

STARTLING STORIES

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A Complete Novel



FLIGHT INTO YESTERDAY

By CHARLES L. HARNESS

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Before making his journey to Earth, Carden Layne had

CHAPTER I

A Title Changes Hands

IT WAS, for Layne, absurdly easy. The Frenchman was a master boxer who could hit like a middleweight blacksmith with either hand. But Layne picked off his hardest and fastest punches with his gloves as easily as a hungry twelve-year-old picking cookies from a pantry shelf. Now and again, when the Frenchman slowed in frustration, Layne would step in, his forearms and gloved fists a blur, to deliver a quick succession of jolting blows whose speed precluded any defense.

He could, he knew, have knocked out the

Frenchman in the first round—he could probably have knocked him out walking on his hands and hitting with his feet if the rules had permitted such a procedure. But he had reasons for not wanting to make his win too spectacular. He had no way of knowing how spectacular he was. How could he? He was from another world and new to this one.

"Alien!" he thought angrily when, in the fourth round, his foot slipped in a small pool of the Frenchman's blood, permitting that rugged and baffled fighter to plant a sharp left

Carden Layne, the Man From Another World,

Forgotten Envoy

a novelet by

SAM MERWIN, Jr.



been briefed thoroughly on his duties by Ptrek scientists

hook against the side of his face.

It stung him and rage boiled up in him—rage and repugnance—and he forgot the need for caution, the careful withholding of his full abilities that had enabled him to obtain this title bout in the Garden with the Champion. The emotion was new to him and he was utterly untrained in restraining his reaction.

Hardened sports-writers at the ringside and veteran fight fans far back in their allegedly "ringside" seats alike knew that they were witnessing something out of the ordinary. The speed and fury of Layne's attack,

the incredible rapidity of his blows, were too fast for the eye to follow.

In less than twenty seconds the Frenchman was lying on his face on the canvas, face battered to a bloody pulp, three ribs showing jagged broken ends through the skin of his side. It took a frantic referee fifteen seconds to wrestle a furious Layne to a neutral corner. If it had taken five minutes it would have made no difference to the Frenchman. He was through for the night—and for a great many days and nights to come.

Later, when the slow motion movies of the

Starts His Earthian Career as a Pugilist!

fight were shown, experts recalled the second Louis-Schmeling fight, when the Brown Bomber landed twenty-two punches on the anguished Uhlan's torso while the German was falling to the floor of the ring. Layne, the pop-eyed experts saw, hit the Frenchman exactly thirty-one times from the moment he started to topple until he was down out of reach.

But that, of course, was later—much later.

Layne didn't come out of his fog of rage and sense of defilement until the white shirted referee was holding up his hand and announcing him as the "new Middleweight Champion of the World." All around him these—people—these beings he found so disturbing and interesting, were screaming like the mad and tortured creatures from the shadowland borders of his own home world.

HE SHUDDERED at their outcry and slid out of the embrace of Packy Gillis, his stocky little manager; who was capering around the ring like a maniac and trying to embrace him in his joy. Over and over, Packy was shouting:

"You done it, kid, and now we're gonna hit the big dough! You done it, kid!"

He felt a curious sickness that made his knees weak and told himself that the overwhelming emotional drive which had caused him to forget all caution and rip so savagely into the Frenchman was bad for him. But so strange had been the sensation, so violent the after effect, that he still felt ill and lost.

He was not himself until Packy and wizened little Luiz Lopez, his trainer, had at last cleared his dressing room of all the howling mob that came bursting in on their heels from the ring—all except Gail Atwater, of course. He shook his head to clear it of echoing sounds of voices, blinked to shed the blinding afterglow of the flashbulbs that had popped in such profusion.

"You blew your top in there, Carden," the girl said in the low, rather husky tones that did such disturbing things to him. There was speculation in the frank appraisal of her green eyes. "I didn't know you had it in you."

"Yeah," said Packy in his nasal accents. He laughed boisterously, as high on vicarious victory as he had ever been on Irish whisky. "It's a good thing you stayed under wraps till tonight or we'd never had gotten the bout."

"He hit me," said Layne as if his reaction

had been the most natural thing in the world—which it might have been had *this* been his world.

"It's a good thing he did. He was winning on points till then," said Packy.

"You frightened me a little, Carden," said Gail, coming close to him and putting her perfumed hands on his bare shoulders. Somehow, with her, he didn't mind the contact—quite the reverse. It had been that way ever since he had met her at the sign-up party six weeks before. It was another thing to bother him.

"You don't have to be afraid of me," said Carden Layne, putting his own long-sinewed arms around her softly slim waist. She was almost as tall as he, with a fascinating figure, a fine boned intelligent, passionate face and long silver red hair that fell smoothly to a gentle roll on her shoulders. She was, she told him, an actress, who had yet to become a success.

Because of the rigors of training he had had little time to share with her, a fact for which he did not know whether to be glad or sorry. She disturbed him and anything that disturbed him was potentially dangerous. They had told him about women, of course, those who had briefed him so long and painstakingly for his mission on Earth. But there was much—so much—they hadn't understood.

"You go easy on the Champ," said Packy, his grin not quite masking the worry in his eyes. "We got the title and it's no time to get out of shape. We come up so fast we ain't had time to copper our hope chests yet."

"Never seen nothin' like it," said Luiz Lopez, the little trainer. "Just that style and speed and he comes out of nowhere to cop the big one."

"We'll have a little time together," said the girl and there was a plea in her voice, in her eyes, in the curves of her body, that spelled heaven.

"Sure," said Layne, pulled her close and then letting her go. "We'll have a little time." He disengaged her arms from his neck and moved toward the shower in silence. He didn't have the heart to tell them this was his last fight. He didn't know it was heart, of course. He told himself it was expedience.

