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MANLY WADE WELLMAN
MARGARET ST. CLAIR

And Others

THRILLING WONDER STORIES

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An Amazing Complete Novel

DONOVAN HAD A DREAM

By JAMES MacCREIGH

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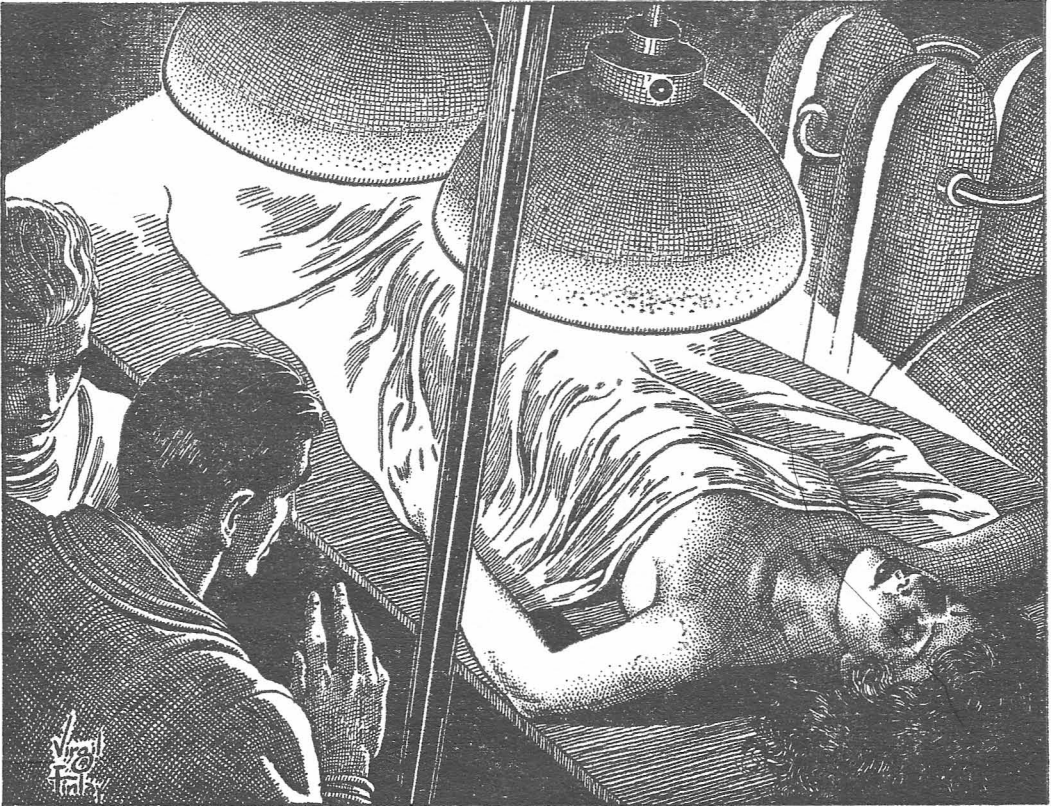
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The girl was supine on a dais, under gleaming orange light (CHAP. III)

Donovan Had a Dream

By JAMES MacCREIGH

When Venus is ruled by a matriarchy of Hags, a quartet of gallant rebels seizes the weapons that can topple tyranny!

CHAPTER I

The Place Called Nard

IT WAS a beautiful city from a distance, the place called Nard. The cloud layer hung a mile overhead and the white towers came almost up to it. You came out of one of the little feeder canals on your canalcraft and there it was, ahead of you. Pure, miraculous white, a city for angels.

"It's the Hags," Hanley said suddenly. "They spoil it."

The narrow-faced man called Valentine stared at him. "Spoil what?" he asked.

"The whole planet." Hanley gestured around him. "Look at this place we're in. A cellar, fixed up with a bar and tables and a couple of dancers who couldn't make a living on Earth. Noise and smoke—dirty glasses with cheap liquor. . . ."

Valentine grinned leanly. "That's treason,"

AN AMAZING SCIENTIFiction NOVEL

he commented. "You can't talk about the Hags like that. Besides, it's not their fault."
"No?"

"No. They didn't build this place. They don't make you come here."

"There's no other place to go!"

Valentine shrugged. "Not for the likes of us, no," he admitted. "But there never was a place for men like you and me." He looked around him, at the drunken canalers and their white-faced women. "This is as good a place as any. On Earth there are better places, sure. Cleaner and quieter and the dancers know how to pick up their feet. I've seen them—though you have not. I liked them, but I couldn't stand it for long. That was what they call civilization, Hanley. Civilization means law. Would you like to be law-abiding?"

The broad-shouldered Hanley started, almost spilling his drink in consternation. "Law-abiding? Not me!" he said sincerely.

Valentine nodded and leaned back in his chair. Out in the center of the floor a pair of dancers were going through gymnastic contortions. Silver-haired and slim, the girl spun out of her partner's arms halfway across the floor, stopping near Valentine's table. As she posed there for a second her eyes caught Valentine's gray ones and she gave him the imperceptible performer's smile of greeting. Then the music surged and she spun away.

"Hope Darl didn't hear what you said about dancers." Hanley grinned. "She's smitten."

Valentine picked up his glass and held it to the light. "I wasn't talking about her," he said lazily, watching the milky green opalescent shimmer. "She could do better than this if she wanted to. Don't personalize everything, Hanley."

Hanley pursed his lips, looking at Valentine wonderingly. He too swallowed his drink before he spoke. "How come you live like this, Valentine?" he asked.

"Like what?"

"Like"—Hanley gestured—"like an outlaw. You could be a successful man if you stayed on Earth, Valentine. You talk like a man who's had an education. Yet you hang around this dirty little city on Venus, skirting the edge of the law. It's a good life for me, I guess—I don't know any other. But you. . . ."

There was a faraway look in Valentine's brooding eyes, focused on a table across the

smoke-filled room. "Look at that girl," he said suddenly. "The Earthgirl with the Space Fleet ensign."

"The pretty one? What about her?"

"She is pretty, isn't she? But look at her face. You can tell how she has spent her life."

Hanley nodded. "She's been rich—is that what you mean? Rich and powerful. It shows."

"That's what I mean. All her life she's been surrounded by luxury, and she couldn't live for a day if she were alone in the swamps." He set down his glass and faced Hanley. "That's Earth for you," he said. "Soft, and haughty, and weak. Venus is no better, but at least here I can do almost as I like. So I go out into the swamps and bring in bellflowers, and you pass them on to some illegal distillery or other, evading the Hags' tithe, and we both have enough money to do as we please."

Hanley grimaced. "Let's not talk so loud about it," he begged.

THE dancers had left the floor and the rickety orchestra was hammering out a dance number. The Earthgirl got up to dance with the youth in Space Fleet blue. Valentine sighed.

"She's still a pretty girl," he said. "Let's have another drink."

"Who's a pretty girl?"

Valentine looked up. The dancer was standing over him, smiling, still wearing the gold-and-scarlet silks of her dancing costume.

"Hello Darl," he said. "I meant you, of course. There isn't a prettier girl in Nard."

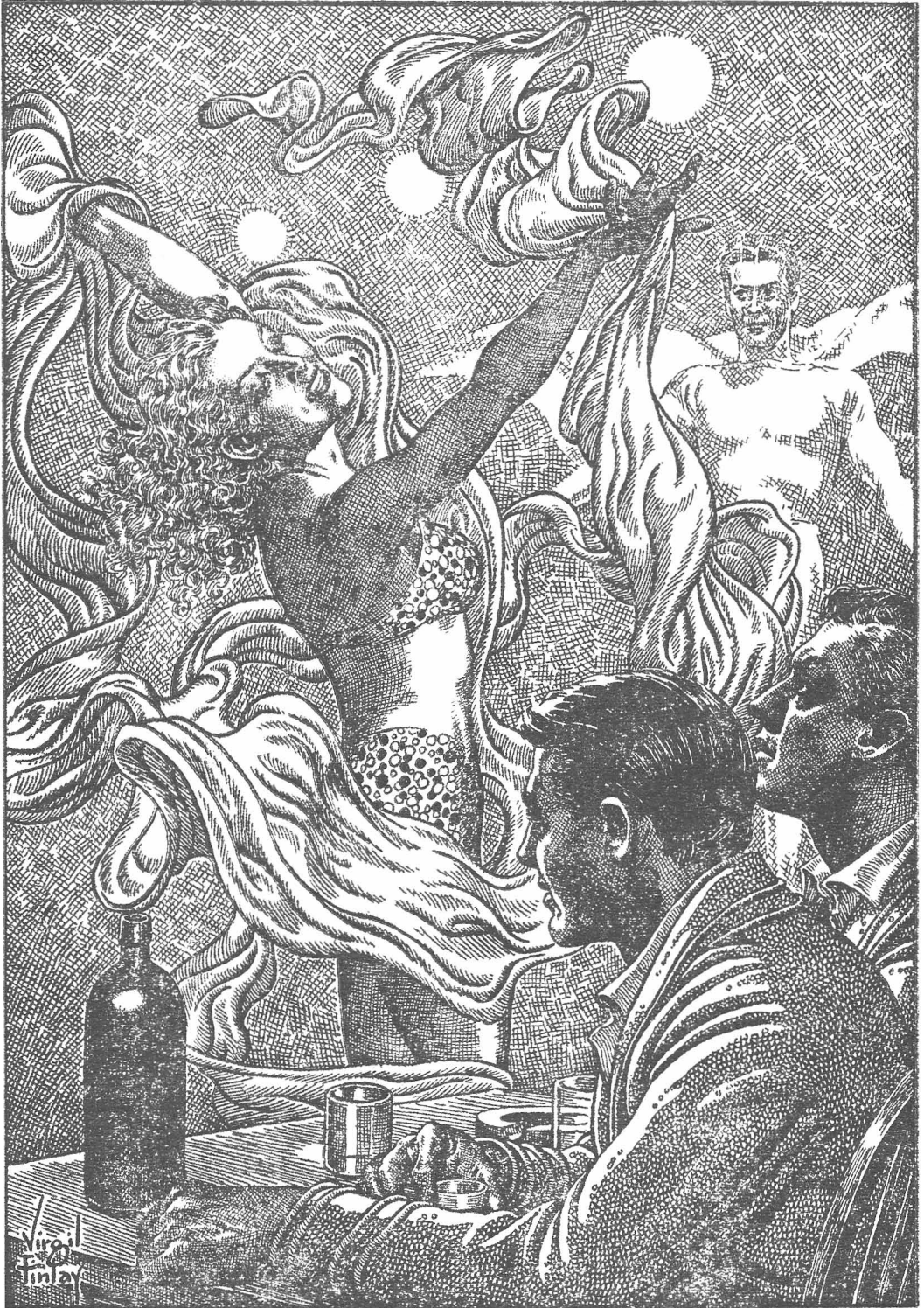
A waiter brought a chair over hastily and the girl sank down into it. "You always know the right thing to say," she murmured. "But why didn't you say it to me instead of to Hanley?"

Valentine coughed and detained the waiter. "What would you like?" he asked hurriedly. She shrugged. "Flower-dew, I suppose. That's what you've been drinking."

Hanley growled, "I'll take whisky. Let's make this one the last, Valentine. We have business."

The waiter vanished and came back with the drinks.

"You needn't be pointed," Darl said. "I can't stay long anyhow. I have to change for my next number. It's something new,



The girl spun out of her partner's arms and her eyes caught Valentine's (CHAP. I)

Valentine— I wish you could stay and see it.”

“Something new?”

“An importation from Earth—an old medieval folk-dance that’s being revived. They call it the samba.”

• “Sounds fascinating,” Hanley said. “I’m sorry, but . . .”

“Oh, maybe we can stay,” Valentine said. He was looking out over the floor again. “Meanwhile, Darl, let’s dance a little. It’ll keep you in practise.”

“Meaning that I need practise?” she said.

They rose and she walked before him to the floor. The band was still blaring at top speed. They fell into the rhythm of it and moved across the floor.

Darl looked up at him. “Have I told you lately that you missed your vocation?” she asked. “You should have been a dancer. You can dance with me any time. By the way, what is your vocation?”

“I’m retired,” Valentine said. “Easy. . . .” He guided her dextrously among the other couples on the floor. She relaxed against his arm, her eyes half closing.

She felt a nudge from behind and stumbled. Startled, she stared reproachfully up at Valentine.

“I’m sorry,” he was saying. “That was clumsy of me.”

They had bumped right into another couple—the Earthgirl and the boy in Space Fleet blue. The ensign said, “That’s all right,” ungraciously, and was about to dance on.

Valentine stopped him. “It was really my fault,” he said. “Can we buy you a drink to make up for it?”

The ensign’s blond brows lifted. “That’s not necessary,” he said.

Valentine put a hand on his shoulder. “No, I insist,” he said softly.

It was the Earthgirl who spoke. She stood regarding Valentine for a fraction of a second with honest curiosity. Then, “I have a better idea,” she said, “let’s buy *them* a drink, Van.”

The ensign shrugged petulantly. “If you like,” he said. To Valentine, “May we?”

“Certainly,” Valentine said. The four walked off the floor to the table the Earth couple had occupied. As soon as they had ordered, Valentine said, “I noticed you from across the floor. It’s not very often that we see Earthpeople here in Nard.”

The ensign permitted himself a smile.

“You’ll be seeing more of us in the future,” he said.

“Really?” Valentine showed genuine interest.

“Sure.” The ensign took a deep swallow of his drink. “You’ll be seeing more than you ever saw in your life before.”

Valentine shook his head gently. “I saw a million and a half Earthmen in the streets of New York, waiting to hear the results of a duel between two professional ray-gun killers,” he said.

“Oh, then you’ve been to Earth,” the Earthgirl said. “How did you like it?”

“I admired the beautiful cities, and the immense factories. I didn’t think much of the entertainment.”

The girl frowned in mock astonishment. “Surely you don’t object if two professionals try to kill each other. I understand that all sorts of killing goes on here on Venus. And the people that get killed aren’t even being paid for it—it’s the Hags killing the Donovans, or the Donovans killing helpless citizens.”

“You’ve been a little misinformed,” Valentine said politely. “Is that why you came to Venus? To see some of the killing?”

The ensign laughed explosively. “No. We came on business.”

“Mixed with a little pleasure, of course,” the girl added swiftly, “In fact, I’m afraid it was almost pleasure. But tell us some more about your reactions to Earth.”

They conversed for a few minutes. Valentine conscientiously ignored the spectacle of Hanley across the room, staring incredulously at the foursome. Then Darl said:

“I’ve really got to change now. If you’ll excuse me I’ll go.”

VALENTINE rose with her and walked as far as the door to the dressing room, after offering the conventional thanks for the drink. Then he sat down next to Hanley.

Hanley regarded him with open anger. “What’s going on?” he demanded. “Do you know what time it is?”

Valentine nodded. “Drink your drink, and I’ll tell you all about it.”

Hanley grunted and lifted the glass to his lips. He held it there, then sat bolt upright. “What the heck!” he murmured. He pointed to the entrance. “Look. What are *they* doing here?”

Valentine turned around. Every eye in the place was on the entrance as three new per-

sons came in.

