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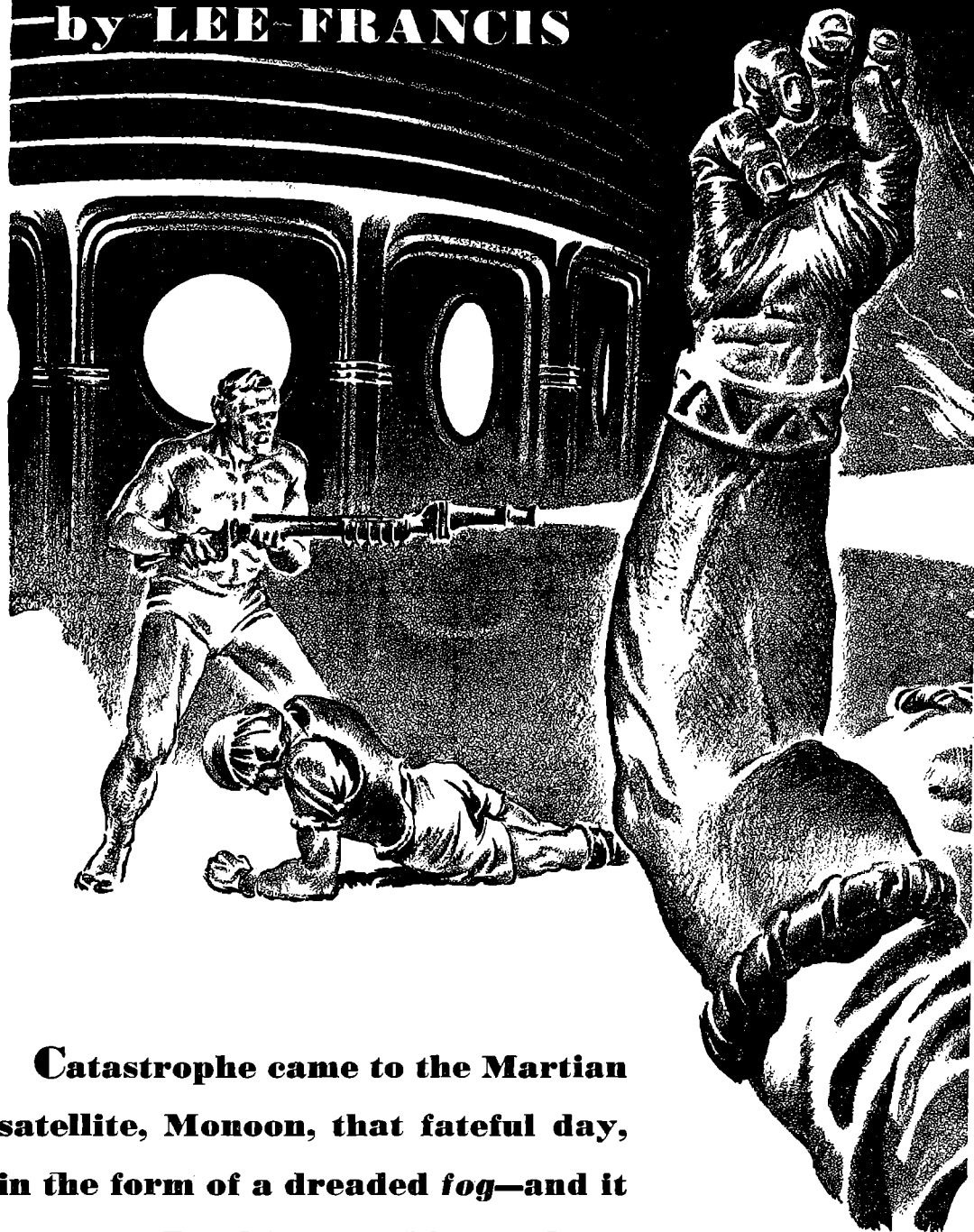


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FLIGHT INTO FOG

—by LEE FRANCIS



Catastrophe came to the Martian satellite, Monoon, that fateful day, in the form of a dreaded *fog*—and it was up to Bradd to save his people . . .



The gun blasted a stream of fire and death, and cries of pain filled the air . . .

ON THE satellite Monoon, which hugged greedily to the Master Planet, Mars, catastrophe struck suddenly. No one could tell how it happened or from whence it came. The new enemy, powerful, murderous, was fog.

Fog drifted down in vast, billowing clouds, covering the lowlands where the shepherds tended their *sheed*. Fog spread slowly, mushrooming across the valleys and into the villages on the hill-tops. The people were at first puzzled, then dismayed. They didn't understand this strange blanket of moisture which hid their sunlit pastures. The fog crept into crude shacks, killing the heat of their stoves. Cold with panic, they huddled together. The old ones felt fog in their bones, and died. The *Youngers*, prayed to Veesa, God of Light.

Among them were a few who dared plan ahead. People who read occasionally and knew that there were other places to which they might flee. They gathered in the darkness of the moist night and planned to leave the desolate, death-touched valleys.

Foremost among them was Bradd, son of Bradd the Elder, wise man of the valleys. Tall, sturdily built, with a determined look on his plain well tanned face, he addressed those he planned to lead to safety.

"It is the Lords who do this to us," he told them. Old men listened with glistening eyes. Young men were there, and women and children, listening in the flickering light beneath the *sheed* stable. The fog paused outside the earth cave, held at bay by the fires. It hung there, waiting, until they must go out again and feel the wet fingers of death against their cheeks.

"The Lords live in the highlands," Bradd said. His face was dark in the uncertain light. He seemed taller, for

the shadow of him on the wall was huge. "The Lords demand our flocks. We have refused to deliver them. This wet stuff—this stuff that blinds us, has been sent by them for punishment. What shall we do?"

Old people shook their heads. The *Youngers* were puzzled. Some of them thought they knew the point that Bradd was trying to get across. Their eyes sparkled. Their fists clenched.

"We shall march to the highlands," Bradd shouted. "We will take up our weapons against the Lords, and punish them for what they are doing to us."

It was a pitiful meeting, that gathering under the *sheed* stable. Bradd's learning was little, and therefore a dangerous thing. He knew nothing of the Lords, except for the fat agent who rode through the valleys each year, collecting bounty. He knew nothing of the power of the Lords.

Across the lowlands of Monoon, to the shepherds and the hunters and trappers, went the word. Bradd had declared war, and they came to him swiftly, for he was powerful and well liked. His word was accepted at its face value.

The hunters left their fog bound forests and came with cross-bows and spears. The herdsman came, driving their *sheed* into the community stables, gathering for the march.

The day came.

GREER the Herdsman, henchman of Bradd the Younger, stood beside the village well. He strained his eyes in the dimness of the white screen, to see even a tenth of the men who had gathered. Greer's heavy red beard was shining with moisture. His heavy, even teeth were clenched together. He brought his hunting club down forcefully against the rock wall of the well.

"How many have come?"

This was Greer's task, for he had

been appointed second in command, under Bradd.

Voices rose until everyone in the town it seemed, and some beyond the town, were shouting to each other. Then came the answering voice.

"Enough! Nine legions or more. Ten perhaps. Enough to drive the Lords from their carriages."

Bradd the Younger climbed the stone wall, and with feet braced wide apart, shouted out into the murk.

"Good! We will go at once. Enough women will go to herd the *sheed*. When we leave the valleys, we will plan our battle. Stout hearts are needed. No one will turn back. Our lands are lost. *We will take new lands.*"

Greer was at Bradd's side. With a mighty cry, he summoned them to follow him. He brandished his war club, feeling in it an extra strength. A strength that would lead them to victory.

"We will tear riches from the hands of the fat Lords," he cried. "We will be flooded with good things, and then it will be the Lords who suffer."

A little awed, still frightened of the fog, they marched from their homes. Pitifully prepared, they went to meet they knew not what.

Laralee, daughter of Yuan the Mighty, came in quickly from the fog drenched garden. She tossed aside the great-coat and wrapped her slim body in the silken colors of the house. The robe was a sheen of rainbow hues, hugging tightly to her body. She wandered slowly through the house, to pause finally by the library door. She heard her father's voice.

"It is a terrible situation, Yuan was saying. "These poor people, several thousands of them, came from the lowlands. They blamed us for the fog. They came with spears and clubs to overcome and punish us. I cannot

blame them."

"But now that they are here? Surely they see that we are suffering as they are? Will they go back?"

Curiosity overcame Laralee. She slipped inside the library and waited quietly. Yuan was discussing an important situation, indeed, she thought. His companion was Lenna, the Thinker. Lenna's white beard made him appear to be a hundred years old. He was respected and sought after by those who needed council. She listened.

Yuan was shaking his head.

"They cannot go back. The fog is even worse there. They are already ill. They would all die if they were forced to return to their homes."

Lenna nodded.

"Then the problem must be solved at once," he agreed. "We will open the Temple of Veesa to them. They must be fed and given warm lodgings, at least until this accursed fog lifts."

Laralee shuddered.

Accursed fog.

Would it ever lift? Would it ever leave them? They planned to open the Temple of Veesa, Bringer of Light, and let these people go there with flocks and their filth. Veesa had not responded to their prayers. Veesa had been spurned, forgotten.

"Father," she called softly. "May I come in?"

Both the old men were startled by her voice. Lenna the Thinker arose and Yuan followed his example. They waited until she seated herself beside the fire.

"You are in time to hear important news," Lenna said gravely. "A horde of shepherds has come from the valleys. The fog has driven them from their homes. They came, thinking we were to blame. They sought to murder us for the deed."

Her father broke in hurriedly.

"When they saw that the fog was here also," he added, "they realized their mistake. They have asked our forgiveness and asked us for lodgings."

She smiled softly.

"And being two very fine men, you have decided to open the Temple of Veesa for them."

Both men looked guilty.

"They can do no harm," Yuan said quickly.

She shook her head.

"On the contrary, they will do good. I shall go there tomorrow and try to help them. Perhaps, if they understand the problem we face, they will be able to help us."

LENNA the Thinker chuckled. There was bitterness in the sound.

"I'm afraid, child," he said slowly, "that where great minds have failed, there is little material of value among the shepherds. They are not noted for their fine brains. Brawn, rather, is the one thing they are blessed with."

Laralee looked thoughtful.

"Even brawn has its place," she said, "if it is directed in the proper channels."

She arose, bowed respectfully to each of them and left the room. After she had gone, Yuan smiled at his old friend.

"This is harder for the very young," he said. "She hates the fog as we do, but it does things to her mind and soul that do not trouble you and I. We are almost old enough to welcome the wet blanket of death which closes quietly about us."

Lenna nodded.

