



Robert W.
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Editor

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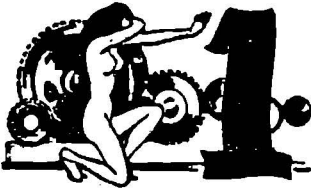


Mars raised the atom gun and blasted
Lieutenant Sloan. Fumes of cooked
flesh choked the other Earthmen.

QUEST OF THE QUEEN

By ROSS LINDEN

Chris Lane could not help but think of the strange, caterpillar-like creature that emerged from the egg that came from the void as female, and as a "queen". A romantic notion, as Chris was the first to admit—but even in his wildest dreams, he never suspected how right he was!



CHRIS LANE wriggled in a massive structure which supported him in sitting position, feeling its every dimension expand or

contract to fit his body as it moved. In a manner inconsequentially miraculous he lit a cigarette scarcely differing from those smoked by his ancestors a thousand years before his birth.

At forty Chris was as happy a youngster as Earth could show; he had work he loved passionately, and at least another two hundred years to perfect himself in it. Perhaps five

FEATURE NOVEL OF WORLDS BEYOND

hundred. Genius was perpetually astray in a science quite alien to his own seeking to prolong his useful existence indefinitely. While wishing them well in their endeavors, he gave little thought to that aspect of the future. He had his dreams, but the present eminently sufficed Chris Lane, assistant taxonomical biologist of the Earth year 2919.

He looked fondly over a vast enclosure which, in the absence of Doctor Jon Cutter, he controlled absolutely. A report of things seen from a passing space patrol had taken the impetuous doctor on a tour of personal inspection. Creatures, it was thought, very similar to the prehistoric serpent lizards of Earth.

So, master for a month, Chris looked about his indoor zoo, his acres of vats, cages, tanks and flying fields, with a thousand machines for controlling humidity, air pressure and density, for manufacturing, mixing and altering strange gases and liquids. In other words, for maintaining environments suitable to specimens captured throughout the Planets and beyond. Many, he thought, might well have been captured and materialized from the dreams of a dipsomaniac.

But Chris loved them all, however horrible, and attended to their needs more assiduously than to his own.

A screen lit behind his desk. A face appeared. "Got something for Doc Cutter," it announced.

"Bring it up," Chris said, and the face vanished. Somewhere he had seen

those rugged features, but in his memory no name attached to them.

They came, surmounting a tall, stocky body, and Chris shook hands with Captain Ivan Blore, of the I.S.P. Behind the captain two men staggered a little as they brought in an object. They set it down, with patent relief, and it rolled a bit, coming to rest against the desk. Blore covered a smile with his hairy paw as he watched the young scientist.

"But—but, Captain," Chris said. "Haven't you come to the wrong department? What could we do with that?"

Blore conquered the smile. "I took it to Carlson, over at metallurgy," he explained. "Carlson says it's alive, and told me to bring it here."

"Nonsense!" Chris said strongly. But he put hands on the object, and it turned on the insulated floor. It was much like a gyroscope, a toy of former centuries. A dozen hoops intersected at opposite axes. A double-dozen arms extended inwardly from the hoops, each tipped with a reflexed bearing surface. And each of the bearing surfaces impinged upon a ball somewhat smaller than the head of a man. The entire structure was of a metal strange to Chris, who was no expert in metals. Carlson would say—would not hesitate to say—that he was an ignoramus in such matters.

"About as alive as my desk," Chris observed, without emphasis; "just a minute, Captain."

He pushed a button that caused

No one, as yet has completely analyzed and dissected the human emotion which we call "love", in its most fully-expressed forms. Some science-fiction authors, notably, Dr. E. E. Smith, believe that should humans encounter alien beings, friendship might be possible, but it would be a long time before humans could actually "like" the other-worlders. Other science-fiction authors, notably C. L. Moore, consider the possibility of "love" transcending such matters as the form and shape of the loved one. It's good for an all-night argument almost any time, since there's no evidence either way; meanwhile, the Moore theory allows for more story-possibilities.

Carlson to appear on the screen, framed by a nebulous background of moving machinery. The Doctor of Metallurgy looked at the zoologist and grinned widely, saying nothing.

"I have your package, Doctor," Chris said.

"I can see it."

"A practical joke, no doubt."

The grin on the screen expanded. "You people want everything that's alive, don't you?"

"You claim there is life in this thing? In that central ball?"

"So my tests indicate. Try it yourself."

"We're not too well equipped for that. However." Chris took a plastoid case from a nearby cabinet, and a coil of coated wire equipped with a hydra-headed mass of assorted plugs, and two elastic bands pimpled with sockets. He placed a band about his head and ears, the other about the mysterious ball. He plugged into sockets in both hands and in the case.

A PALE GREEN light glowed and faded, glowed again and faded, at ten-second intervals. The incredulity on the young scientist's face changed to eager interest; he altered one of the plugs and, at another tiny window in the case, a needle danced in a red light, fluttered within fixed bounds.

"By Heaven," Chris breathed. "I believe it is!" He removed the apparatus and stared.

"Well, get going," Carlson told him, from the screen. "Take what you want; Captain Blore is waiting to bring the rest back to me."

"Yes?" Chris murmured. "Oh," he added, coming back to reality. "Yes, Doctor. I'll clip some of these arms, and keep the ball."

"I'm a busy man," Carlson said, "but I'll take the time to watch you." He grinned again.

Chris bore down with a pair of heavy metal shears; they failed to make a scratch. Whistling under his breath, he and one of the men rolled the strange contraption to a machine attached to power shears, used for

trimming thick cage supports. The machine groaned as it failed to cut through a rod scarcely bigger than a man's thumb. Chris stopped whistling under his breath; he applied a saw-blade which had never failed yet, and watched it slide upon the rod screeching in protest. Then Chris turned to the highly-amused face on the screen. "What kind of metal can this be?" he demanded.

"No metal at all."

"Nonsense," Chris said, for the second time.

"That stuff is cellulose. Wood. Plant fibre. Impregnated with some unknown element, then transformed by a mysterious process into an uncanny material harder and tougher than any metal in my department. Or in the universe, so far as I know. Do I express myself with clarity?"

"You sound delirious," Chris retorted. "What in the world am I supposed to do now?"

Carlson chuckled. "There's a man on his way," he said. "A torch will do it. We've nicked it a little, as you no doubt failed to observe. I just wanted to see you suffer with that—that supermetal. Ain't it wonderful, Chris?"

"I'll have to see it, first; must be a spore of some sort."

"No, no! That frame, I mean. That—new impervium. What the devil do I care about the handful of maggots inside?"

"Stuff for more machines. Haven't we enough?"

"Monsters and diseases and parasites. Ain't you ever satisfied?"

Both laughed, as a man entered trundling a burning machine bristling with accessory gadgets.

"I see Bill has arrived. He'll divide what is yours from what is mine. Captain Blore?"

"Yes, Doctor."

"Lane will take care of his ball. The rest must return to me safely. This is vital, Captain."

"I understand, Doctor."

AN ION-KNIFE, in general appearance rather like a glass-cutter but

capable of generating intense heat that penetrated but the fraction of a millimeter, in time cut through the ball from space. From a packing of stiff insulation Chris reverently removed what was indubitably an egg. Judged from the standpoint of size, a turkey might have laid it; from its color and texture, a mammoth turtle. To Doctor Carlson it would have been as unimportant as if it had come from either, but to Chris Lane the thing was unique and therefore infinitely precious.

He queried Blore until the worthy captain could no longer hide his impatience. He had been crossing the orbit of Venus, on his usual run, and it was his communications officer who had noticed the object amidst a cloud of ordinary meteorites. It being part of his duties to act upon anything beyond the normal, he had been able with some difficulty to net the object. He had taken it to Doctor Carlson, and thence here. And what the hell? His bored countenance added.

No, he replied to an eager question, he had no idea where it could have come from. If a man made it, it was put there, of course. Dropped from a ship, presumably. To hatch in space? He wouldn't know. To reach another planet? How could it? Might it have come from Venus? Possibly. As yet there was no planet so thoroughly explored that almost anything couldn't secretly exist there. The captain regretted his stupidity but really, he insisted, he could be of no further help.



A new structure stood centrally in the experimental zoo. Its outer shell, of aluminum and laminated glass, could be entered only through an airlock. Six flexible tubes led through humidifiers and connected with six pressure tanks containing different gases. A young jacaranda tree perfumed the inner atmosphere. Water ran in a stream six feet long to a pool a yard across. Ferns and other semi-aquatic plants bordered the miniature

river and lake. The rest was sand and sandy loam, supporting plants adapted to the conditions Chris Lane had, after long thought, decided upon. But he was prepared to change every condition within two minutes or less.

A wooden pedestal, hollowed at the top, held the precious egg.

Adjoining the cage was a warehouse containing every food known to be eaten by any bird, anywhere. From the midst of a book-mountain, Chris had combed the known universe for a thousand exotic grains. A sample of each had been ground to flour and mixed with various nutritious liquids to a paste. His collection of eye-droppers and pipettes gleamed like the pipes of an organ.

Other shelves were a zoo in miniature. Meal-worms, hundreds of small caterpillars, earthworms — wrigglers from here and everywhere. Tanks of water from Earth and other places, both fresh and saline, pullulated with small life. Worms, larvae, crustaceae and fish.

Chris was ready for whatever might come from that egg—he thought. Doctor Cutter returned, noted all this with smiling approval, and busied himself with his new acquisitions. They did not include a dinosaur, but the beast was there. He had seen its spoor and he would go back anon and follow it—he and Chris Lane—and there would be adventure at its end. They worked, and waited.



MONTHS passed, delightfully as always. The egg now rested on a thin metallic cup, suitably connected to an indicator at eye-level behind Chris' desk. Foods were kept fresh by constant replacement, or by reproduction.

Weeks passed. Chris was drafting a detailed description of a new life-form. He had to invent a word or two to symbolize certain peculiarities not otherwise describable. He was so absorbed in the exacting task that he



stared for some time at a flickering light without realizing what he saw or what it meant.

"Good Lord!" he cried then, and left his chair, running. On his knees he watched the egg vibrate. It rolled slightly, made a quarter-turn. A gleaming ivory point thrust through the egg-covering. Chris, without moving, summoned three assistants to him. He looked frantically about for Jon Cutter, but his chief was not in sight.

The ivory rose and fell, moving like the blade of an antique can-opener. It cut a slit the length of the egg, while four men needlessly held their breaths. Within the chamber was a semi-vacuum—half an atmosphere, with oxygen at point thirty-five. Eight hands rested on as many valves, ready to take or give; four minds willed the unknown creature forth.

A greenish billiard ball emerged and rose a handsbreadth, and four expelled breaths whistled simultaneously. Their sudden shock lay not in what they saw but in its difference from what they were expecting. The ball was topped by two protuberances like incipient horns, russet-colored above and fading imperceptibly into the pale green of all the rest. The lower portion of the ball ended in a pair of mandibles, and the whole of it was supported by a round column thick as a hammer handle. A pair of short muscular legs gripped the edge of the divided egg and pulled, whereupon another three inches of column appeared and other

pairs of legs took hold. It left the shell to stretch its entire nine inches on the rim of the wooden basin.

"The King of the Caterpillars!" one assistant cried. And then he laughed. The other two joined him, laughing a trifle too loudly, perhaps.

"What sort of grain shall I feed it, Chris?" one asked.

"Or how about a fresh shrimp?"

But Chris stared, oblivious to his companions. He had seen caterpillars as large, or even a little larger, but this small monster was the veriest infant. Fresh from the egg. It would grow; Heavens, how it would grow!