They moved in disdainful silence, like lily-white swans floating through mire. The first two wore the white casques of their mysterious order, hiding their features. The third was a mournful-eyed girl of nineteen in the scarlet-edged robes of a novice.

"Imagine!" Hanley said. "I never heard of the Hags coming to a place like this before. Maybe they're human after all."

"Or maybe they're after something," Valentine said, his face drawn. "I wish I knew what."

The first Hag threw her casque back, revealing the lean face of a middle-aged woman. She looked about her, beckoned imperiously to a waiter in a stained apron. He approached her uncertainly.

There was a rustle of silken garments behind Valentine, and Darl was back. "Do you see who's here?" she whispered venomously. "Vultures! I hate those—"

"We all do," Hanley said hastily. He waved at the dance floor, where the half-intoxicated canalers had noticed the Hags and were unanimous in their hostile looks. "I'll bet they haven't got a friend in the place."

The waiter listened uncertainly while the first Hag said something peremptory and short to him, then he hurried off toward a door at one end of the bar. Valentine looked after him thoughtfully.

"Darl," he said without looking at her, "how would you like to do me a favor?"

"Sure."

"Find out what they want."

DARL looked at him uncertainly. She shrugged. "All right." She was on her feet swiftly.

Hanley said, "Valentine, I hate to repeat myself but it's time—"

"I won't be long," he promised. "I'm curious about this."

Darl intercepted the waiter before he reached the door, returned almost immediately. Her eyes were apprehensive.

"They're looking for somebody," she said. "Jay didn't know what they want him for. Valentine, have you been. . . ."

Valentine pursed his lips. "Not that I remember," he said.

"Oh, Valentine—don't get into trouble with the Hags. They're horrible. They arrested me once. I know what they're like."

Valentine waved his hand. "I won't get

into trouble," he said. "Are you ready, Hanley?"

"It's about time," Hanley grumbled. Valentine dropped a bill on the table to cover their drinks, then got up.

"I'll be back, Darl," he promised.

"Tonight?"—eagerly.

"In a couple of days. Good-by."

Valentine noticed the Earthgirl putting on her cloak as he went out. Evidently she was leaving too.

"We're late," Hanley said. "Let's hurry."

The two men walked briskly along the wide street, dimly lighted with luminous disks set in the white-walled buildings. Above, the hanging clouds reflected the more brilliant lights of the center of the city.

"What was it that Darl said about being arrested by the Hags?" Hanley asked.

"It happened a year ago. They picked her up, held her a couple of days, let her go. Never said a word of explanation. She didn't like the Hags much before that—but now she hates them."

They turned into a small street, then into what was almost an alley. They were in the poorer section of Nard now, a place where laborers lived and worked. The buildings were old and small compared with those in the center of the city.

Valentine greeted the man in the black plastic ray-tunic of the police who lounged on the wharf beside his craft, then stepped into it. Hanley followed, with dubious looks at the guard. Ranged against the cushioned seats at the back of the speedbarge were four baled objects—the bellflowers. Their spiced scent was unmistakable. The guard grinned broadly, turned and walked away.

"Here you are," Valentine said. "Now where's your man to take them off my hands?"

"He'll be here," Hanley promised. "Let's get the bales up on the wharf if you're sure it's safe."

"Safe as the secrets of the Donovans," Valentine said. "Even the Hags can't find those out."

The two men worked quickly and in moments the bales were stacked beside the boat. They climbed out. Hanley plucked a bellflower petal out of a bale and chewed it reflectively.

"Look over there," he said, pointing. "What do you make of that?"

Valentine looked. "What?" A low-wheeled car purred down toward them along the

canal street, stopped at a shabby building not far away. Two persons got out, a man and a girl. At that distance it was hard to identify them but the man was in blue uniform.

"Our friends from the cafe!" Valentine said. "Wonder what they're doing here? That's—oh, I understand. See the Earth-sign?"

Hanley nodded as his eyes took in the two interlocked squares that gleamed faintly over the entrance to the building.

"An Earth storehouse, huh? I can see why the boy wonder would be down here—in charge of a shipment, maybe. But how about the girl?"

Valentine shrugged. "It doesn't make sense to me either," he conceded. "But these Earth-girls—oh, here comes your man."

CHAPTER II

Man Meets Donovan

A SHORT man was walking rapidly toward them, his face tense. As soon as he got within earshot: "Sorry I'm late," he said. "I had a little trouble." He was obviously uneasy, eyes squinted and blinking.

"What kind of trouble?"

The man spat expressively. "The Hags," he said. "I don't know how much longer this little deal of ours is going to work. I've got an uneasy feeling. The Hags are searching for the still."

"Searching?" Hanley repeated. "That's bad. Will they find it?"

"Not unless they look somewhere else." The man sighed and regarded the bales meditatively. "They were looking in my house. I'm not crazy enough to keep the still there. But it looks like they've got a line on me."

Valentine nodded. "Well, do you want to take this batch?"

The man spread his hands morosely. "I have to," he said. "My customers are waiting." He widened a gap in the sacking of the bales, peered at the exposed bellflowers. "Looks all right. Wait just a minute."

He turned his back and walked across the street to where a light cargo car was parked, drove it over to them. The three men

together heaved the bales into its cargo space.

They had just finished when the short man froze. "Watch out," he whispered. "Look who's coming."

Valentine gave him a quick glance, then relaxed. "Oh, the policeman," he said. "Don't worry about him. He's a friend of mine—I pay him more than the Hags do." But the guard seemed anxious as he approached.

He said, "I thought I'd better tell you. There's a robot coming this way. It just came over the talker." He patted the portable two-way radio he carried.

"A robot?" Hanley grunted.

"Yeah. Coming fast."

Hanley's business associate gurgled in his throat.

"They're out for blood," he said. He stood there uncertainly. "I've got the stuff already. I might as well stay with it." He shrugged and his hand went into his pocket for a wad of colored paper, which he gave to Hanley. "I'll let you know later if I'm still in business," he said. He got into the cargo car and was gone.

Hanley looked after him. "Well, what now?" he asked.

"I don't know," Valentine admitted. "Maybe you and I will have to find a legal way of making a living after all." His eyes strayed past Hanley, looking down the street. "We're stuck—look."

Hanley turned and followed his glance. "It wasn't a false alarm, was it?"

Far down the street, beyond the worried back of the guard, a figure was approaching rapidly. It was large, menacing—and not even remotely human.

The serf-robots of the Hags were huge creatures—round-bodied, capped at the shoulders with a many-eyed dome, borne upon a pair of stiltlike metal legs. They had no intelligence in the sense that a man is intelligent but they could respond instantly to radio-control from afar, and what they saw and heard was transmitted to the person controlling them.

The policeman, now a hundred yards away, turned and gave them a fleeting look of warning. Valentine nodded.

Hanley asked apprehensively: "Do you think it's after us?"

"I don't know," Valentine said. "We'll find out."

The creature bore down upon them, then halted in the middle of the street. It seemed

to listen to an inaudible order, then whirled and dashed into one of the buildings.

"It wasn't looking for us, then," Hanley observed with heartfelt relief. "Well, thank heaven for that."

Valentine was frowning. "Now I wonder what it *was* after."

"Bellflower smugglers like us. That's what the guard—"

Valentine snorted. "In there? That's an Earth depot."

Hanley grunted, staring. It had been the Earth-marked warehouse into which the robot had dashed.

"Well, I guess not. Say! The car's gone. Our friend must have left."

"I noticed that. Wish I knew what was going on."

"It's no business of ours," Hanley protested. "Let's go."

"All right. Go ahead, Hanley. I'll see you later. I'm going to find out what that robot's after."

"What do you care? You're just looking for trouble." The puzzled, half-comprehending look was in Hanley's eyes again.

"I do care, though," Valentine said. "That's what matters right now. Go ahead—travel."

VALENTINE waited a half second after Hanley had melted into the shadows of the goods piled on the other side of the street. He ran lightly across the street, down toward the Earth warehouse. He paused in the doorway to make sure no one was watching, then silently slipped inside.

He was in a dusty office with covered writing machines and desks, completely deserted. Valentine heard no sound anywhere. He blinked, then walked softly across the small room to a gaping double door.

Inside was impenetrable blackness, a large storeroom of some kind. Valentine could sense, rather than see, metal crates stacked along the wall by his side. A heap of them before him blocked his vision.

He stood silent, trying to match the super-sensitive hearing of the robot with his own forest-trained ears. Far off there was a faint scratching sound. He stepped soundlessly forward—and slipped, flailed the air wildly to regain his balance, stood teetering for a second. Something was there on the floor that was liquid and slippery.

His nostrils explained it to him even before he carefully bent down, reached out exploring hands. His fingers touched some-

thing warm and solid—a human body! The reek of human blood flowed around him. Valentine pursed his lips and rose to his feet. He could do no good for the man—and the body was a fresh warning of what his own fate might be.

More cautiously he tiptoed forward. As he neared the end of the stack of crates he detached a faint vertical line of light before him. He peered round the boxes, ready to race for safety at an instant's warning.

Far down the long aisle of crates towered the bulk of the robot. A thin beam of light blazed from a socket in the creature's domed top, flared down on an eight-foot crate held effortlessly in the great tentacles. As Valentine watched, the robot set the crate down, reached for another and examined it.

The electric scanners that were its eyes took seconds to grasp the stenciled characters on the box, even with the aid of the light. Valentine wondered whether, somewhere in the brooding city, a Hag sat watching a tele-screen reflecting the things the robot saw, or whether it was on its memory tape alone that the image was recorded.

From behind him there came a crash.

Valentine whirled, his eyes staring into blackness. There was a scrambling noise, then silence. But the robot had heard too! The floor-jolting strides of its massive feet jarred him into action.

His mind raced desperately. Better to face the unknown danger behind him than the sure annihilation by the robot! He darted back around the crates, stumbling crazily in the blackness. He plunged into the office, reckless of the danger. Amazingly, it was empty! And the wide door to the empty bright street stood open.

But he slid to a halt on impulse. He dodged toward the corner of the office and slipped under a desk. The robot would be sure to catch him in straight pursuit in the street. But if he remained hidden and very quiet. . . .

Clattering like a boiler-factory on the run, the robot pounded through the office. Only a single cursory sweep of its search-beam it gave to the office before it hurtled on through the door. It paused irresolutely outside. Then its earphones picked up the footsteps of some luckless pedestrian and it was off in a mechanical rush in pursuit.

Valentine came cautiously out from under the desk, listening. If the monster's search carried it far enough away it would be possi-

ble to escape. Otherwise. . .

"Valentine!"

The voice was a whisper, from the open door to the storeroom.

"Hanley!" Valentine gasped in recognition. "I thought you. . ."

"I know what you thought," Hanley said apologetically. "Are there any more robots around?"

"I don't think so. What are you doing here?"

There was a repetition of the scrambling noise.

Valentine, coming nearer, knew that Hanley was climbing down from the top of the heap of crates.

"I thought it was safer up there after I tripped," he excused himself. "I guess I messed things up, huh? I thought you might need some help, so I followed you. Then I stumbled over this kid here, and when I got up I knocked one of these crates over."

"You stumbled over the dead man?"

"Dead? No—I listened, and heard the heartbeat. Look, Valentine, let's get her out of here. She's not dead—and she's not a man!"

THE dark clouds overhead were beginning to grow light with dawn as they pushed the canalcraft away from the jetty, sent it slicing the unrippled surface of the water and out into the middle of the canal.

"Where to?" Hanley asked from the wheel. "My place down at the edge of the city?"

"We'll go there first," Valentine said. "I'll drop you off there but the girl and I are going on. I've got a plan for her."

He ignored Hanley's questioning eyes and turned to the girl. He had recognized her instantly as the Earthgirl from the canalers' cafe.

Obviously, she had been knocked out by the great tentacles of the robot. Skin was ripped from her arms, a bloody welt marked the hairline at one side of her face. She had lost much blood.

Hanley had been gentle as he carried her in his powerful arms and the blood had clotted to flow no longer.

"Hand me the kit from the locker," Valentine said. He raised her head, propped it up. With the material in the medical kit he dressed her wounds as best he could. He took out a slim hypodermic, slipped an ampoule of colorless fluid into the barrel,

worked the plunger to puncture the capsule. Then he inserted it carefully into the blue-traced vein at the inside of the girl's elbow, pressed down the plunger. The girl twitched and moaned.

"What's that?" Hanley called from the wheel.

"I'm giving her a shot of nihilate to keep her asleep. She'll be a lot less trouble that way."

Hanley frowned. "Listen, Valentine—you can trust me. Where are you going to take her?"

Valentine hesitated, watching the girl. The expression on her face faded into the relaxed mask of slumber as the drug took effect.

He rose to face Hanley. "Maybe you'd better not know," he said. "I trust you. But maybe you'd better do your own guessing."

Hanley shrugged and faced forward. The speedy barge had almost reached the limits of the city. Valentine came forward to take the wheel as Hanley turned it in toward the shore.

"I'll see you in a few days," he promised. "Sorry, but this is important."

"Sure," Hanley said morosely. He relinquished the wheel. Then, "Hold it!" he said sharply. "Look what's waiting for us!"

Valentine's eyes flew to the dock before him.

Standing silent and watchful at the corner of the street which led to Hanley's home was one of the robots of the Hags!

The barge spun around in a sharp turn and Valentine thrust the speed lever forward to the last notch.

"That settles it," he said. "He may have seen the girl. We can't land."

"He might just be standing there," Hanley offered.

"And he might not, too. They could have traced the bellflowers to you—anything. We can't take the chance. I'm sorry, Hanley, but I think you'll have to come along with us now."

"And where are we going?" Hanley asked.

Valentine looked at him with a faint smile. "I think you have a pretty good idea. Why don't you try a guess?"

Hanley nodded slowly and the half-understanding that had been in his eyes became certainty.

"It's the Donovans," he whispered. "You're one of the Donovans, aren't you?"

Valentine nodded and Hanley was silent for several seconds.

"I've been having that idea in the back of my head for a long time," Hanley said. "It's the only thing that made sense. But . . ."

"But what?"

Hanley coughed. "Well, I thought the Donovans were a pretty rough lot. Outside of being pirates, I mean. Of course, all I know about the Donovans is what I heard from the Hags—mind you, I'm not saying they're right. . . ."

Valentine shrugged. "We're not even pirates," he said. "Oh, we *have* stopped freight barges once in a while when there was something on them we had to have. But we only stole from the Hags—and they stole the whole planet of Venus from the people."

"But I thought the Hags always flew."

"They do now." Valentine laughed. "We taught them that."

HANLEY nodded. "But how did you get along?"

"Well—did you ever wonder what I did with the money you gave me for bellflowers? We bought a lot of things, and made a lot. We have factories. Everything we ever stole was something the Hags had that we couldn't get any other way. Stuff from their laboratories mostly."

"I had an idea that the Hags exaggerated a little," Hanley admitted. "Well, anything they say is probably a lie, of course. But why do you live in caves in the swamp, like animals?"

Valentine laughed shortly. "You'll see," he promised.

"Oh." Hanley grimaced. "Then I'm going to the Donovan hideout."

