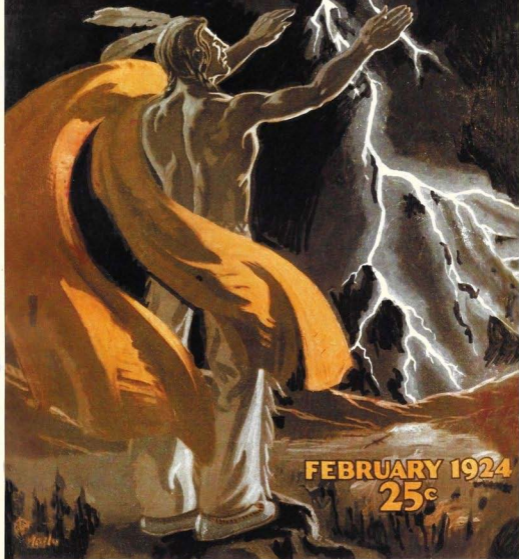


# Weird Tales

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*The Weird Adventures  
of a Young Man Who Was  
Shot Into Space in a Giant Rocket*

# Planet Paradise

*A Complete Novelette*

By DICK PRESLEY TOOKER



## PROLOGUE

**T**HE last of the Cluni reigned over a tribe of man brutes. Queen Saga trusted in the gods. From the sky, in flame and thunder, was to come the great teacher, the mate for Saga, the salvation of the people.

Bright eyed, star, planet and atom watched the move of universal Destiny. Years fled like days. Progress forged on with one people, degeneration with another. The sun burned on to light the way for the races of men. Stars broke loose from their positions in space and went hissing into eternity; comets shot across the boundless chart of the heavens; the juxtaposition of space bodies shifted—the time came.

A sensation brightened the weary spirits of the earth-born. Faithless civilization again laughed at an impossible venture. James Weston alone felt confident that his premeditated journey's end was to be the planet Mars.

## CHAPTER ONE

### THE SCOFFERS OF GENIUS

**O**N THE outskirts of the city, where a golf course had once been, James Weston's instrument of marvelous speed awaited its inventor's hand to plunge into heights and distances unbelievable.

A large workshop, nearby showed the serious toil and pains that had gone to create the sensation of the century. A

high fence surrounded the whole of the grounds, through which curiosity seekers peered.

The rocket-like tube rested upon a trestle-like stand nearly a hundred feet high. A spidery ladder led up to the body of the rocket from the ground. Huge gliding wings lay along the sides of the cylinder, while from either end extended several smaller cylinders, one upon the other, rescubbling a telescope.

Appearing like ants in comparison with the rocket, Weston, the inventor and builder, viewed it from the ground in company with Stanley Monning, an old and skeptical scientist, professing to know much about planets, constellations, gravity and the stratas of the air a few million miles above.

"It can't be done," said Monning, shaking his gray head.

Weston drew up his tall form and fixed his eyes upon the shorter man.

"I say it can be done," said he, vigorously, his straight mouth set in a grim line above his stubborn chin.

"Why, man!" expostulated Monning, "even now Mars is thirty million miles from us."

While Monning talked he watched Weston closely; for Monning believed the inventor might be violent and was prepared to escape at the first sign.

"That isn't so," Weston was quick to deny Monning.

"What proof have you that it is not?" asked Monning.

"Proof!" exclaimed Weston, his gray eyes holding the older man's weak brown ones. "What proof have you that Mars is thirty or forty million miles away? A fool's mathematical theory decided that. Do you suppose that diminutive eye-glass at Washington Observatory is large enough to see an object thirty-six million miles away? Put an aeroplane up four miles or forty from the crests of the west coast Rockies and see if you can see it with that telescope or any other. You can't see it!

"Call it density of atmosphere or hind swell if you will, but, according to the distance you estimate Mars to be, you'll have several million miles of atmosphere to penetrate before you name all the canals. Thirty-six million miles—when the human eye sees that far with any contrivance we have not, we'll discover the thrones of the gods!"

"Nonsense," scoffed Monning.

"Believe my ideas what you will. I shall prove to you and your doubting world that the planet Mars can be reached from Earth."

Monning smiled pityingly. Weston winced, but his strong hands clenched and his gray eyes flashed. He went on arguing.

"The force driving this rocket acts in a vacuum with scarce any depleting of its driving power. I don't need air or atmosphere in order to travel with my invention. The gas makes its own resistance. Moreover, I can supply it with enough gas to last for a much longer time than it will take me to reach any planet we can see from Earth.

"Monning, this is no fool's attempt," Weston grew more earnest. "and I'm not not insane. I don't believe Mars is more than 200,000 miles from us at this hour. I'm prepared for that journey—compressed air for myself—shock absorbers that protect a soft body going at the rate of five hundred miles per hour, I have gliding wings and reverse charges

of gas for brakes. I will have to do nothing but live during the entire journey. Timed ignition will set off the gas until I arrive within the gravity of Mars which presents at this moment a ten thousand mile wide target. That target isn't infringed upon by any other planet's gravity either—you know that, Monning.

"I've tested models, and none have returned to earth that I have found—"

"Probably fell into the sea," Monning muttered.

Weston glanced at him suspiciously, then went on fluently:

"I have placed cartridges of explosive at both ends of the rocket. It will move either forward or backward at my will. The gas chambers can be recharged anywhere with the materials inside the rocket as it stands now ready for the trip. At eight o'clock tonight I shall leave the earth, and sometimes I hope it will be never to return. It appears that you scoffers of genius could at least wish me well. You laughed at Fulton and his steamboat, but you ride in them now; you scoffed at telegraphy, but you're talking around the world today; you sneered at men because they believed it was possible to fly, and now airplanes pass over this city every day carrying your mail. Why not believe there is at least a chance of reaching another planet?"

"Your beliefs are so radical and opposed to the beliefs proven by years of research and investigation," said Monning, "that I could hardly think seriously of your foolish attempt. You are young yet and still precocious—depend on youth to be precocious when it thinks it knows something of science. If you will try this foolish, dangerous prank, do it, but I advise you to give it up. I'm certain you'll lose your life."

"What do I care for life," exclaimed Weston, "when within my grasp is the most marvelous discovery the world has ever known? I start at eight o'clock tonight. If you come to watch me depart, be sure you stay outside the boundary of red flags outside the fence—you'll regret it if you don't."

While talking they had approached an iron gate leading out into the field around the rocket's inclosure. Weston unlocked the gate with a key from his pocket and let Monning out.

"I think you will have quite an audience tonight—depend upon the American public for that," said Monning at the gate, indicating the knots of people peering up at the rocket from the road a half mile away. "I'm sure no one will forget you tonight. I wish you the best of luck in the interest of science."

A sarcastic note in the elder man's voice took the pleasure out of his farewell. To Weston it was worse than nothing. A bitterness rose within him at the thought that among the millions of souls who knew of him he could designate not one who was in sympathy with him.

A suburban car hummed along its track three blocks away. Monning hurried out to meet it and return to the city. Weston watched him go, then at a question from a workman in overalls, who had approached him from the work-shop, he returned to his preparations for the most audacious expedition ever contemplated by man.

## CHAPTER TWO

### INTO THE INFINITE

BEFORE the afternoon was half gone the sky grew overcast with heavy, low-hanging, gray clouds. A drizzling rain set in. Times Square clogged with umbrellas and covered vehicles. Like the sky, the city took on a dreary and gloomy aspect.

