmosphere. The captain and crew of the vessel deigned to take off without even paying respects to the garrison of this accursed outpost.

"Back to Mars!" Kathryn whispered. Her voice betrayed her thoughts, traveling back across a billion-mile gulf to the red, canal-gutted planet upon which her brother awaited a rendezvous with the executioner.

A feeling of intense loneliness swept over Doug as he watched. On the hori-

zon hung a foreboding cloud that seemed to increase the loneliness by its very un-Earthly shape.

"Green clouds!" he muttered.

"Cold and twilight!" added Kathryn, seeming to read his mind. "And my brother lived here two years. It would drive any one to——"

"—madness!" Doug broke in suddenly as he saw her lips compress for the final word of the sentence. Both murder and madness begin with an M.

When the vestibule temperature reached 68 degrees above zero, the inner locks opened. Doug and Kathryn stepped through the opening and came face to face with the entire Terrestrial population of Uranus.

Three persons—two men and a woman—eyed the two visitors, suspiciously, leeringly and with resentment. Behind them stood three other beings, human only in form, black as the night of space, half-fierce, half-comic, toothless, red-eyed and expressionless. The three were Mott, Kinn and Duth, the only living creatures on Uranus ever to have befriended man.

"Greetings, fellows of the Earth!" The tallest of the three human beings stepped forward. He wore rags that had once been a uniform. "I am Major General Lancer, commandant of the Uranian post."

His hair hung in shaggy strings down the side of his head. He was blind in one eye, the sight of which had been lost from severe frostbite in the Uranian atmosphere.

"The radio has informed me you came here to see if I spoke the truth concerning the murder of Vanguard McMurray, for which young Bill Abbot was convicted nearly a Terrestrial year ago."

There was a sarcastic note in the leering voice. As the major general spoke a shrill burst of laughter came from the woman, Marg McMurray, the flaming, red-headed widow of Vanguard Mc-

Murray. Her hands rested on her hips. Her shoulders hunched forward like a cat ready to spring.

Marg opened her mouth, but she was checked from speaking by the third member of the party, who laid his hand roughly on her arm. The man was as uncouth as the others, a huge muscle-bound giant, known from Mercury to Pluto as "Soapstone" Davis, a mongrel who had fought in the space wars of two decades. His face—such of it as was not knotted into an ugly scar burned from the spark of a heat gun during the storming of Io—bore the stamp of cruelty. His high cheeks showed Tartar blood, his thick lips and dusty color evidenced a Negroid strain and his eyes were the milky blue of the northern races. He was bald as an egg.

Doug's eyes met the lone eye of Major General Lancer. "On the face of it," began the arrival, "it looks as if I came here to pin something on one of you three—you six, rather. Forget it. I was not satisfied with the verdict of the courts, sentencing Bill Abbot to the death ray. No one was satisfied. I came merely to clear up the case. This is Miss Kathryn Abbot, Bill's sister. If none of you are guilty, you have nothing to fear."

General Lancer shrugged. "There never was a conviction without some feeling that justice had gone awry. Perhaps there were extenuating circumstances"—the commander's eyes turned slyly toward Marg, whose lips again were cracking into a crooked smile—"but—never fear. I'll give you full cooperation. I'm sure none of us have anything to fear from your visit. Show these people to their quarters, Soapstone."

THE OUTPOST had quarters for five hundred men. Only two or three times since it had been built, two centuries before, had it ever been fully manned. These times had been in

periods of bloody interplanetary wars. At present the residents of the outpost served only to keep the post in repair. For some reason no nation of the Earth, nor of the solar system, had considered Uranus a prize worth conquering.

Soapstone led Kathryn to a barracks which she was to share with Marg McMurray. It faced the quarters of General Lancer across the parade ground of the outpost.

As Kathryn left him, Doug squeezed her hand reassuringly. "I'll be in the barracks to your left, if you need me," he said. "There is a radiophone connection."