They were there when he came out, straightening the tie that still was a strange constriction about his throat. In his brief career as a fighter he had not had to wear

ties often. But on the night of his winning the championship it had seemed oddly correct to dress up a little. The flannel trousers and jacket felt strangely comfortable for alien garments so briefly worn.

He knew the men spelled danger, disaster perhaps, the moment he saw them. There were two of them and, for humans, they looked hard and alert. They wore inconspicuous dark suits and had soft hats with snap brims. Though they did not actually look alike, there was a similarity of poise and movement about them that made them seem almost like twins. The taller of them nodded to him curtly.

"Mr. Layne," he said, "we have orders to take you with us."

"What is this?" Carden Layne looked at his manager in surprise. He knew, of course, that it meant exposure in some form, exposure and the inevitable consequences. But he had been trained to carry through as long as was possible.

"I dunno," said Packy Gillis. "They're G-men. Gee whiz, Carden, are you hot? If you are, don't say a word until I get a mouth-piece to you."

"Hot?" said Layne. He knew what it meant of course. He was hotter than any so-called criminal alive. He looked at the uninvited arrivals, who were posted at either side of the one door into the corridor outside. Swiftly he calculated his chances, noting the bulges beneath the unobtrusive jackets. They had their absurd weapons, of course. Absurd but deadly to himself for all that. The very nature of his role and mission had made him vulnerable.

HE WOULD have to wait to make his break. The decision made he relaxed and smiled at Gail, who was leaning against the rubbing table, looking very scared. He went over to her and gave her a chin-up routine and was surprised to see the tears in her eyes. A sudden protectiveness swept through him, a desire to comfort her and tell her that there was really little to worry about—yet.

"You didn't—you couldn't have done anything wrong, Carden," she said.

"Of course not," he told her. He tried to remember the little he knew of the absurdity called law. It was the existence of law, as much as it was the existence of the records, that had caused him to be sent to the United States. In most other countries, if he were

discovered, they would move with more dispatch.

"What am I supposed to have done?" he asked the leader of the men quietly. He didn't know it, of course, but there was an inhuman flatness to his expression, a flickering wariness to his gaze that made him look deadly dangerous—and guilty.

"You'll find out," said the man. "Our orders are to take you with us."

"I'm going too," said Gail, thrusting herself forward with sudden determination. "I don't care what he's done, he—he needs someone on his side."

"We were going to ask you to come," said the leader in his unemotional voice, though his eyes registered approval. "Mind you, you don't have to—"

"But I want to," said the girl. "I want to if Carden wants me to."

He looked down at her, touched as he had never been touched. There was a sudden and unaccustomed lump in his throat that made his voice unsteady.

"Sure," he said. "Sure, Gail, honey. There isn't going to be any trouble." He knew he shouldn't let her come but once again he felt the confusion of emotional elements he had neither the means nor training to resist.

There were more of them outside—not that they were conspicuous. But they had to be there or Carden Layne and Gail would never have been slipped through the still milling throngs in the corridor and around the Garden so easily. Before Layne could muster his poise he was seated beside Gail in the glassed in rear of a limousine that was proceeding with silky smoothness through traffic.

He leaned forward as they crossed the tracery of the George Washington Bridge and tried the handle of the near door. It did not respond to the deceptive strength of the tug he gave it, nor could he lower the window. A glass partition, which he sensed to be bullet proof, separated Gail and himself from the two men in the front seat. Behind them another limousine followed closely.

"Darling," said Gail, huddling close to him. "I'm scared. What's it all about? You haven't done anything—well, criminal, have you?"

"Not yet," he said grimly and was oddly glad that he spoke the truth. He let the girl snuggle close and leaned back against the cushions. The smooth speed of the car made

him feel almost as if he were flying. When he looked outside to see the lights of the Jersey approaches flashing past he felt a trifle oppressed at the sense of speed. There had been nothing to see on his previous journey—the one that had brought him to Earth from such unimaginable distances.

"Do you know where we're going?" the girl asked him, her voice small and close to his ear. He pulled her to him as he had seen men do in the movies and felt a sudden thrill pervade him at the live softness of her lips under his. The confusion which had muddled his thinking and reactions increasingly of late returned in manifold version and he saw that his hands were trembling.

"I don't know," he replied belatedly, using the excuse of speech to break the disturbing embrace. "And our friends up front aren't very communicative."

"I won't *let* anything happen to you," the girl said in a fierce whisper.

He patted her shoulder with a hand once again made steady by rigid control. He even laughed a little though he was not yet accustomed to laughter. She might be alien but she was so soft and sweet, so innocent of his real motives and purposes. He thought of the one who awaited his signal in the unimaginable craft so far above the thin envelope these creatures spoke of as atmosphere.

His abstraction endured until he felt the girl stiffen and realized that they had left the highway to pass through a large, well-guarded iron gateway and were proceeding up a long, poplar lined macadam driveway. They crested a low hill and before them the lights of a long low mansion twinkled in greeting.

There came the baying of a pack of large hounds from the middle distance as the car pulled to a halt under a porte cochere and the door was opened. He wondered about dogs—they hadn't been part of his briefing and he had had little chance to observe them in his few short months on Earth. Like every other gap in his briefing, they frightened him a little.

The other car had pulled up behind them and he and Gail were escorted to the stately double front door of the mansion by a small squad of government agents, affording him no chance of escape even had he wished to make a break for it. He wasn't sure that he wanted to, for this strange ride with its opulent conclusion did not fit into his idea of an arrest. And there were the dogs!

A stone-faced servant in frogged blue livery ushered them into a large entrance hall whose floor was of marble laid out in black and white squares like a checkerboard. The butler whispered something to the leader of their escort and the G-men did not follow them when they were ushered through another double door. They passed through two more magnificent chambers before they reached a dropped sun porch which seemed to occupy one whole end of the mansion.

There, from behind a desk, a tall, lean white haired man with a long, lined face rose to greet them, revealing a hundred wrinkles as he smiled.

