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# fantastic

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## ADVENTURES



**LAIR** *of the* **GRIMALKIN** by G. H. IRWIN



# fantastic ADVENTURES

APRIL 1948

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# LAIR OF THE GRIMALKIN

by G. H. IRWIN



Farar stood coolly on the tree trunk and sent shot after shot straight



at the monster's hideous head—and roars of pain filled the air . . .

**Earthmen had established bases on the  
planet Venus, and life went onward—except  
for the unlucky ones who ventured into the  
dreaded area of Granlor—and the Grimalkin**

**F**ARAR pulled up his native dug-out and strode up the trail to the big plastic bubble that was the compound of the Venus Mines and Export, Inc. He hated the place, but he was a hunter and the trail led . . .

Farar was hunting the greatest quarry any earthman had ever trailed. The Grimalkin was *not* a "legend" to the web-fingered natives who had told him it nested in the depths of Granlor. Granlor was a vast swamp called *Despair* by the earthmen.

In his hand was a .40 caliber Winchester rifle with telescopic sights which had cost his dead father a small fortune twenty years ago. Incongruously, slung at his belt was a frying pan, the web-fingers of the tall greenies were partial to frying pans. Across his wide lean shoulders cartridge belts were festooned, you couldn't leave the bright things around, either, they'd be stolen. And everything that had weight and came from earth cost ten times its weight in gold here.

Farar had a lead on the Grimalkin. One of the greenies had *yarvaed* him that a man in the mining compound had photographs of some Bunaes. *Bunaes?* Well . . . always found where the Grimalkin nested. *Yarva?* That's thought-talk, greenhorn!

\* \* \*

On Venus there were many areas still feared, uninhabitable, swarming with the unconquerable fecundity of alien life. Life-forms so destructive the earthmen had no weapon to meet their

threat.

In 2020, forty years after the first ship flamed down through the cloud layer, there were whole continental areas which explorers, prospectors and even army expeditions from earth had entered—never to return!

Of all the places earth-men had learned *not* to go into, the one most shunned was an area called Granlor by the green-skinned Venusians. On the error-filled maps of the difficult planet, it was labeled the *Swamps of Despair*, at the headwaters of the mighty *River of Doubt*.

\* \* \*

The man to whom Farar's trail led was a youngster of twenty-two named Hal Worrان. The pictures Farar's native *yarva* had mentioned (to Worrان known to no one but himself) were a series of color-photo shots of the Swamps of Despair. They had cost his brother his life, and he wasn't showing them to any but the right man.

His brother, before his death of acid burnt lungs, acids distilled by the flesh-eating plants of the swamps, had gasped out a tale of a mountain of platinum ore, of a terrifying monster, of a young witch . . . delirium, Hal feared.

But the pictures could hardly be called delirium, and they proved two of his brother's statements to the hilt.

They were filled with strange and dreadful beauty, those swamp scenes. The eerie, irresistible lure of perfumed, poisonous plants—sweetly bit-

ter blooms that lifted on their great mottled stalks of pale green—lifted strange cups of distilled acids that dripped slowly down the stalks and into the dead black water.

That black water rippled silently, heavily; under the ripples moved the gaping mouths of serpentine horrors; tremendous, unknown, destructive life-forms occurring in the fearful, man-shunned swamps; purple and gold and snake-god beautiful—but terrifically, venomously able to destroy. Heavy orchids leaned their faces to be seen with vague roots dangling white and airy, like ghosts of plants yet to be.

THE gigantic cypress of Venus, which is to the earth cypress what the redwood is to the evergreens—drips soft, grey, mossy limbs, and slow, dreadful air movements shift the shrouding mists. Here and there the cypress knees protrude like pointed, gigantic skulls, and the fierce lilies sway softly, their white and writhing pistils poised to strike their venom into any passing life—red are the lilies' faces, like shed blood—and their leaves are black as death. The great white horn snake coils and crawls, or poises waiting for prey. The dim white-green of the swamp is the most striking and prevalent color—the heavy mists join with the cloud curtains higher to shut out all light but a dim green radiance peculiar to the swamps called Despair. The projections fascinated Worrان.

"She lives in there," murmured Hal Worrان to the tall, lean prospector he had met but an hour before. Hal had let it be known he had a lead on a platinum vein, and wanted experienced help to pin the lead down. The man had come knocking at his door, tall, pale and diffident—but with the scars and tough, worn clothing of the jungle guide to recommend him.

He had been telling him of the legends of the swamps of Despair, of the beautiful witch said to inhabit the depths of the swamp, and to emerge periodically to bring her magic to the people.

The man grunted, smiled slightly at the foolish tale. "Nobody can live in there, Worrان."

Hal stopped the film. He changed the adjustment to make a still projection, inserted a tiny segment of film, snapped the switch.

"Notice that hill in the background, Farar?" The man had given his name as Farar, Frank Farar—born on Venus thirty years before. He must have been one of the first children in the first earth colony. Hal was glad that someone who knew Venus as well as a native had turned up. He needed this man.

Farar grunted again, giving his voice the nasal tang that only native Venusians use. Hal went on. "Note on the color film the peculiar deep black of the water. In the foreground the water is deep green. The hill itself is black as pitch. I think the whole hill is Polyxene! Platinum ore!"

"You think the water gets a stain from the earth of the hill, and that it is platinum ore. Water won't dissolve platinic oxide!"

"This water will. It's full of swamp acid, and some of that acid is nitric and hydrochloric. It's been analyzed."

"What are you telling me this for. You don't know me well enough to trust me."

Hal grinned confidently. "Listen, Farar, I'm not worrying about anyone fool enough to go into the swamp without certain things I've learned. He wouldn't come out. You either take me along, or you die in there. Get it?"

"I get it. You know something you aren't spilling. But I'm not entering

myself without proof you can stay alive."

"I've got proof right here. But I don't know whether it will scare you or not. It's a weird kind of proof—but man *can* live in that swamp!"

Hal bent over the projector again, taking out the fragment of film, inserting another.

"I clipped these pieces from the films brought out of the swamp by my brother before anyone else saw them. He was out of his head, kept talking about the Witch of the Swamp and I thought he was raving. But, look at the proof . . ."

Hal snapped the switch, and the screen glowed again with the unearthly, poisonously lovely colors of the Swamp of Despair.

**I**T WAS nearly the same scene, of the low black hill rising like the back of a monster out of the slow-heaving black water. But coming down the slope was a creature, too far off to be seen, and following the figure were a number of smaller man-like figures.

Hal pulled out the film, and put in another fragment. "Now gaze on this and tell me men can't live in that swamp."

"H'mmmm! Brownies! They are a legend of Venus, a dwarf race once supposed to dominate the planet, now vanished. I've seen some of their sculptures in ruins. That's the original dominant race of Venus, Worrان! *Bunaes* in Venusian."

"The girl is what interests me most. Just how do you explain her, Mr. Experience?"

She had passed in front of the camera for a brief instant, and Hal had clipped from the film the few photos where she appeared. She was twice as tall as her dwarfish companions, dressed in a torn one-piece garment,

her limbs bare and her white flanks spattered with green mud. Her hair hung over her small, firm breasts, her mouth open as if she were running, indeed if it had been enough film to show it, she would undoubtedly have been splashing along rapidly, for the water dripped from her legs and flew before her where her flying feet struck. The great lovely swamp flowers made a coronet about her dark flying locks, and the little men about her were looking apprehensively both ahead and back, as if fleeing in fear of some terrible danger which might strike from an unknown quarter; some danger which they would avoid if they reached a sanctuary toward which they ran.

Hal snapped off the light, the scene vanished, and Farar sighed—as at the dispelling of a lovely dream.

"Some girl, eh, Worrان! Wonder who in hell she is, with her friends the non-existent and extinct Brownies . . . Impossible but true!"

"That was the legendary Witch of the Swamp. You have heard the natives talk of her, now you've seen her photograph. You don't doubt your own eyes, do you?"

"That legend is a heck of a lot older than that girl was. She can't be twenty . . ."

Hal laughed. "If she can live in there, so can we."

**F**ARAR shook his head. "Those little people knew a hell of a lot more about this planet than we do, Worrان. She lives there because they show her how. The native Venusians don't go in that swamp either. Their big feet don't help them any against the swamp death in Despair. The mud doesn't get them, but the air does. It's poisonous; it *seems* alright, but it eats out the lungs, and then infection sets in, in the lungs. You ought to know what killed



your brother; you must have been told by the doctor why he died."

"I *was* told. You are right, as far as you go. But my brother lived a lot longer than usual for men who enter the swamp. He got home again."

"Does that mean anything?" Farar wasn't enthusiastic, but the reverse.

"He had with him a square package, among the other things he brought. I didn't know what it was until I projected his films. Did you notice anything about those little fellows?"

"Yes, I saw they had a peculiar pack on their backs. What about it?"

"That round device at the top of the back-pack pulls out on an extension, a hose. It is made to clamp over the mouth and nose, held in place by gripping with the teeth. I think that pack contains the secret of the method of living in the swamp. Those people are just like other humans, except for their webbed hands and wide webbed feet. And most native Venusian life has webbed extremities."

"So, suppose the pack does contain the secret. What about it?"

"I went farther. I had the contents analyzed. It contains a filtering medium with a dozen neutralizing chemicals in it—but none of the chemicals hard to obtain. I have had a half dozen larger duplicates of that pack made, and we can use them—to breathe through!"

"In the photo I didn't see anyone breathing through their pack. How do you know it isn't something else?"

"They were running away from something, and had thrown off the nose clamps to make faster progress. Evidently they can stand it for short periods, only use it when they are exposed to the air for long hours. That is what misled me at first."

"There's no way to prove your substitute pack is as efficacious as the orig-

inal without risking our necks in the place, I suppose."

Hal turned quickly, facing the lean, leather-coated figure, sprawled negligently on his best Harn-leather chair. "Look, Farar, I don't expect to make a fortune off that platinum without a little risk. Sure we've got to take the chance. If you don't like it, get out! I think the work on the pack is adequate. Only I know what is in it. You've got to do it my way, and you've got to stick with me. You're needed only for handling the wild life which I understand is particularly venomous in there, and I'm no crack shot. I can do it alone, if Venus contains only cowards. But I'd rather go in there with a stout heart beside me, in a man like you—if you have one."

FARAR grinned. "I was hoping you'd show a little spunk. I don't aim to go into any such pesthole with a ninny, either."

Spontaneously, they shook hands. "Just the same, boss-man, we could test one of those packs from the edge of the swamp by putting it on a highland animal and tying him in there for a couple of days."

"And if you find him dead, how would you know exactly what killed him?"

"Cut him open, if it's his lungs congested—you know the pack's no good. If his lungs are okay, then it was something else that did it."

Hal nodded, glad to hear sensible suggestions coming from his new-found associate. He was going to have him checked, just to make sure he wasn't a well-known claim jumper or other undesirable, but from the quiet confident eye and able air, he struck Hal as an experienced hunter, a man who had grown up in conflict with the alien life—and stayed alive where oth-

ers had fallen. Of the original colonists, this man was the first Hal had ever ran into who claimed direct descent from their number. Most of them had died without children, of one or another of the innumerable diseases and dangers of the alien environment.

"Look, Worran, another thing I noticed, the girl in that photo didn't have webbed hands! That means she is either of earth origin, or we don't know a darned thing about Venus."

"I wondered about that. But if you want the truth, I don't care if that hill isn't platinum—the girl looks like gold to me."

"She might know plenty about the swamp . . ." mused Farar.

"And she might have those little friends of hers put a dart in us, too."

"You plan to look it over with a heli—?"

"*I did.* You can't see a thing through the gigantic trees and the mist—gotta do it the hard way."

"I was gonna say . . ." murmured Farar.

VENUS contained, in this year of 2020, around ten thousand men and women of earth origin. They lived for the most part in plastic-shelled compounds around the mines of gold, platinum, radium, uranium and tungsten. Mostly they worked in the refineries or in the mines themselves, their living conditions were good but they were confined to the plastic shells of villages by the fertile and venomous natural life of the planet.

There were but two main ports where the earth ships landed and took off with the refined metals and those whose labor contracts were ended and who had had enough of Venus.

But on the fringes of this strictly mining population, confined by their shells in more ways than one, moved a

few hundred intrepid souls who dared to brave the rigors of the jungles, mountains and all enveloping swamps. These prospected, hunted certain herbs and rare animals and insects—or just lived off the bounty of the natives; some of them were squawmen. A squawman was a particularly despised type on Venus. The Venusian natives were a good looking lot—at a distance. But when you got close, they exuded a strong bactrachian odor, and their greenish heavy skin was covered with odorous frog-like moisture. Their hands and feet were webbed, and their lungs were adapted to breathing water for long periods—when they so desired.

There were a few hybrids about, curiosities, as the union usually proved sterile.

They were intelligent and amiable in the same way a Great Dane dog is intelligent and amiable—but it doesn't mean anything. He can't or won't read the morning paper, and he isn't interested in discussing the next door neighbor's cheating on his wife with that blonde.