She tossed her head, angrily shaking her black hair over her furred shoulders. "I'll need no help to take care of myself," she said, patting the heat gun strapped at her side. "I can handle even that vixen. What a place! No wonder there was a murder. But why Vanguard? Bill could have done humanity a service had he slain any one else on this forsaken orb—if he was guilty of killing, which I doubt. Any one here is a likelier suspect in a murder than Bill. He—he, and Vanguard—were the only decent things on this planet!"

"Yer fergittin' Mott, Kinn an' Duth," chortled the hideous giant. "Them's fine people, them Uranians."

He laughed loudly at something he seemed to think was a huge joke. Then he led Doug to his quarters.

The Uranian outpost was one of two built near each pole of the seventh planet. It was fully equipped with modern conveniences, both for living and fighting. Like the companion outpost at the south pole, the northern fortress was occupied for only one half of the Uranian year, which consisted of eighty-four Earth years.

There were several reasons for the seasonal occupancy of each post.

In the first place, the rotation of the planet, once each eleven hours, upset the Terrestrial schedule of daylight and

darkness so greatly that a decision was made by early explorers to build near the poles, where constant conditions reigned half of each year, due to the inclination of the axis of the planet.

The forty-two-year period of continuous daylight during summer at each pole had an added advantage of bringing warmth, although that warmth was far below Terrestrial standards. The period of continuous daylight at each pole sometimes raised the temperature to less than minus 200 degrees Fahrenheit in midsummer.

Such a temperature, it was found, was necessary for safety. Man was able to protect himself from the cold, but not from conditions caused by the cold. Oxygen liquefies under ordinary pressures at minus 327 Fahrenheit and air liquefies at slightly lower temperature. On Uranus, however, with its higher atmospheric pressure, any temperature above 300 degrees below zero is likely to bring rains of liquid oxygen. At the equator, scouting parties had observed hailstones of solid oxygen.

Where liquid oxygen is plentiful, even the smallest exposed fiber of cotton becomes a great hazard. Cotton moistened with liquid air explodes with the violence of dynamite. A spark from a hobnailed boot, even static in uniforms, is enough to set off the oxygen-saturated cotton. Nor is cotton the only dangerous material. Many other things explode or react violently. Metals are particularly dangerous. Aluminum will burn with liquid oxygen in a blinding flash, with a temperature rise from minus 300 degrees to nearly 5,000 degrees above zero in a fraction of a second.

DOUG FISHER, scientist, interplanetary traveler, adventurer, slept the sleep of a babe. It was a deep, dreamless sleep into which he had fallen as he touched the rude army bed in the Uranian outpost barracks.

Then, through the swirling darkness of his slumber, an icy chill struck his consciousness. Some nameless horror seemed to rise from beyond the abyss of his dreams and remain with him as he awakened.

Wakefulness coursed through his veins in a dizzy rush. Despite the darkness of the room he could see swirling mists as he opened his eyes. The fog was there an instant, then was gone like a puff of smoke in the wind. It was not the sight of the fog, but the feeling of *a living presence* in the room that made his flesh crawl.

Sleep had dimmed his vision at first, and when he fully opened his eyes the evanescent mist had gone. But it was no dream. A warm, moist smell, like that of a hothouse on Earth, pervaded the bedchamber. Some nebulous something, gaseous something, had been in the room, whether to do harm or merely to observe, Doug did not know.

At once his thoughts turned to Kathryn. He sprang from bed and rang her quarters by radiophone. A sleepy voice answered.

"Yeah?"

"Mrs. McMurray? This is Doug Fisher. I wondered if Kathryn is all right?"

"Aw nuts! She don't need a nursemaid. Whatsa matter? Been havin' a nightmare?"

"I'm sorry. I was disturbed and I became uneasy about Kathryn."

The receiver clicked in his ear. A nightmare? Doug's nostrils still caught the delicate, but somewhat sickening smell. Then it struck him as decidedly queer that Marg McMurray should ask if he had been having a nightmare.

BECAUSE the Uranian outpost was inclosed by the glassy dome, artificially heated and without weather, only the sleeping quarters were roofed. Doug

found that Vanguard McMurray's laboratory, undisturbed since the day he was slain a Terrestrial year ago, was on the order of an inclosed courtyard.

