

OCTOBER 1936

20¢

ASTOUNDING

STORIES



**GODSON
of
ALMARLU**

By
Raymond Z. Gallun

On Sale Third Wednesday of Each Month

VOLUME XVIII
Number 2

ASTOUNDING STORIES

OCTOBER
1936

A STREET & SMITH PUBLICATION

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Cover Painting by *Howard V. Brown*

Story illustrations by *Wesso, Dold, Marchioni, Thomson, Flatos*

Single Copy, 20 Cents



Yearly Subscription, \$2.00

Monthly publication issued by Street & Smith Publications, Inc., 79-89 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y. George C. Smith, Jr., President; Ormond V. Gould, Vice President and Treasurer; Artemas Holmes, Vice President and Secretary; Clarence C. Vernam, Vice President. Copyright, 1936, by Street & Smith Publications, Inc., New York. Copyright, 1936, by Street & Smith Publications, Inc., Great Britain. Entered as Second-class Matter, September 13, 1933, at the Post Office at New York, N. Y., under Act of Congress of March 3, 1879. Subscriptions to Cuba, Dom. Republic, Haiti, Spain, Central and South American Countries except The Guianas and British Honduras, \$2.25 per year. To all other Foreign Countries, including The Guianas and British Honduras, \$2.75 per year.

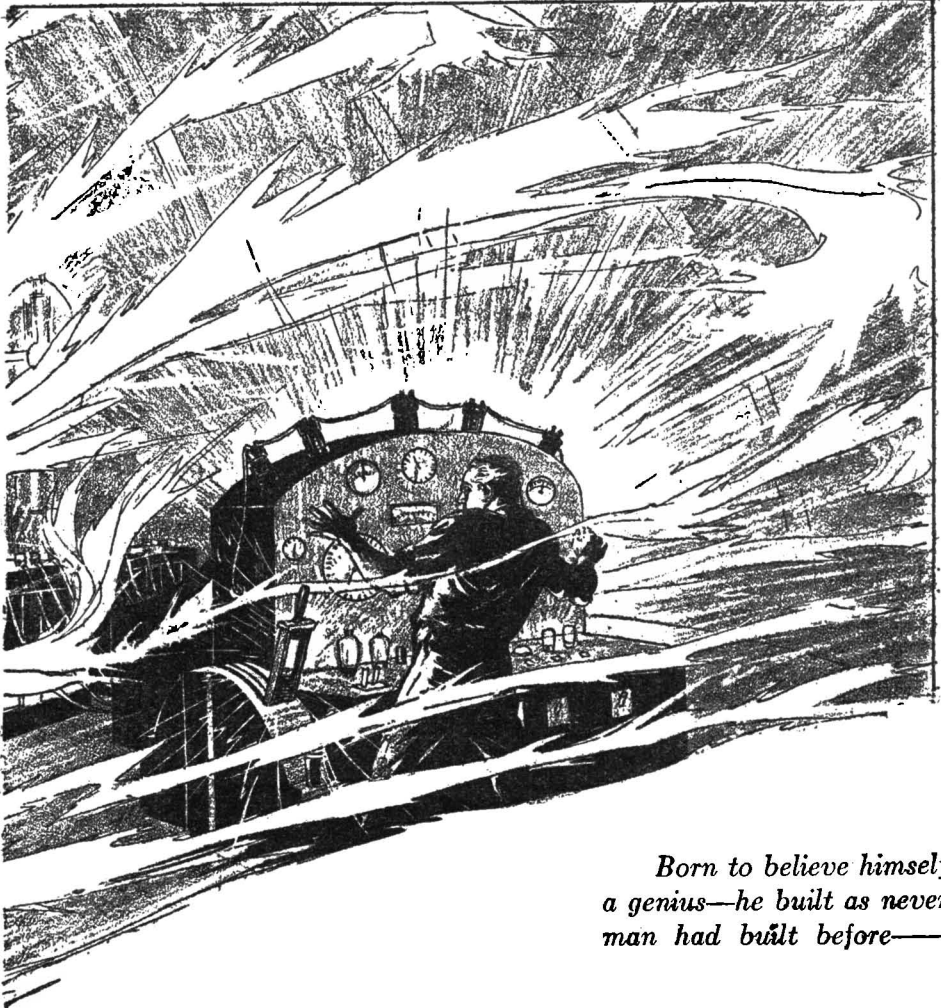
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STREET & SMITH PUBLICATIONS, INC., 79 7th AVE., NEW YORK, N. Y.



It was as if the Earth itself were breaking apart—churning lavender-lighted water—as if a thousand hurricane-driven oceans—



*Born to believe himself
a genius—he built as never
man had built before—*

Godson of Almarlu

A Novel of titanic forces

by Raymond Z. Gallun

WITH almost soundless caution it moved beneath the child's window. No one saw it but the stars. They alone might harbor some knowledge of its purpose.

Satisfied that there was small reason

to fear interruption, it arose from the ground, its five-inch wings of fabric and metal thrumming softly. Slender filaments explored the screen of the window, locating the slit which their owner had made in the meshed wire several

nights previous. Then, stealthily, the thing drew its slim length through the opening.

Again it took to its wings, darting toward the crib. It came to rest on the counterpane, and crept forward like some huge moth out of the realm of fairyland. Its metal antennæ groped over the slumbering child's forehead. The gentleness of its caress contrasted strikingly with its baroque form, glowing faintly phosphorescent in the gloom. Minute sparks, like electrical discharges, flickered about the ends of those fine, burnished filaments. But the child's healthy features remained relaxed in the dancing glow, and his breathing went on evenly. The house was still. None of its inhabitants could have known what was happening.

A half hour went by thus. Somewhere a clock chimed distantly. The visitor had fulfilled its mission, as, on other rare occasions extending far back into ages past, it had doubtless fulfilled other missions. "The ancient learning of Almarlu had worked its magic on its latest protégé. There would be no more unheralded nocturnal entries into the child's nursery after this.

The visitor left the room in the manner that it had entered. It rose rapidly toward the starlighted firmament—one mile, two, three. The air grew thin and cold. The visitor's wings folded, disappearing into slotlike sheaths in its sides. It had become a little projectile that shot with terrific and ever-mounting speed toward the region of the interplanetary wastes.

JEFFERSON SCANLON, born in March, 1934, did not show any early indications of promise. Frankly, he was a bad boy whose impish, freckle-faced grin was always an indication of mischief to his teachers. Yet even then it is probable that certain elusive mental phantasms, which he did not understand, and concerning which he never spoke,

occasionally came into his thoughts.

And when he left school he had a change of fortune. Somewhere within him a knack for business had lain dormant. Starting as a salesman for a company that produced television sets, he began his swift march toward financial success.

Before many years had gone by he had, through a combination of industry, good judgment, ruthlessness, and what seemed a phenomenal, intuitive foresight which his acquaintances found difficult to credit to a small, rotund, sandy braggart like himself, achieved complete mastery of the television company.

After that his progress was still more rapid. He organized a new concern under the broad name of Scanlon Manufacturing. His hunches always seemed more valuable and accurate than the advice of the staff of experts he had hired to watch the field of science and invention; and it was his habit never to scorn a hunch.

Thus he prospered. His company was the first to put out a truly successful rocket motor for planes. But this was only one of its many triumphs. Among them was the invention which made practical the transmission of electricity along beams of ionized air instead of wires; and then there was the electrolytic apparatus which could convert the potential energy of coal into usable power without the necessity of removing it from the mine.

Equally important was an extremely light and hard alloy whose base was beryllium, for it revolutionized transportation, ushering in an era of colossal freight and passenger planes, the dimensions and load-carrying capacities of which were almost as large as those of the vessels which had sailed the oceans.

"What I need is—er—money!" was Jeff Scanlon's watch phrase. Just why he needed it was a question which he seldom paused to consider. He did not

realize that his motive was quite different from the simple acquisitive urge which sometimes impels capitalists to amass vast riches. Nor did he have the remotest inkling of the colossal drama in which, by the prearranged direction of intelligences long dead, he was destined to take a leading part.

WHILE the great war of 1978 was going on, he was busy making Brandt flame projectors, synthetic fabrics, and other things necessary to meet the demands which the strained conditions of the period imposed. And he was also busy looking out for himself.

During the slump which followed the conflict, he managed, by a series of dexterous and sometimes shady maneuverings, to gain control of scores of bankrupt and near-bankrupt companies on five continents.

One of these, an embryonic German concern, interested him especially. Under the pressure of wartime shortages its chemists had developed really practical methods of processing organic substances such as straw, grass, fodder, and so forth, in such a way as to derive from them highly nutritive and not unpalatable food concentrates, quite satisfactory for human consumption. The process had vast financial possibilities; but Jeff's attention to it, for once, seemed more a matter of scientific curiosity.

Three years after he had taken over the companies, he had things moving smoothly and profitably once more. No other man in the world could have demonstrated the possession of resources equaling one third of his. Jeff Scanlon was financial dictator of the Earth. Perhaps he might have become its political master had he so elected.

Picture him then: Now well past forty, growing truly obese, and loving his Napoleonic poses more than ever. His small blue eyes had a glint that was at once benign and foxy. His wife,

Bessie, five years his senior, was the only person who could bulldoze him; though, realizing his peculiar talents, she never interfered with, or questioned, his decisions in money matters. Jeff had no children, but was devoted to a nephew, David Scanlon, who had a reputation for worthlessness.

Jeff's initial move, now, was to build a laboratory, of which he intended to make personal use. The circumstance was puzzling even to himself; for his actual knowledge of sciences such as chemistry, physics, and higher mathematics, was scarcely better than that of any fairly educated layman. And he had never developed skill in the use of his hands, as scientists must. Yet, since he was not a person much given to self-analysis, his puzzlement over his urges troubled him little.

He sometimes had strange daydreams, it is true—visions of un-Earthly waste places, and of incredible, broken desolation, which he thought of as existing somewhere in interplanetary space, still untouched by human exploration. On a drifting, airless fragment of a world in the asteroid belt beyond the orbit of Mars, it seemed to be.

In those dreams he pictured, very dimly, vague, broken things of metal, jagged rocks, and dazzling, depressing sunshine. And occasionally he muttered in his sleep, referring to life spores and to a substance of incredible weight. Once in a great while he even voiced with a sort of morbid reverence the name, Almarlu, without, during his waking hours, remembering more than a shadow of its significance.

Bessie, his wife, scolded him and laughed at him for the strange things he said in his sleep; but both she and he had grown accustomed to the recurrence of such incidents.

NOW, alone and unassisted, he went to work in his splendidly equipped laboratory, leaving the management of his

business to carefully selected subordinates.

And to all appearances the notorious Scanlon luck still held good. Within four months he produced an invention which he boasted was unequaled in the annals of scientific achievement. It would wreck the existing power industry utterly, but it would be a boon to all mankind.

His past success had been such that the populace in general was quite willing to listen to his assertions. The scientists, however, greeted the announcement of his invention with skepticism. But Jeff undertook to convince the doubters by inviting them to his laboratory, that they might see for themselves what his creation could do.

They looked in awe at the marvelous outlay of equipment he had collected; and their wonder deepened at sight of the strange, glittering maze of perfectly tooled glass, crystal and metal, which the little financial wizard, hitherto unrecognized by them as a *savant*, declared he had made with his own hands.

They were astounded at his lithe skill as he moved here and there, adjusting dials and levers, and putting the outlandish fabrication of his into operation. A luminous lavender haze collected around the brightly polished knob that capped the machine. A moment later a great electric motor several yards distant, whose terminals were attached only to a heavy coil made of a peculiar reddish alloy, began to whine out a song of strength.

The observers were inclined to suspect that trickery lay behind this demonstration; for the efficient transmission of electric power through the ether, without the agency of some conductor, either ionized air or metal, was regarded as an impossibility. They knew, of course, that radio waves could induce a current in an aerial thousands of miles from the point of origin of those waves; but it was a small current indeed, com-

pared to the one in the transmitting aerial. Most of the latter's power was lost by being scattered far and wide through space.

