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Vol. 2

APRIL, 1940

No. 1

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 DOUGLAS NEWTON
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Cover illustration for “The Beast Plants”
 painted by Frank R. Paul

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Fire Gas

By STANTON A. COBLENTZ

Armies could not deal with the mad dictator in league with the powers of darkness on another planet, but Hal Remingway set out by himself to break down the vast network of evil!

I

ANTHONY J. REXWELL, Jr., president of the United States flourished a heavy blue document as he ranged along the carpeted length of the State Room. His energetic gray eyes looked angry and alarmed; his square fighter's jaw was thrust forward; his hands trembled as he turned toward his advisers, most of them uneasily seated, one or two standing with clenched fists and twitching features.

"So!" he bawled, brandishing the paper as if it were a bomb he wanted to hurl. "So Dictator Xaragon and his Trans-Eurasian gang think they have us trapped! After four years of the deadliest war in history,

"Halt!" It was Xaragon the Dictator. "Not one shot must be fired in this temple! It means—"

they imagine they've brought us to our knees! Gentlemen, I swear to you, as I revere the names of Washington, Lincoln, and—"

The long gaunt form of Clyde Barrow, Under-Secretary of Defense, shot from his seat. In his excitement, he committed the unheard-of act of interrupting the President. "Mr. Rexwell, you don't seem to understand! This is no longer a question of sentiment. Xaragon has us cornered. This new invention—why, the devil himself couldn't resist it!"

"It's all so new, sir, I'd better explain again," broke in Franklin Krow, Secre-

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tary of Chemical Warfare. "All we know is that the Trans-Eurasian air fleets have let down a new kind of bomb, which, on bursting, gives out a pinkish vapor that produces fatal skin sores. Gas masks, of course, are useless. But what has us stumped—"

"Yes, I realize," interrupted the President. "The pink vapor grows like a conflagration. It reaches out in all directions, emitting a deadly heat. That's why we call it Fire Gas."

"It starts some sort of chemical reaction in the air," Secretary Krow went on, "which continues in ever-widening circles, like a ripple spreading on a pond. Fire Gas appears to be a new nitrogen-carbon compound, built up out of the air—so that it can keep on forming without limit unless we find something to stop it."

"I know. I know," admitted the President, waving the blue document furiously. "This terrible new weapon was only introduced day before yesterday, and already, as you know, we've had to evacuate three important industrial centers."

"With a loss of a hundred thousand civilian lives!" added Daniel McCoon, Secretary of the Interior.

"What about Xaragon's proclamation over the international radio?" put in Vice President Hugh Glouster.

"Oh, that he'll make peace—on condition that we cede New York and New England? On the ground that they have Trans-Eurasian minorities! I'd see him in hell first!" stormed Rexwell, bringing his fist down so sharply on a table that an ink-stand overturned.

"Well, that's just where we'll be, all right!" argued Glouster. "Don't you see, Rexwell, Xaragon's hands are tightening about our throats?"

A heavy silence descended. Some of the conferees chewed bitterly at their lips, or despondently rubbed their brows; the majority stared at their leaders with expressions of hopeless melancholy. Too well they knew the ways of Xaragon—of Xaragon, the most ruthless of dictators, who in 1966 had waded through blood to control

of Trans-Eurasia, and in the ten years of his rule had never scrupled to resort to any extreme of massacre or terror to enforce his will.

It was a cool-eyed and quiet-mannered but powerful-looking individual who at length broke the silence. All eyes turned with respectful interest to Hal Remingway, head of the National Intelligence Bureau, as he declared, with slow, calm emphasis:

"Mr. Rexwell, there is only one solution. To surrender to Xaragon would be unthinkable. We must move heaven and earth to find the formula of Fire Gas, and to unearth the antidote without delay—"

"My chemists are working to that end," interrupted Secretary Krow.

"Chemists be damned!" flung back Remingway. "What I have in mind is our secret agents. They must rush to Trans-Eurasia and dig up the formula."