McMurray, primarily an army surgeon, was a biologist by avocation. At the time of his murder, McMurray had been engaged in an extensive study of the three anthropomorphic aborigines of Uranus. Some of the results of his investigations had been radioed to scientists on the Earth, Venus, Mars, Jupiter, Saturn and the inhabited satellites. Most remarkable of McMurray's discoveries was that the Uranians had no bones. The manlike creatures seemed to be made of a stiff, leathery cartilage which failed to disclose itself in X-ray photographs. Dissection was, of course, impossible.

"Rubber dolls of Uranus," McMurray had dubbed them in his radiograms. But photos of Mott, Kinn and Duth, which had been sent from Uranus, showed the creatures to be anything but dolls in appearance.

Hoping to find the key to McMurray's slaying, Doug visited the laboratory. For more than an hour Doug searched through personal papers of the murdered man. He found nothing, nor had he expected to find a great deal. All of these papers had been examined by army officials from Mars as soon as the death of Vanguard McMurray had been reported.

McMurray had been brutally clubbed to death in his laboratory. Blood-smearred clothing had been found among Bill Abbot's belongings. The club was hidden in the barracks where Abbot lived. Abbot and McMurray had not been on the best of terms, due principally to trouble stirred between them by Marg, Vanguard's wife.

McMurray's papers dealt extensively with the sub-human creatures of Uranus. They possessed a fine degree of intelligence. They were good workers and so far as known had never

attacked an Earthman. McMurray had found out little concerning their culture or where other members of the tribe lived. Questions concerning their race were always answered by Mott, Kinn and Duth with shakes of their heads and shrugs of their shoulders.

A personal diary was found. It consisted principally of accounts of his work. There were veiled references to trouble with Marg and indications that Bill had attempted to persuade McMurray to send her away. On May 12, 2172, one month before McMurray's death, there was a page missing. At the bottom of the preceding page was an account of a stroll through the gardens of the outpost.

"Suddenly," said the diary, "I stumbled upon——"

The next page had been torn out.

Another bit of information was pasted to a back page of the book. It was in no way concerned with other entries in the diary. It was written in longhand, as if Vanguard had intended some time to incorporate it in a paper on some scientific subject.

The paper read:

The curious thing about Bill Abbot is that he, like myself, seems effected by the disease I have called Uranus fever. From what I am able to determine, these sudden fits of dizziness do not effect any of the other Earthmen here, and, of course, none of the three aborigines. Major General Lancer tells me he has not been ill—speaking of disease caused by bacteria—since arriving on the planet. I have obtained secretly, however, a copy of his early reports, one of which complains of illness, and it is followed by a lapse of one week. The reports also list similar week-long illnesses in the case of my wife, the daughter of the commandant who died before Lancer was transferred from Saturn, and in the case of the ogre, Soapstone Davis.

In my case and Bill's case, however, the illness has been chronic for several Terrestrial months. All of the other cases dated from the arrival of Mott, Kinn and Duth, while ours dates from

our arrival here. In addition to the dizzy spells there are dreams of swirling mists, hideous, nightmarish visions of hideous wraithlike faces during our sleeping hours. Some of these are so real that it is only with difficulty that I can convince myself they are products of imagination.

The only satisfactory explanation is that the human systems rebel against the artificial environment of this accursed planet, so far removed and so different from the normal Terrestrial habitat. The saying, "One man's food is another man's poison," has been proved so often that I think it can be accepted as a good premise for this illness. Certain individuals can accustom their systems to dosages of deadly poisons. Others cannot. Shoot a man in one part of his body and he dies. Shoot another in the same place, under identical conditions, and he will live. I believe these dizzy spells which effect Bill and me are essentially the same disorder which troubled others here and which, for some reason, no one seems to wish to discuss.

AS DOUG finished reading the paper he noticed the light grow dimmer. Glancing overhead he saw a huge green cloud, similar to the cloud that had poised near the horizon the day he had landed with Kathryn on the space schooner from Mars.

In form it was similar to any cloud one sees on a threatening day on Earth. But there was a hard-to-explain quality, perhaps due to the green color, which gave the impression that it was *alive*.