"But she is like a flame, eager, vibrant and ready to experience life. It is a shame that life should be snatched away before it has had time to live."

They sat for a long time, watching the wisps of white that snatched at the windows, rusting away the dura-steel

latch, sucking at the metallic fasteners that held the dura-glass in place.

"It will eat its way through everything, as it eats at men's souls," Lenna said softly.

"It will if we cannot stop it," Yuan agreed. He arose and stood stiff, his fists clenched, mouth shaped into hard, white lines. "We *must* stop it."

"First find the cause," Lenna recited. "The remedy will then be forthcoming."

Laralee drew her cape closely about her. The huge doors, now open before her, always brought panic into her heart. Here was the Temple of Veesa. Every fortnight, during the days of sun, she had come here to worship at the fire-shrine. She had tossed her bit of oil-soaked reed on the altar and watched it add one more flicker to the roaring flame.

She had kneeled before the altar and repeated quietly, ever since her lips could form the words:

"Veesa, Bringer of Light, continue to smile on us and we will nurse your flame with our souls."

All that was gone now. Today the fire was out, and the altar was but a square smoke-blackened rock, hated and spat upon by Veesa's worshippers. The fog had come and Veesa had been called upon. Veesa had failed them.

THE Temple had not changed greatly. The stone seats were still here, but the people who occupied those seats were poor shepherds and hunters. She saw fires burning on the floor of the Temple, and smelled the rich odor of cooking flesh. She heard the sound of many voices, arguing and fighting. Here was the throng of ill-clothed shepherds her father had spoken about. Eyes turned upon her and she felt frightened and hot as they stared. She was glad she had chosen to wear the plain robe

of wool. Glad because here were people clad only in the rough skins of *sheed* and wild animals.

The men were dark, tanned and muscular.

Laralee went down the long stairway toward them. She knew that guards were hidden on the balconies above, and was glad that they were there. Their long-range electro-pistols were ready, just in case.

She had planned to speak to these people. To help them. How?

Now that she was here, only a few troubled themselves to look at her a second time. They went back to their food, tearing flesh with their teeth, stuffing red hunks of meat into their mouths. Suddenly she was sick. Disgusted with this crew of—of animals.

A man was moving toward her. His hair was long and clean. He was very young. There was something in his dark, flashing eyes that disturbed her. She tried to evade his stare. She stood still, waiting. She had to admire the strong, muscular body. Somehow Laralee pitied him, for he looked more like Lord than shepherd, save for the poor skins that hung about his waist.

He hesitated barely three feet from her, smiled, and said:

"I am Bradd the Younger."

His voice was young and friendly.

She had to smile. A nice introduction, she thought, without a word wasted.

"I am Laralee."

Bradd smiled.

"That is a nice name," he said. "What are they going to do to help us?"

The question made her suddenly angry. Had not the Lords given these people food—warm lodgings?

"Surely you have received enough help. What more . . . ?"

He shrugged.

"We have always supported the Lords," he said simply. "Without us, there would be no meat, no clothing. Monoon has lived by our labor. Now we cannot labor, and we deserve part of the reward already in the hands of the Lords."

She hadn't expected to meet keen-eyed young men like this—this Bradd. She had been told that the shepherds were dull, zombie-like people who did not trouble themselves to think. She admired him, yet she feared him, for he was the type who made trouble.

"I think," she said stiffly, "that you are ungrateful. You arrived in the worst possible condition. You have been fed and clothed. You will have a home here as long as you need it."

"We want more," he answered calmly. "We want an explanation for the fog that has snuffed life from our valleys. We blamed the Lords for its coming. Now we find that they are not to blame, and we seek the true cause. We deserve a place among the Lords, and want our people to sit in their council."

Laralee's eyes flashed. Bradd saw deep violet eyes, full of sudden fire.

"You demand a great deal."

His eyes never wavered from hers. Suddenly there was a broad smile on his face, and he looked very brave and handsome.

"We *expect* much," he said, "for we are free people. A crisis must be met. We will help meet it. In turn, we demand equality."

She had listened too long. Laralee whirled and walked away from him without a word. She went upward toward the massive doors, without looking back. She fancied she could hear them mocking her. Let them rot in the Temple.

Laralee didn't care. That young man dreamed of power. She would see that his dreams never came true.

At the doors, she paused and looked back. She hated herself for doing it, but the urge was too great.

Bradd was standing where she had left him. His arm was upraised in a salute to her and the smile was broad on his face. Suddenly an intense desire came over her to return the parting gesture.

Disgusted at her weakness, she ran out into the fog without another look. She had the impression that she had been about to make a fool of herself.

MONTRO had been the greatest city on Monoon. Conditions were no better here. The fog spread until it covered Monoon. It seeped into the highest towers. It sank to the deepest cellar.

Gradually fog came to have a new meaning to the people. It was a monster which hung in ghostly sheets over everything. No man had seen the suns for months. No man could fly upward to safety, for space traffic, blinded and shrunken to rust, was forbidden.

Montro became a city of shivering souls. The Council of Thinkers, led by Lenna, called meeting after meeting to no avail. No one could suggest a means of controlling such an enemy.

Men went mad, for the destiny of Monoon was in space traffic, and no one could communicate with the Master Planet, Mars. Monoon was doomed. Days, weeks, and finally, the tenth moon came and passed. At times the twin suns made odd rainbows through the gloom. It was then that hearts beat fast and hopes were high. Always the rainbows went away and the fog closed down tighter than ever. The fog would not give up its prey.

Fog had long since rusted the delicate wires of the communication systems. It made a thick, ugly scum of rust over all metals. It grounded all

space fleets, for moisture had been unknown on Monoon, and men were not ready for it.

On the tenth day of the celebration of the God, Veesa, new hope came in the fact that Strawn, Prince of Montro, promised to speak to his people. Strawn was well loved and very powerful. A few kind words from the great Prince, and the people could go on a little longer, ignoring the grip that the fog had on their bodies.

Those who listened to the few rado-screens still in existence, were doomed to disappointment. Prince Strawn did not speak. He should have appeared at ten to sun, or ten minutes before the second sun hung directly above the city.

The program was interrupted from time to time while last minute preparations were being made. Then, when Strawn was to speak, the announcer was forced to speak in his place.

"We are forced to announce that his Majesty's speech will be delayed. You will hear him later in the day . . ."

Men drew their clothing tightly about them and spoke in whispers on street corners. Some whispered that the Prince had failed them. Others were more loyal.

"Never fear," they said. "He will speak."

Then, over the same rado-screens, came the voice. The voice that some said they recognized. Others were not so anxious to admit their thoughts.

The voice "jammed" all broadcasts. It came from no-where. It said:

"Why doesn't Prince Strawn speak? Why doesn't Prince Strawn speak?"

Startled men stared at each other, asking silent questions. From lip to lip went the word. Who had asked that question?

Some thought they knew. It sounded

like . . .

No—it could not be . . .
Yet?

“WE CANNOT understand who jammed the broadcast,” radio-screen officials said. “Obviously it was not the Prince’s voice, for he is at the palace. He will appear later.”

There were those who thought the strange voice on the radio-screen *did* belong to the Prince. What matter of trickery was this?

Nerves were on edge. Each time the voice came, and it came often in the next few hours, people listened intently. At last they gathered before the palace.

The gates were locked. They could not see beyond them, through the curtain of white mist. Alarmed, they at last broke through the gates and swarmed into the palace itself. The Prince was not there. His entire staff was missing. Not even a kitchen maid remained to explain the mystery.

At night, when the fog was untinted by the suns, people gathered in frightened groups and gibbered like strange, bewildered animals. Intelligent men broke down and cried to the ancient Gods for help. Guns were fired in the squares, to dispel the evil fog. In a few hours, a super-modern city had changed into a bewildered hodge-podge zoo of human beasts.

Yet, throughout the entire night that followed, the voice kept coming to them.

“*Why doesn’t Prince Strawn speak?*”

At last, driven mad by the strain of waiting, a man arose in the Temple of Veesa and cried aloud:

“*Why doesn’t he speak? Listen and I will tell you. He does speak, and he is driving us insane. He has betrayed us and is in league with the Godless power that ruins us. He has betrayed Monoon and is seeking now to destroy*

his people.”

When it was said, others agreed. Others realized that the man had spoken the words they feared to say aloud.

Monoon became a huge, dying beast, cornered by fear, awaiting the death blow. Monoon, cut off from the satellite system, forgotten by the Master Planet—Mars, left to die.

Bradd the Younger was disgusted. He was not witless, as were so many of his henchmen. He worried about the girl, Laralee. He knew now that she was the daughter of Yuan, a very powerful man in Montro. He knew also that only her pride had kept her from coming to him again.

He had been forced to stand by and watch a city go mad. Bradd was not ignorant. He thought clearly and sensibly. He allowed no superstition to cloud his mind. During his life, he had learned much by observation.

He sat alone now, watching his people. The Temple of Veesa was filled with the stench of cooking flesh and filthy bodies. His people had given up, even as the Lords had given up. They refused to fight. There was nothing—no one—to fight.

Bradd tried to plan. It was obvious that few were left who even tried to think.

First, he thought, he knew little of Prince Strawn.

It was quite obvious that if Strawn were so well loved by his people, he must be a man of decent character. Second—if he had *planned* to flee, there was no point in his taking along his entire household staff.

No space ship—at least of the Monoon fleet, had left the satellite for months. The guards had told him that. Their instruments were rusted beyond repair. Only a few were in condition

to fly, and they were accounted for and locked where the fog could not reach them.

If Strawn had left Monoon, *an outsider had come for him.*

An outsider, equipped to fly through the fog and having knowledge of the prevailing conditions.

Then—were there enemy forces? Were human minds controlling the fog? Was the fog a curse, not of the Gods, but sent here by a group of people who wished to destroy Monoon?

The people of the western slopes of Mars could see Monoon. Why hadn't they sent assistance?

Bradd swore softly. There, he suspected, was his answer. But other men—men like Yuan and Lenna, had probably already drawn the same conclusion, and been unable to do anything about it.

He looked down at his poorly clad body.

"Skins," he said. "Wild man—untrained. You have a poor brain, Bradd. A brain untrained. A body that is strong, but useless you know, for you can't see what you are fighting."

LARALEE sat tensely in the tiny room, her hair combed out long and shining against her shoulders. At the first tiny sound, her hands had become motionless. The hair-brush was clenched between bloodless fingers. She drew her robe over bare shoulders. Her face in the mirror was very pale.

Could it have been water, dripping against the stone wall outside her window?

She thought not. The footstep, for she was sure she had heard them, had been clearly audible, as though they came from her bedroom.