"The idea sounds excellent, Remingway," sneered the President. "But it's a little like the question of which mouse is to bell the cat. You know Xaragon has iron walls up against espionage. Still, if you can suggest some member of your department—"

"Certainly, I can!"

Remingway stood erect, to his full five feet eleven, his keen dark eyes flashing. "In a matter of such importance, Mr. President, I do not believe in trusting subordinates. The game is up to me. So, with your permission, I will board a plane this evening."

"You?" burst out several astonished voices. "You?"

"Mr. President," continued Remingway, "I have spent years in Trans-Eurasia. I know the people, and the language. I am capable of disguising myself—in my youth I was a character actor. Naturally, I recognize the peril, yet—" His voice broke, but he continued, hastily, "Yet I can think of no better way to serve my country, if you will give permission, Mr. President!"

Rexwell stared long and earnestly at the head of his Intelligence Bureau. At

length he spoke, in gruff tones that disguised an underlying softness, "We cannot afford to lose you, Remingway. But with the safety of all America in the balance, I cannot refuse any effort that offers even one chance in ten thousand. So go, with my blessings—and, remember, the future of the whole world may be in your hands!"

The President turned aside, biting his lip. And the last glance he cast at Remingway, as the latter hastened from the hall, was such as one may give to the doomed.

II

AT ABOUT one o'clock on a moonless night, an airplane circled down from an immense height above a mountain valley. Dipping and spiralling amid the blackness, it moved with muffled motors that no detecting device could have discovered; and feeling its way by means of a beam of pale blue light invisible from beneath, it wheeled about for some time before its pilot was able to locate a suitable landing place in a meadow.

After long manipulation, the last peril-stage of the descent was completed; the airplane came bumping to a halt amid the thick grasses; a door opened; a shadowy figure emerged; the door closed again; and the airplane began jerking once more across the field, then rose in air like a great bird.

About a mile from the scene of this incident, a stooped figure was seen dragging along a country road just after dawn. His form, with the squalid coat and tattered shoes and trousers, was that of one of the aged beggars to be met occasionally in this remote district. He walked slowly, with infirm, faltering steps, supporting himself on a crooked staff. A black patch covered his left eye; his right temple showed a long, irregular scar; his beard was ragged and dirty; his teeth, discolored a brownish yellow, stood out hideously as he muttered to himself. His voice had the unpleasant squeak of extreme age as he paused every now and then to beg alms of a farm-hand or mule driver.

From most of those whom he accosted, he gained but a cold reception: "Begone, old man, and leave decent folks alone!" Or else, "These are hard times, with the country at war, and Lord Xaragon taxing the very sweat on our brows! We have nothing to give!" But sometimes a passer-by would ask a question of the old man—who was he, and where did he come from? He would put one hand to his ear, look puzzled, and ask to have the question repeated. It seemed that he was very stupid, as well as very deaf.

After shuffling along for some distance, he reached a river where some boys and men were merrily splashing. Instantly an alert look came into his one exposed eye. He sprang into a clump of bushes with an agility not to be expected of one of his years, and worked his way into a thicket, where shone a red patch—the discarded clothes of one of the swimmers.

Snatching at a coat and pair of trousers, he began going through the pockets with fevered haste. He paid no heed to coins or trinkets; but, coming across a small card stamped with a yellow seal, he muttered a pleased "Ah!" under his breath, and transferred the object to the soiled inner folds of his own garments. "Official Identification Card," it read, and gave the name, address and official number of its owner.

He emerged from the shrubbery and went hobbling on his way, but had to pause for a time while a uniformed procession went by, with flags, drums and rifles.

"What may that be, daughter?" he piped at a farm girl who stood by, milk pail in hand. "Such comings and goings were never known in the old days."

"Have you forgotten, old father," asked the girl, in the manner of one humoring a hopeless dotard, "our good ruler Xaragon has just called up the last war reserves?"

"Yes, it is so, it is so," cackled the old man. "I had almost forgotten, my poor wits wander so. What did you say our ruler's name is? My poor used-up mind grows to be like a sieve; everything goes right through it."

The girl's black eyes glowed pityingly.

