

# FANTASTIC

STORIES OF IMAGINATION

DECEMBER 1961

Volume 10 Number 12

REG. U. S. PAT. OFF

## ZIFF-DAVIS PUBLISHING COMPANY

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CRestview 4-0265

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Cover: LLOYD BIRMINGHAM

**SUBSCRIPTION SERVICE:** All subscription correspondence should be addressed to FANTASTIC, Circulation Department, 434 South Wabash Avenue, Chicago, Illinois. Please allow at least six weeks for change of address. Include your old address, as well as new—enclosing if possible an address label from a recent issue.

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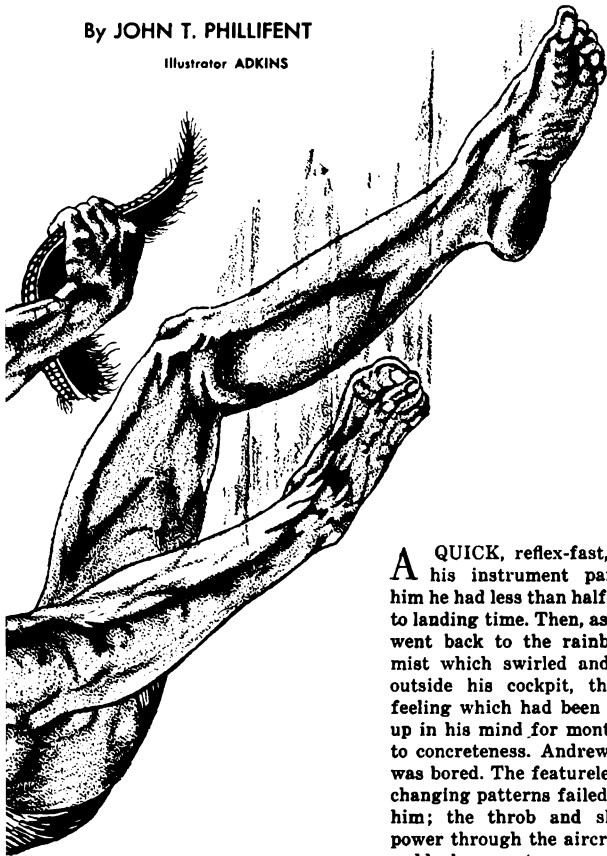
# POINT

*The tradition is old: violent adventure on an evilly dangerous world, good men and bad, a beautiful woman, monsters. But we suggest that no matter how "traditional" this story may be, you will not put it down till you reach the end.*



By JOHN T. PHILLIFENT

Illustrator ADKINS



**A** QUICK, reflex-fast, look at his instrument panel told him he had less than half-an-hour to landing time. Then, as his eyes went back to the rainbow-hued mist which swirled and glowed outside his cockpit, the vague feeling which had been building up in his mind for months came to concreteness. Andrew Quarry was bored. The featureless, ever-changing patterns failed to catch him; the throb and shiver of power through the aircraft were suddenly monotonous; even the sagging, exhausted excitement of the ten men in the cabin at his

back, failed to stir him into anything more than mild sympathy.

What did they have that was new, anyway? Six weeks ago he had flown these men from Venus Prime to Outbase Three. Now he was bringing them back. They were lean, worn out with the heat and continuous sweating, but looking forward to the comparative ease and comfort of Prime Base. They could work up excitement over the cases, bottles and flasks of new and strange specimens they had found, but that was their function. For ten years now, these men, or men like them, had been nibbling at the secrets of this uncaring planet. First a solid foothold, a glass-and-concrete base, under an umbrella of rot-proof plastic to keep at bay the ever-hungry, spore-laden mist. Then little cautious forays out into the swirling, hot mist, the steam-heated insistent life of the planet. A few hard-earned lessons. A beggarly start, but a start. Then more daring forays, and a sampling technique. Take one radar-equipped aircraft, and sweep out huge circles, until you found a solid place. Mark it with a beacon. Put down there, set up a small base, and cast round for samples and specimens of the flora, the fauna, the soil.

Ten years of it. For the last four, Quarry had been one of two pilots who did their flying for them, in specially designed air-

craft and with expensively won methodology. Now, all at once, he was bored with it all. Examining the idea, now that it was out in the open, he corrected it. Not all at once. This feeling had been trying to make itself known for some time, but he had been shoving it away. Boredom was his old enemy, and had chased him all his life. He was unwilling to admit yet another failure. But there was more. Venus had taken a lot of men, and a lot of equipment, in ten years. Not so much viciously as uncaringly. This was a planet with all the life it could hold, already, with neither room nor welcome for any more. It was a place where men broke, unpleasantly. So, he had been afraid of admitting to fear.

He grinned, thinly, at his faint reflection in the cockpit-cover. It was getting to be something when Andy Quarry gave more than half a damn what anybody else thought about him. If they wanted to call him 'chicken' that was their privilege. He was through, bored stiff. Accepting that, at last, relieved the unsettled pressure he had been feeling, and he went forward with the idea. Do it now. As soon as they were down he would seek out M'Grath, and demand his release, and the hell with it.

A WARNING red winked on his board and he withdrew

his vacant gaze from the multi-colored streamers outside, gave his attention to his controls. The polar beacon signal was strong, now. Venus Prime sat right on top of the planet's pole, at its coolest point. Directly overhead, about a thousand miles up, the orbital satellite hung, and the radio-link between it and base was the only certain marker in the mist. Vane-motors purred as he adjusted the aspect of his craft ready for the tail-first sit-down. The auto-pilot could have done it alone, but four years of experience had made him cautious of instruments. Every cubic inch of that air out there was crammed with microscopic, fungal spores, and there was no way of keeping them out for very long. You sealed everything up tight, you dipped every possible instrument in fast-drying inert plastic, and, if you were lucky, you could count on a working life of six weeks. For safety, you ran a duplicate, just in case. He began taking the craft down. The mist, below, thinned suddenly, showing a dirty dark-green patch. Somehow, Venus vegetation managed to get a foothold even on this sheet of glass-faced concrete, in between landing times, but a regular bath of ultraviolet kept it wilted. With the ease of long practice, he set the craft down on its tail, cut the howling turbines, killed the con-

tra-grav, and sat back. So much for that. In a moment, he would climb out and find M'Grath. He looked out and down, staring at those below.

Here, in the coolest spot on the whole planet, it was warm and humid enough to make clothing a matter of whim. Shorts and shoes, for the most part. But the shapes which showed through the mist, to help with the crates and the returning team . . . they were dressed to kill. Only once before had he seen so many buttoned-up shirts and collars. The memory made him frown. Still, it wasn't any of his concern, now. He got up, stiffly, went through the door at his back, down through the cabin, and out into the warm wetness. A shape detached itself from the crowd around the returned team, came close, and proved to be M'Grath. Psychiatrist, father-confessor and maintainer of internal concord, M'Grath was short, fat and balding, with a permanent 'I knew this was going to happen' expression.

"I want you, Andy" he said, abruptly. "Come on, over to Admin. with me, right away, will you?" Quarry fell into step alongside him, curiously.

"Mind-reading?" he asked, and M'Grath looked up, puzzled. "I mean, how did you know that I was coming to see you anyway?"

"I didn't. Were you, and why?"

"Just to hand in my resignation, that's all. I'm all through, here" he sniffed, appreciatively, at the relatively clean air which struck him as they went through the double gate of the dome airlock. Here, inside the dome, the air had faint rainbow tints, a reminder that the spores were still present, although fewer.

"You heard me?" he asked. "I'm quitting."

"I heard" M'Grath grunted. "It can wait. There are more urgent things. As you will have guessed, we have visitors. They didn't come to see you, naturally, but they are going to see you, just the same. A most peculiar situation. I can't handle it, at all. You're my last hope."

"Me? I'm no public-relations man. Besides, I don't like politicians."

"It's not a congressional committee, this time." M'Grath sounded as if he would have been more pleased if it had. "Not that, at all. Quite different."

QUARRY was intrigued, but knew M'Grath well enough to let him say what he had to in his own way.

"My job . . ." M'Grath muttered ". . . is to know what goes on inside people. I know every man here. Takes a certain type, to survive. Unbalanced, one-track mind, you might say. Somebody

who can devote himself to one thing, and make it fill his whole life. Now, such a person is completely at a loss when dealing with the unexpected."

"That's where you come in."

"That is where I am supposed to come in, yes," M'Grath grunted. "But there are limits. Times when I am forced to make a shot in the dark. Andy, when I ran the rule over you, for service here, I recall thinking to myself . . . if ever there was such a thing as a one hundred percent sane person, you're it. Which makes you just about as abnormal as you can get, but let that pass. Right now, I need some solid sanity. You'll see, in a moment." They had reached the door of the Administration building, and suddenly, Quarry was curious as to what lay on the other side of the conference-room door. M'Grath had never broken down like this before.

The room was crowded. He recognized those on the right side of the table: Dr. Richter, Chief of Administration, Venus Prime, flanked by four equally familiar faces, one from each section . . . flora, fauna, geology, meteorology. It looked like a massed attack. Or defense, maybe? Their faces were grim. He swung his glance to the left, and wished he had been given time to put on a shirt. His first two impressions were of numbers, and sex. Nine

people, and two of them were women. The only women on Venus, he thought, irrelevantly. M'Grath did the introductions, swiftly and smoothly.

"Miss Maria Taliafero . . . you've heard of, I'm sure . . ." Quarry nodded, and masked his unbelief by habit. The notorious dramatape star looked up at him from her negligent sprawl, her eyes masked and meaningless under dark glasses. "Miss Rogers . . . secretary-companion-maid. M. Raoul Cardan. Watney Graves. Dan Gilmore. Hector Cortayne. The Reverend Julius Malt. Lieutenant Downey . . . and Sergeant Brand." Quarry could identify some of them at a glance. Cardan, a gaunt, imperious beak-nosed patriarch of a man, noted for his daring, off-trail epics. Cortayne, six-foot six of beautiful beef and pseudo-menace. Watney Graves, a dressed-up dreg of humanity, with a face that had seen everything and had not been impressed. Gilmore, camera-man, maybe. The Reverend and the two soldiers were completely unfamiliar to Quarry. He looked to M'Grath, and the psychologist shook his head, gestured to Richter. Quarry followed.

"You will have gathered that they are here to make a dramatape," M'Grath muttered. "At least, the background for one . . ."

"They must be raving mad. How the hell did they get as far as this?"

"That is the whole trouble," Richter put in, angrily. "This Cardan, he has influential friends in Space Research office. He has documents, signatures, which credit him as assistant research, require my co-operation. I am supposed to throw all our resources into this project . . . this fantasy of dramatape entertainment."

"Sounds as if you've refused."

"Naturally. Damn it, you know this is serious science, and dangerous, too. The staff, and myself, absolutely refuse to be associated with a 'movie' of any kind. We will not be responsible for this man, nor his party. We do not want them here, where they are nothing but an embarrassment. I have told them all this, but they refuse to leave."

"Somehow . . ." M'Grath took up the thread, "they have to be talked out of it, and soon. If they don't signal, and catch the shuttle-ship they'll be stuck here six weeks, until the next one. That mustn't happen."

"How about Johnny Lomax?" Quarry asked, thinking of his opposite number.

"Don't be ridiculous," M'Grath snorted. "You know Lomax is a moron, apart from being able to fly a plane. They wouldn't listen to him."

"Wasn't thinking of that. I wondered if he'd mind checking over my craft, just in case I have to fly this bunch wherever they want to go."

"You can't be serious, Andy?" M'Grath looked aghast. "We want them away from the planet, altogether."

"I know what you want. Now let's go see what they want, eh? And you just listen." He swung around, and headed for Cardan, with M'Grath following.

**M**. CARDAN" he said. "I understand you have some idea of making a dramatape here. That right?"

"Hah!" Cardan brushed the air aside. "Talk, and more talk. I wish for action. Who are you? Do you have influence with Dr. Richter?"

"I'm the pilot who will have to fly you and your crowd, if you're going anywhere."

"Good. You are co-operative. You will be well-paid, more than now . . ."

"You can hold it, right there," Quarry interrupted. "Your money doesn't buy me. I fly because I like it. I'm here because I like it. I'm the guy in the middle, strictly. Not a scientist, nor a technologist. This base is full of both. I'm neither. Strictly neutral, right? And curious. Just how much do you know about conditions, here?"

"So it is rough, and tough, and rugged," Cardan said, excitedly. "I have heard this. But I am Raoul Cardan. I make pictures where no-one else has been yet. On the high mountain. In the jungle. In the air. In space. On the Moon, and Mars . . . but that was not so good. It had been spoiled, long before, you understand? But this is Venus. It is mystery, the unknown, the exotic. It is new. So I will make a picture here."

"Unknown is right," Quarry nodded. "I wonder if you realize just how much. If you added together all the surveyed area of Venus, you'd have a piece about the size of Manhattan Island, maybe. The rest is a total blank."

"So little, in ten years? Then my picture will help . . . we will learn much, is it not so?" Quarry killed a shrug, tried a new tack.

"You any idea what it's like, outside?" he demanded. "Don't get wrong ideas, from this bit here. This is cool, and civilized, after a fashion. Out there it's jungle, and jungle like nobody ever saw before."

"It is nothing!" Cardan brushed that aside, too. "I have made jungle epics before, many times. Borneo, New Guinea, the Amazon . . . all impossible, before I did it. I have my methods, my experts," he chuckled a nod back to the two soldiers.



Lieutenant Downey leaned forward with a hard grin.

"Volunteers, Mr. Quarry," he said. "Sergeant Brand and myself are U.N. Jungle Squad. Specially seconded to M. Cardan. We've done this kind of thing before. I think our kit and experience will cope with anything we're likely to find here."

Watney Graves spoke up, in a jaundiced whine that suited him. "What's all the hassle about, anyway?" he wondered. "It's not as if we were going to live on the job. Three-four weeks, is all."

"You can't make a dramatape in that time," Quarry said, positively, and Graves sniggered.

"Who's the expert, now?" he jibed. "But, all right, we can't. All we're after is a few thousand feet of genuine stuff, backgrounds, scenery, the real thing. We can mock-up the rest, on the lot, so close you'd never know the difference."

"Fake it, you mean?" and Graves held up a limply protesting hand.

"That's a bad word. We can duplicate anything so it's real. With the genuine article to go by. What's wrong with that?"

"All right," Quarry considered a moment. "You want three or four weeks in an outbase, to get some shots of Venus in the raw. And that's all?"

"It is not all!" Cardan broke in, furiously. "I have taken much

trouble, spent much money. I have a name, a reputation. This picture must carry the mark by which I am known . . . real, authentic. Nothing cheap. I ask for co-operation, from your scientists. Advice. And they refuse. They tell me to go home. Me!"

"That's natural, too" Quarry said, gently. "These men are all the experts there are, on Venus. They've told you to go home. You've had your advice, and rejected it. So I'll tell you what we'll do. Dr. Richter will make out a disclaimer, and you'll sign it, which will absolve him of all responsibility for you and your party. Also a formal transfer of responsibility for me and the aircraft, to you. Then you will be completely on your own, and I'll fly you anywhere you want to go, and bring you back . . . and it will be nothing to do with them, at all. How about that?"

The director shrugged. "Very well. I am willing for this. You will enter my employ . . ."

"I told you to forget that bit," Quarry said, flatly. "Nobody buys me. I'm going along with this because I'm curious to see just how far a damn fool has to go before he'll admit to being wrong."

M'GRATH tugged at his arm, drew him back across the room to where Richter was watching, and listening.

"I don't like the idea of a dis-

claimer," the Administration chief mumbled. "It settles the question of responsibility, of course. But suppose they do the impossible, and come back with something spectacular, something new? We'll look fools, too." Quarry grinned, rubbed his nose.