Yet intense excitement burned in the breast of many all through the afternoon. From the nation's center of activity, telegraph, cable, telephone and wireless spread the news of the coming sensation—man's first attempt to reach a planet.

Throughout all the excitement, ridicule was dominant. Even the most radical of scientists were skeptical, though some envied the sensation the hair-brained inventor was making. Just as Weston had told Monning, the public ridiculed or poked fun at the product of another man's hard work, while their forefathers had passed through the same condition precluding the success of other wonders of the world's progressing industry.

Whatever the public thought of Weston and his rocket, they flocked to witness his start. Long before the time of departure an immense crowd gathered beyond the danger signals outside the rocket's inclosure. Gas driven vehicles, bicycles and pedestrians grew into a solid mass. Trolley cars were blocked along the track nearest the field. The police, with doubled force, worked incessantly to prevent jams and hold the rear spectators from pushing the foremost too close to the rocket, glistening through the misty atmosphere.

Stanley Monning, with a friend of like mind, watched developments on the outskirts of the gigantic crowd. An indefinable nervousness possessed Monning. He could not react to the jocular remarks of his friend. Despite his efforts to shake it off, a feeling of awe was

arising in Monning. No doubt his talk with the earnest Weston that morning had caused this. At any rate, Monning, hard-headed and stubborn as he was, felt, somehow, that he was about to witness the beginning of a magnificent achievement.

Weston watched the throng gather from the door of his workshop. A cynical smile quirked his lips. The majority were pleasure seekers, some were merely curious, some extravagant pessimists, a few neutral, still fewer envious; none had faith in him.

Weston blamed himself for their lack of faith—he had never made any friends. Even in college his time had been taken up with his experiments. And yet he hated them for their skepticism, their pessimism, their utter lack of sympathy. Such attitude of mind caused him to wait impatiently for the time of his departure, a departure which would leave behind no sorrowing ones, nor leave him with any regrets in his heart.

At a few minutes of eight o'clock Weston mounted the ladder leading to the door of the rocket. A hundred searchlights played upon him as he climbed through the dripping atmosphere. Weston disappeared inside the rocket. The searchlights paused on its rain-drenched, glistening sides. The great throng seemed to hold its breath as the minutes ticked on toward eight o'clock. Motionless, yet menacing, a suddenly superhuman thing, the steel monster lay pointing into the heavens.

Five minutes after Weston entered the rocket, a great beam of dazzling light flashed out where the rocket had stood. Accompanying it, a terrific, grinding roar shook the entire vicinity. Automobile windows were broken by the shock; spectators on foot were overthrown, while a powerful wind swept back over them, carrying every light object with it from the center of disturbance. Panic reigned, and then was quieted by sight of the powerful beam of light shining down through a jagged rent in the clouds. Around the gaping hole, lit up by the dazzling white light, the gray vapor twisted and tumbled as though some mighty vortex of wind was whirling heaven-ward. A distant rumble, like peals of thunder, rolled incessantly.

As suddenly as the beam of light had blinded the spectators, it drew up through the rent in the enshrouding clouds and disappeared. As quickly the muttering thunder died away from far above. The great crowd, with little thought of the damage wrought, dispersed slowly, many with a great awe in them. Monning shivered in the rear

seat of his car, and his joking friend was strangely silent on the way back to the city.

The terrific shock of the first explosion rendered Weston unconscious. The speed at which he was traveling was tremendous. Three thousand miles he had traveled before he awakened slowly in the depths of the cushioned shock absorbers. It seemed to him that the rocket was traveling slowly. He knew as in a dream that his engine was awaiting the explosion of the next cartridge of gas.

It came, and the rocket tore on at terrific speed through interstellar space. A ponderous weight crushed Weston's strong frame. His body was flattened out in the depths of the great cushions. Weston did not grow quite unconscious, but he was unable to move hand or foot.

Six days the rocket roared on through the sky, passing afar the outermost fingers of satellite gravity. Free from earth magnetism and carrying its unconscious driver, the man-made engine tore on like a comet, plunging thousands of miles through the infinite void at the urge of the explosions behind.

Across interstellar space the rocket sped into the whorls of Mars's gravity. At first it was almost imperceptibly that the rocket reacted to the magnetism of the whirling planet, then slowly it began to fall. And then, faster and faster, head on, it rushed toward substance.

Weston grew conscious of the change of atmosphere. A definable roar was apparent, though his ears were almost deafened to all sound. But Weston knew the sound now above all was the roar of displaced air. Air meant a planet body!

With infinite slowness, but gigantic effort, Weston threw off the switch igniting the driving cartridges. Again he found another switch and threw it over. A cartridge in the fore part of the rocket exploded with a terrific hiss and rumble. The rocket wavered in mid-air, backed slightly, then rushed on, while a funnel of livid fire spouted from the rear. Weston set off a second, and then a third charge. Once the rocket shot fifty miles backward, but the charges were light, and the gravity drawing it again took effect.

A fourth charge Weston set off. The gas split the atmosphere with rending fury, and an instant later Weston, in a half conscious state, felt a crash, a terrific jolt, then silence, while a sensation of falling into unfathomable, illimitable space possessed him.

## CHAPTER THREE

### THE LAND OF THE RED MOON

WESTON awakened with a ray of light in his eyes. A great silence beat upon him. He tried to move, but his tortured, starved, thirst-parched body refused to obey his will.

Blinking wonderingly at the light shining through the interstices of the ventilators in the rocket's steel body, Weston strove to obtain command of himself. He succeeded a little and his memory returned. All the terrible flight came back as an unbelievably terrible dream.

Maudering through his thirst-parched lips, Weston managed to move his hands and arms. He pulled the compressed air nozzle from his face and felt refreshed. Trembling, squirming, panting, the disheveled, gaunt and weary man turned on the hose from the water tank nearby. He drank from the running stream with greedy gulps.

With the quenching of his thirst, he found more strength, and worked open the cover of his larder, which chest now rested over his head. Most of the contents came tumbling down on his head, and from the pile of provisions thus precipitated after him he selected a can of milk and, after an exhausting struggle, cut open the can. He found to his disappointment that the milk had hardened into a cheesy mass. Resting on his back, he nibbled the pulpy mass.

Many times he felt an impulse to wolf the entire bit of food, but conquered it by a supreme effort. He dozed off, and it seemed to him that occasionally and from afar he heard a monotonous chant, as of spirit voices. He fell asleep, with the strange, lulling sound in his ears.

When he next awakened a red light glowed about him. The strangeness of it kept him lying still and thinking. He felt a queer lightness, but reasoned that his condition might cause that. When he turned over on the cushions it was to experience an ease of movement little short of magical. But on struggling to a sitting posture he found how terribly weak he really was.

After another drink of water Weston's brain grew clearer. He thought more rationally and felt a new interest in his surroundings. He managed to eat, without dangerous consequence, the greater part of a can of meat from his larder. The food strengthened him a little.

With this renewal of strength, Weston experienced an almost irresistible impulse to investigate the phenomenon of red light. But he mastered this feeling, reasoning that he was not strong enough

to cope with any elements or dangerous conditions of the outside world.

Weston again dropped off into deep sleep, and he thought he heard again in his last moments of consciousness, the strange, faint chant of voices.

It was several days before Weston found the strength and courage to open the door of the rocket. He had not, even then, quite recovered from his exhausting journey through space. But the red light, filtering through the ventilating slits, aroused a curiosity in him too great to deny. The threshold of the door was on a level with his eyes, and he could just peep out of the rocket. A marvelous sight met his eyes.