So the native Venusians were looked down upon and disregarded, which suited them very well. The venomous fauna kept the earthmen from spreading over hill and dale, kept their numbers reduced to a non-irritating minority—there were no "native wars." They had watched the first earth ships flame down from their cloud-filled sky with complete equanimity, for a time had shown a flattering interest in their everlasting bustle—and then had put them in the category of the unexplainable—and ignored them, quite as much as they were ignored.

There were very few men like this Frank Farar, who had been on Venus long enough to know anything about the place. Or about Grimalkins.

The Venusians lived in stilt houses,

thatched huts erected on the top of tall pole platforms, and in the high forests of the two great mountain ranges, the Kolian and the Donan mountains—they lived in strongly built stone houses, to keep out the ground life.

Much of the wild life of the planet was reptilian. There were only two species with fur, and these were rats and a beaver-like animal. The heat was oppressive except in the mountain tops, and there it rained all the time. People remained on Venus only long enough to make a stake to get back to earth. But the mines paid the owners, who were for the most part non-resident, and men could always be obtained for high wages to make the trip.

**W**OMEN were at a premium, and a few enterprising men had shipped in several shiploads of young girls and established a colony. But the women languishing from an intense nostalgia, would not stay. It was not so much the alien ways; it was the lack of normal sunshine and green leaves, the gray fog, the everlasting rains, the gloomy lack of social life—they would not stay. The men had tried force, imprisoning them—but the miners had broken *that* up in a hurry. And on Venus you couldn't fight back against the miners; they were too hard to get.

So the Venusian colonies were a gloomy place of men and cards and whiskey and homesick melancholy, and little else but work.

Hal Worrان had come with his father, a mining engineer, who had laid down his life before a giant spider of unknown category, on a desperate foray into the jungle to break the monotony. After his death, Hal had been allowed to live in his father's house, cared for by the older men—until the arrival of his older brother—a mining

engineer just out of college. Instead of going to work in the mines, his brother had elected to take the longer shot at the riches of discovery of new and greater deposits of ore. It was this that had led to his death of the effects of the air of the great swamp called Despair on the earth maps. The Venusians called it Granlor, but that didn't matter. Nobody talked to the Venusians except a few like Farar.

Earth educators had talked idealistically of Venus when it was first reached by space ship—but after the first colony had died off, and the others had failed to grow, earth herself ignored Venus. It just wasn't wonderful.

But to Hal Worrان, Venus *was* wonderful! Every tiny crawling serpentine bit of life, every strange leaf, every legend of the past that circulated among the natives, every terrific angle and aspect of the unknown that hovered always over the landscape for him—was wonderful, and exciting, and forbidden by dangers for which men had no answer.

Hal had studied his brother's books with his help, and had studied in the library of the mine superintendent's big house at the center of the plastic shell encircling the "Venusian Mining and Export, Inc.," compound. Once it had been called Fog Paradise by an over optimistic planning commission. Now, like the other settlements, it was called by the mining company's own name, and all pretense of establishing a normal city was abandoned.

Hal had some money, left him by his brother's insurance and his father's savings. It wouldn't last long, but it was enough to finance one trip of exploration. He was going to shoot the works—after that he would go to work.

These films brought by his dying brother were all he had to go on, coupled with his brother's scrawled diary

of notes—they should be enough, he figured. If his brother thought that black hill was platinum ore—it was good enough for him.

**F**ARAR advised a long native dugout, paddled by hand. Nothing goes wrong with a paddle; you don't have to carry fuel. Farar brought two expensive repeating rifles, a .45 and a .32 with telescopic sights. Anything weighing as much as a rifle cost a small fortune on Venus, because of the freight from earth—and Hal examined the guns with proper appreciation.

"We'll probably need elephant guns before we get out—but I've found that a small bullet, placed in the right spot, is worth a lot more than a heavy slug badly placed. I never could fire a really heavy gun rapidly. And we're not toting heavy target rifles. Besides, we won't carry a darn thing we don't have to have. For instance, sidearms. They feel nice and protective, but when you get up against a really savage beast, they're inaccurate except at such close range that the beast will reach you before he dies. We don't want to go lugging holster and pistol around anyway; unless you're a dead shot with a hand gun; but if the dugout tips, they'd sink us. Like shoes, those high-laced kind you've got. Swell for snakes but if you fall in the water, like a stone around your neck. A light, hard-leather puttee is safer, easier to get on and off."

"I'm learning fast," Hal said, enthusiastically discarding both shoes and heavy .45 revolver and cartridge belt.

"I've got a snake serum kit that will do for the known kinds. But the kind we'll run into in Despair are unknown, probably, and it won't help much. So don't get bitten! A paddle or club is better than a gun against a snake, anyway."

"You've got a mess of photographic equipment. I'd suggest leaving it. Dragging that stuff around maybe didn't kill your brother, but it helped. All we want is some of that nice black dirt, and some snapshots of the area it covers."

"Go in light and fast in the dugout, come out quick with the samples. Carry nothing we don't need absolutely. Right, Frank. You sound like sense.

"We've got to carry sleeping hammocks, sleeping nets to cover 'em. We'll probably have to sling 'em twenty feet from the ground and tie ourselves in, but we can rest as long as we keep our hammocks and nets. We can kill most of our food; there's plenty of it. So we don't tote a lot of grub. Just flour and grease, salt and etc. I'll show you how to live in a Venusian jungle. I've traveled from the Kolian peaks clear along the rims of the Sunon sea to Param, across the hills there to the big water, up along the beach to Venusport—and nothing but a rifle and a frying pan. Enjoyed it, too! Except for sleeping! I *never* get used to tying myself in the crotch of a tree. Makes me stiff . . ."

**H**AL laughed. He had the man he wanted, right enough. Probably not another man on the planet knew how to live in the forests and swamps that the native Venusians found so hospitable. Hal rubbed his hands together with excitement. Frank pointed at his hands—

"Another thing. *Don't get excited!* Not for *any* reason. In a pinch, *you only get excited once.* Just learn to hold that pulse down; it's easily learned; keep trying."

"Why do all these other guys who try such stunts turn up dead?"

"You mean they just don't turn up.



Because they get excited, forget to watch every little thing. An insect no bigger than your finger can kill you—if it's the right insect. You've got to see everything, and not take a step till you do. That gets to be a habit, and a habit you change at your peril. They just didn't have the knack of looking at everything in front of them before they walked into it. I'll bet the spider that killed your dad could have been seen if he'd been looking for it. *But he wasn't looking!*"

"You know what worries me most, Frank?"

"Whether that gal will speak to you, I suppose. Or turn up her nose. Girls are scarce enough on Venus to make a guy go into Despair, hah!"

"No, not that. If those little guys with her are what you think they are, the original dominants of Venus, the boys that built the ruins that are so darn un-understandable—*they know plenty we don't!* They're liable to turn loose on us with something we can't handle . . ."

"They don't worry me. Not if they have the same character the big natives do." No use telling Hal what he really knew. Only worry him.

"It's not their character. But what wiped 'em out? What are they running from in the photograph? Is the old original threat that killed them off still waiting around to pounce on us when we show . . ."

"You know what worries me the most, thinking ahead?"

"Whether I'm wrong about what an outcrop of Polyxene ore looks like?"

"No, money doesn't mean so much to me as you'd think. I ain't crazy to get to earth; I've never been there. What worries me is a plain ordinary little wren."

"A wren!"

"Yeah, a wren! When I get near

one, she lets go with a rattle, and I think it's a big rattlesnake. Then I can't see the rattlesnake. Then I get excited because I can't find the snake—and the wren flies up in my face, and my hands shake. Those little birds worry me . . ."

"I didn't know they had wrens and rattlesnakes on Venus."

"Well, I wouldn't know even whether they *are* wrens and rattlesnakes. I only learned what they were looking them up in books from earth. They're the same thing but different colored. For instance the Venusian rattlesnake has his rattles all along his side, like sleigh bells along a harness. And I never saw a sleigh, or snow. The wren has a big red crest she shoots up when she flies in your face. But as near as I could learn they're pretty near the same . . ."

"Just the same, only different. Like everything else here, translated through a million years of variant environment, the similar life forms are far from similar."

"I'd probably get knocked off in a Terran forest by something you wouldn't even worry about. Like the tigers I've read about. I never saw one. I'd think it was an overgrown house cat, or something."

"I never saw one either, Frank. I came here when I was fourteen."

"Heck, you're an old settler! Aren't many stayed here more than three years."

THE men were interrupted in their preparations by a knock on the door. Hal opened the door upon a stooped grey figure.

"Another old settler, Hal," said Farar over his shoulder. "The doc has been around pretty near as long as I have. He gave me castor oil when I was a kid."

"Doctor Allan," cried Hal. "I'm glad to see you! Come in, come in!"

The old man came in, moving his limbs painfully. Sometime he had acquired what was called Venusian paralysis, due to the inroads of a parasite which made its home in the nerves. He moved by jerks but fairly rapidly. He sat down, putting his hands together on the head of his cane and looking at each of them carefully, his head jerking back and forth.

"Something on your mind, doctor?" asked Hal. He admired the old man, who had remained here, he knew, only to learn from the opportunities the alien life presented—and not from any preference for the climate.

"I came to forbid you this trip," Doctor Allan mumbled, his speech had been affected. Hal was used to his infirmities. "But seeing this tall jungle ape here with you, I withdraw my protests. If he goes along you have a chance. I never heard of any human coming out of that swamp alive but your brother. And he died."

Hal showed the old man his breathing-pack, explained why they had a chance to stay alive.

"Only thing is, how long does this neutralizing effect last—how strong is that harmful acid in the air? You don't know. I'd take a dozen refills for the pack, so that when the contents are exhausted, you can replace the chemicals."

Farar groaned. "We're traveling light, doc."

"I said *take it along!* Your canoe will carry you—and *the packs*. If you lose either one, you won't get back anyway."

"I have them made up; if you want the formula for your files, doc, I'll give it to you on condition that you don't divulge it till I am given up for lost."

"S'another thing. About that pack,

who made it up for you? Does the party know what you are going in for, and where you are going?"

"No. I told them nothing specific about my plans. They don't know what the chemicals are intended for."

"If they knew where you're heading, and why—they might give you phony packs and then jump your claims after you're dead. But they don't. I don't trust anybody any more, not where a fortune is concerned."

"How'd you know I was after a fortune?"

"Why else would you get ready to enter Despair?"

"Show the doc your films, Worran. You can trust him, if you can trust anyone."

The old doc sat and jerked his limbs through the little show. When it was over, he said: "I'd give my right arm, aye, and a leg, to go along and see that place. Bring me some specimens, too, for my collection, Hal."

THE old man collected every freakish example of Venusian life, his house was a veritable museum of zoölogy Venusian. He was an authority on the subject, the only one of any importance who had spent an adult lifetime on the planet.

He got painfully to his feet, shaking his head in affected sorrow over their imminent demise. "I'll send flowers, orchids!"

Hal *was* glad the old man had come. It served to recommend the character of the tall Frank Farar, whom he had not known previously. If Doc Allen did not warn him against him, he was okay for his book.

"Orchids for brave men, worse luck. It's a *sheol* of a planet, boys, be careful—and bring back specimens in nice dry moss—I don't want any mouldy messes like some bring."

The old man jerked his unwieldy limbs away out the door and across the dark, sterile soil of the compound. Hal looked up at the gray plastic, over which the rain was pouring outside. Gray, mournful clouds pressing down, the falling rain, an occasional wide-winged scarlet bird crashing against the transparent obstacle overhead. He shut the door.

Farar raised the glass he had just filled.

*"To the defeat of Despair!"*

## CHAPTER II

FOR weeks they had paddled up the wide *River of Doubt*. The natives called it the Granlee, which had some connection with its source in the swamplands they called the Granlor. The earthmen had renamed it the "River of Doubt," because anyone who went up it might entertain grave doubts of coming back down again.

Wide as the Amazon of earth, the Granlee was sluggish, titanic in strength, tremendous in flood-time twice a year, just now shrunk to half its flood size. Occasionally gigantic tree trunks drifted down past their dug-out, a slender trunk of young cypress hollowed out by the natives with fire and stone axe. It was nicely balanced, and Farar had attached his own concept of an outrigger, with improvements enabling quick dismantling for passage through narrow places. Their baggage was reduced to the irreducible minimum; one hundred-pound packs, their rifles and ammunition. Each carried a machete from earth slung to their belt—and that was all.

Day after day the grey-green dripping walls of the jungle slid past, and night after night they moored the dug-out, sleeping in the bottom with the dugout drifting at the end of a hun-

dred feet of line. Farar always chose a place where they could moor and the current would keep them swinging in a short arc, rather than sweep them ashore. He apparently preferred the dangers of the swimming denizens to the attacks of those which prowled the shore.

"Taint natural for the big fellows in the water to attack a boat. Never heard of it. They can't smell you—especially earth people; we don't have a smell they can place. But on shore, a guy snores—they hear him, and come from all directions, crawling, flying, or just oozing—to see what's up."

Hal liked sleeping in the boat better himself. They could see what waited and followed them along the banks; the great carnivorous grey-striped red land eels with strong bodies twenty feet long, and powerful walking legs, who had evolved far beyond the amphibious stage of the earth eel; the tall-necked saurian called Felars, after the Venusian name, who could run like a deer and strike like a two-ton snake, with a head all fangs and fierce eyes. The first men had called them snake-giraffes, but the name had not stuck.