"It's not likely," he said, softly. "You know what it's like out there. I reckon they'll have had a gutful inside a couple of weeks. And even if they do something fantastic, and get some good pictures, so what? You'll have to climb down and be nice to the man, that's all. You've done it before."

He stood back while the scientists put their heads together, with M'Grath, and argued. This aspect of scientific expertise always baffled him, this inability to make a decision without committee work. Then M'Grath turned and hooked Cardan into the discussion with a finger. Quarry strolled across, took the director's seat, between Watney Graves and the lounging Taliaferro.

"You have a story-line to this picture?" he asked, curiously.

"Of a kind," Graves nodded. "Just provisional. We'll rewrite it as we go. That's my job. You know, I don't get your big-domes. This could be a big thing, for them. Can't you see the credit-titles . . . 'Made with the co-operation of the gallant and dedicated band of researchers of Ve-

nus Prime!' Who ever heard of Venus Prime, outside a few scientific societies? But by the time we load our epic on to the ether-lines, the whole world will know. As for the story . . . well, that's pure corn, of course. Vox populi, after all. Gallant band of scientists . . . outbase . . . cut off, no radio-link, no communication. Right, so far?"

"True," Quarry nodded. "We have a highly eccentric ionosphere, and weird atmospheric conditions. We can get a beacon-signal through, most of the time, but that's all. You must have been looking it up?"

"Research, in my own little way. All right, now something goes wrong, at the base, and they're in trouble. Nothing for it but they must make a forced march, through the jungle, back to Prime. And there's your first-level theme. Simple and dramatic. Struggle, danger, heroism, against a jungle background."

"What sort of a march did you have in mind?" Quarry asked, innocently.

"Nothing definite," Graves shrugged. "Say . . . a hundred miles?" Quarry heard the derisive snorts from across the room.

"You stopped your researching a bit too soon. Nobody . . . but nobody . . . has been further than five miles away from a base, on foot, anywhere on Venus. Not and come back to tell."

"Five miles!" Graves was shocked out of his casualness. "Why not?"

"Because, in the heat, the humidity, and other things, by the time you've gone five miles on foot, you've done a day's work. You're ready to sit down and rest. And there are no resting-places. Not here. This planet is alive, and on the jump, all the time. Even here." He looked past Graves to Gilmore, to the shiny straps across his chest.

"Cameraman?"

"Right!" Gilmore nodded. "Without me, nothing."

"Without your cameras, you mean. Are they protected?"

"You bet," Gilmore winked. "I've been on jungle projects before, mister. This job is sealed tighter than Fort Knox," and he shrugged the strap round, flipped the cover on a piece of equipment he obviously prized above rubies. "Any light," he said, reverently, "any range, full stereo, full color, stereo-sound, six mike inputs, completely self-contained and primed for two hours register without changing a thing. Saves having to open up, out in the open. And this is one of six."

"Very nice." Quarry said, heartily. "A pity it will be just so much junk inside twenty four hours, along with all the rest."

"Huh?" Gilmore stared at his prize. "But it's sealed. It's airtight!"

QUARRY explained. "We carry more than a hundred tech men who do nothing else but strip, clean and sterilize instruments and machinery . . . and there is no one hundred percent perfect way of sealing anything, not here. But they do know a few crafty ways of delaying rot. It'd pay you to go see them, get some advice. Else that gadget will be just so much dead weight inside a few hours."

Quarry turned to Graves once more. "Where do the women come into it? We have no women, on Venus, so you can't have a woman scientist, or a girl-friend . . . not and be authentic."

"Make way for the corn," Graves chuckled. "We're selling this to the public, remember? They expect fantasy, dream-stuff. What sort of a thrill is a woman-scientist? No sir, that's no good. Our provisional title is 'Venus Queen', and guess who is billed for the lead!"

Quarry groaned. "Don't tell me you're going to discover natives . . . not that old thing?"

"Why not?" Graves was unashamed. "You said, yourself, that ninety-nine per cent of the planet is unknown ground. So you don't know. *They* don't know."

"Fair enough. I'm no scientist. I only know what I hear, which is that there are no signs of any placental stage among the life-forms so far discovered. Prob-

ably due to the heat, and the dominance of fungoidal forms. But they could be wrong, I guess. So our heroes trek through the jungle, and discover a tribe of Venusians. Ugly and monstrous, of course. The men, anyway . . . ?”

“You’re getting it,” Graves sniggered. “The men are beasts. The women are gorgeous, by implication, anyway. Tally will be the only one to count. She falls for Hector, naturally, by comparison with her own people. And there’s your second-level conflict. Beauty in the wild. The rest is as inevitable as Greek drama. What does he do? Does he rescue her, take her back to civilization? Does he reject her, knowing it would never work out. Or does he reject the evil wickedness of our civilization to stay with her in this primitive, unspoiled world? Sort of Garden of Eden touch, there. We haven’t figured out all the angles, yet. In fact, that’s why we have the padre along, to advise on the religious undertones.”

**T**HE Reverend Malt had been following all this in birdlike attentive silence. He smiled now, and spoke, quickly, almost breathlessly.

“I am grateful for this chance, not just to advise on spiritual matters, but to be able to see God’s handiwork in its unspoiled

state. I am sure the experience will enlighten my view of our troubled civilization.”

“If you’re looking for that place where the hand of man has never set foot,” Quarry smiled, and Malt managed to smile, too. “This is it, all right. But as for it being God’s handiwork, that’s your department. One thing is sure. Whoever did design this place never had us in mind.” Cardan came stalking across, to tap Quarry on the shoulder, a thing he hated.

“It arranges itself,” the director said, briskly. “When can we leave?”

“About seven hours,” Quarry answered. “I need to catch a meal and some sleep. Then I’ll be ready.”

He had got as far as the door when M’Grath intercepted him, caught his arm.

“What’s gotten into you, Andy?” he puffed. “You don’t give a damn, I know that. But, Andy, you may not value yourself very highly . . . as is your privilege . . . but there are those who do. Me, for one. So don’t do anything too damn foolish, will you?”

**Q**UARRY was still revolving that strange statement in his mind as he walked out to his plane, seven hours later. It was the last thing he would ever have expected from M’Grath, who was notorious for not caring about

personal involvements . . . who had no friends, and took pride in declaring it. Birds of a feather, Quarry mused. Then he came up to Downey and Brand, who stood by the plane's gangway.

"All loaded up?" he queried, and Downey nodded, gestured to the aircraft.

"Queer-looking craft," he commented. "I don't recall ever seeing anything like it before. Can't see how the hell it flies, frankly."

"Coleopter," Quarry said, briefly. "A ring-wing. Old idea. Never caught on to any great extent, but it's the only thing that will take-off straight up and function in this atmosphere. Slow, but you can't break any records in this soup. And it's stable." Downey nodded, waved at the mist.

"Sure is thick, all right. What I was wondering, just how much lift do you have? We put a lot of heavy stuff in there," he shrugged a shoulder at the hold. "There's a power-truck, for one thing, weighs just over a ton."

"A ton!" Quarry said, thickly, and turned, to go up the ramp and peer down into the hold. It was crammed, but the rest of the gear looked light enough. He went back down, thoughtfully, and looked at Downey.

"I reckon we can lift off with that lot, all right," he said, grimly, "but it will crowd my safety-margin a bit. What the hell do

you want a power-truck for, anyway?"

"General work-horse, hauler, power-supply for lights, equipment, carry stores, weapons . . . and it's submersible, too. Wouldn't be without it. We like to work on a fair safety margin, too, you know."

"All right," Quarry shrugged. "The contra-grav will take the sting out of it, I reckon, and we won't be bringing it back, anyway."

"What d'you mean by that?" Downey put his jaw out. "We don't lose any of our stuff, if we can help it. It cost too much."

"It won't be worth a nickel, inside a week," Quarry told him, flatly. "You heard what I told the cameraman. Goes for your stuff, too. Anyway, Cardan prints his own money, doesn't he? He can always get more . . ." he broke off as figures began to show, through the mist. The rest of the party he could see by their attire that already they were making concessions to the heat. Quarry suppressed a sneer, wondering how long this would last. For this was the 'cool'.

"We go, now, yes?" Cardan demanded, and Quarry shrugged.

"Just as soon as I run up the engines, yes," Cardan went up the ramp, and into the cabin. Quarry looked at Downey, thoughtfully.

"Do me a favor," he said.

"Check that truck. Make sure it's lashed down tight. As soon as we get altitude I shall be turning into level flight. I don't want that damn thing walking about, back there." He went up the ramp, into the cabin, and up the floor, which was vertical, now. Automatically, he noted that they had had the sense to space themselves evenly either side of the center line. It helped on half of his mind to argue that these people knew what they were up to, in part, anyway. The other half of his mind kept insisting that they were as crazy as all 'artists', and that he ought to wash his hands of the whole business.

**I**N HIS own cabin he went through pre-take-off routine automatically. He held down the contra-grav starter while it rattled over critical into a smooth hum, then watched it come to rest . . . at fifty-three percent. He jolted the gauge with the heel of his hand, unbelievably, then grinned at his own folly. It was still set for his original load. He wound the adjustment up, and up, and saw the register following, past thirty . . . twenty-five . . . twenty . . . and there it stuck. The vernier was hard over. There you are, said gloom. There goes your safety margin. Chuck it, now, while you have the chance. Quitting time, Andy. And then he recalled, with a start, the

idea that had dominated his mind, the last time he'd sat at these controls. He was going to find M'Grath, and serve in his quit notice, wasn't he? What had happened to that bright idea?

He'd been bored, hadn't he? And now . . . ?

"The hell with it," he muttered, out loud, and took hold of the throttle-grips, "No point in backing out, now," and the power-hum deepened. They were off the deck, and climbing. Within ten seconds they were wrapped in rainbow mist, and alone. Feeling the strange sluggishness of his controls, he eased round, watching the beacon-reader, the 'point'. The left-right needles were down, but trying to lift to the impulses from the Prime beacon right at his back. Then he was getting the fainter signal from Base One, and the two needles lifted and steadied. He was very carefully juggling aspect, rate of climb and air-speed, when there came an imperious rap at the door at his back, and it slid open.

"The fog," Cardan snapped. "We can see nothing. I wish pictures, from the air. We are too high. You must go down."

Now it starts, Quarry thought. Aloud, he said, "You're out of luck, mister. We're not going down, but up." He eyed the altimeter, dubiously. They were not climbing fast enough.

"No more joking!" Cardan shouted. "Go down . . . at once!"

"You go and sit!" Quarry told him, sharply. "You're interfering with my trim. This fog, as you call it, goes all the way down to the so-called ground, and all the way up to about three hundred miles. And sideways. Just too bad for your pictures, but we did try to tell you, remember?"

"But how then shall we take pictures?" Cardan screeched, and Quarry bit his lip to kill a chuckle.

"That's your problem. You're the expert."

"Hah!" Cardan muttered something vehement in his native tongue, then, "How long shall we have to put up with this . . . this blindness?"

"It should take us about five hours to get where you want to be . . ."

"Five hours?" he screeched, again. "It is only five hundred miles. You can go faster . . ."

"Not in this!" Quarry lost his patience, suddenly. "Only a fool would try to beat a hundred, in this soup. Why don't you go and sit, and let me get on with my part of the job, hey?" He heard the door slam, but was too concerned with his instruments to bother much. Almost levelled off, now, he was trying to climb, and it was a labor. Three thousand feet was a bare minimum. He had to make more. He leaned on the

throttles, cautiously. All at once, he felt the tail drop and the air-speed sagged. Guessing at once what had happened, he twisted round in his seat, slid the door back, and shouted.

"Downey!" Pale faces in the gloom looked back at him. "Downey . . . that damned truck of yours is loose. Do something about it, or we'll all be down in the mud!" Without waiting an answer, he jerked the door shut and swung back to his board. Juggling desperately, he got the bows down to a reasonable angle of climb, gave the motors a touch more power, and wondered how much longer they would hold out, at this altitude. In his mind's eye he could see the centrifuge filters spouting out the soupy spore-dust, maintaining clean air to the jets. They were efficient, but they had limits, and overdrive at this altitude was crowding that limit dangerously.

HE WAS in a cleft stick. More power meant more chance of a choke, but he had to have more power to climb out of the thick stuff into reasonably thin air. He leaned on the throttles again, anxiously. He wanted to see ten thousand on that altimeter, at least. It crept, grudgingly. The 'point' was steady. He let one hand free to pre-set the autopilot. Six thousand, and still climbing. He held his breath and

touched the throttles just a shade more.

Number Two rev counter fell, and the change in sound came with it. Even as the needle was falling, Quarry flipped the autopilot on, slid out of his seat, seizing and buckling a life-line round his waist. The other end of the line was secure to a strut between his feet. All in one movement, he kicked the access-door open, spat violently as the little cockpit was instantly flooded with slimy mist, and slid out, feet first. By blind feel he went along the fuselage, groping for the intake cowling. The mist caressed him with luminous, greasy fingers, but he ignored it, concentrating on the picture in his mind. That, by the feel and shudder, was Number One motor. He set his foot on it, groped round to the left. Here the howling din was slightly less. Here, somewhere.

He had it. Solid and still. Leaning over, he slid his fingers into the discharge ducts, and dug into the cheesy mass that was jammed solid there. As it came out by the slimy handful, he found time to marvel, again, at the way the sporedust, whipped into cream by the centrifuge, could find and maintain a foothold in the face of that tornado blast. As he cleared the first of the two ducts he felt the outsurge of hot air, which meant that the spindle was still spinning. Warned by that, he

was not surprised when the motor burst into howling life right by his head. Spitting out a mouthful of goo, he dug into the second discharge, felt the gloppy stuff splatter against his arm. No time to stop and be thankful. He pulled up straight, began wriggling back, dazed by the noise . . . feeling for handholds . . . hoping he hadn't lost too much height.

A chattering . . . a cough . . . and the motor beneath his feet fell silent. Even as he crouched, to reach for it, another chatter told of a second failure. And then a third.

"Leaving one," he muttered, hearing the motor he had just cleared pick up into a frantic scream. That would be the autopilot, blindly trying to maintain forward speed, for lift. 'This is it!' he thought, and hung on for a moment, unable to think what to do next, or whether it was worth trying to do anything. He could sense the shift in aspect by the strain on his wrists, and renewed his hold to compensate. The cockpit was now 'above' him, ten feet away, and the craft was falling. Not very fast, what with the contra-grav, and one valiant motor, but falling, just the same. He began to climb, desperately.

"Looks as if Graves is going to get his long walk, after all," he mumbled, "I hope he enjoys it . . ." and the greasy hand-hold



wrenched clear of his fingers as a gust of hot air swept him up. Not 'up', his mind told him, even as he flailed and yelled, seeking something to grab hold. He was falling, but the ship was falling faster still. The contra-grav must have blown out. That lone engine would be worse than useless, now. Part of his mind struggled, insanely, to compute the flight path of the falling plane, under the eccentric thrust of one motor. The rest of him cringed from the inevitable end of everything. His life-line snapped taut, jerking the breath from his body in a grunt. Mist whipped by his head. A solid something hit him. Bright lights burst in his skull. Then darkness.

**S**TILL dark, and warm. Somewhere, very close, there was pain. He was standing on his head, and the whole universe spun round him, slowly. He opened his eyes and the pain washed in. He was hanging, head-down, jack-knifed over his safety-belt, spinning. A foot away from his nose, dark sullen water rippled. As he squinted at it, there came a scurry of pin-points of red-glowing neon, making a spatter of ripples. Not fancying a bath in that water, he screwed his head round, painfully. He made out the leathery bole of a tree, almost within reach, and all of fifteen feet thick.

He was snagged on a branch, like a fish on a line.

Wriggling, and half-blinded by the pain in his skull, he managed to right himself, get his feet to that bole, and then to go up, hand-over-hand, until he fell, wet and breathless, across the branch. Rested, he crawled up, sat, tugged his line. It went up, across, around. Again he threw his weight on to it, scrambled, and fetched up on another branch, shaking with effort.