Low near the broken horizon far away hung a red molten disk flooding the land with its blood-dyed rays. Crest upon crest and crag upon crag of broken mountain ranges glowed dully in the red light, and between Weston and the jagged cliffs lay a vast valley covered by an unbroken forest. There was no breath of wind, and in the stillness of all reigned awe-inspiring sublimity.

A great joy welled in Weston's breast. He had succeeded! The strata of Mars now lay below him and under him and around him—he was upon that planet, and it was a world like the earth. The terrible journey was ended, and he, James Weston, yet lived mayhap to hand down to posterity the greatest of all discoveries and himself experience the most marvelous adventure which ever had fallen to any man's lot.

The chant which he had heard before attracted his attention. He looked about, but could not see directly below him, where the sound seemed to originate. In an effort to command this vicinity, he drew himself up until he could look down from the rocket's position on the side of a great ridge. What he saw held him spellbound until, with his small strength exhausted, he was compelled to drop back to rest.

A score of naked, white savages were gathered below the rocket. At sundry intervals they were bowing their heads from a kneeling position. Accompanying this, they sounded the strange chant which Weston had heard before, at the same time beating their palms upon the ground.

The inventor drew his door shut and pondered over these strange people and the world he had found them in. He quickly decided that the savages were not hostile. On the contrary, they seemed to be worshipping him. There was not a doubt in Weston's mind, after he had thought a short time, that the white savages believed him a

god; his strange coming would account for their entertaining such a belief.

Smiling at his forethought in supplying himself with a weapon, Weston buckled on an automatic pistol, with belt and cartridge clips. Then he opened the rocket door, and, climbing out, dropped to the ground easily. Again, as a result of his drop from the rocket door, he became aware of the lightness of gravity and surmised, with satisfaction, that this alone would give him an advantage over the inhabitants of Mars.

One of the white-skinned hairy worshippers caught sight of Weston standing beneath the rocket and cried out to the rest.

"*Volá! Volá!*" The cry resounded about while the white savages fell upon their knees in worship.

"Peace to you. I mean no harm." Weston called to them, then quickly stilled his tongue. They knew nothing of his language. It would be a waste of time for him to speak it.

Without more words, Weston moved slowly down upon the kneeling people. At the same time he looked over his position. As he had thought, the rocket had fallen on the slope of a great ridge, which was a part of a small range of mountains behind him. The steel sides of the rocket had plowed a groove down the slope until its nose struck the bulge of a small hill and buried itself there, thus bringing the rocket to a full stop.

Weston looked again out over the forest below. He heard a loud, weird, fearsome cry sounding far away from the depths of the trees. The sound of the eerie voice of the wild chilled his blood. It seemed to excite the white savages also. Again they set up their chanting of the word: "*Volá! Volá! Volá!*"

Weston studied the men. They were tall, slender, and sinewy of body, but seemed loosely developed. Mats of hair covered their faces, breasts and limbs. Their eyes gleamed from beneath scraggy locks of briar-tangled hair. They were far from a peaceful sight, and Weston was almost of a mind to retreat into his cabin when the kneeling ranks opened and one whom he had not seen before came slowly forward.

It was a woman—the only woman he had noted among them. Shining masses of long, dark hair tumbled about her shoulders and breasts.

Her symmetrical body, moving gracefully in unison with her shapely limbs, completed a picture exceedingly entrancing.

Weston had known little of women on Earth; he had never given them any

of his time. The urge of his genius had taken him out of society entirely. Now his neglected social self rushed up and consumed him in a great flame of feeling. Spellbound, he watched the woman approach within three feet of him and, kneeling, extend her hand.

Strangely thrilled at the contact, Weston took the proffered hand. He stammered something which he himself did not understand, and wishing to end her servile attitude, he raised her gently to her feet.

Erect, she stood with head slightly above his shoulder. Weston could not tear his eyes away from her face, so free of guile and full of virtuous, sweet, wild, young maidenhood he found it. She was glorious. Science, ambition, earth civilization—Weston forgot them all in the moment her shining, intelligent eyes caught his. She spoke to him in an elemental language understood between all tongues.

Weston thrilled as, with his hand in hers, she pointed off toward the mountains aglow under the fiery rays of the blood-red planet.

#### CHAPTER FOUR

##### CHILDREN OF THE FLAMING ORB

THE age-old instinct to have and to hold one woman gripped Weston's heart. His stupendous accomplishment in the short time past grew sorry by contrast with this new discovery. The woman asked him to come, and he followed her down to the band of white savages.

At a signal from the woman a number of the men led the way down the slope on which the rocket had lodged. More of the half-naked men brought up the rear, while several took a position on either side of Weston and his fair captor.

Looking back over his shoulder, Weston saw his rocket gleaming dully in the light of the red planet. All around a strange, peaceful quiet reigned, broken occasionally by the cry of a beast of the forest. This was a new world, truly—a world of beast and plant and human life; it was a planet paradise. A lump grew in Weston's throat and his eyes grew moist. Something greater than he could name stirred within him; for in the flesh by his side walked those who on earth were his ancestors of thousands of generations ago.

"Monning," he muttered, "I wish I had you here."

He fell silent at the quick interest evidenced by the beautiful woman at his side.

At the foot of the slope the company crashed through a dense brush thicket, thence to enter under the silent canopy of the forest. Weston marveled at the size of the trees that towered about him. They resembled the Sequoia species on Earth and the least of them seemed to him as large as the largest on Earth.

For an hour or more the company continued on through the forest at a slow pace. Weston's weakness manifested itself. He grew quickly tired. But he endured his growing fatigue grimly, while he discovered that he traveled faster and with greater ease than the other men. Their movements seemed a trifle slow to him, weary as he was.

At the end of the first hour of travel the company came to a halt at a word from the woman. Several of the men went on ahead. Weston leaned against a tree. Though he no longer feared harm from these people, he disliked showing his weakness, and remained standing and on the alert until the scouts sent out ahead returned and the band moved on.

Always he was aware of the woman treading lightly at his side. She was different from the rest. Her step was sure and graceful; she traveled erect, with head high, while the males moved at a crouch like beasts on the trail of meat.

Gaunt and haggard, Weston stumbled on with his savage escort. The red light faded. The sun's rays slowly blotted out the blood-red disk now near the apex of the firmament's dome. The pale, yellow light grew slowly stronger. A sunbeam filtered down through the tops of the giant trees. Weston saw a panther-like creature glaring at him from a clump of bushes. A snake with queer legs waddled like a toad out from beneath his feet. Two birds, bright feathered, white crested, with long legs and bills, flapped over the heads of the company.

A sudden glare of sunlight blinded Weston. He blinked in it and stopped with the rest of the band. Slowly, as his sight came back, he swept the grand view ahead.

The band had halted on the brow of a ridge, the sunny side of which dropped ahead, almost barren of trees. The landscape dropped at an angle of nearly forty-five degrees for a great distance, bringing up at the banks of a broad stream. Far to the right a large lake glistened in the morning sun and to the left and directly ahead towered stupendous crags of the mountains Weston had seen from the rocket's landing place.

