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# RADIATION TRAP

Toroga, planet of Sirius, was a crude, new world—and a man who was strong and able could make it over on a better pattern!

By Harry Walton

## CHAPTER ONE

### First Berth

SIRIUS was sinking in the west, an enormous lemon-colored globe as seen through the thick air of Toroga, when Blane guided his rented "cat" through the stockade gate of the Roarke mining concession. Through slow-settling clouds of red dust stirred by the treads of his machine he made out low sheet-metal buildings, a gabled shaft head housing, the plain, windowless bulk of an electronic ore reduction plant. Because he was young, the scene of his first labors brought a lump to his throat; it wasn't every analytical geologist who got a berth like this fresh out of tech. Even the slow sense of disappointment that stole over him at closer sight of the buildings, into which corrosion had struck its green fangs deeply, could not shake his belief in his good fortune. That the place was neglected meant only that it was understaffed—that there was work here for him to do, a chance to pitch in and prove himself. Probably there were bigger opportunities here than in the chromium-plated jobs some fellows picked up at home, on Jupiter or Saturn, where everything had been running on schedule for fifty years and all you were expected to do was fit yourself to a well-worn groove.

Toroga was different, primitive, as far beyond System law and System orthodoxy as it was beyond the System itself. Even in a geodesic-warp freighter

the trip had taken Blane nine months. This was a new, crude world, where a man might still make discoveries, where everything wasn't mapped and card-indexed. What if your bunk wasn't air-conditioned?

The cat's treads crunched obediently to a stop outside the administration building, evidenced by a rusty name plate that hung aslant from a single screw. But even as Blane shoved back the folding windshield there came the heavy clump of boots on a metal floor. Simultaneously appeared the most hideous creature he had ever seen.

Blane was familiar enough by now with the native race—the Quitchies, as they were familiarly called—harmless, indolent two-legged creatures that were scarcely half human and rarely above the cretin rank of mentality. Without doubt this was a Quitchy, but his hairless, nude body was blotched with huge sores such as Blane had never seen on another native. The creature's single eye bulged grotesquely, and from its socket issued a thin trickle of purple blood. Shapeless, swollen lips hung agape, and Blane saw with a shudder that the roots of the teeth were laid bare where flesh and gums had been sloughed away as by a careless scalpel. One arm, wasted to the bone at the elbow, was elsewhere a mere mass of suppurating flesh. Disgust vied with pity to make Blane turn away. But the Quitchy came no closer he stood regarding Blane with a stupid, unwinking stare.



Something hurtled through the air, struck the native squarely on the chest. He uttered a shrill, womanish cry of pain, and limped off, hunched over, his head buried in his arms as though in fear of further missiles. Blane's eyes went to the object, a huge chunk of wood to which adhered a fragment of bloody skin.

"Sorry that damned chap bothered you," said a booming, hearty voice. "He's been warned away twenty times, if once. You're Blane, of course? Come in and have a drink."

**B**LANE looked at the speaker, who had evidently come from inside the shack. A grossly fat man, but with a

ruthless energy evident in the bearing of his overfed body. The heavy-jowled face was greasy with sweat. Small black eyes surveyed Blane with contemptuous good nature and somehow conveyed to him the impression that the other's scrutiny had left him unclean. Nevertheless he grasped the enormous, moist hand the man thrust out, and followed him into the shack.

The bat man introduced himself.

"I'm Jim Roarke. The only other man around here is Dave Faulkner, my superintendent. Been together for years but he's getting old now. That's why you're here. I believe in giving young fellows a chance. A young buck like you won't

have no trouble getting along with me. Here's to luck!"

Blane nodded, drank down the raw fermented liquor he had been given. He found Roarke's friendliness offensive, and silently cursed himself for a thin-skinned fool.

"The fact is," Roarke went on, refilling the glasses, "Faulkner isn't the man he was—as a geologist, I mean. Of course you can't keep up with things in a forsaken hole like this. But what we need is new blood."

Blane toyed with his glass. "Just what is the trouble with the mine?"

