

# fantastic

## ADVENTURES

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# Contents

## STORIES



Jalu, the Golden Girl of Kalendar, returns once more in Orlin Tremaine's newest story, in the March issue.



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A CONCEALED DOOR OPENED, AND A MECHANIC EMERGED FROM WITHIN THE GLISTENING SHIP IN ITS CRYSTAL TUNNEL



# LET WAR GODS

**T**O Sondra the stillness that reigned through the underground rooms was frightening. Past midnight, still she sat at her information desk, waiting, wondering how long the President would keep her at her post. Her face framed in waves of dark red hair was pale, completely revealing her feelings. Something dangerous was in the air.

The President had sent most of his staff home long ago. The few who remained to wait upon him were silent in anxiety. Not from a fear of air raids, for though Midland was a neutral nation, its government offices were bomb proof. Yet there was some intangible feeling of danger.

President Marbl expected a midnight visitor from one of the two warring nations.

Who? None of the staff knew. Someone of great importance, for Sondra and the others had been pledged to utmost secrecy.

Suddenly the silent waiting ended. Starchy Mid-

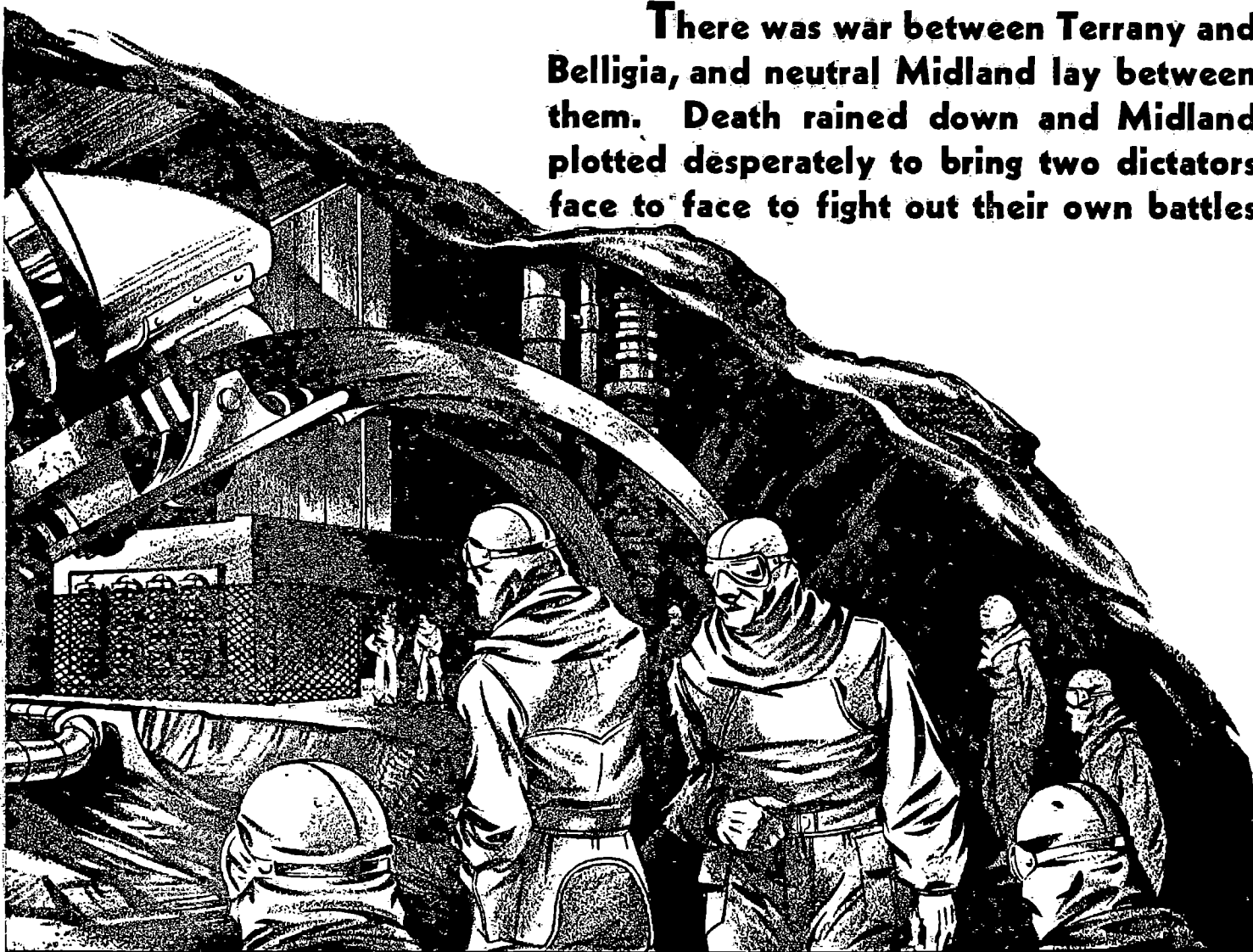
land guards thudded through the concrete halls, passed Sondra's desk like a marching machine, escorted a husky figure in a dazzling green and silver uniform toward President Marbl's sanctum.

Brubbazein—dictator of Belligia! The powerful, hated, war maker—one of Europe's gods of evil. Sondra chilled to the toes.

Was Midland about to sell out to one of the warring nations whose shells whistled overhead? Sondra trembled at the thought. She knew peace-loving Midlanders could never willfully take sides in the bloody death struggle between dictators. But she also knew that President Marbl was desperate: Midland was caught in a vise that threatened to crush her.

No one breathed of the secret visit. The world did not know that Dictator Brubbazein had so much as stepped outside his boundaries. Only Sondra and a few others knew, and they were left completely in the dark over the matter, except for a rumor that spread

**There was war between Terrany and Belligia, and neutral Midland lay between them. Death rained down and Midland plotted desperately to bring two dictators face to face to fight out their own battles**



# CLASH!

By  
**DON WILCOX**

among them like a fierce wind—not to be denied.

Brubbazein would soon return!

And the big shells whined on . . .

A curious war. Since the long and wide valley which was Midland separated the two warring powers, air battles and artillery had been the primary tactics, no infantry would attempt to march over Midland; the mine defenses were impassable. For the present each dictator resorted to such blockades as he could manage, and continued abrasive activities with long range guns.\*

In this game the innocent nation of Midland was the loser.

On her northern borders the Belligian artillery pressed hard, hurled shells over her to kill the foe to

\* A theory of war other than that of complete annihilation is the theory of abrasion, by which the opponents strive to exhaust or discourage each other through slow but ceaseless wear and tear.—Author.

her south (if they did not fall short and kill Midlanders instead.)

Terrany, in turn, directed her shells and planes northward to crush the warriors and civilians of Belligia (if they did not expend themselves upon a Midland factory or cathedral en route.)

But now, after three months, pressure against both Midland borders grew stronger, and the peace loving people were terrified, desperate. Their hopes went out like matches. On either side of them the number one passion was to fight until the last drop of blood was spent.

For the green and silver Belligians cried to the world that they must have every inch of territory which their barbaric ancestors overran a few centuries before. And no less determined were the propagandists of Terrany, who burned to save the world by repopulating it with superior blood. They must kill off their brothers to the north for civiliza-

tion's sake.

As both dictators massed infantry, all the prophets of the world predicted that Midland's hours were numbered. No one could foresee that this small, helpless nation would throw a surprise monkey wrench into the cogs of destruction. Europa moved to the brink of one of the oddest quirks in history. Later, when the dictators' war machines would be only empty ghosts, geologists would have to dig to the very roots of underground mountains to explain the curious turn of events. A secret within the earth.