Now he could see what was left of the plane. In the sickly yellow glow he saw his cockpit, level with his head, six feet away. Peering down, he saw that the annular wing had torn away, bodily. At a guess, the craft had struck solidly, and the motors had kept right on going. But the cabin fuselage looked reasonably intact. His line felt firm enough. Taking up the slack, he leaned out, swung, and managed to scramble back into his own cockpit once more. There was a greasy film over everything. The self-luminous dials registered uniform zero, except one. The 'point' showed life. The two needles surged rhythmically to the pulse from the beacon, telling him that he was eight degrees left off-course.

"That's all *you* know!" he mumbled. "Still, if I can only get you loose from the board, you'll show me the way home . . ."

and he twisted round to reach for the tool-kit. His eye fell on the door to the cabin, and he caught his breath.

"Good grief . . . the passengers!" he groaned. "I'd forgotten all about them." Out of his seat, he struggled with the door, managed to force it open, to look down into gloomy darkness and the smell of fear. Reaching back, he secured a hand-lamp and poured its harsh white beam down there. His first impression was of havoc. Like the heavy motors, the contra-grav unit had torn itself free, and the ruptured floor of the cabin showed the way it had gone. The seats were twisted and wrenched back up against the walls. He could see arms and legs showing. He heard a whimper of shock. Taking a loop of line round his pilot-seat, he clipped the lamp to his belt, and lowered himself into the cabin, scrambling for a foothold. The beam skittered, fell full on a staring face. Cardan. Or, more accurately, it had been Cardan. There was no fire in those glassy eyes, now. Quarry put out a hand to feel. Neck broken. Never knew what hit him. Probably luckier than the rest, that way. Damned unfair, too. He'd got them all into this, and now he was out of it, the easy way. Quarry shifted his feet and the light swung. A voice.

"Gimme a hand, can't you . . .

over here . . ." It was Gilmore, the cameraman, struggling to get free of the clutch of a ruined seat. Quarry climbed across to apply the weight of his foot, and the seat cracked apart.

"That's it!" Gilmore panted. "Now, let me get up there, so I can see. I want pictures of this," and he brushed past. Quarry shoved the lamp into his hand.

"Take this," he said. "Shine it down here, so I can see who else is worth saving. Such as women . . ." If Gilmore heard the sarcasm, he gave no sign. Quarry groped his way down. A flutter of white and red caught his eye. Miss Rogers and Miss Taliaferro were jammed in a heap, pinned against the curved bulkhead. He caught hold and heaved, and the sweat ran into his eyes, but the wreckage held firm. There came a rending crash at his back, and a thick voice.

"What the hell happened?" Quarry squinted round, to see Cortayne throwing away the shattered pieces of his seat.

"Full story later," he grunted. "Right now I can use some of your horsepower. Give us a hand, here."

Miss Rogers was limply unconscious, with a lump on her forehead that would be a beautiful shade of purple, soon.

"Who's got the light? You, Gilmore? Hold it steady a bit . . ." and Hector laid Miss Rog-

ers over his shoulder like a doll, went climbing up.

"Useful things, muscles," Quarry said, softly, watching him go. As he turned to touch Miss Taliaferro, she moved.

"I'm all right," she said, quietly. "It was a crash?"

"That's right," he said, noticing the trace of accent in her voice. "You'd better hold still 'till Cortayne gets back. It's ragged stuff, this plastic."

"Very well. Others are hurt, do you know?"

"Cardan is dead. Don't know about the rest, yet." Cortayne came back, to extend a long, strong arm, and she went up nimbly, like a cat. Gilmore showed the light again, and there was a gentle call, from the very lowest seat. It was the Reverend Malt, and unhurt.

"I think . . ." he said, breathlessly, as he struggled from his seat, "that the two soldiers were in the hold." Quarry frowned, eyed the door under his feet. If the truck had obeyed the same laws as the contra-grav and the motors, then the whole rear end of the hold was probably burst open.

"Got Graves," Cortayne called down. "He's out cold, but alive."

"Pass him up out of it," Quarry called back, "and then come down here, give me a hand with this door. Downey and Brand are in there."

AS THEY stood either side of the double door, Cortayne looked, as near as he could manage, really distressed. For him, it was a stiff grin.

"Might as well get it open," he muttered, and bent to seize the handgrips. Quarry bent with him. Together they heaved.

"Whole damned plane made of plastic?" Cortayne grunted, as muscles leaped up like cables across his shoulders.

"Right!" Quarry jerked, heaving until the blood thundered in his head, "Good reason . . . for it . . . Ah!" and the tough fabric screamed as it came free.

"Christ!" the strong man gasped, as he stared at the black, oily water which lapped six inches below the door.

"About what I'd figured," Quarry sighed, wearily, and straightened his aching back. "That truck must have torn the whole butt-end of the ship off. So there goes Downey. And Brand. And all your equipment. Everything. All gone!"

He followed Cortayne up the ragged ruin of the floor, into the steady beam from the lamp, wondering, stupidly, where all the others had gone. They couldn't all be crammed into the cockpit. They weren't. The lamp was wedged on a splinter of plastic. Graves was slumped in the pilot-seat, with Miss Rogers on his knee, both dead to the world.

Cortayne crouched by the access-door.

"It's nothing of a jump to that branch," he said, "but it's going to be a job getting these two over."

"Life-line," Quarry grunted, unbuckling it, and wincing as the heavy fabric chafed raw flesh. "You hop over, take the slack. I'll rope these two, and you can swing 'em across." The rest of the party were perched in an uneasy row along the branch, with Gilmore at the far end, camera to his face. Last one to leave, and Quarry had a positive dislike for the idea. Once away from the craft, they were afoot, and helpless. He threw out the irrational fear, braced himself to think, to think of anything and everything that might possibly be of use . . . now, before it was too late.

THE control-board pocket yielded a handful of vit-en-z capsules. He took them. The seat-locker held all sorts of things, none useful, until he touched the ultra-violet lamp. Standard equipment for sterilizing anything of fungus and mould. That would be handy. He clipped it to the waist-band of his shorts, went back into the cabin. There were two more U-V lamps in the racks, and more capsules. He felt the thud of feet, and Cortayne's anxious voice called.

"You all right?"

"I'm fine. Here, take these," he passed up the two lamps and the capsules. Then, making his way back to the cockpit, he caught sight of the 'point'. That, of all things, was the essential. Groping for a screw-driver, he began to free it from the panel. Cortayne watched, curiously, and Quarry gave him a side-look.

"This will show us the way, at least," he said. "Chances are about nil, in any case, but with this we can at least point the right way," and the whole craft lurched suddenly, and fetched up solid again. "Hop out!" Quarry advised, grimly, without pausing a moment, "Leave a loop of slack for me, but get clear. No sense in both of us buying it." The screws came free, and he wrenchd the bulky instrument out of its nest as the craft gave another lurch. Wrapping the slack round one arm, he cradled the instrument in the other, and scrambled out of the hatch. With the aid of Cortayne's good right arm, he managed to make it to the branch, and sat.

"You don't know it," he said to the big man, "but I owe you an apology for what I thought about you at first. Big, beautiful and useless . . . but we'd have been in a bad way without you, that's for sure." Cortayne smiled his beautiful smile, through the sweat.

"That's all right," he said,

awkwardly. "I've run into it before. All actors are supposed to be limp-wristed. It's a sort of tradition, I guess."

The hulk of the plane, now seven feet away, gave another rending lurch, and fell away into the yellow gloom. The shock of its fall shook the branch they sat on. Then there was hushed silence again. Quarry looked down at the dim grey bulk that was barely visible. Suddenly he saw it heave and out of the stillness came a muffled roar, together with the crack and screech of tortured fabric. Then, blindingly, the white beam of a searchlight sliced the gloom. Hector flashed the hand-lamp that he had rescued, and the beam swung, and picked them out, on the branch.

"The Lord is with us," Malt whispered. "We are not forgotten."

"That must be the truck," Quarry shielded his eyes. "With Downey and Brand. They said it was submersible. They must have been in it when we hit. Helloooo!" His hail died in the gloom, and a faint cry came back. The engine roar came nearer, then stopped, letting the silence surge back.

"Solid ground, here," came a faint voice. "You all right? Can you get down?"

"It's about fifteen feet," Hector stood up. "I could drop into it, swim over, hook up that line."

"Hold on," Quarry restrained him. "That's not just ordinary water. Try it this way," and he gathered up the line, bent the end-loop into the lamp-grip. Then he lowered it, alight, and began swinging it. Soon, at the far end of the swing, they could see Downey, standing on the truck. The lamp skimmed the dark water, and there was a violent splash as something big and black sliced the surface in a bold attempt to snatch it. Then Downey had the end, and called.

"All secure, here. Come on down."

COMES the other end," Quarry shouted back, passing the belt-end of the line under the branch and swinging it to Downey. "Now . . ." he said, to Hector, "we have a double line. Easier, that way. And let's not sag too close to the water, eh? You want to go first, Mr. Gilmore, and get some more pictures?" The cameraman was already at his elbow, and willing.

"Great stuff, this," he enthused. "Wish the light was a bit better, though." And slinging his camera over a shoulder he stepped on to the bottom line, took the top one under his arms, and went swiftly down the slope as if he did such things every day. Maybe he does, at that, Quarry thought, wryly, watching him. Miss Rogers had recov-

ered, and was ready to try the descent, carefully. Miss Taliafero slid down, briskly. Malt made a slow, but steady job of it. Then Hector, with Watney Graves slung round his neck, stepped on to the line.

"Not much fire in this guy," he said, reprovingly, "Comes of living the wrong kind of life." And away he went, sliding swiftly. Quarry shook his head. This was all wrong. These people weren't panning out at all the way he had figured. He had seen them as prostrated and terrified by this jungle . . . almost, he thought of it as 'his' jungle . . . but they seemed to be taking it in their stride. Clutching the 'point', he stepped on to the line and slid down. With six of them, the top of the truck was crowded. Downey stuck his head up out of the hatch.

"Room for a small one, inside," he said. "Smart idea, that double line. Did you see that thing that snapped at the lamp? Mouth like a bag-full of razor-blades."

"Better take Graves," Quarry sighed, "and take a look at him, too." While that was being arranged, he released the line, hauled it in, looping it up. It would be a load, and he was already loaded, but eighty feet of rot-proof line, with a one-ton breaking strain, was too precious to discard, right now. The loop-line idea had been prompted

purely from the need to save the line, but there was no point in telling Downey that.

"All right, then." Downey poked his head up again. "Let's get moving. You got any idea which way we ought to point from here, mister?" Quarry heard him as if from a distance. All at once, everything had gone out-of-focus and unreal, as if they were all figures in a dream. Sweat ran from him as he put out a hand to lean on Hector. His legs felt like water. Remotely, he heard Hector say.

"Here, you don't look so good . . ." and then, "He had a hell of a crack on the head. Concussion, maybe." And another faint voice, bitterly.

"Oh great, that's just what we wanted." And then fingers fumbled with the 'point', to take it from him. Dragging in a deep breath, he clutched the instrument, resisting those fingers, and the blurry feeling receded.

"I'll be all right," he said, thickly, "and I'm hanging on to this." He held it tight, braced himself to look down at it, peering at the twin needles, and made a quarter turn. "Venus Prime is that way," he raised an arm that felt like lead. Downey shouted something incomprehensible to the sergeant, inside, and the motors growled as the truck wheeled. Quarry fought to get a grip on himself, felt the sweat and shiv-

ers pass off, and his brain begin to function again.

"Hold it a bit," he said, to the back of Downey's head. "You don't think you're going to drive this thing with us riding on top, do you?"

"You have a better idea, like getting inside, maybe?" the lieutenant half-turned. "Because you can forget it. There isn't room for any more."

"There isn't a lot of solid ground, either," Quarry retorted. "What little is known of the terrain shows that it's mostly swamp, with a thin cover of matted vegetation. You were lucky to find this bit."

"So?"

"So you'll go on ahead, and we'll follow."

"On foot?" Downey turned all the way round, now, amid the murmurings of the rest. "You were the one who said nobody had ever made more than five miles at a time, on foot. And we must be all of fifty miles away from the base, now."

"Nearer sixty," Quarry corrected. "I was trying to climb, and going faster than usual, all because of this damned truck. This is what caused all the damage."

"And this is what is going to pull us all out of it, so it cuts both ways."

"This . . ." Quarry said, "will be lucky if it goes five yards with-

out diving. I'm going to walk . . ." and he got down. In the gloom, he could see the others hesitate, and then follow, scrambling down on to the slippery mud. He heard the lieutenant curse, softly. Then,

**L**ISTEN, folks. Somebody has got to be in charge, here, else we're never going to get any place. Mr. Cardan is dead, so I'm told, and I'm sure we're all sorry about it, but it seems that leaves me as the most qualified person to take responsibility for getting us all safely back to base . . . ?"

"All right, so you're the leader," Quarry called. "You go on ahead, and we'll follow. You have the direction." He heard Downey curse again, and the motors cut him off as they burst into a roar. "Don't get too close to that truck," he warned the two women. "We'll follow you, and take it easy, this is no picnic."

The footing was spongy, but manageable. On all sides, great trunks reared up into the gloom, glowing in ghostly colors. "Truly, this is a strange place. Why are we free of the ever-present mist?"

"One of those things," Quarry answered. "The scientists aren't sure why, but wherever there's a cluster of trees, like this, the mist seems to keep away. But it's only thinned out. And it isn't mist, at all. There's a certain amount of

water-vapor in it, sure, but it's loaded with microscopic fungus spores, and micro-organisms of all kinds. And they don't seem to like the trees, at all."

"They're queer, all right." Hector put his head back to follow one purple-glowing giant bole up into the gloom. "Skin like leather, straight as columns, and they shine. Look, there's another yellow one."

"You'll see queerer things than that," Quarry assured him, as they slithered through a knee-deep patch. "This place breaks all the rules. Those trees, for instance, almost certainly don't belong here. You see, about fifty years ago, when the first manned probes went into orbit round this planet, the guess was that the high percentage of carbon dioxide in the upper atmosphere indicated a lack of organic growth down here. None of the probes-to-ground would work, because of the crazy magnetic fields, so they had to go on that guess. And somebody had the big bright idea of seeding the place with plant life. They threw down just about everything they could think of . . . grasses, canes, mosses, creepers . . . and trees. Seedlings, pine cones, acorns, things like that. And they did a thorough job of it. Then they sat back and waited for the mist to evaporate. Ten years ago they managed to establish Prime base,

down on the surface. They've been going slowly crazy, ever since, trying to sort out the mess."

"All mixed up, eh?"

"That's putting it mildly. There already was life, plenty of it, here. Some of our stuff died off, of course, but a lot of it managed to thrive. Now you can't tell whether a plant, a tree, or anything else, is native or hybrid or what. And the spore-mist is still here, as thick as ever . . . whoa up! Something's gone wrong, ahead . . ." He went ahead, rapidly, and sank up to his waist. Peering, he could see Miss Rogers, shoulder deep. To Hector, who came up alongside, he said, "Take the end of the line. Malt, back him up . . ." and he waded forward until he could grab Miss Rogers by the hand, and pull. Then he could see that she held on to the hand and arm of Miss Taliaferro, who was in up to her neck.

"Hold on tight," he said, as steadily as he could, and shouted back to Hector to heave, hard. They went back, slowly, oozingly, until they were in the comparative dry again. Miss Rogers was gasping, and speechless. Miss Taliaferro, in spite of her struggle for breath, and the green slime that covered her from the neck down, was more composed.

WE WERE foolish," she said. "Right behind the truck,



very close, and then . . . squoosh . . . it just went down, right under. I think, maybe, they had the top down."