The man, observing the finely molded features, felt that she was just such a one as he would have liked, if—

But he dismissed the impossible from his mind and lifted one hand to his right ear, as if hardly able to make out her words.

"You see the white tower rising above the forest yonder, old father?" she went on, pointing to a wooded mountainside. "That is Karduspo, the wilderness home of Xaragon, our great leader. There he comes to decide on matters of peace and war."

"Have you ever been up there, daughter?"

"No, old father, how could I go? They say it is surrounded by an iron circle of guards."

The old man stared upward in silence; then pointed to a ring of spires that rose from a flat projection of the mountainside some distance below Karduspo. "And what may that be, daughter?"

"They say it is Xaragon's private temple, old father. There he comes to think over affairs of state. No one but he is allowed inside. Anyone else would meet a doom worse than death. So, at least, I am told. But who am I to know?"

The old man put one hand again to his ear; and, after muttering a word of thanks, went tottering on his way.

A few minutes later, having found a secluded forest trail that wound upward in the direction of Xaragon's temple, he removed the patch from his left eye and began moving briskly forward. His form had become erect and strong, although at the sound of any approaching footsteps he would slump down and once more appear slow and stooped.

III

XARAGON'S temple was a tall circular granite building about fifty yards across. It was windowless, but there were two entrances, one facing due north, one due south. Massive stone pillars shot up before each doorway; and the doors, which were of solid steel, seldom were al-

lowed to swing open. At each portal a uniformed guard stalked, with naked bayonet glistening; and few were bold enough to approach within range of his challenging, "Who goes there?"

Yet toward dusk, on the day we have been speaking of, a bent old figure with a black patch across his left eye stumbled out of the forest and approached the temple's northern gateway. So weak and helpless he seemed that the guard saw no harm in letting him come near—particularly as he turned out to be a rather amusing old fool.

"Where am I, son?" he asked, in his shrill, piping voice. "I have lost my way, and it is hard on old bones to wander all day through the woods. Can you tell me how to get to the village?"

"Turn right back the way you came, Grandpa," directed the guard. "By my boots! Such as you have no business at Xaragon's temple!"

"Oh, Xaragon's temple, is it?" cackled the old man, surprised. "Sacred stars! Who would have thought it? I have always wanted to see Xaragon's temple. May I go in, son?"

The guard bristled. "Don't you know that anyone who goes in, except at Xaragon's command, will die a thousand deaths? I myself heard the screams of a poor wretch who stole in one day, though I have never been inside myself."

"I have often wondered, son," rasped the old man, "what our good ruler does in his temple."

"So have we all wondered, Grandpa. But it is not for us to think of. They say he goes there to meditate, and I know he comes often, and sometimes for hours, and when he walks out he has a proud, fierce light in his face and his eyes glitter strangely."

"No doubt he works some great charm."

"So some believe, Grandpa."

Becoming more communicative, the guard leaned close, and whispered, "It must be so, because sometimes I have heard a queer murmuring from inside, as if he was talking to the devil himself!"

A minute later, the approach of a clattering, uniformed figure put an end to the conversation.

"There comes my relief, Grandpa," said the guard. "He's a new man, starting work this very night."

Twilight had already fallen by the time the newcomer had taken his post and the relieved man had left.

The beggar, who had slunk off into the shadows of a pine grove, waited for a few minutes and then hobbled slowly back.

"Who comes here?" challenged the sentry, with pointed bayonet.

"Nobody of any account. Have you a penny, my boy? Just one penny for a poor starving old fellow who is aching in all his joints—"

A snarl came from between the sentinel's lips. "Back there, you dirty old scoundrel, or you'll ache a damned sight more!"

"But I haven't eaten since morning, my son! If you have only a crust, just a moldy crust, as you honor your mother's name."

"This is a temple, not a charity house!" growled the guard.

"Take pity, my son!"

"Heaven pity you, if you don't clear out!"

Allowing his rifle to slip to the ground, the guard dashed at the beggar, as though to seize him and hurl him bodily away.