She couldn't sit here forever, waiting. She stood up and stepped silently over the threshold. Standing near the win-

dow, erect and un-smiling, was Bradd the Younger. All the fear drained out of her. She could not be alarmed at his pretense; she could not pretend fear, even to herself.

"You?" She put mock anger in her voice.

"I'm sorry I had to come like this," he said "I need your help."

His words made her heart swell with pride. Here was a man who thought her capable of being something beside beautiful. Someone who depended on her.

"How did you get here? The guards are outside."

A tiny smile grew around his lips.

"We evaded the guards," he said simply. "It was easy—in the fog. I saw you pass this window some time ago. I climbed the wall."

He was so cool and capable that he frightened her. He had said he climbed the wall. Forty feet up, with only rough, wet stones to cling to.

"Wait," she said, and walked across the room. She slipped the bolt in the door. In her heart, she could find only admiration and trust for the man. Strength and goodness seemed a part of Bradd the Younger.

"Now," she came quickly back to him. "Why have you come here?"

"I need your help." He had said that before, and it puzzled her. "I must have proper clothing. I must have a uniform of the Monoon army.

She frowned.

"Before I help you, I must know what wild scheme you plan. After I hear your story, there isn't the remotest chance of me getting a uniform for you. It would be treason, especially after the wild thoughts you expressed to me the last time we met."

He sobered.

"I have no plan to harm Monoon," he said. "I seek to save Monoon."

She tossed her head.

"How do I know I can trust you?"

He grasped her elbows, holding her at arm's length.

"There is no time for doubt," His voice was grim. "Monoon is going through a death struggle. In a few weeks it will die. I believe I have thought out the problem as an intelligent man should. But I am not schooled in details, and I need a guide—an assistant. Will you help me save Monoon?"

She made no attempt to escape him. Her eyes were attracted to his as though she were a bird in the grip of a cobra. Yet, there was nothing in him that she feared. She could see only honest determination.

"If I do not trust you? If I call the guards?"

He shrugged.

"Greer and I have fought side by side before. We can fight again."

Her eyes widened.

"Greer?"

A huge man slipped from behind the drapes near the window. His chest, bare to the waist, was a forest of curly red hair. His arms and legs were knotted with muscles, and he carried a huge, spiked war club. Only the torch of red hair on his head, gave away the clown in Greer. Otherwise, his face was sober and brooding. He had gone again, as suddenly as he had come. Only the gently waving curtain gave away his presence in the room.

"Sit down," Laralee said quietly. "I must know your plan."

Bradd sank slowly into the chair. She stood stiffly before him, tense, waiting.

HE STARTED to tell her his innermost thoughts. How, as a boy, he had longed to make Monoon a better place in which to live. How he wanted to see all men share alike. As he talked,

his expression became that of an eager school boy. She could see him when he was younger, groping eagerly for knowledge. Gradually he had made whole cloth from the facts his mind sought out.

"I cannot explain why I feel as I do," he said. "I'm sure that Prince Strawn would not desert his people. I want to find the source of this trouble, and I think that I can do it. I need you, for you are clever, and can fill in the places where my knowledge does not bridge the gap. In the name of those who have died, and will die, you cannot refuse to help me."

He had been talking for a long time. As he talked, Laralee had gone down on her knees at his feet, her eyes lifted to his. Her lips were parted slightly, wonderingly. Greer came slowly from behind the drapes and stared at Bradd. His club hung limply in his hand.

Laralee rose to her feet.

"Wait," she said. "My father has a uniform which he has been unable to wear for many years. I wish to speak to him."

Bradd started forward.

"You will not betray us?"

She put her small hand in his.

"You are safe as long as you trust me," she said simply. "You are young, but I think you will some day be a great man."

Before he could say more, she was gone, locking the door behind her. Bradd sat down, staring at the carpet. His mind was so full that his head ached.

"She is a good woman," Bradd said.

"Very good," Greer answered. "You have chosen well."

Bradd nodded.

"We are fortunate, you and I, to have the help of such a person."

Yuan the Mighty stood at attention, his arm raised in salute. Then, regard-

ing Laralee with reproach, he let his arm drop to his side and chuckled.

"The stranger makes a handsome officer," he said. "For a moment he fooled me, even though I should have recognized my own uniform."

THE uniform *did* fit the shepherd well. It served as proper adornment to the broad shoulders, sinewy waist and long, muscled legs. The red cap, covered with gold braid, looked very business like atop his well shaped head. He stood straight, his face solemn, for to him this was no masquerade. This day could mark the beginning of his career—or—the end of it.

"You and your daughter have been kind," he said. "Greer, and I, Bradd the Younger, have put ourselves in your hands. She told us you wished to speak to us both. We know that your power is great and we hope you fully understand our sincerity."

"Sit down," Yuan said, and motioned to half dozen deep, comfortable chairs that surrounded his desk. He seated himself, never taking his eyes from the tall youth.

Laralee moved behind her father, placing her hands lovingly on his shoulders.

"Laralee told me that you suspected the fog has been manufactured by some enemy group, to destroy us."

Bradd nodded.

"I come from a simple people," he said. "I am not clever. I have, however, questioned the fog from the first. Monoon is a dry place. Never has the fog come before. Coupled with the fact that we receive no assistance or word from the outside, this indicates that someone, somewhere knows of our plight and does not want to help us."

Yuan nodded.

"We have thought of that," he said. "Go on."

Bradd colored slightly.

"I know that Monoon is cut off from the planetary system. Monoon is important only to the dwellers on the western slope of Mars. It is visible only from that point. Therefore, I believe that the source of our trouble lies there."

Greer cleared his throat and looked amazed.

Yuan said: "You seem to possess certain knowledge."

"My father, Bradd the Elder, was once banished from the Court of Lords," he said. "I have not always been a shepherd. Once I dwelt in halls like these."

Before they could interrupt, he continued hurriedly.

"Because Monoon is off the trade routes, only the dwellers of the western slopes would know of our plight. Those traders have been shrewd and lawless. It would be to their advantage to let us die. Then Monoon and its riches would be theirs."

Yuan nodded.

"Suppose I have guessed that for some time. With our communication system lost and our fleet grounded, how can we contact the other colonies? We are out of sight-range. Others know very little about us."

Bradd shrugged.

"What can we lose? The fog *could* be natural. No one can prove that it isn't unless the source is discovered."

"What is your theory about the absence of the Prince?"

Bradd shrugged.

"I don't know. I would guess that the Prince and his entire staff were spirited away to frighten us still more. To break down our last bit of morale."

"And if we find Prince Strawn, we find the source of our trouble?"

Bradd nodded.

The room was silent. Greer was

studying Bradd with admiring eyes. Greer would follow the youth straight to hell, if Bradd could find a way. There was no explanation for Laralee's emotions. Her eyes were misty and far away. For the first time, she was deeply impressed by a man.

Yuan, also, was very thoughtful. Many of the Lords had spoken of these things, but none of them wished to follow through in an attempt to prove their theory.

"How," asked Yuan, "are we to fight back? The ships are rusted. We cannot fly through the astroid belt in this fog. We would wreck ourselves blindly in this ugly, white blanket of death."

"That's exactly what I want to do," Bradd said. "Not wreck my ship—but suggest a manner of going through the astroid belt safely. Surely one of your friends has a ship that is in flying condition. I have heard that some of them, locked safely below ground, have escaped the fog."

Yuan shook his head.

"Such a wild chase is out of the question," he said firmly. "You have no idea who or what you are going to have to face, even if you did escape death among the astroids."

Laralee cried out suddenly.

"Father—I have it. We can use the Gray-ghost."

"The Gray-ghost is a sport-ship," Yuan said. "It supports no guns. No doubt it is in fair condition, being locked in the secret hangar as it is."

He looked thoughtful, then shook his head.

"No," he said. "It would be blasted from the sky."

"What is this ship?" Bradd asked. There was a new hope in his eyes.

"The Gray-ghost of Monoon," Laralee said eagerly. "It's my own ship. It is small and fast."

"MY DAUGHTER'S ship," Yuan explained. "She wanted to fly before restrictions were lited on woman flyers. She had been forbidden to touch the controls. She drove me almost mad, teasing me night and day to fly. I bought the Gray-ghost and painted it an 'illusion' white, which fades and changes with the colors of the void. She has kept it hidden since the fog came, but when the skies of Monoon were clear, she flew almost every day."

"And in a period of ten moons," Laralee said, "Not one army plane overtook me. They never found out who flew the *ghost* ship."

Bradd looked at the girl with new respect.

"Could you teach me to fly the Gray-ghost?"

She shook her head.

"Not in the fog. I tried to fly once." She shuddered. "Though I was only a few miles from the surface, I almost killed myself getting down. It is a hopeless task."

Bradd's eyes still gleamed.

"If the fog were not there?"

Yuan frowned.

"You speak in riddles," he said.

Bradd was excited now.

"When the first fog settled in the lowlands, the shepherds fought it. They found a strange reed in the swamps. When it burned, it dispelled the fog for several yards around. Perhaps we can discover the chemicals contained in those reeds."

"You can get some of them?"

Bradd arose.

"Some were brought here as torches. There are still a few."

Yuan was fascinated by the boundless ambition of the man before him.

"Bring the reeds to me," he said. "We will try."

"Bring the reeds here, Greer," Bradd

said, and in a moment, Greer was gone. Yuan said thoughtfully.

"My people would find great hope in knowing that something is being done."

"No," Bradd said sternly. "The first rule in war is that we remain silent. Traitors may be listening. If we fail, there will be no heart break. A few of us are not important."

Laralee didn't agree. To her, this man had become the most important person on Monoon. She wondered why he was rushing into a task that all the armies of Monoon were powerless to perform.

"This is amazing," Yuan said. "I cannot believe . . ."

They looked at the array of test tubes on the long table.

Bradd smiled.

"Then we are on the right track. We *know* the chemical content of the reed."

Yuan held a small test tube in his hand. It was sealed.

"Before these reeds dried, they absorbed a bit of strange swamp gas. It is a common type, yet in condensed form, it becomes powerful."

He drew a flash-stick from his pocket, opened the tube and ignited the gas. A blob of strange, white light sprang out of the tube and drifted toward the ceiling. It made the room brilliant with light.

"Perfect," Laralee breathed. Her hand was on Bradd's arm. "We can obtain a large amount of it from the reeds."

Yuan was quite happy.

"That's the odd part of it," he admitted. "We already have a huge supply."

"I don't understand?"

"Listen," Yuan addressed them all. "We use a gas for cleaning out the

city sewers. Combine one tenth of this gas with the stock we now have, and we will obtain the same chemical content. I'll have men bring all these reeds they can obtain. The Council will release as many containers of the cleanser-gas as I wish. We'll be ready in a fortnight."