"Find Doctor Cutter," he said without turning. The larva rested its head on the wood and a quivering ran its length. Chris watched with practised eye and slowly depressed his valve. Carbon dioxide began to increase the density of the chamber atmosphere. He exulted inwardly as he saw the quivering decrease, and gestured to the man beside him, who fed in nitrogen. When the gauge indicated a three-quarter atmosphere the quivering ceased. The worm lifted its head.

Lungs filled outside with a reversed whistle. "No," one murmured, "I don't believe *that*."

"What—what is it, Chris?"

Two unnoticed slits had opened and the larva, the lowly worm from outer space, was calmly regarding them with eyes which, small as they were, might have belonged to a spaniel. Brown, humid, intelligent. Intelligently curious. They seemed fixed, for the green head revolved like that of an owl as the creature looked intently at each of the three men.

"Get Doctor Cutter," Chris pleaded.

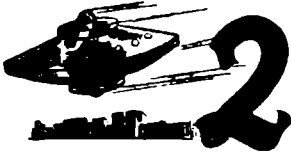
"He is coming," a voice answered beside him, and the previous messenger kneeled. He met the brown eyes behind the glass. He damned himself with quiet fervor. "What is it, Chris?" he also asked.

"I don't know."

"Is that all there is of it? Do you

think—? But, Chris! It is sure to metamorphose. What then? A moth with a brain?"

"I don't know," Chris repeated.



CH^{RIS} STOOD in the airlock crowded by sprays of leaves taken from every plant on the reservation. For an hour he endured considerable discomfort while the assistants played experimentally with their valves. At times the larva showed distress; at others an animation plainly abnormal; but finally they achieved an optimum of pressure, content and temperature endurable to Chris and obviously very satisfactory to the weird stranger.

Chris moved into the chamber and placed his collapsible stool near the pedestal. He was breathing deeply of the thin air and perspiring freely in its damp heat. A tropical jungle, at mid-day, in summer. Valuable data for his future guidance.

For a time it was like a game. One by one the caterpillar brushed leaf sprays with its head, then pushed them off the pedestal. It rejected them all and pushed aside mushrooms and other fungi with obvious annoyance. A botanist from the Planetary Gardens sat outside, keeping score; dozens of men scoured the countryside for new samples.

By nightfall the game had become a grim matter. Chris dismissed his aides after issuing crisp orders for action to commence with the dawn. He stood in the steaming chamber and looked down at the larva as any parent might at an ailing child. His right hand rested upon the edge of the pedestal. His left reached involuntarily to the creature, which closed its eyes. It trembled. Chris gently ran his finger tips down its silky length.

The eyes opened. The larva moved, gracefully flowing, to his right hand, and the formidable mandibles opened.

Though knowing he stood a good chance of having a finger mangled, he left the hand where it was.

"Meat?" he thought. "Could it be?" It was worth the chance to find out, immediately.

But the mandibles closed softly on a finger, nibbling too gently to cause a twinge. The round head turned and brown eyes looked up into his. With affection, he was willing to swear. "Why," he thought, "it would smile if it had a smiling sort of mouth."

Aloud he said, "Tomorrow, baby. There will be food if I must personally strip every leaf off the planet."



DOCTOR Jon Cutter in person woke Chris before dawn. His face was reddened, his eyes even brighter than usual. "Been up in the snow," he announced. "All night."

"You don't say. Why?"

"Getting grub for that worm of yours."

Chris felt a trace of inexplicable annoyance. "Well, Doctor," he said, "I wouldn't exactly call her a worm. It's—"

"Her?" Cutter's eyes widened with interest.

"Uh—er—yes, I think so."

"Why?"

Chris tried to pursue the impulse without success. "I really don't know; I haven't thought of it, and there is no reason."

"Of course there is. You're probably right. An aura of femininity has impressed you subconsciously. At your age, it would."

"Don't make me blush, Doctor."

"A scientist recoils from calling a worm a worm. It's fascinating; I wish I were a psychologist."

"Now, Doctor—"

Cutter laughed uproariously. "I know how you feel," he spluttered. "I had a dog once—long ago—who had more human decency in him than I ever had. I respected the nobility of that animal so much that often I was ashamed to look into those big

brown unreproachful eyes. How could he have such love for a being so demonstrably inferior?

"But a worm! Pardon—I mean a lady, in disguise." He laughed still louder, and ceased only when he saw Chris' face as it lifted when the shoes were tied.

"Sorry, Chris. Meanwhile she gets hungrier every minute, eh? I was thinking on it last evening. Our vegetation may be too tame—too much cultivated for too many generations. So I went to the wilderness up north for some wild specimens. Spruce, hemlock, yew, madrone, manzanita, myrtle, ferns—oh, plenty of specimens. You think?"

"At least I hope, Doctor; it was splendid of you to take so much trouble."

"I enjoyed it. Saw a moose. Ready?"



Two hours later, all of Cutter's northern delicacies had been tossed into the refuse bin, as Chris had expected. He sat on the bench, in the incubation chamber, perspiring from both heat and fear. The rarest zoological specimen on earth lay in its hollowed pedestal, eyes half-shut but watching Chris. He should have been incredulous but wasn't when he saw actual tears in those eyes so like a spaniel's. Nor was he surprised, or shamed, to find some blurring his own vision.

Jon Cutter approached. Chris wiped a sleeve across his face, to remove the perspiration, and joined the doctor outside.

"Malone is on his way, with books," Cutter said. "We must proceed with system. I have called Madras and Cape Town and Malaya and Sao Paulo—jungle country. Men are moving; you will continue with the calling. Malone and I will check off all North American plants, starting with Honduras and working north. Request flowers, if any are blooming.

Maybe she likes orchids or seaweed."

"We have not tried vegetables. Cabbage, turnips and carrots are on their way. Action, my boy, and omit nothing, however ridiculous. And cheer up; she can last several days yet."

"Thank you, Doctor; action is the word."

A stream of carts bore away tons of earth plants, smelled and rejected. Leaves and flowers and pods that Chris had never heard of, he accepted and then threw away. Plants with strange native names as well as the Latin nomenclature of the texts. He called out both names and Malone made proper notations. Grasses, succulents, gourds, cacti—they poured in from every transportation facility on the planet. All through that day, through the night, and until a gray dawn rose on gray, exhausted faces.

The caterpillar was weakening. With motions ever slower it continued to contact and refuse offering after offering. Chris reached without looking into the latest box and pulled out a small bundle of leafless stalks. Without looking, he reached them to the pedestal. They were snatched from his hand!

The sudden crunching was music in his ears. He tore away the label and set up a joyous shout. "Doctor Cutter! Malone! It's sugar cane! From New Orleans."

Not only the news but a televised vision of the caterpillar enjoying its first meal was flashed about the country. Congratulations poured in. All orders were cancelled except a standing one to Louisiana.

Chris stood and laughed shakily. He stroked a silken texture that trembled under his fingers. "See you later, baby," he said. "I need a drink and some sleep."

He extended his hand and felt a finger being gently nibbled.

CHRIS LANE was both lonely and ambitious. Not ambitious for personal wealth or for leisure or for the gratification of his vanity. No, it was the society of certain men he craved, the great scientific discoverers

of his day. Just to feel himself on terms of equality with Bailey, or Wren, or even Cartwright. Only to be among such men and listen to their words.

And so Chris studied incessantly, and was happy with his work and his vision. He lived alone so that no hour should be lost in social triviality. A century of solitary application was no large price if its reward should be the friendship of Wren, or possibly Bailey. Such had been his campaign for living.

But now had come a short-cut; fame might easily become a matter of months rather than decades. Pure luck had brought an unexampled opportunity: This remarkable caterpillar was his future.

He moved into the noisome universal zoo, bag and baggage, as the old saying went. He built a room around, enclosing the airlock so that no intruder could get to the incubation chamber without crossing his body, alive or dead. He kept climatic conditions in his own room similar to those in the chamber and, within the chamber itself, he installed his leisure chair and lamp, and stands for books. Young Carran Millert took over his outside duties. Chris Lane thenceforth had but one duty; to it he devoted twenty-four hours each day, sleeping only when his protege slept.

It was the nights that he came to love most. With all humans gone, other than an occasional patrol-guard; with all lights softened except the golden cone about his chair; with all sounds deadened, he could concentrate upon his sole surviving interest. He rested in his chair of a thousand adjustments, book open before his eyes, pipe generally in his mouth, recording stand at his right and a box of fresh sugar cane at his left.

His unscientific conviction that this larva was a female grew steadily stronger. A name came to his mind. Only one name, for he had given the matter no conscious thought. It merely seemed to him that his strange companion was a being called Myrna, and thenceforth she was Myrna to him and

he so addressed her. When there were no witnesses, of course.

MYRNA now occupied an adjustable table of ribbed plastoid fused to a mat of softest latex. Instead of the jacaranda, which had withered, a pepper tree thickly shaded half the table. Myrna lay in the shade, her glistening round head as close to Chris as conditions permitted, and periodically accepted a stalk of cane. From the gloom out-



side their intimate apartments came an unceasing murmur. Many of the inhabitants of the big room were nocturnal in their habits and, apparently, mournful in their feelings. They yearned aloud for strange environments on distant planets; it was the plaintive song of the captive, so familiar that Chris seldom heard it.

Like all lonely men he frequently talked aloud. He would vocally approve certain passages in his current book, or perhaps give the absent author thereof a spirited argument over statements he disbelieved. Or, at times, he would read aloud when the pages before him carried some special appeal. The not unusual habit led to a remarkable discovery.

Myrna attended every whisper he made; this became obvious almost at once. When he read in silence the sound of ivory jaws crunching cane was steady as the rush of surf across a beach. But if he uttered so much as a syllable the crushing sound ceased instantly and the gentle spaniel's eyes turned to his face. She was listening. After a few tests, Chris had no doubt of it; she not only heard, but was interested.

He experimented widely. Putting aside his weighty texts, with their uncommon vocabularies, he read aloud from daily journals and from fiction writings, not only in the modern style but from the distant past. It was the latter, plainly, that Myrna appreciated most. As a playful puppy might, she used her meager physical endowments to convince him, through wriggings and a variety of head movements.

As he realized that she had a choice, Chris was appalled at the implication involved. It was not his soothing voice that she enjoyed—certainly not that alone. She differentiated. She had an intellectual capacity for understanding. In other words—by the Lord of Creation!—she knew what he was reading.

He selected from a heap of ancient literature a tome entitled *To Have and To Hold*, by one Mary Johnston, and read slowly, his eye more often on Myrna than on the book. She was interested at once; she was even somewhat excited, if he was any judge of emotional exaltation. She crept along the table to its edge and extended half a foot of her length over it until her head brushed his sleeve. He imagined he saw apology and pleading in her eyes and could not manage to laugh, even inwardly, at the imagining. He stopped reading and waited. After a tense moment she placed her forward feet on his sleeve, watching him intently all the while, and moved forward until she lay along his forearm, her head on his wrist and her gaze fixed upon the book.

Chris resumed his reading, in a voice become rather muted, and saw from the slow swaying of her head that she was following the print as he translated it into sound. He did not believe this, but could not doubt that he saw it.

He rearranged their furniture. Myrna's table was provided with a slanting shelf five feet long. When she stretched upon it her head was close to his, beneath the lamp. She could move on the shelf until the distance suited her eyes. And Chris read aloud, through the long nights, from romances

out of a past age. Myrna was insatiable—so much so that Chris noted one day that her rate of growth, which had been extraordinary, was in a decline. Thereafter he insisted upon a meal, of sugar cane, after each chapter. He closed the book to enforce his decree, and Myrna dutifully ate. She was over two feet long and as large about as his arm.

