

Fantastic

ADVENTURES

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Contents

S T O R I E S



The Priestess Who Rebelled returns next month in another thrilling fantasy laid in the future when women rule the world and few men retain their self respect



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THE LITTLE PEOPLE.....by Eando Binder 8

To one of the Little People, venturing into the domain of the Big People was the height of adventure. But brave little Atho became too bold . . . !

JALU OF RADIANT VALLEY.....by Orlin Tremaine 30

One lone woman against seven madmen isn't too great odds when that woman is Jalu The Golden fighting for the love and life of her Kalen.

THE MAN WHO WEIGHED MINUS TWELVE..by Nelson S. Bond 48

There are a lot of odd things connected with the phenomenon of weighing less than nothing, but Uncle Herman didn't suspect the danger facing him.

VOLCANO SLAVES OF MU...by Frederic Arnold Kummer, Jr. 54

"When a golden-haired stranger comes, then is the fall of the city of Cnef near." Such was the legend that spelled trouble to Kirk, The Wanderer.

LUNAR LOOT.....by Edwin Benson 64

How could the pirate know exactly when and where to intercept his victims in space, where ships are as hard to see as motes in the dark?

THE PRINCE OF MARS RETURNS (Part II—Conclusion)

by Phil Nowlan 70

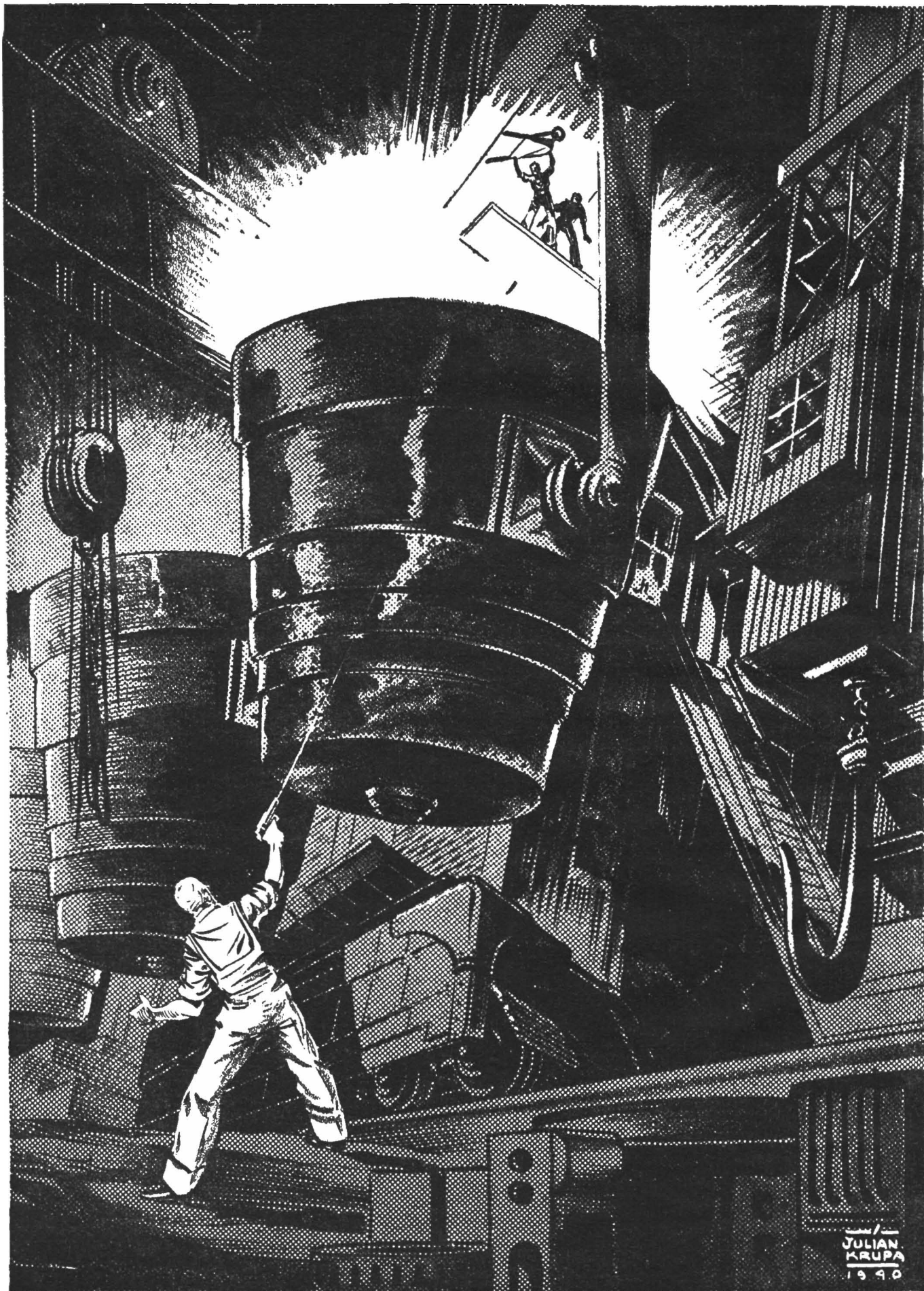
Dan Hanley brings back to Mars the glory and romance of the past as he plunges across the red world to battle for Lilrin of the Ta n'Ur.