Not far from the opposite bank of the stream far below, a series of cliffs

stretched row upon row into the sky. Great gashes lay along their gray faces. Soon he descried dark, round holes, tiny through distance, but evidently windows and doors in the dwelling on the cliffs. They looked like swallow nests, but while Weston looked a human figure emerged from one and disappeared into another dark opening. Weston divined that this was the home of the white savages with whom he had traveled thus far.

The band of savages moved on down the slope. Weston reeled on with them, the wonder of the land engrossing him until he hardly knew the weariness of his body. A fronding plant grew thick beneath his feet. The leaders of the band beat it continually with long clubs, which, except slender stone knives in their belts, seemed their only weapons. The woman by Weston's side carried no weapon of any description.

Half way down the long slope Weston was able to distinguish the smoke of fire. White forms, skin breach-clouted like his escort, crouched over some of the fires under the cliffs. A hairy male crossed the distant clearing, carrying a dead animal over his shoulder.

The foot of the slope was at last reached. A branch of the great forest behind stretched down off the ridge to an apex here. The band of troglodytes with their Earth visitor had come within a hundred feet of the dense growth of trees and bushes when a hoarse shriek sounded from the depths of the thicket. Weston saw his escort stop and grip their clubs tighter. Fear started their eyes. The woman gripped Weston's arm, and while the company stood inactive a great monster of reptilian species hopped, grunting, out of the mass of foliage.

"Zamen! Zamen!" Weston heard a number of the males exclaim in frightened voices.

The reptile, at a single leap, came within fifty feet of the company. The males turned and ran for cover. Weston and the woman alone remained facing the reptile. Wagging its kangaroo head from side to side, the monster rose on its great hind legs, flopping its fifteen-foot tail the while. A disagreeable stench filled the air while the reptile opened and closed its slavering mouth, displaying a frightful row of teeth.

"Vola urrs, Vola urrs!" the savages cried as the monster hopped forward again.

Weston drew his automatic pistol and, leveling it at the point where he believed the heart to be, he emptied his gun at the target twenty-five feet away.

A thin stream of blood spouted from the reptile's breast. The animal tore at the bullet holes with its dog-clawed fore-

feet. Granting raucously, the creature dropped to all four feet and crouched there with nose in the undergrowth.

Weston slipped another clip of cartridges into his gun. Taking aim at the long neck of the crouched reptile, he poured ten more penetrating slugs into it.

A hideous shriek resounded to the cliffs. Weston, numbed with fatigue, felt a dull throbbing of horror, then, with the woman, he leaped away in time to escape the first great leap of the animal in its death agony. In frenzied leaps, carrying it thirty feet above the ground, the stricken creature roared and fought about the foot of the long slope. After a few minutes of tearing up vegetation and soil, the reptile leaped away toward the river.

From his retreat behind a screen of bushes, Weston looked up at the cliff-dwellings. Many women and children were scurrying up to safety, while others looked down from far above, peeping from windows, doors and parapets of their stone houses.

The reptile splashed out into the broad stream, leaving a bloody trail behind it. Near the center of the stream it stopped and beat the water to a foaming cataract. Slowly it weakened and at last the current swept it down stream toward the lake shimmering under the sun.

A loud and joyous shout arose from Weston's escort as they came running toward him from their hiding places. The cry was echoed from the cliffs, and the whole populace poured down off the cliffs and down to the banks of the river crying:

"Vola us urrs! Vola us urrs!"

Weston warmed; he glowed within. Here was appreciation and it was his first taste of it. His heart went out to the strange people. He turned to the woman who was always by his side. Her glorious, wild head was thrown back, and her great, soft, brown eyes held his triumphantly. Fatigue fell from Weston with the surge of a buoyant spirit. The company moved into the shallow stream, chanting:

"Vola, Vola, Vola us urrs. Song Vola! song Vola!"

They crossed to the opposite bank and joined the crowd waiting there.

"Peace to you, wonderful people," Weston cried to them, his eyes burning with the fire of a new-born spirit.

An escort of three males and the woman led Weston up into the cliffs along a rock-banistered passage. After a long climb, a level walk of smooth stone was reached roofed by solid, carved marble. The woman led Weston through a stone doorway near the end of the walk.

The pelts of unknown animals lay on the floor beyond and were draped about the walls. Stone slabs in neat position ranged about. A tiny fire glowed in the center of the spacious room, the light of which flickered on weirdly carved pictures on the walls. Overwhelming fatigue again possessed Weston. He sank down on a heavy robe of soft fur and fell asleep almost immediately.

The red light again pervaded all when he awakened. He saw the woman sitting in the doorway. The red light set her superb head and shoulders flaming. She seemed to Weston, as he went out to join her, a symbolical spirit of the wonderful land.

Weston sat down beside her. She took but little notice of him, yet he knew that she was disturbed by his presence. After a moment she pointed to the great, molten disk in the sky.

"Flasen or," said she reverently.

In his own language Weston unconsciously interpreted it as it sounded. He called it Flaming Orb.

A maiden came up shortly with a platter of meat and a large bowl of water, which she set down before Weston, and, bowing, went away. Weston offered some of the meat to the woman, and they ate together while the red light of the Flaming Orb suffused them with its soft radiance.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### THE FIRES OF REGENERATION

**D**AY dawned again. James Weston found his whole soul enveloped in the life teeming about him. The new land was not a hallucination, but Earth was that. Electricity, steam, gas, air and water vehicles—they were all phantasms of the past. He could hardly believe that he himself was of that age of mankind's marvelous development.

Weston knew that to these people he was significant of some great miracle. He learned much during the first day he spent with the woman who so strongly and strangely influenced him.

She called herself Saga, and Weston learned that meant Magnificent. The appellation Vola, given him by the people, meant Wonder. Saga traced with him a series of crude pictures prophesying the coming of Vola, the Wonder. An ancestor of Saga's had drawn these pictures, and slowly the whole of the great plan of Destiny unfolded before Weston.

Saga aided this after Weston had studied her language for more than a month. The simplicity of the language captivated Weston, and it was not long before he could use the musical phrases of the woman's tongue. He found no

roots, prefixes and suffixes to ponder over; the language contained only those words needed for the conversing of hunters, home-makers and lovers. The very essence of the tongue was life itself, the elements of infinitely simple existence and the features of nature.

Queen Saga told Weston that she had ruled the tribe for ten years. She was the last of a dying race. The old tribe of Cluni, Saga said, could write history with pictures; they understood the elements of architecture; they used cunning methods in capturing game; they were the ones who had foreseen the advantage of cliff-dwellings and had won in war after war through their superior military tactics.

But the ravages of wars had ruined the tribe of Cluni. Inter-marriage with lower tribes had lowered the standard of the race. Hundreds of low-born captives, taken in battle, gradually took the places of the superior warriors who had been killed. Saga's grandfather, seeing the sorry end of the supreme Cluni, made a law that none of the pure-blooded Cluni should marry in a lower class. But the law was made too late. The Cluni dwindled faster and faster. Saga's father and mother fell to a neighboring tribe; a plague struck the tribe, taking all the Cluni but Saga's grandfather. In his declining years he taught Saga the policies of government.

Near the time of his death, Fag, the grandfather of Saga, had a vision. He saw a great flame of fire in the sky that cleaved through the red radiance of the Flaming Orb, struck the tops of the mountains with thunder that shook the forest and mountains and brought with it a terrible engine of the gods. Out of that engine came, after a time, the progenitor of the superior race of Cluni.