Only President Marbl and a few mining engineers knew the geological secret that lay buried beneath their nation, far below the great mine shafts for which Midland was famous.

THE second week after Dictator Brubbazein's secret visit, the guards made another midnight march through Midland's bomb sheltered halls of government.

Sondra sat at the information desk as before. The return of Brubbazein, she supposed. Tonight no doubt Midland would fall into his hands!

She felt sick and helpless, just as she had felt when the news reached her that her brother, attending school in Terrany, had been pressed into the service when he tried to return to Midland, and had lost his life during the third week of the war.

The guards thundered past and she caught sight of the uniformed dignitary they escorted. It was not Brubbazein.

It was a wiry, black haired, narrow mustached military figure—Jaazel! Jaazel, the dictator of Terrany, the prodigy of a totalitarian state who had risen to power through his efficient purges and executions.

Sondra gripped the edge of her desk as the brilliant figure swept by like an electric wave of hatred. For an instant Jaazel's eyes flashed into her own. Distended red-brown eyes that seemed to penetrate the secret channels of her mind, to detect the hot resentment that lurked there. Her brother her friends

Indirectly Jaazel had murdered her brother. He had actually murdered, with his own hands, the father of one of her friends. And now, she thought, perhaps he (rather than Brubbazein) was to become Midland's ally and savior. She quailed, knowing she could never have an ounce of respect for such a beast. She might pretend, but nothing more.

What had happened, she wondered, to her several friends back in Terrany? In her year of schooling across the line she had seen the terrible fascist blight descend upon them as Jaazel's grip tightened.

Arden? What had happened to him? Had there been any truth to the story that he had fled from his native Terrany after his father was taken by one of the deadly purges? Would she ever see him again?

Her thoughts slipped off into chaotic reverie. She could have been fond of Arden. But after that tragedy struck him she hardly knew him, he became so strange and far-off. Then her term of school ended,

she came back to her own country—

A buzzer sounded.

"Sondra." President Marbl's voice.

"Yes, your honor."

"Turn your desk over to number seven for the next twenty-four hours. I wish you to accompany me on an excursion. My personal secretary is ill and I must have someone to keep notes—"

"Yes, your hon—"

"Someone trustworthy—with strong nerves. Our guest desires to make a tour of inspection—underground . . ."

An hour later, still dressed in her plain white and tan office dress, the lithe young girl huddled into a steel elevator car with a small group of uniformed men, dropped down—down through the endless black shaft of one of the famous Silgrilik Mines.

Within the next few hours she learned from their brief talk the guest would examine the deepest excavation ever made by man, pass his judgments upon the destructive resources of steam and molten lava that lay compressed beneath the final floor.

## CHAPTER II

### An Underground Meeting

THE elevator car stopped at a dimly lighted station hewn in the wall. The smell of green stone pervaded the cool moist air. From this point downward the atmosphere would grow warmer and far heavier. Each member of the party was given a refrigerated suit and an oxygen helmet.

Sondra felt weighted down in her clumsy attire. As the men emerged from their dressing rooms she was bewildered to know who was who, for the helmets and suits provided complete disguise.

President Marbl's voice reassured her, sounding with metallic overtones through the electric speaker in his oxygen helmet. He was encased in a soiled yellowish suit, number 11. She noticed that her own number was 22. She looked from one to another of the disguised creatures, finally determined that number 39, a quick nervous figure, was Jaazel. He was completely hidden. Not even his penetrating red-brown eyes could be seen.

Several thousand feet farther down they emerged bulkily from the elevator, passed through airtight doors, entered a spacious, well-furnished, well-lighted lobby that might have been a railway station. Lower Terminal, they called it.

A porter promptly announced that the place was atmosphere-conditioned and that they might remove their oxygen helmets and suits if they wished.

Here some of the employees wore only civilian clothes. Numerous visitors strolled about free of surplus impedimenta, others remained encased, perhaps to be ready to board an elevator or one of the outward bound cars through the numerous later passages, or perhaps to keep their identities secret. Most of these

were business men bent on leasing these subterranean channels to rent them as living space for families fleeing the war zones.

Number 11 led the way; 22 and 39 followed to a private room. Marbl and Jaazel talked. Sondra drew her arms out of her heavy sleeves, held her notebook within the barrel-like trunk of her costume, scribbled shorthand furiously.

There was scarcely time to realize all the implications of the conversation, but the President's plan dawned on the girl gradually. This guest, she realized with a queer thrill was the Dictator of Terrany.

"You say that I will see the shaft that is ready to carry destruction to the capital of Belligia?" he said in a harsh, demanding voice.

"Exactly. You realize, I am sure—" the President's manner was tense, "—that if the dictator of Belligia were suddenly killed, your enemy would dissolve!"

"Certainly I realize—" Through his own heated words the dictator glimpsed another cold truth. If he, the dictator of Terrany were killed, his own war monster would go to pieces. "But how am I to know that this shaft—"

Marbl produced a three dimensional drawing which the other took in his encased hands. Sondra could not see the suspicions that cluttered the dictator's face, but she knew they were there.

"If you wish to see this shaft," Marbl continued, "and a demonstration of the lava pressures which our engineer could release into it, you must descend to another station twenty-five miles deeper."

The helmet of number 39 was motionless. A silent glare.

"Or if you prefer," said Marbl, reading the dictator's doubts, "you may send your best geologist, upon whose judgment—"

"My own judgment is quite reliable," Jaazel snapped. "How do I get there without anyone knowing who I am or what my purpose is?"

"The one engineer who drives the subterranean drill will take you."

"And after I get there," the dictator bit his words savagely, "how will I know the path leads up to the Belligian capital and not somewhere else—my own capital, for instance?"

Marbl paced around the table. His plan was not puncture proof to pointed suspicions like Jaazel's. He tightened his lips and measured his words.

"I'm trusting you with my confidence," he said, "because it's Midland's way out as well as yours. My twelve million subjects never doubt my judgment. When I reveal to them that I have given you a chance at this artificial volcano *for their good*, they will know my action is honest, for I never deceive them." President Marbl put his heart into his words. Straight shooting with his people was one of his virtues, however, that meant little to a dictator like Jaazel, whose long suit was deceit. Well, this time he might get some of his own medicine. "Once we blast the Belligian capital to dust, the war is yours. Your share is to

repay Midland for all losses in property and lives. How could you fulfill your share of the bargain if I double-crossed you? I earnestly ask your faith, for your own good—and mine."

SONDRA'S writing hand trembled as she recorded her master's fervent speech. The brand of history was striking hot through her own fingers. And yet the momentous plea left Jaazel icy.

"Perhaps you've told the dictator of Belligia the same," he answered sarcastically. "I repeat, how am I to know the volcano leads to the Belligian capital?"

The little yellow-clad figure of number 11 advanced toward his questioner with a brisk step that was almost threatening.

"If you desire, the engineer will take you all the way up through the angling shaft. The lower end is twenty-five miles straight below us. You may chart the course for yourself on his three dimensional instruments. It's a day's journey in the subterranean drill."

"Have you made that journey yourself?"

"No, but I've conferred with the engineers."

"How many of them have made it?"

"One," said the president in tense exasperation. "The engineer who operates the drill—"

"Only one? Just one person knows the volcano's course, and your whole scheme is based on his word?"

Figuratively the ground gave way beneath Marbl's feet, but he struggled to stay upright. "You don't understand. The spiral course is long and tedious and riding space is crowded even for two passengers. Moreover, not everyone can endure the spinning of the subterranean drill. There's a rotating motion that makes them sick. It's much easier to stay here in the station and watch the three dimensional indicators that follow the drill's movements than to ride in it."