“HOW IS the lady getting along?”
Jon Cutter asked, towards the end of July. With a grin, of course.

“Just fine.”

“I was admiring her graceful figure the other day. Rather like a stove-pipe, wouldn't you say?”

“Quite similar,” Chris agreed, flushing slightly.

“But, no doubt, that is not important; it's her spiritual qualities that attract you, eh?”

“Yes,” said Chris, turning away.

“I take it you are keeping full notes on the case?” Cutter said to the retreating back, and Chris paused.

“Naturally.”

“Keep your temper, my boy. The eyes of the scientific world are upon you, in a manner of speaking. You have a responsibility.”

“I know; I'm doing my best.” Chris smiled then. “Sorry to have seemed irritable, Doctor. I can't be scientific in this matter without appearing absurd. And neither can I explain that silly remark, nor can I show you my notes, as yet. I have your confidence, sir?”

“So long as the patient thrives, yes.”

“What will she become, Doctor?”

“Who can say?” Cutter gesticulated, not ungracefully. “I have a ten-foot mounting board ready.”

“You'd kill her?”

“What else? Can we let her destroy herself, beating at her cage? And how long does a butterfly live, in any case? Be realistic, my boy.”

“Yes,” Chris muttered. “Yes, that's right.”

He returned to Myrna, much depressed. As a moth or butterfly she would mate and die; without a mate, she would lay her infertile eggs—and die. Perhaps not in hours, or in a few days, but very swiftly. Every known fact indicated that. And yet—

How about instinct? Chris could not tell Doctor Cutter that Myrna read and enjoyed books. He might as well resign his position and future as to blab out anything so queer. Myrna, the huge worm, loved him, the bringer of food and knowledge, with a deeper love than any dog could know, because her intelligence was higher than that of any dog. Instinct?

Why, if her existence was to be so brief, would instinct either prompt or permit her to waste time learning matters which could not possibly effect that short tenure of life? Would instinct, or Nature, allow her to forget her food while her mind lived vicarious emotional experiences of a wholly alien animal form?

In short, why in the devil should Myrna, the worm, care in the slightest what became of a *human* heroine in an imaginary romance? It was ridiculous, but Myrna did care. Intensely. Well?

The conclusion was inescapable; but it was also unscientific. And it was personally disturbing—deeply so. No human worthy of the title could receive such devotion without returning it, in part. Or in its entirety, in his case. Life without Myrna would be a crippled thing to Chris Lane, the lonely ex-scientist. When they came with the chloroform for Myrna, they had better bring also gyves for his wrists and ankles. Strong ones.



BY THE end of August, Myrna was five feet long and a foot in diameter. Her reading

shelf had been braced to carry the weight. The habits of this weird pair of lovers had not changed, nor had Myrna's intellectual standards. Nothing Chris read or stated failed to draw her careful attention, but her preference for the romances of another day was so marked, her enjoyment of them so patently acute, that they became in time their sole entertainment, or occupation. Nor did she care for variety; over and over they would relive together the fancied histories of certain favorites, such as the deathless devotion of Captain Ralph Percy and his Jocelyn.

Chris experienced his metamorphosis first. Though he religiously kept account of all developments he became—and was well aware of it—daily less the scientist and more the decadent swashbuckler of an inferior era. He longed for the feel of Percy's sword in his own fist, and for enemies that he might smite with it; he yearned for physical danger, which existed today in no known spot. Weapons of the thirtieth century were so devastating that there could be no excuse for any human encountering an actual danger. And naturally no man ever thought of fighting his own species. Yet Chris Lane felt an atavistic, a really deplorable, desire to do just that. He loved his fellow creatures, as was only proper, but nevertheless he wanted to fight. To protect Myrna, of course.

From what? He snorted inwardly. From some hungry vulture? He was able to rationalize his mental retrogression. He did so, and still it grew within him. He wanted to encounter impossible antagonists. To struggle and fight and suffer—to love. What madness was this? He demanded in honest perplexity. Whence came it?

Myrna grew throughout September. She was six feet long and of an impressive girth. She devoured a large bale of cane every day, tirelessly chomping with mandibles which could have crushed a coconut. She ate even as he read her favorite books,

and woke during the day to eat again. Except when Chris spoke, her attention wandered. She became distraught, heedless of her surroundings. And at last a drowsiness overtook her, so persistent that the reading stopped perforce. She could not stay awake long enough to hear a paragraph; when she moved, which was seldom, she moved sluggishly and as if partially blind.

Chris was dismayed at these symptoms, but not surprised. He rearranged their furniture, taking out all his own paraphernalia and moving hers to a side of the chamber. He set up a strong steel post from which guy wires reached in all directions, like the web of some metal spider.



Rain drummed heavily on the lofty roof when Chris woke, the morning of the 4th October. Myrna lay upon the floor, her head against the steel post. Chris spoke to her. She lifted tired lids and looked long into his eyes. He nodded. It was the time; he needed no words to tell him that.

Proceeding almost without volition, he did a strange thing. It was an action unprecedented; an action which, for a scientist, bordered on the criminal. In taking it he forfeited his position, his entire future. By this deed he discarded the friends who actually were, or had been when he woke, dear to him. It was the quixotic action of a Ralph Percy—of that quaint variety of human once called a gentleman.

Chris Lane ordered up a screen impervious to light and caused it to be draped over the incubation chamber. He raised a similar screen between his sleeping compartment and its connecting airlock. And he placed himself before it, ready to interfere forcibly with whoever sought to lift either screen.

FROM A distance Jon Cutter took note of these proceedings. He started towards Chris, then turned back to his cubicle, there to ponder

at length. To devise an approach to the unheard-of. The doctor did not consider himself a sensitive man; he had put his instincts in their proper place a century and more ago. But now they spoke to him peremptorily, telling of unscientific matters. Whispering of elementals. He could see his good friend Chris Lane seated motionless over there but he sensed the presence of another. There was danger. Danger? Yes, it vibrated through and about him, promising violence. The doctor fought this invader.

It was not yet serious; he could summon the Academy, bring in experts from another science who could and would deal with the matter. It was his duty to do so. But the man over there was his friend, and till now his best assistant. Much too fine a mechanism to be obliterated while there was hope, however tenuous. Could he possibly deal with the crisis himself? He would try.

He carried a chair with him and sat on it a few feet from Chris Lane. He lit his pipe and puffed slowly, as if with customary pleasure in the mild vice.

He said, as he had said some months earlier, "The eyes of the scientific world are upon you."

"Yes," Chris agreed readily, without emotion.

"To my mind," Cutter mused, looking into his fuming pipe, "there can be no destiny higher than ours. No greater honor than lies in the faithful carrying out of our oath; no greater pleasure than the consciousness of a duty to the entire universe, meticulously performed."

"Yes," Chris said again.

"There is no fact too insignificant to be of importance to us. We face all facts, and seek to understand them in their entirety. The link between cause and its ultimate effect comprises an infinity of related atoms each carrying a minute obligation to every other atom; each effect being in itself a new cause. What you are now thinking will have

an ultimate effect upon the orbit of Saturn."

"Correct," Chris said tonelessly.

"Well?"

"Myrna is changing her personality; she wants to be alone."

Jon Cutter stared. He tried to speak but failed. Minutes passed before he said: "I see the effect, Chris. Tell me the causes."

Chris talked until midday. He dwelt at length upon the causes, both real and fancied, with a wealth of detail entirely unnecessary to his distinguished audience. But not once did Jon Cutter interrupt. Nor did he once indicate his reaction to the incredible tale. He listened. When, finally, Chris stopped his unscientific babble, Cutter spoke his mind. "I have given you three hours. Quite enough time for any lady to change her personality. In doing so I have broken my oath and incurred penalties that cannot be avoided. There is no way to explain to the Board, and I will not attempt it."

"You are a courageous man, Doctor."

"What has gone on behind that screen is probably of little importance; it is not for us to decide. My justification, to myself only, you understand, is that the possible salvation of Chris Lane outweighs the loss we have brought by failing to record a unique occurrence. I admit the reasoning is false. The occurrence was unique. You are not."

"True."

"Chris! Man, don't you realize I should have you obliterated for this?"

"Of course, Doctor."

"And yet—yet— Well, I apologize. You *are* unique. In five centuries of history there is no parallel to such behavior. To give up your life, not for a friend but only that a—a worm— can have privacy. Greater love hath no man, indeed. How can I consider you anything but insane?"

"I don't imagine you can, Doctor."

ated and studied," he muttered. "I believe I will. A plain case of possession. A throw-back of thirty centuries; you would have killed me if I had forced that screen?"

"I doubt it, Doctor. But I would have stopped you."

"H'mmm. Answer me this, Chris." Rapidly he asked a dozen questions wholly beyond the understanding of any person not versed in their own line of knowledge. Chris replied readily.

"Not insanity," Cutter decided. "There is another possibility. You have been exposed to this creature—of which we know nothing, remember—for a long time. Could she or it have exposed you to hypnotism of some sort? Could it be that her will is stronger than yours, so that you cannot be held personally responsible?"

"I'll wait before answering that one."

"I see. I see. But in case she should—no, I retract that. Chris, can you, will you, carry out your duties until the final emergence of this creature?"

"I can and will. Thank you, Doctor."

"I'll inform the Board that there will be only one official report, issued when all facts are known. We will try to deal with discrepancies at that time. And now, might we have a look?"

"I think so." Chris lifted a corner of the screen, then swept it aside. A large pouch of material like papyrus hung from the steel post, anchored to the guy wires, and to the ceiling and floor, by translucent cordage. It was in no way different, except in size, from any lepidopterous cocoon. Within it was life, changed and in the process of change.

"She has indeed changed her personality," Cutter said. "Now for a winter of work, Chris; she won't need you till spring."



But Chris needed her. Though he did his work, the doing of it was a constant strain. He longed for his ro-

CUTTER gnawed at the stem of his pipe. "I might have you incarcer-

mances but could not enjoy them alone. He slept fitfully, alert always for the call that never came. Did she sleep? Dream? Of him? At this instant she was changing, being transformed. To what? Could they again find food, for the new Myrna? Or would she step forth, flutter her wings, and die? Well, that was not the largest of his worries. So could he die, whenever he pleased.



As the winter crawled on Chris became increasingly aware that he had forfeited his future as a scientist. He no longer wanted it. Today, the society of Bailey, or Wren, would bore him; his was a discovery greater than theirs. Instead of feeling impatient when the need for food and sleep forced him to put aside his books, he felt a longing to be done with the day and its tiresome tabulation of facts. The constant stream of new animals, however bizarre, roused little interest in him. His inner guiding light, his soul, whatever it was, had retired with Myrna behind a papyrus envelope. And yet even there she was as disembodied, as formless as was the soul. He was bewitched and unfit to live by any modern standard. Shame drove him into social retirement. He no longer slept in his improvised office.

ONE DAY in January, Doctor Cutter introduced a dark young man with flashing eyes which seemed to embrace simultaneously both Chris and his entire background. A young genius, obviously.

"This is Karl Taggart, of Greater Northwestern," Cutter said curtly. "He is here to learn everything you know; see to it, Chris."

So now his shame was complete, but Chris found that he didn't care. Let

Taggart have his place; he no longer wanted it. Was no longer fit for it. He commenced the further education of Karl Taggart almost with cheerfulness.

No cheer remained when he discovered, after several days, that he had misread Taggart. The newcomer was not interested in comparative zoology; he was interested only in Chris Lane. He was, in fact, one of the bright young men from the Board's staff of psychiatrists.