THERE were other wonders, which Farar took as natural and everyday things, trees that bent slowly over toward them and showered them with bright little seeds from bursting pods, seeds that stuck like glue, shooting little tendrils into the very flesh, beginning to take root at once. They had to be torn off at once or they would grow into the body and kill a person.

"Lotta animals die from that," Farar would say, picking out the tiny tenacious rootlets. "S" the way the tree spreads. Animal gets it in 'im, runs till he drops, dies and fertilizes the ground for the seed to grow in. You run into them everywhere. It's a bad



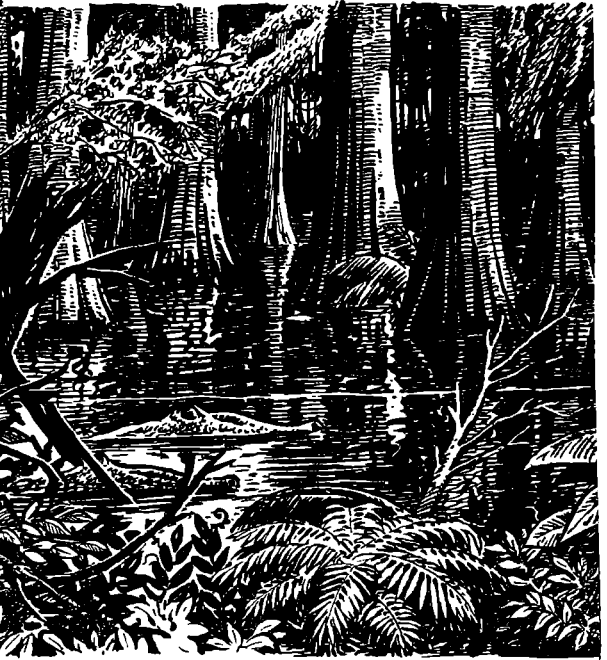
one; watch it."

Hal watched it, as well as everything else, intently, carefully, his eyes darting, darting, getting the habit Frank had told him he must acquire or die. "Never miss a thing, 'cause that's the one thing that's going to kill you. 'J'ever notice the nervous eyes on the Venusians. Always moving, moving, looking at every single object around them till they know what it is and if it can hurt them. Your eyes *have* to do that, here. So start looking, and keep it up."

"First thing I noticed about you, Frank. The way your eyes took in everything, moving, moving. First I thought you were a crook. Then I remembered I'd heard other old timers speak of Venusian eyes."

"There are no sloths in Venusian trees. They couldn't live here like they do in earth forests."

Day followed day, paddle and sweat and curse the rain and the heat, and watch the water for the big swirl that meant a bad saurian of a size sufficient



They paddled on through the treacherous Venusian swamps, day after



to tilt them over. Close such swirls were occasionally, close enough for Frank to sweep up the big rifle in one paw and take a bead. But he didn't fire often, he would watch them come near, note the shadow overhead, decide it wasn't edible, and move rippling away. Hal would sigh, settle back. Paddle, paddle, watch the water, watch the sky for darting Hory birds, the big horned flesh eaters that sometimes attacked men. Big owl eyes of them would swoop close, the naked wings flexed wide as they hung in the air, then away.

"We don't smell right to them," Frank usually said, laying down the light rifle in its dry wrap. He always kept the rifles beside him covered with a light tarpaulin and a paper. If the paper was damp, he ran a dry swab up the barrel, then a little oil, then put dry paper toweling he had included in the indispensable list.

"How many kinds of damn big lizards are there, anyway?" Frank asked after one of these brief encounters with



day, always keeping a sharp eye out for some saurian monster ahead . . .

the swirl of water that had shown a great square muzzle with chisel teeth, then turned away, flipping a thirty foot tail scornfully.

"Nobody knows, Worrán. I've read about earth explorers discovering new kinds of snakes on earth! What would they discover here? Nobody knows."

"Sure is a snake paradise. Something about this river gets me, Frank. Something I think about the next bend, what's going to be ahead . . . I like this river. River of Doubt, eh?"

"Yeh, but Doubt that means the unknown. Those guys named it, they didn't love it. I love the rivers of Venus. Nobody knows what you're going to find when you start up a river here. They're all Rivers of Doubt."

"Are we crazy, Frank? Starting off after a half-naked wild girl, a platinum hill, and a lot of Brownies? Are we?"

"Not us, boy! It's the fellows digging down in those wet mines, breathing rock dust and getting miner's colic, that are crazy. Digging somebody else's fortune out of the rocks. At least we're after our own, Hal!"

"Yeh, they take as big risks every day. You're right. I'm glad I got hold of you, instead of some greenhorn."

"That's what the Doc said when he left me. "Take care of that boy, he's a good one." You've friends, Hal."

"He taught me what little I know. Some men make you feel like living had some sense to it. Men like old Doc, eh? He'd never let a pal down, always on the job to fix 'em up when they're hurt; a life-time he's spent, being good to people! And if he loves 'em, why *men are some good*, Frank."

"Sure they are! But quit talking, it distracts me. And a man can't be distracted when he's going into Despair. I never been here before, myself, you know."

"Uhh!" said Hal, starting his eyes on that dancing movement Frank had insisted on.

THE river was widening, slowing, changing from clear green to a muddy grey green. Here and there streaks of darker water filled Hal with excited anticipation, thinking he was right about what made the water black in the swamp around that hill. Was it . . . or was he crazy, thinking the water had enough acid to pick up the black oxide in solution?

Ahead the forest seemed to reach even higher, up and up into the lowering clouds, great boles marching across the place where the river should be. Straight into the water under these trees Frank headed the dugout, and quite suddenly there was no river, only quiet endless aisles of silence and poisonous beauty—the gloom and the awe and the deadly danger of the Swamp of Despair!

"They didn't know this swamp when they called it Despair, did they?" Hal was moved by the beauty, the weird exotic sensual fecundity of ferns and air plants and hanging orchids, the trailing grey beards of moss from the gigantic limbs of the cypress.

"See that greenish mist ahead? That's the poisonous mist that kills men in here. The plants don't mind it, and the snakes don't breathe enough for it to hurt 'em, I guess. But notice the silence! When a Venusian jungle goes as quiet as this one—look out!"

Hal got out his packs, gave one to Farar, strapped one on his back. "We going to test one like you suggested?"

"As guide I think we should. It would be too late to do anything if we went ahead and they didn't work. But we have to catch an animal, and for that we've got to go back and look for dry land."

They caught a small hairless deer alive by creasing him, which astounded Hal with the accuracy of fire of Farar. They attached the pack, one of the spares the old Doctor had ordered. They slung the small, smooth-skinned, reptilian-appearing animal in the crotch of a forest giant some distance within the borders of the billowing green mist, and paddled swiftly out again to await results.

Night was near, the long drawn twilight of Venus was fading, when they picked a spot for their base of operations, making a start on a tree-platform between a close growing group of trees on an island. Slinging their hammocks just above the rough platform of poles they turned in just as the darkness became complete.

The silence itself was disturbing, the usual serenade of night birds, shrill insects, giant tree-toads—the hooting of the water reptiles, the moaning mating calls of unknown lizards—the scream of battling Hory birds—was all absent, and the absence gave them a strong sense of foreboding, of ominous hovering threat. Something deadly caused this silence, and this far from the borders of the poison mists—there *should* be the always present racket of the jungle night.

Hal dropped off to sleep at last, vainly listening for something, something . . .

**H**E AWOKE suddenly, overturning the hammock and sprawling on the lashed poles they had placed beneath for just that occurrence. It was the first time they had made a permanent camp, and Hal had expected a good night's sleep without the necessary lashings.

He lay for a minute getting his bearings, then stood up, trying vainly to learn what had wakened him. Farar

rumbled from his hammock:

"So you heard it at last. Wondered when it would wake you up."

"I don't know what woke me!"

"Listen, you'll find out!"

Then it came to him, that distant hum and beat as of massive wings—wings of tremendous size—beating the air! Or was it something else, some throbbing giant throat, pulling air in and out in vast gusts?

*Then came the roar!* The very water quivered and retreated from the sound, the trees bent from it, the ear drums refused to bear it, the mind refused to consider it!

"What in the name of God!"

"I'm thinking that's the reason this swamp is feared more than any other place. That is a leviathan, something new to me." Farar still hesitated to tell Hal *he came for this . . .*

"Is that his wings, or his breathing . . ."

"Sounds like it's wings and breathing, and that thing is miles away, Hal. It must be a mile long, to make noises like that."

"It sure ain't a mosquito," murmured Hal.

"If I was in this for the money, I'd quit right now." Farar grinned in the dark at his lie.

"If I didn't want to at least see it, I'd quit with you."

"There ain't no such animal." Hal stood there, listening to the dying sounds of the giant afar off, until he heard Farar gently snoring. Then he gave up and crawled back in his hammock. The grey dawn and the odor of frying meat woke him. Farar was up first again. He had brought up wet earth and made a firepit on the platform. He had made the damp wood burn with his magic, and was cooking an oteli, a squirrel-like animal the size of a dog.

"Did I dream it?" asked Hal, from his hammock.

"I wish it *was* a dream. But I'm afraid the thing exists. It may not be as bad as it sounds. Some of those giants are vegetarians."

"Not the kind with wings. And you said it was *new* to you—now you say *some of those giants*, as if you had run into something like it before."

"Heard the natives talk about the big ones. I thought they were legends, but it seems they keep legends alive, here. The Brownies are supposed to be a legend, too." Funny how a man hates to reveal his inner works even to a friend, mused Farar.

"Going ahead, anyway?" Hal's eyes were bright on Farar's.

"Might's well. Wotta we got to lose?"

THEY took the deer down. A Hory bird had got to him, but hadn't killed him. He was badly torn. Worran put a bullet in his head, and began to cut the carcass open. He wanted to see those lungs. The animal had lived, the mask had not been torn off his nose, and he wanted to see those lungs.

The green mist billowed denser. Somewhere above, the clouds let a shaft of terrific sunlight through, and the mist glowed like emerald dust all about them. The red, bloody cavity of the hairless deer was vivid; their eyes smarted from the mist, hurt from the sudden sun. The sun went out as suddenly, and Hal stood up, the lungs a dripping clot in his hands. Carefully he parted the inner tissues with his knife edge, gave a sigh of relief. "Clean as a baby's," he handed them to Frank. Frank tossed them in the water, watched the sudden boil as a dozen pointed black snake heads shot toward the meat, thrashed savagely over it. Thick as a man's arms, they had teeth

to make a six inch hole in a man.

"The weemies are sure thick in here," he mused, watching the water from the broad rooted base of the tree they stood upon. "I wouldn't know if the lungs were damaged or not, Hal."

"I used to study Doc's medical library, and he told me a lot, showed me a lot. The lungs *are* unhurt."

"I'll take your word for it. Now let's take a look at your brother's sketch maps. We might as well make the deep jump now, before the rain starts. Looks like a spell of mild weather . . ."

Hal put up his knife, got in the canoe. They shoved off, paddles dipping rhythmically. The dull green-black water rippled past, the gigantic trees remarked majestically upon the puniness of man, the grey moss waggled dignifiedly, and the great white horn-snakes raised their heads from the skull-like cypress knees where they waited. The purple and gold of the water monsters flashed ahead where they leaped, but as the dugout neared, they dived out of sight. Above the water, in the slow drifting mist currents, nothing moved but the swaying black leaves of the nodding lilies, the sinuous glide of a snake along a limb, the soft drip of condensation—acid-water of the mist, dripping—*and no other sounds!*

After an hour of this, Farar stopped paddling, opened his pack, took out a round gadget, fitted it on his rifle. He grinned apologetically at Hal.

"Felt kinda guilty about this. It's poacher's equipment. But we don't want to have that thing that made the noise last night hearing us. It's the latest design in silencers."

"Didn't know they *had* poachers on Venus!"

"When they first came, they passed a lot of laws to protect the wild life. Now they know better, they ought to pass laws to protect earth people from



the wild life. But the laws are still on the books, and the wardens still draw pay, and pinch a poacher once in a while. Most of the valuable bird skins are on the illegal lists. Fella has to make a living."

Abruptly the gliding dugout swung, as Frank spotted a landmark, a giant dead cypress, long succumbed to borers, now a tall skeleton of dead white against the grey-green wall. The map had mentioned it. It looked like a cross.

"Should be getting there soon. Look alive for a change."

Hal came out of the dream engendered by gliding water and silence, gripped the mouthpiece of his breathing tube hard, tried to miss nothing that moved.

They couldn't have missed it if they had tried. It was much bigger than the photos had seemed, dominated the whole tree-columned horizon ahead, its broad black top disappearing in the green mists. "Hill! It's a mountain!" Hal cried.

"Smart piece of pocket money if it's what your brother thought. Would a saved us a lot of work if he'd brought samples."

"He was dying, you know that!"

**F**RANK headed the dug-out straight across the open water toward the black sides of the mountain. It took a long time. It was a mountain, distances were deceptive. For some reason nothing grew on that black soil, hard, impervious, almost rock it seemed.