Yet when the scientists examined Jeff's motor carefully, and when they had produced a motor of their own, equipped it with a receptor coil which he supplied, they found that their natural supposition was incorrect. Their motor ran as sweetly as did Jeff's. It not only ran while in the laboratory, but it did so just as perfectly when removed to a distance of more than a mile!

Back in Scanlon's workshop, the learned gentlemen made polite queries as to the manner in which the miracle was accomplished.

The little financier looked a bit stumped over their questions for several seconds, so that they couldn't tell whether he was hesitant about revealing anything, or whether he hadn't a very clear idea of the answers himself. The first conclusion was, of course, the more logical; still, the puzzled gleam in his small eyes, and the heavy sigh he gave, seemed somehow to indicate that he had suddenly discovered an embarrassing gap in his knowledge—one that was beyond his comprehension.

HOWEVER, experience in handling people enabled him to flounder out of the difficulty in such a way that his visitors regained some small measure of confidence in him.

"You see, friends," he orated, "I—ah—couldn't really say much at this time. There might be competitors, you know, who—ah—might treat me unfairly. But I can give you a few facts. This invention of mine builds up a kind of potential in the atmosphere. Not exactly an electrical potential, you understand, but a potential which acts on the red alloy coils to produce a powerful electric current in them. It is just another case of one form of energy being

turned into another form. It's like the chemical energy in a storage battery being changed into current. So you see how it is."

Jeff Scanlon knew that his words were fact as far as they went. But egotistic though he was by nature, he couldn't quite figure out how he had ever built this wonderful apparatus without understanding it better. He remembered times when he had worked on it all night, with consummate efficiency and skill, without, at dawn, recalling more than vaguely just what he had been doing.

"Of course, gentlemen," he went on grandly, "my method of distributing power, though useful, is not so very remarkable. The source of the power in the first place is far more interesting. The supply, gentlemen, is practically without end. It is drawn from the kinetic energy of the Earth's rotation!" Again Jeff knew that he spoke the truth.

"How do you harness it, Mr. Scanlon?" a hawk-faced old fellow with piercing black eyes demanded coolly. His name was Feodor Moharleff, and he was one of the world's greatest *savants*. To his natural doubt of Jeff was added a life-long resentment against all capitalists, of whom the little financier was the most powerful that the Earth had ever known.

Jeff grinned like a mischievous, red-visaged elf. He was sure of himself now that his embarrassing moment had passed. He could give glamour to his incomplete understanding of the things of which he spoke, by veiling them in mystery.

"The energy of the Earth's rotation was harnessed quite some time ago, friend," he intimated. "It was done when man first made use of the power of the—ah—tides. Our planet rotates in the gravity fields of the Sun and the Moon. The attraction of these bodies raises the tides. But if the Earth did not spin, the tides would remain mo-

tionless and without energy. It is from the world's rotation that their power is derived, as no doubt you all know."

No doubt Scanlon's erudite audience *did* know, but they continued to listen patiently.

"However, there is another, more direct method of tapping the energy of this great revolving ball," Jeff went on. "I shall not explain it to you; I shall only give you an analogy. Think of the armature of a dynamo, spinning between its field magnets. The magnets resist the rotation of the armature; and the energy necessary to overcome that—ah—resistance, is converted into electricity.

"Think of the Earth, spinning in space, where an artificial resistance field has been built up. You see the point, gentlemen? The power used in overcoming the drag, must come from our planet's rotation. The law of conservation of energy states that energy cannot be destroyed, but must take another form, in this case one that we can use. Of course, countless ages would be required to reduce the Earth's rate of rotation appreciably, even though we might constantly draw enormous stores of power from it; for the inertia of so huge a mass of material is very great. That is all I need say, gentlemen."

JEFF SCANLON had spoken with an eloquence that even he found surprising. To an audience less learned, he might have been looked upon as some minor deity; but in the minds of the *savants* before him, there were still certain doubts and skepticisms that did not concern his statements so much as they did the possible scientific worth of the man who made them.

With the evidence of his remarkable accomplishment tangibly demonstrated, the scientists still found greater wonder in Scanlon himself. A small, bluff, money baron, who, until four months ago, had scarcely touched a test tube, suddenly proving himself a creative

genius? It was not only a phenomenon; it was impossible! Yet to all appearances, it was true.

But, in spite of that, there was a haunting disbelief among the scientists, and a feeling that all the cards were not before them. They could not know, of course, that perhaps a billion years ago the mathematics of far-seeing minds of another sphere had made certain astronomical predictions. Nor could they know that those same minds had evolved a cosmic plan which was slowly approaching fruition. That Jeff Scanlon was to be the pivotal tool of that plan was perhaps only a whim of chance.

"What are you going to do with your invention, Mr. Scanlon?" Feodor Moharleff questioned with brusque suspicion.

Jeff had apparently not even considered the matter, for he stumbled a bit in making a reply: "I—er—oh, yes!" he said. "You realize that I have plenty of money. I have no personal use for more than a tiny part of it, you see. So I'm going to make a gift to the world. I'm going to build an enormous apparatus which will supply every one with all the power he needs, free of charge!" Scanlon's sudden inspiration was truly a magnificent gesture. The faces before him, trained not to reveal emotion, remained stony, but the minds they concealed were dumfounded and a trifle doubtful.

SCANLON went ahead with his plan with his usual *sang-froid*. He gave radio talks; he interviewed newspaper and news-disseminator reporters. He built several other small power plants, and staged demonstrations of his invention in large cities both in the United States and abroad. The result was that soon hundreds of millions of people were ready to swear by him, body and soul.

In Jeff they believed that at last they saw true greatness of heart. As he had anticipated, money raised by popu-

lar subscription began to pour into his coffers in an appalling flood.

The popular contributions were necessary, for even the gigantic Scanlon fortune would have been almost wiped out by the project Jeff contemplated.

He worked with a staff of skilled draftsmen, preparing blue prints for his colossal plant. He allowed various scientists to examine the working models of his inventions, in minute detail; but he brushed aside their wondering queries as to its principle, with brusque generalizations. They could understand the thing sketchily; and though they were never able to probe out its darker secrets, they naturally assumed that Jeff Scanlon could. Which was untrue. He had made his models in a dream, though he had neither the desire nor the right kind of imagination to realize this fact.

An island, far up within the bounds of the arctic circle, was chosen as the site for his plant. Jeff had no conscious reason for selecting this location; he was prompted to do so only by that prescient mental phenomenon known as a hunch. And, in spite of the obstacles to building operations offered by such a climate, he was insistent.

A great fleet of freight aircraft, in coöperation with surface vessels that could pass through a channel in the ice kept open with explosives and thermite, was pressed into service.

First, a thick glacier had to be removed from the island. Then, over its rocky expanse, a vast foundation, three miles square, was laid. Above it a two-mile tower began to rise, coated with armor plate that would have stopped the hugest shell that any gun could have fired. Into a deep shaft beneath the base of the tower, countless tons of molten metal were poured, forming, when they cooled, a slender ingot that was like an immense electrode.

In every aspect the great building was far stouter, and more resistant to stress and strain, than any fabrication ever be-

fore erected by man. Into its interior, cryptic machines of vast size were moved, and bolted into position. All were connected with an intricate controlling mechanism, which Jeff, working in a state that was like hypnosis, had made with his own hands.

Two years of teeming efforts were required to complete the titanic assembly. It was by far the largest piece of construction work ever attempted on Earth. Tapered in graceful curves, like the Eiffel Tower of Paris, capped with a huge, glittering ball, it was a truly magnificent monument to look upon, rearing over the frigid wastes of the arctic.

II.

DURING the final months of the job, Jeff Scanlon had not been quite himself. Where he had felt cool and self-assured before, he had now become possessed of a feverish inner tension that drove him to haste like a lash. It was as though he were racing with time against some unfathomable catastrophe, of which he could grasp only an unrestive shadow.

For astronomers, probing toward the outer reaches of the solar system with their telescopes, had just seen some tremendous and unexplained phenomena in the vicinity of the planet Saturn. The orbits of all of its many moons, had become elongated in one direction, and its rings, pulled out of shape by the same unknown forces, were disintegrating to form a nebulous haze to one side of the planet. Gaseous Saturn, itself, was bulging ominously; and there was evidence of gigantic explosions taking place beneath the veil of its tremendous atmosphere.

It was as though some terrific gravitational force were being applied to the planet's entire system. But of any invading heavenly body that might cause such colossal distortion, or, in fact, any distortion at all, there was not the

slightest evidence. No faint speck of unknown identity had intruded into the pattern of the stars. And the utter, senseless ruthlessness of what was happening denied the theory that it was the work of an intelligent agent. Though there was no discoverable cause, it seemed rather a manifestation of the mad caprice of nature.

Finally something had come which was even more spectacular than preceding events. Titan, heaviest of all Saturn's satellites, had exploded, dying space with the red flame of its still fiery heart.

The people of Earth, however, were not too concerned with the announcements of astronomers; for such matters seemed remote, and unlikely to influence their lives in any way. They were far more interested in Scanlon and the mighty gift which was soon to be theirs. Quite naturally, a large quantity of receptor coils of red alloy had already been prepared and distributed, to be connected with various electrical devices. And even working men had planes which were intended to be powered by the new energy. For years private aircraft had been common; and now the heyday of their popularity seemed about to arrive.

When the vitals of the power plant were ready to be set in motion, Jeff Scanlon again did the unexpected. He made no speeches. He left word with the newspaper and news-disseminator people that power could be received in five hours; then he departed alone in his plane for the island of his greatest achievement.

TRUE to his predictions, the energy came on. The knob at the crest of the great tower glowed a beautiful, ghostly lavender that brightened the gray aspect of the polar summer. Machines everywhere, awoke to life. The human race went mad with joy. Jefferson Scanlon, who had been a hero, was now a god.

But he was a lonely god, hidden away in his artificial Olympus.

He saw no one, and no one could have pried their way through the walls behind which he was locked. Had he been asked, he would have said that fascination kept him there; and he would have believed that he spoke the truth. But he was in a daze. His subconscious waited for the proper moment in which to act.

Four times the Earth turned without unexpected incident. The power plant was a success. Apparently that was the only fact that any one was aware of. The weather was unusually sultry, but such trivialities were forgotten. There were freak storms and tornadoes. Earth's atmosphere was soaking up moisture, and absorbing Scanlon's potential. The ice was melting rapidly from around the island of the power plant.

On the fourth day some watcher of the sky thought he glimpsed a minute speck of dull reddish light shining in space; but the growing cloudiness of the atmosphere rendered a confirmation of his report difficult. In addition to his observation, certain peculiar tidal and seismic disturbances were noticed; but only a few scientists paid any attention to them.

Except for the dim unrest which these reports awoke in Jeff Scanlon, he gave them no conscious consideration. Only a keen knowledge implanted in the back of his brain long ago understood their mystery. And that knowledge was apart from the true Jeff, for it had never passed the barriers of his conscious mind.

Yet each bit of fantastic news had made a hidden impression upon him, and had stirred up and directed an equally hidden chain of cool, calculating thought, the result of which was an active response that bore an unerring purpose. And so, at midnight on the fifth day, prompted by what seemed to him only

an explorative impulse, he closed a massive switch which belonged to the controlling mechanism of the plant.

At once, hell broke loose around him. Colossal bolts, either of electricity or of something akin to electricity, flashed and forked through the great, vaulted chamber. Blinded and deafened, Jeff stumbled toward the switch, intending to break its contact and end the awful bedlam. But an electrical cramp froze his muscles and forced him back.

With a momentary and unnatural calm, he groped his way to a small window, to get a view of the outdoors, and to consider whether the situation was dangerous or not.

He soon decided that it *was* dangerous. The island was cloaked in ghastly, lavender light, far more intense than it should be. The whole scene, south, east, and west, visible from the window, seemed to glow with it; and the water of the Arctic Ocean, bounded by a ring of ice crags some distance beyond the shores of the island, was beginning to heave and pulsate in a way that was alarmingly unnatural, since as yet there was no wind.

Small, angry wisps, like miniature waterspouts, were rising from the surface of the sea. They swirled and coalesced, promising to grow swiftly until they reached cataclysmic proportions. The aspect of the scene was ominous to say the least.