But as his hands closed about the feeble old arms, something unexpected occurred. The frail aged frame suddenly tightened into something vehement and powerful. The weak old fists shot out and dealt blows like battering-rams. The stooped figure straightened, and became lithe and athletic; the whole form leapt forward with a catlike lunge, and the arms, with a skilled wrestling grip, wound themselves about the guard's unprepared body.

So swiftly did the attack occur that the victim was unable to call for help. A hand on his throat choked out his cries as he fell heavily backward. He scarcely knew what was happening as he was beaten and strangled into unconsciousness.

A moment later the assailant, drawing a

small vial from his inner garments, had forced the contents between the fallen man's lips. "Ah, there, my friend," he muttered, "I guess now you'll be quiet for a while!"

He began half hauling, half dragging the recumbent form into the darkness of the pine grove.

It was but a few minutes before a uniformed figure emerged, strode up to the temple entrance, took up the abandoned rifle, and began ranging back and forth with alert soldierly movements.

IV

OLEV, the new night guard at the temple's north portal, was a stalwart-looking figure. Nearly six feet tall, and with broad, well-developed frame, he had evidently not been able to find a uniform to fit him. His coat and trousers seemed a little tight, and his collar and sleeves were just a trifle short. But with his strong, clean-shaven features, his swarthy Eurasian skin and erect military carriage, he was a character to earn attention and respect.

From the first, he was a favorite with the other guards, with whom he would chum in his spare hours, smoking and exchanging anecdotes in the barracks where they slept and ate. He did not often discuss their master Xaragon; but occasionally he would listen with alert interest to tales of the temple and its contents.

"I am certain," maintained Kragg, the night watchman of the south portal, "that Xaragon has great powers hidden here, and performs mighty experiments. I have heard a tremendous rumbling and whirring from within." And Yuland, the day watchman of the south portal, had similar ideas. "I have listened to a flapping of wings," he swore, "and have seen lights flashing, and felt a wind rushing out. I fear Xaragon is in league with the Evil One."

After a few days, a minor flurry was caused by the discovery of a dead man in the woods. He was wearing a beggar's

rags, had a long, dirty false beard, and wore a black patch over one eye; while a great crooked staff was clutched in his right hand. Yet, while made up to seem old, he was really not past thirty—a fact which caused little comment, for had not beggars been known to play such tricks before? It was not quite certain how he had come to his death; but, from his appearance, it was assumed he had eaten poisoned mushrooms from the forest, as many a better man had done. Since no one could have had any interest in doing away with such a good-for-nothing, the affair was not thought worth investigating.

Meanwhile the countryside was stirred with the news that Xaragon was returning to his mountain home at Karduspo.

About a week after Olev took up his post, the dictator arrived; and immediately went to his temple. Olev, who was off duty at the time, saw the leader approaching in the midst of fifty bayonet-wielding men. Saw the guard station themselves in even numbers at both doors of the temple. Saw Xaragon's broad, low brow and dark, Mongoloid features, his bristling black moustache above the wide, thick lips, and his surly cold black eyes as the iron north portal rattled open. Then for hours Olev watched, while the guard stood stationary as men of steel until at last their master reappeared, with a grim smile on his heavy features.

"Tomorrow he comes again," remarked Pelghru, the day watchman of the north portal, as Olev arrived to relieve him. "They say he consults the stars, and meditates on that which will shake the world."

Pelghru, as he spoke these words, did not notice the sudden narrowing of Olev's eyes nor the secret clenching of his fists.

Nor did he take careful account of Olev's actions the following morning when he was relieved. He did not observe how intently Olev followed his every movement as he unlocked the special safe-like iron door, of which he alone, as the most trusted of the guards, knew the combination. Then, having put everything in readiness for

Xaragon's arrival, he did not suspect a ruse when Olev handed him a message to be delivered to Yuland, at the south portal.

Since he would have to be gone but a minute, he saw no harm in obliging Olev; it did not occur to him to doubt the latter's hurried explanation, "I'm in a rush to get away, old pal. Got a date with a girl down in the valley."

When Pelghru returned, in his, ambling, leisurely way, Olev was already out of sight.