Chris began an uphill fight. He must see Myrna before he died. He plunged into his work with enthusiasm which, if largely synthetic, yet brought results. Though loathing himself for it, he freely discussed with Taggart the great worm he had hatched and bred, and speculated untruthfully as to its probable emergence as the mightiest butterfly known to science. He exhibited, without a visible shudder, the mounting board Cutter had ready.

"You can see," he said to Taggart with disarming frankness, "why the prospect would be unsettling. My anxiety had brought on definite delusions. Might have become an obsession if I hadn't caught it in time. Well, it will soon be over."

Chris bluffed his way through February and early March. Cutter began to lose his dour expression, and Taggart took frequent short holidays. At least, he absented himself from the Pit, as he called the place. It was unlikely that Chris had fooled him except superficially, but no report had gone in to the Board.

The morning of 3rd April, 1920, Chris snapped into wakefulness. It was still dark, and his sleep had been profound. Also it had been dreamless but now, awake, he felt himself in a dream. There was an urgency in the very atmosphere. Something had happened, or was about to happen, to Myrna. No other possibility occurred to him, because for him there

was no other reality; the obsession was complete.

He was still dressing when he reached the tube. He passed the guards without speaking, his identification shield held out as if in a salute, and absently meshed his thumb print with the proper locks. Before the incubation chamber he hesitated, for several seconds. Then he closed a switch.

The cocoon was torn from top to bottom. Its ragged edges were folded back to show a delicate bluish lining, part of which had been ripped away. This much he saw while his head was turning.

She lay upon the long-discarded feeding table, loosely covered by the missing section of blue lining. It was insufficient covering to conceal the loveliest woman Earth had yet seen. Only a smile was needed for perfection, and sight of the man produced it.

"Hel-lo, Chris," she said. These were her first words and they came with difficulty, as if foreignly accented. As if she had learned pronunciation through lip-reading.

"Who are you?" he asked, even more stiffly.

"Why, I am Myrna," she said, surprised. "I am the queen."

"The queen," he breathed, taking a forward step. An illusion? He reached a tentative hand.

She took it and carried it to her face. She nibbled lightly on one of his knuckles, and her laugh was an exhilarating burble of pure joy. "Remember?" she said.

"Yes."

"Read to me, Chris. Of Ralph and Jocelyn."

He was not himself. He found the book and sat beside her, on the floor; he fumbled blindly among the pages. Myrna took the book from him and found the desired passage. She stroked his ear with velvety finger tips while he tried to focus his gaze on the turbulent lines of print.

"They loved each other much," Myrna said. "But our love is still

much greater. It is not, Chris?"

"Much, much greater," he said as the book slipped from his powerless fingers.



THE DECISION of the Board, as voiced by its austere President, caused pain only to Chris Lane. It was but a momentary twinge, however. The Board had been more than lenient with Chris; it had been generous.

The audience listened, those eminent doctors and scientists, like a group of children receiving an unexpected holiday. Jon Cutter, beaming, reached across Myrna to shake hands vigorously with Chris. Carlson patted his shoulder. Karl Taggart smiled as his dark eyes flashed with some strong emotion. Myrna merely looked at Chris, and that was more than all the rest.

The Board, dealing first with the case of Myrna, had absolved Chris Lane of charges not made but implied. His aberrant behavior, in view of the outcome, was recognized as prescience; the future of the queen (the President smiled) would hereafter be guided jointly by Lane and Taggart. But—

But it was to be understood that Myrna differed anatomically in some respects from the mammalian human race. Hence it was decreed that, pending a final report by the Committee on Eugenics, there should be no marriage or mating for Myrna with any human from Earth.

The speaker then took up a matter of greater import. Doctor Carlson had been unsuccessful with his experiments, though each of his failures emphasized the great potential value of the strange cellulose compound. Earth must have that formula. So it was the unanimous opinion of the Board that an expedition should be launched

forthwith, to locate Myrna's people and discover from them their way of turning wood fiber into a diamond-hard substitute for metal.

Doctor Ron Carlson was designated head of the expedition. With him would go Myrna, as intermediary, with Lane and Taggart as her guardians. Taggart was to report direct to the Board and would be second in command. Lane and Carlson would select such assistants and associates as each deemed necessary. Preparations to begin at once.



They were home again—at the only home Queen Myrna knew. Though she kept her spine erect in her Earth clothes, both Chris and Taggart could see that she was much perturbed. She spoke when Carlson had left them. "But, Chris," she said, "I can't interpret anything. All I know is what you have taught me."

"Only my language, Myrna?"

"What chance have I had to learn any other?"

"We have considered that. How do you know you are a queen?"

"No reason; I know it."

"It is what we call instinct, Myrna. Only in your case it may be more than that. Taggart thinks this very possible, and he wants to find out now. Do you mind?"

"What will he do?"

"Nothing to hurt you. He has a machine for inducing hypnosis. That means that your thinking mind will sleep, and your inner mind will give up all its secrets."

She laughed her delicious laugh. "And will you tell me about my secrets?"

"I'll tell you," he promised gravely.



THE LITTLE flashing discs slowed as Myrna relaxed. The tension of a fear she had not admitted disappeared; her eyes opened on a scene not visible to the others. She smiled,

but now the smile became haughty, even a trifle disdainful.

Taggart nodded to Chris. "What do you see, Myrna?"

Her reply was a soft sliding of vowels, rather in the Spanish manner, but it was not Spanish. Nor any other language ever heard on Earth.

"This is Chris, Myrna," he said gently; "please use my language. What is it you see?"

She looked worried. A short struggle ensued within her mind, and suddenly her smile regained its customary sweetness. "The court," she said.

"Who is present?"

"My husbands."

"How many?"

"Why, ten, of course."

Chris looked swiftly at Taggart and thought resentfully that he had caught the ghost of a vanishing smile. "Describe everything you see," he ordered brusquely. She began at once, in that strange but attractive tongue of another world. Chris opened his mouth to intervene but Taggart shook a warning hand. They listened intently for several minutes and were able to catch the rhythm if not the meaning. Taggart slowly nodded his head, looking pleased.

"And now," Chris said when at last she finished, "tell it again the same way, in my language. This is Chris again, Myrna."

Again the short struggle and the peaceful relaxation when it was won. "Yes," she said. "I am in a couch, something like—like a bowl. There is much food on all sides. I am larger." She spread her arms as if about to embrace a hippo; Taggart's smile was no ghost, this time.

"The room is large, but less large than here. It is very light, but there are no lights. My husbands just—just stand around. They are much bigger than you, Chris. Only they are nothing to the queen; she despises them. She—she despises herself. Oh, Chris! She is not—not nice. Not good. Or is she sick? Oh, no, no, no!"

This time Chris stopped Taggart.

He took Myrna's hand, and it slowly unclenched. "Chris is here, darling. Look away now from the queen and her husbands. They are nothing to you. What is outside the room you see?"

"The queen has never been outside."

"There are people out there?" he asked.

"My children, naturally."

"Many children."

"Oh, yes. Of course."

"But you have never seen them?"

"Only a few. But they tell me."

"And yet you are the queen, Myrna. And you are outside."

"No, I couldn't be—" Her acute distress ended the experiment promptly. The men let their eyes meet as their subject regained her known personality.

"How do you feel, darling?"

"Tired, Chris. What does that mean—'darling'?"

"It means I love you very much. Sleep now, and I will come back soon."

THEY LEFT her, apparently already asleep, and strolled slowly between the cages, heedless to the outlandish screams and grunts and whistles of unearthly captives.

"What do you make of this queen?" Chris asked.

"An imprisoned egg-factory."

"Nice prospect, what?"

"They say love conquers all." Then Taggart added hastily, "Anyway, the language will be easy; we'll know all her words long before we get a chance to use them."

"Yes," Chris said absently. They strolled. Suddenly Chris laughed. "By the Great Infinity," he said, "this is really unique. Ten husbands, each of them much larger than I. Can optimism go farther?"

"Not Myrna's husbands."

"Can we be sure, Taggart? Myrna is the queen; we haven't shaken her on that. Is she an actuality? Is she real, as we see her? Or is she some

projected alter ego of that repulsive animal in her bowl-like couch? Maybe Myrna is the queen as she sees herself, or as she would like to be."

Taggart looked at him, wistfully. "In your position, Lane, I would fight like a tiger against such a thought." He lowered his voice discreetly. "I would even fight the Board, I believe."

Chris nodded. "But the Board is right," he said; "they are only protecting Myrna. It has been some millions of years since our ancestors produced an egg. I doubt if I have the knack, even by instinct."

Taggart grinned. "Even millions of years ago," he said drily, "it is not likely that any male ancestor had the knack."



Their space ship was ready at last, and the time to blast free from Earth calculated to the second. The best brains available had collected and correlated all facts which might be of use to the expedition—and meager enough they were.



As for the planet they sought, it obviously was not in Earth's solar system, though in a few respects it must resemble Venus. Its atmosphere would be uncomfortable, but endurable to Earthmen; its gravity would doubtless be somewhat less than that of Earth; it would be warmer and more humid, with considerable rainfall, a profusion of vegetative growth, and a scarcity of useful metals. This latter point Carlson deduced from Queen Myrna's travelling cage. Only a lack of metals would have driven those unknown scientists to such an intensive study of cellulose.

Myrna herself was proof that they

would find human beings of a high order of physical development; the pseudo-metal was ample proof of their intelligence. Myrna's extreme gentleness would seem to indicate a peaceful people, though plainly she could not be considered an average specimen. By her own account she was the best—the queen. Physically that seemed only the simple truth. Nothing can be added to perfection. If she appeared not highly intelligent, that was likely due to her haphazard education. She had been taught only romance and adventure. This seemed a pity to the Board, which, however, realized that Chris could not have known he was teaching anything. It did not seem a pity to Chris.



WITH A flash and a roar the Myrna darted from Earth. Another roar and then a third, hurled the ship beyond matter, out of the atmospheric film into a black realm where celestial torches flared and illuminated nothing. Beyond gravity, flashing into the void by overdrive until reaching the speed of light, when their residual energy drive took hold to advance their acceleration gravity by gravity as light years became to them months, then days, then fractions of days. Sol shrank to an insignificant star behind them, and once familiar constellations twisted unrecognizably.

They sought out, in space fields never yet visited by man, suns approximating Sol in size and color of flame. Lesser stars. And having found one such they skirted its planets and the moons of the planets, but rare indeed were those even approximating the necessary specifications.

Clouds they sought beneath which vegetation might flourish, but they found instead spheres in every stage of disintegration; dead worlds that were outright clinkers of fused rock and metal, dying worlds with a suggestion of air and a sparse mockery of plant growth.

"The year's vegetative crop wouldn't make a hatful of the stuff I am after," Carlson growled in disgust when they had cruised slowly over one of the latter.

Each day Myrna sat in Taggart's innocuous machine and repeated her scant knowledge of the court and the queen and her ten husbands, in the world they hunted. She described these beings, and others recognizable as servants, and the furnishings, in detail. The soft quilts on which she (or the queen) reclined, and the color and texture of everything in that room. But never again did she enter the mind of the queen, and of her husband's thoughts she knew nothing. Only their appearance, their words and expressions.

"Sounds like a hard lot, to me." Taggart whispered once to Chris.

Myrna spoke at these times in her native tongue, and her speaking was recorded and replayed after she had returned in spirit. Then she, with Chris and Taggart, learned the language she could not normally recall. As Taggart had predicted, it was not difficult.



Month after month, they approached the smaller suns and visited each of their planets. One by one, they discarded the useless marbles and moved on—moved into space never yet traversed by Earthmen, where their emotions neatly matched those said to have disturbed one Columbus and his crew on an equally uncertain voyage. There were murmurs, and discouragement, and at last concealed fear was made manifest in angry protest by some of the non-scientific crew.