Greer was grinning delightedly.

"We will float up in a bubble of light," he said. "That alone will frighten Monoon's enemies. We have practically won our battle."

Yuan's face was sober once more.

"I'm afraid, Greer," he said, "that light has not won our battle. However, it has helped."

Bradd's lips tightened into straight lines.

"The remainder of the battle depends on Greer and me," he said.

THE people of Monoon heard strange news. They flocked to the streets and balconies, watching the strange white light in the sky. Yuan, in his own room, watched the light with a quiet prayer on his lips. He prayed not to Veesa, but to a newer, more powerful God that even he did not understand.

The city was bathed in the light. The fog had gone. Then, as the light lifted out of sight into the void, the fog came down again.

Some were sure that they saw a tiny gray speck in the midst of the light ball. Now the fog was down again over the satellite, and Monoon grieved, for its people had hopes that a miracle had happened, and they were free.

Had they known that the speck in the center of the light was a ship carrying a foolhardy young man aloft to an unknown destination, they would have cursed and said that this was another of Prince Strawn's tricks to frighten them. Instead, believing the

light to be a symbol, they flocked to the Temple of Veesa and rebuilt the fire on the altar. There, mixed with the poorly garbed shepherds, they kneeled and prayed with a hope that had died, and been rekindled.

When the light was gone, Yuan rose and spoke aloud to the sky."

"Bring them back safely," he said. "They are our only hope."

Yuan still did not know to whom he spoke. There seemed to be a new and greater power lurking above him, listening to his words. He spoke to a force that he did not—could not—understand.

Bradd watched the control board in the tiny room aboard the Gray-ghost. He had learned to fly only by learning the control board and how it worked. This was the first time he had left the surface of the satellite.

The Gray-ghost was a thousand miles from Monoon now, yet the ball of light persisted, enveloping the ship in its center.

"I don't understand it," Bradd said, and scanned the viso-screens again. "When we were launched, the gas containers were lighted. I saw the light rise and keep the ship in its center."

Greer grinned. He was enjoying the trip.

"And a good job," he said. "Laralee was a good teacher. We escaped the reefs and the astroid belt. Now, it seems we captured that ball of light."

Bradd nodded. It was good to be in the light of the sun again. Below them, under that ring of white fog, lay Monoon. Still, even here where it was hardly visible, the light of the gas persisted, looked like pale silver around the Gray-ghost.

They waited patiently, knowing that little time would pass before they reached their goal. Bradd was well

schooled in handling the Gray-ghost. He could have been flying for years, his knowledge of the simple instrument panel seemed so complete. Greer, staying near the forward viso-screens, was suddenly excited.

"A big planet," he cried out. "It's—very, very big."

Bradd hurried to his side.

"Mars," he said.

"It's a foolish thing we're doing," Greer offered. "A dangerous thing."

Bradd did not speak. He studied the open void ahead. He picked out mountain ranges, rising jaggedly from the western slope. Bradd was concerned in finding a place to land safely.

Below the cabin, a steady *knock—knock* sounded. It could be nothing serious, but gradually it worried Bradd. Steady, maddening. *Knock - knock - knock*.

Bradd was sure of his course now. He locked the controls.

"Something loose in the hold," he said. "Wait—I'm going down."

Greer went to the screen. Bradd opened the hatch and let himself down slowly into the dark hold beneath. It was cool and black down here. The hold was full of tanks. They held more of the light-gas. There were fire-guns strapped to the floor. A small arsenal of weapons was secured to the walls.

He moved cautiously. Something sprang at him from the darkness. Tensely, he threw his body forward, fingers closing like steel around the thing that attacked.

"Bradd—Bradd, you're choking me."

It was a breathless, feminine voice.

"Laralee?"

She was in his arms then, laughing, holding him tightly.

"Father wouldn't let me come. You didn't ask me. There was no other way, Bradd. I hated to be stowaway on my own ship."

He cursed Yuan silently for letting his daughter escape from Monoon. Still, there was comfort in having her near him. Laralee could handle the ship better than he. She might be needed.

"Bradd?" She drew away from him. "Bradd, you're angry."

His answer was abrupt. He grasped her body and drew her to him roughly. His lips met hers and he pressed her face against his—savagely.

He heard her gasp, and felt her melt against him, responding to his caress.

She put her hand across her mouth when he was done, and he was glad that she couldn't see his face in the blinding darkness of the hold.

"We'd better go up to the control room," he said. He felt unsteady and not at all sure of himself.

"I DON'T understand," Laralee said in a mystified voice. "We are very fortunate. See, the light illuminates the entire canyon."

It was true. Bradd had chosen a deep Martian canyon as a landing place. They had plummeted down to the very bottom and the Gray-ghost rested on the rocky terrain.

The light did not reach here from above, and only the strange gas ball made the ugly, rocky hole visible to them. They had left the Gray-ghost and were exploring the place. Straight, forbidding cliffs rose upward a mile to the surface of the planet.

"I've tried to understand," Bradd said. "The gas must have a clinging quality that we failed to detect when we first used it. It can do no harm. It may help, as it has helped us in this dark hole."

Greer had left them, and walked away toward a cleft in the rocks. Suddenly Laralee cried out in amazement.

"Bradd—look at Greer."

Greer was almost out of sight, far

into the cavern in the rocks. Yet, around his body like a shield, clung the bright light.

"The gas?" Bradd gasped. "Does it cling to everything it touches?"

They proved this to themselves.

"It may mean bad news," Bradd said. "We could be easily seen. We could not go about without being seen after dark."

He paused, then smiled.

"On the other hand," he said, "it may prove a blessing."

Laralee was puzzled.

"I don't understand?"

The smile grew more mysterious on Bradd's face.

"Wait a while," he urged. "You will find out."

Bradd the Younger had been studying the charts of Mars for a long time. Outside the Gray-ghost, night had fallen and they were in a lost, blind world. At last he rose. Greer had been waiting patiently. The giant's eyes were on Laralee. Above all else, Bradd had told him, he must protect the girl.

"I have an idea," Bradd said quietly. "I am leaving you both here for a while. I'll know in a short time if the plan will work."

Laralee eyed him sternly.

"I am going with you. You may need our help."

Bradd shook his head. There was a glint of humor in his eyes, but determination made his mouth hard.

"I go alone," he said. "I am able to take care of myself."

He moved to the hatch, opened it and went out into the night. Laralee started to follow. Greer blocked her way, sitting down on the floor before the hatch.

"He has commanded," Greer said. "We will stay."

Laralee stamped her small foot angrily.

"You cannot order me about," she protested.

Greer ignored her.

"You—you are foolhardy and stubborn to let him go without us."

Greer shrugged his shoulders.

"You would make a poor wife for a shepherd," he said. "You are accustomed to having your own way."

Laralee's face turned crimson.

"You—you . . ."

Greer turned away from her and stared through the glass at Bradd's figure as it grew to a small speck of light far down the canyon. Then Greer turned back to see Laralee, her face cushioned in her hands, crying as though her heart would break.

"Don't cry, woman," he said with rough tenderness. "Bradd the Younger will not break his neck. Men his age value their lives too highly to toss them away."

Nevertheless, Greer was greatly concerned over Bradd's safety. Yet he could not leave the girl. Greer shook his head slowly from side to side. He felt miserable. After a time, Laralee stopped crying and the cabin grew silent. Neither of them dared look at the other.

BRADD the younger hesitated on the crest of the hill, staring down into the Valley of Spara. He knew his way well, for he had studied the pic-o-maps of Mars. He recognized the dark outline of the blast furnaces, and the low outline of the town beyond. Here the miners lived, and died, digging and blasting wealth from the hills to turn over to the Lords. Here was the lowest form of slavery on Mars, where men and women were animals, kept in poverty and ignorance.

Spara was a violent place. It was a

place where minds were stupid and death meant nothing. Perhaps, if he could pursue his plan, he might impress these slaves. It was upon their superstition that Bradd placed his faith.

He climbed slowly down into the valley, found a foot-path and followed it. He had gone hardly a hundred yards when he heard a sharp cry of fear ahead of him. Startled himself, he hesitated, then went on again. A dim figure ran ahead of him down toward the village.

Bradd realized that to these savages, he must be an awesome sight. The Monoon army uniform was alive with brilliant light. The light flowed around him, making his way easy in spite of the rough terrain.

Grimly, he loosened his fire pistol and prepared to fight if it became necessary. The circle of light would either win for him what he wished, or foretell his doom. Buildings loomed up before him and he walked down a rough street. The buildings were made of cemented slag, black and ugly as the furnaces and the hill-side. He reached the square, a large, bare spot in the center of the town. Thus far, not a soul had molested him. It was as though he had walked into a deserted crypt.

Taking a deep breath, he shouted:

"People of Spara, come forth and meet your God of Light."

He knew that Veesa was worshipped here as he was on Monoon. Would the light about his body be sufficiently impressive? Could he become a God to these poor people?

He waited several minutes. At first he thought that they would come in force to attack him. Then a small child, clad only in *sheed* wool, tottered out of a house and across the square toward him. Bradd waited. Evidently they trusted him, for he made no move-

ment to go near the child. Men and women came from among the houses. He waited until at least a hundred of them were near enough for him to speak.

"Listen to me," he shouted. His voice echoed back to him from the walls of the valley. "Veesa is not angry at you. He is angry at the Lords who rule you. Veesa rules the light, and no man shall tamper with Veesa's domain."

They were leaning forward intently studying him. Their eyes were wide with wonder.

"Your Lords have caused a fog to settle down and envelope your sister nation, the satellite of Monoon. Veesa is angry because of this, and he seeks the Lords."

He paused, almost holding his breath. Greer had been right. This was the craziest thing he had ever done. He was pursuing a will-o'-the-wisp. If the fog was natural, then he was mad to ever consider coming here alone. Yet, he was sure that someone, somewhere on Mars, was causing it to happen.

The crowd moved restlessly. Some of them slipped back into the shadows. Swiftly he spoke his plea for help.

"Unless those who betrayed Monoon are captured and punished, I, Veesa, will cause a like fog to envelope this valley. I will make the furnaces die, and the sun hide itself. I will bring death to everyone in Spara."

A groan of terror came from the lips of those near him. They were sincere in their interest now, wanting to help him, struggling to please him. Sickly smiles were visible.

"Enough," Bradd roared. "I will go now, but when night comes again, I will return. By then, some one of you must talk to Veesa. You have a day in which to learn the secret of the Lords. I will expect much information from

your lips. To the person who tells me most, there will be a great reward. If nothing is learned, then no one will escape my wrath."