"I hope you're right," Quarry muttered. "We'd better back up, anyway. If they're still capable, that's what they're going to do, and we're right in the way, here." They plodded back a yard or so, and waited. Malt put a gentle hand on Quarry's arm, to draw his attention.

"Look here," he whispered, and, lifting his leg, he poked a finger through the slimed material of his trouser-leg. "The fabric has rotted," he said.

"Right," Quarry nodded. "You'd have to know, sooner or later. Like I said, the mist is still here, only thinned out. And it's hungry. It eats most metal molecules . . . that's why the plane was almost all plastic . . ." to Hector, who was listening. "The engines are metal-plastic plated, and they don't last long. The mist also eats any and all organic waste. Just about anything that isn't alive. Some of our synthetic plastics manage to stand up . . ." There came a squelching splatter and roar from the gloom ahead, and then the glare of the searchlight. And Quarry had a sudden idea.

"I'm a fool," he muttered. "Must be that knock on the head." He stepped into the beam, waved Downey to stop. "Hang on

there a bit," he called. "We'll be right back." To Hector he said, "Look, if we go back as far as the wreck, we might be able to find a chunk of the body-work big enough to make a sort of skid, or sled, that we can all sit on, and let the blasted truck haul us. You with me?"

"Sounds all right," Hector nodded, and they turned back, following the gashes made by the truck treads. Half an hour of plodding brought them to the scene of the wreckage, and within ten minutes, Quarry had laid his hand on a shattered slab that had been a motor-fairing. It might have been designed for what he had in mind, and he was just about to turn and call Hector, when the dark sludge erupted, no more than five feet from where he was standing.

Holding his breath, he saw a dull brown, leathery, pointed thing push up. A head like a torpedo, with only a hint of neck, and then foot after foot of snake-like body, all of six feet in diameter, dripping slime. He felt for one of the U.V. lamps, hoping that Hector would have the sense to keep still. That great head was swinging, groping, until it was pointing straight at him. Then its two great eyes opened, like dull headlamps. This was the moment. It had spotted him before looking, but the eye-opening was the sign that it knew of him. He



aimed the almost invisible beam of the lamp straight for those huge eyes. Instantly, they fired into a bright glare, and then flap-lids snapped down, the pointed snout retracted to show a round mouth ringed with razor teeth, and he winced at the ear-shattering scream that whistled out on stench-laden breath.

"What the hell was that?" Hector gasped, staggering through the mud to where Quarry stood, watching the subsiding mud-ripples.

"A kind of worm, so the big-domes say. Here, you'd better take one of these lamps. Ultraviolet. Handy things. The life, here, is sensitive to it." Hector took the lamp, clipped it to his waist-band, and laid his hands on the chunk of plastic. He heaved, trying the weight of it to be sure it would hold.

"If that's a worm," he said, "I don't want to see a snake" and Quarry grinned, wryly. Together they managed to get the lump of stuff moving, skidding over the muddy surface, until they could hook the line to it. Then they started to haul.

"Not all as big as that," Quarry explained. "Mostly little ones. But they are pretty bad, too. They stick on, like a sucker, and then eat their way in. You have to catch them real quick, or it's too bad. Once the head gets going, you can chop off the rest, but

it keeps right on going, just the same. That's why I didn't want you to go swimming." The way back to the truck seemed to have stretched itself out ten-fold, and Quarry felt his legs buckling like straw by the time they saw the searchlight again. Even Hector was laboring for breath.

**T**HIS heat," he puffed, "Takes all the fight out of a man. Doesn't it ever let up, get cool at night times . . . ?"

"Night or day is all pretty much the same." Quarry settled himself, thankfully, on the new solidness, waved the others to climb aboard. He could see Downey, his head out of the truck-hatch, listening. The women had been making futile attempts to scrape off the worst of the slime.

"Time you learned a thing or two," he said, wearily. "This atmosphere eats just about anything that isn't actually living. That's why the trees haven't any bark, as we know it. And that's why, unless you're wearing orlon, dacron, or some similar synthetic, you're all going to be naked as babies, right soon. For what difference it makes . . . we have more important things to think about than conventions. To start with, how much can we carry, without pockets or straps?"

Gilmore, characteristically, was quite happy.

"Plastic straps," he said. "Plastic carry case, and I dipped this camera, like you said. For the rest, I don't give a damn." Quarry eyed him, and thought, but said nothing, waiting for the others. Miss Taliaferro summed it, crisply.

"We're too rich," she said, "to wear synthetic. Nothing but silk, genuine leather, cotton, wool, for us. It is poetic justice, maybe?"

"That's a point of view," Quarry grunted. "My point is—these" and he held up a pack of vit-enz capsules. "I have ten of these, and there are seven caps to a pack. One a day is the dose, and there are nine of us."

"What are they for?" Miss Rogers asked, fearfully, "against disease?"

"Nothing like that. That's the one thing we don't have to worry about. This mist, even here, is the finest anti-biotic you could want. That's the trouble. Without intestinal bacteria to do our digesting for us, we'll starve to death. That's what these are for. And, as I'm the only one with pockets that will stand up to rot, I'd better carry them." He stood up, moving gingerly to the edge nearest the truck, studying the jagged plastic and unhooking the line from his shoulders.

"If I tie this, here," he said, to Downey, "and pass you the other end, you can secure it to a ring-bolt, can't you? Then you can

rattle on ahead as much as you want, and we'll be right behind you." Downey took the end of the line.

"We have grub aboard," he muttered, so that the rest couldn't hear, "and some of those packs of capsules, but no medical kit."

"Medical kit?" Quarry frowned, then caught on. "You mean . . . Graves? Is he badly hurt?"

"Can't tell for sure, but he seems to have broken something, inside. Got pains in the guts, and spitting blood every now and then."

"There isn't a damn thing we can do about it," Quarry said, grimly. "Except hope that we get out in the thick mist, soon, and find water fit to drink. The one is easy, the other not so. Better make a start . . . use this truck while we have it . . ." and Downey looked at him, sharply.

"You think we're going to run out of fuel, maybe?"

"Not that, but look . . ." and Quarry scraped his finger along the curved metal of the machine. Downey stared at the result, and swallowed. "As I was telling the others . . . this atmosphere eats just about anything, including metal."

"Christ!" Downey scraped at the surface for himself, and his face sagged. Then, urgently, he ducked back into the hatch, and

his voice could be heard, in rapid argument.

Soon he returned.

"Here," Downey nudged him, "Give a hand with Graves. Get him down on the float." Quarry reached out, felt Hector by his side. They laid the limp form over the hull and down on the curved plastic. Downey followed, holding a tiny transmitter. He thumbed it.

"You read me, Steve?" he asked, and over the buzz of static came Brand's voice, thin but understandable.

"Read you, lieutenant. Dropping the hatch, ready when you say."

"Forget that 'lieutenant' stuff, damn it, Steve. All right, go . . . and don't take any chances . . ." The truck growled, and waddled off into the gloom. Downey took the weight of the slack, and Quarry gave a hand, so that they paid out the line steadily, and had the float sliding before the slack ran out.

"Damned pig-head," Downey muttered. "I told him the truck was liable to seize up, so he argued there was no sense in both of us getting stuck with it. Practically threw me out, and 'sirring' me, all the time. But we'll change over, as soon as we find a place where we can have a spell . . . if I have to pull rank on him to do it. We lined up O.K.?" Quarry consulted the 'point' that

he had never let go of, and nodded. "That's all right, then. There's a gyro-point in the truck . . . so long as it holds out."

Quarry sagged back, letting the curved plastic prop him up, thankful to be able to relax. His stomach was churning, and that feeling of unreality was coming back. At his feet, Graves lay ominously still, with a trickle of something that looked black in this light, coming from the corner of his mouth. The sway of the float was soporific, and the weird, dim-lit landscape sliding past contributed to the sense of dream-illusion. Looking across, Quarry could see the two women. He'd been wrong about them, he mused. Both were wet, slimy, dirty and ragged. But the differences were striking. Miss Rogers looked hopeless, helpless and stunned . . . and he'd thought her the tough one. Miss Taliaferro, without her dark glasses, and smeared with slime, looked defiant, somehow. Almost angry. He wondered, idly, where she got the energy from, and how he had ever made the mistake of thinking her pampered and delicate.

HE WOKE to the sudden cessation of movement, and the urgent note in Downey's voice. His head still ached, but reasonably, now.

"Declutch . . . and run the motors right up . . . shake them

loose . . . that's it Now, try again . . ." Downey clutched the handset, listening.

"What?" Quarry asked, easing his aching back from the hard plastic.

"Starboard motor seized . . . no, it's all right again . . ." as a crackling comment came from the speaker, and the float began to surge forward again.

"How far d'you reckon we've come?"

"Fifteen miles, maybe." Downey wiped a greasy hand across his chin. "We've had to dodge about a bit, to miss the trees, and the truck's been submerged most of the time. Hah . . . there it is, now!" He gestured to where the beam of the searchlight suddenly cut the gloom. There was a greyish thickness to the beam.

"Mist beginning to thicken," Quarry guessed. "If it's anything to go by, we should be clearing the trees, soon." Then, over the far-away roar of the motors, he caught the sound of splashing, like a water-fall. He strained his ears.

"What's that?" Downey demanded, as he heard it.

"Bit of luck for us, if it's what I think. Soon see. We're getting closer." The handset gave a thin cry.

"I'm out on the solid again, lieutenant. Watch for it, let me know when you hit . . ." and Downey stood up, peering for-

ward. He gasped, suddenly, as they ran into a solid wall of warm water.

"Stop the truck!" Quarry snapped, and stood up, shielding his face. The rest of the party woke up, spluttering and gasping.

"Drinking water," he told them, briefly. "It's a tree . . . or fungus . . . or whatever you like, which pumps water from way down, up through tube roots, and sprays it out at the top."

"So it's weird," Gilmore commented, reaching for his beloved camera, and swearing as the spray went all over his face. "But why stop right here? We're only getting wet!"

"Also clean, if that matters. Downey, have you any containers in that truck? We ought to store some of this. Apart from these trees, drinking-water is hard to come by."

"What sort of a fungus is it that spits pure water?" Hector marvelled, as Downey slid over the edge and made for the truck.

"Didn't say it was a fungus . . ." as they stood and luxuriated in the warm spray. "It's a carnivore, whatever else it may be. It eats whatever is unlucky enough to get sucked in. And there goes the last shred of your shorts!"

Hector made an instinctive, and futile, grab.

At that moment Quarry no-

ticed that Malt was on his knees by Graves, splashing his face. The script-writer wrenched to a coughing spasm, and there was pink in the froth on his lips. Quarry knelt alongside Malt.

"Try to swallow some of the water," he said, gently. "It might help. We'll be breaking out the meal-packs, any time now."

"None for me," Graves mumbled, his face in a wry grimace. "This is the end of my chapter. Can't feel a thing below my chest . . ."

"Just lie still," Quarry advised, meaninglessly.

"Got any pain-killer?" Graves muttered. "Never could stand pain. Always preferred to see other people suffer. Wish I could have been lucky enough to hang on and watch you all die." Malt drew in a quick breath and ceased all movement. Hector put his huge yet sensitive hand against Graves' scrawny throat, and shook his head.

"He's dead," he said, simply, and Malt bowed his head.

QUARRY realized the need to move on. "You got the food-packs out?" he added.

"Brand has some back there a bit. No sense in sitting here in the rain. Can I give you a hand, Miss Taliaferro?" Downey scrambled over the edge of the float, and offered his arm.

"You can have my shirt, Miss,"

the lieutenant said. "It's nylon. I'll get Brand to pass his along to Miss Rogers . . ."

Within a yard or two, the footing changed from ankle-deep sludge to spongy but firm moss. By some unspoken arrangement, the two women had grouped with Malt, leaving the rest of the men to huddle by the bole of a tree. Except Gilmore, who ate on the move, and couldn't keep still.

"A nut, that guy," Brand grunted, watching him. "Camera on the brain."

"He is a camera," Quarry said, mildly. "That's all he can think about. But he's no more a nut than Graves, or Cardan, or any of you. Just that his is a bit more obvious, that's all."

"You keep crossing me, mister," Downey warned, "and we'll have trouble. I don't like the way you talk. Calling me a nut . . ."

"All I meant was, your bug is 'authority'. You wouldn't be a lieutenant, otherwise. You believe that somebody should be 'in charge', take responsibility for the rest, give orders, and so-on."

"And you reckon that's all wrong?"

"Sometimes it is, sometimes it isn't. Me, I have all I can manage just to take responsibility for myself."

"Ah!" Downey got up, snorting in disgust. "That's double-talk, to me. Hey Dan!" he caught the ranging cameraman with a

gesture. "Let's you and me go put Graves away, while the ladies are eating . . ." and they went off into the gloom, to the float. Brand strained his eyes to follow, then swallowed the last mouthful of the pasty mass that had been a freeze-dried steak.

**D**ARK, all the time, except for these shining trees," he said. "Don't you ever see the sun, here?"

"I haven't seen the sun in four years."

"Doesn't the rotation make any difference?" Brand asked, groping for the ideas. "I mean . . . night and day, that kind of thing?" He shook his head as he looked around. "I don't know much about this kind of thing," he confessed. "The damned planet does turn, doesn't it?"

"The period is about nine and a half days," Quarry told him. "But it makes very little difference. The mist blanket is around one hundred fifty miles deep, and day or night is all about the same. There is something you ought to know, though. Wait, here comes Downey. He might as well hear it." The lieutenant came up, heavily, to slump by them, against the tree bole. Quarry unhooked the U.V. lamp from his belt, held it so they could see.

"I was telling Brand . . . we never get any sunlight here, but

this is the sun's little brother. Very good for the complexion. Ultra-violet."

"Who cares about getting sunburned, at a time like this?"

"I was talking about skin. Your skin, the outside layer, is dead. Did you know that? It's included in what I called 'organic waste'. So is hair." The two soldiers stared, uncomprehendingly. To Brand, Quarry said, "How long since you shaved?" and Brand automatically rubbed his chin. And again, slowly.

"No stubble," he said, amazedly. Downey caught his breath.

"You mean . . . we'll end up skinned raw, and bald?"

"No, not that bad. But you'll have a skin like a baby, you'll never need a shave, and you'll keep, if you're lucky, about two inches of hair. But you'll chafe easy, and that's where these lamps come in. Also handy for scaring off the wild life. They can't stand U.V."

"How many you got?" Downey demanded, quickly.

"Three, with this. And they're staying on top, on the float. One of these times, that truck is going down, to stay. I'm not leaving anything valuable on it, to get lost."

"Apart from me and Brand, eh?"

"We can all start walking, if you like," Quarry told him, flatly. He'd already thought up to this



point, and could see no alternative. He wondered, now, what Downey's reaction would be. The lieutenant was silent, frowning, looking blacker every minute. Then,

"Damn you. Damn this blasted planet, and everything that goes with it . . . every last, rotten, stinking, scummy, blasted inch of it . . ."

"Fine, if it makes you feel better. Now, what do you have, in the way of useful stuff that we don't want to lose?" Downey seemed to pull on some inner store of resolution.

"I guess you're right, at that. We have to be practical. All right. We have grub, in cases, and some water-bottles. We'll split them. Also, we have magnetic rifles, but they're powered from the truck generator . . . so there's no choice, there. Come on, sergeant . . ." and he stressed the word, meaningly, "we have work to do. And it's my turn to drive. All right?"

FIFTEEN minutes later, they were rolling again, but Brand sat by the hand-set, red-eyed and scowling. Ahead, the slim line disappeared into rainbow haze, and the float seemed to be riding in pearly radiance, diffused with ever-shifting hues. The curved slab was piled high with food packs and water-bottles. Gilmore had found, to his delight, that

his spare cameras had been loaded in the truck. Now he was working on his second.