F E A T U R E S

The Editor's Notebook.....	6
Fantastic Hoaxes.....	28
Romance of The Elements.....	83
Quiz Page.....	84
Reader's Page.....	85
Introducing The Author.....	92
Correspondence Corner.....	94
Life On Neptune.....	96
Contest Page.....	97

Front cover painting by Robert Fuqua depicting a scene from *The Little People*
Back cover painting by Frank R. Paul

Illustrations by Robert Fuqua, H.R. Hammond, Julian S. Krupa, Leo Morey, Jay Jackson, Joe Sewell.



JULIAN
KRUPA
1940

The huge bucket swung and Drago's shot spanged against its metal side

◀ Lunar Loot ▶

By **EDWIN BENSON**

Allan Ryan and John Kane sweated hard for that gold quartz, and they weren't going to give it up to a pirate, no matter how clever he was . . .

ALLAN RYAN hunched his big, muscular body uncomfortably about within the confines of his metal space suit, lifting one grotesque metal-encased hand to shield his eyes against the torturing glare of the raw sunlit moonscape before him. Even through the partial vacuum of his suit lining he felt the burning heat from the sunlight, unfiltered by any softening blanket of atmosphere. Searing, salty sweat rolled down his nose and dripped to his lips. His body itched almost unbearably from the penetrating actinic rays.

"Cripes!" he muttered to himself. "Another hour of this burning and I'll be ready for the picric tank. I wish Kane would hurry that signal along."

Fiery tempered John Kane was his mining mate, and right now he was out there in that burning waste setting dynamite charges.

Ryan looked down at the contact box before him, at the wire stretching off into the white glare of the dry crater bottom. That wire would carry the charge to explode the last setting of dynamite in the quartz vein that ran down the side of Tycho's crater wall. Very soon now Kane ought to have the other end connected to the firing caps. Just an hour before they'd finished drilling the holes into the rich, gold-bearing quartz. Then he, Ryan, had returned to lay out the wire and get the spark box ready.

That gold quartz—it was funny stuff. Lousy with grains of gold that could be extracted cleanly by the simple expedient of melting it after they got it back to earth.

Ryan laughed a bit hollowing in his air-tight suit. "If this damn sun was a little hotter, we wouldn't have to melt the stuff. Could go out there with a dipper and take it home in bottles!"

At the thought of the return trip through space with their valuable cargo, half of which would belong to them, his dripping brow corrugated in a black frown.

There was the rub—getting it back to Earth!

The last two ships had been intercepted by Murgot, whose chief occupation was piracy.

Murgot was the scourge of the Lunar Mining Company. Time after time he'd sacked ships, forcing the crews to step from the airlock, just as old-time pirates made their victims walk the plank. Murgot seemed to possess an uncanny knowledge of the time and place

to intercept LMC ships.