As the dug-out bumped against the sheer slope of the black loom, Hal darted his head toward a near splash. Had he seen what he thought he saw? Was that a "brownie"? Or were his eyes playing a trick on him?

"Thought I saw one of the little fel-

lows dive in the water."

"If you do see one of those little men, don't shoot unless you know he means trouble."

"I wouldn't shoot 'em."

Hal was already busy breaking out a small prospector's test kit, shaking a sample of the spongy, hard soil in a bottle with aqua regia. Adding sal ammoniac he got a slight yellow stain, which could be mud or PtC16, what he was looking for. It didn't tell him anything, but it was encouraging. Farar watched him with a slightly condescending eye, then bent and with his forefinger loosened a bit of grey-white granulation from the dark earth.

"If this is what you're looking for, you can stop that. From what I've heard, the oxides of this stuff need only heat to drive off the oxygen anyway. Where'd you learn chemistry?"

Hal grinned. "I didn't. I looked up the tests in the encyclopedia."

"Well, you got it all right except you have to heat the acid and the ore together for days to get it all dissolved. But good ore always contains little granules of the straight stuff, and platinum always occurs with iridium, osmium, and a couple of other brothers of the same family. And here's the granules."

"In my brother's notes he says he never heard of platinic oxide occurring in nature."

"He had an idea it was platinum, and I think he was right. The black color doesn't *have* to mean anything, he just *thought* it was the oxide. Polyxene is what they call platinum ore, and if it's black here, there are lots of substances that could make it black."

"We'll stake out our claims, fill a bag with samples from several spots on the hill, and get out. I don't feel like sleeping in here, I'll tell you. Too much gargantua . . ."

"We're probably the two ignorantest prospectors ever staked a claim."

"So what do they have an assay office for?"

*She hadn't made a sound.* She stood just behind them, still dripping. It was the drip that made Frank whirl and level the rifle.

Then he snorted. She stood quite still and unafraid, looking at him curiously. She held up her hands and looked at them. Then she pointed at Hal's hands, lax with incredulous surprise at his side.

"Oskey mar," she laughed, her voice was all girl; a rich, natural, wild-flavored music.

The two men exchanged glances in which amusement struggled with caution, and a certain natural masculine comment on her appearance was expressed by a low whistle from Frank.

"Wheeeooweee! Some babe!"

"Her photograph didn't do her half justice."

"Justice? They were an insult!"

"Oskey mar yourself," remarked Hal, grinning at her wide smile.

She held up her fingers, running her fingertip over the finger webs, pointing out that there *were no webs*.

"She means she has hands like us. That *oskey mar* business sounds like some words I know. '*Ousky mour*' among my native friends means—'same people.' It's something like 'Hello, clansman,' in literal translation." Frank was studying her. She certainly looked like an earth girl to him. There were no alien signs he could see.

"Can you speak English," asked Frank, taking a chance. An expression of complete surprise came on her face, the smile became a wide O of astonishment.

"Engliss! You spik engliss! Papa!" It was the men's turn to be surprised. Again they exchanged astonished

glances. Frank mused aloud:

"She must have been brought here when young. God knows *how* she got here. I don't get it, but here she is. Now *where* are the Brownies?"

"You're papa to her, Frank." Hal was laughing in spite of himself. "*Papa*, she says. Hah, hah!"

"Don't laugh yet, Worran. We don't know what she's here for. Wait till she lets us know what for . . ."

"She's not carrying a breathing pack. She hasn't come far, and she's going right back. Now where in H . . . did she come from that we didn't hear her?"

"She came up out of the water. I figured those gnomes lived under water. Now I know it! I'll bet this hill is hollow, and we're standing on her front stoop."

"An underwater entrance, like a beaver-house! Say! They're not going to like it when we start digging the ore off their roof!"

"That's what I was just thinking. We'd better be nice, or they'll tell us to leave."

The girl frowned at that. "Leave? No, no!"

Frank squatted on his heels, the rifle in front of him vertically. He said—"Stay? Yes, yes!"

"Papa!" She grinned, and let out a bird trill of laughter, sweet as a ripple in a brook, high and clear and carrying. Almost instantly the water swirled near the shore, a bald head popped to the surface, and a little web-pedaled man clambered ashore, stood dripping beside the girl.

"Snow-white calling her dwarves," murmured Frank.

"I hope *he* isn't her papa."

"I'm her '*papa*!' She said so." Frank was grinning, but he had lowered the rifle muzzle till it stared directly at the amphibian.



The two men climbed from their canoe and onto the bank, their eyes on the girl before them

ANOTHER and another of the peculiar pop-eyed little men shot to the surface, clambered ashore. Their eyes were tremendous, and they darted about with the motion called "Venusian eyes," Hal noted. He tried to see everything himself. Their ears were not at all human, being very large, pointed on top, with wide flaring lobes. They were all three bald as eggs.

"Your Brownies are a little greenish to me," remarked Hal.

"Now don't interrupt, I'm trying to establish communication." Frank was staring intently at the girl, trying to

impress her with his essential benevolence, from the look of it.

"You *talk* to me, girl. Do you live here?" Frank spoke very slowly and distinctly.

Hal suddenly jumped, one of the little men had opened his mouth, unrolled an eight inch tongue with a fork in the end, and rolled it up again. He had a right to be startled.

"Venusian mammals all show traces of reptilian origin," murmured Frank, smiling at Hal. "I heard a Professor say so."

The girl had put her finger in her

mouth, stood sucking on it like a child. "Yes, live here." She seemed to be reaching back in her mind for something long forgotten. That once she had been an English speaking colonist was obvious.

"You live in hill?"

"Inside my home is. You visit me, nice?"

"I visit you, nice, yes. But what about your little friends?"

"Lil frens? Like me, like you, they!"

"Well, what are we waiting for?" asked Hal. "She invited us in, if I know anything."

"Sure. But you don't know anything, and neither do I. They might be cannibals, or poisonous, or crazy."

"Or drunk, or supernatural, or mean, or old ladies like you. You're too cautious, man!"

"I'm alive," murmured Frank.

"I'm alive," echoed the girl.

"And that's evidence enough they mean well."

"It ought to be. But remember that racket we heard last night? That thing's alive, too."

Inside Frank's head the incredible pieces of the tremendous puzzle he had been trailing for a long, long time were falling into place now with a bewildering significance which he had been told would happen but which he had not truly believed. If these gnome-like people *were* the *Bunaes* (which was the origin of the earthmen's appellation for the supposedly extinct race), *then all was not good.*

The natives had assured him they were not extinct. He stood there trying to touch their minds with *yarva*, but they withheld thought-talk from him. That was a danger-sign, too!

His native friends had assured him of the truth of an unbelievable tale about the *Bunaes*, that they still lived hidden away, and would come again

to devastate the planet as of old. That they were not people, but the arms and legs and eyes of a monster that used them as servants and allies—on which they were dependent—even parasitic. They were the distantly controlled parts of a terrible symbiosis anciently inherited, serving a tremendous creature of awful nature, hating all other men.

HE HAD thought it a wild tale until the *yarva* had sent him to Hal to see the photos for himself. These then were the servants of the Grimalkin he had come to see, the hunter's instinct driving him unerringly to the lair.

Other seemingly impossible things he had *yarva'd* of this planet had proved true unerringly.

All his instincts were screaming caution to him, he was hot on the scent of the mighty quarry — but was he equipped to meet it?

If a native Venusian had seen a *Bunae* he would have fled until his legs could carry him no longer—and they were not afraid of the terrible wild-life of the planet, could meet it gamely, even when it meant death.

The *yarva* sense he had developed from his "greenie" teachings warned him of a hidden threat in their stares. A deep cold apprehension grew and grew in him, and would not die. This thing was true!

The acid water of this swamp was the preferred habitat and hiding place of the vast monster he had heard, been told of, and now faced in the person of the little people who served him. He had heard it roaring in the night, why did he disbelieve what his logic told him must be true. The fact of the girl's presence was the part that did not fit—or did it?

ONE of the little men now decided that he wanted to know things.



He stepped up to Frank and tapped his breathing pack. He chattered at the girl—"Osky mar papa paknari sepeeri."

She nodded and smiled. She said—"Paknari sepeeri, too. Yes! Frens like us," she went on, and Hal got it. They were noticing his packs copied from their own.

But Frank had been noticing things too. The third little man was pointing a funny little tube at him, and he didn't like it. "Tell your other papa to put down that sleep producer he's got on us," he growled at the girl, pointing at the object.

She turned and saw the weapon. She screamed—"Lakmari awfu dood, boxi mak!"

"Thanks," murmured Frank. "She's handy as an interpreter. But I don't like the idea of going into that hole of theirs without knowing more about it. Let's just quietly shove off, and come back tomorrow after a little thought on the subject."

"I'm not crazy about it either. But I hate like hell to go off and leave her here. Seems like a crime."

"We're not gonna leave her here. That's why we gotta do things just right. So they'll let us take her."

"They never will. We'll have to steal her."

"She complicates things considerably," said Frank, getting up and stretching his knees. Slowly, keeping his gun ready but not threatening, he walked down to the dugout, got in. Hal started to follow. He was in for a surprise. The girl flung her arms around his neck, screamed:

"No, papas, no. Grimalkin kill! No. No!"

"Did she say kill? Grimalkin kill! You know what a Grimalkin is, Hal?"

Hal was blushing furiously. He had not been near a young woman for years,

not since he was sixteen. The last young woman in the Venusian Mining and Export compound had died then. There were women on Venus, but he didn't know them. Only the superintendent's wife, and she was forty.

"No, what's a Grimalkin?" asked Hal, his hands faltering between unclasping the girl's grasp or returning her embrace.

"Don't get excited, or you're a goner!" Frank was watching Hal and the wild girl with quiet enjoyment of his embarrassment. "Well, a Grimalkin is a thing that there ain't any of, like St. George's dragon on earth. It's an old legend among the natives. I think it's what we heard last night."

"Just a dragon, that's all. Nobody ever saw one."

Hal had unfastened the girl's hands, got into the dugout. He was going to let the Grimalkin kill him, Frank guessed. Frank stroked the boat backward, swung away.

"I wonder if I'm doing the right thing? The way that thing was sounding off last night, we might prefer to be under that mountain of ore instead of on top, at that."

Hal wiped the sweat off his face. It was raining gently. He put his nose mask on, and took up the paddle. Silently they stroked back to the island and their cache in the trees. Frank shot a *poochie* and cooked it. A *poochie* is a feathered serpent, Worrnan learned. . . . Only it barks like a dog! But it was good meat.

They sat looking at each other, waiting for time to turn in. The light died away, it was night. But this twilight was different. It was filled with their own fear of that awful beast they had heard. Waiting for it to start. *Waiting*. The dark was ominous, and they knew now it *was* dangerous. The girl had made that plain.

THE terrible thrash of wings came, loud, and in the silence, fearful. The snort of vast breathing, the lusty splashing, the heavings and then the hum and beat of flight. As the beat died away, Frank turned in his hammock. He lit a match, which he never did except when absolutely necessary. And he held the light in Hal's face for long moments, till it burned his fingers. Hal didn't get it.

"What's *that* for?"

"Tomorrow we're going dragon hunting, St. George."

About three seconds later he was snoring. Hal lay there wondering. Some things were hard to figure. This hunter hadn't said he was going after that terrible beast of the swamp, or had he? He *had* said it! He *didn't* say it till he looked into Hal's face. He must have seen there enough courage to warrant the expedition. Or was it that? Was he just curious as to the effect on him of the terrific implications in the noises that beast made? Nest, dragon's nest near here . . . Hal fell asleep.

*Of such stuff are dragon slayers made.*

They slept soundly all night!

### CHAPTER III

FRANK seemed to know where they were going. Hal knew he had taken a fix on that sound with his sense of direction, and was heading straight for it.

"How come you wanta kill that thing?" asked Hal.

"Dunno, for sure. Just can't help it, I guess. That's why I looked at you last night. To see if you wanted to, too. And you did!"

"You're telepathic, or psychic, or something."

They paddled on, through terrific

columns, a temple of Despair lovely with the curious dim green light bringing out the natural awe of the might of nature's work.

The water rippled silently, venomously alive with water serpents, following the dugout. Waiting, Hal knew. He could feel their hunger, waiting.

Now and then the big V of a larger snake shot toward them, veered as it neared, and Frank caught up his rifle. Hal had picked up the knack of swinging in his paddle and scooping up the gun all in one motion, bringing it to sight, ready for fire. But Frank had said: "Don't you fire unless I yell. This silencer of mine will keep Mr. Grimalkin from knowing we're around. I've only got one along, so just don't."

Frank plugged two of them, and they thrashed purple and gold coils all around the dugout, rocking it dangerously. Hal held his breath while the red froth and green slime squirmed and boiled with the hungry snakes tearing their wounded kin apart. Big ones could attack the boat. They had to be shot before they got that close.

This scene had been repeated several times a day for Hal, but it never lost its thrill. He hated not having a chance to shoot too, today. But he had learned to obey the hunter in the bow. Hal wondered why he had changed from his usual place in the stern. But he hadn't asked. He figured he wanted to look for sign of the monster.