It was appallingly menacing. Vaporous mists swirled against the glassy dome, seeming to exert great pressure upon the surface. The cloud seemed to thicken.

Then from the barracks near the laboratory rose a scream. It was a woman's voice crying out in frightful terror. It was Kathryn.

The scream was repeated. Then the woman ran from the place. Dressed in the slacks commonly worn by women on all occasions in the twenty-second century, her hair flying, she ran toward

the laboratory. In her hand she clutched what appeared to be a rubber ball, about as large as a tennis ball or baseball.

A second form emerged from the building, pursuing the woman. It was followed by another running figure, and then another. Even in the rapidly increasing darkness the identity of the pursuers was unmistakable. They were Mott, Kinn and Duth, the three Uranians whom Vanguard McMurray had considered harmless.

The woman ran toward the laboratory. Doug drew his flame pistol and moved forward to halt the creatures. But the distance was too far and the Uranians moved too rapidly. They seemed to bound over the ground with appalling swiftness. Mott, running in advance of his fellow creatures, reached forward to seize the woman. But as he did so a huge blur swooped from cover of one of the buildings and lurched into the path of the Uranian.

The creature sprawled. The figure that collided with it rose quickly and towered above the Uranian. An excited babble of strange words reached Doug's ears as the other two Uranians halted in front of the man who had frustrated the pursuit. The human voice jabbering to the three leathery creatures had a familiar ring. It was not Major General Lancer, nor was it the voice of Soapstone Davis.

From the dim recesses of Doug's memory came the answer. The voice was that of Vanguard McMurray—the man for whose murder Bill Abbot had been sentenced to death!

Kathryn flew into Doug's arms. She sobbed hysterically with fear, her face pale and her entire body trembling. Her right hand desperately clutched the rubber ball.

"T-take this!" she sobbed. "For love of the Sun, do not let them know you have it! That stuff is made of the flesh of Uranians! I'm sure it will un-

lock the key to the mystery of the planet. I found it in Bill's room, where he told me to look for it!"

Doug recognized the strange rubbery texture of the ball at once. It was pliable, like rubber, yet its feel was oddly warm, as if it gave off heat from some smoldering center. On the bottom the ball was rough. Turning the object over in his hand, Doug saw that it was covered with mud—good old mud from the river-bottom land of North America on the Earth. The soil that had been transported across two billion

miles of space to supply fertility to the gardens of the Uranian outpost.

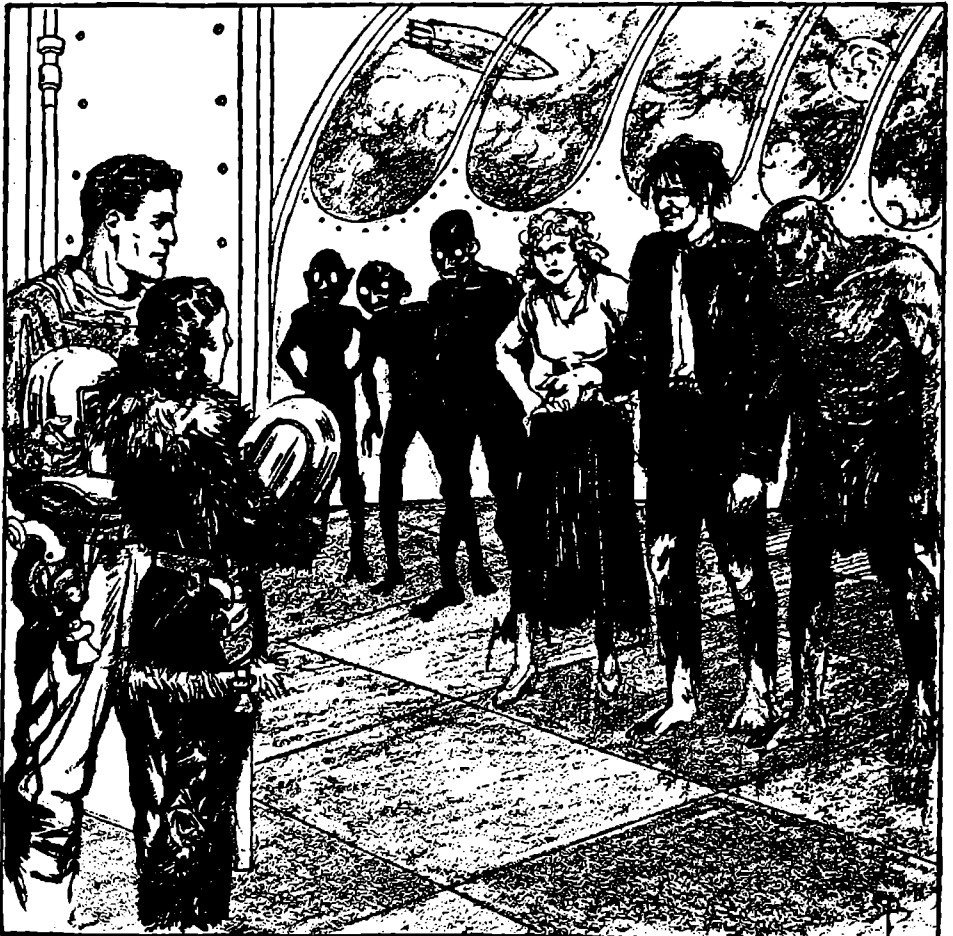
Doug put the ball into his pocket, just as a figure appeared in the laboratory gateway ahead of them. It was Major General Lancer.