"I'm afraid you'll have to. Don't feel badly about it—it's an honor. Only the Donovans have ever been there before."

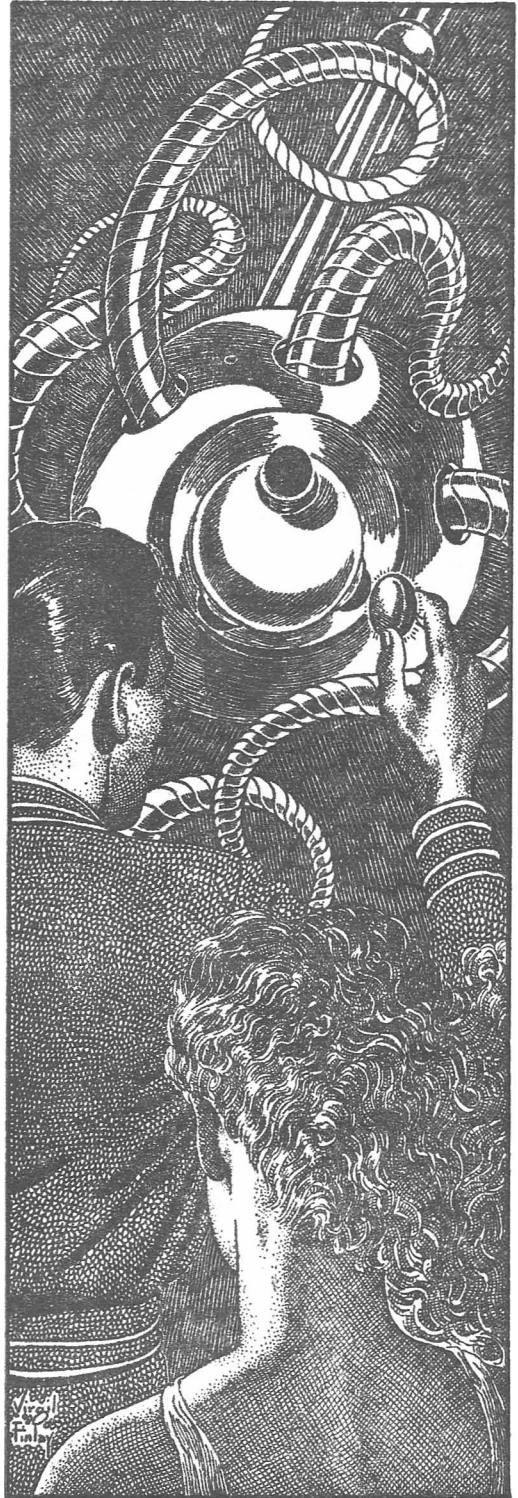
"And the girl?"

Valentine shrugged, and dropped the conversation.

He turned to look behind him. The Hags had fast canalcraft too, of course, and there was always the possibility of chase. But he saw nothing.

The canal, at this hour of the morning, was deserted.

The girl moaned in her sleep. Valentine sighed and leaned back, holding the wheel loosely.



The robot hurtled through the door, whirled and sped toward them (CHAP. IX)

CHAPTER III

Every Word a Lie

AFTER miles of the straightaway, the canal's course took a wide turn and the white spires of Nard disappeared behind the dense trees. Valentine stretched, sat upright, began to pay attention to the shoreline. His gray eyes roved along the tangled vegetation of the bank. After a moment he changed course slightly, ran the canalcraft in toward the shore in a long slant. Where a bent tangletree hung its weeping fronds far out over the water he cast a quick look behind him, then gave the craft hard right tiller.

"What—" Hanley gasped. Then he understood, as the drooping fronds brushed the top of the craft and he could see behind their screen.

It was another waterway, a hidden one. Apparently it had once been a natural shallow stream, for its course was winding. But it was deep enough for the shallow draft of a canalcraft and careful work had cleared enough of the vegetation to make it navigable without destroying the overhead screen.

"Clever," Hanley said. "And you have your huts under the trees, huh? Moving around from time to time so the Hags won't find you?"

Valentine smiled. "We don't move very often," he said. "This is the original Donovan hideout. It's been here a hundred and fifty years, ever since old Donovan himself took his followers out of the cities."

After a winding, mile-long run under the shrouding trees they drew up to a metal landing stage. Half a dozen canalcraft were moored there already, slim shapes that indicated speed.

Valentine stepped out and raised his hands. "Valentine of the Donovans," he said to an unseen listener. "I have two strangers. I bind myself for them."

There was a rustling in the undergrowth and a man in jungle green stepped out, putting a ray-pencil into its sheath. He stared at Hanley and the girl doubtfully.

"Go ahead, Valentine," he said. "I guess you know what you are doing."

Valentine nodded and beckoned to Hanley,

who handed the girl out to him, then stepped onto the stage himself.

"Lead on," Hanley said. "Here—I'll carry the girl."

She was light enough but Valentine relinquished the chore of carrying her to Hanley's great strength.

"This way," he said, and set off on a narrow path.

Hanley looked about curiously for the huts or caves he had expected. He could see nothing, nothing but the thick trees and tangled creepers that writhed along the ground.

"Here we are," Valentine said. A huge boulder stood beside the path before them. Hanley watched in astonishment as Valentine stood before it.

"Who is it?" a voice asked. Hanley couldn't locate the voice's owner—a hidden microphone, he thought.

Valentine repeated what he had said to the guard at the landing stage. There was a slight electric drone, and the face of the rock opened up before him. Within was a broad, shallow flight of steps going down. Another guard with a ray-rod stood inside the entrance, his hand on a lever.

"Come ahead," he said.

Valentine looked around at Hanley and grinned. "This is our hideout," he said. "Welcome to the Donovan caves!" . . .

The whispered buzz of an interphone awakened Donovan. He was at once alert, though he had slept for less than three hours. He flipped a switch beside his bed and spoke.

A voice replied, "This is Surgeon-of-the-day Carla. I promised I'd call when your Earthgirl was able to talk. Well, she's ready whenever you want her."

"Good," said Valentine. "I'll be right down."

He stepped into a tingling shower and quickly dressed. Just outside his room was a small chamber where a man was seated at a table, idly reading.

"Hello, Valentine," he said. "I sent for some food for you." He gestured toward a group of covered vessels on the table before him.

Valentine nodded and sat down. A tap on the covers of the vessels made them hiss satisfyingly. Then Valentine lifted the lids off easily, revealing food kept warm by units in the lids, kept from spoilage by the vacuum. Pouring a cup of the pale, effervescent liquid, he nodded at the door next to his own.

"Hanley isn't awake yet?"

The guard shook his head. "What shall I do with him when he comes out?" he asked.

"Feed him first, I suppose. After that—well, he'll probably be asking a lot of questions. He was pretty surprised at finding a city as big as this underground. Tell him whatever he wants to know."

"Anything?" The guard raised his brows.

"That's right. He knows too much now if we can't trust him. A little more won't make any difference." Valentine chuckled. "You'd better brace yourself for a hard time. I could hardly get him to go to sleep when we came in—he had an idea we were savages, living in caves."

He quickly finished eating, then walked through broad bright corridors to what a plaque identified as the medical section.

"Hello, Carla," he said to the surgeon of the day. "How's the girl?"

Carla was a slim young man in a white tunic. He hesitated. "She's only had a couple of hours under the vita-rays. Actually it would be better if we kept her there. She's lost a lot of blood."

"You can put her under again afterward, Carla. This is important."

Carla shrugged. "All right. She's well enough to talk now. But try not to get her too excited." He led the way out of the room.

The girl was supine on a dais, under gleaming orange lights. They peered in at her through the crystal wall of the chamber in which she lay. Carla touched a switch outside the entrance and the lights flicked and blanched to normal daylight color. He opened the door and motioned Valentine in ahead of him.

The blood had been washed from her and her cuts had closed. Carla thumbed down a lower eyelid and peered at the pupil. Satisfied, he took a small plastic capsule from a pouch at his waist and expertly crushed it in his fingers, close to the girl's nostrils. A sharp, tingling pungency filled the room. The girl shuddered and almost immediately awoke.

Paying no attention to her, Carla turned to Valentine.

"She'll be all right for a while. Call me when you leave and I'll put her back under the rays."

There was surprise and fear in almost equal proportions in the girl's eyes. Valentine said, "Probably you're wondering where you are."

The girl frowned at him. "You—you're the man who bumped into us in the cafe."

"Yes. My name is Valentine. You were injured last night by a serf-robot belonging to the Hags—do you remember? I found you and brought you here."

The girl pushed herself erect, sat with her legs dangling over the side of the pallet. She regarded him carefully.

"Where is 'here'?" she asked. Valentine noticed again that her voice was exceptionally rich and deep. She was attractive enough, he thought. If her skin hadn't been just a trifle too dark, in spite of the bleaching effect of the vita-rays, she might have been almost beautiful.

He asked, "Have you ever heard of the Donovans?"

"Donovans? Yes, surely. They're the outlaws. The savages who live in huts in the jungle."

VALENTINE smiled ruefully. "It seems to me I've heard that too many times today," he said. "We're not exactly savages. You see, I'm one of the Donovans. This place you're in now is our jungle city."

Her lips parted. "Oh? But I thought—that is, all the Venusians said that—"

"I know what they said," Valentine interrupted. "They said we were outlaws. They're partly right."

The girl nodded hesitantly. Then, remembering, she flexed her arm experimentally. She rubbed it, looked at it. The cuts where the robot had flailed it had closed, leaving only pinkish welts under the regenerative influence of the vita-rays.

"You're quite civilized," she admitted. "I shouldn't have expected vita-rays. I suppose I owe you something for helping me. I'll see that my father rewards you."

Valentine coughed. "That brings up a delicate point. I'm afraid we'll have to keep you here for some time."

"Keep me?" The warmth had gone from her voice.

"Yes. You see, our safety would be endangered if the Hags knew as much about us as you do."

"But what has that to do with me? I'm not a Venusian. I have credentials from the Earth government—a trade mission."

Valentine shook his head impatiently. "Credentials from Earth are worthless here," he said. "The Earth government doesn't even know we exist."

THE girl slipped to her feet, eyes bright and fixed on Valentine's. "I'm Elena Orris," she said softly. "My father is an important man." She examined Valentine's face closely, with obvious vexation that the name made no impression on him. "Do you know what that means?"

"What does it mean?"

"It means that my father can call out the Earth-fleet if you hold me here. The whole fleet—eight thousand battle rockets. Do you know what battle rockets could do to you?"

Donovan said patiently, "You don't understand. The fleet could blast us to shreds, yes. But how would they ever find us? The Hags can't find us, and they've been looking for over a century. As far as anyone on Earth would ever know, you mysteriously disappeared. The Hags won't press the investigation too far. After all, it was their robot that attacked you. They can't be sure you're still alive."

The girl bit her lip and looked at him uncertainly. Then, "Tell me what you want," she said.

"That's better," Valentine applauded. He sat down facing her. "There are some questions I want to ask you. About those crates in the storeroom the robot was so interested in. What was in them?"

"I can't tell you."

"Why?"

Elena Orris hesitated. "I—I can't. I swore an oath. I'm not here as a tourist, you know. This is part of my job. The Earth government sent me to make sure that the goods got here safely. It's important that it be kept a secret."

"It's important to me, too. Who was it for?"

She shrugged. "A man named—Smith. I don't know him."

"Do you know who he's acting for?"

"No."

Valentine stood up, took a step toward her. "I tell you, we Donovans have got to know all about this," he said. "We're not savages. We don't usually force people to talk. But this is different."

The girl gasped. "Are you threatening me?"

"With torture? No. With being made to answer, yes."

"You can't make me answer!"

Valentine smiled humorlessly. "We can try. There's a sort of hypnosis technique we've worked out. It's very good."

"I'll never submit to it!"

"It's not up to you," Valentine explained.

"There's a drug that goes with it so that your cooperation isn't necessary. Unfortunately, it sometimes affects the mind."

The girl winced. "Beast!" she whispered. "I'll tell you."

"Thank you," Valentine said gravely.

"What was in the cases?"

In a dull tone she said, "Atomic explosives. Uranium isotopes and the catalyst to make them work."

Valentine frowned thoughtfully. "What about this man Smith?"

"I don't know much about him. He came to my father on Earth—my father is the Industries Controller for the Earth government. Smith wanted what he called industrial explosives. He offered money and concessions on Venus."

"Strange the Hags couldn't make their own uranium isotopes," Valentine observed. "Venus has plenty of carnotite. I thought I knew all the Venusian officials that work for the Hags but I never heard of Smith."

"It may not have been his real name. But his credentials were good. My father investigated."

"Of course, there's something else about it that's peculiar, you realize. The Hags are the government of Venus. Why would they send one of their robots to pry into something that they themselves had bought and paid for?"

She shrugged. "You know as much as I do. Ensign Drake brought me down to look the shipment over before I went to bed. The guard on duty—an Earthman—complained of some kind of a fever and asked to be relieved. Ensign Drake took him to his quarters to get another man, and I stayed behind to keep an eye on the place. We didn't expect any trouble. I was just waiting for him when—that robot came blundering in." She shuddered. "I don't think it really meant any harm—not unless I got in its way. It just sort of pushed me aside."

Valentine looked at her thoughtfully, then at his watch. "I must go," he said. "I'll be back. Until then, the surgeon says you'll be better off under the vita-rays. You can do as you like—except that you can't leave."

He left her staring after him. On the way out he stopped to talk to the medic.

"See that she's fed and kept out of trouble," he said. "I'll be back."

"I'll put her to sleep and give her some more rays," Carla promised. "Did she tell you what you wanted to know?"

Valentine grimaced. "She wouldn't tell me a thing at first. I had to threaten to use force on her finally."

"And then—did she talk?"

"She talked." Valentine smiled humorlessly. "She answered every question—and every word she spoke was a lie!"

CHAPTER IV

Alliance Refused

VALENTINE switched the teletalker in his room to *Record* and dictated a full account of what he had seen for the benefit of the council of the Donovans. As he was finishing the story he heard voices outside the door and Hanley came in.

"You've got a wonderful place here, Valentine," he said enthusiastically. "I'm sorry about—you know, about what I said about caves."

"Sure," Valentine said absentmindedly.

"That guy who was outside took me for a walk around. This place is immense—eleven thousand people, he told me. Growing your own food, operating your own factories, everything underground. Wonderful!"

Valentine smiled. "I suppose you know all our secrets now," he said.

Hanley looked embarrassed. "Yeah, I guess so. Look, Valentine. That's something I wanted to talk to you about. Understand, I don't care if I ever go back to Nard—I like it here. But if I do go back I want you to know I won't say a word to anybody."

"We'll be sure of that," Valentine said ambiguously. "Did your escort tell you everything you wanted to know about us?" He sat down and lit a greenish cigarette.

"Well, almost. But there are one or two things. For instance, who runs this place? How did it get started?"

Valentine pursed his lips and blew a long plume of smoke.

"It goes back over a hundred and fifty years," he said. "The Hags rewrote the histories, so you probably don't know much about it. But back in two thousand one hundred and sixty-nine Venus was a colony belonging to Earth."

"Oh, sure. I knew that."