Ahead there loomed a vast tangle, the gigantic trunks of trees canted at crazy angles, making a giant brush heap. Frank backed water, began to circle the place slowly. Hal didn't say anything. He knew now *when* not to talk.

Closer and closer, the paddles hardly dripping, Hal mimicking Frank's stroke, not raising the paddle, but twisting it and sliding it ahead for the

back stroke. Noiseless as a shadow they slid closer to . . . the nest!

*They could hear the deep soughing breath now!* Minutes apart, they seemed! Between the wrecked branches they slid the canoe, and Frank took the rope and wrapped it once around a limb, not knotting it but making a slipknot. Hal pictured themselves trying to run from that . . . It didn't make sense! Frank picked up the heavy rifle with the silencer. Hal picked up the lighter gun. They slid up the canted trunk of the tree like two serpents. Slow, slow, not even scraping their feet. A twig cracked under Hal's hand. They froze, didn't move for minutes. The vast rhythm of breathing did not change. They went on. Higher and higher . . . and *they could see!*

**I**T LAY in a hollow of trampled muck and limbs like a locomotive dropped there from above. Frank amended that. Like a freight train, with caboose attached!

Its vast head lay like a Gorgon's, the sorrows of horror in the deep lines of pain around the great closed eyes and the jaws that dwarfed a whale's by three. Two round throbbing spots marked the ears. It was earless.

The wings were folded along the terrible leviathan back like two collapsed circus tents. Circus tents made of mottled, hideous leather, scarred and horrible with past battles.

The incredible pieces of a vast enigma clicked into place now in Frank's memory, his deductive mind created the whole history of this terrific monster out of a bloody planet's terrible past. Only one piece remained—were the Brownies, the Bunae—*really* servants of this thing?

Why else was their home but a short distance from the ancient nest of a killer incarnate—a killer such as no

earthman ever saw before? If they were attached to this thing by any bond but fear, why was the earthgirl living with them in apparent security? Still an enigma, but Frank was afraid. Afraid that they were up against some ancient mystical terror, some peculiar and inhuman thing that could not be understood, and would kill them before they did.

But the hunter in him brushed aside the futile speculation as to what connection there was between the Bunae and this creature, thrilled at the size of the quarry, thrilled—and decided what he had not before decided—whether to try to match his skill against the monster he had but heard—or to get out and leave the mountain of rich ore to the swamp and its terrible guardian. *Now he knew what he had to do, to risk.*

That horrible body stretched vast sinews—on and on; Hal turned his eyes away, sickened to his soul's depth. The gargantuan haunches ending in great bird-grasping claws, big enough to pick up a three-story house . . .

The tiny forepaws lay along each side of the terrible jaws, but they weren't paws, they were hands, neither webbed nor clawed, just terrible, sentient, knowing *hands*.

**I**T WAS like a Cerberus, guarding the gates of Hell, terrible and knowing and waiting. *It* was like chaos before life, the time-aura that hung stinking about *it*. This thing had winged across worlds before man crawled from the sea, one would think. *It* was like a Harpy, sleeping and dreaming of blood and the shedding of blood and the drinking. *It* was like the sea bottom, aged and ageless, barnacled and hoary and littered with bones about *it*. *It* was terror incarnate, and *Farar was drawing a bead on the head of it!*

Hal's heart dropped into his boots and bounced into his throat. No, *this wasn't sense!* No bullet made by man could even sting this thing awake, let alone *kill* it! He had not realized *Farar was mad!* Mad, madness to even be looking at this ancient leftover from time's worst period of hate!

From the scalp, long tentacle—like bristles—moved slowly as the scalp muscles writhed beneath. It opened those three vast eyes, one in its forehead, two wide-placed beneath, and stared at them. Stared sleepily, unnoticing—or not? Stared, and visibly thought—*yarva* smart with the ages of mind-reading in its memory!

Frank fired. Hal heard the venomous little unmistakable hiss of the silencer. The monster jerked his head as if a fly had bit him. A tiny fleck of blood appeared in the vast eyeball, spread quickly, one great eye was as if bloodshot suddenly, little veinings of running blood spreading outward from the center. The silencer hissed again! The monster roared, now! The wide circus tents began to unfold, fold on terrible fold, the haunches bunched, the vast claws spread and buckled with the weight, taking the strain of his lashing endless tail. Up and over that tail, like a titanic scorpion's, down and crash! It must *yarva* this enemy, *it could not see it!*

Frank's rifle hissed again. Hal brought the 32 Special up, thinking he might as well be crazy too, but Frank knocked it down, gripping his arm with fingers that sank in to the bone. His eyes were bright as a demon's on Hal's, the fire of terrific strain and pride running in his glance like lightning. *His words were as light and hissing as the silencer's hiss.*

"Don't move!"

They stood there, and those vast wings spread over their head like night's

own shadows, wider and wider, the wind rushed down from their "beat, the head of it reared up and up, the human-shaped hands pawed dreadfully at the now bright-red, blood-streaming eyes. Frank's rifle hissed again. And again. He put in a new clip.

*Sentient*, the thing that had nested in Despair since the dawn of life, by the stench of it, the odor of a thousand-year-old abattoir swept outward on the wind of its wing beats. Frank retched, the rifle bobbed. He steadied, and it hissed again.

*It* lifted, the beating wings were a blur of power, the trees crashed as the wings beat against them; it lifted, the claws clenched and spread again, and a tree-trunk splintered—a tree that would have built a hundred houses.

**I**T LIFTED, and Hal clung to his leaf-hung perch with hands that ached with gripping, his heart was tearing his chest apart, his breath came and stood and came again. Up, up, up, and still it blotted out the light, still the terrible stinking wind of its flight, still the fear that stopped a man's blood in his veins.

Up and up and up, flight into safety, and then it roared, and dived like a space liner. Roared like Hell on a holiday, letting out the souls, roared like a planet giving birth, roared down upon them, diving with its wings driving it down. Skipped the tops of the trees, the vast wingtips close enough to step on, trees crashing right and left, crashing and splintering and falling. Trees it would take both of them more than a day to cut through knocked down with a touch of those wings!

Up, up, up—and out of sight!

"Sorry I didn't bring two silencers!" said Frank.

Hal gulped his breath back to living pace again. His eyes stared and

stared at the "nest." Bones and bones and bones—it was a nest built of bones! How long, how many years would it take to get that many bones together?

"You know, Frank, you're not as sorry about the silencer as you're going to be when I remind you, you said not to bring cameras."

Frank didn't try to smile. Both their faces were drawn and white, their limbs were shaking too much to try to get back to the canoe. They stood there, Hal filled with pride in his hunter, Farar. Terrific pride—in man!

"Do you think you managed to blind it?"

"I put bullets in each eye. It had three. If it's not blind, I don't know how to make it blind. If it *is* blind . . . wonder if it will *stay* blind? Some reptilian life-forms have remarkable healing powers. Limbs grow back on. Maybe eyes can grow back to sight again."

Frank put the breather back in his mouth. They descended the sloping trunk, got in the dugout.

"If that thing can think, and I swear it is full of knowing, like an old man; and if it can see—we may see it again."

They paddled slowly back toward the hill of ore. They began to set out stakes, marking off two claims. They had to be right. It took time. They had driven off the guardian, now they were claiming the spoils.

The water gurgled, a big bubble of air broke surface, and after it came a Brownie. He clambered to the bank, stood watching them. After awhile there were three again. Then there were four! Hal saw them, but decided to ignore them. When they finished they walked back to the row of little men standing gravely. They wore their packs today, and the breathers were in their mouths. Evidently yesterday had been an emergency, today was dif-

ferent. Today they meant to stay above the water for awhile.

"OSKY mar," said Hal genially, sitting down on a hummock and cleaning the dirt off his moccasins.

"Oskey mar," they chorused, solemnly, unsmiling. They waited. Frank walked up.

*Suddenly the little tubes flashed, and light flared and splashed around them. Hal grabbed his eyes, they hurt like blazes. When he took his hands away—he couldn't see! The little men had blinded them!*

"Grimalkin say!"

One of them said that! Even as they were pulled to the water's edge and tumbled in, Hal was trying to figure that one out! "Grimalkin say!" If that meant what he thought it meant, they were in for it! It must be coincidence, it couldn't have possibly implied that . . . that the Grimalkin had ordered them blinded!

When they were pulled out of the water Hal's lungs were bursting. After he had coughed some of the water out of his lungs, he gasped:

"Did he say 'Grimalkin say'?"

"That's what he said." Frank's voice was far from unperturbed, but he seemed more cheerful than necessary.

"Does that mean *in English*, or mean in Venusian something else?"

"I suspect it means in English. Why do you think I shot that thing? Do you really think I wanted to get killed? *I knew, man!* It didn't matter that I knew, till I saw the girl. Then I knew what I had to do! The Grimalkin, Hal, *was a God*. The Brownies worshipped him. *I knew* that. You didn't."

"I don't get it. That's impossible. Nobody would worship that."

"If your ancestors worshipped the Grimalkin for a thousand years—you'd worship, too."

"I would, I suppose. But where does the girl come in?"

"I guess you never read your fairy tales. The only way to understand Venusians is to read fairy tales. In primitive times, *people thought like that*. When they had a dragon to placate, they fed him a pretty girl. She was—*dragon-bride*."

"I knew all about what was supposed to be in this swamp, Hal. *But I didn't believe it*. I thought the natives had lied to me; you know, tall tales. I came to you hunting the Bunae. Then I *saw* the photos of the Brownies and the earthgirl. That was when I really got suspicious. *If they were true, like the natives had told me, then the Grimalkin was true, too*."

"You said *she was*?"

"They can't feed her to that thing now. He won't be around for awhile, if ever."

"Dragon-bride. That girl . . . God! And I never tumbled."

"You're a dead game kid, Hal. But I was afraid knowing would upset you. Besides you wouldn't have believed me. I didn't use to believe the natives either, and they tell some wilder stuff than this. From now on, I'm making a study of Venusian folk-lore. Their fairy tales are so damn up-to-date."

#### CHAPTER IV

FRANK was talking to a little man outside their cell door. The bars were of wood but it was ironwood. A knife wouldn't cut it. He'd tried. Hal still couldn't see. Sitting in the dark, he tried to make out the words of the Venusian patter. Frank was saying some words over and over, learning the differences between this brand of talk and the one he was familiar with.

The talk went on and on. So did their blindness. The girl had been in to see

them. She had been crying. Hal had put his hand through the bars and felt the tears on his hand as she squeezed it. She had said: "Papa, no, no!" The voice had given his heart a twist. It hurt *her* more than it did them! He could still hear her heart-broken words, over and over, sorrow and pain and love and wild music in the sweet voice: "*Papa, no, no!*" "*Papa, no!*"

He guessed she called them *papa* because she had been little and had known only her father. Her father had had hands like them. So she called them *papa*. She didn't need words, anyway. She had meanings as many as music, and the same kind. The wet tears on his hands told him more than words ever could.

They were in the hollow hill. He knew that much. It had been too short a trip to go anywhere else.

Day after day of blackness. Day after day after day listening to Frank chattering Venusian lingo to the little man who had to sit outside their door and guard them.

Gradually Hal found he could understand them. Occasionally Frank would explain a word to him, tell him what was said. As time went on he became extremely interested because Frank was busily occupying his time by pumping the whole past history of Venus out of the Brownie. These remnants of a once great people were the only intelligent creatures on Venus who really *knew* that history.

Day by day he absorbed the terrible history of a people whose very *base* was horror; of the building of their unspeakable civilization, incident by incident, village by city by state; and the fall again. Nights they would lie and talk over what they had learned.

IN THE early times there had been several races of people; tall, golden-

skinned races, short squat mermen, a race of winged creatures that were not men but had intelligence—five different types of intelligence had vied for the planet.

But the little Brownies, who were called Bunae in their own language, had hidden in the swamplands in their hollow-hill villages long ago—just as they were doing now in the Swamp of Despair.

Not far from the Bunae villages, there was usually the nest of a Grimalkin!

The Grimalkin was the real dominant old first comer on the planet! He talked to the Bunae telepathically! He talked, and they listened and obeyed. They served him as eyes and fingers and locksmiths. Step by step, village by village, the men who served the intelligent Grimalkins conquered the other tribes around them, imprisoned them, enslaved them—and fed the war captives to the Grimalkin. Not that they fought very hard. The big creature they served did the fighting. He would swoop down upon a village eat a meal of people, and command them to surrender. Sometimes they tried to kill the monster, usually they just surrendered or tried to flee. But when they fled, there were the endless lines of the Bunae, blowguns and little flash tubes of blinding explosive light in their hands—to drive them back—to the slavery and the despair of watching their people used to feed the monstrous flying lizard every day.

When such a tribe, conquered and nearly all used up as fodder, finally became too few, the process was repeated—the monster moved and the tribe of Bunae followed, leaving a colony of their own to people and hold the conquered land.

By such irresistible alliance the dwarves and the monsters became the

masters of the planet!

But the alliance contained the seeds of its own destruction. When at last there were no more slaves, no more enemy tribes, no more anything to feed the monsters—they learned about that!

They had become dependent on the monsters, and the monsters now fed on them! At first they chose by lot, as their conquered enemies had to do—who should be fed to the monster.