The angry breathing of the dictator subsided a little.

"That's the reason," the president continued, "that most of the work and the cruising is done by one ingenious engineer. He invented the giant drilling machine originally to facilitate his geological experiments. At the time the war struck he was tracing a seam between two underground mountains, and it happened that the upper end of his path rose toward Belligia, while the lower end penetrated molten rocks and reservoirs of steam—"

Jaazel's suspicions eased. The explanation was convincing enough even for his skepticism; still, something stuck in his throat—the realization that, even though well equipped for his incognito adventure, he was still taking a terrific chance. A descent deeper into the earth in a crowded car with an unknown engineer.

"Let me see the man that operates your boring flivver," he snapped.

A minute later a rather tall figure stalked in. He wore an oxygen helmet and a greasy brown "cooler," as the subterranean garments were popularly called, bearing the number 1.

He closed the door of the private room back of

him, glanced from one to the other of the three helmeted, suited figures, approached the table where they sat.

"Have him remove his helmet," Jaazel cracked in a low voice.

The president of Midland arose and introduced himself to the young engineer, who at once removed his helmet and bowed respectfully.

Sondra, gazing through her visor, suddenly slumped in her crusty "cooler," breathless with surprise. The young man before her was Arden!

SLIGHTLY taller than when they had been in school together, white faced from months away from the sunshine, he had more of the mystic's look than ever. That same far-away intensity burned in his eyes, gave a certain mysterious magnetism to his strong face and his whole bearing.

His encased hands went calmly to the table. He stood not quite straight. In spite of his bulky refrigeration suit, she could tell that his gaunt shoulders bent forward a trifle. Like his slightly prominent nose, solid cheek bones and set jaw, the angularity of his frame spoke of a certain urgency of purpose that he held in check.

His smooth voice carried a depth of feeling, Sondra thought; it reminded her of his father's tragedy. She shrank closer into her shell, fearful that a look from him would crack through her protecting helmet and send it clattering to the floor, to reveal her.

Marbl asked, "You're the operator of the subterranean drill, are you not?"

"Yes, your honor."

"These are friends of mine," said the President. "Could you accommodate one of them with a descent to the lava level?"

"One of them—yes," said Arden, "though it will be quite crowded, for there is to be another passenger. You don't mind, I trust?"

Visors and eyes turned upon number 39. Sondra and the President were sure that within his helmet the steel skepticism must have returned to his countenance. In reality, had his expression shown through the mask, they would have seen the crafty face of one who hungered for murder.

For Jaazel saw in the young engineer a similarity to someone he had once killed, and for a moment he felt a reverberation of his strongest passion, the pleasure of cruelty.

Jaazel had never given any consideration to those writers of science—psychiatrists and doctors—who had analyzed his personality, his rise to power, his thirst for war, in terms of perversions toward sadism. But Jaazel never denied to himself that the purges which he personally executed gave him a thrill that thrummed every fiber of his being. At this moment an echo of that thrill came upon him like a ravenous appetite, influenced him to throw cautions to the winds.

President Marbl misinterpreted the silence. "I

doubt whether my guest would care to go under such crowded conditions."

The dictator breathed heavily, still did not speak.

"Or, on second thought," Marbl added, "he may prefer to go in company of his own choosing."

Arden spoke without a symptom of emotion. "I shall be glad to respect your wishes, Mr. President. If your guest does not mind waiting a few hours—"

At once Sondra's suspicions went aflame. Something told her that Arden already knew who it was hidden within the helmet and suit numbered 39, that he was playing some desperate game of his own, a game of revenge against his father's murderer, the dictator from whom he had fled—

"I'm satisfied to go now," said the dictator in a low voice. He added that he didn't mind being crowded, and Sondra thought Arden gave a slight breath of relief. "I make only one simple request to insure my safety." Jaazel's head turned toward the girl.

"One request—I wish to take the girl with me."

THE request plainly startled Arden, who had not known to this moment that number 22 was a girl. He seemed about to protest. President Marbl also groped for excuses. He had no intention of subjecting the girl to such a gruelling adventure. The passenger space could scarcely accommodate—

Sondra stopped them. "I'll go," she said.

President Marbl had no comeback. Further protests from him would look too suspicious. The girl must go or the whole scheme might fall through. "Very well," he said.

Number 1, helmet in hand, led the way across the lobby into a room of colored lights that flashed.

Along one side were electrical instruments, dials, controls, three dimensional indicators, alive with the magic of subterranean power. The opposite wall, a series of built-in cases, flamed with the brilliance of geological displays—rare tints and hues, scintillating sparkles captured from the natural formations deep within the earth.

Arden stalled for time. Sondra watched him. His attention continually stole toward the various persons who roamed through the room past the exhibits.

The men who wore red coolers, Sondra noticed, were operators of elevators and mining trains—Arden paid no attention to these. Apparently he was trying to spot his other passenger among the visitors.

"We'll start in a few minutes," said Arden, consulting the time. "Perhaps you would like to see the electric mole\* while we wait."

---

\* The electric mole was what Arden called his subterranean drill, so named because it bored through the earth and left an open path for future travel. At slow speeds it could eat its way through rock, projecting a battery of augers that acted upon stone like a buzz-saw upon pulp. Moreover, it contained refining mechanisms that instantly digested the crumbs of its labor, paved its circular tunnel with rifled walls of unbreakable crystal that facilitated future travel, and disintegrated the residue of its diggings. Once it had formed a tunnel, it could spiral through at good speeds, like a gigantic bullet through a rifled tube.—Author.

The President's party followed Arden through airtight doors, out into cavernous passages where the lights were dimmer and the gravity-packed atmosphere more buoyant. They trailed past rumbling machine shops and power plants, came to a great pillar of crystal as large as a circular house, that rose through the floor of stone, extended through the stone ceiling.

The party crowded against a rail and peered into the ominous black pit revealed by an arched opening in the immense pillar, which was in reality a section of the borer's tunnel as seen from the outside. In the shadows the smooth machine-laid interior of the cylinder showed dimly.

"Give us the flood lights, will you, Alec?"

Arden's request was addressed to a husky figure who had crowded up close. His face could not be seen, for he was completely encased in a red cooler outfit. Strangely, the man did not respond, and Sondra caught a look of surprise in Arden's face. Either Alec's speaking equipment was out of order, or this wasn't Alec. Another employee passing the switchboard snapped the lights on.

A mechanic who had the electric mole on an upper level for a last-minute oiling brought it down into view.

The smoothly humming bullet-shaped machine corkscrewed downward through the crystal shaft with the grace and precision of a gigantic shell spiralling, slow motion, through the rifled barrel of a gun. It was built on the proportions of an oil tank.

It came to a stop. Its curved side, ridged with bold metallic threads studded with rollers, glistened like panels of jewels filling the window of a crystal tower.

A small concealed door drew inward, the mechanic emerged. Light gleamed from within the barrel-like opening and the onlookers caught a glimpse of the inner mysteries. In the heart of the vast machinery-filled bullet was space for the operator and two occupants.

While the mechanic answered a few questions, Arden slipped out of the group long enough to exchange a word on the sly with President Marbl.

Marbl said, "I don't know why your other passenger doesn't come. Every arrangement was worked out to the last detail, though he was very suspicious and said he'd kill any man that might give him away. He was to arrive at my office an hour after midnight and come on down."

"Then he should have been on the third elevator after yours, with Alec as his escort," Arden whispered.