"This could go on for a lifetime," Captain Hardestal said, mildly.

"Not without a supply base."

"No," the captain assented; "we are near the half-way limit now."

"Another month, you think?" asked Doctor Carlson.

"Oh, yes. With light rationing."

THEY FOUND it ten days later, circling a sun of the third class. Its four planets showed, even from a distance, a ragged outline. Water-vapor, obviously. They hovered closely over the largest of the four, since its 5000 mile diameter should logically provide the desired gravity.

"Well, split my personality!" Taggart ejaculated, looking into the smaller and more powerful telescreen.

"What you find?"

"Tree tops, that's all. Sticking out of the clouds. How high are those clouds, Captain?"

Hardestal made a swift calculation, his heavy eyebrows raising as he finished. "Low-lying storm clouds," he said; "about twelve hundred."

"And the trees, some of them, are easily three hundred more. Make our redwoods look like asparagus."

"That may make our landing something of a problem, too. I assume that you want to land, gentlemen?"

They did, and Hardestal began a search which resulted in finding, a quadrant away, an extensive hole in the clouds. Instead of trees they saw an expanse of well-weathered mountains covered with vegetation too small for trees. They saw also shining lines rounding the peaks and running arrow-like through the valleys.

"Could be roadways," Chris suggested.

"They must be; we will follow one."

And so they came to a city much like the medieval cities of ancient feudal Earth. A vast palace, a score of lesser yet still impressive buildings, and about all a great wall. Within the wall a broad belt of box-like erections sat in concentric circles, broken by wide paths extending radially from the palace grounds.

"Since we have with us a queen," Taggart murmured, "it seems only appropriate that we call at the palace."

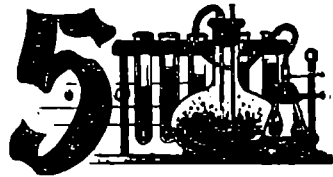
Hardestal glanced at Carlson, who nodded. The captain set his sights on

a sort of plaza a few hundred yards from the largest structure in view, and expertly brought his ship to a halt in its center. They were in a saucer, cut off from the rest of the planet by that towering wall. There was no sign of life.

"Let's try the atmosphere," Chris said. "Maybe we can take it without helmets."

He stepped alone into the airlock. As the outer air gradually filled the lock he felt his pulse quicken to accommodate his faster breathing. The new air was humid, as they had expected, but less hot than they had feared. Chris smilingly beckoned and soon all had stepped lightly to the paved surface of the plaza.

Carlson went to his knees. "It is," he announced solemnly. "The same stuff; they pave their streets with it. Compadres, we have arrived. There, Queen Myrna, is your realm."



SHE STOOD clinging to the damp hand of Chris, seeing nothing familiar. Broad steps led to a blank wall. What might be windows were unbroken strips running horizontally and bending with the walls, for nowhere was there a corner. The palace curved and bulged in graceful planes merging at improbable lines. It was in a way reminiscent of a conglomeration of soap-bubbles under light compression, yet these were bubbles harder than steel. For everything was of that dove-gray substance which had drawn Doctor Carlson and his men such an intolerable distance from their home laboratories.

"Well," said Captain Hardestal, "shall I blast a doorway through it?"

His pleasantry drew no response, because the doorway appeared; plates invisibly joined withdrew to leave a single elephantine opening. A figure

came from it, hesitated, then strode towards them. It was a bearded man, burly and wide-shouldered, approximately seven feet tall. He wore a multicolored head-covering which rose from a gaudy brim to a hemisphere topped with a scarlet ball. A similar ball, perhaps an inch in diameter, dangled from each pierced ear. His loose tunic was decorated with golden figures not readily discernible at the distance. He was truly resplendent, in an oriental manner. A massive saber hung from his waist, in a scabbard that flashed in the strong sunlight.

"One of the husbands," Taggart whispered; "get ready to take him, Chris."

"Don't think I can't," Chris whispered back. But to himself he added, "*With an ion-gun, maybe.*"

"Hush," said Carlson. "Karl, you're the best at their language. Present our greetings and felicitations."

Taggart stood alone a few feet from the others, waiting the arrival of the giant. He began his short speech as the native came to a halt, his mighty chest almost in Taggart's face. His tunic and beard fluttered a very little in the gentle breeze. His large brown eyes fixed on Taggart's moving lips. Then he spoke in answer, for a full minute. Taggart bowed and turned to his compatriots, not all of whom had learned this tongue.

"Boiled down," he reported, "the gentleman says that this is Telanus. The planet, that is. He himself is a Telan, one of its princes, in fact. He asks first, do we come as friends or foes. I am about to assure him that we simply exude friendship—right?"

All nodded as a unit.

TAGGART spoke again. If his slim, dark figure seemed insignificant so close to the Telan, he seemed blissfully unaware of it. Nothing had occurred to shake his complacency as a higher example of the highest of civilizations.

While he was explaining their peace-

ful intentions, the brown eyes opposite and above him widened. The Telan spoke more rapidly, more loudly. He was staring over the black-topped head of Taggart at the only female in sight.

"Telana," he said forcefully. "Telana regina! She is from no distant planet. How?"

Taggart turned again. "Well," he said helplessly. "You heard him. How?"

"It is part of the story we have to relate to you, sir," Carlson said soothingly. "A long story. Telana, as you say. Yet she is a valued member of our party, and truly she has just come from a distant planet. We are here as friends; are we welcome?"

The Telan flashed at him a smile without warmth. "Welcome, of course," he said. He elevated a broad hand, tipped its fingers towards the doorway, and strode off.

After a hurried consultation Hardestal placed his chief officer in charge of the ship with instructions to prepare for anything whatsoever. He took with him Sloan, second officer, and walked behind Carlson and Taggart, Chris Lane and Myrna, in the wake of the giant. The others boarded their ship and prepared.

Five Earthmen and a lady from space entered the palace of the Telani. Its doors closed noiselessly behind them. They found themselves in a room, or enclosure, about forty feet in diameter—for it was quite round. A cylinder on end. They might have been standing in the breech of some incredible cannon. The floor, a mosaic of gray bricks and pink mortar, rose with them.

"An elevator," Chris said, his tone somewhat hushed. Carlson grunted meaninglessly.

The motion ceased, a strip of wall curled upon itself like a window-curtain, and they saw through the long slit a portion of the plaza and the all-encircling wall. Moving closer in a body, they looked down a hundred feet upon their ship. Their royal guide had vanished, as if by witchcraft.

"Look!" cried Captain Hardestal, and their eyes followed the pointing of his rigid forefinger.

The curve of their shaft merged a few yards beneath them with a hemispherical bulge considerably smaller radially. In its center had appeared a hole, then the end of a tube quite three feet across which glided snake-like from the hole. It tipped and, as Hardestal uttered his fervent protest and prayer, an unseen something left the tube, left but a heat-quiver as it passed. And below, their space ship and everyone within it passed from existence as but another quiver. It was gone; it was become nothing, not even a puff of smoke.

Five men drew their puny weapons and gathered in a huddle, facing outward with Myrna in the center. They sought to die fighting, if only there were something to fight.

"We come in friendship," Taggart said bitterly. "How do you suppose they would greet an enemy?"

"Take him apart one atom at a time, no doubt. Let's all blast this Telan at once, if he comes. A small revenge, but better than nothing."

Even that was not permitted them. The round ceiling sank upon them, with quiet but terrifying speed. Chris took Myrna in his arms. After an instant she clung to him, rubbing her cheek to his. "The first—kiss. Isn't that what it was, Chris?"

"Yes darling."

"And I love you very much too, Chris."

"Goodbye, Myrna."

The ceiling stopped just over their heads and belched a yellow gas. They sagged against one another; a second treatment sent them to the floor.



THEY AWOKE, almost at the same instant. Aside from a fuzziness of the tongue and a dull ache in their lungs, there were no after effects. Myrna was as before. The men had been stripped and reclothed; they now

wore a gray tunic like a cloth sack with short sleeves. Boots of some flexible plastic covered their feet and ankles. And that was all. Their weapons were gone.

Chris looked at himself and the others. He lifted both palms in a gesture of ultimate futility. "They have us," he said. "Nasty people, but most efficient."

"I, too, feel out of my class," Taggart said, smiling grimly.

"There is still hope," Carlson said. "Where?"

The doctor inclined his head. "Queen Myrna," he explained. "We are alive, for no other reason that I can imagine. In Myrna lies an unsolved mystery. So I would like to suggest, gentlemen, that we hereby appoint Chris Lane as our leader and spokesman for the duration of our stay on good old Telanus."

"I so move."

"Seconded."

"No opposition? Elected. What do we do first, chief?"

"Nothing," said Chris.

"Consider it done," said Taggart. "I'm going over to this alleged corner and have a seat." He braced his hands against the floor to keep from sliding out of the molded corner.

They were men of action, those overlords of Telanus. A door winked and the self-styled prince stood beside them. He stared penetratingly at each of them, but longest of all at Myrna. It would appear that he could scarcely credit her existence. "The kaldore waits," he announced.

"That's a shame," Taggart commenced, but Chris silenced him with a brusque interruption.

"We are ready," Chris said.

The prince waved open another door and led the way through it. They were in a corridor of such length that its end seemed no larger than the palm of a hand. The corridor floor moved, raced away with its passengers almost half that distance, and stopped without a jar. The prince stepped through a doorway twice his height and ushered

his captives into a dome-shaped chamber. It was brightly illuminated by invisible sources.

Myrna tightened her grip on Chris' hand. It was the court chamber, exactly as she had so often described it. A couch, bowl-shaped, occupied the exact center. Around its rim depended baskets, filled with some cracker-like food. In it lolled a fat obscenity, one hand to its mouth and the other groping in a basket. They were in the presence of royalty—the queen.

Her eyes were closed, as if by blobs of fat. Every feature was obscured and overlaid by the bulging of unhealthy flesh. On Earth she would have weighed as much as 800 pounds. Worst of all, she was covered by the smallest veiling consonant with human ideas of elementary decency. To the captives she was a repulsive spectacle. Yet she was the queen.

HE WHO escorted the prisoners completed a group of ten. They might all have come, Chris thought, from the same setting of eggs. Haughtily they stood, in their something like Earthly oriental splendor, bending only their necks as they examined a long table on which were spread the clothes and weapons and personal belongings of the captives. The princes varied, to a casual look, only in the shapes of their beards. These had been trimmed according to each prince's individual taste, and some were fantastic. Their garments were a royal uniform, it seemed. They were armed only with the long sabers.

"The captured invaders are here, O Queen."

Her flabby cheeks trembled briefly and one eye came open. It closed again as she filled her mouth with food. "See that they are killed at once, Prince Mors," she mumbled.



The prince glanced at his nine brethren, a faint smile twitching his forked beard. He continued deferentially, "At once, O Queen. There is a female with them. Telana." He paused, then added more loudly, "Telana regina."

Both piggish little eyes popped open. The queen even raised her head several inches to glare at Myrna. "She must die!" the queen squealed. "Immediately, Prince!"

"Yes, O Queen. Immediately." He spoke humbly, but now his smile was unmistakable as he turned his back. He took up and examined one of the atom guns. "Would you care to test the strangers, Kalu?" he asked over his shoulder.

The giant with a spade beard advanced languidly. He combed his beard with thick fingers as his agate eyes passed judgment on the unhappy six. He pointed to the young lieutenant. "What do you know?"

Karl Taggart spoke up. "He does not yet speak your language, O Prince. I could interpret."

Kalu nodded his permission.

Taggart spoke earnestly to the lieutenant. "He wants you to tell him what you know, Sloan. Spread it on thick, man; make him think you're a genius."