Valentine nodded. "And the Hags were a brand-new order on Earth. They had just

begun operating, oh maybe ten or fifteen years before. They were a sort of a crazy imitation of a religious order—composed of women who thought that men had made a mess of the world. They were brilliant women, of course. Doctors, chemists, physicists—everything."

"Then what?"

"Then they got into trouble." Valentine frowned thoughtfully. "Even we Donovans don't know exactly what they did. I was curious about it when I was going to college on Earth—a lot of us go to Earth for schooling—so I looked in the old records. But all I could find were hints. I think they began using men in biological experiments. And somehow word of it got out, and they were banished from Earth. And they came here."

"To Venus? The government let them come?"

"There was no other place for them. They started a revolution, persuading the colonials that they had been unjustly banished and they could give them democracy and freedom."

"That's a laugh."

"Yes, but it sounded better in those days. There was a lot of justice in what they told the people. Earth had been pretty grasping, looting Venus without compunction. So the people fought their revolution for them and Earth didn't have as big a space fleet as it has now and we won. That is—the Hags won. The people, of course, were no better off than they had been. Maybe worse."

Hanley shifted uncomfortably. "Sure," he said. "That's very interesting. But how about the Donovans? Where'd they come from?"

Valentine stood up. "Let's take a walk around while we're talking," he said. "You can't have seen the whole city."

"Sure," Hanley said, rising and following him through the door. They walked down a broad, brilliantly lighted corridor toward a large chamber where many people were moving about. "You were telling me where the Donovans came from," he reminded.

"There was a man named Jeremiah Donovan," Valentine said. "He was one of the leaders in the rebellion. He preached democracy to the people and they followed him. When the revolution was won he began trying to put democracy into practice and the Hags arrested him as a traitor."

"How do you like that? After he fought for them."

"He escaped, though. He tried to fight the Hags. It was a good fight but they had everything on their side. About a hundred and fifty men were left after a month of it and they followed Donovan out into the swamps. They built this city—or began it, anyhow. At first the story about the caves was true."

Hanley nodded and stared about him. They were in an immense underground chamber. A deep pool of crystalline water was at one end of it and men and women were swimming or lounging about under the bright sunlamps on the dome forty feet overhead. Others were moving about purposefully from corridors opening into the chamber to booth-like affairs in the chamber itself.

Hanley said, "With all these people, why can't you come out into the open? You must outnumber the Hags."

"But they have robots," Valentine explained. "We don't."

"Can't you make them?"

"We're trying. But we aren't having much success because we can't duplicate the alloy the Hags use in the electronic brains. Duplicate it? We don't even know what it is!"

"Can't you—well, capture one?"

"We have. In fact—" he hesitated—"in fact, we've captured several different types."

"Different types? But I've only seen one kind."

Valentine nodded. "I think the others are experimental. One was built into an aircraft that crashed. It ran the plane. And on the same ship were three or four little ones. Really little—about the size of a pinhead."

Hanley whistled. "Wonder what they were for."

Valentine said wryly. "So do we. We've taken them apart and analyzed them and we still don't know what we've got. They were just the brains of the robot—the radio cell that controls it."

THEY sat down on a broad bench next the pool. Valentine stared into the water thoughtfully.

Hanley said, "How come you know so much about the Hags?"

"Oh, various ways. We monitor their radio—hear everything they broadcast. And we keep a couple of men close to their palace in Nard. But they're smart too and we don't find out as much as we'd like to."

"Oh." Hanley fell silent for a moment, watching the people of the underground city. "What's that place over there, where all the

people are coming and going?"

Valentine looked. "That's the Council Hall. The government of the city is handled there. By the Council of the Donovans. I'm a member of the Council. There are thirty-five of us." He smiled ruefully. "By rights I should be in there now, answering questions for them."

"What questions?"

"Questions about the Earthgirl. But I don't know the answers to them. Questions like what is she doing on Venus, and what's in those crates, and—"

Hanley interrupted by snapping his fingers. "Me and my memory," he grunted. "I knew there was something I wanted to tell you." He fished in a pocket, pulled out a couple of flat silvery disks and handed them to Valentine.

"What are these?" Valentine asked, fingering them curiously.

Hanley grinned. "While I was up on the crates—remember?—I knocked one over and broke it open. It spilled all over. I picked these things up. The crates were full of them."

WHEN Valentine walked in Elena was sitting on the dais in the crystal room, furiously smoking a cigarette. As soon as she saw him she burst out:

"I'm going insane! Why don't you let me out of here? I've told you what you wanted. Now keep your end of the bargain. Let me go!"

Valentine looked at her coldly for a second.

"We made no bargain. And if we had you didn't keep it."

"I didn't keep it?"

"Yes. I asked you what was in those crates."

Elena Orris opened her eyes wide. "Of course. I told you—they're supposed to contain industrial explosives. My father's men inspected them just before we left."

Valentine laughed aloud. "You're magnificent," he said. Then, opening his hand to display what he held: "Look. Is this your industrial explosive?"

The girl stared at the disk incredulously. "You—but where—" Abruptly the strength seemed to flow out of her. She looked up at Valentine helplessly.

Valentine sat down facing her. "Start telling me the truth now," he ordered. "The real truth—bearing in mind that twenty minutes ago this thing was in several pieces

and one of our radio techs was telling me all he could about it. Or do we have to use the drug?"

Elena said sullenly, "I'm not a radio tech. I don't know very much about them."

"Tell me as much as you do know. Who were they for?"

She said, "They are for—for the Earthmen on Venus."

"Earthmen?"

"Yes. The Embassy staff. Commercial missions. Every Earthman on Venus—almost a thousand of them. Most of them right in Nard."

Valentine frowned. "And what are the Earthmen going to do with them?"

"That's the part I don't know," Elena said flatly. "They—they had something to do with robots."

"With the Hags' robots?" Valentine's face was impassive but his mind was racing. "You mean with the radio-control of the robots? Some radio device. . .?"

"I think so. I think these things interfere with the radio-waves between the robots and wherever they're controlled from. I heard my father talking about them once. He called them 'wavetraps'. They just sort of reach out and absorb radio waves."

Valentine said slowly, "And that would mean that the robots would be helpless. They'd be blind, deaf and paralyzed." He took that thought in silently, liking it, hardly daring to believe it. So powerful a weapon. . . . "What were you supposed to do with these things?" he asked.

"Just bring them here. Ensign Drake was actually in charge of them but I was sent along to watch Ensign Drake. He was going to turn them over to the Embassy staff tomorrow."

Valentine stared at her curiously. "That doesn't strike you as being unethical?" he asked. "To just attack like that?"

"Unethical?" she echoed. "Are the Hags ethical?"

"You have a point," he admitted. He turned the idea over in his mind. Mechanisms to paralyze the robots, meant for the Earth Colony on Venus. An Earth plot—a plan to wrest the planet away from the Hags, make it again a colony of Terra!

He looked soberly at the girl. Absently he noticed that she was strangely pale—then he remembered she had been under the vita-rays. Life moved faster under the vita-rays. Without compensating ultra-violet, her newly-regenerated skin was pale, bleaching as much in a few hours as it might otherwise have done in months.

She watched him uncertainly. Then her expression changed as a new thought crossed her mind. "Valentine!" she said eagerly. "I have an idea! You hate the Hags, don't you?"

He laughed. "I couldn't love them."

"We hate them too! Oh, Valentine, why can't we join forces? As allies we couldn't lose!"

"Allies? The Earth government—and we outlaws?"

"Certainly! Earth would help you. With our Space Fleet, our weapons, you could destroy the Hags in a few days. They could be wiped out completely—and you could come out of hiding."

Valentine listened without changing expression. He said, "And what would happen after that? What does Earth want from Venus?"

Elena Orris spread her hands. "Only friendship," she said persuasively. "Friend-

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ship and trade. Venus has millions of tons of radioactive ore—I'll be truthful with you, Valentine. We need it. Our mines are running low."

"Can't you get it from the Hags without overthrowing them?"

"We've tried. They won't listen to reason. Undeveloped resources that mean life to Earth—and the Hags won't let us develop them. That's all we want. Nothing that will hurt Venus, just—"

"Just the chance to make it a colony again," Valentine finished for her. "You used the wrong word. You don't want allies—you want slaves!"

CHAPTER V

Escape

ELENA recoiled from him, anger in her eyes. She whispered, "Don't forget, swamp-dweller, Earth can *take* what it needs! Help us and we'll reward you. Try to stop us and you'll be exterminated along with the Hags!"

Valentine nodded his head unwillingly. He admitted, "Unfortunately there's some truth in what you say. If you can stop the robots you can take over the planet—and Earth will be more dangerous than the Hags to us."

"Well? Why not accept my proposition?"

Valentine said patiently, "For two reasons. First, I can't speak for all the Donovans and you can't speak for Earth. Second, I'm not sure you can stop the robots."

"Don't worry about it," Elena boasted. "The wave-traps work. The Hags have only one type of robot—we know that. We tried it out. It stopped the robot cold."

"Oh." Valentine studied her thoughtfully. "Are you sure that the Hags only have the one type?"

"Positive! We've had reports from agents in the Hag Palace itself."

Valentine nodded noncommittally and stood up. "Well, there's only one thing to do," he said. "I'll report what you say to the Council of the Donovans. If they agree I'll come and tell you." He nodded a farewell and turned toward the door.

"Wait!" Elena Orris sprang after him. "Don't leave me in this jail! I hate it!"

Valentine looked at her in surprise. "Where

do you want to go?"

"Back to Nard! You can see why I *must*. That robot was prying into the crates. I want to find out what he discovered."

Valentine shook his head. "You're being absurd. Obviously we can't let you go. No one but the Donovans knows about this place and we can't take a chance that you might tell the Hags about it."

"Good heavens!" She stamped her foot in anger. "Are you deaf, Valentine? I told you that you and I would fight the Hags together. Why would I turn you over to them when I need your help?"

"Oh, you might find some reason," Valentine said. "No, you'll have to stay here for a while. Later on we'll see."

Hanley was open-mouthed when Valentine switched off the recorder and turned to him. "Was all that stuff true?" he asked. "Are the Earthies planning to take us over?"

Valentine grinned. "The Earthgirl said so. I think this time she was telling the truth."

"Well, what are we going to do about it? They'd be as bad as the Hags."

"Worse," Valentine admitted. "I don't know what we'll do. The Council of the Donovans will have to decide. They'll meet in a few hours. Meanwhile. . ."

"Yeah?"

"Meanwhile you and I can take another look around Nard." He scrutinized Hanley's face carefully. Slowly, "You see, I'm taking your word that you're on our side now."

"Oh, I won't spill anything, Valentine."

"I know you won't. And anyhow I have to take the chance."

"What are we going to do in Nard?"

"Look around. We'll take up where we left off last night."

Hanley grimaced. "I hope the Hags don't remember what we look like," he said. "Suppose they've still got a robot in the depot?"

"That's what we have to find out. Those crates are important. If the Hags have a good look at them, they know something's up. And I'm afraid they've had their look."

"I'm with you," Hanley said. "I don't see much future in it, though. If the Hags find us poking around in a thing like that—"

The interphone buzzed sharply, interrupting him. Valentine flicked the switch, said, "Go ahead."

"Valentine!" a voice crackled. "This is the guard post at Main Gate. The Earthgirl just knocked out the guard here and got away!"

VALENTINE looked over the shoulder of the medico who was working on the guard. "What was it?" he asked.

"Some kind of a drug. I'll have him around in a minute."

The guard commander said, "There are five men out patrolling for her. She can't get very far."

"How did she get up here in the first place?" Valentine asked him.

"Carla called from the surgery a minute ago. One of his men found him unconscious. When they woke him up he said he was all set to put her to sleep but she snatched the nihilate needle out of his hand. That's all he remembers."

"She must have done the same thing to the guard," Valentine conjectured, his brows drawn. He turned to look at the guard, who was stirring, shaking his head. He opened his eyes.

"That girl! She stabbed me," he said.

"With a nihilate needle," Valentine said. "How did it happen? Weren't you on the watch for the Earthgirl?"

"Earthgirl?" the guard repeated. "She didn't look like an Earthie. She wasn't dark, and there wasn't anything about her clothes. . . ."

"The vita-rays," Valentine said. "They bleached her. Well, it doesn't matter. What did she do?"

The guard shakily stood up. He said, "She just came up to me without saying anything. I was going to ask her what she wanted, when I saw something shiny in her hand, and—"

The guard officer interrupted them. "Here comes that patrol," he said. As soon as they were close enough, "Where's the girl?"

"She's gone," the first man panted. "Fenwick and Cavally are chasing her. She took one of the barges at the stage."

Valentine paused no longer. "Come on!" he yelled to Hanley. "We'll follow her. There's still a chance."

He dashed down the short jungle path to the landing stage in the hidden canal. No longer were there several neat silvery barges tied up at the side. There were only two and they were adrift. Obviously the girl had stolen one for her escape, cut the others loose. And by the stage, with the fifth man of the patrol bending over him, lay the figure of yet another guard.

"She doesn't care *who* she stabs," Hanley grunted. "Hey, what are you doing?"

Without wasting time Valentine leaped far out over the water into the nearest of the idly floating canalcraft. The vessel bobbed and rocked dangerously under the impact of his weight, but didn't capsize. He quickly seized the controls, started the motor, headed back toward the stage where Hanley stood gaping.

"Jump in!" he yelled. "She's only got about ten minutes start. Maybe we can still catch her."

Hanley took his words literally and jumped. His heavier weight rocked the craft badly but it only shipped a little water. Valentine opened up the motor and the craft shot ahead through the winding waterway.

If they had come through the devious turns of the hidden stream rapidly the first time this trip was like lightning. Hanley crouched in the back, watching the spray fly past him, dodging the tree branches under which they raced.

"You think we can stop her?" he yelled to Valentine.

"We'll have to try. Maybe the other barge can do it. But if she tells the Hags where the Donovan city is hidden it means war. And we'll lose!"

Abruptly they were at the end of the concealed waterway. The canalcraft burst through the low fronds of the tangle-tree, then made a wide arc as Valentine turned it toward distant Nard. Both men strained their eyes. The barge of the Donovan guards was skirting the bank on the other side of the stream. There was not a trace of the girl's craft in all the length of the waterway.

"She got away!" Hanley gritted.

Valentine shook his head puzzledly. "She must have. But I don't see how. The canal is straight here for miles. She didn't have that much lead. Unless. . . ."

He swung the craft around, slanted in toward the other barge. The men in it were peering under every low-hanging bush and tree at the shoreline.

"Any sign of her?" Valentine called.

"Not a trace," the man at the controls of the other barge yelled back. "But she's got to be here. She didn't have time to get all the way down the canal. We'll find her!"

They didn't. They scoured every suspicious-looking clump of bushes for a mile in either direction but they didn't find her. After half an hour, Valentine beckoned to the other barge and they met in midstream.

"Keep on looking," Valentine ordered. "It

looks as though, somehow or other, she got away—but keep looking.”

“What are you going to do, Valentine?”

He said grimly, “If she does get to Nard sooner or later she’ll go to the Hags. So we’ll go to Nard now—and stop her!”