"I thought I heard a disturbance. I came to see."

The officer's voice was suave, oily.

"Those Uranian pets of yours chased Kathryn. Nearly scared her out of her wits!"

"Mott, Kinn and Duth? They would hurt no one. Perfectly harmless. Per-



"Greetings, fellows of Earth! The radio has informed me that you came here to see if I spoke the truth concerning the murder of Vanguard McMurray."

haps Miss Abbot picked up one of the toys and they wanted to play. They're just like children, you know."

"About as childlike as the innocence of Kubla Khan." Kathryn smiled, her courage restored. "No, general, I'm afraid you don't know your little boys. They're naughty. I really think they intended to tear me to pieces."

"Why? The general looked at the woman closely.

Kathryn looked up toward the roof of the city.

"Goodness, general, it's getting dark! What is the matter?"

"Just a storm. They occur sometimes. Never bother us, though, with our overhead protection. No man could live through one outside, however."

The whole structure of the glassy shell seemed to tremble with the weight of the clouds that pressed angrily from above.

DOUG did not mention to Kathryn nor to General Lancer his belief that he had heard Vanguard McMurray's voice haranguing with the three Uranian savages. He did not wish to arouse Kathryn's hopes with belief that her brother could be saved from execution by proof that the man for whose murder he had been condemned was not dead. As for the general, Doug was not sure if he could be trusted.

There had been proofs of McMurray's death. Even Bill Abbot did not deny, during his trial, that McMurray had been slain. Then there were photographs of the body, the inquiry conducted by television from Mars, after Bill himself had notified the interplanetary headquarters of the death. Some one had been killed, and the evidence that it was McMurray was irrefutable. Although battered, McMurray's head was not unrecognizable. It had been McMurray who was killed. Yet the figure that collided with Mott with such force as to knock the savage

to the ground, and which had talked in that un-Earthly babble to the three Uranians certainly was not a disembodied spirit.

The general talked for several minutes with Doug and Kathryn, leaving the impression that he was pumping them.

When General Lancer had left, Doug took Kathryn by the arm. "Come," he said, "I don't dare leave you alone and there is something I must learn."

He went into the laboratory. From a cabinet he selected a sharp scapel and cut open the ball. From the center issued a pale-blue smoke.

"*Tobacco!*" they cried in chorus.

The center of the ball had been filled with tobacco smoke.

"Your brother did not smoke, but McMurray did. McMurray was the only man in the outpost who used tobacco."

Doug seemed to be thinking aloud. Then, half pulling the girl with him, he left the laboratory. The two of them walked through the paved streets of the post, toward the outskirts, where the gardens lay.