Fag believed that the vision was a divine revelation, and he taught Saga to believe as he did. Then Fag died, leaving the last of the pure-blooded, intelligent Cluni to rule over the tribe of slaves while she waited for the coming of Vola the Wonder, which name was given the coming saviour of the race.

"I have watched and waited," Saga told Weston, her brilliant eyes glowing with spirit fire. "I took no mate. It was the will of Flamen Or. A thousand times the Flamen Or faded in the light of the Great One while I watched for Vola, the great man coming from the gods. And then I saw.

"It was like Fag's Vision. Terrible thunder sounded afar and from on high. All my people hid in their houses. I watched from the cliffs in Flamen Or's light. Fire shot down out of the sky; it lighted the forest as the sun lights the

forest. The great mountains across the valley flamed with it—the cliffs shook and trembled; a thunder like was never heard before struck upon the mountain tops. The light died away, but the flame had pointed and I led my people there.

"Eight times the Flamen Or faded with the coming of the Great One. I and my people prayed before the monster on the mountainside. From the sides of it came, then, Vola and the vision of Fag was true. You are Vola; you are the saviour of the Cluni, and I am yours; it is the decree of the gods. I bow to it."

The tale was ended while Weston and Saga stood on the edge of a stone parapet overlooking the valley below the cliff-dwellings. The first fire of the Flaming Orb was manifesting itself. The sun's rays, mingling with the growing red, scorched the great forest with living color. The great lake to the left of them and the river directly below gleamed like a polished, golden mirror tinged with scarlet. A mystic, fiery nimbus hovered over all. Weston had watched it many times since his coming, but now the woman's strange story, woven into it like a fable of the ancients, struck an awe within him.

Weston had not the heart to tell Saga that he had not come from the gods; that he was only a common mortal from a race far advanced from hers in civilization. He already understood her simple language well enough to learn that she had perfect faith in his divine origin—and he did not wish to shatter her faith.

A low flame lit up Weston's spirit; it waxed strong and smoldered warmly. The beat of primitive life sounded on all sides, and the elements in him answered. His breath came quicker and slowly his lips parted. Saga was very close.

Down below in the clearing under the cliffs by the river activity went on. A breast-clouted man squatted before a fire; a woman nursed a child and stirred something in a stone pot. Five hunters came out of the forest and waded across the stream, depositing the game they had brought near a cooking fire.

There below and all around was life elemental; no food but to satisfy genuine hunger; no clothing but to hide; no ornaments; no luxury; nothing but the struggle to live, mate, then die.

Weston started. Queen Saga's hand was on his arm. She leaned her head upon his shoulder. The scent of her hair struck fire in his veins. The low flame burned brighter within him. Queen Saga's soft body pressed against his.

A heavy voice broke the silence. Weston and Queen Saga turned. A male knelt on the carved ledge behind them.

"Arise, Clunet," said Saga.

The male obeyed, and Weston noted that he was a superb specimen of his kind: The eyes and brows of Clunet were more intelligent than those of the other males. The man stood in respectful silence until Queen Saga had again spoken.

"Do the Waken's go to war with the Cluni?" asked the woman.

"They do not," replied Clunet. "Flanen Or faded forty times while I watched, and I saw no warriors dancing. A great sickness has come upon them. They die many at a time."

The queen dismissed him and spoke to Weston.

"He has traveled far toward Flanen Or's home. The Waken's abode there—they are our enemies. Clunet says they are weak and Clunet tells no lies. He loves me."

Weston said nothing, but the revelation of Clunet's love disturbed him. Again Queen Saga's magnetism drew him. He fought it determinedly now. Other duties bade him beware how he degenerated into a troglodyte. All his knowledge would mean little to these people. They could not conceive nor use, at the stage of their advancement, either electricity, gas or steam. They had no reasons for wishing to sail upon the lake and river, or fly about in the air.

Yet, within Weston, the old culture sheathed instincts threatened to envelop him, as with every breath he took, the odor of primitive life tantalized his senses. There was no object near to counteract the effect of regeneration, which Weston believed was degeneration also. Which ever way he turned he met a symbol of the elements. Behind him was a stone cliff, under him lay a hand-tanned pelt of a wild animal, before him, without a smudge of smoke save for the spiraling wood-fires directly below, lay forest and mountain, lake and stream.

Again Queen Saga drew near Weston, and he grew taut in body. For a panicky instant he glanced about for some friendly object which would help him to realize that somewhere in the great void beyond lived men of his kind—men who knew what he knew and fought with his weapons.

But only the dark mouth of a cliff-dwelling yawned at him, and the stone parapet, leading along the brink of the cliff, stretched out in front of the village, carved there by the toil of undeveloped minds.

The Flaming Orb chased each lingering sunbeam from the landscape, while Weston of Earth and Queen Saga of Mars watched the ever-changing play of light. Weston's mind was fevered with his struggle between his love of this life

and his desire to acquaint men of Earth with the facts of his wonderful discovery. But the prophecy of Fag, as told by Saga, ought also to be fulfilled if these people were to advance normally. The strange story and the coincidence of his fulfilling its prophecies affected him strongly. More and more he was growing to wonder how Earth had ever been a reality to him.

The low flame glowing in Weston's breast waxed stronger, grew brighter, consumed more of his cultured exterior. He warmed with the effect of it. It set his blood tingling. One moment he saw himself king of these men, the next moment he berated himself for thinking such thoughts.

Queen Saga could not understand Weston. She had but one idea, and that was that Weston was the mate sent her by the gods. She did not know why Weston rebelled against her advances. This reaction of his saddened her. She was convinced by all the males she had ever known. Why, then, had the gods sent her one who cared little for her.

But the mind of Queen Saga was as an empty void compared with the intricate intelligence of Weston. Saga's method of expression never permitted her to hold back any feeling whatsoever. Like or dislike, hate, fear, or anger were quickly evidenced by her so soon as they had struck her spirit. The man of Earth studied; he pondered over future effects; he was cautious; he looked through a telescope of history toward the inevitable consequences of what he did.

Yet in both the man and the woman the bloom of life flourished, and when Weston slept, after an evening spent with Saga, that bloom swelled nearer to maturity.

The next day and the next Queen Saga drew upon her resources of charm in an endeavor to reach the heart of him whom the decree of the gods had named as hers. But Weston did not answer; he wavered from one side to another. The knowledge of what he might bring to Earth if he could return troubled him. And if he became heart and soul the mate of the Mars woman, he knew he would never return to Earth. Then invaluable knowledge would be lost to science—in the code of his world, he would have failed.

Despite the fact that he knew he was growing to love the life of the new found people, thus putting himself farther from Earth and what Earth meant to him, Weston hunted and explored with the men of Mars. He learned their honesty, their straightforwardness; he found for the first time in his life, genuine human sympathy. The Cluni had faith

in him and all that he did—they believed.

Weston joyed in teaching his simple scholars the art of binding wounds, of building with stone and making better pottery. He taught them to make spears and bows and arrows and to use them. With more and more intense interest in their future, Weston razed the foundations of his knowledge in an effort to teach the Cluni everything that he believed they could learn and which would be helpful to them. Always the outstanding characteristic of the Cluni, which made them apt pupils, was their faith in their teacher. Weston, whose greatest invention on Earth had called down upon him the jeers of the public found appreciation in this new land for all that he did.

Clunet's strange philosophy cheered Weston; it warmed his heart. He listened and talked to the man of Mars many times.

"You are the best mate for Saga," Clunet told Weston. "I love her. I want her. If she wished for me I would try to kill you. The blood of Cluni is in my veins, but I am a slave and am not worthy of the queen."