"Welcome to Earth, Carden Layne," he said in a deep and mellow voice. "It is good to know that Harman Layne's son is still, miraculously, alive."

CHAPTER II

Man With No Past

FOR a moment or two Layne remained motionless, stunned with surprise.

"I beg your pardon," said Layne. This was incredible—unless it were the first overt move in some well-laid conspiracy which had been brewing underground against him for weeks. If he had had any idea that taking up prize-fighting would make him so conspicuous, he'd have managed some other way. But those of his fellows who had briefed him so carefully for Earth had known nothing of money. And his physical conditioning had made it the most simple method of support.

"Who are you?" Gail Atwater asked their gray haired host bluntly.

"Dr. Raymond Barnett," he said, nodding in courtly fashion toward the girl but scarcely removing his eyes from Layne. He added, "The likeness is unmistakable—and coupled with the name. When I saw you in the television screen I knew, of course. Harman had no family. You had to be his and Jane's son."

"Just a minute," Gail's green eyes had widened as memory came flooding to her aid. "You—you're Dr. Barnett the physicist, the man who invented—" "She hesitated, added,—"just about everything Edison and Einstein didn't think of."

"You make it all sound absurdly easy, my dear," said the scientist, his smile widening at

her recognition. "The Sunday supplements have been kind to me."

"But if you're that Dr. Barnett," said the girl half angrily, "why the pinch? What's your interest in Carden anyway? Why him?"

"I'll try to explain," Dr. Barnett said gently. He nodded toward a large television projector designed to cast its pictures on a screen which hung against the wall opposite his desk. It was obviously something far superior to the 1978 models which were currently on the market. As the most distinguished scientist since Albert Einstein, Dr. Barnett rated the most modern in all such developments.

"When your Carden Layne—" This with an inclination of the head toward the new champion, who was standing on guard as warily as a faun aware of unknown peril—"was introduced in the ring, I spotted it at once. The resemblance was unmistakable even to a mere dabbler in anthropology like myself. The formation of the head above the zygomatic arches, the shape of the ear lobes, the formation of the lower mandible—to say nothing of the general unmistakable likeness. I knew instantly that I was looking at the son of Jane and Harman Layne."

"I'm afraid it's just chance," said Carden quickly. He knew of Dr. Barnett, of course—not only during his brief stay on Earth but from the exotic printed matter he had come to know as books during his education elsewhere. He was going to have to spike this development and quickly.

"You see, I was discovered on an orphanage doorstep near Des Moines." He told the fiction glibly for he had long "arranged" an Earthly origin for himself. He added what he thought was a neat touch. "As a matter of fact I took the name Layne because of my resemblance to the man you called my father."

Dr. Barnett looked puzzled and a trifle tired. Gail had been caught in the conversational crossfire long enough. She stepped forward once more and said:

"Just a minute, Dr. Barnett! Why should Carden be being this—this other Layne's son make him important enough to put G-men on his trail?"

"Because," said Dr. Barnett, his eyes suddenly dark and brilliant against the faded vellum of his skin, "if he is, as I fully believe, the child of Jane and Harman Layne he is the first known Earth human to have been born

in space.

It was too much for Gail. She found the nearest sofa, her legs unsteady, and sank into its softness, disbelief on her every pert feature. She looked at Dr. Barnett as if he were a madman. Layne, watching her closely, saw this incredulity fade as she evidently remembered who their host was, then saw her eyes turn toward himself, saw affection and then a new and more disturbing incredulity stir beneath it. He gave her what he hoped was a smile of reassurance.

"It won't take long to straighten this out, honey," he said to her. But he could not meet the fixity of her regard, turned uneasily back toward the scientist. "I'm greatly honored, Dr. Barnett, but isn't this whole business just a little—well, it's hardly a proper celebration for a new champion."

"My sincere apologies," said Dr. Barnett, waving Layne to a seat beside Gail on the sofa. "Of course it isn't. Your performance in the ring was remarkable, young man, truly remarkable." Layne didn't like the speculative look in the wise old man's eyes as he said this.

Dr. Barnett pressed a hidden button on his desk as he sat down. Seconds later the gold frogged butler appeared.

"Bollinger, Jenkins," said the scientist. "The Nineteen Seventy-One *brut*." When Jenkins had gone he added, "Both of you must accept what hospitality I can offer. Champagne is the wine of conquerors—and their ladies. As for me, I am on the threshold of either the most glorious moment of my life—or its worst. In either case, I shall need a stimulant though I shall only enjoy it in the one."

"Thanks, Doctor," said Carden. "But I'm afraid you'll be disappointed."

"We'll soon know," said the scientist. "As it happened I had some rather distinguished friends here to view the fight on my new machine. One of them is high in the Department of Justice. When I told him my suspicion, he at once set the wheels rolling. We'll soon know what the score is."

SILENTLY they drank champagne and Layne found he cared little for the unfamiliar beverage. But he drank because he was supposed to, even though he could sense its relaxing effect upon the guard he could never afford to let down. Then Gail, who was regarding him, when she thought he was not aware of the fact, with a new furtive-

ness, asked Dr. Barnett again what it was all about.

The famous scientist smiled. "It is not a new story," he said, "although it is a forgotten one. It is, you see, a story of failure, a failure in which I, alas, played a small part. You see, back in Nineteen Fifty-five—a trifle more than twenty-three years ago—we thought we had mastered space travel. It was not publicized—our relations with the Russians still demanded strict secrecy. And its failure has resulted in our not following up what I believe to be the one true road.

"He paused, his eyes once more glowing with their amazing intensity, then went on. "It should not have failed," he said passionately. "Although the *Pilgrim*, with its two gallant passengers—two who I have reason to think became three—vanished like that—" He snapped his fingers to indicate the suddenness of the disappearance—"I have never been able to believe that it *did* fail.