"No animals?" he called, from where he was perched on the edge. "I want to get some shots of monsters . . . if there are any!"

"Touch wood," Quarry grinned. "The racket we're making is probably scaring them away . . . and that's all right with me, too." To Brand, he said, "Why don't you catch up a bit of sleep? I can hold on to the radio."

"Sleep, hell! That truck is grinding, already. Hear it? If he hits one or two more deep patches, he's really in trouble."

"What could you do, suppose something did happen?" Quarry asked, and Brand turned on him, savagely.

"There isn't a damn thing I could do, and I know it. But I'm going to be handy, when it happens, just the same."

Quarry abandoned the argument, resignedly, and leaned back against the curved rim of the float, surveying his companions. The human animal, he thought, is an unlovely sight, when its dignity is the kind that comes off with clothing. Malt, now, drowsing on the curved floor, leaning against Hector. Fat, flabby . . . and he looked undressed. This was God's handiwork, too? Hector, on the other hand, looked as natural, and com-

plete, as the magnificent animal he was. Maybe that was Man's mistake, in trying to be more than just an animal.

His eye roved to the two women, asleep and huddled together. He'd been all wrong about them. Miss Rogers was the weak one, leaning on routine, propped up by having someone else to serve. Nothing for herself.

**I**T MUST be daytime, now," Brand said, suddenly, and Quarry had to wrench his mind back to attend him. "This light, I mean. It's no good for seeing, but it's a sort of glow . . . so the sun must be up there, someplace."

"Doesn't follow," Quarry shook his head. "This is a kind of phosphorescence, just like the mushrooms back on earth. According to the educated guesses, the spore mist acts as a kind of light-energy transport system. The really fine dust ranges high, picks up a diluted form of direct sunlight. Makes them grow, and begin to clump. So they fall, as they grow, and the light-energy gets down here."

"But that wouldn't explain the trees, though. They don't reach clear up into the sunshine, do they?"

"Well, just like any other tree, they reach as high as they can, and they do get first crack at the transported energy. But the big-

brains reckon they have also developed some form of photo-multiplier effect. It's all guess-work, though. Just about everything carries its own lights, here . . . listen to that!"

A harsh, grating scream split the quiet drone, and the tow-line jerked violently, almost upsetting the float. Brand thumbed the hand-set, tensely.

"Something's fouled the line," he said. "Back up, and give us a light, quick." The motor noise died, and that grating scream came again. Then, out of the misty glow came the harsh white of the searchlight, swinging round. Miss Rogers screamed, and Quarry couldn't blame her. Just this side of the truck, they saw, dimly, a great greenish-black mass, heaving and bulging. Obviously, part of it had been crushed under the truck-treads, and the rest of it was objecting, blindly.

"It's a slug," Quarry said, and Brand swore.

"That size? Man, it must be all of twenty feet long, and as big as a horse . . ." but, as they stared, the near end drew out into a blunt head, sprouted a cluster of horns, each with its own glowing light. The green forest winked as it slewed that obscene head round, seeking to find what had attacked it. A great yellow cavern of a mouth opened, to give out that scream again. Gilmore

was over the side, and running, almost before the forward movement had stopped.

"Keep the light on it!" he yelled, and went down on a knee to aim his camera. Then he hopped up and shifted round, following the head, as it swung round in a loop and bent towards the truck. They could just see the hatch open, and the dark blob of Downey's head. Then a glint of light from his hands.

"Oh, the fool!" Quarry whispered, as he guessed that Downey was going to use a rifle on this. There was no sound from the weapon, but the splat-splat of the projectiles came plain enough, as they bit into that shapeless mass. Made of strain-steel, and designed to shatter on impact, they were tearing great chunks of blackish green meat from the slug. But, still screeching, it bore down on the truck, soggily, as unstoppable as a flood.

"Get back in there!" Brand yelled, craning over the side of the float, completely forgetting his radio. "Get that damned hatch down . . ." Just in time, Downey seemed to realize that he was achieving nothing, took the prudent course, and ducked down. They heard the click of the hatch, and the soggy slap of the slug as it spread itself over the hard metal, blanketing the searchlight. Visibility fell off to a yard or two.

"Now what?" Brand snarled. "I can't see a damned thing . . ."

"Stay with the radio." Quarry snapped. "Tell Downey to stay in there. Come on, Hector, and bring a lamp. We have to chase that thing away before it finds Gilmore." Keeping one hand on the line as a guide, he went, hastily, into the mist, with the stench of wounded slug coming strongly to his nostrils. Where the hell was Gilmore? Cautiously, guessing he must be near the truck, he flicked on the lamp. Here, in the mist, its violent glow shone bright, and his heart lifted up into his throat as he saw the dark bulk of the slug right over him, its cavernous mouth agape. With a sense of utter futility, he aimed the lamp square into that mouth, and it shut, with a squelch. Then the blackness of it cringed back, and he nerved himself to follow, although his legs felt like string.

SHOCKINGLY, the searchlight beam broke out again, stabbing through the mist, and Quarry saw that the slug had been on a blind run, straight back along the tow-line. Now it was twisting and curling away, off to one side, snorting. Over the sound of its breathing, Quarry heard the hatch click open again, and turned.

"Hold your fire, damn you."

he yelled. "You can't kill it . . . you're only making it mad . . ." but Downey was deaf. He cuddled the rifle to his cheek, and Quarry could hear the projectiles whistle. He turned again, just in time to get a flash of something pink, and running, and then the slug had engulfed it, and gone on, slithering, away into the haze. Quarry realized that his arm was aching, from the frantic grip on the lamp he held. Shivering, he forced his hand open, and turned to walk back to the truck. After a minute or two, Hector came up alongside, heavy-footed and grey faced. He swung a camera by a strap.

"I found Gilmore . . . all there was left of him." he said, thickly.

They went back to the float. Quarry faced the others, as if they were strangers, as if they didn't really exist. The way he was feeling, he was looking at dead people.

"Epitaph!" he said, putting the camera down, gently, along with the rest. "I don't think there's anything else worth saying."

**T**HEY rolled on in defeated silence, the mist growing thicker every moment, until they could barely see across the float. It was almost the same as flying, Quarry mused. You had that sense of being all alone. But this was dif-

ferent, in that there were other people involved . . . useless, stupid, fanatical people . . . who kept right on clinging to their set ideas, even if they died for them.

"Lend a hand, here." Brand said, suddenly. "I'm going to haul in. About time we stopped for another bite. My turn to drive, too."

"I'm surprised that truck has kept going so long." Quarry commented, laying hold on the line. "We must have come all of thirty miles. It's a record, if that means anything, under the circumstances."

"This is no time for wit." Brand growled, heaving away. Hector moved up, to lend his weight.

"The mist is a bit thinner, looks like." he said, and Quarry looked around.

"Seems that way. We could be running into another patch of trees. If we have any luck at all, we might find some fruit. Make a change from that mush in the packs. Tell Downey to keep on going a bit, see if we come up with some trees."

"All right," the sergeant nodded, spoke into the handset, and they began sliding forward again. Quarry kept his hand on the bight of line they had taken round the stub of plastic, kept his eyes forward. But his thoughts were on Taliaferro.

What was it M'Grath had said? 'Jut-busted, pseudo-Italian whore.' But Graves had said 'always so pure and remote.' How could anybody know *what* another person was? And this was a damned fool thing to do, anyway. Andrew Quarry, the nobody, attracted to, even falling for Maria Taliaferro, the great star. Only, she didn't look like a star, at the moment. Downey was lean, and his shirt didn't even begin to cover her, even if she had tried to fasten it, which she hadn't. Jut-busted she was, for sure, but it was genuine flesh, not just blubber. One way and another, she seemed to be a pretty genuine sort of person. And he laughed, wondering how much of that opinion was due to these fantastic circumstances. He felt that she was looking at him, glanced down, and she was.

"Just thinking," he said, softly, noticing, now, that she had a trick of lifting one eyebrow higher than the other. It gave her a rakish look. He wondered if she knew that she was going to lose almost all her eyebrows, soon, along with most her yellow locks.

"Thinking? About me, maybe?"

"As a matter of fact, yes." he decided on the frank admission. Why not?

"You make it sound as if it should not be. But it will be good for you, yes? To think about

somebody else, for a change?" Her voice was enigmatically calm. He wondered just what the devil she was getting at. Then Malt put in his timid yet eager voice.

"The mist is thinning again." he said.

There was a strained quiet, and, ahead, the mist rolled back, until they were into a cathedral-like glade of great towering holes, of all colors, glowing silently like pillars of light.

Downey came walking back. "Nicest place we've found, yet." he called. "If it wasn't for the damned heat, it would be pleasant. Know what, I bet an artist would go mad, trying to paint this lot."

"How are the motors?" Quarry asked, as they squatted to rip open some foodpacks and add water.

"Not too good." Downey's grin was forced, now. "I reckon the bearings are beginning to fall. But we'll keep on for a bit yet, all the same. The power-unit packs enough push to drive the damn things even if the bearings go to mush."

They picked out a tree to squat by, and Quarry explained, briefly, while they ate, about the need for ultra-violet treatment. The two women hadn't heard it, and he was only too uncomfortably aware of several painful chafes of his own. Both Maria and Miss

Rogers felt of their hair, ruefully, when he assured them they would lose it.

"Always I have objected to this." Maria declared, wryly. "Anything else . . . I do, and agree, for the picture. But never will I cut my hair. Now . . ." and she shrugged as she reached for the lamp he held out to her, ". . . it will grow again, someday. Come, Nancy . . . we will go behind the tree . . . for privacy!"

**T**OUGH as leather, that dame." Downey muttered, as they passed out of sight. "Glamorous, all right, but I like 'em a bit more dependent, myself." Which was all in keeping with his 'authoritarian' slant, Quarry thought. But the lieutenant had something else on his mind. "While the ladies are out of it," he said, lowering his voice, "just how do you rate our chances, Quarry?"

"Zero!" Quarry said, laconically. "We're living on borrowed time."

"That's a hell of a note!" Brand sneered. "We're not dead yet!" Quarry eyed him, curiously. This was the thick-headed kind, that didn't have imagination enough to recognize an unpleasant fact when it came up.

"You're entitled to your opinion. But we ran out of 'yet' some time ago. Because of the truck,

we're some thirty miles closer to the end, is all."

Just then the air was filled with a full-lunged scream, insensate in its frenzied violence. They all came up standing, as if electrified. Quarry felt the short hairs lift on his neck as that raving scream came again and again. He felt for his lamp, and remembered that the women had it.

Then Nancy Rogers came reeling round the bole of the tree, her hands to her head, her whole body wrenching to the screams which came with throw-away madness. And her head was a mass of sparkling, glittering fire. Quarry half-stepped towards her, then swung to make for the float: Over his shoulder, he called,

"Knock her down. Gently, but knock her down . . ."

By the time he had scooped up another lamp, and got back to the trees, her screams had stopped, and Hector was standing over her, clenching his fist.

"Try to get her hands clear." Quarry instructed, as he aimed the lamp. "It's all right, I know what I'm doing. These things are a sort of cross between a stag-beetle and a dragon-fly. Thing is, they bite like hell, and they go for anything moving, so everybody keep dead still as soon as they start to move." Under the invisible beam the cluster of

glowing insects flared brightly. In seconds, they had lifted from her hair like a cloud of flame, and went buzzing off. After a tense wait, Quarry relaxed.

"Turn her over," he said, "just to make sure . . ."

"Is she all right?" It was Maria. Quarry looked up, then got from his knees, heavily, looking at her.

"She'll be all right, I think. What happened to you?" He tried to keep his voice level, but she must have felt the unspoken accusation in it.

"Nancy was using the lamp, on me." she said, steadily. "Then she screamed. She threw the lamp away . . . clutching her head . . . so I went to look for it. It is here, see?" and she held it out to him. "I thought it was the more important . . .?"

"I'm sorry . . . for what I was thinking." he mumbled. She gave him a big smile, that made him feel dizzy. Or it might have been the sudden excitement, and the shock. Miss Rogers stirred, and gave a low moan.

"Help her back to the float" he said. "It's time we got moving again." Sergeant Brand made for the truck, before Downey could object, and soon they heard the roar as the motors ran up. On the float, Downey took up the handset, angrily, thumbed it, but Brand was before him.

"The gyro-point has folded."

he said, and Quarry grunted as he heard it.

"We'll have to con him, that's all. My 'point' is still O.K. Look, give me the talker, and you stretch out, get some sleep. You and Brand are the only ones who can drive that damned thing, so you've got to keep fit, as far as you can. I can steer him.

THEY rolled on, Quarry squatting by the tow-line, watching the 'point', as the float slid and heaved over the squishy surface. Despite the multicolored trees, the truck was out of sight, ahead. The longer this grove stretches, he thought, the better for us. But there were losses, too, in that they had to follow a twisting course to dodge the trees that were in the way. The 'point' needles wavered and swung, hypnotically, and he squeezed his eyes tight, to fight off the urge to sleep. The ever-present heat was a drain, on anyone's vitality, even in the best of circumstances. The least effort was hard work.

"You're a bit out to the left." he said into the set. "Pick a right-hand turn, next chance you get."

"Wilco!" Brand's voice came back, amid the crackle, which, like his voice, was getting steadily fainter. "Looks like a bit of clearing ahead . . . sort of pond, far as I can see. Should have a

free choice, there, if it isn't too deep. On the edge, now" and Quarry squinted ahead. Soon he caught the faint glint of light from a rippling surface. There was no sign of the truck, at all. Only the taut line, cleaving the water.

"Some pond," he breathed, as his eye failed to see the far shore. "Might as well be an ocean." He checked the 'point' and they were dead on course. The plastic float ducked and sent up a fount of warm water as they skidded over the edge and righted. Downey came awake, suddenly, looked round.

"A lake!" he said, and Quarry chuckled.

"That's an advance on your partner. He called it a pond. It can't be all that big, though. We must be within thirty miles or so of Prime Base, and there isn't any very large body of water that close. Trouble is, anything looks a lot, when you can't see more than thirty feet."

"Hey, Brand. Steve!" Downey had taken the handset. "How are the seals, down there?" The answer, if any, was drowned in crackle. Downey shook the set, put it to his mouth . . . and the front of the float dropped, with breath-catching abruptness. Quarry felt himself lifted and thrown forward, gasped as he went into the water, and lashed out, frantically, for the surface.

By sheer chance, his fingers met the tow-line. He clutched it, sliding his grip until it came to the slip-hitch he himself had made, against just such a chance as this. Caught up in the same knot was his precious 'point'. He grabbed the instrument, jerked on the knot, and felt the line whip away through his fingers. Then, with bursting lungs, he kicked for the surface. And kicked . . . until his consciousness hovered on the thundering edge of red haze. After what seemed for evermore, he broke surface, sucked in a breath that scorched his throat, and strangled on a mouthful of water. What with the 'point' and the U.V. lamp at his waist, he had to struggle just to keep his nose out. Something would have to go. Thrashing round, he spotted the float, bobbing, and kicked out for it. Reaching it, he went right under as he lifted the instrument clear, felt it roll over the edge. Surfacing again, he took hold, held on, fought for breath.

Then, spurred by thoughts of what might be lurking in the water, he made an almighty effort, and dragged himself up, out and fell over the edge, into safety. For a painful few moments, he coughed, and spat water, and wondered, miserably, if anything was worth this much trouble. A glance showed that the float, now a raft, had been swept clean.



Then he saw finger-tips clutching the far edge, and crept across, gingerly, to look. It was Malt.

"Help!" he choked, "I can't swim. Help!" Quarry dragged in a deep breath, sprawled himself out flat, leaned over, took hold, and heaved.