When you worked for LMC you staked your life against riches with all the chances on the side of failure. That's why LMC split fifty-fifty with miners.

But Ryan didn't give a whoop about that. He'd taken the mining job because it offered adventure, danger, and the thrill of conquest over man and nature. He wanted enough out of this trip to get a ship of his own.

The bright gleam of Kane's space suit appeared over a sand rise. Ryan waved an arm. Kane responded with two arms raised, then sat down and waited. It was the signal. The charge was ready.

The big man stooped, jammed the lever of the contact box down hard, jerked his head erect and watched. High over the ridge sparkling chunks of quartz rose, flailing high into the airless void under the impetus of the blast. A great column of dust spurted aloft. There was no sound, no ear-stunning explosion, only the mushrooming dust, the flying pieces, and a slight tremor underfoot. No air to carry sound.

Ryan waved an arm at Kane then picked up the contact box and disconnected the wires. He began to wind up, walking slowly forward the while. In a few moments he reached the perspiring Kane and paused to lay one metal-clad hand on his shoulder.

"Let's get the rest of the stuff loaded and back to the dome," he said, his voice now audible to his companion by reason of the contact. "I'm getting red as a boiled beet. We've been out too long already."

"I know it," returned Kane, his piercing blue eyes becoming thoughtful and his tanned face serious. "But old man Lawrence says we've got to finish this time. We leave eighteen hours ahead of schedule."

"I don't like that," growled Ryan. "It'll mean over ten thousand miles of air-travel after we reach Earth, and taking a space ship through air is no cinch. It ain't like a plane. I can't see why that crazy stunt is necessary."

Kane shrugged. "The old man says Murgot won't be expecting us to take off then. 'I'd a darn sight rather meet him though, than crack up in some jungle on Earth, or in the middle of the Sahara. But I guess he knows what he's about.'"

Ryan removed his hand in disgust, breaking the

conversation off. Crossing the ridge, he came in sight of the quartz. The dynamite charge had dislodged huge pieces which lay scattered about on the sand.

On the ridge of the vast crater several miles away was the fort-like dome that housed the rapid-firing guns of the LMC. These amazingly accurate and powerful weapons made it suicide for any ship to attempt mining the precious quartz veins without permission. Company gold was safe while it remained on the moon. It was only those two-hundred-forty-thousand-odd miles to Earth that was breaking the company. And now, the old man was sending them off schedule in an attempt to get a ship through Murgot's net.

Ryan turned his back on the dome and resumed his winding. Kane was already engaged in carrying huge pieces of quartz, which on Earth would have weighed over five hundred pounds, to their ship. Eight tons was their capacity. Finished with the wire, Ryan picked up a small piece of quartz in one hand while he carried the spark box in the other. They'd have to hurry, because they couldn't stay out here much longer. The burning of his skin was beginning to give proof of that.

"Damn Lawrence and his off-schedule idea, anyhow!" he uttered in disgust.

FAR below, the pitted surface of the moon was dropping swiftly away. The Earth swam low down on the horizon, and the ship was heading almost directly away from it, beginning the first lap of a great curve that would eventually land them on Earth.

Kane stared from the port, his raw, burned face serious and intent.

Ryan, at the controls, glanced at him and grinned. "Lookin' for Murgot already?" he joked.

The ship shuddered throughout its entire length as he pressed the firing lever for the last rocket discharge. From now on they would coast, using only occasional bursts for steering.

The shuddering ceased and the unutterable silence of space descended on the ship. At an average speed of five thousand miles an hour they would fly until they reached Earth. That meant fifty hours of steady vigil at the controls.

Ryan jerked a thumb toward the bunk.

"I'll take the first watch," he said briefly.

Kane nodded, turned and stretched his body out on the cot, strapping a wide leather belt across his chest. In space a body weighed almost nothing and sudden motions were to be guarded against.

He slept.

For hours Ryan scanned the blackness of space spread out before him, interspersed by millions of brilliant white stars, glowing with an unwinking brightness never seen on earth.