Sloan tried hard to comply but he did not look like a genius nor was his record too impressive. Taggart inflated the account as much as he dared. Kalu looked at his confreres, his thick lips pursed in reflection. He decided. "This prisoner, then, is a fighter. There is no fighting of that sort on Telanus. He flies space ships; he will never fly another. That he is a mechanic is more interesting. But would one of my brothers care to have an enemy alien repair his ship?"

The query was obviously rhetorical, but Kalu waited several seconds. He gravely bent his head towards Prince Mors.

Mors raised the atom gun and blasted Lieutenant Sloan. Sickening fumes of cooked flesh choked the re-

maining Earthmen. One of those hidden doors winked and two men came with tools and a basket. They quickly cleared away the debris and departed as they had come.

MYRNA CLUNG to Chris, transmitting the uncontrollable shuddering of her body. A savage growl rumbled through the throat of Captain Hardestal. Both Carlson and Taggart looked pale, grim and defiant.

Kalu gently tugged at his beard. He looked next at the doctor. Carlson stared back, then stepped nearer the prince. He rested his hands on his hips and raised his chin. D'Artagnan could not have improved on the attitude.

"And what do *you* know?" Kalu inquired.

"More than anyone on this murderous planet," Carlson snarled. "I know metals—just about everything there is to know of metals—from every place Earthman have visited. We came here as friends, both to learn and teach. I have learned enough; tell the royal butcher to pull that trigger and get it over with."

Ten princes smiled ten smiles. Kalu did not turn to consult the others. "We welcome your teaching, O learned one," he said. "If you are indeed so wise, you shall have honor on Telanus. However, if the wisdom is but in your mouth, it would be best to admit it now."

"I stand by what I said."

Another came from a suddenly-appearing door. He was thin, and his shapeless smock bore modest decorations. He took Carlson by the arm and the two were soon gone behind the vanished opening. The queen uncovered an eye, shuddered for some obscure reason, filled her mouth, and dozed as she chewed. Kalu bent his gaze upon Hardestal. "Have you outstanding knowledge? I repeat, it is better to die swiftly than to ~~claim it~~ falsely."

"I know space ships and space travel," Hardestal said dully. He had

not recovered from the horror of Sloan's death. "I calculate. I understand a machine when it has been built, but I cannot build one. I am an executive. I lead and direct men, control them in all situations. I—" His voice died away, as if his lungs had been emptied, for the last time.

Kalu consulted his fellow princes, with his eyes. It was plain that all were mildly amused.

"We have shown how we regard space ships and their fliers," Kalu said. "Brothers, here is a leader and director. One who gives orders. Have we need of such on Telanus?"

He laughed aloud, and before the sound of it had ceased Captain Hardestal was a smoking ruin of lifeless flesh. The odorous litter was soon cleared away.

Myrna heard the gritting of teeth just over her head, and felt Chris' muscles tense. She gripped him tighter.

"And you?" Kalu inquired, of Karl Taggart.

Taggart sneered. "I study minds," he said. "Sick minds, like yours. I search for genius and combat evil, where it lies hidden in the personality. When I find a diseased and inferior example—like you, O Prince—I strive to cure it; I do not kill, as cowards and weaklings do."

Again Prince Kalu laughed aloud. But from the loose ranks of the assembled royalty advanced a prince with a sharply pointed beard under a waxed mustache. This individual, though tall as the others, was somewhat thinner in build. His movements were swift and graceful. Kalu's laugh subsided to a smile. "Yes, Rován?" he said softly.

"I request ownership of this prisoner," said Rován. "I have dreams at times, as I have related. I wish to consult with the stranger concerning them."

"Will you have him search for genius, or evil?"

"I wish him to find what is there, Kalu," Rován said simply.

A quick survey disclosed no opposition. Rather the princes were again

amused. Probably, Chris thought, this proceeding was a treat for them—a new sort of circus. "He is yours, Rován."

TAGGART shook hands with Chris and Myrna, then followed his guide. The remaining pair straightened. They stood hand-in-hand, facing the inquisitor Kalu and the executioner Mors. Over both these, as well as the other eight, had come a new tenseness. This was apparently felt even by the reclining queen; both her eyes showed, glittering pinpoints of fear and hatred.

"She must die!" the queen said.

"Of course, O Queen," said Kalu. "Yet consider. Her existence implies the highest treason. Would it not be well first to investigate? How is it possible that she lives? Her seed came from the royal vacuum. How was it taken? How was it borne away to an alien race? How could an ignorant people know how to rear so splen—even so miserable a hag as this despicable interloper who seeks your throne? Shall we not discover these matters?"

"It does not matter; she must die! Immediately!" cried the queen in a small shriek of panic.

"Immediately," Kalu agreed. "But only by the ritual, as of course Your Majesty intends. She, however ugly, is of your seed, O Queen."

"I forgot; I still forget. Ritual? How long, Kalu?"

"With the rising of tomorrow's moons, O Queen."

"Then start. Start at once!"

"At once, O Queen."

Kalu turned, as the monstrosity packed in new food, and winked openly. From this Chris and Myrna knew that she was not to die. Not with the rising of tomorrow's moons, nor so long as these princes could hood-wink a half-witted ruler in name only. The queen could have no power outside this one room.

Kalu spoke sternly. "To the dungeons with the hideous pretender. Let us prepare the ritual. Immediately, brothers! In fact, at once!" He

winked again. The brothers loosed a growl and shuffled their feet. Two women in cowls which hid their faces appeared.

Myrna clung to Chris. He bent and kissed her. "Goodby, darling. For a time."

"Will they kill you, Chris?"

"No."

"Are you sure?"

"They need me, to learn of you; I will not die soon."

She walked slowly away between the cowed women. Chris Lane stood alone before the ten mighty princes of Telanus. He did not wait for Kalu to question him. "I have no knowledge of value to you," he said. "I am a zoologist on Earth. I know animal life, how to breed and feed and classify new species. It was I who reared the Princess Myrna. And that, Royal Sirs, is all I do know."

On the basis of his accomplishments he rated extinction, beyond a doubt. But because of his knowledge of Myrna he would be kept at least partially alive until they had that knowledge. So he did not so much as glance at Mors.

But he was surprised, to put it mildly, at the behavior of Rován. The prince stepped hastily forward, his fingers shaking in his beard. Again, and more plainly, showed that look of amusement on the other faces. "Kalu," Rován said. "Kalu, I must have this prisoner, also. You know, brothers—all know—how I have waited and hoped. Almighty Lorchal must have sent him!"

All heads bowed momentarily.

Kalu smiled. "I believe it unlikely, Rován, that Almighty Lorchal would concern Himself with you and your caged monsters; this alien could be of value to you. . . . But he is yours." Kalu shook a huge finger in the air. "He is yours, provided you can persuade him to empty his mind concerning—" He broke his sentence, looking over at the somnolent queen.

Rován came close and looked into Chris' eyes. "How are you called on—on Earth?"

"You have heard Kalu, Chris. I am a zoologist, on Telanus. The only zoologist. I need your companionship and help; will you speak of—" he hesitated—"of the princess?"

"I have nothing to conceal," Chris answered, and felt his hair stir in the breeze of Rován's relieved sigh.

"Tell us."

SO CHRIS, who could think of nothing worth concealing, related the whole story—to a rapt audience. They were especially interested in the sugar cane.

"This plant grows in quantities?" asked Mors, the atom gun dangling forgotten from one finger.

"In certain places, yes."

"It grows wild, there?"

"No. It is cultivated."

"And eaten?"

"We use only the juice; it is converted into a granular substance we call sugar."

"Where," asked another prince, "was the queen-seed found?"

"I don't know," Chris replied. "The second man you killed could have told you."

"It matters little," Kalu said. "We must learn how it was stolen and how removed from Telanus. This prisoner cannot tell us. I believe his story. For the present, I approve Rován's request." That being the obvious consensus of opinion, Kalu gestured Chris away and turned to the table.

"Let this trash be destroyed," he said, indicating the clothes and weapons. Mors tossed the gun he had been using onto the table. "Now, brothers," said Kalu, "let us prepare the ritual. Death to the false queen!"

The true queen forced open her pig-gish eyes. "At once!" she wheezed.



PRINCE ROVÁN leaned his elbows on a parapet and looked down into a vast pit where

prowled a score of strange and fearsome beasts. "Do you have these on Earth?" he asked Chris, who was at his side.

"Not native to Earth. They are somewhat like the Venusian carnosaur, though larger. I marvel, Prince, at the stubby wings; for what possible purpose could nature have developed them?"

Rován chuckled. "For the swiftest of flight. These are kept clipped. In the jungles the wings spread fifty feet. Trapping them is the finest sport on Telanus, Chris."

"And their food?"

"Only live food. The gray lemmis, chiefly. We have not yet seen the food pits. It will take days to inspect everything; I intend to put you in full charge, Chris."

"It is the work I love, Prince."

They were long silent as they watched the great beasts prowl beneath them. A mutual affection for animals, for even such frightful brutes as these, began to form a bond of sympathy between the prince and his new slave.

"There was a time," Rován said idly, "when love and friendship and honor were not unknown on Telanus."

"But now those virtues are extinct, Prince?" Chris kept his tone casual.

"Not quite, Chris." The prince meditated; "the princess is beautiful."

"Very beautiful."

"But no more so, believe me, than was once the present queen."

"That—"

"Yes. That. She was entrancing."

Chris gathered his courage. "But she was evil and cruel," he hazarded boldly.

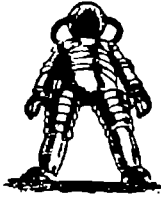
"Not at first, they say; you call the princess, Myrna?"

"Yes."

"Queen Myrna." The words were spoken carelessly enough, but behind them lurked a meaning Chris knew he was intended to grasp. He feared that he understood, but temporized.

"You mean a warning, Prince?"

"The kaldore meets today. That is our name for a business gathering of



the princes. We will decide when and how to kill the queen. The Princess Myrna will take her place."

"And become another horrible mass of blubber?"

"In time. It does not happen overnight, but the fat is necessary for the production of many seeds. Soon the queen would be a starved and haggard thing."

Chris, without considering the risk, grasped the massive arm nearest him. "Prince," he said earnestly, "you would not tell me this if you approved. You wish to prevent it. Tell me how; tell me how to help."

"Let us walk, Chris. I will show you part of the city."

ALL ROADS and paths in the city proper were the tops of walls, and between the walls were gardens, or deep pools of water swarming with fish. Or, in Prince Rován's domain, they were the infinitely varied living quarters for his animals. Beneath the wider roads the walls comprised houses for the citizenry who, apparently, could never leave that particular garden space upon which their doors opened. The prince and Chris Lane strolled above them, over the roofs of the city.

They mounted steps to a higher wall surrounding a garden that reached straight to the great wall of the city. Many artificial streams kept the dark soil always moist. Thousands of people, not noticeably different from Earthmen, worked among the grass-like plants.

"The royal nursery," Rován murmured. "In fact, the only nursery; it is unlawful for a seed to mature anywhere but here."

"How can you enforce such a law, Prince?"

"Because it is impractical to raise this plant anywhere else. Would they raise a *menos* and see it starve? Beneath us now are the incubators. The *menos*—that is, the newly-born—are put here on the growing plants. They remain for three weeks. Then their education begins. Let us go down, Chris."

It was a narrow stairway that took them down to the garden level. They entered the wall through a doorless opening and halted before a sight which caused Chris to rub his eyes.