"Lie flat, and keep still!" he gasped, as Malt collapsed into the middle of the raft. "I don't fancy another ducking in that." He raised his head as he heard a powerful thrashing coming towards the float. Friend or foe? Then he saw that it was Hector, with something in tow. Shifting on his knees, he called guidance, reached out to help. Seconds later Nancy Rogers sprawled alongside Malt, oozing water from nose and mouth. Quarry gave Malt a non-too-gentle nudge.

"Don't just lie there, man. Do something for her. Turn her over on her face, and squeeze. How about you, Hector?"

"I'm all right," Hector grunted, sliding himself over the edge. But Quarry had spotted the black thing stuck to his shoulder.

"Hold it, right there," he said, crisply, unhooking the lamp from his waist. The worm squirmed, snapped its tail, and then dropped free. Quarry snatched it, as one grabs a hot coal, and sent it over the side. "No, hold still," he repeated, as

Hector went to flex his arm. With hard fingers he probed the area of the bite, but it felt soft enough, and the blood flowed freely. "I think it's O.K. Can't feel any head in there, anyway. Now, what about the rest of them?" and they both turned to scan the dark surface of the water.

WHAT happened, anyway?" Hector murmured. "I was asleep . . . then I was in the water . . . how did it happen?" "The truck went down a hole, I reckon. Dragged us under. I managed to free the line, else this float would be down there, too. See anything?"

"Over there . . ." Hector pointed, and went straight into the water, like a fish, before Quarry had seen. Then he saw a limp, pink something, spread-eagled, and Hector's bow-wave sweeping up to it, then sweeping back. Quarry knelt, reaching. It was Maria, and frighteningly still. Inboard, Quarry saw there was a bruise on her forehead, but she was breathing strongly, and began to struggle as they laid her down.

"No more worms on me," Hector panted. "Better check her over, while I look out for the others . . . for Downey, anyway . . ." Quarry knelt, as Maria began to sit up.

"Hold still," he ordered.

"You've had a crack on the head . . . but can you feel any discomfort anywhere else?" She lay still, her green eyes wide, then she winced, and made it into a smile, stiffly.

"Look for yourself," she said, and wriggled over on her face. "Is not ladylike to talk about such things . . ." but he had seen already, and was in no mood to think about lady-like behavior, or otherwise. Three worms were at work on her, and he swung the lamp to shrivel them. Two in the small of her back snapped their tails and fell free. He swept them into the water with a quick hand, the while he kept the lamp steady on the third, which was fastened into the soft flesh of her buttock. "This might hurt a bit," he warned, digging his fingers into her back. As with Hector, the wounds were soft, and bleeding. But the third clung defiantly, even though its tail withered and shrivelled. Quarry set his teeth. He pressed his finger-tips hard either side of that black head, and the blood welled up, so that his grip slipped, and Maria winced.

"That hurts," she said, angrily. "What's the game, eh?"

"It's going to hurt a damn sight more, honey, if I don't get that head out of there." He caught a side-glance of Malt's face, close and staring. "Here!" he said, roughly, "hold this,

shine it on here." To Maria, he said, "Hold on to your dignity, now, because this is going to hurt like hell." Wiping the blood away from the rounded flesh, so that he could get a clear view, he put his face down, his mouth to the wound, and dug his teeth in. He could feel her snap taut, but she held still, and silent. It was an odd sensation, but, within seconds, he could feel a hard lump, like a nut. Clenching his teeth on it, he dragged back. And it came free. Instantly, he lifted his face, and spat the offending thing into the water. Then, with his mouth open, he turned to Malt, shut his eyes, and gestured.

"That was a hell of a thing to do," Hector breathed. "You might have got a bite in the lip, or swallowed the damn thing!"

"Didn't, anyway," Quarry grunted, wiping the blood from his face. "All right, honey, you can come back to normal now," and he slapped Maria, gently, in the most handy place. "It's all over." She turned over, gingerly, and sat, hunched on one side, staring at him with a strange look on her face. Then her lip trembled, and she put a hand to her face.

"It is not enough to say thank you," she whispered. "But what else can I say? And you understand, I could never tell anybody about this, could I?"

"A secret, between us," he grinned, and was pleased to see a smile come back to her face. This girl had courage of a kind he had never seen before. There was nothing blind, or ignorant, or fanatic, about it, but sheer inner strength.

I WONDER where Downey is?" Hector growled, daring to stand up on the uneasy foothold. The answer came with shocking certainty. From out there, in the gloom, came the harsh, awkward scream of a man angry, agonized, and frightened, all at once. Hector bent his knees to dive, and Quarry gripped his ankle.

"Don't be a damned fool, man. That was all of twenty feet away, and look!" he cast the beam of the lamp over the water, and it came alive with little pinpoint glows of eyes, snapping and darting. "You left a trail of blood for them. You'd be eaten alive in the first ten feet . . ."

"But we can't just sit here . . ." Hector snarled, and stopped, as a sudden muttering rumble hushed his words. Everything seemed to slow down. Quarry had the dream-like sense that time had stopped in its tracks. The rippling water bulged up, glassily smooth, then sagged back into a hollow. Then it leaped into the air in a spout, massively, slowly, hugely . . .

and out of the spout came a single slam of noise that hit like a blow, stunning his eardrums. On the instant, he fell flat, grabbing the edge of the float, throwing the other arm across Maria, his only coherent thought a hope that they would not have to go into that water, again.

A great wave took the piece of plastic, threw it high, slapped it down in the water again with a smash, and rolled on, leaving them bobbing and swaying, stunned and staring at each other.

"I'm beginning to feel like you," Hector mumbled, shaking his head as if to get out the ringing noises. "Cardan was the lucky one, to get it over with. We can't take much more."

"The Lord giveth, the Lord taketh away," Malt said, numbly. "Good Lord, deliver us, if it be Thy will . . ." Quarry got up to his knees, shakily, and realized that he had been squashing himself on the hard metal of the 'point'. And it was still functioning. Mockingly. As if saying 'I'm willing, if you are'. Maria lay still, only her eyes moving. Beside her, Nancy Rogers had relapsed into unconsciousness. What now, he thought, helplessly, what now?

Brand and Downey were gone, that was certain. The truck must have flooded, or collapsed, under the weight of water. And the ex-

plosion would have ended Downey, even if he hadn't been as good as dead, anyway. So they were adrift, in the middle of a lake, without anything at all. His mind kept circling back to the explosion, fumbling and falling over it. Explosion. Shock. Shock-wave. He stirred, crept to the edge of the float, peered at the water. Then he went to nudge Hector.

"Check me," he muttered, "but I'd say that shock killed or stunned just about everything that swims in this water . . ."

"That figures," Hector nodded, dully, then his face livened. And then dulled again. Quarry swallowed, tried to think over the ringing in his ears.

"You reckon, if we got over the side and pushed, we could beach this thing, and get ashore, on our feet?" Hector looked at him, and frowned.

"It's worth a try." He got to his feet, but Quarry halted him, went to kneel by Maria. She sat up, wide-eyed.

"Take the 'point', here, he said. "Keep the two needles on the center-line, like this." He moved it, felt her shoulder warm against his arm as he swung it round. "That way, see? Now, me and Hector will get in the water and push. You guide us. Sing out if we get off the line. All right?" He left her, crawled across to Hector, indicated the

direction, and they slid over the side together.

The water was warm, and thick with slimy things, so that his flesh cringed, but he set his teeth, began to kick out. By his side, Hector did the same.

YOU feel so much as a nibble," he puffed. "You shout, good and loud, and get out, fast." He blew, put his head under, and kicked, pushing with his arms. He swam, and swam, lifting for breath and ducking under, until the whole world shrank to the narrow confines of warm water, spray in his nose, and the hard edge of plastic pressing against his hands. Everything else became darkness, and the soul-consuming ache, and urge, to let go, to slide, and fall, into restful quiet. It would be so pleasant, just to give up. Then, out of the warm velvet blackness a sharp, knife-like pain struck into the calf of his leg. Fine time to get a cramp, he thought, wearily. Then his clouded senses sharpened into anxious life, and he threw his head up, slapped an urgent hand on Hector's shoulder.

"Out!" he gasped. "Out, quick! I'm bit. The holiday is over!" he dragged himself on to his stomach, looked back. Hector stared, dull-eyed. "Come on! he put a crackling edge on his voice. "Get moving, damn you!" Sob-

bing for breath, he slithered to safety, and got his fingers to the worm, while Hector levered himself, soggly, out of the water, and lay down, with a sigh. Quarry stared at him, knowing just how he felt. Then, making an effort, he got to his knees and crept to Maria.

"How did we do?" he croaked, and she pointed. There, ahead, just visible, were flickering glowing columns. fifteen yards, maybe . . . and they'd be safe! He re-read his own thoughts, and killed a threatening giggle. Safe! Still, it would be a shade better than being adrift on open water, to starve. Then he caught a glimpse of her arm. It was spotted with bright red scars. He caught her wrist, looked at the other arm, which cradled the 'point'. Same marks. He looked close, and they were little circles, oozing blood.

"How'd you get those?" he demanded, harshly. She hesitated, then,

"I was paddling. You know, like a dog. I wanted to help. They don't hurt much, and you can shake them off easily, if you're quick."

"That's just great," he groaned. "You idiot! Shake them off! D'you think they're all little ones? Where would you have been if you'd come across a big one, big enough to swallow your arm at a gulp, eh?"

"I was helping," she said, mutinously. "You were all the way in the water. Suppose a big one swallowed you?"

"That's a chance we had to take. Oh, what the hell . . . you did right, I suppose. Sorry. And it's an idea, too. We can all do it. Not you, though, not while you have that 'point'. You sit still. It's about time Malt earned his keep." He dragged himself about the weary business of organizing their strength, he and Malt at either side, and Hector up front, and they leaned over, on the sharp edges, and paddled. Wearily, splashingly, but they moved. And they bumped, at long last, on something solid.

IT'S a rock, or root, or something," Quarry sighed, exhaustedly. "We can get off, anyway, if we're careful. And there are trees ahead. Ladies first . . . if you can slap some life into Miss Rogers. She'll have to make it on her own steam." He fretted as Maria worked on her dazed and shivering companion. Hector went first, carefully along the leathery bump, to stand and hold out a hand. Miss Rogers went on her knees. Maria followed, carrying the instrument, with Quarry holding his breath. Then Malt, also unashamedly crawling. Quarry went last, achingly aware of his unsteadiness, and knowing that the others felt the same.

They needed food and rest, above everything else, and the chances of either were very slim. He had a pack of vit-enz in either pocket; they had one U.V. lamp; and the 'point' . . . and that was all. He joined them, where they had huddled by the bole of a huge tree which gave off a hot orange glow. They were a sorry looking party. Even the mighty Hector was slumped, despondently, and Nancy Rogers seemed to be in a blank trance, just staring into nothingness. Quarry eyed her, uneasily. He had seen this kind of state once or twice before, among the men who came back from outbases. As M'Grath had said, you can push a person just so far, and then something has to break. M'Grath . . . Lord, how long ago and far away all that seemed, now.

"Soon as we've had a bit of a blow," he said, "we have to push on, and hope we find something to eat. The longer we go without, the less chance we have. Let's get moving. Maria, I'll take that 'point', if you like . . . ?"

"It is all right" she said. "It gives me something to think about."

"Just as you like, only don't lose it. Damned if I'd trust it to anybody else, that's for sure. Which way, now?" and he leaned over, as she steadied the instrument. Her hair was now in short damp curls, close to her head.

They brushed his face as he peered. "Got yourself a new hairstyle" he murmured. "It makes you look Greek. You should keep it like that."

"Is appropriate" she smiled. "My mother was Greek."

THEY began to trudge, he and Maria abreast, Malt leading Miss Rogers, and Hector plodding heavily in the rear. Underfoot, the top layer was wet, spongy moss, for an inch or so, but firm enough, below that. By degrees, Quarry felt his way into a dragging step that minimized the wrenching slips, and spurred himself to look about for a certain type of tree-bush. He would know it, if he saw it, but it didn't glow, and was well-nigh indescribable to the others. Ahead, the colorful gloom stretched on into dim distance.

"It's as if the Earth-type apple, pear and plum had all got together and co-operated to fight the fungus" he said, trying to explain. "Queer-looking thing, mushy, and no great size, but all right to eat."

"There are no native fruits, then?"

"Not that anybody has found. You see, the fungus makes it almost impossible for anything to grow a skin, or rind. How are the bites?"

"They are comfortable," she said, thoughtfully. "This is a

strange, and a wonderful place, in some ways. Even the heat . . . is not too bad, for me. I like the heat." He snorted, and she heard it. "Why did you do that?"

"You broke another illusion," he said, grinning. "I've been thinking of you as tough, and with plenty of guts, because you're still pretty chipper, when the rest of us are just about dead on our feet. Now it turns out that you just like the heat!"

"I'm sorry," she said, meekly. "You are thinking about me quite a lot . . ."

"I have all sorts of other things to think about, too, not nearly so nice. Hold still a minute . . ." he caught her arm. "Listen . . ." and they heard the far-off splash of falling water. He swung his head, to line it up. "It's a bit off course . . . but if that's a water-tree, it's worth it. Come on!" he waved the rest of them to follow.

The tree stood all alone, close by a narrow neck of the still water, and the sound of splashing grew loud as they came near. Now Quarry realized how thirsty he was, how the constant heat was robbing them all of water, even though they were greasy with sweat all the time.

"Drink all you can ho'd," he advised. "It may be a long time to the next," and he set them an example by standing under the water and letting it soak him, in-

side and out. Just that, by itself, was refreshing. His mind began to stretch and work, again. Maria, coming close in the spray, looked at him.

"You are worried," she said, positively. "Always worried, but more than usual, now. There is some trouble, maybe?"

"You have sharp eyes," he said, and stooped to kick off his shorts. Then, squatting, he set about trying to tear the rugged material into strips. "To make a carrier for the 'point'" he explained. "A pity you girls got rid of those shirts you had. Would have been handy."

"You evade," she said, opening her mouth to the water, and blowing it in a thin stream. "There is something wrong, yes?"

"All right. It's like this. We must be within twenty-five miles or so of Prime Base. Must be. And I don't recall any big body of water, not this big, or yet any grove of trees . . . not this close."

"But you said no-one had been more than five miles . . . ?"

"On foot, sure. But we've done a lot of aerial survey. An echo can tell the difference between water, rock, and trees. Of course, we might have missed this bit. It's possible." She took another mouthful of water. Then, "Why is there no rock surface, like on Earth? No mountains . . . ?"

"You're not thinking, now," he told her. "Look, even on Earth, you find moss and lichen, even flowers, right up into the zones where it's too cold for anything to grow, almost. Here, there isn't any cold, at all, and the air is full of life, of micro-organisms that can eat just about anything. There is one kind of rocky outcrop that is almost proof against the fungus, but it's rare. A sort of glassy stuff, like obsidian. There's one big slab of it right over the polar point, and that's why Prime Base is built there, as a matter of fact. Pure luck . . ."

**S**TOP! "Quarry, look out!" the frantic cry came from Malt. Quarry snapped erect, staring. Nancy Rogers was about to leap at him like a cat. He had a flashing glimpse of splayed fingers, and her twisted, snarling face.

"You . . . !" she said, harshly. "You got us into this, didn't you, you . . ." and she recited his past, present and future in language he would have sworn she didn't know. He backed off, his whole body ready to duck and run. What the devil did you do with a mad woman? He caught a glimpse of Malt, and Hector coming up on the other side. They looked as helpless as he felt.

"Murderer!" she screeched, making a threatening swipe with her claws. "You're only half a man. There's only one good man

out of the pack of you . . ." and she rolled her eyes aside, to Malt, who cringed. With startling suddenness, she broke her crouch and ran for Malt. Quarry snatched for her, too late, and stumbled. When he could see again, she was away, running like a deer, and Malt fairly flying in terror in front of her. Quarry groaned.