"We were experimenting with tremendous forces—forces of which we know little more today. Supersonic flight was a reality and, with sufficient screening through the new and comparatively light duralcoid, we could mount atomic motors in comparatively light ships. But this very fact made us overreach."

He paused again and motioned Layne to refill the glasses from the huge magnum that rested in its bed of ice, swaddled in a fine damask napkin. He seemed to be recalling forgotten hopes, forgotten dreams, forgotten faces. "We tried to do too much at once," he went on regretfully. "We had the planets in our grasp, but he had reason to think that none of them would serve humanity. And Dr. Layne and I had developed a principle which, with sufficient power, showed promise of going much further. We planned to reach Alpha Proxima. In short, we reached for the stars, and to the best of our knowledge, we failed."

"Gosh!" said Gail, eyes as round as a little girl's. "What happened?"

Dr. Barnett shrugged his massive shoulders. "Who knows? Oh, we had it beautifully planned. We had the *Pilgrim* packed with instruments, of course—and we had atmosphere and stratosphere ships placed at various levels to watch her passing up to a height of thirty miles. And there were Jane and Harman."

"How did a woman happen to go?" Gail asked. "She must have been brave."

Dr. Barnett chuckled. "I doubt if she ever thought much about it," he said. "She had,

in some ways, the best mind of the three of us. She had worked on the project from the first and we couldn't have kept her off. She was the ablest astrogator on Earth, she knew every bit of the plan and she loved Harmon."

"I think I understand," said Gail quietly, her eyes on Carden Layne.

"I think perhaps you do," said the scientist. "At any rate, she and her husband went alone. They had no room for any others or I'd have been with them. As it was we computed that, even if our device worked, they'd be in space for at least three years. They took with them supplies for ten."

"What was the nature of this—this drive of yours, Doctor?" Layne asked. He sat quietly, hands on his thighs, trying not to reveal his interest.

"An odd question from a pugilist," said Dr. Barnett with a smile that was faintly sardonic. "It was a development of the curved space theory of Einstein. It involved certain of the 'great circle' principles of global navigation. It involved an instrument which could cut chords across the arcs of bent light."

"Perhaps," said Layne, "it cut through the arc." He wished, as soon as the words were out, that he had kept his mouth shut. His host regarded him oddly.

"Perhaps it did," he said. "It didn't occur to us until long afterward, when the whole project was dead and shelved." He smiled again and nodded to himself, paused to sip from his wide glass. "At any rate, when the *Pilgrim* took off from White Sands—we still used the old rocket base then—it vanished."

"And neither they nor the *Pilgrim* were ever seen again?" said Gail.

"Never," said Dr. Barnett with a weary gesture that bespoke finality.

"Then," said Layne, who had been feeling the coils of this unexpected trap coiling ever tighter around him, "your idea about me is obviously wrong. Perhaps, in some strange way, I happen to look like them—a freak of heredity."

"Oh, it's manifestly impossible," said the great scientist. He paused and added, "Except for one slim pinpoint of possibility. You see, Jane told me before the *Pilgrim* took off that she expected to have a child. She was willing to take that chance—to convert her love for Harman Layne to the ends of science."

"It sounds—horrible, somehow," said the girl with a quick shudder.

"No," said Dr. Barnett, "for their loves for science and one another were their lives. And since deep space travel must involve great lengths of time, as well as distance, the ability to bear and rear a child in space could be a vital factor. And when colonization of other planets in other Systems becomes fact, as some day it must, it may well be the decisive factor."

"Interesting," said Carden Layne, "but it still doesn't tie me in."

FOR a moment or two the aged scientist regarded him, then shook his head.

"Perhaps not," said Dr. Barnett. "But, you see, if Jane Layne's child were born and lived—and if he were a male child—he would be almost exactly the age you claim. Taken with the resemblance and certain other factors—" He paused to study Carden Layne narrowly. "We'll soon have our answer."

"But," burst out Gail, "if the *Pilgrim* was destroyed in the take-off—"

"The *Pilgrim* was not destroyed," Dr. Barnett spoke quietly. "She took off all right at the correct acceleration. Not until the special drive was applied did she—vanish. And, as Mr. Layne has already acutely suggested, she may not have been destroyed. She may have cut through a chord of the curve of our space at too great a velocity, have become a tangent and entered some universe of which we know nothing. She may even have come back."

There was a long silence after this. Layne wished heartily that he had never blurted forth his suggestion. He studied the scientist, wondering how to deal with him. Violence would do his cause no good—not now. He began to tabulate possible courses of action to save his mission and his own kind—and then jumped as did Gail when the telephone on the desk shrilled its summons.

Dr. Barnett picked it up deliberately, put the handset to mouth and ear. His voice was low, almost a murmur, as he made himself known to the talker on the other end of the radio beam which had long since replaced

cumbersome wires. Layne strained his ears but the Dr. said nothing of import. During most of the five full minutes the call lasted he was listening.

Finally he replaced the handset on its cradle and regarded Layne with a faint smile which had a sardonic twist. His voice, when he spoke, was gentle but bore none the less a covert ring of triumph.

"Carden Layne," he said, "the most efficient investigating force on this planet has just reported to me through their chief. The subject of their investigation, as you have doubtless already guessed, was yourself. There is no record of your induction into an orphanage near Des Moines nor anywhere else. In short, there is no record of you at all until you appeared in a fight club in Milwaukee a little over a year ago and began to reveal close to superhuman ability in the ring. Carden Layne, you have no past on Earth."

"Perhaps," said Layne, hoping the sudden dryness in his throat would not reveal itself in his voice, "my past is one I do not wish to reveal."

"That," the scientist remarked dryly, "is very evident. But listen to this: less than two weeks before your initial appearance strange meteorological disturbances were reported in the isolated border lake district of Northern Minnesota. On successive nights the sky was lighted up by some strange object which was reported by hunters first to come down, then to vanish into space."