CHAPTER VI

Hag-Bound

NOT without apprehension the two lashed their craft to the canal side at the outskirts of the city and walked in.

It seemed their apprehension was groundless. They walked to the canalmen’s bar where they had been the night before—ever so long before—without untoward event.

It was early afternoon. The place was empty of customers. On one side tables were stacked and the floor was being cleaned. Darl and her dancing partner were going through a new routine to the music of a disgruntled pianist. When Darl caught sight of the newcomers her eyes widened sharply and she broke step, colliding with her partner.

She walked over to Valentine. “I’m honored,” she said. “This is the first time you’ve come here in the day.”

“We came to find out something,” Valentine said seriously. “Darl, did you say last night that you’d seen that Earthgirl before?”

“Why, yes. She’s been here several time.”

“Do you know where she lives?”

“No. Or—wait. Yes, I do. She’s staying at the Marabek. At least I think that’s the hotel. I heard her mention it to the ensign last night.”

“Good girl!” Valentine applauded. “Well, thanks. I’ll be seeing you.”

“Wait a moment!” Darl said stormily. “I’m going with you. I want to know what this is all about.”

“Now, Darl. . . .”

“I want to know! Last night you maneuvered around until you got a chance to talk to her, then you left the same time she did. Now you’re going to visit her. Well, I’m going along.”

“Wait a minute, Darl,” Hanley interrupted. “Honest, this isn’t a romance. Valentine has to keep her from telling something to. . . .” he halted. Darl wasn’t looking at him. Wide-

eyed and frightened, she stared at Valentine.

“I guess I talk too much,” Hanley finished embarrassedly.

Valentine snorted. “I guess you do,” he agreed. “Darl, I’ll tell you the whole story later. Right now I can’t.”

“Oh, no,” Darl said quickly. “Valentine, I knew you were in trouble. The Hags were after you last night. You’ve got to let me help you. I can help—there must be something. Maybe she won’t let you see her. Maybe I can go to her and do whatever you want me to do.”

“There’s something in what you say,” Valentine admitted. He sighed. Earnestly he said, “Darl, you may be getting into serious trouble. Do you realize that?”

She nodded.

Valentine spread his hands. “Then come along,” he said. “I didn’t want to mix you up in this but I guess I’ve got to.”

Darl’s ground-car was parked just around the corner. She made hasty excuses to her partner and the pianist and they started for the Marabek. When the car was moving Darl spoke.

“Can’t you tell me something about this, please, Valentine? I’m worried about you.”

Valentine grimaced ruefully. He said, “I’ve spilled more secrets in the past twenty-four hours than all the rest of the Donovans have in a hundred and fifty years. I guess I can tell one more.”

“The Donovans!” Darl echoed. “I thought there was . . . oh, Valentine!”

“Yes, I’m a Donovan,” Valentine admitted. “And the Hags would make it worthwhile for anyone who told them so!”

“I’d never tell! I couldn’t. And you know how I feel about the Hags. Ever since they came and took me to that awful Palace, and kept me there so long and asked me all those questions.”

Valentine nodded. “I’m not worried about you,” he said. “But the Earthgirl’s a different matter. She knows—and she’ll be happy to talk. We had a little run-in last night.”

“Oh?”

“In fact, I practically kidnaped her. I had her in a safe place and she got away. I have to get her again before she sees the Hags.”

“But can’t you hide or runaway—out into the swamps?”

Valentine shook his head. “That wouldn’t even save my own life,” he said gently. “And there’s much more at stake.”

Hanley said, “We followed her in this

morning from that safe place Valentine mentioned. She knows where it is, see?"

Darl bit her lip. "Well," she said presently, "what shall we do? We're only a few blocks from the Marabek—and there's the Hag Palace, right ahead."

"Go to the hotel," Valentine ordered. "Maybe we can find out at the desk whether she's back." He cast a quizzical look at the looming white tower of the Hag Palace. "I can't say I like getting so close to our friends there," he murmured. "Maybe we'd better—hold it! Look!"

HE WAS erect, pointing out the window of the ground car. Darl gasped and the car swerved under her hand. She brought it to a halt.

"It's the girl!"

Hanley stared. "What's she doing here? You think she's going to the Palace?"

Valentine wasted no time. "We can't take any chances. Stay here, both of you, and watch what happens. I'm going to try to stop her!"

"Wait!" Darl wailed but Valentine was out of the car already. Even faster than his body moved his mind was racing—trying to find a plan, a method of kidnapping the girl on the crowded street. On impulse he called to her, "Elena! Elena Orris!"

She was perhaps a dozen yards from him, walking toward the Hag Palace. There was no hurry in her walk. Valentine found time to wonder at that—and then she turned in answer to his call.

Her eyes widened in recognition and her hand flew to her mouth. Instantly she turned, began to run. Valentine, cursing under his breath, ran after her. He was faster than she but they were almost at the entrance of the cloud-high, stalagmitic tower of the Hags and he hadn't the slightest chance of stopping her.

And he was amazed. The girl raced past the entrance without a glance, ran on down the block. Astonishment made him falter, then he saw something which stopped him in his tracks. From the door between the girl and himself came a rushing clatter, and then a group of robots hurtled out, half a dozen of them. Without stopping to look around they raced toward him!

He had only a split second in which to think and act. It was not enough. Frenziedly he grappled for the disklike affair in his pocket to try the desperate gamble of pitting

it against the oncoming monsters but it was too late.

Instantly they were around him. He grunted in pain as the snakelike tenacles of one whipped about his body, squeezing him in a metallic embrace. His hands were pinioned hopelessly and the pocket with the disk was out of reach.

He was lifted into the air. He caught a faint glimpse in his gyrations of the couple he had left, standing paralyzed next to the ground car, watching him. Then the robot rattled and bumped along the street and bore him, helpless, through the open gateway of the Hag Palace. . . .

Valentine stared into the eyes of the hawk-faced woman. She was the one who had been in the cafe, he noted wearily. The robot completed its rough, thorough search of him and bore the trophies to the Hag.

The woman laughed harshly and picked up the silvery disk. "Another one," she said. "We're making quite a collection." She tossed it down contemptuously and leaned forward, staring at him.

"Valentine of the Donovans," she said, "I suppose you know where you are."

"Yes."

"And do you know what is going to happen to you?"

"I have a fair idea," he admitted.

She shook her head silently. "No," she said. "No, you don't have any idea at all. I understand you Donovans aren't as skilled in—shall we say, punishment?—as we."

Valentine stirred restlessly. He said, "Of course we aren't. I confess I don't expect to leave here alive."

She said contemptuously, "Is that all? You don't understand. We probably shan't kill you."

Valentine stiffened silently. *Torture*, he thought—torture to make him tell what they wanted torture for the sake of their holy science, torture for the love of torture itself. . . .

The woman smiled satisfiedly as she saw that he understood. She made as if to rise, then hesitated.

"There are a few minor questions," she said, "I don't think you'll mind answering them. Suppose we get them cleared up before we ask the important ones."

Play for time, Valentine thought. Aloud he said, "Let's hear them."

"What were you doing in the dirty little cafe?"

"Visiting a friend. What were you doing?" he countered.

She raised her eyebrows imperiously but answered. "We were looking for you. Unfortunately we let you get away."

"What did you want me for?" Valentine asked.

The Hag smiled maliciously and shook her head. "No," she said. "You answer the questions. Who was the friend?"

VALENTINE hesitated, then said. "The dancer. Her name is Darl." After all, he thought, they must know that much already.

"Why?"

"Why?" he repeated. "Because I'm a man and she's a beautiful girl. Do you understand a thing like that?"

"I understand it," the Hag said grimly. "I need not believe it." Abruptly she shrugged and stood up. Imperiously, "It will be simpler to ask you questions later. Follow me."

She walked out of the room, not even looking around to see if he followed. With her unarmed back before him and no other person in sight a quick, furtive gleam of hope danced in his mind—a dream of a break for freedom. But it paled and died as he heard the clattering steps of the robot behind him. The woman, he ruefully admitted to himself, took no chances.

It was a short walk. Valentine had a brief glimpse of gray-walled corridors that seemed endless, then they were at the entrance to a large room. Over the woman's slight shoulder as they walked in, Valentine saw rows of steel-barred cages along one wall, flat, white-topped tables that looked ominously like a surgery, a pair of brooding Hags watching them.

In a husky voice like an old man's the smaller of the two waiting Hags asked, "Is this the Donovan?"

"Yes," answered the one with Valentine. "You can take him as soon as you're ready. He—"

She was interrupted by an agonized scream from within the room. Loud, shrill, horrid, the sound seemed to startle even the Hags. The small one gasped something and whirled, ran to one of the cages along the wall, her long skirts flapping around her sticklike legs. She fumbled briefly with an intricate sort of catch, then flung the door open and rushed in.

Valentine, startled enough almost to for-

get his peril, followed her curiously. Inside the cell she was bending over a body—a human body, Valentine saw with a thrill of horror. As he caught sight of it it writhed spasmodically and there was another shriek, louder than before, dwindling into a bubbling guttural. Then the half hidden body slumped and relaxed and the ululation ceased.

With an exclamation of disgust the Hag rose and came out of the cell. She stamped her foot petulantly—and Valentine thought the womanly gesture singularly horrible in that caricature of a female.

"The third one," she said bitterly. "I thought for a while that she'd live—but she died the same way as the others. I think we are a long way from success in this series."

The Hag shrugged impatiently. "Take another subject," she said. "This is ordered. It must succeed."

She noticed Valentine's taut face and stare. Her impatience changed to arrogant amusement. "Donovan, perhaps now you begin to understand," she purred.

White-lipped, in anger as much as apprehension, Donovan asked, "What was that?"

The Hag shrugged. "An experiment. We make many of them. Perhaps you will be an experiment too, some day," she said. "Would you like to avoid that?"

He raised his eyebrows skeptically. "Do I have the choice?"

"Surely. Just open your mind to us," the Hag said. "You Donovans are trouble to us always, out there in the swamps, always silent and threatening. Sooner or later we will have to destroy the Donovans. If you will help us to do it *now*—you can live."

"And if I don't I die."

The Hag nodded.

Valentine pursed his lips. He seemed lost in thought, staring beyond her at the instrument-covered operating table. He paced absently toward it. "Well," he said thoughtfully, "none of us can live forever."

The Hag scowled and stepped back a pace. "You're a fool, Valentine! she crackled.

She might have said more but Valentine, in his slow, abstracted walk, had got where he wanted to be. He was between the Hags and the door, across the operating table from the three of them. In a decimal of a second his arms slipped under the table, lifted it, heaved.

With a shower of instruments it caught the three of them and bowled them over. Not pausing to see what he had done—hoping

that the shattered glassware and flying scalpels had killed at least one—Valentine spun and ran lightly for the door.

It was a long gamble—and the only one he had left to make. He reached the door, rounded the corner. . . .

He had only a fleeting glimpse of what was waiting for him outside and then the lunging, ponderous metal figure of the serf-robot, the forgotten, impregnable serf-robot, crushed him against the side of the door.

He never saw the tentacle that lashed down upon him. He only felt a stinging whip-crack on his scalp and then he was unconscious.

CHAPTER VII

No Sisters to Him

THERE was another wasp-bite sting, this time in his nose, and Valentine was awake. The small Hag who had made the experiment was looking down at him distastefully.

Valentine struggled up on an elbow and saw that he was back in the surgical room, in one of the cells along the wall this time. The Hag reached down and grasped his wrist contemptuously. After a second's consideration of his pulse she dropped the arm and walked out of the cell.

"Stay there," she flung curtly over her shoulder.

In a moment she was back with the other Hag, the one who had interviewed him when he was first captured. She stared malignantly at Valentine, who was slumped against the wall, still dazed.

"You're meek enough now," she said. "Why don't you try to escape again?"

Valentine said tiredly, "It doesn't seem to do much good."

The Hag nodded. "If there is a next time, it will do you a lot of harm. You *hurt* three of us!"

Valentine shrugged. "Your robot didn't help me much," he observed. Then, remembering, he put his hand to his scalp. There was no pain, no scar. Only a sort of a tingling there, and at the nape of his neck, that indicated the growth of new, healing flesh. Vitamins, he thought wonderingly.

He said, "Thanks for the first aid. You take

good care of your—ah—guests."

The Hag waved a hand impatiently. "Talk," she said. "You are given one more chance. You saw what happened to one of our subjects—and we were not trying to punish her. We wouldn't be so dispassionate in treating you."

"Oh, I wouldn't expect it."

"Now you may make your choice. Life or the laboratories."

Valentine raised his head. "What kind of life? Will you let me go free?"

"Of course not. You'll be a captive. We have need for captives sometimes. We'll make only one promise. You will live as long as you would normally and you will not be in pain."

Valentine looked at her speculatively. "You know," he said, "I'm tempted to say yes, just to see what you've got planned for me. I bet it's a beauty." Then he sighed. "But your offer isn't good enough. I'm afraid it never would be good enough either. You see, I'd rather be dead than alive on those terms."

She shrugged—and without disappointment, he saw with surprise. Anxiously she glanced at the watch strapped on her wrist before she spoke.

Valentine thought there was a curious, sardonic light flickering in her webby eyes as she said, "I'll let you think it over. You needn't stay in your cage—you may have the freedom of this laboratory. But don't try to leave it. The three cages to your right contain subjects for one of our experiments. Look them over—it may help you to decide."

She turned and walked out, closing the corridor door behind her. A wait of half a minute and Valentine was at the door. He tried the latch without hope and was not disappointed when he found it locked from outside.

He ranged the walls of the room. Opposite the cages there were only blank walls and cabinets of equipment and instruments. The wall opposite the door was mostly a huge white screen—for viewing microslides, he thought. And the cages offered no escape.

IT PENETRATED that there was no escape. He shrugged and began a search of the cabinets. A weapon, he thought, would be valuable. It was in the third cabinet that he found the workbook. He glanced at it incuriously, was about to toss it back on the shelf when a fluttering page caught his eyes.

He picked it up and read:

Your progress unsatisfactory. The ship is ready and will be dispatched for Ganymede colony within thirty days. It is imperative that we have true-breeding specimens for labor by then.

He frowned at the jagged script. Ganymede colony—were the Hags planning to spread their authority to another planet? And what sort of "true-breeding specimens" were meant?

He opened the book and examined it hurriedly. There was page after page of a sort of shorthand, an abbreviated technical jargon concerning some biological experiments being made. He puzzled over a diagram which showed a human circulatory and respiratory system but with what looked to be a sort of gill arrangement instead of the nose-and-lung of mankind.

A neatly lettered table in the back of the book was more enlightening—and hopeful. It said simply:

2314---	840	Novitiates.
2315---	798	Novitiates.
2316---	781	Novitiates.
2317---	778	Novitiates.
2318---	742	Novitiates.
2319---	708	Novitiates.
2320---	675	Novitiates.
2321---	596	Novitiates.
2322---	489	Novitiates.
2323---	312	Novitiates.

Valentine shook his head, hardly able to believe it. It was true—less and less had the Hags come out in public within the past years—but it was hard to believe that the reason was that they were dying out! And if it were true—at the present rate another five years would see them extinct!