Then they revolted against the horrors they had so diligently nurtured for centuries.

They used their blinding explosive light tubes to blind the Grimalkins, and the blind *things* lay and starved; and they moved away from the stench of the vast dead bodies.

Over the whole planet the war between the dwarves and the monsters went on, and at last there were very few Grimalkins anywhere.

Alas, they had now no allies against the “savages” still hiding in the jungles. Farar smiled grimly as he heard the little man call the people hiding “savages.” *Savages* against *horror* . . .

Now the reverse of their former conquering began, and village by village, fat Bunae city by city—the tall, straight, independent men of the forests took Venus away from the things that had served the winged monsters.

**N**OW it was all over. There were no more Bunae, only themselves, a few people, and one great old Grimalkin whom they had always served. And Frank had blinded their God! They would pay, those two. They would be fed to the God when he returned.

Such was their history, the history of a shameful alliance of a race of humans with a race of monsters. Sitting there in the dark, listening and staring at nothing, his blind eyes aching and aching, Hal saw that it was true! He



*had seen the giant winged thing! Those two had faced and bested the beast that had once devastated a planet!*

"It seems unbelievable from a modern point of view," said Frank. "But when you know that many of earth's primitive tribes worshipped such things as bulls, alligators, vultures—there is hardly a beast or reptile hasn't been dignified with divinity by some fool group of primitives."

"Yes, even when they were supposed to be civilized, the Egyptians sacrificed to the river Gods by feeding girls to the alligators."

"I'm glad that I know what lived in the ruins, now. I had felt sad about the disappearance of a people. But now . . ."

"Venus was the Grimalkin's little nest, the whole thing under—a race of beasts!"

"That thing was considerably more than a beast. It could *talk* to them—they *talked* to it."

"Priests always talk to their God one way or another."

"You haven't heard the whole thing in the detail I have. It *had* thought, lots of it! It lay and telepathically commanded them. They were and are completely attached to its mind. Now they are like a people with their head cut off! They blinded us because we blinded their ruler!"

"If they were keeping the girl to feed to him at their ceremony why didn't they do it?"

"He wasn't interested enough to order it. She was only a small, skinny tidbit anyway. And they liked her, figured he would forget about her."

"I wonder if we're permanently blind?" Hal couldn't keep the break out of his voice.

Frank didn't say anything. Hal knew what he meant.

As the days passed their keeper grew

increasingly careless about his job, and resentful that no one else took his place. He was absent for longer and longer periods.

They didn't know it was her at first. They heard her feet, soft and quiet on the hard soil of the cave, knew someone stood there. Then she whispered: "I have brought you the healing light. But do not tell anyone you are not blind. You must keep on acting as if you were blind. The Great One is returned to his nest. All are away to greet him and to make amends. Soon they will have a ceremony, and they will feed him. There are only you two, and me, and one other wild man for him. It is hardly enough."

THEY did not know what to say. They waited. Hal went to the bars and put out his hands to touch her. She was much in his mind. In his hands she placed a tube, showing his fingers what to do. He pressed the stud, and her hands guided the thing close to his face. After moments a light stole into his mind, brighter and brighter—he could *see* vague shadows about him. He could see the girl like a quivering shadow before him! He cried out—"Oh, God, *I can see!*"

"Quickly to the other papa," she said, in her weird English. Hal put it before the crouching shadow he knew was Frank. After long moments Frank took it from his hands, stared into the soft glow of it.

"It is very old. I got it from the witch-doctor's bags. He is gone to propitiate the Great One, to make the Grimalkin happy. *We must go before they come, papa!*"

"Mama, you're wonderful!" Frank was crying. Great tears rolled down his cheeks as he stared and stared at the quivering pale light in the tube. After a long time he handed it back

to Hal. "Stare at it as long as it glows. I think the light that blinded us had the power of repolarizing the inner nerve screens of the eyes so that light left them unaffected, like inert matter. This glow-tube changes the polarity back. It is probably a simple magnetic secret if we understood it. We'll take it along. Now, open the door, sweet little savior that you are, and tell me where the guns are."

She fumbled with the long triangular key in the ancient black metal of the lock, and the door swung open at last. They were out in an instant, hurrying the girl along toward . . . They didn't know anything about their prison! Their eyes were astounded at the rich number of alien objects there were to see. The loot of the rich descended wealth of a nation lay stored in the long low rooms through which they fled. There were weapon rooms, from which Hal picked up a tube similar to the one that had blinded him. The other weapons, except for bows and arrows, were incomprehensible. There were even books, pictographs drawn on leather, and painted and decorated shields lined the wall, and everywhere there were statues of the Grimalkin, the hideous beast idolized, with spread wings and rampant claws grasping still other smaller monsters. Not so very long ago there must have been many more of them than they had thought lived here. But there was no time. They found their own breathing packs, their rifles and gear from the dugout all neatly piled in the end of the last room they came to. At one end of the room a hole, and in the hole black water was rippling.

"Quick, someone comes," cried Hal, pulling the girl back from the hole.

**T**HAT round bald head bobbing in the water gave Hal a repellent sense

of alien horror, now that he knew what a degenerate thing it was. A race that had built an empire upon the strength of a bloodthirsty monster! Frank grabbed the little man by the neck and hauled him out of the hole. He spoke to him in Venusian, and the little man made a quick answer.

"More coming, Worrán. Keep the gun on them, while I grab them and take the tubes away from them. I don't feel like going blind again."

But it wasn't to be so easy. The girl gave a cry of fear, and Hal looked around just in time to catch the flare of the light tube. Blinded again, Hal knew that their jailer had been left behind and had seized the chance to take a nap. Waking, he had missed them and followed.

Standing there with his rifle useless in his hands, he remembered Farar's words, "*Never get excited, or fail to see everything that could harm you.*" He had been looking in the direction from which the little man came, but he had not seen him till too late. He should have noticed him but he had been watching the water instead of the opening beyond. Did it take catastrophe to teach a man to watch things?

He could hear Frank struggling and cursing. The girl cried out again, and he heard a splash. After a time he was led back to the cell and locked in.

He was alone, and the blackness was doubly oppressive. The day passed, he heard the lack of faint sounds in the caverns about that meant night. Night dragged on, and he wondered if they had killed Frank.

Morning came, and he was dragged out. His arms were bound behind him, and he drew a deep breath as he heard the splash of the water tunnel ahead. The cold wetness and the falling were twice as bad when you could not see when they pushed you in.

He was pulled out and walked along with the little patting footfalls of webbed feet somehow horrible around him. Presently a soft hand was placed in his hand, and the girl said—"Papa, no, no!" her voice mournful music.

"We're going to feed the monster?" he asked.

"Yes, yess, papa! Soon no more me, no more you. Grimalkin, ahh!"

"He's one hell of a God if you ask me."

"He is very old. Their papas, and their papas, and their papas, served him and fed him. He has *always* been *the Great One!*"

"Where is Frank?"

"Other papa ran away. The light did not strike him; he made his back go to it."

"Ran away? I don't believe it!"

The sense of abandonment, of being left to die, of a friend deserting him in the hour of need, was a very great hurt. In his blindness he could not bear to think of it. He turned his mind from that and squeezed the girl's hand.

"What is your name, girl? You have never mentioned it."

"Name, me? No name, me! Just girl, *puley*."

"*Puley*, eh. That is Bunae for girl, eh?"

"The little ones call me *puley*. Long ago I was called a name, *Janey Boone*. Papa dead long ago, nobody name me Janey now."

"*Janey Boone!* A good old earth name! I thought so. Where else would you come from?"

THEY were pushed along through low branches, and got into boats. The paddles dipped, he could hear the breathing grow labored. After a time he heard the stirring of the vast might of that *thing* out of forgotten time. The great tearing breaths like winds, the

stirring of the wings, the crash of branches as he turned his might. He must be restless or in pain.

"Are we getting near?"

"Soon we go in to *the Great One*. Then no more you and me!"

"No more you and me," Hal echoed, squeezing her hand. "Janey Boone, *brave girl*."

Her voice was deeply sad but unshaken. "Always there was to be this for me. But the Old One never required it any more and they did not. Now he is angry and in pain. He moans . . ." Hal could hear the terrible roaring like a locomotive in pain just ahead. "I can see him, now! Soon we descend to him along the way of the bones. His eyes are bloody and black; something has hurt him."

"I *hope* it hurt him."

Underfoot he felt the crumbling, rolling bones, the stench of death was sickening. This nest of perdition had to claim that sweet child . . . and Frank, mighty hunter, ran away! He cursed him silently.

It was just then, as he expected any second to feel the vast mouth close upon him . . .

It was *then* he heard it. The high, nearly inaudible hiss—and knew it was Frank's poacher's silencer. *Again, again, again!*

The wings began their terrible stirring, he could feel the ground shake beneath as the legs drew up and took the weight. The terrible roar was deafening as *It* bellowed. Hal threw his arms around the girl and pulled her back and back. They crouched among the stinking bones, and the roaring went on, rising higher to a terrible keening, the wings beat and beat; he could feel the ground rise from the release of the terrible weight. Overhead the air-blast from the wingbeat beat down upon them, and Hal covered the girl's

body with his own in case a wingtip should touch them. Up and up went the roaring. Up and up and died away!

The venomous hiss of the rifle still sounded. He could hear it plainly now in the suddenly painful silence. Hear the cry of the stricken little web-footed horrors as they fell. He heard the spiteful snap as the tubes went off, light flared even though his blind eyes vainly tried to see what was happening.

At last he felt a strong hand raise him, a strong friendly voice that touched his heart with the real meaning of friendship.

"I've still got the healing tube! They're all dead or crippled. We're safe, I guess. Now let's get out of this damned swamp and file our claim."

## CHAPTER V

THE trip down the River of Doubt, with Janey Boone chattering at both of them, was the happiest time of Hal's life. Janey was irrepressible, her spirits, so long repressed by the threat of the monster and the gloomy ways of the little Bunae, found food for revel and delight in every sight and sound and word of banter. Her high, bird-like laughter set off the winged and scaled screamers in the jungle, and she loved to mock them so that they screamed back, swooping over the dugout in scores, scarlet and gold scaled; the Wierly birds trailing long green spines of beauty.

She delighted in relearning her language, which she had nearly forgotten, but about her own past she had little to say, she could not recall.

But she still had a fear, and she watched the cloud sheath constantly. At last Frank asked, "Do you think there are more Grimalkins?"

"Not more! Him, *the Great One*. He will follow if he can see again! His

eyes got better when you drove him off before. He is like an old man, spiteful, revengeful—and he is *smart, like you!* He knows who hurt him, the little ones *told him*. He could not see to strike back, but *he will follow*. He does not smell you, he smells you with *yarva*, see!"

"*Yarva* yourself," kidded Frank.

"*Yarva is mind talk*. He smells people with it!"

"I *know* the Great One. I talked to him. I can *yarva* him far away, in pain and terrible anger, waiting; at night he moves to another place nearer us."

"Waiting till his eyes heal up again. Hal, we'd better step on it!"

"That would not matter. At night he gets around without eyes, by his *yarva*. In the daytime he always sleeps; the sunlight, the daylight, is bad for *yarva*. Blind, he cannot follow in the daytime. At night he flies overhead till he gets our *yarva*. Then he makes a nest there."

Hal imagined the great creature, hundreds of years old, venomously following his quarry, day after day. "Why doesn't he swoop down on us at night?"

"He is not sure he can *yarva* close enough. But when you get to your city home, *then* he can *yarva*, blind or not, the scent is strong, and he will kill *everyone!* This is his revenge! That is why I worry. When we get home he will strike that home to nothing! He is terrible, and he does not give up. He always thinks one thing, hate, hate!"

"Can you *yarva* the thing?" asked Hal, not smiling even a little.

"She's probably got it straight, she ought to know. I wonder what I can do to throw him off. He'd crash into that plastic dome and the mining settlement would be hash. Natives taught me a little *yarva*, it's true."

"How many bullets have you put into him, Frank?"

The girl exclaimed excitedly as the canoe suddenly came within view of the strange city



"About eight in the eyes, and a dozen around them. But you must remember the massive bone structure, even behind the eyes, would absorb any bullet I have without letting it in. Too, a reptile like that has a nervous system that's decentralized. Even a hit in the brain itself wouldn't be fatal. But infection may kill him, I don't know. His eyes were filled with matter and blood, and swollen areas around them. He was still half blind. He knew I was there but he couldn't *yarva* me close enough to grab me. He *had* to run away, he had to get away from my fire soon enough. The healing powers of Venusian creatures is much greater than earth, I have been told. I have hit quite small hairless deer what seemed like a heart shot, and then a year later killed the same deer. Cut it open, looked at the heart, found the heart itself healed, the scar right in its valves."

"We can't lead that horror back to the mine, Frank, if she's telling the truth. And she certainly is not lying, unless she's mistaken about the thing."

"I'm thinking, Worrان. Thinking if she could *yarva* me its location . . ."

The girl pointed silently.

"The Old One sleeps over there, beyond where we camped last night."

"Why don't he attack?"

"He wants to kill *all* your kind, Frank. All hissing bullet spitters, like you!"