V

INSIDE the temple, all was deathly dark except for one uncanny blue light that burned from the ceiling fifty feet above. The intruder, feeling his way inch by inch, had the impression of walking among tall, inimical shapes that waited to swoop down and seize him. To his touch, the surfaces were hard, straight and steely cold, or glassy smooth and rounded; while now and then he felt his way along great pipes and over coils of wire.

By straining his eyes in the dim light, he could vaguely make out objects like huge inverted funnels, and other objects very like the enlarged ventilation tubes of steamships, and still others like long slanting poles arranged in groups.

After a long time, he concealed himself not far from the point where he had entered, crouching down amid masses of heavy black drapery that reached from the ceiling.

Hours went by, and he remained silently waiting, scarcely permitting his cramped muscles to move. At last, just as he was starting away, a heavy rattling to his right smote him with mingled hope and dread.

At the same time, the north portal clattered open and a flood of light burst in. But almost instantly the light was shut off again, to be replaced by an eerie deep red illumination as the snapping of a switch came to the hidden man's ears.

Through the dark folds of the draperies, while he again crouched near the floor, he could see but indistinctly. Yet he did make

out that the entire room was filled with gigantic machines; with tubed devices like magnified radio receivers; with immense racks across which copper wires twisted; with gigantic lenses and mirrors; with motors, dynamos and enormous electromagnets; and with other engines whose nature he could not even surmise.

In the center of the hall, dominating everything, was a tower of red glass, which tapered from a ten-foot onion-shaped bulb to a slender projection like the periscope of a submarine. In front of it was a crimson light, with the sign, "Dangerous! Explosives!" Hundreds of wires entered it from all directions; dozens of dials and knobs stood out near its base; and several megaphones and tubes like telephone receivers added to the bizarre decorations.

As the concealed man strained behind his draperies, he saw Xaragon going to this contrivance, and, with an eager grunt, taking his seat in a little revolving chair at its base. The dictator pulled a switch, and wheels began to whirl and levers to click. Then he pulled another switch, and spoke in slow, deep, hollow tones.

"Gunzabi, it is I! Earth speaking! It is I, Xaragon! I await further instructions, Gunzabi! Give me the perfected formula!"

These words were spoken deliberately and very clearly. Yet the eavesdropper wondered if he had heard correctly. What could Xaragon mean by saying, "Earth speaking!"? What formula did he refer to? Who was Gunzabi? And could it be that the dictator was awaiting instructions from some one far off in the universe?

Ten minutes went by, while Olev remained motionless, staring out through the uncanny dull red light. Xaragon likewise made not a motion. But meanwhile the clicking and whirring of the machines continued as an unpleasant undertone to the intruder's thoughts.

Then, with shocking suddenness, a voice broke out through the megaphones, calling in grating, machinelike tones.

"Rumterox speaking! Rumterox speaking! It is I, Gunzabi! We have caught your

message. We will give you the new formula. The old compound was too slow-acting. The new gas will wipe out your enemies like a hurricane. Take this down, O Xaragon!"

There followed instructions for building up a substance out of nitrogen, carbon, oxygen, phosphorous, sulphur and several other elements, under particular conditions of heat and pressure. The hidden man meanwhile had slipped a small notepad and pencil from his pocket and strained to take down the message regardless of the poor light. But despite all his efforts, he missed several words, and had lost hope of filling in the gap when he heard Xaragon declare, "I did not quite follow, O Gunzabi! Will you not repeat?"

Again an interval of about ten minutes, before the reply came in the same mechanical tones, "Rumterox speaking! Here is the formula again, O Xaragon!"

As the spy jotted down the details, he performed some rapid mental calculations. Why had it each time taken Xaragon so long to get a reply? From anywhere on this planet, the response by radio would be practically instantaneous. But what if the message did not come from this planet?

THE calculator's head reeled. Although not aware of the precise present positions of the planets, he knew that radio waves, traveling at a hundred and eighty-six thousand miles a second, would require about ten minutes for the round trip to a spot fifty million miles away. Then was not Xaragon's "Earth speaking!" to be taken at its face value? Might it not be that he was communicating with some other world—say, with Mars?