A hundred plastic tubs stood in ten rows. In each grew a small clump of cane, and somewhere on each clump lay an elongated figure the sight of which brought to Chris a pang of memory. Brown eyes in small heads of green were directed as one to a screen showing in three dimensions one of the princes of Telanus. The televised prince was reading from a little book...

"—vested under the authority of Almighty Lorchal to the Queen of Telanus, all-beautiful, all-wise. Without her guidance we are nothing, and less than nothing; our shallow minds and thoughts are not to be trusted. Our lives we pledge to the Queen, and our obedience to the Princes she selects to instruct us.

"We pledge ourselves to—"

"Let us go," Rován said abruptly, stepping back to the garden and beyond hearing of that monotonous drone. "It never ceases. They are pledged never to think for themselves and, to the death, they will keep the pledge. What the *menos* is taught before the great metamorphosis, he will remember while he is an adult. His mind is formed and it cannot change."

Rován walked slowly, his face a gloomy mask. On every side people cultivated food for the *menos*. "These good citizens would tear you to pieces if they could read your thoughts of

the queen." He chuckled, then. "Let's climb out of this."



ON THE road above Rován said, "You see what the Princess Myrna has escaped."

"Then," Chris said carefully, "neither can the princess forget what she was taught as a *menos*? She cannot change?"

"No."

"She wished to learn nothing but love." He paused. "It is enough for anyone to know."

"That is so," Prince Rován agreed, gravely. Chris caught a glance from the corners of Rován's eyes. The prince looked instantly away, grasping his pointed beard. A shade of doubt darkened the Earthman's thoughts; wasn't this exalted being perhaps a trifle too confiding to a stranger and a slave?

They returned to the noisome bear-pits belonging to Rován. Again they looked down on the restless *carno-saurs*.

"Is it permitted to ask, Prince, where you yourself were educated as a *menos*?"

Rován seemed not to have heard. Instead of replying he pointed to the beasts below. "Are you afraid of them?"

"How long would a zoologist last, with fear?"

"True. Then follow me." He pressed a hidden switch and a ladder stood out from the wall. They descended. Chris, hoping fervently that the *carno-saurs* had been fed recently, stood beside Rován in the center of a living nightmare. Green eyes leered balefully down upon him. A jewel twitched back from fangs long as his hand. Prince Rován drew his saber and spoke a stern word. He stared down one pair after another of the green eyes. He advanced and slowly retreated.

They reached the feeding trough near the center—a shallow tank where-

in hundreds of living lemmis were poured twice a day. Rován jumped lightly into the tank, followed by Chris. A ring of frightful heads looked over the rim at them. Rován trod upon a circular plate and a four-sided screen sprang into the air, boxing them in as it bruised a few overhanging jaws. Rován laughed. "I think none of my brave brothers would have faced twenty of my little pets," he said.

"Nor would I, alone," Chris admitted.

"But they will face them singly. Ah, yes, you will see tomorrow."

"Yes?" Chris said, blankly.

"Tomorrow we celebrate." He trod on another plate and the floor of the cage sank suddenly, carrying them down until flush with the floor of a large corridor or tunnel, running both ways. And so did a smoothly-running walk, to the right and the left.

"There," said Rován, pointing, "the palace." He stepped on the walk travelling away from the palace. They rode for some time, not speaking. Above a luminous ribbon created blue twilight. They moved to solid floor at the end of the tunnel, where Rován used a thin pencil of light to open sliding doors.

They entered an underground world with a translucent sky freckled by sunlight sifting through tremendous trees dimly seen. This large and almost transparent sheet was not a single pane, for solid rods ran longitudinally through it at spaced intervals.

Chris was fascinated, both by the structure itself and by the dim shadows which moved across the sky in aimless wanderings, like small clouds drifting aimlessly before a zephyr. For the shadows had feet with claws. Unfamiliar animals walked above him in anonymity except for their flattened soles.

They scattered suddenly, like pigeons before the onslaught of a hawk, and new feet appeared, moving

with slow majesty, larger than the print of the mammoth, with the claws of a grizzly magnified unbelievably. Chris gasped.

Rovan looked up. "A scarron," he said carelessly. "Any movement on this side attracts them."

"Are those things caged, Prince?"

"I haven't the resources to cage even one of them. I feed them here, occasionally. The roof folds, when activated." Rovan laughed. "From a distance, you understand."

"I'd give a finger to see one clearly!"

"A finger wouldn't satisfy him, he would want all of you."

ROVAN BECAME moody again as Chris looked about him on his own level. The left half of this large place contained nothing at all, and might easily have served as a hangar for the biggest of space liners. The right half appeared to be a factory, swarming with men busy at many machines. No sound reached the two visitors and Chris saw, though not easily, that a partition, practically invisible, ran the length of the place. He saw a cylindrical halved box several hundred feet long, its upper part swung back. A gigantic log of wood moved on small tractored vehicles up to the box. Chris suddenly understood what he was seeing.

"How big will that log be when they are finished with it, Prince?"

Rovan pointed to his wrist, and Chris whistled. As his thoughts turned inevitably to Doctor Carlson he noticed the doctor, on his knees, studying some feature of the box. And next he saw Karl Taggart, who watched with tepid interest from a distance. He waved when he chanced Taggart's eye.

Rovan noticed and beckoned to a nearby workman, who came through a doorway not previously discernible. Following instructions, he returned and sent Taggart to the prince. Taggart brought with him his thin, sar-

donic smile. "Greetings," he said. "We have arrived at Carlson's heaven. But what is it to be for the rest of us, Prince?"

"Death," said Prince Rovan.

Chris met Taggart's look and for a second his nerves rippled coldly.

"Death is a constant companion," Taggart observed solemnly, but with a dancing gleam in his dark eyes. "He joins us at the instant of conception, and bides his time. Is it time, O Prince?"

"Tomorrow," said Rovan. "The Princess Myrna has brought a new and terrible force into Telanus. My brothers now know it was I who stole her and hid her away in space. For that I must die, once the games are done. I will be given a chance to die honorably, in combat. On your planet, does love beget hate?"

"Frequently," Chris said:

"Our perfected system cannot contain so explosive an emotion. We have educated it, among the people, into limbo. We princes have shared our queen, and shared our responsibilities as rulers because our interests were similar; there was nothing for us to envy. Now our unity is shattered."

"Tell us more, Prince."

"We have eliminated all personal weapons from Telanus except for the sabers we carry. Those have a special purpose. We are princes only because of our size and strength and courage. Among the people we are revered as agents of the queen, not as individuals; any commoner physically able may become a prince. I myself have been one less than twenty years. We maintain the virility of the people through a selective system which permits only the strongest to breed. You will understand, tomorrow."

"Why, tomorrow?"

"By special decree. It is not the usual date. Tomorrow the queen expects the princess to die, my brothers expect the queen and we three to die. But I expect to see the deaths of the princes."

"And what becomes of Myrna?" Chris demanded, bluntly.

"We cannot hope to change her love for you," Rován said, enigmatically.

"No, I think you can't," Chris said. His mind seethed with premonitions; with half-plans, hopes and fears. Rován had surely not exaggerated. Hate had come to Telanus, on the wings of love. He saw no sign of hate but he felt it strongly—felt it closely around him.

"You plan that we three shall kill the princes?" Taggart watched the ambling scarron above.

"I do. My plans were drawn in detail, long ago. That mountain of destruction," Rován jerked a thumb in the direction of the scarron, "was to do the work. But it is unlikely that he could have destroyed all nine. However, I am not ready for that plan. The interference of you Earthmen has spoiled it. Myrna was not to have lived until all were dead. So now the plan is dead. I have a better one."

"Tell us, Prince."

"But—" began Chris.

Taggart cut him off. "They murdered our friends," he said harshly. "Hardestal, and Sloan, and the entire crew. They will kill us; and destroy everything worth while in Myrna. I agree to any plan Prince Rován has prepared, if it will work."

"Very well," Chris said slowly. "So do I."



CHRIS LANE wondered if such pageants as he was about to see were indigenous to intelligent races everywhere. The drama, the excitement, the eagerness of the most mild-mannered to see a game in which death was the victor. He thought of the Roman circus, of the chivalric tournaments of medieval times, of the

Latin bull-fight, of the most recent prize-fight where soft gloves gradually had replaced those iron gauntlets wherewith gladiators had crushed skulls with a single blow.

He sat with Karl Taggart in a small balcony overhanging a sanded pit. Before him was a panel with buttons controlling the opening of gates and their closing. Across the amphitheater a larger balcony, more ornate, seated the ten royal gladiators. Today they would prove their fitness to transmit the genes of the race, prove their right to bear those long sabers, and carry to the people the will of the queen.

The people, or several hundreds of them at least, sat upon surrounding walls, dangling their feet over the sand. A third balcony adjoined the second and connected with it by a temporary walk. Here sat six great commoners, large as the princes but dressed in the ubiquitous gray smock; today any one or even all of them might become princes.

Chris punched one of his buttons and a stairway lowered from the opposite balcony. Prince Rován left his nine brothers and walked, with dignity, down to the arena. He walked to its center as the stairway rose behind him. He drew his saber and flourished it in salute to his brothers, then to the aspirants for his title. He looked then at Chris, who felt his pulse quicken because of the courage he was seeing. Despite his hatred for these princes, he could not deny that they were magnificent in their barbaric brutality; he punched another button.

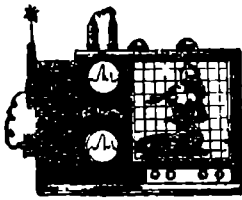
Roaring as it raced into the arena, its six legs a rolling blur, came a pain-maddened carnosaur. Having been carefully tortured behind scenes until its rage reached the maximum, it was now given opportunity to return the favor; it made murderously for Rován.

The prince leaped aside, his blade flicking out and back. A heavy mur-

mur of approval filled the arena. The carnosaur whirled, one pointed ear slit to its base, and charged again. Rován darted in and swerved, splitting the other ear and brushing the great scaly body as it hurtled past. Another murmur, still louder.

Yes, Chris thought, a bull-fight, on a frightening scale. Any Earth bull would make but a day's provisions for the animal Rován fought, without picadores or diverting horses or any other help. He alone must kill or be killed.

The slashing went on and on, neither the man nor the beast seeming to tire. Gouts of blood spotted the sand. Throughout the fight the frenzied roars of the carnosaur were answered and multiplied by a score of waiting brutes beyond the barrier. Rován's saber snapped from his hand once, but he recovered it, barely in time.



Finally the prince met a charge with only a single side-step, and held his saber at arm length. It pierced the scaly hide and vanished up to the hilt. Rován released the weapon then and leaped away. Without glancing over his shoulder he walked slowly towards the balcony. If his saber were properly placed, the fight was over. If he had misjudged the thrust, he had no further defense.

The crowd, suddenly silent, breathlessly watched the carnosaur. It raced on for a short distance. Its legs faltered. It managed to turn to the prince and even advance a short way, bellowing its rage and terror. Then it fell and died.

CHRIS BROUGHT down the stairway and Rován, with dig-

nity, climbed back to his place. He was prince until the next testing day—unless his brothers succeeded in murdering him, now that he had refused suicide.

Chris pushed another button. A small vehicle slid in, was attached to the corpse, and slid away dragging it out of the arena. A man ran in with Rován's saber and carried it up to him. He then ran down, and was followed by Prince Kalu, who drew and waited.

Kalu appropriately and ceremoniously carved his carnosaur into an activated bulk of mincemeat, and despatched it with ease. It seemed to Chris an impossibility, yet Kalu made it seem even easier than had Rován.

Prince Mors did almost as well. He slipped once and it seemed that he was gone—but like Rován he recovered in time and added his quota of carnosaur blood to the arena floor.