THE SKY was thinly overcast; but a blur of light in the east, betraying the position of the hidden Moon, found its way through the veil. A momentary rift in the clouds to the southwest revealed a single, dully glowing dot of red fire, like the eye of a malignant planet. For no discoverable reason, except that he knew that that ruddy orb should not be there, Jeff felt fresh fears coming upon him.

The fat little man was frightened—not so much for himself as for others.

Had any one been able to look into his mind just then, it would have become apparent to that person that Scanlon had a heart after all.

He must stop the maddened forces that were running amuck around him. To fail to do so, he felt sure, would lead to devilish and far-reaching consequences. The giant power plant had overstepped the bounds of its normal functions, and had assumed other functions of which the true Jeff Scanlon had no inkling.

Such was his excitement that he did a very foolish thing. He seized a metal bar that was part of the detachable railing around the crystal-cased intricacies of the controlling mechanism; and since he could not reach the switch which seemed to be causing all the trouble, he hurled his improvised club straight at the governing apparatus, hoping that, if the mechanism were damaged, the chain of forces that were surging madly in the vitals of the huge plant would be broken.

The spinning bar struck the stout crystal cage fairly, though it did no visible damage. But, wrapped in lancing, coiling ribbons of flame, it seemed the rebound as if hurled from a catapult. There was no chance to get out of the way. The bar flew straight at Jeff, gashing his shoulder and striking him violently on the side of the head. His senses reeled into oblivion.

SOME TIME LATER, he regained a semblance of consciousness. The thunder and flame around him continued unabated. His attack on the controlling mechanism had not lessened in the slightest the fury which possessed the giant power house. In fact, new elements of terror had been added to the hell that had been unleashed.

The air was hot and fetid, and it reeked with the choking pungence of ozone. The great structure in which Jeff was imprisoned trembled and rocked

perilously, as if the Earth itself were breaking apart.

Jeff felt a giddy lightness, which may have been only a natural result of his recent injury, but which still might have a deeper cause.

Through the eighteen-inch glass of the windows, no familiar polar scene was visible—only churning, lavender-lighted water, crowding close against the panes. The entire island, and part of the tower itself, seemed to be submerged by an abnormal flood. From beyond the mighty walls that encircled Jeff, came a monstrous soughing sound, as if a thousand hurricane-driven oceans were breaking against them.

Mingled with the noise of chaos was the blare of a near-by news-disseminator diaphragm, bringing to Scanlon's ears, in disjointed fragments of terror, the story of a world being battered under the fury of outraged elements.

"Station XC-Delta, Flagstaff, Arizona, broadcasting," a voice shouted from the diaphragm, and it was like the voice of a man lost in a storm. "Cannot contact Station O-Gamma in Frisco. Last message from O-Gamma received ten minutes ago. Reported heavy earthquake—reported heavy earthquake; also tidal wave approaching city. Am trying to raise Frisco. Am trying to raise O-Gamma in Frisco—"

Automatically, the communication was broken off by the receiver's rotating selector disk; which, unless stopped for a time by a listener interested in any particular broadcast, kept turning round and round, contacting in sequence a large number of stations throughout the world.

Another voice took the place of the first: "Eastern seaboard under water. New York stations dead. No replies to calls from any coastal cities between Nova Scotia and the Florida Keys. This is Pittsburgh, Station NV-Theta—NV-Theta. Nothing from Asiatic cities for the last several minutes. Japanese

islands believed disintegrating. Trouble began coincidentally with the accident at the Scanlon power house an hour and nine minutes ago. Phenomenal activity of Scanlon plant still in progress."

Finally Feodor Moharleff came onto the air, presenting his theories coolly from a Minneapolis station: "Our friend, Jefferson Scanlon, seems to have tampered with something too big for him to control; that is, if this is not a deliberate scheme to bring the nations of the world to their knees that he may dictate his terms. What has happened is perfectly clear. His plant is drawing far more energy from the rotation of the Earth than was intended. It is acting as a brake, slowing our planet's rate of axial rotation to such an extent that its internal balance has been disrupted. The results are earthquakes, tidal waves, volcanic eruptions, and storms, all of a violence hitherto unheard of. The Scanlon Tower must be destroyed——"

THE COMMUNICATION ended, and more reports of death and destruction roared from the diaphragm.

Jeff, lying on the metal floor of the great chamber, listened to it all with a kind of fearful fascination. Several times he had tried to rise, but as yet there was insufficient strength in his battered body. He could only drag himself feebly to a corner, leaving behind him a blood-flecked trail, like a wounded animal. He sprawled there panting and perspiring. His thoughts were not of Jefferson Scanlon, but of the millions of human beings that would suffer and perish in the holocaust.

It was easy for one's imagination to fill in the gaps neglected by the generalized news-disseminator accounts, giving heart-rending detail to the picture of the calamity.

Without realizing it, Jeff had climbed above his egotism. The pettiness in him

had minimized. He reached out toward the stars.

"Heaven give me some way to help!" he screamed despairingly, forgetting the smug pride of his usual oratory.

His face was buried in the hollow of his doubled arms. His every muscle and nerve was taut. And his emotions were a driving, throbbing fury, whose sole objective was to lash his sluggish faculties to action that they might find a means to combat the hell which he seemed to have unwittingly created.

He could not stop the functioning of the plant. The lancing, roaring flames around all its controls prevented that. He could hope that attempts would be made to destroy his great tower; but considering the tremendous solidity of its construction, and the storm of forces that now raged around it, the task would be anything but easy.

Possibly it was the inner tension which possessed Jeff that served to puncture, in some small degree, the barriers which kept the storehouse of his subconscious memory hidden from him.

He was like a man beginning to recover from an amnesia that has been with him through his entire life. Things that had been implanted in the convolutions of his brain long ago came foggily into view.

He saw again, though clearer than ever before, that picture of unutterable desolation—a landscape that was not a landscape, for the ground did not give the impression of even reasonable levelness, like the surface of a sphere. It was broken and harshly jagged, like the mad, formless contour of a fragment of a shattered world. There was no air; the sky was not azure, but a hueless gray, like slate over which chalk dust has been smeared unevenly. There were sharp stars, and there was a sun of dazzling brilliance. This part of the memory was almost as vivid as if he had visited the place yesterday.

JEFF raised himself feebly on his elbows, a wild hope shining in his eyes. "They're wrong!" he said defiantly. "Feodor Moharleff and all the rest of 'em! A bunch of liars! Because—because they've got to be!"

Feverishly, Scanlon continued to review the memory picture. Interwoven with the shattered rocks that strewed the planetoid were twisted braces and girders that must once have formed the framework of buildings. And there were other things which gave more intimate hints of the lives and personalities of the creators of those buildings.

Pinched between two great lumps of stone, was a torn bit of pale-blue fabric, sheer as silk. Uncounted eons in the cold vacuum of space had changed it not at all. It seemed to be part of something else—something hideous and brown and dried, like a mummy. Crushed between the great stones with its visage showing, it formed one of the most prominent elements of the scene. It might have been human once; it might have been beautiful; it might have been capable of feeling love and hate and fear and tenderness, like any man or woman of Earth. But that had been a long, long time ago.

Not far from the withered body, trapped amid the conglomeration of junk and broken rock, was a large sphere, battered and dented in spite of the fact that, as Jeff knew from the memories that had been transplanted into his brain, it was almost solid.

In a hollow cavity at its center rested the intricate thing that was its reason for existing. The thing was not alive; it had no sense of being, like a man; and yet, in a way, it could think, as much simpler devices, such as the calculating machines of Earth, are able to think. Partly it was a clock, which counted the passage of ages as easily as it counted the seconds and hours. Partly it was a record of the thoughts

and preparations of a race that had perished; and partly it was the instrument for putting those preparations into effective action.

It could not move from its tremendous protecting shell, which had already shielded it from calamity unutterable; but piercing that shell was a small, cylindrical passage which provided a means of entrance and exit for the soulless, mothlike fabrication that was its messenger.

Jeff Scanlon, deafened by the mounting bedlam going on around him, and sickened and dazed by the pain of his injury, could still grasp much more of the truth than he had ever, previously, been privileged to see. The dim hints which had been given him in past years, and which he had consciously ignored, had now assumed shadowy meanings, though much was still hidden.

Gingerly, he raised himself from the trembling steel floor under him, and stood on his unsteady legs. Oblivious now to the blaring declarations of calamity which continued to come from the news-disseminator diaphragm, he let his mind rove briefly to other things.

He thought of Bessie, his domineering wife, and of his nephew, Dave Scanlon. But such human attachments were trivial. He thought instead of the ruddy, ominous little planet that had now come close to the Earth. Far out there in the region of Saturn, it had been too small to see; but, because of its incredible density, its gravity was something terrific.

"ALMARLU!" he muttered under his breath; but he knew, even as he spoke, that he was making a mistake. The red midget was not Almarlu; it was rather the insensate, unreasoning fiend that had brought ruin to Almarlu and her inhabitants. It followed a tremendous, elliptical orbit around the Sun,

returning from its prodigious plunge into the interstellar depths once in many ages.

"But hardly anybody even bothers to notice the things!" Jeff complained childishly. "They're too busy watching me!"

His brows puckered partly in vexation, but mostly because there was still so much that was veiled and mysterious. And so he continued to mumble to himself, as if, by so doing, he would be better able to straighten matters out. His words were halting and jangled, and his manner was that of one person advising another:

"Neutronium, Scanlon," he said. "Don't you remember? It's the heaviest substance that can be conceived to exist. Sixty million tons to the cubic inch, it's supposed to weigh, according to how the old-timers in the third decade of the Twentieth Century figured. No—ah—normal atoms in it. Neutrons. Compact, lying close together, with no space between. Dense as the devil. Certain stars—the White Dwarfs—are supposed to have quite a lot of the stuff in them. And there's supposed to be some at the center of the Earth, and at the centers of—ah—other planets. It could have collected there from submicroscopic particles of the dope floating in space.

"They're so heavy they could fall right through any other substance—right through the body of a man, even, without his knowing it—most likely. And our little red visitor from space is made mostly of neutronium—of compact particles called neutrons, each one of which consists of a normal electron and proton in contact, without any silly planetary electrons revolving in their orbits and taking up room!

"That's why this—ah—small visiting world has so great a force of gravity. Its mass must be many times greater than that of the Earth; and gravity is proportional to mass. That's why——"

Jeff paused in his monologue, and began to pace unsteadily up and down. His struggle with the memories that were his, and yet not his, had whimsically taken a new track. His scowl of concentration darkened.

"Why are you always thinking of life spores, Scanlon?" he demanded of himself. "Why can't you remember? And who made you the—ah—goat? That is—who gave you all your information? The machine on Almarlu—on a fragment of Almarlu? Fragment——"

He uttered this last word with a kind of blurred excitement, for it was significant. It started a fresh chain of probing thought, angling back over the loose bits of information he had covered before.

"Of course!" he said suddenly. "Almarlu broke up—exploded—to form the minor planets of the asteroid belt. Her people were wise, but they didn't know of the danger soon enough to escape. So they—they——" Jeff halted, and then leaped at a more significant piece of information: "Now there's going to be another asteroid belt," he stated, before he grasped the full import of what he was saying.

DURING the next few seconds his round face, already pale because of his physical injury and because of the strain he had been under, went ashen.

"No!" he shrieked. "No! It can't be as bad as that! The Earth is too solid—too permanent. It couldn't—break up! The whimwhams it's got will end some way before that happens!"