"And Alec hasn't shown up?"

"No, but his uniform has." Arden indicated the big fellow in red near the door of the mole.

"I'm afraid there's been foul play," said the President. "Better take a chance on him and go ahead, and don't let him know you know he's Brubbazein until you're ready to defend yourself. Sorry the girl got mixed up in this, but there's no way to shelve her now. Don't tell her our plans either. Good luck."

Arden slipped back into the group.

Five minutes later he and his three anonymous pas-

sengers, huddled in a compact knot of masks and coolers at the center of the powerful machine, spiralled downward.

### CHAPTER III

#### A Floating Man

TWO circling lavender beams of light cut paths into the bottomless pit that yawned beneath the descending machine, illuminated the iridescent cylindrical wall that sank into the depths of thick purple mist. The heart of the electric mole, a tub-shaped wheel within wheels containing passengers and controls, coasted into rotation slowly as the hull accelerated. The four pairs of eyes—Sondra's were widest—peered downward through the apertures to watch the play of lavender headlights which the spinning framework blacked out intermittently like a stroboscope.

Faster. The sight became a flicker of magic color. Soon the speed of descent was so great that the stroboscopic effect was lost, the picture was again solid.

Now and then an object would come drifting up out of the mysterious depths—a plank floating in the heavy atmosphere, just as a gas filled balloon floats in the higher levels—a scrap of electric wire—a rusty spade—odds and ends that had fallen into the shaft, caught in the cushion of gravity-compressed air. A thump and a clatter as the machine ran into them, then they were gone. Again the musical hum of the mole.

Four occupants jammed together as tightly as their bulky coolers would permit.

Close together but worlds apart.

Faster. The sight became a flicker of magic color. Soon the speed of descent was so great that the stroboscopic effect was lost, the picture was again solid.

To Sondra this little group was dynamite. She knew nothing of the husky red-suited man who had joined them at the last minute without a word. But she knew that Arden and Jaazel would be deadly enemies if they discovered each other's identities—and perhaps Arden already knew—

Her heart pounded in sympathy for Arden. How could she blame him if he sought to avenge his father's death? Or was it his nature to seek revenge? You could never tell about these silent, mystical persons.

No, she must keep a grip on herself. She was on an errand for her country. She must see that this wiry, narrow mustached, cold-blooded creature in the cooler next to her, Midland's savior, return safely with his purpose achieved.

And if Arden dared to make trouble Dynamite? Little did she realize—

THE dictator of Terrany sat relaxed. He had forgotten his earlier misgivings. Accustomed to living in fear of assassination, he felt himself for once isolated from that danger.

He pondered Marbl's proposition, wondered how

he could twist it to his own advantage. If the volcano was indeed ready, perhaps he could turn it loose this very hour, as if by accident, before any bargain was sealed.

But was he so eager to cut the war short with a quick victory? War was his game. There was a pleasurable excitement about it. Again Arden's face crossed his mind. Why did that young man's appearance give him such a glow?

Hovering over Jaazel so closely that an arm weighed against his shoulder was the man in the red suit.

The dictator of Belligia gripped the back of the seat against which he leaned, set his teeth tightly as he dreamed of future battles. He must think fast to have new campaigns ready as soon as he and this ingenious engineer blew up the capital of Terrany, which he had learned only a week before sat on the top of an artificial volcano.

If inspection proved that the young engineer had a sure thing, he'd be in line for a military commission as a reward. Brubbazein was generous with rewards that enhanced his own grandeur.

And what a swell thing it would be for Belligian morale, Brubbazein thought, to blow up Jaazel's capital! A volcano, be it natural or artificial, would seem very much like an act of God! God on the side of Brubbazein's green and silver warriors!

Arden was the only one of the four occupants who spoke, and as he got no answers to his comments (which was exactly what he expected) he soon grew silent. That was well enough. It would postpone trouble until they got to the Lava Station. Plainly each of the dictators expected to get by incognito, and neither knew nor cared who his fellow passengers were.

Arden's gloved hands worked at the controls feverishly. His refrigeration suit worked overtime against his own high temperature as well as the increasing heat from the interior of the earth.

What a situation! Hot trembles flooded through his spine. Never in modern history, he thought, had two hostile war gods been trapped together before. How simply they had toppled. Another hour or two would tell the tale. If the television broadcast would only put their meeting across with the outside world—

But the girl—there was the stumbling block. If he could dispose of her he would have clear sailing, and it wouldn't make any difference what happened to his own life.

One trick was sure to help. He would speed up the descent so that she would become ill from dizziness. Then as soon as they reached the final level he would drag her off into a side room of the Lava Station and let her sleep off her illness while he took care of the world's trouble makers.

He touched up the throttle. Faster—faster!

The little cluster of passengers spun wildly. The sensation was that of a tailspin straight down a plumb line. One by one, three of the occupants felt

the blackness sweep in. They sank together in an unconscious heap.

The blood left Arden's brain too, and for an instant he felt himself going. Then his grip on the throttle cut the acceleration—none too soon. Gray melted through his darkened vision. The machine still sped like a rocket down into the depthless purple mist.

Suddenly a white object drew up out of the deep—something that resembled a human body. Arden cut the throttle, jammed the brakes as hard as he dared, but the momentum was too great. The powerful machine could not stop in time—

It was a man, scantily dressed, floating in the air—air of his own specific gravity. A spectral sight as he appeared to rise up by magic, the whirling lavender lights playing over his white body, limp, drifting.

Like a locomotive engineer powerless to turn out of his tracks, Arden held his breath, awaited the inevitable thump—

Another instant and it had happened. The floating body was a thing of the past. Shattered—gone!

But from the last glimpse Arden caught, three telling details clung in his mind's eye. Clear as daylight a bullet wound showed in the man's temple, his face was the pain-contorted face of death, his left shoulder bore a familiar tattoo mark. Alec!

So that was how Brubbazein had come by Alec's uniform. Simple, direct action—bullets. A sickening shudder came over the young engineer. He glanced at the figures crowded against him. Still asleep.

Breathing heavily, trembling to the fingertips, he held back the speed. The memory of his father came upon him sharply—

Never since the hour of that fateful tragedy had the realization been so poignant that the dreaded dictators were geniuses of crime, whose statesmanship was simply glorified murder braced by glorified excuses that were forced down the throats of their people. Human lives were cheap to them, and woe unto the innocent man who happened to block their paths.

But now that they were at war, what could be fairer than to bring them face to face, let them take their venom out on each other?

Three dizzy passengers in the electric mole blinked their bleary eyes, saw that their pilot still clutched the controls, that the two lavender headlights still sent their whirling spots down—down—

Again, Arden threw pressure on the throttle. Another stretch of sickening speed. The passengers went into a heavy sleep.

At last the tunnel angled outward, straightened out over the deepest floor man ever found, widened into a station.

## CHAPTER IV

### An Underground Drama

ARDEN unloaded his sleeping passengers. They were easily handled in the buoyant air; he clung



to a cable with one hand to keep from rising.

Once within the air-tight doors of the Lava Station, the atmospheric conditions were less abnormal. This station was artificially walled, having been dug and paved by this electric mole; it was here that Arden had originally found himself at a dead end in descent, for the rock was still in a molten form. Even the thick walls of crystal could scarcely resist the terrific pressure of the expansive steamy substance.

Arden glanced hastily through the crow's foot of passages, a series of dead ends that testified to the electric mole's struggle. He was gratified to find that only a few minor breaks had appeared since his last visit; the inpouring lava had stiffened, clogged its own passage through the walls.