"Still very far-fetched, Doctor," said Layne, stirring uneasily. They had discovered entirely too much. Dr. Barnett rose from his desk and passed a blue veined trembling hand across the broad expanse of his forehead.

"There must be some reason, Carden Layne," he said, "for your denial of your birthright, for your refusal to tell us a truth whose results, for mankind and yourself, would be of value to make Columbus' report to his queen on his return from the first voyage to America look like small change." He gave his visitors a small courteous bow.

"If you will excuse me," he said, crossing the carpet, "I'm going to get pictures of Jane and Harman Layne and of the *Pilgrim*. Perhaps sight of them may stir memories that remain stubbornly quiescent."

He had gone and Layne was sitting there, his eyes flat, his fists clenched in his lap. Gail was looking at him. She said, "It's true, darling, isn't it? It's all true?"

NEXT ISSUE

STATION IN SPACE

A Fascinating and Thought-
Provoking Special Feature

By WILLY LEY

CHAPTER III

Lethal Plans

LAYNE looked at her wildly, then dropped his head on his hands. "I don't know," he said. "It may simply be a trick—a trap."

"Darling," she said, moving closer to him, "you're in some kind of a jam I don't understand. Why not talk to me—tell me about it?"

He lifted his head and regarded her angrily. He said, "How could you ever understand? How could anyone here on this strange planet?"

She shrank away from him then but he did not notice. Memory came flooding over him—memory and recollection that had nothing to do with Earth—memory of all but the last few months or years of his entire existence.

It had seemed normal in the incubator, there on Ptrek. He felt a sudden sense of strangeness at his effort to think of his unpronounceable home world in English letters. It was so—different, so very different. He had been confined from his earliest memories until the landing in the lake district on Earth, confined to the duralead screened area of what later became the ship.

They had explained it to him from the first. He was, they told him, a very special personage, bred for a very special purpose, the salvation of a planet and perhaps a universe. Sclor, his teacher, and Odrana, who was his friend and had piloted the ship to Earth, had told him the story many times.

They were his people, of course, and they lived on the world that was home. It was a world of raging elements and constant change and of a very great science which had created him for his special purpose. It was a world in which only creatures of great science and incredible physical agility could survive.

He could not help but notice that he was different from them. Their round blue bodies and interchangeable limbs, which enabled them to perform incredible acrobatics, their single eyes and triangular mouth were incredibly inhuman. But then, he had not been brought up to consider himself as human.

"Our world," they had told him in the

curious sounds they called speech, "is in a state of dissolution. Its elements once were stable. Now they are becoming progressively less so. We have created you for our salvation."

He had, of course, believed them. Even within the confines of the ship he could sense the fury of the elements beyond its protective screens, the storms, the earthquakes, the volcanic eruptions. Often the great ship that was his home had trembled under the furious onslaught of some cosmic assault.

"We have discovered," Sclor had told him when he was old enough to understand, "that there is a world where the elements work in reverse. Where they have progressed from volatile to stable. We have created you to exist freely on this world and to visit it. We have created this ship to take you there. From its vast supplies you must obtain a precious metal which we believe must be present on this world. It is an element its inhabitants call lead."

He had listened and, of course, believed, for they were his people, the only people he had known. They had taught him to read the books in the ship, had fed him the food that came from containers in its bunkers. They had taught him all they knew of Earth, which was, of course, only what the ship contained.

Thinking himself one of them, if a special mutation created for his purpose, he had imitated them, driven his growing body until, like them, he could walk on his hands almost as well as upon his feet, could indulge in most of the super acrobatics that were a necessity to their survival upon a world which was dissolving through a reversal of the radioactivity tables of Earth.

"You could not live long outside the screens," they told him. "Just as we ourselves would have trouble living on a stable globe." So he had accepted his confinement as a part of his existence, had trained himself for his task.

There had been voice tapes to which he had listened—and the voices were different. From them, with the aid of his tutors, he learned something of speech—thought he had been forced to unlearn much of it upon his arrival. He now knew, of course, that one of the voices had been that of a woman, the other of a man. And they called him Carden Layne. But this, his mentors taught him, was merely a creation of their own to adjust him

to the different conditions on Earth.

So he had grown, had waxed strong and amazingly agile in his roomy prison. And always the supplies had dwindled until, at the end, there had been barely enough to ensure his voyage and return. Odrana and he, with the blessing of Sclor, had blasted off on their vital mission, and never had any conditioned young fanatic been better briefed for his all important task.

THE voyage had been long—but neither of them had cared. The ship, after all, was the only home Carden Layne had ever known and Odrana, like all of his species, cared little about time. Their tough blue bodies were ageless. They had landed in an isolated region of the continent of North America, where they had been ordered to descend according to the master plan of Sclor.

"You will scout this world briefly," the great creature had told them in their final briefing. "Then Sclor will take off and remain in space for one circuit of this precious planet around its star. You will assemble sufficient of their leaden metal to pack the holds of the ship. It will hold enough to suit our purposes. For with it we can build more ships and get more metal."

And so it had happened. Carden Layne had found himself alone upon an alien planet—alone and with a vital mission to perform. He had had a number of narrow squeaks getting adjusted. There had been the matter of clothes—he had been forced to rob a farmhouse to get suitable wear—and of money.

But his adjustment to his distant planet home and the physical prowess that was its result had enabled him to launch a ring career quickly. He had sufficient money now for his needs—he could promote enough as champion to pack the hold of the ship many times over. But by winning the title he had sacrificed the anonymity which was the essential core of his mission's success.

He looked again at Gail Atwater and his throat was suddenly too choked up for speech. She seemed to catch his need for she once again came close to him and this time her lips again found his and woke them to new sensation.

"I don't care where you come from," said the girl. "You're human to me."

They sprang apart as Dr. Barnett returned, bearing a tooled leather folder, which he laid down on his desk and opened. At

his bidding they approached the desk, though Layne felt as if he were approaching the headman's block. It was difficult to contemplate what the pictures might prove.