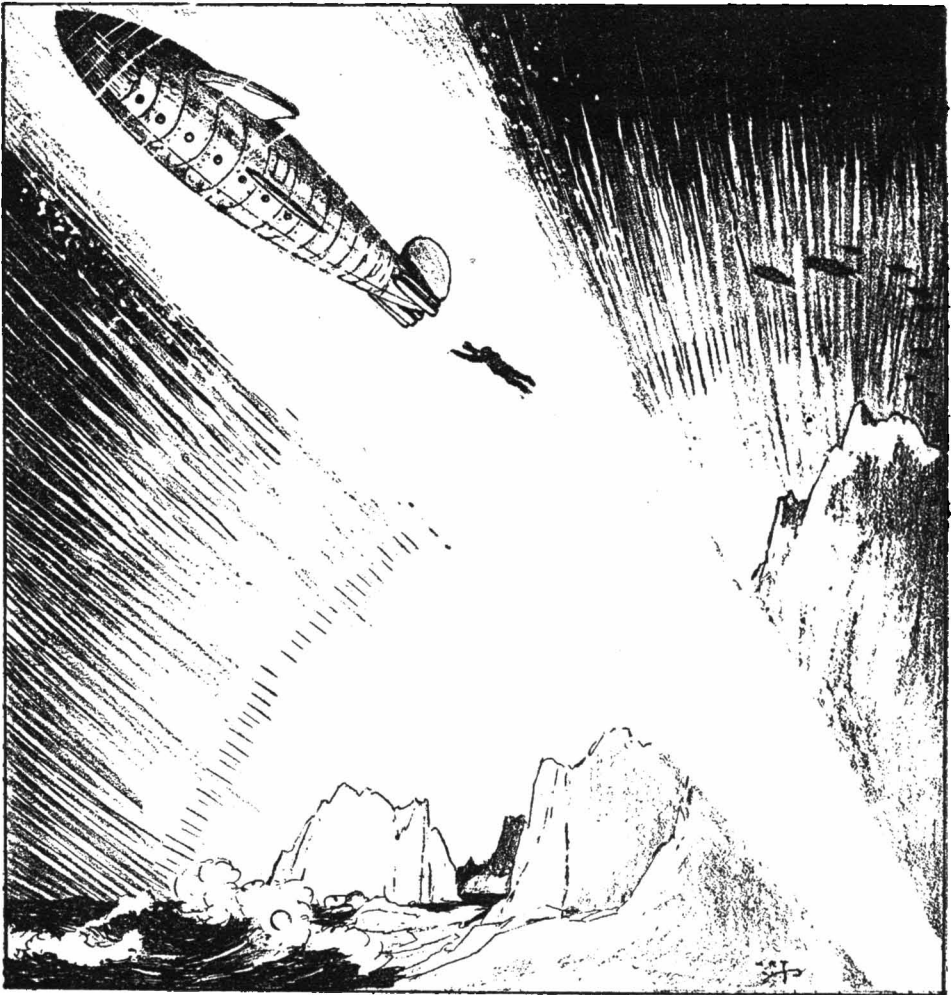
But even as he spoke he knew that he was only trying to reassure himself, and to deny the workings of an immutable destiny. They of Almarlu had made a mathematical prediction of the calamity an incalculable time ago. Then, too, Titan, moon of Saturn, had burst—— A giant of tremendous strength had gone mad in its vitals.

Jeff's dread suddenly vanished, and a great calm took its place. The progress of events was not over yet; it had little more than begun. Even now the earthquake temblors, which made the huge tower groan and vibrate, seemed to grow heavier and more frequent. But he knew that the plans of ancient wizards of Almarlu were fairly certain of fulfillment.

So far, in spite of their complexity, they had worked out to perfection. He glanced toward the crystal case which

contained the controlling mechanism of the power plant; and he knew that it could guide all necessary functions of this mighty marvel he had built. Several matters were still unclear to him; but there was one task which he must take care of. He must broadcast a message to the world. After that, his usefulness as a pawn would be at an end. Death for him seemed to be decreed; but, of course, that was too trivial to make any difference.

With some semblance of litheness, he



*No, he was not free—but shooting upward—ever upward—
along the slanting path of energy—*

strode to the microphone of the news-disseminator radio.

III.

DAVID SCANLON, favored nephew of a world's money baron, heard the report of the mishap at the power station, along with every one else. The titanic blaze of lavender flame around the two-mile tower of the plant had been spotted instantly by planes flying over the arctic wastes; and the news of the phenomenon was whisked over the world by the magic of man's science.

Radio, developed and refined to a point where static no longer interfered with transmission, continued to function as usual, blaring out reports over the vast news-disseminator network.

Conforming to the dictates of his nature, Dave Scanlon was in a night club at the time. The city was London, and his companion was a blonde. They had just arrived; but, true to his nature, Dave Scanlon was already bored. He wasn't worried about this circumstance, however. The music was sweet, and as soon as he got tight he'd feel better.

When the diaphragm of the news disseminator began to rasp, he wheeled around lazily and listened to what the thing had to say. The information it conveyed produced no startling result in the youth. The left shoulder of his tall, angular form, sagged a bit more truculently. With a reflective air he pulled at an ear lobe, and the sour expression on his face changed to a rueful, one-sided grin. That was all.

He turned to the girl. "Looks as though I've got a job, Evelyn," he remarked mildly. "I'll be seeing you some other time, maybe."

Evelyn made heated protests, to which no response was offered. Without haste, young Scanlon slouched his way to a phone booth. Once latched behind its soundproof door, he communicated with the local offices of the International

News-disseminator Co., and discovered that in the past twelve hours, no message had been received from Jefferson Scanlon, alone on the arctic island of the tower. Ordinarily, this information would have been no special cause for worry; but, under existing circumstances, it looked a bit suspicious.

Even Dave Scanlon had his loyalties. His Uncle Jeff was the object of one of them. He was ready to make any sacrifice for him, providing that conditions involved the conceited little man in real danger, and not merely in exasperating inconvenience. Dave didn't care whether Jeff Scanlon had inconvenience or not. In fact he had frequently been the cause for such inconvenience. But now things were different; they looked serious. Dave Scanlon was ready to respond to duty.

He made another phone call, this time to Chicago by radio. For secrecy, revolving disks at the transmitting stations, both in London and Chicago, changed the wave length of the carrier wave during every second of a communication; and other disks at the receiving stations, synchronized with those of the transmitters, retuned the receivers for each change, so that for the persons speaking with each other, the messages remained unbroken. But since the disks were hourly readjusted to a fresh wavelength pattern, there was small possibility that an outsider would be able to pick up the conversation.

AFTER A WAIT of only a few seconds, the youth was speaking with Jeff's wife, who, disinterested in her husband's achievement in so far as the technical side went, had remained in Chicago.

"The old nitwit seems to have got himself into a tangle, Aunt Bessie," Dave explained in a brusque drawl. "I'm going to try pulling him out. And now here's a little advice for your benefit: Stay where you are unless this thing leads to real trouble. I've got a

funny feeling that certain saps are going to get mad about what's happening. If they do, the name of Scanlon is going to be in hot water. Keep away from people as much as you can. If worst comes to worst, you could fly up to Uncle Jeff's lodge in Canada. It'll make a good hide-out."

"What—what do you intend to do?" Bessie Scanlon demanded.

"Oh, I dunno," Dave replied. "Take my crate up north to the island, and see what's happening, I suppose. The rest is in the laps of the gods. Take care of yourself, and don't worry."

Young Scanlon broke the connection abruptly, and ambled out of the booth. Just then he felt a perfectly perceptible tremor under his feet. Earthquake! Five minutes hadn't elapsed since the report of trouble at Jeff's island had come. Things were evidently moving pretty fast. Now the people around him were shouting excitedly and crowding toward the exits. He'd better hurry.

He got into the street. A cab, piloted by a driver with a scared look on his face, whisked him to the airport where his plane was housed in a public hangar. It was a new job, fitted both with rockets and with electric motors intended to draw their power from the Scanlon plant.

Dave got the machine rolled out onto the field. The receptor coils of red alloy were drawing plenty of power for the motors—too much, in fact; for Jeff's huge apparatus, having gone crazy, was delivering energy to the atmosphere at a rate that was in excess of normal. But this excess, for some reason, was not nearly as great as one might have expected. And Dave could overcome the difficulty it presented by moving a metal contact point, thus reducing the number of turns of the red coil acting to collect power.

The Earth was shaking with increasing violence at irregular intervals, as young Scanlon took off. He circled, and

headed northwest. A hot, unnatural wind, gusty and treacherous, was on his tail. But he had no intention of remaining within any short distance of the ground. The quieter stratosphere was above; and, hampered by little resistance, one could attain terrific speeds there. The cabin of his plane was insulated and air-tight; and the compressor-ventilator system would maintain an internal atmosphere of normal warmth, freshness, and density.

He pulled the joy stick back and nosed sharply upward. The roar of the rockets joined the thin screech of the motors. With all the majesty of some great meteor pursuing an inverted path, it growled and flamed its way skyward. The breathlessness of Dave's climb was dizzying. But at last she shot through the last thin layer of clouds and attained the cold, calm glory of the stratosphere. The ship leveled out and screamed on at maniacal velocity toward its distant arctic destination.

GRIM-FACED, Dave looked about. To the east, amid the clear, sharp stars, was the Moon. It was the same as it had always been; or, was it a shade larger in appearance, as if some monstrous force had pulled it closer to the Earth? From far to the northwest a thin thread of lavender light angled up, its point of origin concealed somewhere far beneath the cloud-wrapped horizon. At this distance it was impossible to study details of the phenomenon. And so Dave turned his attention toward the west.

It was then that he glimpsed the small invading wanderer from space, for the first time. It was a tiny, reddish crescent, luminous only because its surface could reflect a little of the Sun's light. A halo of gas clung around it, not fuzzy, as the atmosphere of a normal planet would be, but with outer limits that were defined much more sharply. A tremendous gravity had compressed it,

making it so. Through the vaporous envelope, a solid surface was dimly visible. Though scarred and cracked, it seemed otherwise perfectly smooth. It was as though features such as mountains and hills could not exist on such a world, for their weight alone would be enough to flatten them.

Dave felt the lightening effect of the invader's tidal tug, and wondered vaguely what it might be.

"Damned funny!" he grumbled truculently. Cynic though he was, the shadowy terror of the unknown was upon him. Then he shrugged to dismiss the feeling.

He put his radio receiver in operation, and for a while listened to the catastrophic reports coming from various news-disseminator stations. Now and then he attempted to contact his Uncle Jeff with his transmitter, but he received no reply.

Minutes passed, and hundreds of miles slipped away beneath his keel. The slanting bar of lavender fire ahead thickened and became more distinct, as the distance between him and it was shortened a little. The air, even here in the stratosphere, was growing bumpy. The Moon-silvered clouds, speeding past beneath, were denser than before, and the gray wisps of them boiled and seethed ominously.

Now and then a rift appeared in their texture, through which Dave could look down toward the Earth, far, far below. He could see nothing but inky blackness; yet his imagination was keen enough to picture a little of what would reasonably be taking place under those chaotic clouds—wind and blinding rain, sweeping over white-capped waves—for his odometer told him that he had now progressed far enough to be over the ocean.

And so he kept on, his motor and rocket throttles wide open, racing with the unknown, with the recklessness of the cynical dare-devil he was. At last

he reached the summer twilight of the arctic.

Piercing the chaos of the clouds ahead was the pyrotechnic marvel of lavender flame. Dave knew that it slanted down through the atmosphere, contacting the ball at the summit of the Scanlon tower.

MEMBERS of the Scanlon family were supplied with private wave-length code disks, similar in function to those used in public radiotelephone systems for secrecy. As he had done when he had tried to contact his uncle before, Dave inserted his disk into his transmitter, and called "Uncle Jeff!" into the mike. Repeated hails brought no response. This meant nothing, for Jeff might not have prepared to receive a private call now. And because of the rotation of the news-disseminator selector disk, it was impossible to judge what wave lengths Jeff's outfit could pick up at a given time. Any contact that might be made would be a matter of pure luck.

Meanwhile, considering his next move, he looked again at the great bar of livid luminescence. He judged it to be at least a mile in diameter where it disappeared into the clouds. It slanted toward the east, and gave the impression of tapering away and away into the depths of the sky, until its visible extremity vanished in the distance. It might be of the same diameter throughout all its length; but apparently it was like a huge lavender, silver-tinted spear point directed straight at the white visage of the Moon.