A group of stars blotted out for an instant. He strained his eyes, muttered an exclamation, then pressed the firing lever. The ship leaped forward.

"What the hell!" Kane ejaculated, hurled awake by

the sudden acceleration.

Ryan shot one terse sentence at him that made him leap from his cot.

"A ship, cutting in on us!"

"Murgot!" Kane burst out.

Ryan nodded dumbly and pointed through the port.

There, heading so as to cross their path was a long, black ship, its outlines almost lost against the black background of space.

"The man's a devil!" Kane avowed. "How can he know when and where to intercept us when we're off schedule?"

"There's something more than mere mathematics behind this," growled Ryan. "But whatever it is, we're in for it."

"What are we going to do?"

The big miner shrugged.

"Run for it, I suppose."

He gunned the ship at full power. But inexorably the black ship cut toward them. For several moments it looked as if the pirate would intercept them but running at a diagonal, it fell several miles short as it passed them to the rear.

"He can't catch us!" exulted Kane.

But like a leech the ship swung in behind and began to creep closer, clinging to their trail like grim death and gaining.

Ryan cast a final feverish look at his instruments, jammed the speed lever down to its stop, then glanced through the rear vision port. A grim look came into his eyes.

"She's faster than we are."

Kane peered disgustedly at the black, lance-like shape speeding toward them like an arrow of fate. On its bow was painted the grim white insignia of the skull and crossbones. Murgot had a sense of humor.

"Yes," he put in moodily. "It's no use. He'll draw up beside us and fasten tight to our hull no matter what we do. He knows we can't veer away fast at this speed with our cargo."

They watched helplessly through the ports as the black ship swung slowly in alongside, then grappled tightly to their hull. No use now to try to swing away. They were as rigid as one ship.

A few moments and a heavy air-tight canvas connection extended itself from the port of the raiding ship and clung to theirs, held by powerful suction clamps. Then the inner section bellied out stiffly, filling with air as the pirates prepared for a crossing.

"What now?" asked Kane in a puzzled tone. "How's he going to get in?"

Ryan shrugged. "Nobody has ever come back alive to tell how he does it. But listen, doesn't that sound like a drill?"

Kane listened a moment. "Sure! He's drilling a hole in us!"

Ryan grinned. "A regular safe breaker, eh? Going to blow us open eh? Well, let him work. When he gets it open we'll be ready for him."

"They won't get me without a fight they'll remem-

ber," avowed Kane, his fiery eyes flaming.

The big miner flexed his muscles. "Watch me," he put in. "Murgot hasn't got that gold yet!"

Kane sniffed. "Do you smell anything?"

Startled, Ryan glanced at him. "Gas!" he exclaimed.

There came a hissing noise and a swiftly spreading cloud of gas came through a small hole in the port. Stricken in their tracks by the choking fumes, the two miners slumped to the floor, unconscious.

A SHARP pain in his ribs brought Ryan to consciousness and he opened his eyes to discover that he was lying on a sandy soil under a hot, burning sun. Over him stood a leering, dark-faced man, garishly dressed in colorful clothes, his foot raised for another vicious kick.

"Wake up, you beeg pig. We have work for you!"

Blind rage suffused Ryan as the heavy boot thudded against his side.

"Damn you!" he choked struggling to his feet. He wobbled uncertainly, his mind still clouded by the gas. Lying on the ground beside him he saw Kane's limp body. A little way off was a space ship resting on the sand. Further away a rim of mountains formed the line of demarcation of the tiny valley in which they stood. They were on Earth!

The leering face of the buccaneer swam before him and he lashed out heavily with his big fist. Laughing gleefully at the futile attack, the pirate planted a fist squarely on Ryan's mouth, hurling him to the ground, his lips battered and bleeding.

"Ha, beeg pig, you want to get tough, heh?"

"Cut it out, Drago," another voice cut in sharply. "Do you want to kill him? We have work for him before that."

Ryan staggered dazedly to his feet, turning in stunned amazement toward the speaker.

"Lawrence!" he gasped. "Old man Lawrence, the dome boss!"

The LMC dome boss grinned. "Surprised, aren't you?" he asked.