Prince Lance next took his station, with the same contemptuous air of confidence. He sliced one ear, then the other. He slashed here and he slashed there until, feeling that enough was enough, he sidestepped and sank his blade. It missed, however closely, any vital spot. The carnosaur whirled, sped forward, and fell like the wrath of doom, on the retreating back. Royal blood stained the sand. The thoroughness of the dismemberment turned Chris' stomach briefly, though he wanted to cheer.

No emotion appeared in the opposite balconies. One of the candidates rose and moved across the connecting walk. He bowed to Rován, who returned the bow and presented his saber. Chris lowered the stairway, offering up a small prayer for the ambitious commoner.

The candidate jumped widely as the wounded carnosaur charged the stair. He lit in safe territory and raised his saber for the next rush. For several minutes he fought well, adding a number of new wounds on the bleeding hide of his antagonist. But when

he sought to bury his blade in the death stroke it struck on bone and flew high in the air. The candidate was then swiftly shredded and the carnosaur lifted its gory head to roar new challenges.

"Even a Spaniard would free that animal," Taggart muttered. "How many does he have to lick?"

"Five more candidates, and six princes," Chris said. What Taggart said cannot be recorded.

A lucky candidate finished the unhappy beast. He buckled on the saber of the late Prince Lance, and carried that of Rován as he climbed to his new grandeur. The princes were again ten.

"Isn't this the time?" Taggart whispered.

"Yes. Where is Rován?"

"Not in sight. Let her go, Chris."

Chris hesitated. What he was about to do was murder, on a grand scale. Never had he killed even an animal, unless as food for another animal, or in self-protection. When he had agreed to this conspiracy it had seemed both necessary and morally right; those towering and overbearing bullies had butchered his friends. In his mind they had ranked as cowards, but the past hour had shown him that they were not; they risked their own lives as casually as they took those of others.

But the alternative was death for himself and Taggart and possibly Carlson, and worse yet for Myrna. A hungry carnosaur was presently to be dropped into that underground passage, whose only outlet would be the courtroom. There a fat and wholly unworthy queen would die horribly. Immediately after, the new queen would be installed. That was the plan, as evolved and agreed to by all the princes—a shocking accident.

But more shocking was the accident planned by Rován, and agreed to by Chris and Taggart. Well—

Chris set his jaw and spread both

hands over the buttoned panel before him. He covered four buttons at once, looked over at Taggart, took a deep breath, and jammed hard on them.

BECAUSE he happened to be looking that way, he saw Taggart take a wild jump and get his hands on the wall behind them. The arena floor swung up as on an axis, there was a rending crash, and Chris found himself sprawling on the sand, half stunned. He leaned against the collapsed balcony and slid his back along it as he stood.

At close range he saw a veritable madhouse. Both the larger balconies had tipped to dump their royal contents like apples poured from a barrel. A tangle of princes, candidates and sabers writhed as its component parts fought to break away and again become units. But even as Chris noted all this, the entire horde of carnosaur burst from their adjoining pit and fell savagely upon the struggling mass. A hellish cacophony of hate and terror and agony sickened his soul.

Chris stared numbly for several seconds. This was Rován's plan, and it was working to perfection; no prince would ever leave the arena. But it was in accordance with no plan Chris had heard that he, too, should be a part of the carnage—though he should have expected treachery. Could Rován enjoy Myrna while Chris Lane lived?

Galvanized at last into action, he looked wildly about him. Karl Taggart had escaped—he was not in the arena. Their small balcony lay beside him, crushed by its fall. Across the way, beyond the quickly disintegrating heap of princes, the larger balcony hung at a sharp angle, slanting up the wall to the one corner that had held. Too frightened to know fear, Chris began to run.

He ran like an antelope, along the wall. For a few more breaths there was a chance. Kalu and another yet stood and fought, their long sabers rising and falling as they beat back

the ravening beasts. None had eyes for anything outside their own bloody circle. But, to reach the slanting balcony, Chris must cut a tangent to that circle. He ran, gasping for more oxygen, and darted in between the circle and the wall; a carnosaur, its jaws dripping, intercepted him twenty feet from his goal.

Chris jumped into the melee, nearly within touch of Kalu. He tripped and fell, grasped the object that had tripped him, and rose with an ownerless saber in his hand. Back to back with Kalu he hacked clumsily but desperately at the nearest face, until the carnosaur rushed to one side for a flanking attack on both men. Then Chris hurled himself forward and upward, catching a dangling bench with one hand. Terror drove him up the impossible slant, climbing like a squirrel. He reached safety just as Kalu went down for the last time. He found, to his astonishment, that he still clutched the saber; he reached the wall and sat suddenly upon it, as if his legs had been stricken from beneath him.

DOWN IN the pit the saturnalia continued, though all men were dead. The frenzied monsters seemed determined that not one limb should remain attached to its body. Unopposed by man, they fought among themselves. Lacking the strength to rise and go away, Chris watched. His mind began to function, in a disordered sort of way.

Rovan, Machiavelli of Telanus, had plotted to remove all opposition in a single stroke. A miracle of luck had saved Chris; but, he wondered, how had Taggart escaped? Could his reflexes really be so perfectly coordinated that he moved, without warning, faster than gravity? Chris himself had not realized what was happening until he struck the ground. And not even then, at first.

He pounded his forehead, bludgeoned his mind. Myrna was in the

palace, heavily guarded. But a word now from Rován would scatter the guard at once. Or a fat and odious queen, undeterred by giant husbands, might give an order Chris hated to think of. And there was Karl Taggart, somewhere. His human ally, suddenly become more mysterious than any. More intelligent than any, and potentially more dangerous. What to do?

Myrna. He must find Myrna. Strengthened by the decision, Chris rose and buckled the sabre to his belt. It dragged slightly on the ground as he walked the wall and angled across the south end of the arena to the pit which customarily held the carnosaurs and was still open to them when they had finished their ghastly feast. Chris pushed the proper button and went down a ladder into a pit. He crossed to the feeding tank and stepped on a plate. The floor lowered him into the passage which, Rován had said, led to the palace and the throne room. This was to have been the highway of death for the queen. Chris walked the highway, the tip of his saber cutting a thin line through a film of dust.

It was still possible that the savage six-legged executioner of the queen might overtake him. Possible that in pushing those buttons he had loosed his own destroyer. Though Rován could not have envisioned Chris Lane alive in this corridor, he might have withheld one of his unspeakable pets for a special job. Chris plodded on, hoping it was not so; he was not the swordsman to hold back one of those monsters.

The tunnel widened at its end, and the floor seemed different under his feet. Chris brushed aside the dust and located two of those circular plates. He threw his weight on one and sighed in relief as he felt the floor rise. Blocking sheets slid away to open a vertical shaft. A distant circle of light lowered and spread around him until the pavement he stood on

became part of a larger floor—the floor the throne room in the palace of the Telani.

Chris looked into the narrowed brown eyes of Prince Rován. The prince was in the act of removing his crimson saber from the gross and lifeless body of his queen. His eyes widened then with surprise, and twinkled with amusement when they saw the saber the Earthman was dragging.

"So," he said. "Almighty Lorchal sends still another pleasure, this momentous day. I would like to hear how you have escaped, and came by a prince's saber. Tell me the adventure."

Chris said nothing.

ROVAN SMILED. "You might live," he suggested, "while you are able to entertain me."

"Where is Myrna?"

"The queen rests." Rován wiped his saber on drapery lying across the huge corpse between them. "The queen should have a smaller couch," he went on, as if to himself. "This one can serve as a pyre. And you," he added brightly, "can burn with her. Think, Chris, you will lie at last beside a queen."

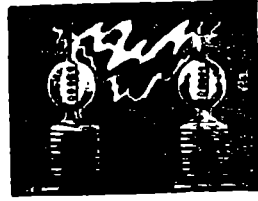
"You never will, Rován."

"Tonight, little man."

"Not while Karl Taggart lives. He excels you in brains as you surpass him in muscle; it was not wise to plot with Taggart, Prince."

"You mean he survives, also? You are extraordinary, you Earthmen. I did not plot with Taggart; I wished you both a swift and easy death."

"Thank you, Prince. In that case you are in greater danger than I. Taggart is subtle, and I know that he loves Myrna. He could not have escaped unless he had learned of your whole plan. He could have warned me, but instead he, too, wished me a swift and easy death; I wish the same for both of you."



"Well said. You would not care to live as a subject to King Rován and Queen Myrna?"

"I would not."

"I plan great reforms, Chris. All my people are to be taught what Myrna has been taught. They will be free; there will be no more hatred or fear on Telanus, only love."

"You are a mind-reader, Prince. That is my plan."

"Then let us find and destroy this Taggart. Afterward, we can come to an understanding, you and I."

"I understand already that you are a treacherous devil, Rován." Chris drew his oversized saber. "Taggart can wait his turn."

Rován drew and saluted.

It has been said that the greatest swordsman need not fear the second greatest. It is the unorthodox amateur, ignorant of the prescribed ritual, who becomes dangerous because of his unexpectedness.

Rován slouched gracefully into fighting position, left foot advanced and both knees slightly bent, ready to spring in any direction. He smiled in anticipation. His saber rested in a loose grasp, aimed horizontally at his antagonist.

Chris raised his sharp weapon high, as if to chop some object on the floor. He took two quick steps, whirled the saber around his head, and released it. In a flashing spin its edge sliced through Rován's left arm and sank deep in his side. Rován staggered, dropping his own saber. He tore at the blade within him, trying with his remaining hand to wrench it free, but it was too solidly embedded behind

severed ribs and he collapsed while tugging at it.

CHRIS WHIRLED on hearing a slithering sound behind him, and saw that Taggart had entered the court. He was alone and unarmed. His restless black eyes absorbed the gory scene and turned to the face of his fellow explorer. Chris met the gaze and could not read it, but he could feel the mind back of it, remote as a far constellation, its emotions dark as space itself. If there was enmity in the stare, it was not actively alive at this moment. If friendship, it too was dormant.

"Well?" Chris said, at last.

"Was it you who killed Rován?"

"It was."

"And he was the last of the princes?"

"The others will have been eaten by now; we were very fortunate." He tried to imitate Taggart's impassivity.

"I believe," Taggart said, "that you understand. To kill the princes, one of us had to die. To protect Myrna, one of us must live. I made the only possible choice; that you could be able to kill Rován never occurred to me."

"I do understand," Chris said.

"Suddenly, I do. You read Rován's mind. Or his face, maybe, as he spoke. If one balcony could fall, why not another? You expected to fight Rován, yourself?"

"I would have destroyed him, in some way."

"And now you will destroy me, in that way?"

"No. I retire. How strong is your hatred, Chris?"

"Is Myrna safe?"

"No one could be safer; she is the queen."

Chris looked away then from the searching black eyes. Weariness struck his muscles with a light tremor. He conquered his desire to sit, on the floor if necessary. He spoke deliberately as he outlined his first decrees.

"The people in this place have been taught to revere a queen," he said. "In this they cannot change, so for the present generation there must be a queen. But there will be only one prince, Taggart."

"Surely."

"As a menos, Myrna learned to love me, that too cannot be changed."

"I know it well."

"Rován, and no doubt others, has a space ship capable of returning to Earth. You will take the journey, bearing messages, and send another expedition of which you must not be a member. Carlson will stay, I imagine, though he may go if he chooses. So long as it is necessary, the queen and I will rule this little kingdom."

"I salute your majesty."

"Thank you, Sir Karl. Kindly take me to the queen, at once."

The ten guards, one appointed by each jealous prince, divided to let Chris through. He saw a joyous face and outstretched arms, and knelt in fealty before the lady who was to be his queen, for all of his days.

THE END