Dave shrugged. He had not the faintest idea of the thing's meanings. Besides, it was probably best not to waste time just wondering. If he could descend far enough, and get closer to the power plant—

He nosed his plane down sharply, and catapulted toward the churning atmosphere. When he reached the clouds, the furious wind struck his ship like a

hammer. But the momentum of its dive, backed up by the thrust of its propellers and the blasts of its rockets, kept the stout little ship on a fairly straight path.

Dave, himself, did not weaken. He clung grimly to the stick, with no thought of turning back. He had nothing to guide him but his instruments, and the foggy path of lavender light shining through the blasts of snow-packed wind. Yet he kept on until he had almost reached the point where that majestic enigma of weird light was rooted in the Arctic Ocean. It was hardly an ocean now, but a maelstrom of all the struggling forces that could convulse tortured air and water.

The scream of the tempest sounded even above the growl of the rockets. The world was a gray blur of whistling snow and booming, ice-flecked waves. And all that inferno seemed to converge upon that inclined pillar of lavender glory that looked like a Gargantuan vortex—like a monster waterspout magnified a billionfold. All about it the scene faded away into the dense gloom of the storm—a gloom that was like the blackness of infinity.

Dave, struggling to keep his plane from destruction, looked toward the base of the vortex, seeking the tower and the island on which it had been built. Neither could be seen. Both were hidden somewhere in the depths of that ethereal colossus that seemed to be sucking up the substance of the sea and of the atmosphere. It had a faint pearly tinge and eerie witch flames sparkling in it slumberously. Could Jeff Scanlon still be alive inside that unholy miracle?

DAVE had no time to consider the primary motive of his arctic adventure; for he felt his plane being pulled by the suction of the vortex. Instantly, he looped the ship upward and half rolled, completing a sloppy Immelmann turn. Then he opened up his motors and his

rockets to full capacity, and the tug o' war began.

For perhaps ten seconds everything hung in the balance; then he began to tear away from the whirlpoollike attraction. Instant by instant his velocity mounted, as he battled his way back toward the calmer regions of the stratosphere. Only the maneuverability and power of his little ship had enabled him to escape from what seemed certain death.

"Whew, that was close!" he growled when he had reached a comparatively safe altitude. "I don't dare get too near to that—that purple column again, even at this height. It'll be just too bad for any dumb army pilot who tries to bomb the Scanlon isle!"

Dave's ship was coated with ice. Once, during his climb, a gust of spraying water, like inverted rain, had struck its metal wings, and had congealed swiftly. The memory of the incident gave Dave an inspiration. Was the flaming vortex perhaps sucking sea water into space for some purpose? Was the pillar of energy projecting it, in the form of finely divided ice crystals, across the etheric desert, together with enormous volumes of air?

Young Scanlon was not a scientist. The efforts of his youth, most of it mispent, had given him only a very mediocre knowledge of such matters. He had little more than a good imagination to back up his guesses. Besides, his main purpose was to try to contact his Uncle Jeff, and to give him what he felt from the start was much-needed help. But the question of aiding Jeff, imprisoned in an armored tower in which devilish forces were obviously at work, had a doubtful aspect.

He did not quite know what he should do; and so, for several minutes, he cruised back and forth through the roughening air of the stratosphere, listening to his news disseminator. Coastal cities everywhere had ceased to broad-

cast; and there were few places even far inland whose stations were not dead. Those that were still active, reported dire calamity. A tidal wave, heralded by a mighty hurricane, was sweeping up the Mississippi Valley. A vast volcanic crevasse had opened up in central Nevada, and was spewing flame and smoke. And so it went.

AIRLINERS and freighters, having found temporary safety in the upper atmosphere, were still sending out reports. From the FMZ, a scientific ship, came the information that, according to calculations based on sketchily gathered data, the Earth had slowed on its axis, the time required for it to make a complete revolution having increased by two minutes, since the accident at the Scanlon Tower not so much more than an hour ago. Fleets of bombing planes, sent out by various nations, were speeding north, and might be expected shortly to reach their objective.

And over all the messages whisked through the tortured ether was cast a vindictive note directed at Jefferson Scanlon, so recently hero of a world.

"Damn!" Dave sputtered absently. He didn't know what to believe. His natural loyalty to his uncle made him angry at every one who denounced him; and yet the seemingly obvious evidence that Jeff was the maker of his own misfortunes was irritating to say the least.

"If the old fool thinks he can get away with universal murder he deserves everything that's coming to him!" the youth growled savagely.

Then, like a bolt from the blue, the voice of Earth's newly elected archfiend sounded from Dave's speaker diaphragm. And the tone of it didn't sound like the tone of an archfiend at all. Rather contrite, it was—rather apologetic.

"Jefferson Scanlon speaking from the Scanlon Tower," it said. "To my people

everywhere: Believe me, I am not responsible for what has happened. But no, I cannot ask you to believe that. Anyway, it does not matter. There is one thing I must tell you. Soon the Earth will be untenable. Within a matter of hours no one will be able to remain on its surface and live. The upper air is the only safe temporary refuge. Load food supplies aboard every ship capable of flying in the stratosphere. Load other necessities, including apparatus for manufacturing synthetic food. Embark and fly north, all of you who can. Approach the Scanlon Tower, and fly into the energy beam above it.

"This is my advice. You will think the last part of it insane; and you will hesitate to believe me anyway. But the time is not far off when you will be ready to do anything that promises some faint possibility of survival. That is all I will say. If I told you more of how everything that has happened came about, you would be still less inclined to listen to me. I shall not communicate after this, except with members of my own family. I shall be waiting for calls from them on our wave-length code. Good-by, everybody. Good luck!"

Jeff had spoken very calmly, without his usual, halting ahs. And his message was going out over the entire world, the impulses that bore it covering every wave length of the news-disseminator band.

IV.

DAVE'S first reaction to the tones of his uncle's voice was one of gladness that the older Scanlon lived. Then came doubts and deepened puzzlement. But since there were no available answers to the latter, his thoughts and emotions returned to the practical.

It was simple for him to contact his financier uncle now, with the code disk. He inserted it deftly into his transmitter. He thought of making some caustic remark as an opening to their conversa-

tion; but the memory of Jeff's strange, new humbleness checked the anger inside him. Somehow he was sure that to express it would be extremely unkind.

So he just said: "Hello, Uncle Jeff. This is Hiho. I'm above you with my crate. What'll I do?"

In making an answer, Jeff tried hard to suppress his joy at hearing the kid's familiar tones, and he tried to be matter-of-fact; but his voice was wavering and husky, and his words stumbled.

"It seems—ah—sort of queer that you talk just like ordinary, Dave," he said. "Everything else is—is so changed!"

"We'll skip that," Dave responded with a trace of irritation. "I'm here to get you out of your jam. What'll I do?"

"You heard my message?" the elder Scanlon asked. "And you have food aboard your plane?"

"I heard your message," the youth stated impatiently. "And I have the usual concentrated emergency rations."

"Then—ah—do what I said. Fly your ship into the energy beam."

"What'll happen to me if I do?" Dave questioned guardedly.

"You'll be carried to a place where you'll have a chance to—live," Jeff replied. "You can see for yourself that—ah—the Earth is an uncertain place to be."

"And where is this refuge, may I ask?" young Scanlon demanded.

"Well, you see I'm afraid that you'd think— That is—"

"Uh-huh," Dave responded. "You think I'd think you were plumb loco if you said right out in plain, clear English that the destination the energy beam takes things to is the Moon. I don't catch on to much of what this mess is all about yet; and it's true that I did have some bad moments wondering whether you were quite right or not.

But I have faith enough in my own sanity to believe what I see; and I've seen plenty in the last little while that I wouldn't ordinarily take any stock in. For one thing that purple column is pointing straight at old lady Luna, and keeps on doing that, in spite of her change in position."

"Then you'll do as I tell you?" Jeff demanded incredulously.

Thus challenged the youth was, for a moment, not quite so sure of himself. Cynical though he was, the unknown still had its terrors. But at heart he was a reckless dare-devil. And the news-disseminator reports of the convulsions that racked the tortured Earth cheapened the value which he placed upon his life.

"You're going to take your own advice?" he questioned.

"I—I can't, boy," Jeff answered solicitously. "I'm trapped inside this tower. Besides, my work is done."

"Your work is done!" Dave sneered. "Cut the heroics! Do you mean to say that you are just going to sit tight and let all this sneak up on you? Can't you even try to escape? Don't you know a few things about your own power plant?"

THE YOUNG MAN was very doubtful of his uncle's position. But he saw no harm in perpetrating a subtle bluff that might provoke the financier to action.

"There's something I could try, with your help," Jeff said. "I don't have to stay here. There's a controlling apparatus that takes care of the running of the plant—even keeping the energy beam turned toward the Moon. But I—I'm waiting for a call from your Aunt Bessie. And the planes are coming—the bombers. They can't do anything to the tower; but if you wait and they see you and find out you're a Scanlon— Well, you know how the world loves Scanlons."

Dave, who had been guiding his ship in a wide circle far above the power plant throughout the conversation, forced a grim chuckle. "You bet," he said. "If glimpsed, I'd probably be burned out of the sky like an unhealthy mosquito, just because I happen to be related to what everybody thinks is a louse. Which proves nothing at all about the justice and good sense of mankind in general. But have you tried to call Aunt Bessie yourself?"

"No," Jeff responded. "That is, not unless—ah—what I said at the end of my message to the world—about my waiting for calls from members of my family on our private wave-length code, may be construed as such."

"That was plenty good enough," said the youth. "I had almost forgotten. If she's still alive and anywhere near a news disseminator, she knows you're hoping fatuously for a buzz from her. But if she's got half the brain I give her credit for, she won't oblige you. Even wave-length codes can be un-snarled. If she happened to call you, and somebody happened to find out it was she—well, a direction finder would be all that would be necessary to put Bessie Scanlon in a hot spot. She never did like crowds, particularly crowds that booed and threw things."

Jeff gasped, like one who has just discovered that he has walked unwittingly into a place of grave personal danger. "I—I slipped up," he muttered raggedly. "I didn't remember. But you can't talk like that about my wife, you—you young scamp!"

"Oh, never mind that, Uncle Jeff!" Dave said with placating impatience. "I'm as anxious for Aunt Bessie's safety as you are. If she's still one of us mortals—and of course she's left earthquake-ridden Chicago if she is—she's probably listening in on us right now. Anyway, the sound of our voices never was so very important to her, even in a

pinch. She's as well able to take care of herself as the average person. We can't do anything sensible to help her out anyway. I'm getting a little bit tired hanging around up here, and being bumped around by this choppy air. What was that plan you had for getting out of the tower with my help?"

Jeff gulped fearfully, as he thought of the physical hazards of his idea. But when he spoke again his tone was firmer than before. "Wait exactly five minutes, counting from the second we break communication," he said. "Then fly into the energy beam. As soon as you are inside it you'll find your plane being thrust upward very powerfully. There'll be a lot of water and ice and wind around you; but I think that you're skillful enough to use such impromptu measures as may be necessary to reach the approximate center of the beam."

"Straighten your ship out so that its fuselage is parallel to the path of the beam, with its nose of course pointed upward. Then shut off your motors and open up your forward retarding rockets to cut down speed, meanwhile keeping on the lookout for me. I'll come sailing up behind you—quite helpless."

"The—ah—important thing is for you to stay in the center of the beam. If you don't, you'll miss me entirely, for the tower is at the center of the beam and I'll shoot straight along the latter when I escape. The energy path is more than a mile in diameter. There's plenty of room for a fellow to get lost in it. That's all, unless you have any questions, boy."

"Cryptic but sufficient," Dave responded with a forced curtness, for he was worried for his uncle's safety, and his nerves were keyed up. "More information would only tend to confuse. And now good luck, Uncle Jeff. Good luck, Aunt Bessie, if you're listening. I'm looking at my wrist watch. I'm getting ready to——"

"Count!" said Jeff.

Their communication ended with the snap of switches.

JEFFERSON SCANLON, in his mad tower, removed his head from the soundproof box which was used to cover the microphone of his radio when there was any noise to interfere with the exchange of messages. The screech and roar of the inferno that hemmed him in struck his eardrums almost like a physical blow. And his eyes were tortured by their reëxposure to the lancing tracery of stabbing flame. In the box over the microphone only a tiny pilot light had burned.