It was the ship that had been his home. There it stood, its glossy tapered snout pointing directly toward the heavens, its ports, its fins just as he had seen them for the first time when he left it nearly a year before. Again he could not speak—it was too shocking to have a lifetime stripped from him.

He saw then that Dr. Barnett was showing him pictures of a tall, dark haired young man, of a woman whose beauty lay in fine bone structure and level eyes and full-cut generous mouth rather than in what he had already come to know, as feminine artifice. He saw and he looked at a mirror on the wall and saw again. There could be no mistaking the similarity of those features.

Dr. Barnett read his expression correctly and said, "Now, perhaps, you'll tell us something of your story. I think both Miss Atwater and I have a right to know." He sat down again behind his desk and nodded for Carden Layne to refill the glasses. The young man did so and then he and the girl sank onto the sofa.

"One question before you begin," said Dr. Barnett after lifting his glass silently in greeting to the child of his two former colleagues. "Can you tell me anything of your parents' fate? Naturally, we—I have no record here."

"It's a little hard to realize all at once that I had human parents," said Layne with the suggestion of a smile. Then his expression grew thoughtful and he added, "I'm afraid, if they left the ship, the radioactivity killed them." He went on to explain about the reverse state of the elements on Ptrek. Dr. Barnett listened with glowing eyes, Gail Atwater with lips parted in astonishment.

"Of course," said the scientist, "in a world of unstable elements, lead would be as rare and important as radium in our world. Intriguing concept."

"But not for the inhabitants," Layne told him and went on to explain the restrictions such conditions had imposed upon the life forms. Dr. Barnett had him draw sketches of Sclor and Odrana and studied them with complete concentration.

"And you believed yourself to be one of them?" he asked Layne at last.

The younger man nodded. "What else could I believe." He shrugged, then looked

at the girl. "I must confess that my experiences on Earth must have been undermining my subconscious. The discovery you have forced upon me tonight comes as a relief. You see, there was so much about us that they didn't know."

He spoke the truth. He was convinced now. The picture of the *Pilgrim*, surrounded by human technicians on its launching ground, had been the final clincher. At the moment, all he felt was relief. He could like this fine older man, he could even love this girl and not feel like a criminal.

"Of course you thought you were one of them," Dr. Barnett said slowly. He permitted himself a chuckle. "I once had a friend who had, for some reason, a number of dogs. Someone gave him a very young pullet. By the time it was grown, that bird was convinced it, too, was a dog. It played with what it believed to be its own kind, hunted with them and even tried to bark like them."

"It was all the bird knew," said Layne. "Just as they were all I knew."

"Of course," said the scientist, "this remarkable bringing up of yours is the secret behind your success in the ring. Any species which has survived on a planet under such conditions must have amazing stamina and agility."

"They do," said Layne and suddenly he was frightened. His mission, which had seemed until now a noble thing, was horrible. For he was no longer one of *them*. Human beings, this Earth, were no longer alien. He shoved his fear resolutely to the back of his mind as Dr. Barnett asked him to demonstrate some of the alien tricks he had mastered in the course of his strange boyhood.

LAYNE took off his coat, stood briefly in the middle of the carpet. Then, with a series of flips and twists too fast for the eye to follow, he somersaulted in the air from a standing start, got momentum on two end over end flips, took off upside down high against the wall, spun to land on his feet from the exact spot and direction which he had started in.

"It's incredible," said the older man. Layne got back into his coat and answered more questions. He explained how he had acquired his earthly education from the books aboard the *Pilgrim*, went on to detail the gaps in his training.

"Naturally," said Dr. Barnett, nodding.

"A couple like your parents, en route to the stars, would have collected only the scientific texts they considered might be vitally needed. I know—I helped them select their library. I must say, Carden, from what you have told me, that they would be proud of you if they could see you. You have solved incredible problems in highly brilliant fashion."

He smiled, added, "Your vocabulary was one of the first things that gave me assurance my mad hope was right. No prize fighter, not even the famous Gene Tunney, ever talked as you do." His smile faded. "And now," he said, "I should like to know more of your mission to Earth. Surely it must be vital—to them."

It was the request he had been dreading—for no matter how great his joy at finding himself human, the conditioning of a lifetime was not easy to break. He thought of Sclor and Odrana and all the others, hopelessly imprisoned on their unstable world, thought of all the lead and other stable elements on Earth. . . .

They had tricked him, virtually imprisoned him, perhaps destroyed his parents, yes. But in doing so were not they obeying the oldest law of all nature—the law of self preservation? He saw Dr. Barnett regarding him gravely, looked at Gail and answered her intimate smile—and knew that there could be but one reply. He cleared his throat and sat up to make his statement.

"Though I am hardly in a position to know the innermost plans of my—my friends," he said, "I feel fairly certain that, if I succeed in fulfilling my mission it will mean widespread destruction, possibly the end of mankind on this planet." He paused as Gail exclaimed in horror, then nodded and went on:

"You see, Dr. Barnett, if I load the *Pilgrim* and it gets back to Ptek, they will use its cargo to manufacture other ships—and some of the elements they will use will almost certainly be ruinously radioactive to Earth. I imagine a Geiger count check of our landing place would reveal a high radiation. If I hadn't moved away from it quickly I should not be alive today."

"It has already been tested," said Dr. Barnett quietly. "Surely, young Layne, you do not think us utter fools." He paused in thought, added, "It's quite a problem. You say your friend Odrana is coming back for you."

"In less than ten days I must meet him," said Layne quietly. "If I don't—well, he is

to embark upon a tour of destruction around the world. He has been mapping it during this year, and the ship is armed with some deadly weapons."

"Well, in that case we must make him happy," said Dr. Barnett. "I presume they have some means of tracing the *Pilgrim* from their universe through to this one, young Layne?"