He was distracted from this pleasurable thought by a sort of flopping noise coming from one of the cages. He walked over to peer into it—and stood fast, incredulous and sickened. A sodden lump of flesh lay on the floor, rhythmically arching its body, then relaxing with a flop. Over and over it repeated the slow, brainless motion, its face upturned blindly to the ceiling—if the eyeless, noseless mass of flesh below the hairline could properly be called a face. And the body to which it was attached . . .

He turned back, revolted and burning with fury. He gave the subjects in the other cages only a split-second glance—just long enough to see that they were beyond help from him. Was that, he wondered, why the Hag had

left him alone? So that he could look at them, and be frightened into obedience?

He could see no reason to doubt it—none but a deep conviction that the Hags were never obvious and a puzzled memory of the glint of malicious laughter he had seen in her eyes.

Valentine paused no longer. He walked quickly to the instrument cabinets and looked over the array of surgical tools inside. He chose a lean bistoury with a flat, razor-like blade and a handle that fitted his palm and walked to the locked door. His plan was far from concrete in his mind as he stood there, patient, waiting for what might enter.

Plan? He had no plan. Everything would depend, he thought dully, on the foresight of the Hag. If she came alone—then there was a slim, slim chance for life. If she came with one other and was just a little bit careless in her arrogance there would be a chance for revenge. But if she came cautiously and made no mistakes—then there was only a chance for death.

He remembered the uncanny medical skill of the Hags and realized that even death was not sure. A second's hesitation—a gash that cut not quite deep enough—and they could bring him back to life on their surgical tables. And that was a chance he could not afford to take.

His wait was not very long. He had just begun to tire of his position of rigid attention when there was a premonitory click and the door abruptly swung open. Valentine tensed for the spring, peering at the opening. Luck—there was only a single Hag! But as he was about to leap another figure appeared from behind her, holding a drawn ray-pencil. Stunned, Valentine recognized Darl! She was smiling, almost weeping in relief.

"Hurry, Valentine," she whispered. "Thank heaven I got here in time!"

VALENTINE wasted no time. He drew the pair inside the door, closed it. With the straps on the surgery tables he bound the Hag, and gagged her with a strip torn from her own white robes. He carried her to one of the cages, dropped her none too gently inside. Then he turned to face Darl.

"You're wonderful," he said simply. "Tell me how you got here—but not now. Now we have to get out. Do you know the way?"

Darl nodded. "The way we came—if there aren't any Hags around. I thought we could

take this one with us, and if anybody saw us they'd think we working for her or something."

Valentine shook his head. "Too many of them know what I look like. We'll have to try to stay out of sight, that's all. Lead the way."

Darl peered out into the hall, then motioned to him to follow. They hurried down the corridor, past the room where Valentine had been carried by the robot, to the elevators. Darl pressed the button and they waited for a silent second.

A clattering sound came down the corridor.

"A robot," Darl whispered, "Valentine!" He stared about, saw a door ajar and tugged her toward it. They were inside just as he caught a glimpse of the thing rounding a corner toward them.

"Did it see us?" she whispered.

"I hope not." Valentine turned to inspect his surroundings. They were in a little anteroom. He saw another door and moved silently toward it, peered around the frame into the room beyond.

It was a long, narrow room with both long walls lined with telescreen after telescreen, all going at once. Before each screen was a photorecorder, and a Hag was moving along the line of screens, examining them. She was absorbed in what she was doing, Valentine thought, and the buzz of the sounds from the screen would cover any slight noise they might make.

He leaned out a little further, craning his neck to see what was on the screens. Oddly, they didn't seem used for communication. The nearest one showed only dim, flickering lights with no shape or substance. The second was a book, magnified in the foreground of the screen. It, too, flickered—part of the page becoming brighter and the rest dimmer from time to time.

The whole scene jerked around in the screen occasionally, as though the telecaster had been jarred by an incautious elbow. Valentine tried to make out the background of the scene but without success. It was curiously dim and blurred, worse than the usual out-of-focusness.

The Hag halted abruptly, staring at one of the screens in consternation. He tried to see what had made her excited. He caught only a glimpse of a woman's figure and a mechanical gadget in the screen. Then she had thrown a switch and the screen was blank.

The scene, he thought puzzledly, had a peculiar quality to it. It was something he had seen. . . .

Over the drone of tiny voices from the screens he heard the clatter in the hall, recalling him to his predicament. He moved to Darl's side, stood tensely while the pounding metallic feet came closer . . . and moved on past without interruption. They grew fainter, and finally faded out entirely.

"Good!" he framed with his lips for Darl. He opened the door cautiously and stepped outside. The elevator door was open and no one was in sight.

They dropped rapidly in the shaft. Valentine belatedly took the ray-pencil from Darl's hand. He held it half-concealed against his side as the elevator stopped and the door opened. There was still no one in sight. Incredible luck—thought Valentine and turned toward the daylight that shone through a door at the end of the corridor. They emerged into the court that was the main entrance to the Palace. And there luck deserted them.

There was a cargo-car parked in the court, and walking slowly around it was the massive shape of a robot. Valentine instinctively braced himself for the hopeless struggle—but there was none! Apparently the robot was only a guard for the goods-car. Surely its myriad eyes had seen them. But it merely continued its even mechanical march around the car.

Valentine asked no questions. Trying to seem as unconcerned as possible he led Darl out the entrance, down the street to where Hanley sat in the parked ground car, waiting for them.

CHAPTER VIII

"Bring in the Donovans"

THEY were blocks away before Valentine could sit back and relax.

"Give me a cigarette, Hanley," he said. "They picked my pockets in there."

He lit it and inhaled the pungent smoke with satisfaction. He stared at Darl through the fumes.

"I owe you my life," he said. "Thanks. Tell me how you did it."

"It wasn't very hard," Darl confessed. "I—I knew the place a little bit from the last time I was there. I just went back to the café and got the cashier's ray-pencil, and came in and got you. I ran into that Hag the first thing, so I brought her along."

Valentine shook his head wonderingly. "Marvelous girl," he said. "Well, let's get moving. There is work to be done."

"What do we do?" Hanley called over his shoulder, from the wheel.

"We go through with the original plan. Take us to the Marabek—you still going through with this, Darl?"

She nodded silently.

"Good. We'll get out there and you do a little scouting job. I want you to go down to that Earth storehouse and see if you can find out whether the Hags have taken it over. If possible get a couple of the disks—the Hags took mine away from me. But don't get in any trouble and meet us in the dining room of the Marabek in—well, let's say an hour."

Hanley nodded. "Okay," he said resignedly. "Don't think I'm going to enjoy it, though. It seems to me they'll find out you're gone some time soon."

"I thought of that," Valentine agreed. "That's a chance we have to take."

Hanley paused in front of the mammoth hotel just long enough for Valentine and the girl to get out, then was off toward the canal-front.

The covering clouds overhead were turning gray with sunset as they entered the hotel. With Darl on his arm Valentine strolled in a leisurely fashion toward the dining room, unobtrusively noticing every person in the lobby.

As they passed the desk he paused and said to Darl, "Excuse me for a second." Then, to the clerk, "Is Miss Elena Orris in her room?"

The man picked up a cradle phone and spoke into it. There was a brief wait, and then he spoke, shaking his head. "I'm sorry, sir. May I take a message?"

"Oh, I think not," Valentine said casually. "We'll be here for a while—I'll try later. By the way, what's her room number?"

"Twenty thirty-seven," said the clerk. Valentine thanked him politely and escorted Darl to the dining room. As the headwaiter came up he selected a table and pointed to it. The functionary gave him a sizing-up glance, then bowed and led them to the chosen spot.

It was near neither the orchestra nor the thinly-populated dance floor but it had one tremendous virtue—it was partly screened by a potted fern-tree, and there were no tables behind it, only a small alternate entrance to the dining room.

Darl and Valentine sat facing the dance floor. The waiter brought them thin glasses of greenish flower-dew, waited while Valentine ordered a meal. The restaurant surroundings reminded him that he hadn't eaten for hours—days, if one counted the time spent under the Hags' vita-rays at its true value.

When the waiter had gone Darl said, "No one can hear what we say now, can they?"

Valentine lifted his glass, smiling gently. "I suppose not. What do you want to talk about?"

She returned the smile but her voice had no laughter in it. She said, "Oh, Valentine, I'm worried!" The dancer's professional smile stayed on her face for the benefit of whoever might look but her voice was dangerously close to breaking.

Valentine said softly, "I won't lie to you. I'm worried too."

She stared at him for a bleak moment. Then the smile, which had wavered, came back. She lifted her glass to touch his. They drank ceremoniously . . . and then the waiter came back with the food.

When they had eaten and were sipping their thick, black swamplands coffee Valentine spoke seriously again.

"The vacation's over," he said abruptly. "Now we get back to work. I've got to see Elena Orris."

DARL nodded. "What are we going to do?"

He gestured to the waiter, asked for a phone. "Call her for me," he asked Darl. "She won't recognize your voice. Tell her you have to see her."

The waiter brought the phone and plugged it in. Darl picked it up hesitantly, looking to Valentine for help.

"Room twenty thirty-seven," he supplied. "Please. . . ."

Darl frowned but took the phone and spoke into it. She listened for a second, then said: "Hello. . . . Oh, she isn't? Thank you," and put it back in its cradle.

"She still isn't in," she told Valentine. "I'm not sorry. I don't know what I would have said to her."

Valentine ran a hand through his hair. He said, "But suppose I made a mistake. Suppose she doesn't come back to her room tonight."

Darl's annoyance faded. Her tawny eyes were large as she said, "Oh, Valentine, I'm sorry. Can't we wait here or something until she comes?"

"We might as well," Valentine said dourly. The waiter returned to remove the phone. Valentine watched him silently until he began to walk away, then snapped to life and called the man back.

"Two more flower-dews," he ordered. To Darl, "We might as well make a party of it. We'll drink this round to Elena Orris."

"Then you'd better order another," said a deep female voice from behind him. "I'll drink one to myself!"

Valentine stifled a grunt of surprise as Elena Orris walked around from behind him. She gestured to the waiter to bring another chair. There was cocksure confidence in her manner as she faced Valentine.

"They told me at the desk someone had called my room from here. I had a ghost of an idea it might be you so I came in the side door." She turned her eyes to Darl, studying her curiously. "Oh, I know you," she said. "You're the dancer, aren't you?"

Darl said evenly, "I dance at the Golden Nard. Do you earn your own living?"

"A point," conceded Elena Orris. "Well, let's talk about something else. Valentine, why have you been looking for me?"

Valentine shrugged. He said, "That's pretty obvious. You know where the Donovan city is, and I don't want you to tell the Hags."

Elena Orris smiled as the waiter came up with the fresh drinks. When he had gone

she said over the rim of her glass, "You're a little late. I've had eighteen hours in which to tell them if I wanted to."

He said dryly, "I was unavoidably detained. Do you mean you haven't tried to tell them?"

"I haven't. I wish you'd trust me, Valentine. I told you—Earth wants the Donovans for an ally."

Valentine said slowly, "Maybe you're lying again. But if you are it's too late for me to do anything about it."

"Correct," said the girl. "So you might as well assume I'm playing fair. Is there any reason why we can't be allies?"

Valentine said honestly, "I don't know if we can trust you. Earth has a bad record."

The girl said impatiently, "I told you what we want—mining concessions and trade. What do you have to lose?"

"Very little," Valentine admitted.

"That's right. It was different out in the swamps. You could keep me there, and your secret was safe. But I escaped."

"That raises an interesting point," Valentine said. "How did you get away?"

The girl smiled. "I took the anesthetic away from your surgeon."

"I know that. I mean, after you got in the barge."

"Oh. Well, I just started it and kept going until I came out in a canal. Then I stopped a canalcraft and asked them the way to Nard. He gave me directions. I went straight ahead for six miles, then left where the canals forked and left again—"

Valentine started at her. "You *what*? Which way did you turn, coming out of the Donovan city?"

"Why right, of course."

Valentine leaned back, still staring. He

[Turn page]

shook his head ruefully after a moment. He said almost to himself, "I guess it was an easy mistake to make—but we were idiots, all the same. We forgot there were two directions on the waterway. We headed for Nard and you were going there by the long way around! No wonder we couldn't catch you!"

"Was that the wrong way? I'd never seen it before, you see."

Valentine said resignedly. "Never mind. Go ahead with your story. You were persuading me we ought to be allies."

The girl shrugged irritably. "That's all. If I haven't talked you into it by now I give up. Help us and we'll help you. Refuse—and you know very well the Hags will wipe you out."

Valentine said, conversationally, "Of course, I could kill you and keep you from telling the Hags that way. I might even be able to get out of Nard alive, that way."

THE girl shook her head. "It wouldn't do you any good. I'm not the only one who knows."

Valentine scanned her narrowly. "I suppose that means you told the ensign about it. Well, it would be a little harder but I could kill him too."

She wavered, but clung gamely to the argument. "I doubt if you could find him—I told him to stay hidden. Even if you did, you wouldn't be sure. And you can't afford to take that big a chance."

Valentine admitted defeat. "All right," he said abruptly. "Let's talk business. We're allies—I can speak for the Council of the Donovans."

The girl exhaled deeply and raised her glass again. "A toast to our alliance!" she proposed and drank. Then, "I'll tell you the whole story," she said. She took one of the wavetraps out of her handbag and tossed it on the table.

"You know what these things are. You operate them—so." She touched a tiny stud projecting from the rim of the disk. Valentine thought he heard a faint, faint hum before she pushed the stud back into place and the sound died. "They take any radio wave within range, suck it in and rebroadcast it as static. It's not just a radio receiver—it attracts radio waves. It will even break in on a sealed beam such as the Hags use for their robots. And the effective radius of action is about fifty feet."

"Suppose they change frequencies?" Valentine asked.

"It doesn't matter. This isn't selective—any wave length will work it."

"And what happens to the robot?"

"It depends on what it's doing when it comes within range. If it's just standing still, nothing happens. It keeps on standing there and you can walk up to it and defuse it. If it's moving it will probably keep on moving until it runs into something or falls down. But it can't be controlled any more by the Hags."

Valentine nodded, reached out and touched the thing. The hum began. He listened to it curiously, then said, "When does the attack come off? Are the rest of the Earthmen ready?"

"They're ready. The attack is planned for tomorrow!"

"Tomorrow! And what do you want us to do?"

"Bring in the Donovans! Let them help us do the fighting. We'll give them wavetraps, fight side by side with them against the Hags."

Valentine, face suddenly tense, said, "I forgot to ask you. Do you know that the Hags found out about the wavetraps? Apparently they found them in the warehouse last night."

"I know," Elena said. "Ensign Drake told me all about it. The robots were buzzing around there like flies. They took a crate of the traps to the Hag Palace and left a robot guarding the door so we can't get at what's left. He was watching from across the street."

"Fine," Valentine said disgustedly. "What does that do to our plans?"

"Why, nothing at all. We only had about a thousand traps in the warehouse. We have six times as many hidden away."

"Where?"

She hesitated. "They're—in a safe place," she said finally. "Maybe it's better if I don't tell you where. That's how secrets leak out."