Weak though he still was, Jeff made his preparations coolly. An old smock, tied into place with a cord, protected his mouth and nostrils. Thus arrayed, he made his way up a spiral runway to a chamber two floors above. The small, portlike windows, set at even intervals in the curve of the trembling walls, were made to open by an arrangement resembling the threaded breech lock of an artillery piece.

Jeff worked the lever that controlled the lock of one. The pluglike mass of the window folded inward. With tearing force, a thick spray of water and air rushed past the opening, producing a howling sound, like wind blowing across the mouth of a bottle, though infinitely louder. Mingled with it was the sibilant scream of the tempest, and a crackling rumble which must have originated in the tortured bowels of the Earth.

Except for a few scattered drops which could do no damage, no moisture entered the chamber through the window. It was as though the speeding, inverted rain, aglow with slumberous lavender fire, was hurled on by too great a force to be deviated from its path.

Jeff tried to make his mind a blank,

so that he would not be conscious of the dreadful risks he was about to take. Then, drawing a deep breath through the smelly texture of the smock over his face, he got down on all fours and crept through the window.

It was not even necessary for him to leap; in fact, no such opportunity was given him. Before he was fairly at the outer lip of the circular opening, he was caught up and torn from his perch as if some aërial henchman of Eolus had seized him. His injured shoulder was pumped severely against the metal sash of the window, and his legs collided with painful force against the same obstacle; then he was free in that phantasmal hell of icy spray, and slumberous, cold livid fire.

No, he was not free, for he was shooting upward along the slanting path of energy as helplessly as a bit of steel sped through the loops of a helix by the magnetic force of the current passing through its spiral coils. The comparison was apt, for the power that propelled him at ever-mounting speed, would not be derived solely from the blast of wet air that rose around him. It was another enigma, entwined with the many mysteries of the lavender flame.

HE HAD KNOWN that his adventure would be like this, informed by the subtle intimations that had broken their way across the line between his consciousness and subconsciousness. Yet there can be a great difference between knowing and realizing.

Water, changing swiftly to ice, soaked his clothing and chilled his flesh. His wind was gone in spite of the protecting cloth over his face. His body was wabbling and gyrating crazily, until he wondered how it was that his senses endured the motion. And every second his velocity increased. Would he reach comparative safety aboard Dave's plane, or would he perish in the terrific cold

of space? A sinking terror fluttered in his heart; but after a moment it gave place to the calm of resignation.

He could look about now, sanely, through slitted lids, almost closed to keep the spray from blinding him. Everything was a luminous, streaky haze inside that slanting bar of energy. In it, coursing with him, were cakes of ice, and smaller objects which must have been fish, sucked from their normal habitat by the vortex.

It was perhaps odd that any part of his mind could think of Bessie, under existing circumstances. But he found that he could picture her now very clearly—tall, angular, austere, handsome in a majestic sort of way, and—caustic. She had laughed at his shortness, his fatness, and his Napoleonic pomposities. Always there had been in her gibes a hint of rancorless benignancy that made them all the more irritating, because it seemed somehow to emphasize the impression that she regarded him as being nothing more than a dandy little money maker, trivial and ridiculous and a bit pathetic in every other respect.

But now, for Jeff, there was a homely sweetness about the thought of her that gave his throat the tightness of a sob. He had called her "a darned old battle-ax" on more than one occasion; but now, with death threatening from every angle, he found that she meant more to him than anything else in life.

But while his mind rambled thus, Jeff kept his attention centered, as well as he could, along that vast Jacob's Ladder of un-Earthly magic that climbed into the void. Scarce daring to hope, he kept watch for Dave's plane. Thus many seconds went by. It was colder now, for he was nearer to the emptiness of space, and most of the flying water about him had changed to finely divided ice crystals. He did not know whether he could remain conscious much longer.

Presently, however, above him, and to his left, he glimpsed the bulletlike form of the ship he sought, showing like a dim shadow through the streaking, lavender-tinted blur. Its forward retarding rockets were spewing incandescent streams to check its speed, so that his hurtling body could catch up with it.

Almost simultaneously he saw, beyond the limits of the energy beam, many hazy specks of white heat, which he knew marked the position of other active rockets—those of an approaching squadron of bombers, he supposed; but he gave this distressing circumstance little attention.

AS IN A DREAM, Jeff saw Dave's ship edge toward his line of flight. He wasn't sure whether the movement his eyes perceived was real or just a vagary produced by his agonized wish that it be true. Drawn on by the mysterious propulsive force of the column of energy, he shot ahead until he was abreast of the plane. Its rockets now ceased to flame, and the two, the man and the ship, coursed on, close together.

The financier saw the craft's stubby wing tip slip inch by inch toward him, guided by the skillful manipulations of the pilot. The wing was within reach now, and Jeff grabbed at it automatically with freezing fingers. Then he began to edge his way inward toward the cabin.

It was easier to do this than one might have expected; for Jeff was, in effect, quite weightless, with the force that propelled both him and the ship, supporting his body. Nevertheless, in fulfilling his aim, he expended almost the last dregs of his expiring energy. But the door of the cabin opened in time; a pair of muscular young arms clutched him and drew him inside.

For several minutes after that, impressions were vague and fuzzy. He knew that he was panting heavily, and

that Dave was rubbing his limbs in an effort to restore retarded circulation. He felt under him the reassuring reality of the plush upholstery of the plane's interior.

Dave talked to him. He made wild answers, saying things about a world of the past—a wrecked world called Almarlu which had once floated serenely between the orbits of Mars and Jupiter, where, for untold eons there has existed nothing but a region of cosmic débris called the asteroid belt, or the path of minor planets.

Coherence came to his faculties without any fine dividing line between the jangled and the sane.

"What is this Almarlu, again, Uncle Jeff?" Dave asked. It was the first question which the older Scanlon remembered later to have clearly understood.

Jeff looked at his nephew quizzically for a long moment. "Well," he said at length, "it's hardly possible that you'll believe me; but—ah—you really don't have to, of course. Almarlu is the planet where all life on Earth had its origin. Her people didn't have time to escape when catastrophe came. But their science of—ah—biology was highly developed. So they created life spores, deriving them from their own flesh, and from the tissues of the various animals and plants of Almarlu. They put the spores in small projectiles and shot them to the still sterile Earth, where—ah—the spores became active, and through the well-known evolutive process, reached their present stage of development.

"Before their world broke up to form the asteroids, the people of Almarlu devised a machine which—ah—through the ages would now and then influence terrestrial life, guiding it and protecting it to a certain extent—though not enough to make it the emasculated puppet of an ancient civilization.

"I'm one of the tools of Almarlu, as maybe—ah—chaps such as Pasteur and Edison were, and as maybe the cave man who first made a flint spearhead, was. Everything I have done was indirectly the work of Almarlu. It was necessary if any one was to survive. Certain things were implanted in my mind when I was a baby; they came to the fore when it was time. More about Almarlu was revealed to me than to any of its previous godsons. So there you are, Dave. I've told you—ah—what you wanted to know."

JEFF'S NEPHEW didn't speak for several seconds. He was glancing this way and that, through the windows of the plane's cabin. The financier's explanations were not so difficult to believe, if what was visible beyond those windows was true.

The ship was clear of the atmosphere now; it had shot along that flaming path originating at the power station until it had entered the region of empty ether in which the planets float. All about it was the pearly haze of freezing air and of suspended ice crystals, borne on by the mysterious energy of the vortex, just as the plane itself was now being borne; for its motors had been stopped. Through that haze, the stars gleamed steadily; and ahead the great path continued on, tapering into the distance, to form a lavender dagger point directed straight at the pale face of Luna.

Far to the right, receding now, was that tiny red invader of ill omen, gashed and smooth and vapor-wrapped, going on to keep its cometlike tryst with the Sun. But it had already sown its seeds of destruction on Earth, starting processes at her core which only a wizard of physics could have probed.

"You're expecting me to call you a liar, Uncle Jeff," Dave Scanlon said; and his voice was vibrant in the strange new stillness that had come now that

the motors were stopped. "But I'm not doing it. Because—because what has already happened is so extraordinary that what you say must be true, too!"

"Thanks, kid," Jeff acknowledged, knowing that the caustic cynicisms of Dave had been temporarily subdued.

They looked back toward the Earth, a vast, bulging expanse beneath, the horrors that were taking place on its surface hidden by boiling clouds. And then they saw another craft—a huge bomber following the cylinder of flame and ice and air in their wake. Beyond the first were others, and mingled with them were several small planes which must have belonged to newspaper and news-disseminator reporters. The two Scanlons saw the faint beams of the leading bomber's flame projectors stabbing in their direction.

There was no time for comment. Dave leaped to the controls of his ship, and opened up both the motors and the rockets. Thus driven, the little plane raced swiftly away from its clumsy and somewhat less speedy pursuers.

"Uh-huh," Dave remarked. Some of our friends who were going to blow up the plant—the ones that the vortex sucked in before they knew what was happening to them. They must have seen your get-away, and are still able to remember that Scanlons are to be brought in dead or alive."

Jeff said nothing, but his plump face looked weary and old.

They did not speak for some time. Both were aware that the future held many uncertainties. But one thing was sure: Wherever they were taken, those warcraft crewed with angry, vengeful men, armed to the teeth, would not be far behind.

"Do you see what I see, Uncle Jeff?" Dave questioned presently. "The face of the Moon is changing."

IT WAS TRUE. At one edge of the disk the old, familiar features were giv-

ing way to others which were new, but of the same character as those which they had replaced.

And Jeff Scanlon remembered the meaning of the phenomenon, just as he had remembered other things which had been buried in the darker recesses of his mind.

"Yes," he said without excitement. "The Moon is beginning to turn more rapidly on its axis, so that now it no longer keeps just one face turned toward the Earth. It is like the armature of a great electric motor to which electricity is being fed. Invisible fingers of force are—ah—speeding it up, just as similar fingers of force are retarding the rotation of Earth. Energy is being transferred from one sphere to the other. Earth is the armature of the generator, revolving in an unseen force field established by the power plant; and the Moon is the armature of the motor, being turned by a force field of similar origin."

"I see," was Dave's only comment on the explanation, and it was matter-of-fact. "And now about ourselves. I gather that we've got some two hundred and thirty-nine thousand miles to travel. Won't we smother out here in space? Won't we freeze?"

"No. Not yet, anyway," Jeff replied. "There is air all around us, even if it is partly congealed. The hull of this ship has vacuum compartments to protect us against cold. Besides, the plant is still giving us plenty of power for heating purposes and so forth."

And so the two Scanlons tore on across space, following the path that Almarlu's science had created. There was little to do but talk and listen to radio messages coming from various aircraft. As far as they were able to tell, all of the ground stations had gone out of action.

One thing about the messages pleased them: Many people, driven by desper-

ation were following Jeff's advice. They were loading planes with supplies, and flying toward the Scanlon Tower. For some reason, perhaps associated with the lack of centrifugal strain due to the Earth's rotation, the earthquakes were less violent in the polar regions than nearer the equator.

Then, too, the tower, being located as it was, near the north pole, could send its beam continuously toward the Moon, unhampered by long periods during

which the satellite was far beneath the horizon.

But though refugees were preparing to use Jeff's plant as an avenue of refuge, the chance he had given them did not lessen in the slightest the fury they felt toward him. For he was still the man whose blunderings or designed evil had brought about the destruction of their homes and property, and the deaths of their loved ones.

The aspect of the future was black.



Adventure was at an end. Already the godson of Almarlu was turning over in his mind plans—plans for—

Both Jeff and Dave knew that they were facing almost certain destruction, even granting that they could survive the inanimate dangers which lay in their path.

V.

FEODOR MOHARLEFF, wizard of physical science, inhaled and exhaled heavily through his slender beak of a nose. A long sprint over ground that heaved almost as tumultuously as the waves of the ocean had winded him. Besides, a fury that would have quickened the pulse and breath of any man surged within him.

"The crime, Franz—the crime of this blundering dollar-chaser—— In no tongue known to man are there words to express its blackness!" he said, his thin, austere face working with emotion.