"I believe so," said Layne, nodding. "They have developed something like your radar to amazing lengths. They talked to us—from Ptek—on a video globe to the rim of their universe. And they have a tracer ray which follows the ship into this one."

"How I'd like to have you work that one out for me," said the scientist with a sigh. "In the meantime, however, we have a more vital problem to answer. And we have only ten days in which to do it. May I bid you good night?"

He left them there and Layne, who had risen, became aware of Gail standing beside him. Without a word he took her into his arms. For the first time since his arrival on Earth he was able to give—himself.

CHAPTER IV

Last Toast

THE world wondered the next day—wondered and speculated as to what had happened to Carden Layne, the strangely articulate and generously gifted young man who had knocked out the Frenchman to win the Middleweight title. It was a disappearance impossible to cover up, what with all the swarms of reporters, photographers, promoters, fans and hangers-on who sought to see him.

Layne and Gail, still at Dr. Barnett's home, read the story with amusement. It was the same story, with only the embellishments varied, in all the New York papers. They were in an upstairs living room of the great house in New Jersey, awaiting the arrival of the justice of the peace who was to marry them.

"It's supposed to be bad luck for the bride to see the groom before the ceremony," said Gail, her eyes laughing and her nose wrinkling delightfully. Layne kissed her ardently, then held her off and looked at her seriously.

"Are you sure you want to go through with this?" he asked her.

"Do we have to go through with it *again*?" she countered. "If the world is going to end in nine days or so I want them to be happy ones. If it isn't—if anything should happen to you—I want to have known happiness with you. Okay?"

"Very much so," he told her gently. He had no doubt as to what he was now. He was entirely human and at the moment it was a glorious feeling. They were still sitting quietly close together, saying nothing, when the gold frogged butler knocked and entered to tell them that the justice of the peace was waiting.

The ceremony was brief and simple. Packy Gillis, Layne's manager, had been smuggled out of town to serve as best man. Dr. Barnett, looking like one of the man of distinction whisky advertisements of post World War Two days on Earth, gave the bride away. It was, Layne discovered, practically painless.

"I dunno what it's all about," Gillis told his fighter from nowhere when it was over and the toasts were drunk, "but I gotta wish you luck. Gail's a good kid—good as they come—and you—well, boy, you won me my first title."

"I'm afraid I won't be fighting again, no matter what," Layne told him, putting an arm across the smaller man's shoulders. "But it can't be helped."

"Yeah, it's way out of hand now," said the manager sadly. He glanced at Dr. Barnett and shook his head. "Some day maybe you'll tell me the score, huh?"

"Some day," said Layne, "if I can, Packy. It's rather a long story."

"Ain't it just my luck?" murmured Packy rhetorically. "I bang around in this business for years trying to collect winning purses for a bunch of bums. And then, when I get an out-of-this-world fighter, I lose him to this." His glance was comprehensive and included everything and everybody in the large room.

Shortly afterward he was gone. There, was of course, no honeymoon for the newlyweds. There wasn't time. They were simply staying on with Dr. Barnett while Layne was subjected to exhaustive interviews by that distinguished handful of men and women who make up the roster of the greatest scientists on Earth.

Each in his own field wished to know all there was to know about Ptek and its

strange conditions and inhabitants. Though his existence there had been limited to the shelter of the *Pilgrim*, Layne found, under interrogation, that he knew more than he had suspected. For Sclor and Odrana had of course told him a great many things in the course of some twenty years which he had almost forgotten.

It was not easy for any of them—Layne, Gail, Dr. Barnett, the other scientists. But Layne and his bride at least had their nights undisturbed—which would hardly have been the case had they stayed in Manhattan or gone to one of the well publicized resort hotels which had been seeking them as guests.

Occasionally he awoke in the night to find Gail weeping softly by his side. And he wished bitterly that there were some other way out of the dilemma. For when Odrana brought the *Pilgrim* back to Earth for a second time it was he, Layne, who would have to meet him. There was no other choice.

The main issue—the saving of the world from the destruction of Odrana—went on quietly but apace. Officials, important and small fry, came and went in a steady stream, telephone and radio lines were kept busy, a private video was installed with its own secret network channel. Over it Layne talked to the President, who regretted his inability to visit him at Dr. Barnett's estate.

"Perhaps, when this is over—if all goes well—I shall have the opportunity to greet you in person, Layne," he said. And Layne, who had become sufficiently American to appreciate the honor, murmured his thanks.

Then, exactly a week after his abduction by the Government men from a dressing room under Madison Square Garden, Layne bade Gail farewell and, for the first time in his life, he knew true emotional grief. Had the urgency of the forthcoming role not been so great he'd have been tempted to let the world go and stay to meet whatever fate had in store with Gail at his side.

"You're coming back, darling?" she asked him softly. Standing in the doorway of their bedroom, he could only shrug and shake his head.

"I don't know, honey," he said. "I'll do my best. It's my life too."

SHE had cried then, and he had left her, for of course he knew that there wasn't a chance of his returning. In only one way could the invasion from Ptrek be prevented—by convincing Odrana and Sclor and the

others that Earth and its System were too radioactive themselves to be worth raiding. And to make this convincing it meant the sacrifice of a man's life. The only man could be himself.

Dr. Barnett said little during the flight to Minnesota. It was night and the stars were mirrored in the lights of the towns and cities that passed quickly some twenty miles beneath the supersonic progress of their rocket plane. It was a government ship, a special ship in whose design the scientist himself had had a major hand. It made the flight from a North Jersey airport to Duluth in just over half an hour—if changes in time were not taken to make it a minus in time. But to Layne, who had traveled the starways, it was a humdrum journey.

From Duluth they took off in a swift and smaller helicopter for the lake near where the rendezvous with Odrana was set. Layne was only moderately surprised to discover that they had the exact location already marked. Even after a year and at night the glittery desolation caused by the atomic jets of the *Pilgrim* were plainly evident. It shone like glass in the light of the moon.