"And he's letting me lead him to them. That settles it. We can't go home."

"Talking to those little *Bunae*, Frank, I remember their telling you about the ruins, how they were built. Now, near every ancient city of theirs, is a nest for such a thing. Couldn't we set a trap in one of those, sleep in the ruin, and he'd nest there where the others did."

"If we had dynamite, and plenty of it."

"But we don't. So . . ."

"Even these forest giants, for a deadfall, aren't any too big."

"That's an idea, man, a deadfall. It would take work, but it might be done."

**T**HE ruin lay along the side of a mountain, gloomy with the dead past, the tall towers crumbled and



fallen, the wide walls covered now with giant creepers, snakes nested in the warm rock crevices, swarms of birds—the featherless flying reptiles that Frank called birds—took to the air at their approach.

It was quite a city once; the little Bunae had had atrocious taste, though. The walls that still stood were lined with the rock-hard gesso sculptures of the pot-bellied lords of the Bunae. Frank laughed as he remarked, "They were better fed in those days than the ones we knew."

There were pictured processions, whole populations praying to the Grimalkin monsters, and everywhere the same idealization of the monster; over doorways his wings spread in stone, on the walls he accepted his human victims in a lazy crouch. It was evident that once the monsters had had little need to hunt food, it was brought to them on its own feet.

"History of a planet," murmured Hal, grim with the ugly past pictured before him, a past of the torment and wreck of a planet's peoples . . . "It's no wonder the natives are backward today. They never had a chance!"

But Frank was hunting out the trail that led away from the city, that path beaten by a thousand thousand victims up the side of the mountain, steep but worn smooth, with stone steps at intervals. It was well marked. Along the way sculptures extolled the beauty of the great winged monster, and the servility of the pot-bellied little web-feet that served him.

"Probably this one's great granddaddy nested here, long ago."

They stood at last above a natural bowl, round and beaten hard by giant feet, about it the same tangle of wrecked trees and fallen trunks, though there were no dead trees here.

A ring of giant evergreens about the

bowl leaned far outward away from the center, where long ago when they were young the saplings had been pushed away by the nestling weight of the monster.

Here and there the out-thrusting giants were crossed, and nowhere could Frank's eyes find a tree that leaned inward for his purpose.

"You can't fell a tree against its own lean," remarked Hal.

"These trees have done a lot of growing since a thing nested here. As big as anything I've seen. But they all lean away from the nest."

"If we stay here, he'll be here tonight, and it's nearly noon."

"Did you ever see a timber-slide?" asked Hal.

"No. I never saw much lumbering. You can't ship lumber to earth."

"Well, I did, and I want to show you how I think it can be done. Lumbermen make a long earth slide down the side of a mountain, then they cut the trees at the top, roll them to the slide and let them roar down. Get it?"

THEY ascended the mountain above the bowl of ancient horror, and sighted a line down to the exact center of the nest.

"Now we've got to clear every pebble and hump off that line, so that nothing diverts the descending weight. That's work, but it doesn't have to be perfect. There's a natural trough leading to that bowl, except for that little ridge above it that turned the water away. We've got to cut through here, and that's all."

"You've outlined a week's work, and we've only one light axe. Think of something better."

"Okay. We go up to the very top of the mountain and fell and strip the biggest tree. That's one afternoon's work if we plug it."



"Then we point it down the hill, and hope it jumps that ridge and hits the big boy.

"We've got to get it ready to slide, and put chocks under it to hold it that can be knocked out easily. We've got to carry water to wet down the first part of the slide—and by then it'll be dark. Then we've got to take shelter till he lights. That'll be toward morning."

"Shelter?"

"You know they had underground places where they hid from the neighbor's monsters during attack. We've got to find one, that's all."

"After he settles and thinks he's safe in this ancient nest, we sneak up the mountain in the pitch dark—that's the part I don't like. We're apt to run into anything."

"Okay. We split up. You go back to the ruins with the girl, I stay here with a rifle and axe and wait till he lights."

"Why don't we all stay here?" Janey was pouting, prettily.

"He'd wonder. He yarva's you better than us. He knows you, Janey. You've got to be under cover, and you've got to yarva him to light here."

"Yes, he yarvas me more than you."

"Will he yarva you what we plan to do to him," asked Hal.

"He might know. Sometimes he is sharp."

"I'll be yarva'd to death if he does!"

"I will not let him," Janey was deadly serious.

"Well, let's go. It's the best we can do and the time is short."

THE ring of the axe filled the afternoon, and by twilight they had one great timber poised on rollers, the rollers lightly chocked. The lighter end was down the hill but they could not help that. Two men could do no more.

With their last strength they chopped the end of the gigantic lop to a sharp point. Then they rested as the darkness swept down.

"Get going, Worrان! You and the girl get under cover while there's still light. You'll have to run . . ."

Hand in hand the two ran down the dim ancient trail of sacrifice, Hal clutching his rifle in one hand, the girl in the other. The rain was beginning, great flopping drops, and Janey was laughing with the thrill of racing along beside him, leaping down the stone steps, sliding along the sloping grass banks.

The long twilight held, the ruined walls rose above them as they dashed through the gates, pounding pell mell along the deserted streets. Janey led him to the place unerringly; she knew how the little men built. They entered a low doorway, stooping along the down-sloping tunnel. Walking into pitch darkness, Hal's ears, sharpened by past blindness, heard the rustle of scales ahead. He stopped short, drew the girl back into his arms.

He pumped his hand flash, the generator hummed, the tunnel filled with light.

Crouching ten feet away lay a serpent. It was all snake, and it opened its maw and hissed. If it hadn't been a maw big enough to fall in, if it hadn't had a two-foot horny crest, if it hadn't shot its tongue out till it touched them with the forked tips, if . . .

Janey pulled him gently backward. Step by step, while he fumbled with the rifle and tried to keep pumping that hand flash so he could see it, they backed up. The snake writhed, one great pulse of strength, and it was again close.

Janey pulled him back. He dropped the flash, and the darkness was fear itself.

He picked up the flash, pumped a light again. If he fired it would madden it; it would rage after them. If they kept backing up? They did. It followed, pulsing slowly along, trying to see what made the light, and would it hurt?

"Yarva, Janey, see what he thinks . . ."

Janey yarvaed, said: "He does not like lights. He is a night thing. Take the light away, or he will eat it."

Hal let the light die out, and they backed silently, step by step, and never knowing . . .

"Yarva, Janey."

"He is going to nest . . . He is glad the light went out. He wants to lay his eggs."

"Her eggs, Janey."

"Her eggs. What's the difference, he, her, huh?"

"It's a mighty important difference, sometimes. For instance, I'm a he, you're a her. That's important, isn't it?"

"Papa! Yes, yes!" She laughed, filling the tunnel with rippling forest music.

They squatted close up beside the door by which they had entered. Janey said she wanted to yarva the Great One down to nest. She could do it better close to the surface.

"So yarva works better above ground, eh?"

Hal was deeply interested in her telepathy. She said, "Yes, I hear outdoors better, and they hear me. You can yarva many things safe, you know."

"Explain."

"You can make things go away if you make them think so they do it themselves. I used to make the Great One not hungry when the fast days come. Then he forgets to ask for me."

"The way you made the birds sing

along the river?"

"Yes, I make the Great One think of me as a flower, as a sound he likes to hear, never of to eat me, and so I am alive."

"Didn't he ever eat the Bunaes?"

"No, they are his servants, and they yarva him too. But the Great One yarva them too. Then they find the trails of the big serpents, and he goes to find them and eat them."

"Couldn't he find their yarva scent himself?"

"No, they all make silent sound. All animals do that, make silent yarva when hunted."

"Make a silent sound to me, Janey!"

SHE closed her eyes, and Hal distinctly felt the impression of nothingness, of silence. He would have sworn she was not there. He opened his eyes, and she was gone!

"Janey, Janey, oh hell! *Now* what's up?"

From outside came her merry laugh, and he went out into the dark and the rain and grabbed her close. She fell against him, peering up in the darkness, the great flopping drops striking her face. Her body was warm and soft and close, her laugh in his ears.

"I yarva you think of me, Hal Worran."

"You *know* what I think of you, Janey, *Janey!* You know, of course!"

Her face was almost visible, he felt that yarva of hers telling him glorious things in secret; he felt the infinite grace of what she pictured to his mind of her desire for him. He bent and kissed her sweet, soft, laughing mouth, pulled her back out of the rain.

"Never trick me like that again, Janey. I get very hurt when you are not there."

"Never, papa? Never, *maybe never?*"

So with soft music of words that

meant so much to them and so little to anyone else they passed the slow hours of darkness, and Hal forgot the lean hunter waiting on the mountain top to kill the gargantuan winged threat that followed like a Harpy, never seen, always scenting them afar.

But Janey did not forget, and even as she kissed Hal, and laughed at the new and infinitely sweet sensation of young lips to lips, her fear-experienced mind was searching, listening, *yarva-ing* for the dread that would follow them.

Toward morning, the far beat of the wings came to her, her *yarva* reached and touched the mind of the Grimalkin, signed to him slightly that this was the place they camped, and signified fear and hiding, touched him lightly with the sensing of herself so that he was sure—and nearer and nearer came the beat and throb of vast wings.

She took Hal's hand then, he pumped the flash and they descended again toward the deep tunnels.

Even there the roar of his descent came to them, the thrash and beat and thump of him settling in the ancient nest of his forefathers, the nest that the girl's *yarva* made him realize was waiting for him. The roaring died out, the night quieted, the far fear-screaming of the wild at the descent of horror from the sky died away, and the night outside was silent again.

High on the mountain side above that grim ancient bowl Farar waited, leaning on his axe, listening and watching the black shadow swoop and hover and settle.

Waiting while the horrible sound died away, and there was no sound but the *soughing* of the thing's quieting breathing. Waited, and retched a little as the vast wingbeats sent the death stench of *it* up the slopes to him, and looked at the black sky with their

faint far flashes of ever-lightning, listening, to the frightened sound of the forest life, cheeping and jittering and fleeing through the dark—away—away.

JANEY *yarvaed* again that hate smell of *it*, following relentlessly and hating, hating; waiting till it could kill all things that had hissing stings. Till it found the city where the man-thing sourced, and made sure there would be no more man-things like *that* one.

For long, for too long, it had ignored the man-things, but now was the time come to blood them till there was no more blood left. "Now, *soon*," Janey heard it think, "*soon* it would *know*, their trail would lead him to the home-nest of the man-thing that had struck him, and vengeance would be the Grimalkin's again."

Farar heard the deep *soughing* breath lessen and still, and the softer sound of sleep breathing come. He swung the axe, knocking the first small rock from under the log roller. Then quick he swarmed over the log and knocked out the chock on the far side, running back along the log to the heavier-burdened rollers at the butt and knocking out the heavier rocks and around the butt as the monster log stirred, and so at last the rollers were freed, and the weight of the great log groaned on the rollers as it moved, and moved faster, became an irresistible weight driving down, down—*down* toward the winged thing that could not be, *but was!*

Farar stood spraddle-legged, the axe held high like a brand, and the demon gleam in his eye as he faced again the terrible strength of the monster, remembered the time-horrored, *thinking* face of the thing, the awful stench of an age of killing upon it. His face was



The huge pointed timber hurtled down the slope straight for the monster's body

a glory, was an eye-lightning cursing *down* upon the nest below. He was a spirit guiding the terrific rushing weight of the timber, shaft of gravity-borne endless mass, on and on; roaring its own defiance of all in its path, roaring and crushing aside boulders and trees and earth, rushing irresistibly down upon the bowl below.

That bowl of ancient undead flesh nested, raised its half-blind horror-face and felt the quake as of the avalanche; the down-rush of fear from above; felt the power of a greater strength than its own bearing down upon it, felt *fear* that it had not known ever. Fear of a greater thing struck it; it unfolded the vast wings, sprang erect upon those terrible haunches, clasped earth deep with wide talons, and the wings beat once, it lifted—lifted. . . .

Again up at the hiding-tunnel's entrance, little Janey Boone yarvaed ecstatically, feeling the fear and the lost,

tearing loneliness of the horror; the strangeness of facing a power greater than himself, reveled in sensing the thoughts of terror and flight in the breast of that *thing* that had never faced a thing that shook the ground.

As the wide wings beat, and it lifted up on its haunches to get its leviathan bulk airborne, Janey yarvaed desperately, telling it to *face its enemy* and *fight*, that no thing as strong as *he* need ever flee any other life; that this thing that rushed down was but a flea in the night, but a stomping beast of no strength.

AS IT lifted, these thoughts of anger and of fighting back made it hesi-



tate, it settled once, and turned to face the down charging weight.

The great log hurtled over the slight brow of the bowl, lifted and hurled by the momentum, lifted and hurled straight at the breast of the monster.

That scream, as the sharpened spear pierced clear through the joint of the vast wing and the body, pierced and tore and pinned the titanic weight to the side of the bowl as a vampire is staked to its grave—that scream—the ululating, hill-quaking terror of death and pain and utter defeat. That death—agonized scream from *it* that had lived a dozen lifetimes and never faced a thing great enough to make it fear—and now faced death—that unending ululation brought Farar bending to a tree for support to keep from falling with pain of hearing. The yarva-sensing of that pain made Janey bend her head into Hal's arms, sobbing with the ending of a strain that had been hers since she could well remember.