He walked from the square and a wide path opened through the crowd. He went down the street and up the hill past the furnaces without once looking back. He was sure that he had a thousand eager slaves working for him now. He must hide in the hills. By night, some of them might have knowledge to offer that would help him greatly. He had to depend on that for the time being.

A grim smile touched Bradd's lips. He was high on the hill-side now, walking steadily upward. Suddenly out of nowhere, a boulder broke loose and lunged down toward him. Swiftly he dodged to one side, but his foot was caught beneath it and he fell, groaning with pain, and rolled over on his side.

The vague outline of a man ran down toward him. Before he could move, Bradd saw the fat, ugly face.

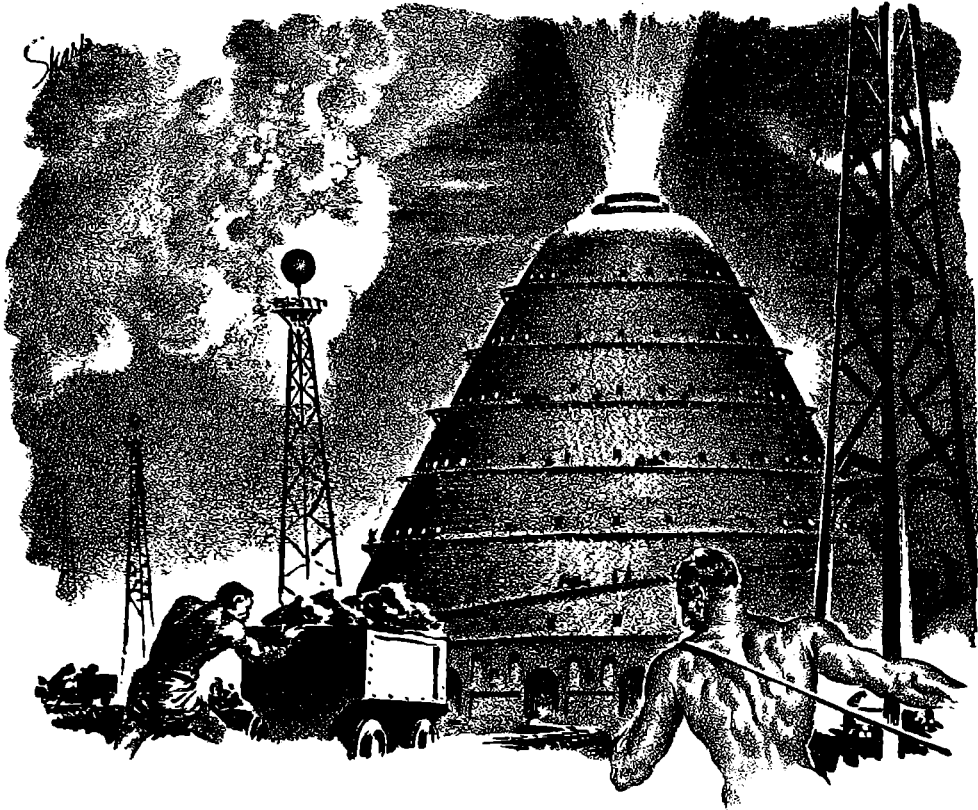
"So it's Veesa?" The voice had an ugly snarl to it. "Good Veesa, Bringer of Light, who is going to punish all the bad Lords in the valley."

Bradd fought his way to his knees, his eyes filmed with pain. He lunged out with both arms.

"Well, *Veesa*." Thick arms went around him and forced him down. "You're a funny looking God now. Get up and float away, if you can. Otherwise you'll answer for those bold words you spoke down there. Come along, now, up with you."

The arms gripped tighter, twisting his body around and pulling him upright. Silently Bradd struggled, cursing the ankle that made him want to cry out in pain.

HE SAW the pistol in the fat man's hand, and tried to dodge as the



Men were stripped to their waists in feverish work all over the area . . .

butt came crashing down against his skull. Bradd sank to the ground again with a moan of pain.

"Fight back, will you, bogus God of Light?"

The big man lifted Bradd's limp body to his shoulder. He struggled across the rocky field to a road. His carriage was hidden in the shadows of a great boulder. He dumped Bradd into a box-like container at the rear of the carriage, and shouted up to the coachman.

"Away with you, and don't breathe a word of it to your friends. Death will be the penalty."

Only silence came from the coachman's seat. The coach faded into the night, and the rear compartment was made bright by the light that still clung to Bradd's body. A light that was beginning to fade, as does a bright cloak

when it is worn too long.

Daylight drifted down into the canyon, touching the walls and making them a rusty brown. Laralee stirred from her sleep and lifted her head from her arms. Her face was very pale.

Greer sat cross-legged on the floor, near the hatch. His eyes were filmed with sleep as he looked up at the girl.

"Greer," she said, and her voice sounded strange and far away. "He should have come back hours ago."

Greer nodded. He arose and wandered to the porthole. He studied the grim, deserted floor of the canyon. Then he turned to Laralee.

"I think we will follow now," he said.

Laralee went into the tiny room adjoining the cabin, bathed her face and donned a small, white leather belt. She found a jet-pistol in the cabin and

placed it carefully in the holster. When she spoke to Greer again, her voice was much more steady.

"We will find him. He has courage. Almost too much courage."

On the crest of the hill above the Valley of Spara, Greer and Laralee hesitated.

Laralee was exhausted, but she knew that she must go on as long as they could follow the trail left by Bradd in the pumice-like dust of the hills.

Greer knew little of this place. He had depended on Bradd. Without his young warrior friend, the grizzled fighter was lost.

"This is Spara," Laralee said. "Bradd came here. Perhaps he is a prisoner in the town. If we go there, they may harm us and they may not. We can learn nothing here, for the rocks and the hills cannot speak to us. We must question the people."

Greer shook his head.

"You wait here," he urged. "I will go down alone. Bradd would not be pleased if I allowed you to approach danger."

The girl shook her head.

"We will go together. The light still clings to us. Last night I dreamed that Bradd had come back and that he believed the light would protect us."

She had been thinking during those gray morning hours before she slept. Thinking that Bradd had planned to use the light, for he had acted strangely when he talked about it. Perhaps he had tried to frighten the people with it?

She started down the hill, picking her way over slag piles and among the huge furnaces. A pall of smoke hung above the valley. The place was like the ugly, red mouth of Hell, spewing up fire and filth.

Greer followed close behind her, ready to kill at her command. They

entered the town, and as had been the case when Bradd visited this place, the streets were deserted. In the square, Laralee hesitated and stared around her. The houses and shacks looked even dirtier in the morning sun.

"It seems almost as though the place were deserted," she said.

Greer shook his head.

"They are hiding. They left their furnaces burning. They must be afraid of us."

His words were wise, so she waited. Waited with the knowledge that only Greer and her pistol stood between them and death.

THEN a man came from one of the larger shacks. He stood facing the square, arms at his sides, his sooted face a mack of terror.

"We will tell you all we know," he cried. "We will direct the Gods to the Valley of Lords. The secret lies there. We have heard it from the lips of the agents."

Greer lifted his war club, balancing it easily in his hand.

"Let me go after him," he growled. "I'll make him speak sense."

Laralee was struggling for a secret meaning to the strange message.

"No," she said. "Wait."

To the man who waited, she called: "You have spoken to the man of light?" Her heart was beating wildly, hopefully. The man dropped to his knees in the dust.

"We have spoken to Veesa," he shouted. "We did not know that Veesa was sending his Goddess to us. We expected him to come himself—tonight."

Laralee stiffened. So she was a Goddess. Goddess of Veesa and of Light. She must play her part carefully and well.

"Come closer," she called, and even Greer was stunned by the new confi-

dence in her voice. "You will not be harmed."

She saw others moving in about her and Greer. The man came within six yards of her and fell once more to his knees. His eyes were distended with fear.

"Veesa was kind and did not harm us," he said in a low voice. "We ask that the Goddess of Veesa leave us in peace. In return, we will offer what we know. It is little enough."

The square was ringed by poor slaves, all blackened by soot and thin with the lack of food.

"We will not harm you," Laralee said. "Veesa is busy with the western stars. He sent me in his place. Where is this Valley of the Lords? Where is the mystery of the fog and of the lost light?"

The man pointed east, beyond the rugged, treeless mountain. He shook his head sadly.

"We know little of the fog," he admitted. "The agents of the Lords come here. They steal our riches. They cause our illness and poverty. We hate the Lords. We hope you will destroy them."

He paused and looked around the square.

"We can only say that the agents sometimes talk to loudly of a strange machine they have hidden in the valley. A fog machine. It must be that which you seek. Last night Veesa followed the road toward the valley. We saw his light until it was lost in the hills."

There was much head-shaking and loud noises of approval came from the crowd.

Laralee's mind worked swiftly. Bradd was safe. He had gone along the road, seeking the Valley of Lords. Nevertheless, she had come this far, and Greer and she must follow Bradd. He might need them soon.

"We are puzzled," the man said suddenly, as though he had not dared speak of it before. "We ask one question. There are those of us who dared follow Veesa at a great distance. The children of this place saw Veesa riding in the carriage of an agent. Tell us why this is?"

A low growl of anger arose around them. Laralee wondered. Had Bradd accepted help from the agent?

The man's voice wasn't so humble now.

"Why did Veesa contaminate himself by riding with the agent of the Lords?"

She drew herself up proudly, playing a haughty part that she didn't feel inside her.

"Veesa moves in strange ways," she said quietly. "If he chose to ride in the carriage, he no doubt removed the occupant, this agent, swiftly and not gently. He has not explained this silly riddle to me. It tires me to talk like this. Open the way and we will leave. No harm will visit you.

"Perhaps Veesa will choose to shower some special reward upon you for your help."

They were satisfied, and parted before her as she walked. Greer shouldered his club, and Laralee, with as much grace as possible, left the square, walking at his side.

No one followed them, and in a short time they reached the dusty road. They followed it toward the range of mountains. Toward the Valley of the Lords, Laralee thought grimly, and toward Bradd, if they could only find him.

The Valley of Spara grew small behind them as they climbed the hot, red slopes of the foothills. Then Spara disappeared around a bend in the road and Laralee sank to the ground. Her legs refused to carry her farther. Her head throbbed with the heat of the

sun.

"We will rest," she said.

Geer grinned.

"In the valley," he said, "you were a Goddess. Here with me you are only an exhausted child."

He scooped her up in his great arms and continued onward, carrying her as though she weighed no more than a feather.

At first she protested, but after a time her head fell against his shoulder and she listened to the steady, rhythmic beating of his heart. She closed her eyes to shield the sun from her tired brain, and slept.