They examined the setup. Great piles of lead had been stacked close to the area and were guarded by Government operatives and a detachment of troops in full battle dress and equipment. Someone produced a Geiger counter and its ominous ticking rose to near machine-gun intensity as it was brought near the lead.

"Good—good!" said Dr. Barnett heartily and Layne turned away, wondering a little at the heartiness of the man under the circumstance. He had a sudden pang of doubt as to how the parents he had never known had come to be sent to their fate while Barnett continued to amass wealth and honors on Earth.

But then the scientist was taking him by the arm and leading him back to the helicopter, saying, "By tomorrow night the men will be withdrawn to form a circular cordon around the area at a distance of two miles. It's a good thing the district is so isolated. We'd have trouble in a more populated area."

"So," said Layne quietly, "would Odrana. No one on this world is quite prepared for anything like him. There are—differences."

"I want to know more about them," said Dr. Barnett. "Let's go back to Duluth and the apartment the Government has arranged for us. You can tell me more about them

while we are waiting for your friend to make his reappearance."

They ate and tried to sleep and waited and talked—and all the while the hour of doom drew inexorably closer. Dr. Barnett asked innumerable questions, his curiosity about the aliens insatiable. Layne, though he wanted only to be left alone with silence, since seeing Gail again was out of the question, knew it was his duty to answer them and did his best to conceal his irritability.

Finally it was time. The scientist gave Layne a squeeze of the shoulder and opened a case that had been reposing, its clasp untouched, upon the secretary. It proved to contain a pair of small cut glass bottles filled with a rare looking amber fluid. The scientist procured glasses from the bathroom.

"A farewell toast," he said. "This is something few on Earth today have ever tasted. It is a brandy laid down by my great grandfather himself. One of the vials for you, one for me. I'd have brought more—but it's all there is."

Layne felt touched. In a matter of minutes he would be on his way to the meeting place again in the helicopter. And this time he would not be coming back. For, when the *Pilgrim* reached the rim of the universe and came within range of the alien video globe, it would be his duty to fissionize the atomic explosives concealed in the lead. Only thus could possible invasion be halted.

"Your health," said Dr. Barnett and there was an odd gleam in his eye. Layne nodded, unable to speak, and drank the entire glassful. In a matter of seconds he found himself sitting on the floor, only prevented from lying helpless upon his back by the fact that a chair was directly behind him.

Dr. Barnett, moving swiftly, glanced at him and nodded. "Don't worry, young Layne," he said. "I may have failed your parents but I'm not failing you. I've had my life here—a long and full one. Yours still lies ahead—and as the first space born Earthman, you are far less expendable than I."

Layne sought to ask a question but his vocal cords, like the rest of his body, were paralyzed. The scientist, who was busily working on his hair with something from a bottle, caught his effort in the mirror before him and spoke again without turning his head.

"It will wear off in three hours," he said. "It is something new—a more efficient type of anesthesia. We have finally eliminated the

need for the needle." He worked on while Layne, whose mind at least was active, sought to understand the full implications of what was happening.

DR. BARNETT pulled what looked like a thin sheet of rubber over his face and turned—and Layne would have gasped had he been able to. For he was staring at a replica of himself. The scientist looked again at the mirror, then busied himself with donning Layne's overcoat and hat, which were on a chair near the door.

He moved toward the exit, turned to wave a final salute.

"Just a little thing," he said with a faint smile, "that I thought up myself. As for you, don't worry. Someone will be coming for you soon."

He closed the door quietly behind him. Layne lay there, helpless, trying to visualize what was happening from moment to moment. The magnitude of the older man's sacrifice impressed him more and more deeply. It was something that could not even have been understood by those who had brought him up on the distant world of Ptek in that strange universe where elements moved backward.

Somehow he was proud of himself for belonging to a race capable of such a sacrifice, for being able, in one short year, to understand it. He heard a faint roar from the distance and then he knew suspense. For if the second roar did not come at the proper interval it would mean Dr. Barnett had failed.

Though he could not move, sweat poured from him, drenching his body. He could see in his mind's eye the opening of the port, the emergence of the great crane to pick up the deadly cargo, the entry of the scientist into the *Pilgrim*. He hoped only that his mind's eye was not deceiving him.

He wondered if he shouldn't feel outrage at having his own role subordinated. But then he thought of Gail and could not resent Dr. Barnett's action. Life—a life such as he had never dreamed of ten days before, lay ahead of him. But only if the elderly scientist were successful in his masquerade.

Then, after interminable time, the second roar sounded—less a roar this time than the tremor of a distant quake. The *Pilgrim* had taken off. If destruction were to follow it would come almost at once. He waited, still sweating. But once the floor stopped shaking there was only silence.

He was barely beginning to regain some control of his muscles when the door to the apartment was flung open and Gail rushed in and was cuddling him to her and asking him what had happened. Layne grinned, found his lips could move at last and managed to mutter:

"He went for me. He doped my last drink."

He had no need to explain whom he meant. . . .

On the volatile planet of Ptrek, where Sclor and others were anxiously awaiting the return of the treasure ship that had come to them so mysteriously and unexpectedly some circuits before, a round blue bodied scientist kept his single eye glued to an odd

combination of mirror lenses adjusted to the refractive capacity of his own unearthly eyesight.

Beside him glowed a video globe.

"It comes!" he rasped suddenly in the strange dialect that was language to him. "The Earth-ship comes. Our salvation has crossed the rim of the universe." He turned to broadcast the great news to his fellows.

Then, as his triangular mouth opened to give the news to the transmitter by the video globe, he uttered a low whistling sound that was, to him and his kind, a scream of horror.

For in the globe the cigar shape of the ship had suddenly vanished in a brilliant burst of light that was more than his single eye could bear.