The gardens were only vestigial. Only weeds and grass grew in the soil that had been transferred with so much expense from the Earth. There were not enough men to care for the gardens.

At the edge of the field was a large inclosure, housing several armored tanks and a small space ship, which had been used in bygone decades for short trips to Ariel, Umbriel, Titania and Oberon, the now uninhabited satellites of Uranus.

The outside storm was raging with greater fury each moment, as the two reached the field. The huge glass dome creaked with the weight of wind and clouds that hurled against it.

Kathryn clutched her escort's arm. "Doug," she whispered, "Doug! I—I'm afraid!"

"You *must* stay with me!" he insisted.

"You can't go back and the storm won't hurt you, unless that dome breaks, and it will take millions of tons of pressure to do that. There's something behind this that will rock the history of the solar system. McMurray stumbled onto it by accident, I believe, and it cost him his life. We are going to learn the truth and then, heaven help us!" Doug halted in his stride. His eyes fell upon a bare patch near the gate to the inclosure. "There is the answer to our puzzle!"

It was not a patch of ground one would notice ordinarily, except for three sunken pits in the center. Somehow that patch of ground reminded both Doug and Kathryn of a patch of graveyard.

THE ENTIRE PLANET seemed to rage at the discovery. The outpost shuddered beneath the whistling gale that held the dome in an enraged grasp. The place was nearly dark. The green clouds had blanked out the light of the distant Sun, save for a sodden emerald glow that filtered through the mist.

Doug handed his flame pistol to Kathryn. "Stop any one you see. If they don't stop shoot—and shoot to kill!" he ordered.

He brought a spade from the inclosure. He worked steadily at the first of the sunken places in the patch of ground. The soil was loose and, with little effort, he cleared away the dirt from the top of a coffinlike box. Without ceremony, he pried open the lid.

Inside the box, stiff as stone, was the body of General Lancer.

Kathryn gasped and grew pale as she saw Doug lift the body from the box and carry it to the space ship inside the inclosure. In a moment, Doug returned. Rapidly, he uncovered the second box. In it was Marg McMurray. After another half hour of toil, Soapstone Davis was carted from his box into the cruiser.

Doug had not finished. He examined

each of the boxes with care. At last he found what he was seeking, a black, pitchlike smear along the edge of one of the boxes. From his pocket Doug pulled out a package of cigarettes. He lighted one, puffed two or three times, then blew a cloud of smoke against the smear.

Kathryn could scarcely believe her eyes. The pitchlike substance seemed to detach itself from the box and roll around the cloud of smoke. Using his gloved hands, Doug molded the pitch-covered smoke into a ball and handed it to Kathryn.

"It's just like—like the ball I found in Bill's room," she stammered.

"It's a substance that is neither a gas nor a liquid," explained Doug. "It undoubtedly is formed by the intense Uranian cold in action with some chemical that is unknown on Earth. The presence of unknown or little-known chemicals on Uranus was suspected long before interplanetary travel, by examination of the absorption lines in the spectrum."

"But it's the stuff the bodies of the Uranians are made of," objected Kathryn.

"That's just it. The Uranians have no bodies! They're gas. That's why Mott, Kinn and Duth are the only three known to man. They're unique."

"Gaseous beings!"

"The idea is hundreds of years old," explained Doug. "As far back as 1919 it was discovered that the spectroscope had revealed evidence of the existence of chlorophyll on Uranus. Chlorophyll is a highly complex nitrogenous compound which supplies the green coloring matter in plants. Ordinarily it is not a gas, but different conditions, slight alteration of the elements in the compound might make a gas, not chlorophyll exactly, but something quite similar to it.

"Those green clouds pressing against the roof of this outpost are alive. They possess intelligence and emotions, and

even now they are venting the wrath of the gods on the superstructure, trying to get at us. Our discovery has been a dangerous one. The gaseous beings of Uranus have plans of conquest, perhaps, or it may be that they resent intrusion of mankind in their domain. At any rate these beings have plotted against the men of Earth, and unless we act quickly man's rule over the solar system is likely to be disrupted by gaseous life cells from Uranus."