It was due to the great friendship which sprang up between Weston and Clunet that Weston learned of Mulick's coveting of the queen.

Mulick was one of the strongest and lowest of the tribe. Weston spoke to Saga about him.

"I fear him," said she. "I should have him killed. It shall be done immediately."

But Weston remonstrated. He argued against so ruthless a murder of one who was a strong warrior.

Saga yielded without further words. Weston's word was law with her, and so Mulick lived to see the woman he coveted throw herself at Weston to be rejected with soft words and subtle, mysterious actions.

## CHAPTER SIX

### THE BATTLE IN THE VALLEY

A YEAR of Earth's time rolled by.

Weston knew that again Mars was nearing Earth, coming closer to his home planet than it would again for ten long years. The revolutions of the shifting planets told that through past investigations. The constellation of Lyra slowly wormed across the Heavens. Weston, knowing well the movements of the various stars and planets, watched, with growing restlessness, the inevitable approach of that period of time when his rocket could be sent on the return trip.



Queen Saga noted Weston's restlessness and his continuous watch of the stars peering through the red mist of the Flaming Orb. His actions boded ill for her hopes of keeping him. It seemed to her that his heart was not with her people.

Weston left the cliff-dwellings on long expeditions occasionally and as Mars came nearer and nearer to Earth he went oftener and stayed away longer. He spent his time looking over the mechanism of the rocket on the ridge across the valley. Clunet saw him working there and reported this to Queen Saga.

"He digs beneath the god-monster on the mountainside. It has fallen down. The end near the sky now points toward the ground. Vola disappears within the monster also. I hear strange small thunders."

Saga did not speak to Weston about his work on the rocket. She was suffering the first effects of deceit and secrecy, which Weston's reticence had born within her. Unwittingly it had been done, but slowly Saga had learned the man of Earth's tactics; her knowledge was growing more sophisticated.

It was at this time that a hunting party brought in the news that a horde of Nacos were moving across the valley toward the Cluni village in the cliffs. Weston learned that this could mean but one thing—war.

Joining Clunet, Weston went to the village council chamber with Saga. Here they planned their defense.

"The scouts are big-eyed," said Clunet. "They say the Nacos number in thousands. Half that number in truth would be many. But they are crossing the valley. We should meet them before they reach the river. Our food store in the cliffs is low—we cannot endure through a long siege."

"Clunet is right," Saga spoke. "We must drive them back before they reach the river. They will ravage our hunting grounds."

Both waited for Weston to speak. He was about to sanction their plans when a man appeared in the doorway of the chamber. It was Mulick, whom Clunet had warned Weston against. Bowing low, the hulking, beastlike man asked to be admitted.

"He is a good warrior—one of our best fighting men," said Weston. "Let him speak with us."

Queen Saga motioned him in. After he had squatted down by Clunet's side Weston spoke:

"How many fighting men have we?" he asked.

"Five hundred," Clunet and Mulick answered in one breath, and Saga nodded an affirmation.

"Then let three hundred meet the Nacos and two hundred remain to defend the village," Weston suggested.

"That is well," Saga approved. "Let us attack in three parts," Weston went on. "Let one part be led by Clunet, one by Mulick, the other by myself. We can then attack from the front and both sides."

Mulick's deep-set eyes glittered beneath his shaggy brows. His teeth bared—it was his way of smiling. Weston thought him glouting over the coming victory.

Clunet and Saga, though they consented to this, were not so evidently pleased as was Mulick. But an excited hunter came rushing in, bearing the news that the Nacos were half way across the valley, consequently the council was broken up before Saga or Clunet found time to enter any objections to the division and leadership of the forces.

A great number of the Cluni had gathered in the clearing below the cliff-dwellings. Women and children still wound up the trail to the safety of their rock abodes. The leaders chosen for the coming battle divided the fighting men gathering in the clearing. Weston sent out scouts to watch the movements of the Nacos. During the division of the forces Clunet, who was troubled, spoke to Weston.

"I do not question those of greater mind than I," said he, "but have you not forgotten that Mulick is jealous of you and has showed this by word and act? And he desires the queen. Much may happen in the heat of battle when one leader is not worthy of trust."

Weston was quickly serious.

"Mulick will forget his troubles in serving the tribe. We must all forget our own desires when the safety of our home is at stake. Mulick is a great fighter. The men will follow him well. Do you know any other whom they would follow better?"

Clunet did not, and the preparations for the battle went on. Two hundred of the less choice fighting men took to the cliffs in order that they might defend them in case any of the Nacos advanced that far. The rest of the men, numbering approximately three hundred, were divided almost evenly between the three leaders: Weston, Clunet and Mulick; Weston having a few the greater number because he was to take the central division. Mulick was to lead the left flank and Clunet the right.

The long Mars day was half over when the little army crossed the river and

climbed up the long slope to the edge of the great forest which covered the valley beyond.

Weston had thought Queen Saga back in the safety of the cliff-dwellings, but, to his surprise and chagrin, she joined him at the edge of the forest with an escort of ten men.

"Why have you come?" Weston asked her. "The enemy will fight the harder when they see you in our ranks."

Queen Saga straightened to her greatest height. "I fight with you, Vola," she declared. "I am not afraid to die or to live with you."

Her eyes challenged Weston; they fired him, too. Excited as he was by the coming battle, the evidence of faith and love and courage from a woman whom he had never given any reason to believe he loved, set his blood on fire. He argued no more with her, but consented to her presence with him, strengthening her guard to a full twenty of picked men.

Weston, Clunet and Mulick conferred together before they led their men on. It was decided that the different divisions should separate before going further, all to march within signaling distance. When the enemy was reached Weston was to discharge his automatic as the signal for the charge. More scouts were sent out ahead to reconnoiter and the army marched ahead. Mulick leading the left flank, Clunet the right and Weston and Queen Saga the center. Thus, with spears glinting and bodies shining in the sunlight, the army of the Cluni disappeared into the forest.

The eyes of the fighting men glowed brightly with the excitement of the prospective battle. They were surcharged with energy for the coming clash. Weston walked as in a dream. His scant breach-clout, the remainder of his earthy garments, was all that covered him. The automatic, the ammunition of which had long been carefully treasured by him for emergencies, contrasted strangely with his wild, unkempt appearance. Saga, close to the rear under heavy guard, seldom took her eyes from his back. In Saga's heart the battle was as well as already won. Vola who had come from the gods would lead them to sure victory.

Far to the left, Mulick set a fast pace for his company. In the heart of Mulick deceit had grown from the seed planted there by the man of Earth. Some of the mysterious secrecy evidenced by Weston had diseased the pure, though low, mind of Mulick. And with the aid of a hundred men at his back, his ambition flamed high. Mulick's intent was to win the battle without the aid of either Weston or Clunet and their men. Only

another step then and Weston and Clunet could be conquered. With this in mind, Mulick forged far in advance of the other contingents and quickly arrived in the vicinity of the oncoming Nacos. With one great stroke Mulick strove to win in love and war, and realize his every ambition.

The first sign of Mulick's treachery came to Weston and Queen Saga while they were moving cautiously within five arrow flights of the marching Nacos. They heard a faint shout, then a chorus of cries; the sound of distant blows. The battle cries grew louder and louder.

"What is it!" cried Queen Saga to Weston.