He dragged each of his companions to a separate wing, left the neon lights burning dimly, hastened to the power room to step up the refrigeration plant. The threaded crystal floors were unbearably hot. It would take a few minutes for the air to cool and the fumes to clear. Meanwhile, the oxygen helmets were needed.

He telephoned to the Lower Terminal, which was now twenty-five miles above.

"President Marbl? . . . Everything okay so far. They're still asleep from the ride. . . No, they didn't suspect a thing, so we're all set. My telecaster is already switched on, so go ahead with your connections. I hope you can pull in all the networks . . ."

Arden hung up, whirled to his instruments, scanned them with a practiced eye. As always, his heart gave an extra jump as he caught the new oscillations on the seismographic record. He noted from another instrument—a thick steel tower through which lava circulated—another slight rise in the index to the pressures that thundered constantly beneath the crusty floor. Without instruments, that ominous sound was almost inaudible, but Arden trembled to realize the direful power back of that low rumble.

Back to his victims.

Jaazel still lay against the wall, his eyes closed. Arden dug into his cooler, found a pistol, removed it, hurried on.

Brubbazein's frame rocked slightly as Arden removed a weapon from him, but settled back to a comfortable position on the floor. A sleepy groan. No time to waste now. The husky dictator would soon come out of it.

Arden chased into a third passage, hoping the girl would be dead asleep. No such luck. She was up on one elbow. She saw him approach, got to her feet unsteadily, reached to remove her helmet. Arden did not restrain her, for the air was clearer now; moreover he was curious to see her face, to know what sort of person he had to deal with.

He stopped short, stared. "Sondra!" he said.

Lighted by the soft glow of neons reflected off the iridescent walls, the beautiful face was revealed to him—the deep colored waves of hair, the fine white skin, lustrous eyes, lips parted in a half smile.

"YOU—you still remember me, Arden?"

"Remember you! Of course—" He reached out for her hands. Their clasp was encumbered by the bulky gloves but they didn't notice that. Arden hastily removed his own helmet, his face was very close to hers, his expression was one of mingled discovery, delight, and—most of all—utter bewilderment.

"Sondra, I can't believe it! It's been four years since—" The gladness in his countenance waned, as if he had allowed himself to be too much carried away by surprise. He glanced back into the big open room impulsively; the lines about his mouth tightened, he turned toward her sternly.

"Sondra, what are you doing here?"

Her radiant look faded. Her eyes fixed upon the two pistols jammed through his belt. Her stare was the only answer she offered. He bristled with defense.

"Sondra, I've got a big job on my hands. I don't want you to misunderstand me—I'd like to tell you everything—I will if we get out of this alive—but just now—" Another sharp glance toward the big room. "Sondra, will you help me?"

There was a vibrant appeal in his voice that shook her, magnetized her as back in her student days when she dared to be fond of him. But now—she must keep a grip on herself.

Accusation showed through her steady eyes. She shook her head slowly.

"What's happened to you, Arden? You've changed since I first knew you—"

He was silent. Of course he had changed. She must have known that after his innocent father was purged—upon a pretext—

A note of sympathy came into her voice. "I don't mean to hurt you, Arden. I know how cut up you were—and yet—I saw the change coming over you before I left—and I—I was afraid!"

"And now?"

"I'm more afraid than ever. I've lost touch . . . Why didn't you ever write to me?"

Arden turned his eyes away, spoke impassionedly. "I couldn't after what happened—after what I did. You must have heard. I ran away from Ter-rany the week I was to have gone into compulsory military service." His eyes turned back upon her; his voice went defiant. "I couldn't go into it! Everything within me revolted! I couldn't! Don't you see! It was all a farce to me—and it still is, even though my native country is at war! War for what? The amusement of our great dictator! How could I fight for a criminal like Jaazel? I tell you my own principles wouldn't let me!"

"I wish you had written me, Arden."

His tall taut frame drew closer to her. He looked into her lovely face, seemed to breathe in an inspiration of human tenderness long forgotten. "Sondra," he said softly, "I often dreamed of you after I came here to the mines—dreamed that some day I'd see you again—maybe meet you by chance, like this, and we'd have a chance to talk about—lots of things . . ."

Sondra's face lighted to know he felt that way. She smiled, not knowing what to say.

THE far-off mystical look returned to his face. "After you left—after my father was murdered—I began to see what was happening to everyone in Ter-rany. I saw Jaazel waving his high sounding ideals at us with one hand and branding us into inhumane beasts with the other. I knew for the first time that his system was rotten to the core, and we were all the goats. But I wanted to prove it. I wanted to know whether he himself believes in the things he makes my people die for." He turned to Sondra sharply. "Do you think he does, down deep in his heart?"

"I—I don't know."

"Or is he just pulling the wool over his own eyes with all this talk about saving civilization—doing it to mask the fiend that's down inside himself feasting on murder?"

"I can't answer that, Arden I—"

"It's a question that ought to be answered!" The depth of feeling in his voice shook Sondra. What a dramatic figure he was, a giant of courage, his nerves sharpened to a fighting edge. "And maybe it *can* be answered—this hour—for the whole world!"

"What do you mean?" Sondra's lips trembled. "Jaazel came down here at President Marbl's request, to inspect a war device. It's my duty to see that he gets back—"

"He won't get back. Not the way he came. I can promise you that!"

Terror came into Sondra's white face. She glanced at the gleaming weapons. "Not in cold blood, Arden!"

"No. I won't lay a hand on Jaazel if I can help it—but our other passenger might."

Sondra's trembling hand touched her shocked mouth. "Then you've—you've brought a thug along to do the deed for you!"

"Exactly. One of the most skillful thugs in Europe. He ought to be a perfect match for Jaazel. His name's Brubbazein."

"Brub—" the girl gasped. "You mean that man in the red who came down with us was—"

"Brubbazein. He's here for the same purpose as Jaazel. His visit was arranged by your honored President. The same thing goes for Brubbazein. They're both here and if they're awake by this time they're each in a stew to blow up the other's capital. That's why I—" He felt Sondra's fearful stare grow cold upon him.

"I can't let you do this, Arden. I can't betray President Marbl. I'm bound to see that Jaazel gets a square deal."

"He'll get whatever deal Brubbazein gives him!"

Sondra shrank backward. "Then this is all a trick to avenge your father's murder!"

"No, Sondra, you don't understand. It's something far bigger than that." Arden took another step

toward her, his brow twisted painfully as he strove to make himself clear. He couldn't find words for it. Her sensitive face—how could he make her understand that this was not simply madness? "Sondra, you shouldn't be here. The very sight of you makes me go soft. It was always that way with you and me. I needed to be bitter and hard—that was the only way to satisfy the fire inside me—and you wouldn't let me—you couldn't stand the cruelty. But I've got to go through with it now. I've got them here I've got the television receiver It's on—now—in the big room—so the world can judge for itself."

"The world—?" Sondra's eyes fluttered. At last the meaning began to dawn upon her.

"The world will see them come together—two war gods—pitted against each other. They won't know they're being watched by anyone except you and me. They'll reveal themselves—they'll give us the answers that are at the heart of the world's trouble! You'll not interfere with this, Sondra—you'll let it go through?"

"I'll not interfere," said the girl weakly. There was no other answer, even though the fears that shot through her were sharpened by the knowledge that Jaazel had brought her here as a shield in case of personal danger.

The trudge of heavy footsteps sounded. Shadows criss-crossed through the large cavernous room. The husky figure in the red cooler strode into view.