"Come on . . ." he waved Hector, "we've got to catch them, before we all get lost." He began to run, with Hector pounding heavily beside him. "Watch your footing. Stay in their tracks. Damn fool trick . . . running . . . in this . . ." he panted. From ahead, from the wavering pink shadow that was Nancy Rogers, there came a wild cackle of laughter, and then a sudden wavering scream. Quarry felt the underfoot give way, so that he was ankle deep, and then up to his knees, and he slowed to a stop. Now he could see Miss Rogers, up to her waist, still struggling forward, paying no heed to Malt, now. He was over to her right, and also waist deep, but struggling to turn back. Making a snap decision, Quarry threw himself flat on his face in the ooze and paddled, strongly, towards Malt.

"Don't fight it," he called. "Lie down. Try to float. Spread your load." He slid forward, feeling the slime creep up over his shoul-



ders. Malt was still flapping, trying to turn, and sinking deeper all the time. Quarry raised his head. "Lie down, you damned fool!" he yelled, and shoved forward again. He reached and touched something which flailed and then fastened on to his wrist. Hanging on, he tried to back up, and his head went under. Ooze surged up over his shoulders, into his ears, and he fought, frantically, to get his head out, to get a breath. That clutch on his wrist was like a vise, and a dead weight. Heaving, he got his head free for a moment, spat and sucked in a huge breath, then, as he kicked back, he went under again. Warm sludge enfolded him, clinging and holding. Lights flashed in his head as his breath began to burn in his throat. Slime crept up his nostrils, nibbled at his tight-pressed lips. And he could hold on no longer. A strangling fire seared his throat. Then merciful darkness.

**H**E WOKE to water splashing in his face and a foul taste in his mouth. He coughed, painfully, and moved his head, to realize it was resting on something warm and soft.

"Lie still, now," Maria said, gently. "You had a close call."

"Thought I'd had it, altogether," he choked. "What happened . . . the others?"

"You keep still," she repeated, and he realized his head was resting on her lap. "The padre will be all right, soon. When he comes round. You had him in a death-grip. We could hardly separate you."

"We?"

"Hector and me. I managed to grab your ankles . . . and he held mine . . . and, anyway, you're all right, now."

"And Miss Rogers?"

"She wanted to die, that one, I think. We couldn't get anywhere near her, in time. Poor girl. Possibly, it was better, like that. She was . . . not right in the head, at the last. She was singing . . ." he could hear the ragged edge in her voice, and knew that she was fighting a strain.

"M'Grath told me a bit about that kind of thing," he muttered. "Pavlov did the original experiments on it, I gather. You can stress an organism just so far, and then it goes into a blank area, as if all the learning, the conditioning, was washed out."

He rolled his head aside, out of the spray, opened his eyes, and sat up, with an effort that made him groan. "Where's the 'point'?" he asked, and she put a hand to her side.

"I have it, all safe."

**H**E SAT, sagging, then fought his way to his feet. Off to

one side, Hector was working on Malt. He looked up, grinned, and sat back on his haunches.

"He'll be all right, in a while. Not as bad as you. He never went under, at all. But you . . . brother, were you full of mud! All right, now?"

"You could call it that." Quarry tried to copy the grin, but his face wouldn't stretch to it. He felt empty, unsteady, and raw all over. But he could still stand. He even managed to lend a hand to drag Malt clear of the rain-fall, up to a firm slope, where they could look down, in the colorful gloom, to the water-tree and the neck of quiet water. Maria, squatting by the three men, was busy with the rags of his shorts, twisting them into a single strand. She had managed to keep the waist-band intact, joining the pockets. Now she was securing the 'point' by one pocket, and the lamp by the other. What a woman, he thought! Steel-wire and leather, all through. Plus looks, and a shape. How the hell had anyone as fine as this managed to drift into the phoney world of T.V. fakery?

"There!" she said, making the last knot. "It is not elegant, but it will serve. Who will wear it, eh?"

"We'll take turns," Quarry said, and looked at her with admiration.

Malt gave a sigh that was al-

most a sob. He tried to sit up, but Quarry pushed him back.

"Just lie still," he said. "Take it easy." Malt sagged back, and lay still. Quarry looked around at the pseudo-peaceful scene, and sighed. Then, forcing a briskness he didn't feel, he tapped Hector on the arm.

"I'm as empty as a drum," he said, "And you must be the same. We'd better scout round for something to eat. This is a likely place for fruit."

"Both of us?" Hector queried, and Quarry nodded his appreciation.

"That's all right. Maria can look after herself every bit as well as we can. And we can use the noise of the water as a homing guide. You go that way, I'll go this. Never mind the big trees, the shining ones. Keep an eye out for something small and twisted, about so high. If there's any fruit on it, it will be grey colored, and sticky on the outside . . ."

He set off, until the splashing was barely audible, then cast in a great circle, stumbling among the tree-boles, slithering on treacherous mud-patches, and found nothing. He kept on, desperately, feeling his energy draining away, and his legs shivering with the effort to keep on. At last, feeling sure he'd completed a semi-circle, and still empty-handed, he put his face to

the water-noise, and began shambling back. And then he found what he'd been looking for. A whole clump of twisted, gnarled bushes, huddling round the base of a huge column that blazed green fire. The thumb-thick branches were sticky with sap, and bent under the weight of their fruit. Repellent grey, it was, and shaped like a nightmare version of a pear, but dripping with juice. Even though he knew they were edible and pleasant, he had to force himself to pull one. It squished in his hand, and the juice dribbled over his chin as he bit into it. But it was good, and not too unlike the pear it resembled, in taste.

He spat out the stone in the middle, pulled another, and his stomach growled. Then, taking a bearing on the water-noise, he set off at a shambling trot.

**A**LL at once a huge note, throbbingly powerful, like the boom of a mighty organ pipe, struck his ear, and he skidded to an unbelieving stop. From dead ahead, from what he'd been thinking of as 'camp' . . . but what? Like nothing he'd ever heard, or heard of, it reverberated through the columnar trees, steady and clear. He picked up his feet and ran. The great tone cut off, and came again on a higher pitch. Then he heard, over it, the stomach-catching

shrillness of Maria's scream, and he flung himself into a gallop. Breaking from the gloom at the top of the slope, he went slithering down, peering.

Malt sat quite still, just beyond the edge of the water-spray, like a wax image. Maria had backed away, up the slope. Both were staring, fixedly, at what had come up out of the narrow arm of water. Quarry felt sick as he saw it. Huge, yellowish-pink, heaving and shapeless, with stringy tendrils radiating in all directions from the central, surging, soggy mass. A jelly-fish, he thought, and then, as he came closer, he saw that it had a hide, that the tendrils slithered in and out through slits, that it had a ring of mouths, opening and shutting at random around the mid-way jump that was its body. And this was what was making the organ note.

Maria heard him come slithering down the slope. She turned and ran to him, blindly, holding out her arms. He grabbed her, tight, staring over her heaving shoulder. The thing came on, steadily, and Malt just sat there, paralyzed.

**G**IMME that lamp," he choked. "I never saw anything like this before, but I have to try to stop it," and he went down the slope, fearfully, clutching the lamp, sweat running into his eyes

as that great tone thundered. Behind him, Maria screamed again, and the beast stopped its note. Mouths opened and shut, sickeningly, and then it gave off a scream . . . the exact copy of Maria's voice, but much stronger. Quarry clung to his slipping sanity, and aimed the lamp, as he came up to Malt's shoulder. The thing was less than a yard away, its lamp-eyed tendrils questing towards the two men. The scream cut off, and it began to pipe a series of notes, up and down the frequency range, as if seeking something.

"Snap out of it!" Quarry grated, giving Malt a nudge, and holding the lamp steady on the advancing bulk. He caught his breath as the padre's body fell, sideways, lifelessly, and sprawled. He stooped to take hold, and the creature suddenly lurched forward, all of a mass, the leading tendrils grabbing Malt's body. Quarry fell back, scrambling to get to his feet, lifting the lamp and thumbing it. But the thing took no notice, at all. Even the little glowing eyes at its tendril-tips didn't glow any brighter. Horrified, Quarry turned the lamp on his own face, and realized that it was burned out. Useless.

He tossed it away, and crouched, impotently, striving to think what to do next. The thing could move quickly, when it

wanted to. That 'singing' . . . as if it was trying to talk to him. Waiting for him to run, maybe. Then it would jump him, the way it had jumped Malt. There was no sign of him, now. Maybe he'd been already dead, of fright. Better, that way. And it kept right on coming, slowly, sounding off piping . . .

From his back there burst a clear soprano note, strong and full-throated, leaping up the scale with confident bravura. Then it went into an aria, strong and melodic. Part of his mind independently identified the melody. 'Cara nomé . . .' he thought, and wondered, while the rest of him, helplessly, watched the weird beast suddenly halt, its tendrils falling slack and still, its many mouths opening and closing as it strove to match that cascade of sound. Maria sang on, firm and defiant, pouring her all into the leaping trills and flourishes of the aria, while the grotesque jelly-like thing lost its yellow tinge and flushed an angry red. Frustration, Quarry thought, his mind reeling with the insane idea. But it seemed to be the answer, for all that.

Flaring bright red, and awkward in its haste, the thing gathered itself and retreated, down the slope, leaving a trail of glowing slime, and into the water. Quarry sagged to the ground right where he stood, and gasped

with the reaction. Then, lifting his head, as Maria stopped singing, he turned, to see her kneeling, her face in her hands, and Hector come running from the trees. Quarry got up, and staggered back to her, where she crouched, silently. Hector came tramping up.

"What happened?" he panted. "I got lost, back there. Then I heard that booming noise. Couldn't make out what it was. Then Maria, singing, and I headed for that, quick. What was it, and where's the padre?"

"A jelly-fish came up out of the water, and frightened him to death." Quarry could hear the quaver in his own voice. "It's the truth. Then Maria sang to it, and it went away. That's what I saw, and I don't give a damn if you don't believe it. I can hardly believe it, myself. A syren luring lesser creatures into its maw. But it met its match, this time." Hector looked at him, shook his head, and sighed.

"This is a queer place, all right. Did you find anything to eat?"

"Good for you," Quarry grunted. "You keep your mind on the main track, all the time, don't you? What we need, right now. Yes, I found a bush, back that way. Come on, let's eat . . ." and he stooped to nudge Maria, gently. She got up without a word, and they went back to the fruit.

YOU sure these are all right to eat?" Hector demanded, looking at the repulsive mass in his hand. But he changed his attitude when he'd had a taste. With the first mouthful, and the pleasure of swallowing, they lost their reluctance and ate, ravenously, careless of the juice which dribbled over their hands and faces.

"Better . . ." Hector said, at last, sighing and leaning back on the moss. "I feel a bit more human, now. Pity we can't take some of this with us."

"I suggest," Quarry said, studying the 'point', and frowning at the way the two needles were sticking, "that we rest here awhile. Drink, eat, and get some sleep, in relays, and then push on. It's all we can do."

"You reckon we have a chance, at all?"

"I told you, before, we never did have a chance, right from the word go. We've been lucky, this far, believe me!" Maria lifted her head, at that.

"I don't understand what you mean," she said. "This is lucky?"

"We crashed, and only Cardan was killed. Graves injured. We had a truck that kept going a lot longer than we had any right to expect. We have a guide, a pointer. We've found water, twice, and food. We've only met a few predators, and one lot of insects. And we've had trees most of the way.

That, for this place, is luck. In the first two years of Prime Base, eighteen first-class men went out scouting, just round the base, and never came back. And nobody knows what happened to them. Why d'you think Richter didn't want you on his conscience? This is no place for people, and never will be."

"It's tough, all right," Hector nodded, then, with a glance down, he raised a big hand to his lips, and gestured. Maria had sagged, and was now curled up, with her head on one arm, fast asleep. "You'd better do the same," the big man said, quietly. "I'll go wash and drink, and be right back. You curl up."

"All right," Quarry stretched himself out. "Don't take any fool chances, now. At the first sign of drowsiness, you call me."

HE HAD no idea how long he slept, but he was stiff, aching, and hoarse, when Hector shook him. Maria's arm lay warmly across his chest, and he moved it gently, as he sat up, and stretched, looked round.

"Nothing new," Hector yawned. "A few noises. Sounded like somebody singing, a long way off, one time." Quarry yawned in his turn.

"Could have been our jelly-fish friend come back. I'll go get a splash, and then you stretch out."

Ten minutes later, Hector was breathing heavily, while Quarry squatted, sucking on one of the fruits, and thinking. It was crazy, how it had all worked out. No rhyme or reason to it, that he could see. After a while, he heard Maria shift and stir. She sat up, shivering, despite the sheen of sweat on her skin.

"It is real, after all," she whispered. "I thought, maybe it is all a bad dream, but no. They are all gone. Only we three are left."

"I was thinking about that," he murmured. "If I'd been asked to guess who was the most likely to make out, I'd never have picked us. Well, Hector, maybe, but not you, or me. You, a woman . . . pampered, famous . . . above the rough stuff. Me, a nobody. The others . . . they'd all done this kind of thing before. I'd have picked them to pull through, if anybody. It doesn't make sense . . . there's no point to it, this way." She sat, cuddling her knees, thinking. Then,

"I think it does make a sense, of a kind. You said it, yourself, about being committed to something to the point where it kills you. The others were like that. They were living *for* something, for some idea, some reason . . . but not for themselves. Not just for living, for itself. You see?"

"That makes sense, in a way," he agreed, grudgingly, "but . . ."

"Why are you so unwilling?"

she asked, softly. "You don't want to accept your own values. Why is that?"

"I suppose it's because I've always run into the other kind. I've never met anybody who thinks the way I do, so, naturally, that makes me wrong. Doesn't it? I mean, only a crazy man would think that *he* was right, and everybody else was wrong. Wouldn't he?" She nodded her head, crooking it to one side, then got up, went to the bush and pulled a fruit for herself, and one for him.

"It is not quite an apple," she said, handing it to him, "and I am not Eve, but I ask you. Forget the 'right' and the 'wrong'. You do what is right for you. It may be all wrong for other people . . . but you are not other people. You are you. And I don't even know your name . . . Mr. Quarry."

"Call me Andy," he said. "I never thought of it that way. I've always gone my own road. Kid-ded myself it took a certain amount of courage to do just that, too. But I never really believed in myself, not the way you mean. Just thought I was queer, that's all. But, if it comes to being genuine, why aren't you a singer. You have a wonderful voice!"

I HAVE a voice. I have had training, even. But it is not

wonderful. I went to drama school. I can act. But that is not wonderful, either. Just so-so . . . what they call 'not bad'. But I have a shape, ah! That is good. It makes the men drool. For this, I can get big money. For singing, a pittance. So I sell my outside, for men to look at, to drool over, for women to go green. I get good money. My singing, that is for me, inside. That I do not sell."

"They drool, all right," Quarry grinned. "I've seen 'em. I've seen all your tapes. But, like we were saying, isn't that the easy way out?"

"You think it is easy, to prostitute myself, to pretend? I make movements, faces, suggestions, and I shrink, inside. It is not easy, never to be able to talk to anyone, not even another woman, the way I am talking to you, now. You do not drool. You talk to me as if I was another man, I think. That is why I said . . . I like you, Andy," and she put a hand on his arm. He looked down at her hand, at the strong fingers. Then, to her face.

"You start that kind of thing," he warned, gruffly, "and I'm likely to start drooling, just like all the rest."

"But no!" she laughed. "Not like them. You warn me, first. You play fair, according to rules."

He stood up and stretched.

"It's about time we got moving." Then laughed and added, "anything to get off this dangerous topic."

Maria woke Hector while Quarry picked up the 'point' and shook it. The needles were stuck. He tapped it, turned it, and they came free, momentarily. He turned, carefully, got an angle. He pointed, and they began to move, in a steady trudge.