Ryan gaped at him. "You!" he demanded incredulously. "You—Murgot, the—the pirate!"

Lawrence bowed ironically. "You guessed it the first time."

Ryan's mind cleared rapidly. "So *that's* how the ships were being intercepted so neatly!"

"Sure," Lawrence chuckled, "I schedule them, then go out and intercept them at my leisure at any desired point. And now, with this shipment, I've got enough. The LMC will go broke and my attorneys have fixed it so I'll get the whole thing for a song. With the gold I've gotten from these ships, I can buy out the company at auction. I can take possession, and no one will be the wiser, though I presume many will wonder what became of Murgot, the pirate. However, since he is no longer necessary to my plans, I will allow him to disappear into the void, never to return. It is a good joke."

"So that's why you had us start out eighteen hours ahead of time—so you could land here. . . ."

"Exactly."

Kane staggered to his feet now. "You dirty pirate," he raged. "If I get the chance, I'll wring your rotten, double-crossing, murdering neck. . . ."

Ryan gripped the irate Kane's arm. "Quiet," he warned. "That won't do us any good."

Lawrence laughed ironically. "Nothing will do you any good. After you get through loading your quartz into our smelter, Drago has a little experiment he wants to make. He's always been interested in biology, but he gets so few subjects to vivisect that he hasn't made much progress. However, when he gets to work on you, I think you'll have to agree that his technique is almost perfect."

Ryan stared at the ready, keen-bladed knife in the hands of the grinning pirate and restrained the leap he had been about to make.

"I do neat job," promised the swarthy, gaudy pirate. "But now you come, break quartz, put in smelter."

"I'll be damned if I'll do it!" snapped Kane. "No dirty space pirate is going to make me knuckle down and break quartz."

Ryan halted the tirade that seemed headed for tragedy, with a glance. His lips moved imperceptibly.

"Wait our chance," he whispered tensely.

Kane subsided and followed Ryan as the swarthy space pirate ordered them forward toward the mound of quartz which had been removed from the ship.

For hours, under the blazing sun that told of their nearness to Earth's equatorial line, the two space miners worked, swinging heavy sledges, shattering the big lumps of quartz into small chunks.

But though they watched warily, no chance to escape presented itself. Drago watched them always, an evil leer on his swarthy face, and within call were a dozen armed pirates.

THE sun was setting when they finished shattering the quartz. Ryan swore under his breath as the glancing rays brought a bright gold gleam from the last piece. An especially rich lot of quartz this was. Eight tons they'd broken today, and the ratio was one sixteenth gold to fifteen sixteenths quartz . . . over eight million dollars!

"Now, one more job," leered their guard. "Take thees broken quartz to the smelter een wheelbarrow. Then I do the operation!"

Kane clenched his fists and bristled forward.

"You rat," he choked. "I'll . . ."

Ryan grasped his shoulder and wrenched him back against the quartz pile. Kane fought to escape him.

"Don't," he growled under his breath. "We can always do that. Let's get busy with those barrows. I've an idea."

"No talking there, you beeg pig!" shouted the buccaneer, brandishing his knife. "You no escape anyway." He swung a vicious kick and Ryan sprawled headlong on the quartz pile. As he rose to his feet

his face was bleeding where the sharp fragments had cut.

Kane swore bitterly. "What the hell, Ryan. Are you going to take that? Why not die now, fighting? We'll die anyway, and I'll be damned if I like the idea of cleaning up all the work first."

Ryan glared at him. "You and your temper," he spat out, then lashed out with his fist to catch Kane squarely on the jaw. He went down with an expression of utmost surprise on his face. But the fire was gone from his eyes as he rose and grasped a wheelbarrow.

"Okay," he said, "You're right."

Ryan grinned. "You're all right," he acknowledged. Then his grin faded to a ferocious scowl as he faced the pirate, who was standing, his jaw agape. The buccaneer laughed. "You are crazy," he announced. "Or maybe it ees because you are afraid of Drago? Yes, that ees it. You are yellow!"