Arden slipped the guns out of his belt, hid them in his oxygen helmet which he carried like a basket, and went forward with a slow, easy stride. Sondra followed.

## CHAPTER V

### Volcano for Sale

"ONE by one my guests are coming to life," said Arden casually, turning bright lights on throughout the crow's foot of passages as he passed a switch-board. "How are *you* feeling?"

He got only a muffled grunt for an answer, which was as much as he expected from a dictator concealing his identity.

"The spin usually affects passengers that way, and the heavy atmosphere down here makes some very sleepy. But I've got the pumps working, it's getting cooler, you'll be all right now. It won't take us long to look around."

Brubbazein grunted again.

Soon the other helmeted figure came to life, came rushing out of his corridor with considerable agitation but hastily regained his poise when he caught sight of the waiting party.

"And now that we are all ready," said Arden suavely, "we'll review these geological curiosities systematically. But first, would you gentlemen care to remove your helmets? I'm sure you'd find it more comfortable and congenial." Neither man acted

upon the suggestion. "Very well, we'll proceed."

There were numerous gadgets to explain and demonstrate. Here and there Arden pressed levers and jets of live steam shot across the floor or whistled overhead. One faucet released a blast of black smoke; another, with a heavily insulated hose and nozzle attached, produced a fine spurt of lava that splattered the arched ceiling like molten lead. The round stones that lay loose on the floor, Arden explained, were simply globules of lava that had stiffened.

Farther on was an instrument that enabled them to hear the thundering torrent of lava bounding up like a million geysers of hot metal against a ceiling somewhere beneath them. None of the party, regardless of hidden anxieties, could fail to feel the thrill of dynamic power that lay hidden here. Pity the man that chanced to be on this spot when the subterranean hell broke loose.

But the one object that stuck in their eyes from the first was the large hand lever conspicuously rising from a small platform in the center of the main room.

Each time the party moved from one dead end corridor to another they passed it. They saw the printed directions it bore in bold yellow letters.

The lever stood at dead center. One arrow pointed outward to the word Terrany at the right; the opposite arrow pointed leftward to the word Belligia.

"And now we come to the most interesting feature," Arden's monolog continued in tourist-guide fashion. "This lever—"

The dictators drew too close to the object for comfort.

"Keep back off the platform steps, please," Arden warned. They backed away. "This lever is a delicate trigger connected with two vast stores of explosives, buried back in two of the corridors we have just visited."

"Two!"

Arden was uncertain whether it was Brubbazein or Jaazel who spoke, or whether both in unison. Each visor was turned toward him.

"These two stores of explosives were planted originally to blast openings from the volcano beneath us, to relieve the pressure if it became dangerous; perhaps eventually to clear the path for further descent. However, it was necessary first to drill outlets, hence two angling tunnels were cut toward the surface as lava lead-offs."

"Two?"

This time Arden was certain both men spoke.

"Two," he answered. "I find that visitors are always interested to know where these tunnels go. Well, one of them follows a seam between underground mountains and rises toward a city in Belligia. The other, by chance, leads to Terrany. Hence the marks on this lever."

"Just *where* in Terrany?" came the voice of Jaazel, badly disguised.

"By a strange circumstance, to a conduit subway

beneath the national capital of Terrany."

Through the electric speaker in Jaazel's helmet a hard gulp sounded.

"And the other?" the husky figure in red demanded in a hoarse voice.

"To the Belligian government buildings. Quite a coincidence, don't you think?" Arden was the only one who laughed, and his effort was distinctly strained. "Some of our visitors have remarked, now that the war is on, that one false move from this lever might wind up the trouble in a hurry. What do you folks think?"

Dead silence. Arden could feel the wrath gathering.

"It does seem," he continued, "that it would be an easy way of accomplishing exactly what each of the dictators wants to accomplish. Don't you think so?"

Another silence, heavy with tension.

"Some folks say to me, why don't you go ahead and shove the lever one way or the other and stop the damned war?" Arden chuckled as if he were talking to himself. "Gosh, it does sound tempting." He placed a foot on the first step, gazed at the object of his discourse. "But I always tell them I can't make up my mind which way it ought to go, and then ask them if they want to make me an offer to thrust it in the right direction. Well, nobody's made me a decent offer—so far."

Arden moved up the three steps, stood on the little platform. In one hand he still held his helmet, its contents concealed. The other hand he placed on the lever.

"Perhaps," he said with an ironical smile, "some of you visitors would like to make a bid. Here we are, open for business."

Number 39's shoulders drew up tightly. His angry breathing was audible.

The husky figure in the red cooler stood stiffly, passed his glare from one to the other of his companions; his visor came to rest on the one person, other than himself, whose face was hidden.

Arden monologued on in his quiet voice. Gradually his words grew crisper. "I assume you're all wide awake by this time. Surely you're not going to let a good opportunity slip by. All joking aside, I'm in the mood for action. It wouldn't take much to make me blow up the Belligian capital. Today the great dictator Brubbazein shot and killed one of my best friends."

The three persons stood paralyzed for a moment. Up to now the two hidden dictators had thought perhaps the young engineer was simply chattering to hear himself talk. But the gleam in his distended eyes arrested them. Was that gleam a fighting challenge or something insane?

Brubbazein, closest to the platform, moved backward a step. Jaazel reached his hand out as if to catch Sondra's arm. She was a few steps out of reach. He gave her a swift glance as if to remind her she was his protection, returned his eyes to the bold speaker.

"And now that I think of it," the young man's lips

drew down, "I could blast the capital of Terrany off the map without blinking an eye—for a certain dictator named Jaazel murdered my father."

With these words the speaker let a glove drop from his right hand. He dipped into his helmet, brought up a pistol.

"Take off your helmets, you cowards!" he demanded.

## CHAPTER VI

### The Challenge to Fight

BY this time hundreds of thousands of televisions over central Europe were tuned in to bring the strange underground drama before puzzled spectators.

Suddenly the television world was aghast. Helmets removed, the two mysteriously reticent figures became no other than the two great dictators in person!

What was this—a faked show? An impersonation? A new brand of propaganda? No, seeing was believing, and no one in the civilized world could mistake the faces of these two much photographed war gods. Moreover, their voices—

"What happened to my gun?" the dictator of Terrany barked.

The lean young man on the little platform set his teeth. "You've no need for a gun. Brubbazein doesn't have one."

The wiry, black mustached dictator tossed his oxygen helmet aside and took a threatening step toward the young man with the pistol. There was powerful defiance in his perspiring face. The hosts of invisible onlookers fully expected him to pounce to the platform and overpower the keen-eyed boy with sheer pressure of a domineering personality.

"You can't get away with this!" he snarled. He leaped forward.

With a quick step, Arden's toe pressed a button in the platform floor. A screen of live steam shot outward in all directions from the base of the steps. Jaazel threw his arms up over his face. Then the white cloud filled the picture. The television audience heard the long hiss of steam, saw nothing except the dim figure of the girl escaping from the scene.

Over Terrany the word spread as fast as radio could take it. History's most sensational news caught in the very making. Jaazel was trapped. Trapped with Brubbazein. Foul business. Both capitals quickly denied any knowledge of the plot. President Marbl's staff were completely baffled.

Whatever the mystery back of it, the masses of people and regiments of soldiers went wild with excitement, crowded over televisions enthralled.

"The dictators have come together!" The newscasters screamed. Everywhere regular television service switched off scheduled programs to cut into the sensational drama. News commentators slipped words of interpretation in edgewise now that there was a

silent moment. Here it was at last, they said; the clash of the world's two great heroes, inflamed at each other from years of hostile relations, their angers at fever pitch from three months of devastating warfare. How they had come together was still unknown, but . . . "here they are glaring at each other through the mist. The war is in *their* hands now, ladies and gentlemen! Like the giants of old who stepped forth from their armies . . . Brubbazein and Jaazel, ready to fight it out!"