Olev's blood turned cold within him at this thought. This, then, might explain Xaragon's unparalleled inhumanity! That he was taking instructions from some evil force beyond the earth! Some force whose ultimate aim, perhaps, was to destroy mankind!

His head was in a daze as he bent forward to listen. "Mix your elements carefully, O Xaragon! The substance can be

made easily and quickly. If your enemies called the first poison Fire Gas, they will call this Whirlwind Gas, for it will spread like a whirlwind when you have dropped it on their heads, and the fleetest runner will not be able to outrace it. Use it soon and well, O Xaragon!"

Olev, his fists clenched until the nails bit into the flesh, started creeping forward. Such horror and fury filled his mind that he had some wild idea of springing forward, clutching the dictator from behind, and ending his maniacal career.

The draperies stirred slightly as the spy slid forward. But amid the whirring of the machines, the faint rustling was not perceptible.

Just then a rumbling came through the megaphones, a muttering and groaning as of contending voices. But Olev could make nothing of it at all, except that Xaragon seemed disturbed, and cried out, "Gunzabi! Gunzabi! Speak to me, Gunzabi! Tell me all is well—"

Keeping mostly out of sight behind the great, wired radio-like cabinets, Olev had stolen up to within ten yards of the dictator, whose black figure frenziedly pulled knobs and turned dials amid the eerie red light. The rumbling from the megaphones momentarily died down, then was resumed at an increasing tempo, when Olev shot out from his concealment, resolved to risk all in one desperate dash.

But as he started, his foot struck a hidden wire. With the brazen note of a fire alarm, a chorus of great bells filled the place with their sudden clanging. And, at the same time, a battery of arc-lights shot out a blinding white blaze.

Olev, at the first terrifying peal, had crouched low, darting back amid the draperies; while the dictator, wheeling about in consternation, uttered a frightened gasp.

Almost as he did so, the north portal and the south portal burst open simultaneously, and the guards rushed in, their bayonets glistening, their cries ringing forth tumultuously.

"There is someone here!" Xaragon belatedly, his mighty voice bawling above all

the others'. "Some traitor! Some spy! Catch him, men, and, by my teeth, there will be not one bone left whole in his body!"

Even as these words were shouted, the hidden man came forth, not slowly and cautiously, but dashing full speed, no one was certain where from.

"Where is he? What is it? Is our great leader safe?" he panted, apparently half beside himself.

In his guard's uniform, he attracted little attention—particularly as he was immediately accosted by Pelghru with a cry of, "Oh, you here too, Olev! Come, there's no time to waste! We've got to catch that black devil!"

And so Olev joined the other guards in searching for the suspected spy in every dark place and in the inmost recesses of the machines.

VI

VARIOUS and conflicting were the rumors circulated following this episode. Some said that the spy had been caught and executed. Others claimed that he was still at large, but that Xaragon's men were hot on his trail. Still others maintained that there had been no spy, and that a short circuit or other accident had rung the alarm. And as nothing was known definitely, this explanation was most widely believed.

On the morning after the incident, Pelghru again opened the temple door to prepare for Xaragon's coming; while Olev watched alertly as he worked the combination. But Xaragon did not come; and that evening it was whispered that he had left the vicinity.

That same evening, after relieving Pelghru, Olev turned to the door under cover of darkness. In one hand he held a pocket flashlight, with which he could barely read the numbers on the lock. But he remembered very clearly Pelghru's various maneuvers; and he moved with expert skill, since his work had taught him all about locks.

Accordingly, it was not many minutes before the hinges began to creak and the door swung inward.

Within the temple, all was as eerily dark as before, except for the single blue light shining high above. With crawling caution, by means of the flashlight, Olev worked his way forward, around the shadowy machines, taking care not to step on any wire that might set off an alarm.

It was all of five minutes before he had reached the tower of red glass in the center of the building. Pausing before the huge onion-shaped bulb, he examined the various dials and knobs beneath the projecting megaphones. He thought he remembered, in general, how Xaragon had worked the machine; but, in any case, now was no time for hesitation. And so he immediately pulled a switch.