"Use your eyes all you can," he advised. "This thing is just about done for, and we may have to go on sheer judgement. So long as the trees hang out, we can sight a track, after a fashion."

**A**FTER a dragging, wearying hour of trudging, in the slithering mud, there were signs of the mist. It grew thicker, until they could barely make out the tree-boles as they came to them. Quarry called a halt.

"Been trying to save you from this," he muttered, "but the 'point' has been dead for some time, now. All we know is, we're headed the right way, as of now. But we can't see a thing for this damned rainbow soup."

"So what can we do?" Maria asked, quietly.

"Keep on going, is all. Hector, you're left-handed, aren't you?"

"That's right. Why?"

"Because a man walks in a circle, when he's walking blind.

But if we spread out, you on one side, me on the other, Maria in the middle it ought to compensate for it, a bit. We can't afford to miss a thing, now."

They went on, wearily, with Maria singing, softly, in the middle. It was an eerie, desolate sensation, staggering on into hot wet mist, of all colors, over slimy wet sponge, with strange boomings and pipings on all sides, with Maria nothing more than a voice and a dim shadow, to his right, and nobody knew what, everywhere else. Delirium must be like this, he thought, lifting each foot as if it was a weight, putting it forward with effort, dragging the other one, until the very act of walking became a life in itself, and balance was a meaningless, senseless thing. Time came to a stop, and the universe was nothing more than wet, hot fog.

Until, suddenly, the glowing mist in front of him went dark, and then as black as night. He stopped, stood swaying, rubbing his eyes. Then, cautiously, he went forward, with his hands out, to reach and touch a smooth, glass-hard wall of rock. He called out.

"Me, too!" Maria called back. From further away, Hector announced that he'd found the wall, also. They came together. A wall. A cliff?

"Now what?" Hector sham-



bled into view, and leaned against the blackness. Around them, unseen blue things piped and fluted. Quarry put his back to the wall and slid down to sit. The other two copied him.

"This . . ." he said, "is good, and bad, at the same time. This is, for sure, the edge of the rock outcrop that Prime Base is built on. Can't be anything else. It's a rough circle, and it's no more than nine miles across, at its biggest. Prime is bang in the middle, and is all of half-a-mile radius. So we're closer than we thought, and all we have to do is get up there, and we're home."

"Sure, but how?" Hector sighed. "This is like glass. We haven't got sticky feet."

"That's the bad part, all right. All we can do is feel our way along, and hope there's a break, or ledges, or something. Come on . . ." and he led off, with one hand stretched out to the wall. His foot caught in something, and he kicked it away.

Then his sluggish wits did a double-take, and he halted, went back, calling a warning to others. It couldn't have been a creeper, or a root, not here. He found it again, and it was what he'd thought. A line. The twin of the one that had gone down with the truck. He saw Maria, dimly.

CATCH hold of this," he said, "while I reef in the slack.

Unless I'm crazy, this is, or was, somebody's life-line." The end he was hauling on came taut, angling up into the darkness. "That's what I thought," he muttered. "Try the other end . . ." and a coil grew at his feet as he heaved it in. There was something, not very heavy, on the end. "Better not look," he advised Maria. "Lord knows how long this has been here." The "thing" proved to be a pair of shorts, thick-grown with moss. He freed the line from the bel straps, and picked at the unpleasant relic with unwilling fingers, but there was no mark to indicate previous ownership.

"We'll never know who he was," he said, grimly, "but he's given us our lift. The other end of the line is still fast. We ought to be able to go up." The songpipers had stilled their calling, some time ago. Maria looked down at the line, and shivered.

"I wonder what happened to him?"

"That's something else we'll never know," Quarry muttered. Hector came near.

"Let me go up," he said. "I reckon I can climb that, and I can haul you up, if there's anything like a ledge, up there."

"All right," Quarry agreed. "Sure is more in your line than mine. But don't take any chances." Hector grinned, rubbed his hands together, and took a trip

on the line, yanking it hard. It held firm. Shifting his grip, he moved in to the wall, put his foot up, and leaned back. Steadily, hand over hand, he began to walk up. Quarry, steadying the dangling end, watched him, and his arms ached in sympathy. Muscles or not, Hector couldn't keep that up for long, not after what they had been through. The line jumped and swayed, all there was to show that the big man was still going. At a guess, he must have gone twenty feet up by the time the line stilled and went slack.

"All right?" Quarry called, anxiously.

"Fine!" came the call from above. "A ledge . . . sort of cave . . . tell Maria to catch hold, and I'll hoist!"

"You heard what the man said." Quarry turned to her, gathering up the slack. "Hold still a moment, and I'll sling you a bight to sit in." He fashioned the tie, showed her how to sit in it, and jerked the line, as a signal.

"Haul away!" he called, and watched her go up, jerkily, kicking at the wall with her feet. Then, about a foot beyond his head, she stopped, swinging helplessly. Getting a breather, Quarry guessed. Then, with no warning at all, she fell, and Quarry barely had time to brace himself in a futile effort to break her

fall. Flat on the wet moss, with all the wind knocked out of him, he struggled to get up, to squirm free of her weight. By a lesser miracle, he hadn't broken anything.

"You hurt?" he gasped, getting to his knees and pawing through a tangle of line to touch her. She groaned, sat up, shook her head.

"I'm all right . . . I think . . ." she said. "What . . .?" and the question died in her throat as the air above them was rent by a harsh, scraping screech . . . like nothing he had ever heard before. The hairs prickled on his neck as he peered up. The screech came again, hoarse, like a nail on glass, setting his teeth on edge. Then a wild cry from Hector, and a grunt of effort, and the thrashing of a mighty struggle. Quarry got up, put his hand to the line, and Maria clutched his ankle.

"No, no!" she gasped. "You can't . . ."

"I can. I've got to. Hector's run into something, up there. He's in trouble . . ." he kicked her hand away, gripped the line, and leaned back, testing his grip. As he did so, there was a despairing shout, the line was wrenched from his grasp and a scrambling mass fell heavily, soddenly, into the moss, right in front of his face. He staggered back a step, then forward, took a

look, and his stomach heaved. By his side, Maria screamed, bit her hand and screamed again. Ignoring her, and fighting to keep his last meal down, Quarry snatched at a loop of line, wielded it like a whip, and slashed, viciously, at the grey-white, many legged thing that was wrapped, snake-like, round Hector's limp body. The fall had burst it, crippled it, but its ropy limbs were still writhing, reaching, even as it bled stinking green ichor. Quarry slashed at it, retching and sweating, flailing it with the line until there was nothing left to writhe, nothing but a mass of torn and oozing pulp.

THEN he knelt, took Hector's arm, to lift and drag him clear of the evil-smelling mass. He saw that Hector was still gripping, in each hand, a snake-like tentacle. They had been ripped bodily from the carcass. But that fall had done its work. There was a dark stain at the corner of Hector's mouth as he tried to grin, to talk.

"Only one . . ." he gasped. "A cave . . . came out and tried to drag me . . . in there. . . all right, now . . . tell Maria . . . sorry . . ." but he was never to say what he had to be sorry about. Quarry knelt quite still, and there were unashamed tears in his eyes. He knuckled them

away, roughly, head bowed.

"You're not half as sorry as I am, big man," he whispered. The others had been just names and faces, but he'd grown to know and like Hector. A real person, just as Maria had said, and in the same sense. He got up, slowly, touched her on the arm, and she raised her face, sadly.

"He was a good man," she said, simply. "I never knew him to do harm to anybody. A good man." Quarry knew how she felt. He gathered the down-hanging line, tugged it, and it was still fast. If Hector was right, and there had been only one of those many-headed snake-things, their way was clear. If not . . . well, there was only one way to find out. He gripped the rope, took a deep breath.

"I'm going up," he said, and she stared, wild-eyed.

"You can't . . . you can't leave me here, all alone . . . with that?"

"I've got to," he said, flatly. "It's the only way. Come on, honey, get a grip on yourself. There isn't much more. Nearly home. Try, now?" She seemed dazed, staring at him. He let go the line, went to her, put out his hand, and she took it. All at once, she was clinging close to him, like a child seeking shelter. He held her, gently, stroking her short hair with a clumsy hand. "It's going to be all right," he

promised. "I can get as far as that ledge . . . and then you sit in the loop, the way you did before, and I'll pull you up. That's all. Now, you take the end of the line. That way, you'll feel me on the other end." He coaxed her to take the line. Then, again, he took a grip, put his foot to the wall as Hector had done, and began to walk up. It was even harder than he had thought, and the line kept trying to slip through his fingers as he reached for each hold. Cramp struck at his forearms as he gripped and heaved and heaved, and made the ledge with nothing to spare. He fell on to it, heavily, catching a blurred glimpse of the cave. If there'd been another of the snake-things in there, he couldn't have lifted a finger to save himself.

LONG before he wanted to, he got to his knees, crept back to the edge, and called down, tugging on the line. He caught her answer, very faint, and held on. Then she called again, and he began to pull in, until her weight came full on the line. Then, with bursting lungs and string-weak arms, he realized he wasn't going to be able to lift her. Casting round, desperately, he saw the spike of rock that the line was anchored to, and fell on his knees beside it. Hauling taut again, he looped the slack round it, pulled tight, and reached down for a

grip. Heaving like mad, he managed to get it to come up, and to take up the new slack. He did it again, and the rock bit into his knees. Again, gaining inches only, but gaining. And again. And just once more. He kept promising himself that 'just once more' until the white of her upturned face showed out of the mist, so that he could reach her hand, and give one last tendon-cracking heave. And she fell in a heap beside him. Then he rolled over on his back, and gave way to breathing, as if it was the only thing left in life. His arms were afire, and he couldn't feel his fingers, at all. He heard her get up, and move away. Then she came back.

"Andy," she said, wearily. "We're not home yet."

"Huh?" he grunted, levering himself up on an elbow. "What d'you mean?"

"There's more cliff. Look!" and he rolled over to look. The black went up still higher. He stared at it, bitterly. Then, getting to his knees, he eyed it again. It seemed to be less black, somehow, up high. He labored to his feet, and shambled over, close, to lean on it and look up.

"The line!" he said, stretching out his hand, and she put the end of the line in his fingers. Fumblingly, like a sleep-walker, he dragged out a loop, and cast it up, over his head. It stayed up

for awhile, sliding back slowly, then all of a rush. "Edge . . . about ten feet up . . . maybe a shade more," he mumbled. "Might as well be ten thousand, with nothing to hook on to." He let the line fall, and slid to a sitting position, with his back to the wall. And sat there. This, for sure, was the end of the road. After all they'd come through. But that ten-foot height was just too much. She came and sat beside him, silently.

"Well, we nearly made it," he said, as lightly as he could. "Nearly proved me wrong, that time." She put her hand on his knee, gripped it. Her fingers were surprisingly strong.

"You have lost your strength, now," she said, softly, "or you would not say that. You were strong when I was weak. Now, is my turn. We will find a way up. Somehow. Rest for a while. But don't give up, ever!"

HE SAT still, watching the fantastic forms of his imagination in the curling mist, and grinning, wryly, at the mocking fate that had brought him to this pass. Women had never been much in his life. It was funny that he was going to snuff out, at last, along with the only woman he had ever met that he could really admire. Death, of itself, wasn't anything to be scared of. It had to come, sometime. But

what a damned silly, pointless way to die. And it was even worse, for her.

"But what fools!" she said, suddenly, lifting her head from where it had been on his shoulder. "Ten feet only! You can stand on my shoulders, Andy. I am strong enough for that, surely?"

"And then what?" he asked, grimly. "I couldn't haul you up, not again. I don't know how the hell I managed that last time, but I certainly couldn't do it again. And there'd be nothing to hang on to, if it is the top. Just moss."

"It would be worth a try. At least . . . one of us would get up."

"You're right!" he said, suddenly interested. "One of us can make it, and that one will be you. You on my shoulders!"

"But no!" she protested, at once. "Never. I will not go, and leave you. In any case, I could not pull myself up, not from just the fingers. I have a strong hand and grip, truly. But not these arms. I will not do it. Never!"

"You're talking like a fool," he said, flatly. "You on my shoulders, and you're away. Safe. That's only right. Who cares about me?"

"I do!" she said, at once, and he caught her hand, angrily.

"Don't say that. You don't want any part of me. I'm not

your sort. I'm a loner. I don't go with other people, ever."

"Now you talk like a fool!" she snapped. "I will not go, and leave you. There must be another way. For both of us. Or nothing!" and she snapped her jaw on the last word, like a trap. He groaned. Damn crazy female. But just what he would have expected, at that. He had to find some way to persuade her.

"Listen to me!" she said, suddenly. "I think of something."

"Like what?"

"I climb on your shoulders, yes? I get hold of the edge. I have strong fingers. Then . . . you climb up, over me, to the top, and then pull me up. Now?"

"You must be raving mad!" he said, weakly. "I couldn't do that."

"Why not? You think I cannot hold on? I have held on to the things I value, all my life . . . with these . . ." and she spread her hands out, then took his wrist, and gripped, hard. "With this hand . . . I pulled you from the bog, Andy, by the heels." He clutched at his wits, desperately. It was insane, but it might work. It might fail, too, and that would be the end of both of them. A fall, on to this rock. It was too big a chance.

**I** COULDN'T do it," he said, again. "I couldn't get a grip, anyway. You're as naked as a baby, and greasy with sweat. I

couldn't do it." She snorted, and got up, went to the line which lay in great loops.

"Help me to make a harness, of this," she ordered. "Then you will be able to climb, yes?" He looked up at her, and saw the light in her eyes. "Andy . . ." she said, very softly, "I mean this. I will not go, without you, anywhere!" He got up, unsteadily, and caught at the line. She stood quite still, while he fumbled to make some sort of secure tie that would not cut her shoulders too much. At last he had it as best he could manage.

"Stiffen yourself," he warned. "I'm going to bear down," and he put his weight on the loops. She winced, but stood firm. "All right, that's the best I can do. I still don't like this crazy scheme, but you seem hell-bent on it. Ready?" "Yes, I am ready."

He went to the wall, put his back to it, made a cup of his hands, and waited for her. She came close, ignoring his hands, and put her lips to his, swiftly. Then her foot went into his palms and she went up, her knees brushing his ears. He shifted his feet, trying to balance.

"A bit higher," she called, and his arms creaked as he lifted her. Up to his chest, he could manage, and there he stuck. Taking a deep breath, and sinking his knees a bit, he surged up and got his hands up to his head.

"I can feel a ledge," she called, as the pulse hammered in his ears. "Can you go along a bit . . . to my right . . . a bit more . . . ?" he shifted his feet, heavily, feeling the muscles of his back beginning to complain. Then, suddenly, her weight was gone, and he almost fell. "Now . . . quickly!" she called.

He turned, put his face to the wall, took a deep breath, and reached up, past her toes, to her ankles. He felt her legs stiffen, and press tight together. On his toes, he reached higher, to grip just below her knees. Then, willing himself to pull out everything he had left, he took a firm hold, and heaved. It had to be all in one smooth motion.

He slid face downwards on the soft moss. Quick as a flash, he rolled over, lay flat, and reached for her arms, recklessly squandering the last dregs of his strength. The next moment, she

was sprawling on the moss beside him.

"That was . . . a good grip . . ." he panted, and she chuckled, breathlessly.

"I get what I want . . . and I don't let go, ever," she said.

"I still think you're crazy," he muttered. "I don't make promises, and I can't abide strings."

"I know," she said, softly. "I was only trying to frighten you. A joke. I don't want you, with strings, Andy, but just as you are. Like a partnership?"

"You mean that?"

"I mean just that, yes. I wouldn't want you, tied up, like I am, now, but free. And I would be free, too, yes?" He got to his knees, and began unfastening the line. She lay quite still, watching him, until he was done.

"That's it, then," he said, and stood up, holding a hand to help her. "It's all uphill, from here. We can't miss." **THE END**