Valentine nodded slowly. "All right. Just so you get them to us when we need them." He sat up straighter, reached out for the disk and held it for a second before clicking it off.

"It sounds all right," he said. "You agree not to make any demands for Earth beyond the mining rights?"

"That's all. We have to have them, Valentine. Venus is the last rich source of carno-

tite, and Earth needs uranium."

Valentine said abruptly, "We'll do it." He paused, thinking rapidly. "I can get back to the Donovan city in two hours. Say it takes me four hours to get a thousand men together, then another two hours to bring them back. We'll pick up the gadgets on the way and be here and ready by daybreak."

The girl stood up, her face flushed, the sparkle of high adventure in her eyes. She said, "I'll find Ensign Drake and tell him to get everything ready. We'll meet you at the waterfront at the south end of the city—an hour before sunrise!"

She picked up the disk, turned and hurried out without another word. Valentine followed her with troubled eyes.

Darl asked, "Can we trust her, Valentine? These Earthpeople. . ."

"I wish I knew," he said wearily. "Heaven knows she's right in what she says. He have nothing to lose—but I just can't trust Earth."

He glanced at his wrist watch. "Hanley's overdue," he said. "We'll give him ten more minutes, then I'll have to start out for the city. It's going to be difficult enough without wasting any more time. . ."

But it was less than ten minutes when Hanley appeared—only a matter of seconds after the Earthgirl had left.

There was anxiety in his chunky face as he stared around the dining room for them. When he spied them he hurried over.

Valentine rose instinctively to meet him. "What's the matter?" he asked crisply.

Hanley groaned, "Elena Orris—that's the matter. I saw her coming out just as I was coming in. She was a prisoner, with a robot holding onto her. They took her toward the Hag Palace!"

CHAPTER IX

Time to Move

VALENTINE stood fast, but it seemed the room spun around him. Success had opened up to him where he had expected only failure—and then it had been snatched away.

He sank down into his chair. All he said was, "Lord!"

"Quickly, sympathetically, Darl touched his hand. "I know, Valentine," she whispered.

"It looked good for a second."

"I can't understand it," he said dazedly. "If they knew she was connected with this revolt—or knew that she had information on the Donovan city—why didn't they pick her up before? Why didn't they get her this morning, when they jumped me? It's almost as though they knew everything that was going on and were giving us enough rope to hang ourselves."

Darl shook her head despondently.

Hanley said, "Listen, maybe they have this place wired up, Valentine! Maybe they've been listening in on what's been said here!"

Valentine snapped to attention, his eyes darting about. Then he slumped back. "No," he said. "They couldn't wire every table in the city—and they didn't know we'd sit at this one." He held up his hand. "Please," he begged. "Let me think this over for a second. Part of this just doesn't make sense."

The two watched him with bated breath. He sat motionless, staring into space, revolving ideas in his mind. Somehow the pieces could be fitted together, he thought. Somewhere there was a solution that could save them. The wavetraps, and the robots and the Earth plan for revolt. . .

The Hags knew more than he had imagined, he realized. That morning the robots had come boiling out of the Palace as though they knew what they were after. There had been no looking around for him, no indecision. And his escape was peculiar.

It was peculiar that Darl had made a single-handed entry into the supposedly impregnable palace, and succeeded.

"Let's get out of here," he said suddenly. "I want to see something." They paid their check and left. It was dark night outside with only the fluorescents of the city casting a glow upon the clouds overhead. They got in Darl's parked ground car, Hanley at the wheel.

"Drive down to the canal where we left the barge," Valentine ordered. "If it's still there maybe we can get through to the Donovans. But I'm not very hopeful."

And his despair was justified. Hanley wheeled the vehicle down to the waterfront and there before them was the spot where they had left the canalcraft. It was still there—but standing impassive guard before it was a serf-robot, silent and waiting. And out in the stream they could see the lights of patrolling canalcraft, could make out the jagged outlines of the mechanical monsters

who were their crews.

Hanley drove past the moored canalcraft at an even pace, to avoid attracting attention, then turned another corner and slowed.

"It looks bad," he said over his shoulder. "It looks like they're waiting for us."

Soberly Valentine nodded. "I was afraid of it," he said. "Now I think we're beaten."

His mind was surprisingly calm. He accepted the fact of defeat. It was there and nothing could be done about it. The girl and the wavetraps could have saved them but the Hags had her captive. And the disks were guarded—he had glimpsed the robot as they drove past.

The Hags had Elena Orris. She was not the type to talk easily—but they would not be as humane as he and she would talk in the end. When the Hags had the location of the Donovan city from her the robots would come. . . .

He mused idly upon the curious callousness of the robots, steel and plastic simulacra of humanity. If it had been human warriors fighting for the Hags there might have been a chance. But against the machines—never. And the tiny new ones the Hags seemed to be building now, the receptors they had found in the crashed plane— What were they like? They were so small, small enough to be lost in a garment, or a fold of flesh.

He sat bolt upright and Darl stared at him. "What's the matter, Valentine?" she asked querulously.

He stared at her in abstraction. "Nothing," he said finally. "I just . . . nothing."

In his mind was a vision and he clung to it, fascinated.

It was a line of telescreens like those he had seen in the Hag Palace, and before the screens a Hag was watching. The brief glimpse he had caught of the scenes portrayed—the mystifying scenes that seemed to be the wheel of a ground car and the pages of a book and the blurred vision of a scene oddly like the one he himself was looking at. . . .

"Give me a pencil and paper," he said.

Darl, staring at him curiously, fumbled in her bag and brought out a notebook. "I'll light the dome light," she said, reaching for the switch. But Valentine stopped her.

"Never mind the light," he said.

Darl watched him with deep apprehension. His eyes were fixed on the back of Hanley's head before them and the notebook was in his lap. His hand was painfully printing

on the page of the book in the slow, agonized manner of a blind man. She peered to see what he was writing but his big hand covered the page.

AFTER a few moments he ripped the page out, still without looking at it, and folded it once. He handed back the notebook and pencil.

"What was I saying?" he asked.

She sat upright in the seat, half facing him. "Tell me what you're thinking!" she demanded.

Valentine took her hand gently. "I'm sorry, Darl," he said. "I was upset for a while. Now it's all right."

"All right!" she gasped. "With the Hags ready to wipe out the Donovans, searching the city for you—"

"Darl, if you had heard just twenty-four hours ago that the Hags had wiped out the Donovans, what would it have meant to you?"

"Why—nothing, I guess," she confessed. "But that was yesterday!"

"And today it's the same," Valentine said persuasively. "What would you say if I told you that we can live in peace, you and I together?"

Her eyes opened wider than ever and her jaw unbeautifully dropped. She faced him without words, searching his face in the darkness. She could see lines of strain lurking behind the impassiveness.

"We can do it, Darl," he said. "The Hags made me an offer today. My life in exchange for information. Since they'll have the information soon anyhow I might as well give in. You see, we're beaten, Darl. We haven't got much left and we can't afford to lose what we've got."

There was a shriek of brakes and an abrupt swerve. Hanley brought the ground car to a stop, turned and faced them.

"What the heck, Valentine!" he exploded. "I heard that!"

Valentine released Darl and leaned forward, his face drawn with obscure emotions. He placed a hand on Hanley's shoulder and said tersely, "What else can we do? Think it over—don't say anything yet."

Hanley's furious expression turned to perplexity and he gazed down into his lap. Valentine hastily sat back.

"While you're thinking, Hanley," he said, "you might as well drive us around. I don't know how much more freedom we're going

to have and I want to make the most of mine."

Valentine placed an arm around Darl's shoulders, drew her to him. She struggled free, almost weeping. "I don't understand," she said.

Valentine sighed and narrowed his eyes. "Darl, Hanley said something to me the other night. He said you were in love with me. Tell me whether he was right or wrong."

Color leaped into her marble cheeks. She said, "He was right, Valentine."

He swallowed convulsively. "Then trust me," he ordered. "Lean back—here." He drew her to him. "Close your eyes, Darl. I want to tell you something." Gently his fingers crept around her small head, touched the lids of her eyes to make sure they were closed.

Valentine shut his own eyes and spoke to her softly. "I could never tell you that I loved you before, Darl," he whispered. "Not while I was a Donovan and an outlaw. I couldn't ask a woman to share the risk. But now. . . ."

He spoke on and on, and gradually the tenseness in the girl's slim figure subsided and she clung to him. "Don't open your eyes," he whispered, and took his hand away. It was only then that he found his hand was damp . . . with her silent tears.

In the front seat Hanley frowned and read over again the note that Valentine had surreptitiously dropped in his lap. He shrugged hopelessly, then with determination crumpled it, flung it out the window and started the car again. After a moment the frown disappeared and his face began almost to wear a smile.

At least, he was thinking, there would be a fight!

THE car slowed down and Hanley's voice came back to them.

"Valentine," he said tentatively, "Valentine, we're there now. Are you sure about this?"

Valentine said exultantly, "Is the robot still guarding the entrance?"

"Yep."

"Just one—no others close enough to do us any damage right away?"

"Well—the one across the street. But we'll have half a minute, or so, before it can get here."

"Fine!" Valentine released the girl. He yelled, "Go ahead, Hanley! Plow into him!"

The car surged forward as Hanley trod on the accelerator, swerved around in a tight arc and smashed into something with a vast cacophony.

Darl's eyes flew open as she was catapulted forward in her seat. Valentine caught her as the car ground to a stop and she stared around. "Why, we're back at the warehouse! she gasped. "What's happening?"

But Valentine was no longer beside her to hear. He was up and out of the car, followed closely by Hanley. She heard his exultant yell, "Got him! Good man, Hanley—come on!" and saw the two of them run into the warehouse.

Then she saw what he was gloating over—what Hanley had done. A serf-robot, feebly waving its tentacles, was pinned between the collision-bumper of the car and the corner of the building. It was not destroyed but it could not do them any damage and Darl began to understand what Hanley had done. They couldn't challenge the serf-robot on foot but the momentum of the heavy, hurtling ground-car had done what their feeble human strength could not.

Still—there were the other robots. Darl, stricken by the thought, whirled to look at the robot which had been guarding the canal-craft at the wharf down the street. And just in time—it was racing toward her, tentacles flailing the air.

Darl didn't stop to think. She ran into the building, following Valentine and Hanley. Inside was darkness except for a yellow point of light off to one side, where Hanley was holding a match flame while Valentine scrambled around in a broken crate that had been dashed against the floor.

She ran toward him, screaming, "Run! There's a robot right behind me—oh, run, Valentine!"

But Valentine was already running—toward her. He was fumbling with one of the silvery disks as he ran. He dodged past her without a word, his expression invisible in the dark. Astonished, Darl turned to stare after him.

There was a thundering on the floor and the huge bulk of the robot hurtled through the door, whirled and sped toward them, the bright search-beam flaring from its domed body. Silhouetted between the robot and herself Darl saw Valentine halt and stand tensely waiting, caught a glitter of light from the silvery disk in his hand. The robot pounded toward him.

Then, when only a dozen yards away, it happened.

As though stricken by an invisible sledge, the robot stumbled and fell, slid along the rough wood of the warehouse floor for twice the length of a man . . . and lay motionless, its brilliant search-beam pointed straight at the ceiling.

Valentine's exultant laugh rang out. "It works!" he yelled. "The wavetraps—they really work! Hanley, Darl—fill your pockets with them. And then come on. We've got to get out of here!"

CHAPTER X

Into the Hags' Palace

MIRACULOUSLY, the car still worked, though it bucked and bumped from an axle that had been jarred askew. But it carried them rapidly along if not in comfort.

"We're going to the Hag Palace," Valentine ordered. "And hurry. We've got a lot to do before we're out of danger."

Hanley nodded and concentrated on his driving. But Darl said dazedly, "I don't understand. Ten minutes ago you said we were hopelessly beaten. What happened?"

Gently Valentine rested a hand on her shoulder. "That was misdirection," he said. "The Hags were listening. I had to throw them off the track to give us a little time."

"Listening? How?"

"That's what puzzled me," Valentine admitted. "I couldn't understand it, at first. Then, when I thought I had it, it was fantastic, hard to believe. But it checked."

Hanley took a corner on two wheels. Over his shoulder he complained, "I don't know what you're talking about. *What* was hard to believe."

"Do you remember what I told you about the Hag ship that crashed? We found something on it—tiny little robot transmitters. At least, we thought they were for robots. But they weren't. Do you remember the tele-screens we saw in the Hag Palace? Each one of those was showing a scene being picked up by one of the tiny transmitters. They were spy transmitters!"

Darl gasped. "Do you mean the Hags were listening in on everything we said with one of those things hidden in the car?"

Valentine shook his head. "Not exactly. They were just transmitters, nothing else. They didn't have photocells or microphones. All they could do was rebroadcast radio waves."

"Well then! What in the world—"

Valentine reached out and touched her hand. "That's what was so hard to believe," he said. "But the brain is a kind of a radio transmitter itself. Yours, mine, everybody's. The nerves conduct a measurable amount of electrical energy. It can be detected by a sensitive radio set. Do you begin to see now?"

She shook her head silently.

Valentine shrugged. "They rebroadcast brain waves! Everything you or I saw and heard the transmitters picked up and relayed to the Hags. Darl—remember that you told me what the Hags did to you when they took you to the Palace, and then let you go without explanation?"

"You said they had given you a vita-ray treatment, after anesthetizing you. That means only one thing—an operation. I had the same experience. Do you know what the operation was? What they did to you while you were unconscious?"

Woefully—"No."

"They buried one of those transmitters in your flesh! I think it must be in the back of the neck, near the spine. That's where mine seems to be, and it's a logical place—near the brain, you see. The thing was so small you'd never notice it. Even an X-ray might not show it. And under the vita-rays even the scar was healed before they released you. But from that moment on the Hags could see everything you were looking at with your own eyes, hear every sound that came to your ears!"

"Good heavens!" Hanley cried. "No wonder the Hags knew everything."

Darl whispered, "How awful!" Then her hand flew to the nape of her neck. "Can they still see everything?" she asked.

"No! The wavetraps protect us. They interfere with the radio communication of the spy transmitters, just as with the robots. As long as we carry the traps we're all right—and if we live through the next hour we can have one of the Donovan surgeons remove them later."

"Sounds logical," Hanley admitted from the driver's seat. "Tell me one more thing before we get to the Hag Palace—how did you know all this?"

"It was the only answer. The Hags knew things that they couldn't have known any other way. They knew where Elena Orris was and where I was. And then they let me escape—deliberately, as if they knew you were coming. They left me alone at just the proper time.

"Coincidence doesn't stretch that far, and the Hags don't make such obvious mistakes. There had to be an explanation. And there was. They *wanted* me to escape. My guess is that they expected me to make a run for the Donovan city. That would have been fatal—a thousand robots would have followed me and destroyed us all!"

"I get it," said Hanley. "Okay, Valentine—we're almost there. Now what?"

"Stop the car across the street from the Palace," Valentine ordered.

HE LEAPED out as soon as the car had stopped, glanced around quickly. It was still dark though the dawn was not far away. Across the street loomed the Hag Palace. A robot was visible at the entrance a hundred yards away. Satisfied that there was no immediate danger, Valentine turned back to the car.