JAAZEL was the first to speak. He shot curt words at his husky, blond-haired enemy. "Who planted you here?"

The iron man of Belligia glowered at him. "Nobody plants me. I'm no pawn. My mistakes are my own—and that goes for this one."

The two iron men looked each other in the eye. The invisible hundreds of thousands of spectators, whether in Terrany, Belligia, or elsewhere, could not mistake that exchange of looks: it betrayed a light of common understanding.

"It's obvious we're both victims of a cheap trick," Brubbazein added.

Jaazel nodded. "A frame-up to bring us together." He looked about hopefully for the girl but she was nowhere to be seen. He turned upon Arden, who still occupied the platform. "All right, here we are. You've pulled us in with a fake volcano—"

"Fake?" Arden's ejaculation was defiant.

"Here we are. Go ahead and have your laugh, then get me out of here. I've got business—"

The dictator of Belligia, fists on his hips, broke in with an arrogant challenge to the young engineer. "I'll call your bluff on that artificial volcano, you damned upstart! Cut it loose and rip my capital to pieces if you think you can! Go on! Do it!"

The two war gods started to charge him, shaking their fists. Again the steam blast hissed. The challengers writhed, fell back.

"Well," Brubbazein groaned, touching his scalded face painfully, "what's your game? What do you want out of us?"

Arden's steady eyes gleamed through the clearing fog. He stood like a delicately poised statue before the glare of the two enraged dictators. Chills played through him. This was the moment he had lived for.

"I thought you two were at war with *each other*," he said. They continued to stare at him. "Then why don't you fight each other?" Silence. "Well, here you are. What are you going to do about it?"

"Nothing," said Jaazel dryly. "You must be a simpleton if you think this will get you anywhere."

"I want you to *fight!*" Arden shouted. "For years I've heard each of you rave about what a menace the other is. All right, give us a demonstration of how you feel! Show us what you'd do if your armies were standing back of you, looking on—"

"Crack-pot!" Jaazel yelled. "Damned imbecile!" With a slight turn toward Brubbazein, "He doesn't

know the first principles of modern warfare."

The two dictators apparently had no intention to fight. At a safe distance from his platform Arden had planted hydrants with hoses and nozzles attached, to give them the opportunity to shoot live steam upon each other if they desired. Not so deadly as machine guns, he reminded them, nor so painful as the flames which they made their soldiers use upon each other, but at least they could express their feelings toward one another.

They only snorted in disgust.

Red anger shot through Arden's face. "Jaazel, what kind of man are you? I want to know. You've roared to Terrany that the one person responsible for the world's trouble is Brubbazein—just as he says the same thing about you. You tell the people they can't have the kind of world they want as long as his regime lasts. They must cut a path of blood to get to him. All right, there stands Brubbazein!" Arden fairly screamed, feeling his plan turn to dust in his hands. "What are you going to do about it?"

"NOTHING!!!"

"Jaazel, if the people of Terrany could hear you say that—"

"The people be damned!! I know what I'm doing. I stand ready to negotiate with Brubbazein when the time comes—after our fighting fools have had their fill." His eyes flicked in Brubbazein's direction, caught the hint of an approving nod.

"I regret," said the Belligian war god in a stentorian voice, "that this embarrassment has arisen. Mr. Jaazel, you have voiced my sentiment as well as your own. This damned hot-head doesn't seem to realize that what we tell our people is necessarily a very simple version of the real issue. If we told them nothing but the truth, the saps wouldn't fight. We've got to prime them with plenty of war juice to get any kind of results. For you and I know, Mr. Jaazel, that our difference is worth fighting for!" His manner became elegant. "It is rooted deeply. It must be resolved in blood!"

"Whose blood?" Arden cried. "If the people aren't capable of understanding the issue—"

"They're quite capable of fighting and dying. That's their share! Let them go to it! After the smoke of battle has cleared there must be men of vision to come together and make peace."

WITH a sickening feeling Arden knew his plan was spent. If their words had carried out to their people by television, perhaps something had been accomplished—perhaps a little of their sham had registered. But the hope of forcing them to fight out their own troubles—that was vain. Men of vision indeed!

"The smoke of battle is clear down here," cracked Arden, "and you can take all the time you want to negotiate."

The men edged closer together as if they wanted to confer in private. All right, he'd leave them here and

let them confer till they rotted. It seemed a harsh thing, but it was kindness compared to the hell they sent their soldiers into.

They were well back from the platform now, but not out of range of the concealed television receptor, for Sondra—unconsciously it had warmed Arden's heart to catch glimpses of her from time to time—lurked in a shadowed corner, kept the instrument turned on them to best advantage.

The receptor was shelved too far away, however, to hear the low words which Jaazel spoke to Brubbazein.

"I know who this person is—he said I killed his father—now I recall the resemblance to one of my traitors—caught in a purge. Later the son escaped the country. That's our cue. A runaway. If we threaten him, we'll find him a coward!"

Brubbazein muttered, "He doesn't act like a coward to me—"

"Help me corner him," Jaazel said through tight lips, "and I'll put the works on him—with pleasure!"

"Let him talk himself out first," Brubbazein mumbled, "then we'll split and get out of range of that steam and . . ."

"And find the girl!" Jaazel snapped.

Arden shouted at them again. Though the telecaster caught up his words, they seemed only a hodgepodge of meaningless instructions at the time. The two chummy dictators appeared to ignore them, but the time was not far ahead that they would recall them to the last detail.

Then as they backed farther away and began to divide, they saw him beckon toward a corner nearby.

Almost on the instant Sondra reappeared. She fled across the open room. She and Arden tried to make a break toward the exit. But the cumbersome refrigeration suit and the bold crystal threads that striped the floor played havoc. Sondra tripped, spilled.

Arden and Jaazel were about the same distance from her as she went down.

There were millions of television watchers and listeners by this time. Most of them were still stunned by the very intimate revelation of war gods they had just witnessed—war gods with the shell of deceit cracked off. Consequently there were millions who saw something unspeakably treacherous in the glitter of Jaazel's eyes as the girl fell.

They saw him spring into action, leap across the floor to seize her. They heard Arden's breath as he plunged to her rescue, saw Arden's helmet roll back of him spilling two pistols. And they could not miss seeing Brubbazein's determined jaw as he followed into the fray, scrambled for the weapons.

One instant Jaazel was on his feet, the next he staggered from a left to the jaw. A right followed through. Another left. He went down.

The young engineer turned to face the dictator of Belligia, who, tearing a left hand out of a glove, jabbed a trigger finger through one of the pistols.

"Higher!" Brubbazein growled. "Leave the girl

alone. You're the one I want. Come on—*now!* We're going! You're going to take me back."

Sweat streamed down the big man's face. His gloved hand held the second gun awkwardly against his body. He brought it into his grasp. Keeping the business hand carefully poised, he gathered up his helmet and glove.

Jaazel was still down, his eyes half closed, as the larger dictator forced the engineer toward the door. Sondra had apparently gone into a faint.

"They can look out for themselves," Brubbazein snarled. His heartless words rang through the telecast even though he and his prisoner moved out of the picture.

At once the girl looked up, crept to her feet, slipped off in another direction. For the moment the breathless world saw only the prone figure of Jaazel. They could still hear voices, however. Brubbazein's orders. The young engineer stalling for time.