BRADD awakened. His head ached dully. He had slept so long that most of the pain in his ankle and foot had gone. His brain functioned clearly. He remembered the boulder that had crushed his foot. He tried to reach the aching foot, but he was bound firmly with ropes and could not reach it. Sunlight flashed in his face, through the slatted sides of the box.

Gradually he became aware of the sounds around him. First, the crack of the whip as it urged the horses forward. The grinding, protesting progress of wheels. He struggled to make himself more comfortable in the dusty interior of the trunk-like box in which he was prisoner.

Then the wheels hit a smooth surface. The coachman shouted something that came to Bradd as a muffled cry. The coach surged ahead and made a sharp turn. He struggled up to a sitting position and could see the green valley into which they had come. This was strange country to him. The rugged red hills were still visible in a distance. During the night they had left the mountains in favor of this valley.

Tall spires of translucent marble came into view. Houses, half hidden

among the evergreens along the road. He started to loosen his bonds with his fingers. His foot hurt worse. He wriggled his toes and was relieved to know that they weren't broken. He could walk.

The coach stopped abruptly. Bradd sank back, closing his eyes.

He heard footsteps descending from the coach and grinding against gravel. Then a gruff voice addressed him.

"Out with you, and no acting. You're awake all right."

He didn't move. A rough palm slapped his cheek hard. Groggily, angrily, he moved and opened his eyes.

"As I thought."

He stared into the eyes of the man who had attacked him last night. Bradd sat upright. They had stopped before a huge, ancient castle-like building of translucent pink marble. Tall spires of the stuff reached eagerly up to the sky. An empty moat surrounded the buildings.

He had an opportunity now to survey the agent who had brought him here. The man was dressed in elegant embroidered clothing, silk stockings and low boots. He wore a broad brimmed silk hat. The black, contorted face was pleased, indicating pleasure with a broken-toothed grin.

"So—Veesa has come to the home of Nara Fen," the agent snarled. "Nara Fen will be pleasantly surprised at receiving so great a visitor."

He drew a whistle from his pocket and blew a piercing blast upon it. The bridge over the moat dropped with a clang of metal against stone. A half-dozen blue-coated guards sprang across the bridge. They carried fire-lances as did the guards of Monoon.

The agent yanked Bradd from the box, still bound hand and foot, and threw him face down in the dirt. An intense fury was burning in Bradd's

heart. A fury that told him to be careful what he did and said. He would bide his time. He got to his knees awkwardly, shaking the dirt from his face. He felt sick and dizzy.

"So Veesa is tamed, is he?" The agent whirled upon the waiting guards. "Take this prisoner to your master. He is from Monoon. That is enough for you to know."

The dark faced men closed in about Bradd. One of them brought him to his feet, slashed his bonds and twisted his right arm behind his back savagely. Bradd winced and remained silent. The agent mounted the carriage once more and went slowly across the bridge ahead of the guards.

Bradd the younger came in this manner to the house of Nara Fen, First Lord of the western slope of Mars.

NARA FEN sat on an ebony throne, his leering face lowered so that he might study the dusty, silent youth laying on the rushes at his feet. Bradd stayed where the guards had thrown him. His head was filled with a strange, buzzing sound. He could hardly see through the bloody haze that covered his eyes.

He brushed the hair back from his eyes and stared up at the Martian above him.

"A handsome dog," Nara Fen said. "It's unfortunate that his brain is lacking."

Sputann, the agent who had brought Bradd here, protested quietly.

"Not such a small brain, I think," he said. "The man played a good part. I was too clever for him."

Nara Fen lifted his eyes to meet the agent's.

"Silence, Sputann. Your own brain is of no *great* value. Anyone could have been as lucky."

Sputann frowned as Nara Fen studied his victim once more.

At last Nara Fen addressed Bradd personally.

"Well, you are here? You wanted to find the power of Mars? *I* am the power. What have you to say?"

Bradd was silent. The room was hushed, as though each of the half hundred men here were dead. It was an ugly silence.

"*Nothing* to say?" Nara Fen said slowly. "I take it that Monoon had finally decided to fight back? Decided to rise up and destroy the affliction?"

Bradd's heart was pounding loudly. He knew that he had no chance to protect himself here; weaponless, half dead with the punishment he had taken. Then Nara Fen *did* know something of the curse that had settled over Monoon?

"I know nothing of an affliction," Bradd said slowly. "I come from eastern Mars. I was attacked by this fool. I ask for release at once. It will be the wisest thing you can do."

Nara Fen's eyes narrowed. His mouth opened slowly. His face was very white.

"What is this you say?" He turned on Sputann. "What is this madness, Sputann?"

Sputann chuckled.

"Let me tell you what he said to the slaves of Spara. Then you will know the truth."

He repeated the words Bradd had said at Spara. How he, Sputann, had lurked in the shadows and listened.

When he was done, a murmur of angry voices arose in the hall. Nara Fen seemed more relaxed. His smile grew satanic.

"So—you lied to me? What is your name?"

Bradd's face became expressionless. He didn't answer.

"What is your name? Who sent you here?"

Bradd thought of Laralee and Greer. Hoped they hadn't tried to follow him. Still, he refused to answer Nara Fen's questions. He saw that Nara Fen's rage was growing.

"Well! No matter. We know that you are from Monoon. As you are to die anyhow, it may make death harder for you to know that you have approached very close to the trouble you sought."

Bradd tried hard not to show the sudden wild hope that filled him. He waited, knowing that, by silence, he would learn the most.

"The fog that has ruined Monoon, comes from this valley," Nara Fen announced dramatically. It was evident that he was enjoying himself to the utmost. He leaned forward, eyes narrowed and glittering.

"Do you understand?" he shouted. "Monoon is doomed, and when she is a dead satellite, the fog will lift. I and my henchmen will own a wilderness of riches. Is that clear enough to sink into your peasant skull?"

Nara Fen was burning with a desire to torture this rugged, silent youth who dared stay here without expression on his features, without a word issuing from his lips.

"Talk," he shouted, and stood up abruptly. "Talk, damn you, or I'll cut out your tongue so that you *can't* talk. Pray for help. Pray for your people, that they might be delivered from my power."

Bradd's lips were sealed. He had never seen such savage hatred written on the face of a man. Suddenly Nara Fen sank back to his throne. The color washed from his face. There was defeat written there. All emotion was drawn from him.

"Take him away," he said in a list-

less voice. "Hide him in the lower cells where there is no light. Tomorrow, perhaps he will be more willing to speak to me."

Bradd felt his arms jerked back again, and gritted his teeth tightly together against the pain. As he passed Sputann, the agent kicked him brutally in the side. He doubled up silently in pain, and the room went black. He heard Sputann chuckling, and knew no more.

GREER grew tired of his burden. It was long after dark, and Greer had carried Laralee for many miles. At last he had reached the crest of the hills, and was looking down at the dark, lush valley of the Lords.

He found a large bush growing on the naked hillside. He put Laralee down on the soft, cool dirt a short distance from the road. The bush would hide them well. Greer had grown to hate the queer light that followed them. It wasn't so bright now, but it would give them away if they persisted on entering the valley before dawn.

He crouched before the sleeping girl, his club across his knees, his eyes and ears alert for any sound. His head fell forward and he dozed. When he awakened, the moons were bright and the valley below him was twinkling with rainbow color from the multi-colored spires.

A short distance ahead, the road wound down hill past a huge castle that dominated the others. Greer could see a winding, silvery river near the far side of the valley. He saw something, also, that puzzled him. Near the center of the valley the floor of the earth raised into a perfect cone-shaped hill. There was a hole in the center of the cone, and from it shot a hazy, pale white smoke that disappeared into the sky. Yet it could

not be smoke, he thought, for it faded into nothingness almost instantly.

There were fires about the base of the cone, and men who went swiftly from place to place, like tiny ants. He thought he could see coaches and strato-cars also, but the light wasn't good enough to account for many details.

His thoughts turned to Bradd, who was somewhere down there, ahead of them. Thinking of Bradd made him turn once more to Laralee. He studied her lovingly, knowing that this precious burden was his to guard with his life. Laralee slept well, her head cushioned on her hands, her slim figure doubled up to ward off the hard ground beneath her.

For a long time Greer sat there, listening to her steady breathing, and wishing that she were safely on Monoon, so that he might work alone.

It must be close to day, he thought. He smelled the fresh breeze that came up suddenly from the hills. They must not be caught here on the barren hillside when day came.

Greer arose, stretched his cramped muscles and gathered the girl once more into his arms. She awakened abruptly, crying out, pushing him away from her. Fully awake, she sighed.

"Put me down, Greer," she said. "I will walk now."

He placed her on her feet. Laralee looked down into the valley.

"I have slept a long time." Her voice was filled with surprise.

"We have come a long way," Greer admitted. "Below us, Bradd will be waiting."

The girl stared down at the castle below the hill.

"Then we must go at once," she said. "We must find him."

Greer caught her arm, holding her back.

"Wait," he urged. "We must make a plan. We must not be captured. There is no one else to help us, or to help Bradd."

He spoke the thoughts that had been troubling him during his wakeful hours.

"We must find out where Bradd has gone. Perhaps, if we hide in the heavy shrubbery near that castle, we can listen to those who pass, and pick up some knowledge that will lead us to him. A stranger's appearance here would start too many tongues wagging." Laralee nodded soberly.

"And when night comes again, we will find Bradd?"

Greer thought of the cursed light, fading perhaps, but still strong enough to betray them.

"Perhaps," he said. "We will see."

BRADD knew it must be morning, for he had been in the lightless cell for many hours and had heard footsteps and voices, far above him. They had pushed food under the door for him. Mush that tasted like the Martian *mulka* weed ground into dust and soaked in water. He had slept and grown strong. He felt better and was able to walk again.

Now he heard loud voices outside the cell. A key turned in the lock and the door opened wide. A huge, black-bearded keeper stared in at him.

"Come out."

He stumbled out into the twilight of the hall, blinded by the light. He followed the bearded jailer up three flights of damp stone steps, and out into the courtyard. Horses were being led about. Nara Fen and Sputann were already mounted on white steeds. Nara Fen turned toward Bradd. He laughed shortly.

"Our guest of the night is a sorry looking picture," he shouted. "Come, Veesa. We go for a ride."

Nara Fen's thin, extremely tall figure was clad in shining *meta-armor*. He carried a long firegun which he handled like a spear. Bradd noticed that it was pointed in his direction. He shuffled forward, clothing dirty and torn, boots ripped open at the seams.

"We are going to the Cone," Nara Fen said. "Our visit will fill a twofold purpose. You will see the thing which you seek, and you will die feeling its sting of death."

Guards mounted their horses. Sputann called loudly to one of them.