She wept there in his arms for long minutes, for an hour; and the light came strange and strong and new, the grey-white dawn of Venus.

Farar marched down the torn path of the tree slide, axe in hand and rifle in the other. As he marched he sang an old song his father had sung, though he did not know well what it meant:

"John Brown's body lies a'mouldering in the grave."

Farar stood above the great blood-thrashed bowl of ugly agony and marveled at the giant havoc among the age-old evergreens; the flung trunks of giant trees, the wide trenches gouged by tearing death-thrashing claws, the broken endless reaches of those sprawled folds of wings, the terrific life-strength of the thing.

The three vast eyes still stared malevolence up at him, the repellent

slaughterhouse stench rose sickeningly, the sides still labored with its tearing great dying breaths. The whole green breast of the forest about the bowl was now but bloody-gashed earth and splintered trees.

Farar stood and looked at those eyes, and examined that trembling forest-giant spear that had plunged clean through the terrible body and struck itself so deep into the earth the vast weighty butt of the timber quivered still and hung there, forty-five degrees of suspended stripped white pole, the clean wood scraped off the bark in the long run down the mountain now splashed with great dripping blood-stains.

THE monster flopped once, and the blood rushed from the great hole in its side, the hot stench of it rose steaming, the vast claws scrabbled and scrabbled futilely as it still strove even against death to rise again. Farar wondered just how long it would take to die? Or would it die? *Was the thing unkillable?* The sides panted in great sighs, the limbs struggled on and on and on, and Farar mused above it like a Demon watching over the torments in Hell.

He noted the healed tiny wounds of his bullets that had smashed into those eyes, now but healed-over pinpricks on the eye's expanse.

Janey and Hal came up beside him and looked down and marveled at the terror and strength still in it, and Janey threw rocks down on it to tell it once and for all that she was not a servant like the Bunae. It ravened at them, the great stick of timber shook and Farar saw it move in its socket, swing over and back, and he was afraid.

"We are still in danger if that timber falls and looses him, Mr. Grimalkin is very far from dead. Go down and get

in the dugout, I'm going to pump bullets into it to try and finish it off. When I come we will go, there's no need your watching the ugly business."

They would not go and leave him, but compromised by ascending the mountainside and watching from a safer distance. Farar stood and fired steadily into the vast body, picking out every spot that might give a wound in a vital spot, and the monstrous flopping and writhing went on. There *was* no way to kill it, and at last they started to descend the trail leaving the vast thing pinned there like an immortal vampire-ghoul on his titan's stake; praying that it was truly the spell needed to bind him forever.

"Yarva Grimalkin once more, Janey, and tell us if he is dying?" asked Hal, smiling gently.

"I did, and he doesn't know. He is weak, and he cannot get up and fly, and that is all he knows. He will die, I think."

Farar stood for a moment exulting in the hunter's pride in the catch, such a deed and such a quarry as would be sung of in hunter's camps on Venus so long as men of Venus bore weapons after quarry.

As he turned away he saw Hal approaching the dying carcass with the axe in his hand. Hal went up to the still grasping and ungrasping vast talon of the hind foot and began to jockey about trying to get in position to strike the still constantly moving claw.

"What the . . .? Get away from the thing, you'll be crushed!"

"Not leaving without proof! I'm getting one of these claws."

So, leaping about to avoid being crushed, Hal hacked and sweat and cursed and loosened the great bird-like claw in its socket. Farar made a rope fast to the tip, and so pulling and hacking, they tugged the claw free and up

away from the less frequent thrashings of the giant.

**B**UT the pain of the last great indignity roused the beast again, and the vast haunches bunched and tugged, the blood spurting from his side as he raised horribly, straining against his stake to get over on his front again.

With continual swaying and vast powerful wrenching, the tall swaying butt of the timber swung in a wider arc, and suddenly loosened, and swayed down and up, and down again, to crash thunderously on the high rim of the bowl, the weight of the butt over the high rim bearing down on the lighter point in the creature's great side, lifting thus with leverage and so raising the weight he could not raise himself. Raised it till its vast legs dangled and reached for the ground, the terrible wings spread and whirred once and the leverage of the suspended butt of the log bore down and as his wings beat, the weight tossed the sharp end high, so springing the Grimalkin suddenly into the air as a boy would fling a frog from a bent spear.

Up and up, turning end over end, the great wings beat at first feebly, then, feeling again the rush of wind about him, and believing himself to have raised with his own strength perhaps, the wide wings spread naturally, the long glide and circle on those sky-filling wings of horn and leather and aged scars and stench told them that it was again moving under its own power.

Frank seized the girl's hands and began to race with her for the shelter of the ruined city, for the persistence of life in that undead carcass might be such as to cause it to seek on and on after them till it found them in the sparse shelter of the great trees with great spaces between. It did so glide



and hover like a hunting owl, stooping again and again for some shadow that it hoped was its enemies.

At last, even as they crouched and ran through the gates of the ruins, they saw it rise from its following of them and fly straight across the city, just clearing the trees beyond, on and on, heavily in a ragged wavering flight.

"We didn't kill it! It wasn't really dead. It was just badly hurt!"

"I wonder if anything short of total destruction could kill it?"

"What was it going to do, Janey?" asked Frank.

"It is going to do what it did before, hide and get well and find us again."

"I'm going home. That thing cannot find us."

"Is it going back to its swamp home?"

"If it can get there. But it weakens; if it falls, it will die."

THEY put the nightmare out of their consciousness, and three went down the River of Doubt. Happiness went with them, singing in the forest-wild voice of the girl; singing in the heart of Hal who had got her promise, *yarva promise true!*

Something like happiness was singing in the heart of Farar, who had to his credit the besting of the greatest fighting beast of a whole planet. So the fabled Grimalkin of Venus did not exist?

Unknown to them, Janey found *yarva* talk to make with distant friendly minds, and told the minds of the glory of their deeds and of the dying monster they had beaten and which had fled away to die.

So, singing in *yarva*-style communication, far ahead of their canoe went the news of their exploit. It was a great warrior's song that was passed along, and thrilled the hearts of the

web-fingered natives who knew what the monster was and how unkillable.

So it was that as they rounded at last the grey-walled moss-draped curve of the last mighty bend of the river above the mining camp, their destination, their paddles ceased their rhythm. Surprise and even fear struck them, for so many native craft they had never seen before in one place.

Along the two wide-separated banks of the great river moved two lines of the long high-prowed ceremonial craft, hung with flowers, with maidens and women among the paddlers, and all chanting a famous war-chant of honor, sung only upon the return of a hero.

The webbed hands drove the paddles rhythmically and beautifully. The *song of victory* swept across the water to them as the dugouts circled and surrounded them and the maidens tossed flowers upon them so that they moved in a sweet rain of blooms and laughter and cries of admiration and the great ancient song of honor to them ringing and ringing, the water flowing with flowers.

Farar's keen hard eyes softened and became filled with a proud moisture of gratitude to these his native friends—for he alone of the three knew what honor this was, how very few ever won the ceremony of the song of victory. And no earthman had ever received this accolade before.

So escorted, they swept down to the landing near the great grey banks above which and back above the mighty trees reared the great glittering bubble of plastic which was the mining city of the earthmen. *In there* was miner-work and noise and earth-boring toil and soiling-smoke. *Out here* was singing and rejoicing and heartwarming praise and a people who loved them for what they had done. Farar knew a truth, this day.

Cries of fear filled the air as the grimalkin crashed down upon the plastic dome of the city . . .



THEY marched up to the gates of the plastic bubble, Farar and Worran carrying the great claw on their shoulders, and the weight bent them. Clinging to Hal's arm was Janey, bright and happy and smiling with yarva talk to the otherwise silent natives. For

many of them knew how to speak to her, and she was their friend now.

Suddenly, in the midst of this fun and deeply grave honor and flower-strewn path and singing voices, the workers and tradesmen inside coming out to the great gate to see what was

going on and joining in with the smiling throug . . . suddenly, Janey gave a shriek, and seized Hal's arm and Farar's so that they staggered and dropped the weight of the claw.

"Grimalkin come!" she screamed, and tugged the two men off the wide way of the city gate and into the forest beside.

Screaming down like a diving plane came the avenger, roaring to be heard, now. For Janey had heard his hate thought—filling the sky with wings, beating, beating—to crash down upon this place and kill all who would wound him! Never, *never* should another face him.

His weight struck the crown of the glistening plastic and buckled it in great tearing rents that ran across like shattering glass, but the stubborn stuff held its shape although the crown was torn across.

Poised there on the top of the glistening bubble of the city-to-be, he was like the doom of the past awakened, the dread past of Venus awakened and terrible again. He roared, his great scorpion-like tail lashed down, and cracking plastic crevices ran from each blow like lightning from a thunder cloud.

He beat at the glistening tenacity beneath him with his great horny jaws, beat and tore with his vast bird claws, and the whole city roof became a spiderweb of cracks running and interlacing and the fabric bent and gave beneath him till he sat in a bowl of cracked transparency and roared defiance and rage.

Farar watched, and crouched there; with the people who had so honored him fleeing in all directions through the forest, and from the city gates streamed the earth-men. As they streamed out, the monster reached down and gathered up a claw-full of

screaming, shrieking humans and mouthed them bloodily.

Farar swung up his rifle, scuffled from out his pack the small cylindrical gadget and fastened it to the muzzle, took aim through his telescopic sights, and fired. The monster roared pain, and dabbled at his eyes, and picked up yet more people and stuffed them in his maw.

**F**RANK fired, and fired again. The vast sickening ugliness slid purposefully down the side of the city shell like a child down a sliding board, and began to beat at the smaller trees and bushes along the trail. Carefully he flattened and beat at the area about the trail, making sure no thing lived, for he knew now that the thing did this stabbing of him from close at hand, was hidden in the leaves. Like a dog snuffing out a mouse, he snuffled among the flattened mess of branches and torn earth, making his great claws scratch in the way a chicken scrabbles for a worm.

Hal and Janey were now running far back in the shadows of the forest, runing hand in hand. Suddenly Hal tore loose his hand, and turned and left Janey, running furiously back toward the place he had last seen Frank. In his hand was his unsilenced rifle, and as he did not see Farar, he stopped and took a bead upon the great black center of the pupilo of the eye, and fired. The shot cracked out in the horror of silence and the monster sat up like a dog begging, pawing at his eye and screaming, then bending again to search the bushes.

Hal fired again, and the noise drew the great eye, it saw him. Hal turned and ran, in the other direction from Janey's position, and the thing hopped grotesquely over the trees, and landed ahead of his fleeing, waiting to seize

him as he appeared.

Hal stopped, noting that the vast wound in the side was not healed, but was raw and green with infection, with maggots and great vermin-like white snakes in it.

He drew his gun tight to the shoulder, taking steady aim, his last had missed the eye entirely. *Crack*—and the monster pawed his eye and hopped madly after the sound, and Hal ducked and crawled swiftly right toward where the thing had sat when he first fired.

Thus crabbing backward into the mess of wrecked branches where it had searched, he came upon Farar, lying unconscious among the bloody thrashed leaves and earth and splintered limbs.

Hal took his rifle with the silencer and the telescopic sights, and left his own lay there, and squatted on his haunches, sighting till he got the eyes again.

So the game went on, endlessly he sighted and fired and scrambled under the covering leaves away from the searching eyes far above him.

A grim idea came to him, and he led the hunt, not knowing which was the hunted—ever toward the wide burned place where the rockets landed and took off from earth.

But he had no chance to put it into effect, for he saw the circling plane in time and picked up his heels and ran like a deer.

The bomb fell right beside the wide wings, the eyes upstaring at the flying plane swooping so near—just missed crashing square into the harpy face of it.

The concussion knocked Hal Worran flat, and merciful unconsciousness came to him for a second. When he rose and turned to look, there was a

great smoking crater in the earth, and a great red scattered mass of flesh and bits of leathery wings, and hunks of torn limbs, and huge bones splintered and lying about.

Hal quietly dropped his rifle and dragged his legs wearily off after Janey, who was not going to be fed to any Grimalkin, *now!*

THE marriage ceremony took several days, for feasting was the native custom, and somehow he *had* to invite the diffident green-skinned men who had so welcomed them home. Janey yarva'd that they would always be welcome among them if they were included in the ceremony.

Farar, who had not been badly hurt, kissed the bride as a best man should, the natives brought hides of soft green serpentskin, the white and gold furs of the *Lajg* for rugs for the bride, and dresses of the soft red leather from the hairless deer.

\* \* \*

The Swamp of Despair echoes now to miners' drills, and rattling conveyors. Above the deathly green mists rises the greatest of all Venus' cities shells. High upon the gleaming clear plastic wall are the words—

*Worran and Farar, Inc.*

The silence of Despair is broken forever.

For all his wealth, Farar likes to spend his time cruising the great rivers of Venus on long trips, hunting and exploring.

Sometimes Worran and Janey Worran go along on these trips, *when the kids are off at school.*

But the purple and gold serpents of the swamp do not like the new order of things, at all.

THE END