There was a whirring and a sputtering, and a red light flashed on.

He pulled another switch, and a blue light came into being. Simultaneously, there arose a banging noise that made the intruder shrink back in alarm.

"Better go more carefully there," he cautioned himself, as he pushed a knob. A low continuous buzzing came from the machine, and a little tube like the mouth-piece of a telephone lowered itself to the level of his lips.

"Earth speaking! Earth speaking!" he called into the tube. "Answer me, Rumterox! Answer! I have need of your instructions!"

Knowing that it would take ten minutes for the response, even if the apparatus were working properly, he crouched uncomfortably on the floor, while cold shudders crept down his spine as he stared at the intricacy of dim, faintly rumbling machines.

It seemed to him that much more than ten minutes passed. It seemed that his efforts had failed; that surely he had pulled the wrong switches. He had just leaped up to try again, when a deep, sepulchral voice sounded through the megaphones:

"Rumterox speaking! Rumterox speaking! We have caught your message, O Earthling! We rejoice that you will confer

no more with Gunzabi and his forces of darkness! We rejoice that you have turned the Ninth Vibration switch, and tuned in instead on us—on Llevelyn and the Legions of Light! You will be rewarded, O Earthling!"

In stunned amazement, Olev could only conclude that he had turned the wrong switch, and, by so doing, had contacted not the evil powers evoked by Xaragon, but a group of superior beings. •

"Hear us, O Earthling!" the voice went on. "For long we have tried to reach you. It is now more than two years, as you count time, since you solved the secret of the infra-ether waves, and learned to use the pulsations of space to talk with Rumterox—which you call Venus. It is over a year since you taught us your speech, which was hard to pick up even by beings of our intelligence. But Gunzabi found a means of reaching you—Gunzabi, the master of all black arts. From that time until this day we, the Powers of Light, have had no chance!"

QUIVERING with excitement, Olev had drawn out his notebook and pencil.

The voice halted for a second. The lights flickered, and went out, but instantly shot on again. And the unknown continued, to the accompaniment of a louder buzzing than before:

"Gunzabi, in order to prove his power, has offered you the Formula of Damnation—the formula that once threatened to drive all life from Rumterox. Fortunately, however, we have an antidote—"

"Antidote! What is the antidote? For Heaven's sake, tell me!" cried Olev, forgetting for the instant that the speaker was millions of miles away.

There came a slight suspicious rattling from the direction of the north portal. A vague warning sense told of something hostile that moved through the darkness. At any other moment, Olev would have run for cover. But he could only listen in rapt attention as the voice continued:

"Day after day, O Earthling, we have been awaiting our chance to tell you the

antidote. Now we will reveal it at last. Listen carefully!"

The rattling from the north portal was unmistakable. Olev's every instinct was to take flight. But he was as a man glued down, while his pencil raced across the pad.

"Wherever the Fire Gas is spreading," went on the informant, "pour a solution of sodium chloride. This will absorb the gas, and combine with it to form a harmless neutral substance. The action is instantaneous, and will save your world!"

"What!" thought the astonished Olev. "Can mere common salt be the remedy?"

"Have faith in us—in Llevelyn and the Legions of Light, O Earth—"

All at once the voice was drowned out. The faint rattling had grown to a terrific pounding and clanging. With a thudding din, the north portal burst open, and a rush of uniformed men stormed in. Simultaneously, the entire place was bathed in a white blaze.

Springing around the onion-shaped glass bulb, Olev checked himself with a gasp of dismay. A score of men were crowding in from the south portal as well!

VII

FOREMOST among the intruders, in that dazed fraction of a second, Olev observed a well known figure with low, dark brow, bristling black mustache, and insolent eyes.

He could even see the faint triumphant smile on Xaragon's face as the dictator pointed to him and cried, "Grab him, men! By my sword! We will make the worm squirm before we stamp him underfoot!"

Although the odds against him seemed millions to one, Olev made a sharp dive, trying to plunge out of sight behind the great machines. At the same time, a shot rang out, and a bullet twanged against his right ear.