Franz, elderly laboratory assistant aboard the FMZ, small, scientific air cruiser owned by Moharleff, nodded impassively.

"It is so, sir," he replied. "But it is fortunate that we were able to rescue you from the crumbling wreckage of Minneapolis. You should be glad, sir, because if it hadn't been——"

"Glad?" Moharleff echoed, his bushy eyebrows arching upward. "If you had seen cracks open in the ground that engulfed streets and whole crowds of people, and if you had seen those cracks closing again like monster maws, and if you had heard the screams of the dying and had smelled the volcanic fumes and the odor of burned human flesh, you would never be glad again, Franz."

The great scientist leaned wearily against a workbench that extended along one wall of the cruiser's laboratory. The craft was climbing swiftly through the chaotic atmosphere, after its daring swoop to the tiny landing area that was, or rather, had been, part of Moharleff's suburban property.

"I am sorry, Franz," he said after

a moment. "I am afraid that I have shown poor self-control. No one should allow himself to become so excited, even when he has as good a cause for anger as I have. But you will forgive me, I know. What new developments have you to report?"

"Several," the assistant responded. "First, the Earth has slowed still further on its axis. The day is now a full five minutes longer than normal. Observations of the Sun's motion prove this."

Moharleff nodded, his thin lips compressed. "A continuation of the Scanlon blunder," he commented. "That nad plant of his keeps on drawing power from the Earth's rotation at an enormous rate, straining the planet's crust and stirring up its internal fires. And the other developments?"

"I have seen a small heavenly body, reddish in color, and apparently following a cometary path," Franz replied. "It is receding now, but should still be visible to the naked eye. I noticed it before, but paid little attention to it because of the pressure of other things. An obscure astronomer, named, I believe, Moseley, claimed to have observed some such object with his telescope when all was yet well. My attention was drawn to the thing when I noticed a strange tidal effect that the action of the Scanlon Tower did not seem to explain. It decreased the weight of objects very appreciably at the time of the visitor's closest approach to the Earth. And there is a puzzling aftermath which I do not understand at all."

Moharleff's eyes had narrowed with interest, and his shoulders were hunched. "Aftermath?" he questioned very softly. "What kind of an aftermath, Franz?"

"A fluctuation in the weight of anything," the old assistant replied. "It is a fluctuation that is as regular as the swinging of a pendulum. Here, I'll show you!"

FROM THE WORKBENCH he took up a spring balance, and attached to it a hundred-gram weight. Next he suspended the balance and the weight from a metal support above the bench.

"A plane in flight is not the best place in which to attempt such an experiment as this, sir," he said. "But our pilot has leveled off now and there should be little to interfere with this test. Watch!"

Very slowly, as the two men observed, the weight and the pointer of the balance, moved downward, then up again, then down once more.

"You see?" Franz questioned sharply after the several minutes necessary to complete the oscillation had passed. "If our nervous systems weren't a little deadened by the jars and jolts we have recently been subjected to, I have no doubt that we could feel the change in the weight of our bodies."

"Hm-m, interesting," Moharleff growled. "Only one thing that I can imagine could cause such a phenomenon: a regular shifting or swinging of the Earth's center of gravity. At times it is nearer to us than at others, and when it is nearest our weight is greatest. We know from Newton that the gravitational force of a body is inversely proportional to the distance from its center of gravity."

"But what could cause such a shifting or swinging?" Franz demanded.

The scientist seemed reticent to reply immediately. "Show me this small invading planet, Franz," he ordered.

The cruiser was flying now in the upper stratosphere. Franz pointed through a window toward a place in the deep purple of the sky, not far from the early-morning Sun. In spite of the intense illumination, the tiny speck of red fire was not hidden, for the air was very thin.

"There, sir," said Franz.

The object, as it appeared now, was

not remarkable. Mere visual inspection of it could reveal nothing but a very hazy idea of its position in space. Yet the sight of it seemed to arouse in Moharleff a chain of involved thought.

"Do you remember our experiments with neutronium, Franz?" he asked suddenly.

The assistant nodded. He had reason to remember, for he was carrying in his pocket, as a sort of charm, a lump of lead formed curiously like a piece of the common delicacy of amusement parks—popcorn. The lump had an interesting history: Once it had been an invisible speck of unbelievable weight, supported in a glass tube by the force of a terrific protonic bombardment. It had been synthetically made there by the rearrangement of the inner structure of an original fragment of lead. But, when the fury of the protonic bombardment had been increased to a point that its stable composition could not endure, it had expanded suddenly, changing back to the lead it was meant to be.

"All intelligent theory points to the existence of neutronium at the center of the Earth, Franz," Moharleff said. "There cannot be a large quantity by volume, but its mass must be tremendous. It floats at the exact middle of the planet's molten core, being held there by an equal, or practically equal, gravitational pull from all sides. Normally, the only deviation from equality of attraction is produced by the tidal pull of the Sun and the Moon, and this is comparatively feeble.

"BUT if something came in from space suddenly—something with a great gravitational attraction—something that moved so swiftly that no time was given for it to pull the Earth appreciably from its natural orbit—you can guess what would happen. The central core of neutronium would be drawn outward, through the molten substance of the Earth's interior, toward its crust. Then,

being so much heavier than surrounding material, it would sink back toward the center of the Earth after the force that had drawn it outward was lessened.

"Gathering momentum in its fall, it would not stop at the middle of the planet, but would pass this point for some distance, before it again began to sink, and in a slightly lessened amplitude, continue the process of oscillation. Its mass being so great, the neutronium core, moving thus back and forth like a suspended object brushed by some carelessly passing person, could easily cause the Earth's center of gravity to shift regularly, causing the increase and decrease that you have demonstrated in the weight of objects on the surface. You see how it all fits into the pattern of things, Franz?"

"Yes," the old man replied. "The movement of the center of gravity would strain the Earth's crust just as constant bending back and forth weakens a wire. Earthquakes would be inevitable. And, owing to varying air pressures over the face of the Earth, due to differences in gravitational force between one place and another, there would naturally be terrific storms."

"Nor are those things all that the list contains, Franz," Moharleff pointed out. "The moving core would stir up the molten interior of the Earth in a simple, mechanical way, too; though its action would go far deeper than that. Neutrons, compact and very heavy, can fall right through the tenuous structure of an ordinary atom, which is built like a minute solar system and consists mostly of empty space. In its motion the neutronium core would doubtless become diffused to a certain extent, not clinging together in one lump, for it is evidently shifted with a fair degree of rapidity and could not push other material entirely out of its way.

"Many of its neutrons would seek the shortest path as they moved, going right

through the fabric of neighboring matter, wrecking many atoms and causing them to give up their store of energy—a tremendous store if we may rely on calculations and experiments. Then, too, as you will remember, neutronium is something like the old-time explosive, TNT; it is stable enough to stand a great deal of abuse, yet it has its limits of patience."

FRANZ NODDED silently and impassively. For several moments the two men looked out of the cruiser's windows, occupied with thoughts of their own. A hell of heaving, writhing clouds was beneath them; but the Sun was warm. The little invading planet could still be seen very dimly.

"I wonder if we haven't an explanation of the recurring ice ages and periods of tropical heat of our geologic history here, Franz," Feodor Moharleff remarked presently. "Our ominous friend follows what seems to be a path like that of a comet, returning to the solar system at very long intervals, since its presence has never before been detected. Couldn't it increase the internal activity of the Sun at the time of its nearest approach, just as it has now increased the internal activity of the Earth?"

"The tropical ages would come when such solar activity was at its height, and the ice ages would prevail when it was at its lowest ebb. What we have been experiencing is not properly to be called an ice age; but this does not deny my theory, for certain factors inherent in the solar structure could vary the length of the period during which this mighty midget, whose main component is obviously neutronium, would maintain the Sun's fires."

"But why hasn't the solar activity been more violent?" Franz asked. "Why, during previous visits of its little tender, hasn't it become a true nova?"

Moharleff managed to chuckle a bit. "It is so very big," he said. "Besides, it is largely gaseous, while the Earth is made like a grenade, with a hard crust on the outside and potential hell within. Bodies like the Moon are dead; they have lost their internal fires and are practically solid, and so they have a greater immunity. Besides old Luna is a light world, with a feeble gravity; it could have little neutronium in its composition, nor could it collect much from the minute particles which science has recently suggested may float in space."

Franz hemmed and hawed for a moment, by way of an introduction to something which he meant to express—something that he felt was a delicate subject to broach to his master.

"Your mention of the Moon was fortunate, sir," he said. "It is invisible from here now, but I have seen it. Its rate of rotation is increasing. Its hidden face is becoming exposed. And you no doubt know of Scanlon's last message before he—he left Earth. He asked that every one fly north who was able. He asked them to enter the beam over his tower.

"The implication of his words is clear now, for several bombers were drawn into the beam together with a few news-disseminator planes. These craft report no discomfort among their occupants, and some of them suggest that other ships follow them, for there is some belief that they are being borne to a place of safety, in spite of the feeling against Scanlon.

"People are complying in many cases, for there seems to be nothing else to do. Perhaps we should follow them, sir, now that so much that is new has been revealed to us."

Moharleff stiffened suddenly at his assistant's words. His dark eyes blazed; the muscles of his face twitched, and his cheeks whitened with fury. But otherwise he maintained a deadly calm. He

had denounced Jeff Scanlon once, and pride formed a barrier to the retraction of his words. And then, too, the training of a lifetime smothered reason.

"No, Franz," he said very quietly and distinctly. "We shall not follow the herd—at least I shall not—even if the way leads to a real Utopia. What I have learned since my rescue has not altered my opinion of Jefferson Scanlon. I shall accept no favors from him, nor will I help him in any way. He is still a petty, self-glorifying capitalist to me. But you are free to do as you like. I can leave the cruiser in a parachute unless you decide to cast lots with me. In the latter case we will continue our scientific observations until the end."

But Franz had an Old World loyalty for his superior, as had all of Moharleff's employees, among them the pilot and navigator of the cruiser.

"My place is with you, sir," he said. "And I think I can speak for Gregory and Vladimir as well."

The little cruiser swept on above the boiling clouds, golden and sulphurous under the Sun. Red volcanic flames had begun to dye their chaotic depths.

VI.

"WE CAN LAND in a minute, Uncle Jeff," said Dave Scanlon who clutched the controls of their plane. He spoke matter-of-factly, for both men had, by now, grown accustomed to the appeal of the unusual.

Below them, sweeping by, was a desolate, ashen plain—a lunar "sea." Their journey had been made without incident, in a trifle more than twenty hours. During part of it their speed must have reached many miles per second.

Above were gray clouds from which thin, salty snow was falling very slowly—the first snow which Luna had known for an incalculable time, for both her

air and her water had been gone. Now a flood of both had been brought to her magically from Earth.

With a grinding thud the plane landed in the fine, dusty soil.

"Here we are," Dave announced without animation. "For the sake of our own skins, I guess we'd better hide this crate and then keep under cover ourselves, eh?"

Jeff only nodded.

They opened up the sealed cabin and clambered forth, breathing the brittlely cold, lung-searing air. It had been half congealed in space; but contact with the surface of the Moon—which until the arrival of the rejuvenating substances from Earth had been exposed to the fiercely hot rays of the Sun—had warmed it very considerably.

Behind the two refugees was a small crater with a broad ledge projecting from its outer wall. It seemed an admirable place to conceal their ship, if they used a little ingenuity of their own.

The slight gravity of the Moon made the task of wheeling the plane into shelter beneath the ledge an easy one. Nor, for the same reason, was the piling of scattered rocks to hide the gap under the projecting shelf of rock particularly difficult. And the fine but steady snowfall would swiftly obliterate all evidence of their work. The men left only a small spy hole through which they might peep and observe developments.

They ate a sketchy meal from their dwindling store of concentrated rations. Then Jeff indulged in a short nap, while his nephew kept watch. The elder Scanlon, taking the next shift at the spy hole, was the one who saw the first of the bombing planes arrive from out of the lavender pall in the center of the cloudy sky.