Ryan ignored him and for the next half hour they loaded the quartz into the huge maw of the big iron smelter that stood erect in the center of the valley. Below it was a heap of rocket fuel ready to ignite. Its terrific heat, equal to thermite, would rapidly fuse the quartz, whereupon the gold would flow to the bottom and the quartz to the top, completing the separation.

It grew dark and the loading went on.

Kane's arms ached as he trundled the heavy quartz from the rapidly diminishing pile past the space ship, past a huge pile of crates and boxes. He noted the characters **EXPLOSIVE** on one pile as he trundled past.

At last he wheeled the barrow up the incline behind Ryan and prepared to tip his last load into the smelter. Then he gasped as he saw a wooden box slide down as Ryan dumped his own barrow. He caught a flashing glimpse of the letters **EXPLOSIVE** as it dropped.

"How long have you been doing that?" he demanded incredulously, staring down the incline at the leering face of their guard. Several other pirates were now joining him, surrounding the incline. Others were lighting the fuel below.

Ryan grinned as the valley sprang into glaring red from the intense flames.

"Eleven boxes altogether," he said lowly. "Our guard has been so busy sticking out his chest that he didn't see me put those boxes on every time I went past first. He stuck pretty close to you, feeling that you were the dangerous one."

Kane chuckled. "I see your game now. But it isn't going to do us much good. That delegation down there is waiting to receive us, and it looks like this is it!"

The big man grinned. "You wanted to fight," he pointed out. "Now you've got something to fight for." "What?"

"To stay alive until this smelter goes up. Then, in the confusion, maybe we can do something. But come on, it's getting too hot up here."

Ryan turned and faced down the incline. "And

now, you dirty pirate," he muttered, staring down at their guard, "we'll see who's yellow!"

LIFTING his barrow he hurled it down and leaped after it. In a moment he was the center of a whirling melee of fighters.

Kane hurled his body down also and swung mightily with an axe handle that fell to his grasp. For a moment he was unable to reach the ring that enclosed the giant Ryan, then he cleared a way with a vicious swing that cracked the skull of a pirate like an egg-shell.

"Move away from the smelter!" gasped Ryan.

Accordingly Kane began to sidestep with each swing until finally they were some hundred yards away from the smelter. A glancing blow felled him in his tracks and blackness whirled before his eyes. A loud yell of triumph echoed in his ears as Ryan stood astride his body and faced the pirates. A yell of defiance burst from his lips to meet their shout as they closed in.

A hurtling body flung itself on his back and he bent quickly, one arm thrown over his neck. With a crash the pirate went to the ground with his neck broken.

Ryan grinned joyfully and sent a fist smashing home into a vicious face. The man went down with a crushed skull.

Suddenly, with a tremendous roar, the smelter belched a great column of flame into the heavens from its open top, then tilted slowly over.

Petrified with astonishment the buccaneers watched it fall. Like a river of molten diamonds the glowing quartz rolled liquidly out and flowed across the sand toward the pile of boxes marked **EXPLOSIVE**.

"Run for your lives!" Kane heard a voice scream. "The whole valley, she will blow up!"

Stricken with fear, the pirates rushed for their space ship, all except one. From the ground rose the bloody figure of Allan Ryan to reach out a long arm and grasp Drago by the neck.

"She may blow up," he yelled into his victim's ear, "But you'll not see it!"

With a vicious wrench he jerked the pirate's back across his knee and pressed. The spinal column snapped and the pirate went limp.

The roar of rockets from the space ship rent the air of the valley, and the fleeing vessel roared aloft. Suddenly there came a tremendous blast as the molten quartz reached the pile of boxes. A terrific burst of flame caught the rising ship squarely. Like a wounded bird it plunged down to explode with a final cannonade against the rim of the valley.

Slowly Kane lifted his head from the ground where he had been flung. He staggered to his feet. Another figure rose some yards away and grinned at him.

"I guess Drago was wrong," Ryan hazarded. "Most of the blast went straight up. The valley's still here, and so are we."

"And so's the gold!" Kane exulted, pointing at the spot where the smelter had stood. "Eight million dollars worth, half ours!"