"Bring the visitor a proper mount." He pointed in the direction of the deep moat. A guard ran across the courtyard, dropped out of sight into the moat and came up after a few minutes, dragging an immense *sheed* behind him. The men in the yard laughed loudly at the joke. The *sheed* was a long-bodied, cumbersome animal, covered with black, greasy wool. It stood there, head swaying from side to side, bewildered eyes staring at Bradd. Nara Fen levelled his fire-gun at Bradd.

"Mount the beast," he snarled.

Bradd knew what would happen if he refused. The fire-gun would blast him to nothingness before he took two steps. He sat astride the *sheed*, his feet dragging in the dust. He was forced to ride ahead, while Nara Fen and his agent rode directly behind. The guards came in the rear.

The horrible stench of the *sheed's* wool was in Bradd's nostrils. His clothing and hands were covered by the oil that oozed from the animal's coat. Far ahead of him, he saw the Cone, rising from the flat floor of the valley.

At last it was close to them, and Bradd forgot his own plight and stared wonderingly at the green slopes of the huge mound.

It seemed that all the Lords of the valley were here. Their horses were

tethered around the base of the mound. From inside came the steady pulsating roar of many motors. The Cone seemed almost a holy spot to these people. A wide road had been built around the base. Huge doors led into it from all directions. Great cases of materials were being unloaded from Startovans, and hurried into the Cone.

The *sheed* stopped its plodding walk, and Nara Fen drew alongside.

"Dismount from your noble beast," he said. "You will not need him again."

A new courage was growing inside Bradd the Younger. A courage born of desperation. He was very close to the solution of Monoon's troubles. This was what he had waited for. He had suffered worse than death from the hands of Nara Fen, for Bradd was proud, and pride died hard within him.

Nara Fen entered one of the huge crystal doors.

His men followed. Bradd, alert and ready now, was lost among them. His arms were pinned tightly behind him, so that he could not escape. Inside, there was a large domed room. The place was filled with intricate machinery. Dozens of men worked about the big motor that ran the machines. A workman, clad in brown shorts and a metallic blouse, saluted Nara Fen.

"Chamber ten reporting, Sir," he said. His face was youthful and eager. "All cartridges full and ready to take over. The power comes from chamber eight now, Sir."

Nara Fen nodded and spoke curtly.

The workman went away, satisfied. Nara Fen turned.

"You see one of the most wonderful machines ever produced," he said. "No harm in telling you about it. You will be destroyed before you leave here. What you learn will be sealed in the heart of the machine."

Bradd had been thinking much about

the personality of this man. When he was calm, he was dangerous. When he lost his temper, it made him weak and frustrated—unable even to speak intelligently. That had been proven to Bradd only last night.

"You are very sure of your cleverness," Bradd said. He was trying hard to appear calm and untroubled.

Nara Fen gasped.

"So—at last the prisoner has decided to talk."

Bradd waited.

"Good," Nara Fen went on. "Listen to me carefully. You wonder about the fog that covers Monoon? You came here seeking the answer."

He chuckled.

"In one sense you are wise. In another, very unwise. You were wise to guess the source of the fog. You were unwise to seek me out. I am not selfish. I will share my secret with you.

"Many months ago, I conceived this idea of a cone as a source of terrific power, sending out a ray of fog that would envelope a huge stretch of land."

Nara Fen knew he was speaking to an audience now. His voice rose to a higher pitch.

"FOG is a terrible enemy to those who are not prepared to fight it. It closes all avenues of escape. It kills men's hopes and drives them mad. You can't escape it. Hence, my choice of fog as a weapon. The solution of how it must be produced was simple for a man of my intellect."

He frowned at Sputann, and continued.

"The Cone is made up of forty chambers, such as the one we are now in. These chambers surround a shaft from which the fog escapes. Each power chamber . . ."

A voice over a speaker system drowned out Nara Fen's explanation.

"CHAMBER EIGHT CLOSED. OPEN CHAMBER NINE."

Far away, powerful motors faded, then hummed louder again with fresh vigor.

"You have heard a demonstration of how carefully our power system is handled," Nara Fen said proudly. "But, on with my story of a brilliant plan.

"We completed this project. The fog beam, when first used, was so powerful that it did not become visible for several thousand miles. Carefully, we aimed the shaft at Monoon. The motors were turned on and we now wait for Monoon to kick in its last death struggle."

The speaker interrupted again.

"CHAMBER NINE CLOSED. OPEN CHAMBER TEN."

Near Bradd the motors roared into action. The room was filled with noise, shattering all hope of Nara Fen being heard unless he shouted.

"Monoon is only the first. We will claim the deserted satellite as our own. After that—Venus, perhaps Earth, will become our targets."

He grinned evilly. He gestured to Sputann.

"The prisoner does not seem impressed," he cried. "I wonder if he would feel better to die in the same manner as did his leader, the *mighty* Prince Strawn."

He led the way into the small hall, and closed the soundproof door behind them. He, Sputann and Nara Fen stood alone. Bradd wanted to ask questions now. He wondered about Strawn's voice. How had it come to them from the void?

Nara Fen led the way to a small door. He opened it and went in. Sputann was behind Bradd, pistol drawn. The cell was small, housing only a small viso-screen sender. Transmittal wires led upward into the stone ceiling. Nara

Fen pressed the button release on the sender and the room was filled with a familiar voice.

"Why doesn't Prince Strawn speak? Why doesn't . . ."

Nara Fen flipped the button off again.

"Because," he said in a low voice, "Strawn is dead."

"Recorded," Sputann said, nodding at the machine. "Your Prince was a wise man. He came to plead with us in behalf of his people. Of course, we could not allow him to return. A few sharp shavings pressed beneath his nails, and he was ready to speak to his people. He could not stand pain. He was an old man."

Sputann shrugged.

The words sent chill horror down Bradd's spine. He whirled, ignoring the gun, grasping Sputann's thick neck.

"You—dirty . . ."

"CRACK."

Nara Fen's fire-gun hit him a hard blow, hurtling him back against the wall. Bradd was white with anger. He came up slowly, his back to the wall, lips drawn to a snarl across his teeth.

"Easy," Nara Fen said. "The gun deals death swiftly."

"You'll—pay . . ."

"I'll pay—nothing," Nara Fen said.

Sputann was rubbing his neck. His face was red, partly from anger—partly fear.

He came after Bradd slowly, head weaving back and forth like a snake.

"Stay away," Bradd said. He hardly recognized his own voice.

Sputann couldn't hear him. He was raving mad, crazy for revenge.

"*Entertaining*," Nara Fen said. To Bradd, he was speaking from an immense distance. "*I have often wondered how far Sputann would go.*"

It was a dreamy voice—far away. Bradd stood very still, watching the big man come in. Sputann's arms were

swinging, gorilla fashion, at his sides. Suddenly he charged. Bradd stiffened, forgetting everything but that ugly, leering face.

His left arm went out and caught Sputann, holding him at arm's length. His right fist shot upward, catching the agent on the bony part of the jaw. There was a dry, sharp "*crack.*"

Still far away, in another existence, Nara Fen laughed. It was a sly, satisfied laugh.

"Two birds with one stone," he was saying. "I have often pondered doing that myself."

BRADD'S eyes saw only the fat, red faced man on the floor before him. Only the red was draining from Sputann's face now. It had gone white, and Sputann's head was twisted far around to the right, in a broken, unnatural position.

Bradd looked at Nara Fen. The fire-gun still covered him. Nara Fen moved forward until the head of the spear-like gun was pressed into Bradd's stomach.

"*Now*," he said, "*march.*"

Greer grasped Laralee's arm and pointed.

"There, beyond the wall," he said. "It is Bradd."

Together, shepherd and daughter of royalty, they crouched under the heavy green protection of the hedge. They had been waiting for many hours. Each dreaded the moment when they might be discovered. Each prayed for some clue—some hope. The sun was bright. They would not be detected, at least until night.

They watched the procession as it left the castle. Laralee was frightened, but Greer, wild with anger, wanted to charge to Bradd's assistance. With clenched fists, they watched Bradd disappear down the road ahead of the procession of horsemen.

"He hates them for what they are doing," Greer said. "Yet he will get revenge. We must follow at once—before dark."

Laralee nodded.

"The light is not visible if the sun remains bright. We may pass for natives if we are bold."

He took her arm.

"Wait until these two pass who are now on the road."

The two peasants went by them, and on up the road.

"Now," Greer said.

They slipped from the hedge and went in the direction Bradd had taken. They followed the road, looking neither right nor left, until they came out into the open circle about the Cone.

All life of the valley seemed to revolve around this place. Great Stratovans were unloading boxes that were moved into the Cone. The Cone itself looked like some human manufactured volcano.

Greer dared not hesitate here. He saw the horses of Nara Fen and the *sheed* on which Bradd had ridden. They were tied in the shadow of the Cone. He knew that Bradd was inside, and strode unhesitatingly toward the place.

"Wait," Laralee whispered. "I have my pistol. If we go together, we may be captured together. If we separate, we will have a double chance to help him, and ourselves. Go ahead. I will follow."

Greer dared not wait too long. Already, eyes were upon them, searching for anything suspicious.

He let go of her fingers and marched toward a door. A well armed guard stopped him at the door.

"You are not allowed inside, rough fellow. Only Lords and workmen come here."

Greer stared at the man with narrowed eyes. All these hours, he had

held his temper in check. He had longed for battle many times, and for Bradd's sake, held back. From the corner of his eye, he watched Laralee smile at a guard and enter the Cone without a challenge.

Greer grinned suddenly. It was a wide, innocent grin.

"You aren't going to hold me here?"

The guard drew his pistol.

"That was my plan."

Greer's smile vanished.

"Then—change it."

His war club came down neatly beside the guard's left ear. There was that instant when only the crack of wood against bone disturbed perfect silence. Greer, seemingly unconcerned, entered the Cone.

THEN a mighty cry of warning went around the Cone. Guards ripped their weapons from their holsters and charged into the Cone. Greer moved swiftly for his great bulk, coolly seeking only one man.

He looked hurriedly around the room he had entered. Men were staring at him, so amazed at his presence that they could not move at once. It was like facing a pack of wolves. Each would fight in a pack, but each hesitated facing him alone.

Then they closed in on Greer slowly. It would have been a simple matter to shoot him down. Perhaps no one thought to do so. Perhaps the fact that he had no pistol made this seem unnecessary. Greer waited, while the guards outside the Cone gathered near the door. Then, lifting his club, he started calmly to break his way through the workmen who faced him.

He seemed as unconcerned as ever. As he had faced the timber-wolves of the lowlands, now he faced human wolves. He knocked three of them down with broken ribs and skulls before

he felt the sting of an open wound on his cheek. He wiped the blood away and the sight of it on his own hand, maddened him further. There was an open door leading deeper into the Cone. He headed for it.