Like an apparition, sheathed in ice, it dropped toward the surface of the fantastic world. The growl of its motors was ghostly in the stillness. Things

fell with it—small objects which seemed to be refuse from the Arctic Ocean of Earth. Then it was on the ground, taxiing to a halt.

"Dave!" Jeff whispered hoarsely to the sleeping youth.

No other word passed between them for a long time. They could only crowd each other at the spy hole and watch.

THE BOMBERS appeared in swift sequence, until nine of them rested on the now snow-clad expanse of the plain. They looked strange there, with jagged, isolated hills and mountains towering around them. The several news-disseminator ships landed with them.

For an hour or so no other craft arrived. Then the flood of adventurous souls who had responded to Jeff's call began to appear in a motley array of ships, ranging from huge airliners to terrifically speedy sport planes. The caravan thickened after that until every ten seconds seemed to produce a fresh arrival.

By then, many familiar sounds were finding their way to the tense ears of the watchers: human voices talking excitedly, angrily, and very often in the wild tones of hysterical grief; shouts; clangings of metal; the baaing of a sheep from somewhere in the depths of a great freighter; and, from near by, wonder of wonders, the cawing of an excited crow! Some one had brought his black-feathered friend along!

People were moving about among the growing concourse of ships from Earth. As yet, few of them showed any signs of a constructive urge; they were concerned only with their emotions, and with the novelties of their environment.

Hours passed, and more and more ships arrived. The great blob of lavender shifted in the sky, substantiating the known fact that the Moon was turning on its axis more rapidly than was its wont. The blob of color was the only

visible celestial marker, for both the Sun and the Earth were hidden by the dense grayness above—the grayness of falling snow.

It grew dark as night approached, but it was considerably warmer than it had been at the time when the Scanlons had arrived. The Sun's rays, beating down on the opaque blanket of vapor and ice crystals that overcast the sky, had had its effect. Through the gloom, lights in the interiors of the assembled aircraft gleamed eerily.

Now the incoming planes were not landing close by, for, because of the rotation of the Moon, the energy path across the void no longer touched this part of its surface, but another part farther west.

A stiff breeze arose where there had been no breeze before, for, with the great interplanetary duct directly above, feeding atmosphere to the Moon, its burden had been scattered evenly in all directions, causing no wind. But now that this dead area had shifted westward the effect was different, as the flood of air and moisture poured over the vacuum of lunar sea and rille and crater.

MEN came past the Scanlon hide-out, grumbling angrily. The reflection of the rays of a flashlight which one of them carried lighted up their faces. They were strong, determined-looking fellows, all of them; weaklings had lacked the courage to dare the unknown, and had stayed behind, on Earth, to perish. Perhaps, in their mighty plan, the *savants* of Almarlu had considered the selective factors of these human elements.

"Death is almost too good for him," one of the men said with sibilant emphasis. "The blood of three billion people is on his hands, the little, stinking rotter with his crazy ideas!"

"Sooner or later we'll find him," another reassured meaningly.

Both Scanlons, crouching in their

hide-out, knew to whom the speakers referred.

Three times day and night came. It was much warmer now, and misty rain replaced the snow. Dave's and Jeff's lair would soon be discovered, for the fallen snow that concealed the rocks they had piled in front of their refuge was fast melting.

The lunar sea was dotted with many shallow puddles and lakes of salty water. But low ridges still provided ample camping ground for the Earthians. A few had erected tents, but most of them still preferred the comfort of the cabins of their ships. Some were now busy fabricating machinery—steam engines several of these devices seemed to be, their boilers flanked by huge mirrors, which, when the unsettled weather, incident upon the influx of air and moisture from Earth, came to an end, and the Sun shone once more, would collect and concentrate the solar rays.

Still other colonists were attempting to plant gardens in the ashy soil—efforts which were almost certain to be abortive under the new conditions. But by now countless pale-green shoots were peeping through the snow everywhere, promising soon to develop into a lush growth that would provide nourishment for such live stock as had been brought to the Moon, and at the same time offering a source of cellulose from which, by synthesis, a nourishing diet for human beings could be made. The green shoots were the sprouts of the ancient lunar vegetation, whose seeds or spores had remained quiescent in the waterless soil for countless ages.

On the fourth day the misfortune which the Scanlons had anticipated, occurred. Wandering bands of colonists had moved past their lair constantly day and night, preventing any chance of escape.

THERE WAS nothing very dramatic about their discovery. A girl of per-

haps twelve years suddenly shouted, "Look, dad!" to her father who was walking with her; and in a minute it was all over. Other men had come swiftly; the barrier of rocks was torn down, and though Jeff and Dave fought, they were swiftly overpowered. Half stunned, they were dragged forth.

Bound securely, they were tossed into the cabin of a plane. There they were left, presumably while their captors determined their fate. Wild-eyed folk who had recently been civilized, peeped in at the windows of their prison and exchanged comments in low tones.

"Well, I guess we're in for it now, eh, Uncle Jeff," Dave remarked with a crooked grin.

Jeff shrugged. He felt weary clear through. "Don't know that I blame them much, boy," he said. "If friends and relatives and homes are taken suddenly away from people, particularly—ah—when everything looks rosy, they temporarily lose their natural kindness, their reason, and their sense of justice. And if it looks even a little bit as if you are responsible for their misfortunes, you're just out of luck if they get hold of you. They're just mad beasts. I don't much care, though, as far as I'm concerned. I've done my job. The big shame is that you are mixed up in this mess, just because your name happens to be Scanlon. They'll probably give you the same medicine they give me."

Dave forced a chuckle. "Who cares?" he said in a laconic expression of loyalty. "What do you suppose the future here on the Moon will be like?"

"Well," Jeff replied, "my unsubstantiated guess is that there are at least two hundred thousand survivors here. Their—ah—descendants will live on the Moon for perhaps a few centuries or millenniums until their science has advanced to a point where they will be able to move to a more satisfactory planet if

they so desire. There will be hardship and starvation and death, but these things will strengthen them and make them hardy——"

For more than an hour the two Scanlons chatted casually. From outdoors they heard shouts and cries and low mutterings, mingled with the carrying tones of news-disseminator diaphragms aboard various crafts. The report of the capture of the supposed archfiend of a world was spreading swiftly, via the ether.

Then, quite subtly at first, the aspect of the altered lunar scene, some of it visible to the prisoners through the windows around them, took on a new, disquieting element. A diffused, ruddiness, like the glow of hot embers, spread itself ominously over the wild terrain. It came from the sky, from behind the dense translucence of the clouds, like red fire shining through a fog.

The world without seemed very still; awe had checked human tongues in their wagging. Only the smooth, muted rustle of news-disseminator diaphragms told that these devices were in action, waiting for some one, somewhere, to speak into a radio microphone.

But the Scanlons were not as awed as the other watchers, for their knowledge was more complete.

"Do you know what the red glow in the sky means, Dave?" Jeff asked.

"Yes," said the youth. "The Earth is—going." His lips curled as if he were in pain.

And then several news-disseminator diaphragms, belonging to receivers that were correctly tuned to receive the incoming message, began to boom. Others joined them, as swift fingers, working almost automatically, adjusted dials.

"CRUISER FMZ calling lunar colonists," came the message. "Feodor Mocharleff communicating. I must talk rapidly, for I have little time left. I have heard of the capture of Jefferson Scan-

lon and his nephew; and I wish to say that neither deserves death. Jefferson Scanlon is a hero, not a blackguard; for somehow—I know not how—he foresaw calamity and provided you with a means of escape.

“I who have publicly denounced him, tell you this, though I swore I would never aid a money king. But things have changed. One cannot see nature crumble around him, and not attain a broader, clearer view; one cannot see death approaching as it is approaching me, and feel that petty animosities are worth their pain.

“I have been a fool. If I had not been a fool I would be with you now, enjoying the same chance to live that is yours. Nor would I be sacrificing the lives of three of my loyal employees who are with me aboard the cruiser.

“We are in space now, in the energy beam. We have just left the Earth. But we can never reach our destination, for the beam can last but a few seconds or minutes more. Only the tremendously stout construction of the Scanlon Tower has enabled it to remain active until now.

“The Earth is exploding. The action is still chiefly along the equator. It is all happening with apparent slowness and great majesty. In a way it is a beautiful spectacle. Our old Earth looks now like a huge, rosy ball of cloud, gradually expanding around its middle. Molten rocks, like sparks of fire, are hurtling up through its cloudy atmosphere. Now a large chunk is drifting away into space.

“Neither Scanlon nor his invention is responsible for what is happening; though the latter, by retarding the Earth’s rotation and imposing a certain strain on its structure, was guilty of a guiltless fault—that of aggravating an already hopeless situation. A small cometlike body, with a tremendous force of gravity, is the real cause of Earth’s

misfortune. It caused Titan, moon of Saturn, to explode, too, as some of you may remember. It contains a large quantity of neutronium. There was also neutronium at the center of the Earth. There is little time to explain further, but there are scientists among you who can work out a theory.

“The energy beam in which we are floating is wavering and flickering. The jolts are threatening to break up the cruiser. The neutronium inside the Earth was caused to swing back and forth by the terrific tidal attraction of the cometlike invader. Atomic energy was unleashed from broken atoms. And now, finally, under the fury of that energy, the neutronium at the center of the Earth is expanding to form common matter, probably lead. A speck of neutronium, too small to be visible, would weigh several tons. So you can imagine. For every tiny speck of neutronium, several tons of lead, much greater volume. Terrific explosive possibilities—— I——”

THE COMMUNICATION broke off with a sort of twanging crash that had the sound of sudden death. The slender, elastic duct from Earth to Moon had snapped; and, like a fly roosting on a tautly drawn strand of rubber that is suddenly released, the cruiser in which Feodor Moharleff and his loyal henchmen rode was crushed by the contracting forces.

Everything now seemed deathly still. There was no sound except the sighing of the wind and the whisper of news-disseminator diaphragms. The people of Earth had respected Feodor Moharleff’s learning.

Then the Scanlons heard the rasp of many slow footsteps. In a moment they saw awed and sheepish eyes looking at them through the windows. The door of the cabin, partly ajar, was opened wide. No one cheered, no one smiled,

and for many seconds no one said anything.

It was Jeff who broke the spell. "I guess everything's all right now, isn't it?" he asked very mildly. His old swaggering, oratorical self was dead forever; Jeff Scanlon felt very small and lost and trivial.

There was a pause. Then a big, burly fellow spoke up. "Yes, I think so," he said. "And I guess you're in command here now, Mr. Scanlon." He offered no apology for wrongs done, and he asked no questions. Yet his words were an expression of blind faith which most of his fellows must have felt, too.

"No," Jeff replied. "We all belong to a democracy. But there's something I'd like you to do for me. Send out a radio call for my wife, Bessie Scanlon. I want to know if she came."

Several men leaped to obey his commands; but Jeff wasn't flattered. He was only a comic little man, trying to do his best. The bonds that pinioned him and Dave were quickly cut, and they were helped out into the open.

Timid questions were put to him, but he brushed them aside with brief and noncommittal answers, for he was too weary to attempt an explanation of ancient Almarlu.

There was a small girl near by, crying; while he waited for an answer to the radio call, he tried to cheer her up by directing her attention to a large

cat, greedily devouring a fish that had been brought to the Moon from the Arctic Ocean of Earth.

"No report from Aunt Bessie," Dave announced presently, relaying the information from a near-by plane.

"That means that she isn't here and won't come," Jeff said quietly. "Every one on the Moon would have received the call." And though he smiled as he spoke, he knew that he had loved her more deeply than anything else in life, even though she had often irritated him. But she had never, never been willing to obey his suggestions.

The sky above was much redder now. Meteors—fragments of the Earth—might soon be falling.

Jeff looked at the fernlike lunar sprouts in the damp soil; he thought of food and of sleep and of work. Already the godson of Almarlu was turning over in his mind plans for the future. Adventure was at an end. Tomorrow toil would begin in earnest. Jeff was pleased.

Dave seemed pleased, too, for he smiled grimly. Harsh fact had made a man of an aimless trifle.

And the long-dead people of another sphere might have been pleased also, had they seen the successful termination of the thing they had planned—the survival of the folk who were, in a sense, their children.