"We're in a bad spot," he told the others. "I don't know just how we're going to do it but we have to get Elena Orris out of there."

"How?" asked Hanley.

"I don't know," Valentine confessed.

Uneasily Hanley said, "Look, Valentine, why can't we just leave her there? I know these wavetraps are great stuff but suppose something goes wrong? What would happen to the rest of the Donovans?"

Valentine shook his head. "You're right—but she's in trouble. We've got to get her out."

Hanley succumbed. "All right—but she wouldn't do it for you." He glared bitterly at the disk in his hand.

"I don't see why they couldn't have made these things a little bigger," he complained. "The way it is now, they're only good as a last resort. If they—*hey!* What's the matter?" He jumped back involuntarily as Valentine spun on him, staring.

"Say that again!" Valentine demanded.

"All I said was, these things should've been bigger. Don't scare me like that!"

Valentine shook his head wonderingly. "Hanley, you're a genius. Why didn't you think of that a little sooner?"

"Think of what?"

"Think of juicing the wavetraps up! It's very simple—with the power that they get from the built-in powerpacks, they're effective at fifty feet. Twice as much power and they'll be effective twice as far. A hundred times as much power and they'll blanket the city! All we have to do is give them more power and we're in!"

"But where do we get the power?" Darl asked.

Valentine's lean face split in a grin. "From the powerpacks that run this car! Get out, Hanley. Let me get at the packs."

Hanley got out, and the two of them ripped furiously at the floorboards. In a second they had exposed the dull black brick that powered the ground car. Valentine was reaching for the leads when he heard Darl's gasp.

"Valentine!" she whispered urgently. "Better hurry up—there's a robot patrol coming this way!"

Valentine swore and straightened, staring down the street. A few hundred yards away came trotting three serf-robots. As he looked the leading robot, sweeping its search-beam from side to side, caught them in its glare.

"They saw us!" Valentine said. They had—there was but a second's pause and then the robots swerved in their course and came hurtling toward the parked ground-car and the three fugitives.

"What'll we do?" Hanley asked nervously. Valentine held up his hand. The three stood frozen, tensely waiting, while the robots hurtled toward them. Then they crossed the invisible line of the wavetraps' influence. They staggered—and the first one fell, the others tumbling over it and lying there like wrecked fragments of machinery.

Hanley exhaled a long sigh of relief. "Maybe I'll get used to this in time," he said prayerfully, "but that time's a long way off."

"We aren't safe yet," Valentine interrupted. "There'll be more, now that the Hags have seen us. And they may get smart enough to stay out of range and use a ray-pencil on us! Here—loosen the leads to the powerpack, while I open this disk."

He took another wavetraps out of his pocket, turned it in his hand. There was a tiny slit next to the lever that turned it on and off. As he had seen the radio-tech do back in the Donovan city, he inserted his thumbnail in the slit and twisted. The top of the disk came off in his hand, and he was staring

down into an intricate mass of wires and condensers.

Hanley had one of the power leads loose in his hand. The other was still attached to the power-pack, lying on the seat of the car. "Suppose it's too much power and the thing burns out?" he asked.

"It shouldn't. There aren't any tubes or filaments in it—nothing that might burn. And if it does that's the chance we take." Valentine frowned and lifted out a tiny cylinder, half the size of a cigarette.

"Thank heaven I watched our radio-tech take these things apart," he said. He ripped loose the wires to the dwarf powerpack, attached them gently to the leads, wrapping them securely around the contact points. He set the whole affair down on the seat of the car.

"All right, Hanley," he said. "Plug the other end of the lead in and keep your fingers crossed!"

Then he heard the familiar drumming on the pavement again. He looked up in consternation and, from the gateway of the Hag Palace down the street, saw what seemed an unending line of robots racing straight for them!

"Plug it in, Hanley!" he ordered. Hanley tore his eyes off the robots and thrust the loose end of the lead in his hand against the terminal of the power-pack. There was no faint drone this time. Instead there was a shrill buzzing as of a million tiny hornets. It was hard to realize that so much noise could come from so tiny a thing as the wavetrap—but it was working!

"Look!" gasped Darl. Like Juggernauts gone mad, the robots were hurling themselves to destruction. There must have been forty of them in the street all racing down on them in one second, and in the second that followed—destroyed.

Without the distant control of a Hag to keep them on course, most of the serf-robots merely toppled over and slid, piling up as had the three others.

Some, even after they had fallen, continued to thrash the air with their waving tentacles and limbs—still moving but no longer under control and no longer dangerous. One went careening off in a broad arc, smashing finally against the wall of a building less than a hundred feet from them.

"So far, so good," Valentine said grimly. "Now we try the hard part—fighting the Hags in their own Palace!"

CHAPTER XI

The Trick That Took

CLUTCHING Darl's ray-pencil, Valentine ran toward the Palace with the other two following. They skirted the prostrate forms of the robots and were inside the Palace itself before they met trouble. There was a flat hiss of sound and Valentine involuntarily flung himself to the ground.

He caught a flicker of motion in one of the corridor-entrances and fired at it. A Hag with a ray-pencil yelped and disappeared, her running footsteps echoing out to them. When he got to the entrance she was out of sight.

The three trotted down the corridor to the elevators, where Darl and Valentine had come out less than a dozen hours before. A car was waiting. But when Valentine thumbed the controls nothing happened. The controls were dead.

"They've cut the power," he said. "Well—there's no help for it. We'll have to find the stairs and climb!"

What had been an effortless trip of a few seconds in the high speed elevators of the Hags turned out to be a man-killing climb on foot even after they had found the stairs.

"You were on the fourteenth floor," Darl panted. "Maybe—Elena—will be in—the same place."

Valentine merely nodded, conserving breath. They had one more floor to go—then they heard the sound of alarm bells, a clanging that rolled toward them from all directions as every bell in the Hag Palace went off at once. A shrill female voice shrieked words that distance muffled and made impossible to understand over the annunciators.

"They're alerting the whole Palace," Valentine gasped. "Here's where the going gets tough!"

They burst out of the stair well into the familiar gray corridor, Valentine in the lead with the ray pencil ready. The corridor was empty. Darl pointed breathlessly down the hall.

"I think it was that fourth door," she said. Valentine nodded and raced to it—but when he flung open the door, the room was empty. He dashed to the pens that lined the wall—all were empty, even of the flopping mon-

strosities the Hags had created with their surgery.

Darl was about to speak but the rattle of the alarm bells drowned her out—near by this time, and so loud that they almost deafened them. There was a squeal of sound, then the shrill, peremptory female voice again.

"Warning," it shrilled. "Warning to all Novitiates. Ascend to Ship Level Immediately! The Earthies are approaching the Palace. Blast-off time in ten minutes!"

"Ship level?" Hanley repeated. "What's that?"

Valentine shrugged. "I don't know. But something's up—looks as if the Earthies have declared themselves in on the fight." He frowned. "Let's get out of here," he said. "We've got to find Elena Orris."

"Perhaps I can help you," said a harsh female voice from the corridor. "She's right down the hall."

Valentine whirled, the ray pencil jutting out at the Hag who stood watching them. She raised her scraggly eyebrows in mock surprise.

"I have no weapon," she said. "See? All I want to do is to take you to Elena Orris."

Hanley growled, "It's a trick! Careful, Valentine!"

The Hag frowned reprovingly at him. Valentine said, "Of course it's a trick. Still—let's see what happens. We'll never find Elena by ourselves."

"That's right," said the Hag. She pointed to the door of a room across the hall. "She's right in there. The door's not locked."

Valentine, face tense, said, "You go in first. Remember, I have no compunctions about killing women. Not when they're as vicious and corrupt as you!"

The Hag snarled silently but walked ahead of them. She flung the door wide and walked steadily in. Through the door, lying supine on a couch against the wall, was Elena Orris, apparently asleep.

"Anesthetized," the Hag flung over her shoulder. "She'll come out of it in an hour or so."

Valentine started toward her, his guard momentarily down. He was well within the door before his ear caught the faint clatter of moving metal—and by the time he whirled it was too late! Hidden by the open door stood a serf-robot, unaccountably still in operation.

Before Valentine could overcome his shock

the lashing tentacles had whipped about him and caught him dizzily into the air. He heard a yell from Hanley and a gasp of pain from Darl as they, too, were caught. A twisting tentacle snatched the ray-pencil from his hand . . . and they were neatly trussed and helpless.

The Hag shrieked with gloating laughter. "The very clever Donovans," she crooned. "As helpless as babes."

She strode closer, staring at Valentine. "Can you twist your head a little bit?" she asked solicitously. "Just far enough to look down at the floor. What do you see?"

VALENTINE looked, puzzled. There was a long, black cable snaking off to a monitor box in the wall. He wondered—then it became clear.

"I see you understand," the Hag said harshly. "Your wavetraps worked beautifully—as long as the robots were directed by radio. But you never expected us to connect one to its monitor by cable, did you?" She laughed stridently, then stepped back and glanced at the timepiece on her wrist.

"I must hurry," she said apologetically. "The Earthies are coming—and I must be gone before they arrive." Her face darkened savagely. "You—animals," she spat. "You and the Earthies, daring to pit yourself against us! But don't think you've won! All this means is a temporary inconvenience. We'll be back. Ganymede is not so far off that we won't be able to come back. And when we return we'll stay!"

"Ganymede!" gasped Darl, startled into speech. "But how—how will you get there?"

"Ha!" the Hag grunted explosively. "Then you didn't know everything, did you? We've planned this for a long time—a colony on Ganymede. We've prepared everything—bred specialized slaves in our laboratories, even built a ship. Oh, you never knew what went on in the Hag Palace!

"The ship alone was an immense project. But you never knew. Listen to me—I'll tell you about it. It's in this very building! The six topmost stories are false—and inside them, all ready for the trip, is a rocket capable of taking us anywhere in the System!"

She stepped back, mock sympathy on her face. She turned to the wall, swung out a panel and carefully turned a knob concealed behind it.

"That gives you eight more minutes of life," she announced. "In five minutes the

ship takes off—and, three minutes after that, the timer will set off enough U-Two thirty-five to blast this building to powder!”

She waved a sardonic farewell and walked past them, out into the corridor without a backward glance. In a moment they heard the closing of an elevator door—then silence.

“Try to get loose!” Valentine ordered as soon as the Hag was out of earshot. “Squirm—twist around—it’s our only chance.” He was straining every muscle himself but it was useless. Against the steel tentacles of the robot his strength was impotent.

“Can’t do a thing,” Hanley panted. “Listen, if all the Hags are leaving for the ship what makes this thing keep on holding us?”

“That’s what it’s set to do—it’ll keep on holding us until the controls at the other end of the cable are set for something else. Or until we all blow up.” Valentine abruptly stopped squirming.

It did no good. The only thing that could help him then was thought. Brow furrowed, he stared at the floor, his mind racing. He gazed absently at the snakelike black cable. . . .

“That’s it!” he whooped. “Hanley—can you reach that cable with your feet? You’re nearest.”

Hanley strained. “Yeah,” he reported. “What do I do?”

“Try to pull it out of its socket! They can’t have had time to do a good job. Kick it loose!”

Hanley, stretching his leg to the limit, managed to slip a toe under the curling length of the cable. He kicked—but the cable slipped away before he could accomplish his purpose. He swore, tried again. This time it happened! There was a sharp electrical hiss and a puff of acrid blue smoke. The robot’s tentacles tightened on them convulsively, bruising their already tortured bodies. Then they slacked and fell away.

“I got a shock,” Hanley complained, rubbing his foot.

“Never mind that!” Valentine darted over to the panel in the wall, stared desperately at the knob the Hag had turned. That was all there was, just the knob with a pointer on a dial graduated in minutes, nothing else. After a quick inspection Valentine grasped the knob and tried to turn it. It would not turn, no matter how much he forced it.

“No use,” he said dismally. “It only turns one way, apparently—and I’m afraid to try to shut it off altogether. We’ll have to make

a run for it.” He turned to the sleeping Elena Orris, slapped her ruthlessly. She didn’t respond. “We’ll have to carry her.”

“I’ll take her,” Hanley offered. “Come on, let’s get out of here.” He picked up the girl and hurried out of the door, down toward the stairs. Darl started to follow, then turned to look at Valentine.

“Go ahead,” he ordered, his face wrinkled with thought. “I’ll be with you in a second.”

THEY made it down the long flights of stairs in record time. On the lowest level of the Palace they encountered the vanguard of the Earthies, milling around in indecision under the inadequate leadership of Ensign Drake. But they responded to Valentine’s shouted warnings and every human was out of danger when it happened.

Hanley was just gasping, “It’s about time for that ship of theirs to be blasting off,” when there was a mighty thunder of sound and the entire Hag Palace seemed to bulge and crumble. The concussion sent them flying into each other, sheltered though they were from the direct blast.

Debris rained for blocks around but they had been warned, and were hugging the walls of the buildings. There were a few casualties among the Earthies—men hurt by flying stone—but no one was killed. And the Hags were destroyed.

“What happened?” Hanley asked in awe. “Why didn’t their ship get away?”

“It didn’t have a chance,” Valentine said soberly. “The timer for the U-Two thirty-five only worked in one direction. I couldn’t stop it or set it back to give us more time. But I could set it ahead. I set it three and a half minutes faster—and it went off right on schedule, thirty seconds before their blast-off time.”

Hanley nodded, looking around. An Earth surgeon was bending over Elena Orris with the Space-Fleet ensign hovering anxiously in the background. As he watched she stirred and looked up, jerking her head away from the stimulant capsule the surgeon had crushed under her nose.

Hanley looked at Valentine and Darl, standing behind him in the sheltering doorway of a residence building. Valentine’s arm was around the girl, and Hanley regarded them with pleasure. Then, surprised, he saw her face suddenly cloud.

She jerked away.

"Valentine!" she said. "Valentine, you— you heel!"

Startled, Valentine looked down at her. Darl's eyes were flashing in abrupt anger.

"I'm a little bit slow in understanding things," she said tautly. "Forgive me. I've been so rushed, I haven't had time to think."

"What are you talking about?" Valentine asked bewilderedly.

"You know what I'm talking about! Your deception!"

"What deception?"

"What you said to me in the car! Telling me that you loved me—kissing me—just so you could get me to close my eyes, so that the Hags wouldn't be able to see where we were going. It was all a trick—and I fell for it!"

Valentine looked at her for a searching moment. Then, without turning his head,

he said, "Hanley, go visit somebody else for a while. As a personal favor."

Grinning, Hanley turned on his heel and strolled toward the Earthies. But as he walked away he heard Valentine saying softly, "Darl—that was part of it. I admit it. I couldn't just ask you to close your eyes—it would have made the Hags suspicious. The easiest way to do it was to make love to you. Don't you understand? It was the only way I could do it."

"Yes . . . yes, I suppose so," Darl said, almost sobbing. "It's just that I made such a fool of myself, with all those horrid old harpies watching. And that was all it meant to you—just a trick."

Valentine shook his head. "No, that wasn't all," he said gently. He stepped closer to her, holding out his arms. He whispered, "Darl, there's nobody watching now."