"A battle is going on," he returned. "Mulick surely must have outdistanced us and fallen upon them already." He dispatched a runner to discover the state of affairs. The entire force halted and stood waiting under giant trees for the runner's return. All the while the sounds of shouts and blows grew nearer and nearer through the trees, echoing along the silent forest aisles with increasing volume. Weston grew uneasy. A runner from Clunet on the right came up, out of breath, and was sent back with the command that Clunet bring his men nearer the central body and await developments.

Uncertain as to what course to take, Weston finally ordered an advance. The white-skinned warriors, nervously fingering their spears and bows, had not advanced a dozen spear lengths before the runner, whom Weston had sent out, came panting up, shouting that Mulick was retreating. At nearly the same instant the forest ahead was filled with running Cluni.

"Mulick! Mulick! Death to him. He has betrayed me!" cried Queen Saga.

Weston fired the signal to charge, and his men surged forward, shouting their battle cry. They met Mulick's panic-stricken men. A mass of twisting, wriggling, screaming warriors piled up on the forest floor. Weston's men strove to advance; Mulick's sadly depleted hundred strove to retreat, while behind them came the yelling, dark-skinned horde of Nacos, fired with a taste of victory.

In vain Weston and Queen Saga strove to steady their men, but the axes of the Nacos took heavy toll and the Cluni slowly gave ground to them. The great forest resounded with the blows of stone war clubs and the shouts of battle-maddened primitive men. Dead and dying quickly covered the forest floor. Weston shot away his precious cartridges to no avail; his men were

beaten before they began; Mulick's retreating band had demoralized them.

On the right flank Clunet and his men were engaged in hot strife against superior numbers. A horde of the enemy charged down between his men and Weston's; they spread out behind both forces and surrounded the entire Cluni army. Hemmed in on all sides, the Cluni fought over the bodies of the fallen.

With the battle yet in progress the Cluni were cut off from their retreat to the cliffs. Certain victory turned to overwhelming defeat. In the excitement of the fray the Cluni forgot Weston's teachings of the advantages of spear and arrow. They dropped what they considered superfluous material and fell upon their foe with knife, club, tooth and nail.

Queen Saga's guard of picked men alone remained intact while the battle waged furiously about them. The first charge of the Nacos had swept by the guard's couched spears. Weston did not leave them. One thought since the beginning of the battle had beat within his heaving breast. It was Saga! One great, devouring flame consumed his every other desire, and that was what Saga really meant to him now that she was endangered. His thoughts fled to the rocket on which he had spent much of his time of late. The guard was slowly being forced in the direction of the ridge on which it lay.

Weston heard Saga's voice in his ear. Bravely she was crying:

"They can never defeat you, Vola—you will win—you will win!"

Still the primitive woman had faith in him; a faith that knew no bounds. Weston furiously asked himself why he had thought of returning to Earth; why he had thought of leaving this wonderful paradise where human love and faith and truth were unswayed. What of the bloodshed, the privations and hardships endured; what of disease? This was paradise for Weston, and, strangely, the overpowering realization came to him in the heat of battle.

Crying his eagerness to fight, Weston thrust his automatic with the last clip of cartridges into its holster. Snatching a stone mallet from a dead guard's body, he lay about him with all his strength. Blind with the fury of battle, he gave and took blow upon mighty blow, while he heard the woman shouting encouragement to him above the ceaseless cries of the struggling men.

Five of Queen Saga's guard had fallen when the band attacking them lost heart and disappeared into the forest in search of easier fighting.

Weston leaned on his bloody mallet, breathing heavily. A bleeding Cluni staggered up to him from a cove of dense brush. A broken spear haft protruded from his torso; half his scalp was laid open and his right arm hung limply by his side. It was Clunet.

"I fought," came from his bloody lips in fevered tones—"I fought to save the Queen and the Cluni, and, oh, Vola, I shall meet the gods with joy because you are yet alive to save the woman I love!"

Then he died.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### THE CONFLICT TO SURRENDER

JAMES WESTON stooped over the fallen man with the queen. Remorse filled his heart. To his death Clunet had faith; he believed that James Weston was Vola, the Wonder; that he could save Queen Saga in the hour of defeat.

"Man, man," Weston spoke in his own tongue to the silent ears. "If I had only known one on Earth like you—a comrade, a friend, a true man. I brought your people deceit and I thought you lower than I. Ten thousand years my race has advanced one way and retreated the other."

He looked up into Queen Saga's brilliant eyes. "One woman," said he, while his voice shook with emotion, "in defeat I would make you mine. Our gods are one and alike, but your spirit the greatest; our bodies are no different, but yours is more perfect. For that much I love you and I will die for you."

"Not die," her voice was swelling with love. "Vola cannot die. You will save me and the Cluni with thunder and fire—with your magic. As Clunet believed, so do I, and I love you."

Weston gripped her supple arms for a tense moment, then they were disturbed by the sound of running feet from the direction of the scattered fighting. A dozen of the Cluni came running through the trees, hailing the queen's party with great joy. This strengthening of the guard greatly encouraged Weston. The newcomers knew little of the general effects of the battle, save that they had been cut off from the main force. None had seen Mulick, and Weston surmised that the over-ambitious leader had fallen.

After arranging his men in the most efficient manner, Weston gave the order to return to the cliff-dwellings, though he had small hope of their ever reaching the river. And scarcely had they advanced twenty yards before they met a company of the enemy thirsting for battle. The queen's guard was forced to retreat at a run in order that the

Nacos might not surround them. Creeping into a thicket, the small band of Cluni managed to hide from their pursuers who then proceeded to search cautiously for them.

The game of hide-and-seek ended when a Naco warrior caught sight of the queen as she was being lifted over a fallen tree. Another skirmish began. Weston knew now that the only safety for the queen lay in retreat and that a well-generated one.

The slow retreat, requiring fighting at short intervals, brought the band of Cluni nearer and nearer the rim of the valley opposite the cliff-dwellings. Weston thought of Queen Saga's reference to his saving the Cluni with "thunder and fire." The rocket on the ridge was now in perfect working order. It held in its chambers a terrible force for destruction. Weston wracked his brain for a method by which to use it in battle. A possibility presented itself and Weston hurried the retreat.

The sunlight was dying in the red glow of the Flaming Orb when, with a hoarse cry of triumph, Weston sighted the rocket looming through the trees from its perch high on the ridge. His joy was contagious and was echoed by the band. But the sound proved their undoing.

A band of pursuing Nacos had managed to circle around to the front of the retreating band and were searching for the creeping Cluni when the sound of the shouts attracted their attention.

With a sinking sensation Weston saw a number of dark-skinned men slinking through the trees and cutting off his path to the rocket. The Nacos charged. Swinging his stone mallet, Weston urged on his men. Running low with the queen in their center, the Cluni met the oncoming Nacos half-way. Far behind the main body of trailers echoed the cries of their band. Weston heard and knew that the fight must be short, sharp and decisive else the main body of the enemy would overtake them and all chance of reaching the rocket would be lost.

A dozen of the charging foe fell at the first flight of the Cluni's arrows, then the lines closed. A stone knife slit Weston's arm from shoulder to elbow; he parried with his mallet and with a short jab stunned his adversary. The Cluni fought like fends. Man after man fell on both sides; Weston could feel the ranks of his men thin, then the tide turned. The few remaining Nacos fled. But only five of the Cluni remained to guard the queen. Weston could not hold them. Shouting triumphant cries, they ran after the fleeing Nacos. Groaning,

Weston viewed their end before he saw it in a clearing a few yards away.