"What of General Lancer, Mrs. McMurray and Davis? How did they get in those boxes?"

"They have been there for years, perhaps. There was a note in McMurray's diary which hinted that the gas creatures had overcome them, one by one, soon after Mott, Kinn and Duth arrived. We can assume that these three gas beings were covered with the pitch we found on the coffins and molded into anthropomorphic likenesses. By portraying sub-human intelligence and acting harmless they were admitted to the domed outpost.

"We have evidence that every one but McMurray and your brother were overcome by whatever weapons these creatures possess. McMurray and Abbot, however, possessed resistance to these weapons, just as you and I—— You had dreams last night, no doubt?"

Kathryn nodded. "Horrible dreams—swirling clouds, hideous faces!"

"So did I and so did McMurray, until one day a dream came to life and batted him over the head!"

"A dream?"

"A Uranian. McMurray stumbled onto something in this garden patch one day. Perhaps he made the same discovery that we have just made: that General Lancer and the others we met at the outpost are merely gas creatures, clothed and painted to resemble humans, who have aped the voices and manners of the people they represent. We know

that McMurray must have molded the ball of tobacco smoke. Somehow your brother got possession of it. When the Uranians found out that their secret was out, they gave up trying to use subtlety and used violence in getting McMurray out of the road. Then, because Abbot was too watchful, or for other reasons, they pinned the crime on your brother so that he would be taken out of the way."

"But why did the Uranians assume shapes of the general and the others? Couldn't they have been just as well off in the forms such as Mott and the others?"

"I'll answer that, young lady!"

BEFORE THEM appeared two men. The one was in the likeness of General Lancer. The other was the likeness of a dead man, Vanguard McMurray.

Each held a flame pistol aimed and ready to fire. Doug's heart sank. These were not humans. He could not expect pity. They would kill with no more computation that a hunter kills a rabbit.

"Very interesting, your deductions." General Lancer smiled. "You have been right, except in one point—our motives. You attribute to us a desire for conquest or resentment of intrusion. Neither is right. We do not care whether one man or a thousand comes to our planet. Nor do we care to leave our home and invade other spheres of the solar system. We are contented here on Uranus. But one thing man has taught us. There are disadvantages in being a gas. Man, as an individual, has independence. He can travel on the ground, through the atmosphere and through space itself. We are limited to our atmosphere in our travels. Naturally, we saw the advantages of your form of life and adapted it.

"Our first experiments, Mott, Kinn and Duth, were not completely successful. All three are ungainly and awk-

ward. That is why we used men as dies to cast our body molds. The three you have carried from their sleeping place into the space ship have been satisfactory for models. You two will be more satisfactory, because you are young, more perfectly formed."

Doug's body tensed. He was separated from the two men by ten feet. If he could surprise them——

"I wouldn't if I were you," cautioned McMurray, seeming to read Doug's thoughts. "I would hate to kill you. Your body would not last for years of molding as the others have, if you are dead. I was made from McMurray's dead body. There are only a few of us. The body has turned to dust and there will be no more."

"Only a few?"

General Lancer laughed and nodded across the field. A column of men was marching toward them. Not only were the men dressed alike in soldier uniforms, but they were physically alike. There were companies of General Lancers. There were battalions of Soapstone Davises and even Marg McMurrays. Every detail, from the service stripes on General Lancer's arms to the frowziness of Marg McMurray's hair was exactly duplicated in each of the type.

"You'll never have a company of Doug Fishers," snarled the Earthman. "You'll have to kill me. I'm immune to that hypnotism or whatever it is you worked on the others."

"You are not immune to cold," leered the general. "In a few minutes my people from all parts of this planet will have crushed the dome above this outpost. You have no space clothing to protect you from the cold blasts that will strike you. You'll fall half frozen. We will inject preservatives into your blood stream and keep you in a state of living death for centuries to come."

"You'll never get away with it! My people——"

"Your people! Bah! A few paltry billions on a second-rate planet. All of your weapons of war could not kill my people fast enough to make an appreciable dent in our vital statistics."