But instantly there arose the crash of Xaragon's voice, in anger and alarm, "Halt there! Not one shot must be fired in this temple! You do not know—you do not know the consequences!"

Crouching low along the floor between two rows of wired cabinets, Olev looked in vain for a place of refuge. From around a bend just in front of him, a uniformed giant had sprung with a roar, bearing down upon him like a football tackle. But Olev had drawn his automatic pistol, resolved to sell his life dearly.

Even as his finger pressed the trigger, he heard a second assailant springing at him from behind, and felt his arm clutched and jerked forward. The attacker had been too late to check the pistol's discharge, but had deflected the course of the bullet, which leapt upward, above the head of its intended victim, straight toward the tower of red glass.

There came a spattering, shattering sound as the bullet struck above the onion-shaped bulb; then a great crash as the entire superstructure of glass collapsed in a rain of fragments. And almost instantly, before anyone could realize just what was happening, a greater commotion arose above the yells of the men and the clatter of the rent glass.

A puff of smoke burst forth, and an eruption of green flame; accompanied by a detonation like that of a cannonade, as the remains of the red-glass tower were lifted, it seemed, by some Titanic hand and shot upward in a thundering explosion.

COMING to himself, Olev found that he lay in the midst of a bloody shambles. The two cabinets, between which he had been crouching, had protected him from the worst of the blow; but his clothes were torn, and his face and arms were bleeding where fragments of the glass had lacerated him. From all sides, through the darkness, he could hear the groans and moans of Xaragon and his men in a tormented chorus. Then, after a minute, some rescuers bearing torches burst in, and he could see the victims lying sprawled all about him, like the casualties of a battle.

No one observed him as he began crawling off, worming his way through the wreckage to the north portal. No one noticed as he slipped through the gate,

and slunk away along the dim path toward the woods. Nor did anyone ponder the identity of the filthy old beggar who, after bathing his wounds in a stream and rummaging among refuse heaps for discarded clothing, went hobbling along the road the following morning, soliciting alms.

When evening had fallen again, an airplane circled with muffled motors over a small bare plateau high above Karduspo, as it had done every night recently. A figure below signaled with flashes of a small searchlight; it shot down to a landing; and the figure entered, and heaved a sigh of thanksgiving as the machine began wheeling skyward.

VIII

AN AIR of solemnity hung over the State Room as President Anthony J. Rexwell, Jr., paced back and forth among his advisers. A peaceful smile had appeared on his face, which showed the marks of long strain. "Yes, gentlemen," he reminisced, "the antidote came barely in time. You know, as well as I do, that in another few days Fire Gas would have wiped out every population center in the country. But we learned to check it—"

"Thank Remingway, Mr. President!" put in Clyde Barrow, Under-Secretary of Defense. "If it hadn't been for him—"

Barrow paused, and pointed to the head of the Intelligence Bureau, who, looking somewhat pale and with bandaged hands and face, sat modestly in the rear.

"I do thank Remingway," resumed the President. "Don't we all thank him for turning the tables on Xaragon? I assure you, that dictator got the surprise of his life when he found we could use Fire Gas against him, while he didn't know the antidote!"

"Well, let's not speak unkindly of the dead," said Remingway, rising. "The poor devil got his when he had to sue for peace on our terms, then was forced to abdicate, and finally died in misery from the after-effects of the explosion. Still, I've often thought, Xaragon had the most marvelous invention in history, if only he'd used it properly—"

"Come, come," interrupted Rexwell, "we're getting off the point. What I've summoned you for is this. My term of office expires next year, and, as you know, I've decided not to run again. Just now there's no more popular man in America than Hal Remingway, the Savior of his Country. And no one more capable, either! And so, Mr. Remingway—Olev—" The speaker paused, then finished with a benignant smile. "I propose to use all my political weight to secure you the nomination for President."

Remingway's mouth gaped wide with astonishment, and he raised one hand protestingly. But he could not check the chorus that dinned about him in admiration and prophecy, "Remingway for President! The Savior of the Country for President! Hurrah, hurrah for Hal Remingway, next President of the United States!"