The Nacos, discovering how few pursued them, turned about and fell upon the over-confident Cluni. To the last man they died, and quickly Weston and Queen Saga, who had hidden in a thicket throughout the battle, ran toward the ridge where the rocket rested. Up the steep slope they panted, while below the angry Nacos poured out of the forest on their trail.

Weston flung open the door of the rocket as he passed it. Inside he could see the row of operating switches reflecting the red glow of the Flaming Orb. On up the ridge Weston staggered with the queen close at his heels.

A thirty foot bank with almost perpendicular sides crowned the ridge above the rocket. Weston climbed to the top of this, drawing the queen after him. Panting, he lay down close to the brink and, rolling over and over, shifted to a position where, like a bright point of fire, he could see the switch that set off the rocket's gas. As he leveled his pistol at the gleaming point the forest below vomited forth a hundred screaming warriors. Straight up the slope they came, swinging their war-clubs and brandishing their knives. Fear gripped Weston's heart. The target through the door of the rocket seemed infinitely small. But the woman's hand on his arm steadied him.

"Even now you will save us, Vola," she breathed in his ear with a quick intake of breath. "They cannot win. You are Vola of the gods. My faith is stronger than myself. The thunder and fire will come at your will."

Weston's muscles grew taut; his eyes cleared; the pistol steadied; a great peace and calm came over the man of Earth. Yes, he would save her, though he was not of the gods. Silently he prayed that the "thunder and fire" would answer to his call.

The Nacos covered the slope below the rocket and they were coming fast. The pistol in Weston's hand grew very still; the front and rear sights lined with the point of fire that was the ignition switch; the report of the gun sounded above the cries of the savages. Then a hundred thunders broke loose; a streak of livid fire shot down the slope sweeping all before it. A powerful gust of displaced air whipped Weston and Queen Saga back from the brink of the cliff as though they were straws; small stones and dust rained down in showers everywhere.

Far up in the heavens the great beam of light died away with the distant mutterings of thunder. Tiny eddies of

whirling air brushed the two prone figures on the ridge top.

Silence reigned again. Weston and Queen Saga crawled back to the cliff brink and looked below. Heaps of torn-up soil were scattered about below the point where the rocket had rested. A great rent was torn in the forest at the edge of the valley. An uprooted, giant tree-trunk wavered and fell as they looked. No sign of the enemy was presented until they had watched some time, then they saw an arm move up and down from where it was thrust out of a heap of stones. A ghostly body hung from the limb of a tree. It clung for some time high above the ground, then broke loose and fell to the ground. All movement and sound ceased. Weston turned to the woman and took her in his arms.

"The prophecy has been fulfilled," he told her with a voice that trembled. "Thank Heaven I had the strength to do it. And now I must tell you that I am only a man; that I never came from the gods; that I am even lower than you in all that God intended us to be."

A guttural voice from behind startled them. Weston and the woman turned about. Mulick stood glowering at them a short distance away. And in the moment that he saw him Weston knew that Mulick had heard his last words and that the inevitable had arrived—*he* would have to fight the primitive battle for the possession of the queen.

"I have heard you say you are only a man," growled Mulick. "Your fire and thunder are gone—the gods give you no more magic power. I would have the woman for my own. Throw away the magic at your belt and meet me tooth to tooth."

The slow fire in Weston's breast burst into a mighty conflagration. Trembling with a strange eagerness, he unbuttoned the automatic from his waist and threw it far out into the wreckage below the ridge. He crouched. Slowly the two men circled.

Mulick tried to close in. Weston fenced, struck him square upon the jaw and the savage went down. Bleeding at the mouth, Mulick was up again. The crafts circling began again, while Queen Saga watched with burning eyes.

At close quarters Mulick struck Weston on the side of the face with the flat of his hand. Weston was caught slightly off his guard and was knocked off his feet. Mulick leaped in to follow up his advantage. The two men rolled on the ground, writhing and twisting. Mulick strove to strangle Weston, but the man of Earth doubled his legs upon the stomach of his adversary and thrust him off with a quick, strong straighten-

ing of his legs. Again the two stood erect and facing one another.

A sharp stone had cut Weston's forehead during the scrimmage on the ground. His face and breast were covered with blood from the wound and the long slash in his arm was bleeding anew. Eyes gleaming and teeth bared, he crouched, ready for the onslaught of his rival.

They closed again. Weston tripped Mulick, but to his own undoing. From his knees the Cluni swept Weston's legs from beneath him with his forearms and Weston fell upon his stomach with face away from the Cluni, who now held Weston's legs close to his breast. Using Weston's legs as a lever and the ground as a fulcrum, Mulick strove to break his opponent's spine.

Queen Saga picked up a stone and tried to batter Mulick's head, but Weston stopped her.

"Stand back," he cried hoarsely, "back, back!" She obeyed, but hid her eyes from the sight of his seeming sure death.

But Weston drew upon strategy. Mulick was leaning far forward and straining ever in that direction. Though the pain in his back was excruciating, Weston suddenly twisted to one side and precipitated Mulick upon his face. In a trice the surprised Mulick was on his feet and snarling.

Almost exhausted, the men clenched again. With tooth and nail and brute strength, they now fought, neither with

any thought of strategy. Straining, sweating, bleeding, snarling, they weaved about the rim of the ridge. On and on they strained to conquer until their muscles would not answer to the urge of their wills.

Panting and reeling, they broke apart and wavered drunkenly before one another. Mulick fell upon Weston with hands searching for hair and fingers for eyes. Weston stepped back, then launched himself forward with all his remaining strength—and the man of Mats went over backward, with Weston upon him. Slowly they wriggled over the ground until Mulick's head hung over the crown of the ridge. Weston clenched his hands and pushed down upon Mulick's head. The tension grew terrific. Sweat ran in streams from both bodies; Mulick's head bent farther and farther over the sharp edge of the bank. A low, dull snap sounded, and Mulick lay very still and limp. Rolling off the inert figure, Weston pushed it over the brink of the ridge and dropped panting upon his back. Quickly Queen Saga came forward and gathered his head in her arms.

"You see that I am not of God more than you," he gasped out. "I am only a man and I am yours—you are mine—I have won you. I will tell you soon of my people and how much greater your people are than mine."

"My mate." Her voice came low and her inflection was scarcely coherent, but

Weston heard. "You have fought the man's fight with the man's weapons," she went on. "You are the better man. I am proud of you and I am glad that you are not of the gods' terrible making."

For a long time Weston lay in her arms with eyes closed. The Flaming Orb shed its soft, red radiance over all. A low tramp of many feet sounded in the forest below the ridge; a low chanting of voices came to the ears of the two on the ridge. A large band of Cluni came out of the forest directly and Queen Saga hailed them from the ridge. They came on shouting the news that the Nacos had fled in fear of the thunder and fire of the rocket as it left on its unguided journey into space.

#### EPILOGUE

*FORTY thousand miles from Earth a steel body plunged through the infinite, carrying an invaluable creation into eternity. Onward the rocket rushed through untrammelled space. By star and planet, satellite and atom; through light and darkness—unsuared it roared, nor once felt the halting power of any planet's gravity. On it forged until the last charge of gas blew out.*

*Then, three hundred thousand miles from the abode of life and substance, the great rocket, spent of energy, halted motionless in the heavens; there to remain hanging in space until the crack of Doom.*

THE END

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