Hot flame flickered out and touched his back. He whirled and saw a guard, fire-gun in action, seeking the range. He picked up a workman, held him above his head and with a grunt, heaved the man straight at the guard. The man screamed as the fire ate at him, and the guard went down flat.

Greer ran down the corridor. He lifted his hand as he ran, placed his fingers between his lips and sent a piercing whistle ahead of him. He paused, hearing the men close behind him, waiting for the whistle to return.

It came, faint but straight ahead. The call of the lowland stag. No one but he and Bradd knew that signal. With a triumphant grin, he charged ahead.

He came to a turn in the corridor. He whistled again, and the call came back, closer this time. Greer wondered about Laralee. What had happened to the girl? He had paid no attention to her. Unless she betrayed herself by fighting, no one would notice her in the rush.

The men were close behind Greer now. He stood close to the wall where the hallway turned, and waited. A guard hurried past him. Greer swung neatly, catching the guard in the back. The blow broke his spine. Grasping the guard's fallen fire-gun, Greer turned and sent a long, searing blast of flame into the ranks of men who came close behind. The hallway smelled of burned flesh and echoed to the cries of dying guards. He tossed the gun away and went onward.

He came out suddenly on a small lodge above a deep pit. Almost unable

to stop in time, he fell flat, clutching at the smooth floor. He heard Bradd call to him.

He had emerged on the central shaft, and looking across the deep pit, he saw Bradd locked in a struggle with a tall, barbarically dressed stranger. It was the man who had ridden behind Bradd on the trip from the castle, and as Greer watched, Bradd caught Nara Fen neatly in the back and sent him plunging into the steaming cauldron below. Bradd's voice came to Greer, merged with Nara Fen's dying scream.

"Go back. You're at a dead end. I'll meet you outside. Hurry before it's too late."

Greer turned, a grin of satisfaction on his face. So Bradd had not done so badly after all. Leave it to Bradd, Greer thought. He'll make out.

Then he heard Bradd's sudden cry, and pivoted, staring with wide eyes at what he saw. Bradd had been too close to the edge of the pit. The stones had given away. Even now they crumbled beneath Bradd's feet, and Greer watched with wonder and horror as the young shepherd slipped and fell backward after Nara Fen.

Greer hesitated, then heard Laralee call his name somewhere far back along the corridor. He turned and started back, swiftly.

LARALEE heard the cry of warning. She slipped quietly into the big room full of machinery that roared until she could hear hardly anything else. Two or three men remained at the machine. She saw one woman, dressed much as she, talking with the men. There was a sign over the machine.

ROOM TEN

Then there were more of these rooms, she thought, built around the base of the Cone. Men were hurrying swiftly

toward the room she had seen Greer enter. She pretended to ignore them. She knew how little chance to escape Greer had, and finding Bradd might turn out to be her own job.

Gradually the noise seemed less and she heard the men talking. Their voices, and the voice of the woman, merged excitedly. Evidently an intruder here was unwelcome indeed.

"The shaft is too precious," the woman was saying. "If it were destroyed . . .?"

A workman ran past her.

"Leave one man on duty. We are next. Watch for the power change."

Then the voice came over the speaker.

"POWER OFF IN ROOM NINE. ON IN ROOM TEN."

The sudden increase of noise stunned her. The room vibrated as the motors leaped into triple action.

The woman, evidently the wife of the one workman who remained, said in a frightened voice:

"They must find the spy before he does damage. It would take little now to destroy us."

Laralee moved closer to the machine. The workman smiled at her, but his wife scowled. The shaft, Laralee guessed, was operated by a series of machines. Room ten, the one she was in, was now causing activity of some kind in the shaft.

"It would take little to destroy . . ."

Bradd had been seeking the cause of the fog. Somehow it all tied up. If Bradd was here? She must depend on her sex to protect her. Laralee hated that, but she admitted to herself that she was not strong.

She moved closer to the motors.

The workman, a middle-aged, scant-haired man, spoke to her.

"Why is it you do not go with the others?"

Laralee gave him a wide-eyed smile. "I—I hate bloodshed," she said.

The workman nodded.

"I like to see a woman who does not have to quarrel and fight to make her happy."

His smile was almost too friendly. His wife sniffed. She was broad and fat, and stray wisps of uncombed hair hung down around her pimply face.

"Why don't you say that you love the sight of a pretty wench, Hurbert?"

Laralee was near the main motor now. She knew something of its structure. Those in the Monoon power houses were much the same. Man and woman were arguing heatedly now.

"Rave like an old witch," the man shouted. "Why are wives all like you? You grow fat and homely and curse us when we relieve our eyes by staring at youth."

Laralee drew her pistol and fired it straight at the main power tubes that fed the machine. The room was filled with a blinding flash of colored light. She heard the woman scream wildly and saw her start toward her. The woman knocked her down with her immense body and fell on top of her, tearing at her face with clawed fingers.

Fat fingers touched her eyelids. Nails started to cut. She rolled over, aimed her pistol upward and pressed it into the woman's fat ribs. She pulled the trigger. There was a long sigh as life left the woman's body. Laralee fainted.

BRADD rolled over on his back and rubbed a hand painfully across his eyes. He felt more dead than alive. The light that clung to his body showed faintly the outline of the metallic bottom of the shaft. The shaft was *dry*. He remembered Nara Fen telling him that the fog was produced by steam under immense pressure. How the

steam would kill him immediately.

That was before he had overcome Nara Fen and managed to push him. Bradd shuddered, looking around him. Yes—that wet, sodden blanket of clothing, huddled against the far side of the tube, would be Nara Fen.

Then why hadn't he, Bradd, suffered a like fate?

Someone had turned off the power that supplied the shaft. He was sure of it, for the entire Cone was stilled now. He heard no sound, not even a vibration.

He sat up painfully. Whoever turned off the power, had done it at the instant he fell. Had saved his life.

He sat up painfully and looked upward, toward the tunnel openings on the wall above. His eyes sought and found a small metal ladder, leading into the shaft, probably for repair work. He stumbled across the bottom of the shaft and started to climb. One arm hung limp at his side, but he made the best of it.

Bradd went through the hallway slowly, and reached the wrecked, smoking Room Ten. The workman's lifeless body had been lifted and tossed across a huge broken tube. Then he saw Laralee. He pushed the body of the fat woman off Laralee, lifted her with one arm and placed her across his shoulder. His bad hand could still grasp a pistol. He took Laralee's. He could feel life coursing through Laralee's slim body, and did not worry about her for the present.

He went from one room to the next, and was increasingly amazed for each of them was deserted. He blasted each motor as he went, breaking every tube. He worked grimly, methodically, for he was still in much pain.

Where had the people gone? Where was Greer?

At last, crumpled on a corner be-

neath a half dozen dead guards, he found Greer. The shepherd was in a sitting position, only his red head visible above the pile of bodies. His chin was bleeding and his eyes, wide open, were staring straight ahead.

Greer was stunned.

Bradd placed Laralee carefully on the floor and managed to free the giant from the mess on the floor. He helped Greer to his feet. The giant blinked at him and grinned foolishly.

"We must get out of here," Bradd said. In spite of the completely deserted condition of the Cone, he talked in a whisper.

Greer grinned crookedly.

"The club killed," he said. "It wasn't fast enough. There were too many."

There must have been, Bradd thought. Half a dozen men lay on the floor, their skulls cracked open. Greer's head was bleeding. One arm hung limp at his side. His clothing was half torn from his body.

"They left me for dead," Greer said wonderingly. "They ran as though they were afraid of the devil."

Suddenly the meaning of it all flashed through Bradd's mind. Here were dozens of machines powered to send untold activity into the void. The fuel for those machines? He remembered the tons of material being unloaded from Strato-vans. *Radioactive lead*. Tons of material that must be used before it could overheat and blow up of its own accord, instead of exploding under controlled processes.

THE machines were destroyed. They couldn't use the energy. Yet it was all here, packed in the Cone, and probably fast reaching the exploding point.

"Greer," he said. "Greer, for the sake of your life, get out of here. We may have only seconds to go."

Greer struggled up, leaned on the wall and staggered toward the door. Bradd picked up the girl. He tried to steady Greer by leaning his weight against the big man. They moved hesitantly forward toward the door of the Cone.

They reached the sunlight, but Bradd knew the danger was still close and deadly.

One lonely horse and two Strato-vans were parked in the empty square. He moved toward the van closest them, pushing Greer ahead of him. As though in a nightmare, he placed Laralee on the seat and helped Greer into the empty rear of the van. Behind the controls, he released the rocket lever and the truck began to rumble out of the square.

The truck climbed the steep hills slowly, for it was built only for heavy loads and low speeds. Gradually the valley grew small and Bradd's mind became more at rest. At the lip of the valley, he stopped and turned to stare behind him.

The Cone had turned brown. The heat, generating below its surface, sent smoke curling lazily upward from the shaft.

He drove onward again, stopping only when they were safely in the hills. Laralee awakened and was staring at him silently, evidently trying to explain her presence here.

"Look back," he said in a hushed voice. "See what happens when a machine of doom meets its end."

He had hardly spoken when an intense explosion rocked the valley and made the road under them shudder with protest. The entire top of the Cone disappeared into the sky. A mushroom of flame leaped upward and disappeared into a cloud of black smoke.

The valley was no longer green. It was brown and withered. The build-

ings were gone. The trees were no longer shafted against the sky. The valley was a dark pit of death, with a smouldering cavity lying in its center.

"Fog machine of Nara Fen," Bradd said slowly. "No wonder the machine demanded careful control. One room out of order, and nothing could save the Cone from destruction. If one man must control so much energy, he should use it in a good cause."

He looked down at the girl at his side. His eyes were no longer bitter. He spoke softly.

"It was you who destroyed the first machine?"

She nodded, holding his hand tightly. She shuddered.

"You saved my life," he said.

"And you saved mine," she answered.

Greer moaned in his sleep. They stared back at him, lying in the dimness of the truck bed.

"Greer doesn't realize that he has helped save Monoon from the fog. Greer is sorry, because six men managed to overcome him and his war club. He is ashamed of himself."

Laralee smiled.

"Greer doesn't know, I'm sure, that he is the bodyguard and best friend of the future Prince of Monoon."

Bradd did not answer. He started the rocket motors and eased the truck forward, toward the Valley of Spara and the Gray-ghost hid in the canyon beyond. At last he said:

"You dream fine dreams, Laralee. But should your dreams come true, remember that I could ask for no finer Queen than you. I could not be Prince without you at my side."

He didn't take his eyes from the darkening road after that. He felt her soft lips shyly pressed against his cheek—and smiled.

THE END