"So you're going to leave the volcano to Jaazel?" Brubbazein's heavy trudge stopped. "It's a fake." "Do you think so?"

From his bluster of words the Belligian dictator was evidently caught between courses. Then he came back, marching his prisoner ahead of him, headed straight for the little platform.

Jaazel came up to a sitting position in time to see them march in front of him. They moved as with a single purpose. Brubbazein was so intent he didn't look to either side until the shadow of the girl crossed his path. Five yards from the lever he turned with a jerk, saw what was coming.

To the television audience there was simply a slushing sound like the splash of hot metal. A black stream cut across the picture to strike Brubbazein's hands. Steaming lava. A gun shot went wild. Everything dropped from the big dictator's hands, he gave a sharp huff of pain.

The girl and the boy ran out. Doors sounded. A machine rumbled and hummed away into dimness.

## CHAPTER VII

### Two Capitals Wait

**B**ACK in the whirl of the electric mole again, Sondra found relief in a stupor more genuine than her recent faint. An hour later she awoke, was alarmed to find Arden crowding the throttle as if it were a matter of life and death.

"I want as much elevation as I can get, just in case they should set off the volcano," he explained. "I've planted a number of safeguards through this shaft—still—" He made an effort to relax. "We're probably all right by now."

"Then it's really so?" Sondra gasped. "The tunnels and all? It would really blow up both capitals?"

Arden nodded. "They doubted it, but if they meddle with that lever—"

The girl shook her head. "What a jolt that would

be! Think what a shake-up it would give the war!"

"Speaking of shake-ups, I only hope both warring nations got to listen in on what they said. I thought my scheme had failed at first, when I found they wouldn't fight. But as I look back on it, their words may prove more explosive than any volcano. It wouldn't surprise me if the troops on both sides made some decisions of their own after this."

He cut the speed to a more comfortable gait.

"Thanks," she murmured. "I'm still rather dizzy—though it's partly from the whirl of events," she added, laughing. "Do you think the dictators will manage to get out of their tunnels as you instructed them?"

"It could be done, but I don't know. We also left them the guns. I think we've done our duty by them."

He slackened the speed a little more, turned to her, smiling. "We're out of danger now, I'm sure. I want to talk about us, Sondra. It's what I've been wanting for four years, and now, all at once here you are—right beside me—almost in my arms."

She drew closer, and he put his arms around her.

"It's a curious world," he said. "It gets in some devilish tangles, and some of us get twisted and crushed till we don't know whether we're still human—"

"There's nothing crushed about you," said Sondra. "You've practically tied the world in knots today."

"Maybe," he smiled broadly. "Anyway, now that that's off our shoulders and we've done all we know to do, it doesn't seem nearly so important to me as—"

"As *what?*"

"As finding you. His lips found hers, and again she found herself whirling dizzily.

Miles below them a tense drama continued. Miles above, the world watched, waited.

And though the drama seemed at a standstill, few of the millions of unsuspected watchers could tear themselves away from their televisions. The vast majority, including hosts of entrenched soldiers, government officials the world over, news correspondents, common people stunned from being called fools by their leaders—held on for the last ounce of bitter truth.

For most of two hours the world's two great dictators simply sat, talked little, seldom looked at each other. Their harsh brooding expressions were clearly visible under the blaze of lights.

The thing which gave a magnetic tension to their arrested drama was the object which stood between them—a small dark platform only three steps high, from which a lever extended straight up.

Their eyes continually roved to this object. They were far from aware that every glance toward it sent thousands of their subjects scurrying out of the capitals—for by this time the listening world was assured by alert commentators of its unspeakably dreadful function.

When they grew silent, the television audience became all the more enthralled, for the news commen-

tators carried on, pondered what schemes might be revolving in their minds, discussed every chance action and clue.

In a low, mumbling conversation, the two trapped men spoke of trying the perilous escapes the young engineer had indicated. Time was precious. There was no chance of a rescue down here. They agreed to take their chances on their respective tunnels.

They rose to go. Their guns still lay on the floor in the foreground. They decided to leave them untouched. Except for an occasional, almost indefinable indication given here and there—a sharp glance, a nervous twitch of the fingers—which only the most alert observer could catch, the breathless world might have believed these deadly enemies were ready to part on terms of trust and friendship. If Jaazel knew that Brubbazein had once got the upper hand on the young engineer and nearly slipped away, leaving him flat, he evidently chose to forget it.

The men shook hands, took up their oxygen masks, turned their backs upon the television audience and started away, Jaazel toward the corridor on the left, Brubbazein to the one on the right.

**A**N alert news commentator who had recorded Arden's strange words of instruction two hours before, now reread them.

"You've each got one chance to get back to your capitals. At the end of that left corridor there's a valve entrance to the big tunnel that leads up to Ter-rany. In the right one, an entrance to the Belligian tunnel. Once you get in, you'll find the compressed air so buoyant that you'll rise part of the way. When that runs out, remember the threads in the wall are deep. Each tunnel runs on an angle. You can climb. I'll inform your governments where to look for you."

The two dictators trudged out of sight. Minutes passed.

Back into the picture came Jaazel, slipping along stealthily, his eyes on the lever. He grew more cautious as he neared the point where their ways had parted.

From the other side of the projecting partition Brubbazein reappeared. He too moved with caution, looked toward the same goal.

At the corner they met, faced each other. Again a suave demeanor on the part of both.

"I was coming back to call you," said Jaazel, "to make sure you found your entrance."

"Yes, and you? . . . We're all set, then."

Again they parted. Again the picture seemed deserted. Then Brubbazein came back, marching brazenly past the corner straight for the platform.

Jaazel scurried into the picture, hailed him sharply. "What's the idea?"

"Come here," Brubbazein retorted. "Something occurred to me. See how the arrows on this lever point. Just opposite from the direction of our passages. Did you find a label on your entrance?"

"No," said Jaazel. There was angry suspicion in his glare. "What are you driving at?"

"I think that young traitor switched tunnels on us. He was just clever enough to try to send me up to your capital and you up to mine!"

Brubbazein held his bold front against the other's scornful look.

"So you thought of it, *too*," said Jaazel. He was sure Brubbazein had snatched at this straw only to appear innocent of any designs on the lever, but there was something in the idea. Yes, on second thought that's the very thing the scoundrel would do. "I was about to call you to say the same thing. We'd better think this thing over."

They sat down again and began to reason out which tunnel was which.

Twenty-five miles above them the electric mole at length emerged from a leisurely ascent, and Sondra and Arden emerged.

Everyone in the Lower Terminal was crowded around televisions, but President Marbl hurried to greet them and congratulate them. The light in his face was glorious to see.

"Has anything happened?" Arden demanded. "Did they set off the volcano?"

He was relieved to know it hadn't been touched.

"Did they ever fight?" Sondra asked.

Again the beaming President shook his head. "No such luck. They talked and pondered about the tunnels until they were almost chummy before they finally parted."

"Then they've gone!" Arden's eyes gleamed with eagerness. "Did they take their own tunnels—or each other's?"

"Their own."

A sickening disappointment showed in Arden's face, but only for a moment.

"It's all right," said the President. "In fact it couldn't be better, for the radios from both capitals announce that popular revolutions are on in full swing. The people of both nations have overthrown their dictatorships with lightning swiftness, and there's a nice little mob waiting at the top of each tunnel for any dictator that shows his face."

Before either Sondra or Arden could catch a breath to speak, the President added, "You two will have to take a week off to read your telegrams. They're rolling in by the thousands from all over the world."