A grinding crack sounded above. Across the domed roof of the Uranian outpost zigzagged a crack of destruction. The structure shook with renewed vigor as the gas beings outside realized that their efforts to break down the works of man was about to be rewarded. The superstructure seemed to bend inward.

A ROAR shook the ground around them. At first Doug believed it to be the dome collapsing. Then he saw General Lancer and McMurray vanish before his eyes. A streamer of flame flashed across the soil to wipe out the pantomimic human caricatures by the column.

Kathryn screamed and collapsed into Doug's arms. The Earthman picked up the burden and ran toward the huge thing that lumbered toward them. It was an army tank, spitting flame toward the horde of Uranians.

The door swung open and Doug ran into the machine, to be greeted by grinning General Lancer, the real major general of interplanetary fame, and a sweating soldier of fortune, Soapstone Davis.

"By Jupiter! That was a close shave." The general laughed. "Take her back to the space ship, Soapstone. Marg will have the motors working, if the sky doesn't fall before then."

The tank rolled back toward the ship. The survivors of the Uranian columns rallied on the field behind them. They had no weapons, but they charged. The field echoed with a weird, singing battle cry of the molded gas beings.

The tank plodded on, with Soapstone at the controls. General Lancer fired the flame guns. He cut down the

Uranians by the hundreds, but they did not stop. The molds for their bodies were fleeing; the future of the race was at stake.

The tank drew up besides the space ship. Already the combustion chamber of the old-fashioned rocket tubes glowed red as the engine panted in readiness for the first charge that would send it soaring into the planet's atmosphere.

Soapstone threw open the door. But he did not jump out on the ground. Some deathly fear of touching the soil held him back, until Marg McMurray, not the vixen, but a dimpled redhead, ran an insulated plank between the tank and the ship.

The transfer was made with but a minute to spare. As the door of the ship swung shut the dome of the outpost crashed. Glass showered like autumn leaves across the field.

It was then that the Uranian horde discovered the advantages of a gaseous body. Lancers, Davises and McMurrays were cut to ribbons by the falling glass. Screams of the injured sounded across the field.

"Let's get out of here!" cried Doug. Soapstone sprang to the controls, touched a lever. The passengers were thrown backward as sudden acceleration swept them off the ground.

The craft plunged into the misty, living gas. Even the sides of the space ship creaked with the weight of billions upon billions of gaseous beings pressing inward, trying to impede progress of the escaping Earthmen.

Davis and Doug Fisher manned the rocket feed lines. Fuel surged into the combustion chambers and sent the craft plowing forward against the immeasurable pressure of chlorophyll gas.

General Lancer, forward in the ship, sprayed ahead with his heat gun, driving the nebulous beings back out of the way. But as the gun broke down the

chemical compounds of the living gas, new clouds pressed in ahead.

But slowly the ship gained headway. Mile by mile it traveled upward. The gas clouds thinned, although even at twenty miles the progress was slow. Then, at last, the ship was free of the atmosphere. Like an uncaged bird, it sprang forward into the darkness of interplanetary space toward the distant twinkle of Saturn, nearly nine hundred million miles away.

"How on Earth did you come back to life?" asked Doug.

"You insulated us, young feller," said Soapstone. "You see, after we came to in the ship here, Marg started to go outside. The minute she touched the ground she keeled over again. The general got some rubber gloves and hauled her back inside. She came to. We figured that the ground was charged, and we couldn't understand how the rest of you were standing it. Then we gathered from your conversation that you needed help, so we started in. I didn't want any more fellers lookin' like me in the universe, and neither did Marg or the general. And say, while there's explaining to be done, how does it happen you weren't shocked into unconsciousness?"

Doug laughed. "It bothered me all along how the Uranians put some of you out and only disturbed the others. You see, different people have different resistances to electricity. The Uranians used just enough to shock you into unconsciousness. They were afraid to use heavier voltages for fear of killing you. After you were unconscious they supplied food and nourishment through periodic injections of life preservatives."

Kathryn moved toward the radio-telephone. There was a message to be sent to Mars. A message that would save her brother's life when it was verified by Major General Lancer.