"Trouble?" The big man frowned. "We can't get any more ore—nothing but low grade stuff. Faulkner can't find any new veins. That's your job."

"I wasn't told there was a geologist on the spot already," Blane said. "If there's mirzonite ore below, he ought to be able to find it."

"Faulkner's getting old, I tell you. Besides, he's so taken up with those damned pets of his—here he comes now." Roarke raised his voice to a bellow. "Dave! Come meet the new man."

There was no reply, but a few seconds later a man entered the shack from the adjoining bunkhouse. In violent contrast to Roarke, he was thin, almost emaciated in appearance. Bloodless skin hung loosely upon a gaunt frame. The eyes were deep-set and almost hidden beneath the overhang of the brow. The hands were wrinkled and gnarled as though with heavy labor. There were blue half-moons on the finger nails that awakened in Blane a vague, unpleasant sense of familiarity. The other seemed to sense this, for he hastily put one hand into the pocket of the brown jumper he wore and clenched the other so that the nails were hidden.

"This is Blane, the new geologist," Roarke said. "Come to help us out of our troubles, Dave. That'll give you more

time to spend with those damn Quitchies of yours—"

Fire blazed in the small man's sunken eyes—only for an instant, but Blane saw it both glow and subside, as though a veil had been drawn over smouldering depths.

"Which reminds me," he put in hastily, "whatever was wrong with the one I met outside? A ghastly show—of course I don't know much about these natives—"

"And you aren't missing much," Roarke finished. "They're a lazy, worthless bunch of beggars—we use them to load the ore cars below because they're immune to the radiations, and there isn't enough high grade ore to pay for machine loading. But you won't have to bother with them. Just leave them to Dave and me."

"Blane asked what was wrong with Tulag," Faulkner put in drily. "Why don't you tell him, Jin?"

"Huh? Oh, Tulag? Hell, Blane, you know what natives are. No sense, no sanitary habits, no idea how to care for themselves. The fellow you saw has a native form of leprosy—nothing contagious so far as we are concerned. He's been forbidden the stockade and I want him kept out. That's all."

In the last words Blane sensed a warning that Roarke did not wish to pursue the matter further—a warning to Faulkner even more than to himself. Nor was he unwilling to forget the repulsive picture of the diseased Quitchy.

"Perhaps I'd better unload my stuff," he said. "Then I'd like to study the plans of your workings before I actually go down—"

"There ain't no hurry," boomed Roarke in that hearty voice of his. "Make yourself comfortable first, while I rustle dinner. I do all the cooking around here—if there's one thing I want it's good food. I'm no slave driver, Blane. Work in your own way and I won't

bother you. Results are all that count with me."

## CHAPTER TWO

### In the Mine

IT WAS four days before Blane felt ready for a descent into the mine. During that time he had checked the dog-eared water stained maps used by Faulkner and some unknown predecessor, and formed a tentative opinion as to where new veins might be opened. Roarke, he learned, had little practical knowledge of the mine. Faulkner, on the other hand, volunteered no information that was not discouraging. The mine, he told Blane, had been operating at a loss for more than a year. There was no sign of new ore below, nor even of a promising "face" of ore-bearing rock. He had advised Roarke to surrender the concession.

Of all this Roarke gave no hint. But Blane found evidence that the relations between the two men were at least curious. Roarke, who cooked for all, kept the food supplies in a locked and windowless kitchen. He slept behind a locked door, and was habitually armed with a neutron blaster—the only weapon, Faulkner said, on the premises.

But if he could not understand Roarke, Blane told himself, he could at least try to do what he had been sent out to do. He assembled his instruments—sub-electroscope, Geiger detector, powered rock drill and a handful of mini-charges, and announced that he was ready to go down, thinking that Roarke might wish to accompany him on the first descent.

"Dave will show you through the mine," the big man told him. "He's below, but you can phone him from the shaft house." He hesitated, as though feeling for words. "Guess I better tell you, Blane, that it won't do you no good

to listen to Faulkner too much. He's lost his grip on things here. And he's got some crazy ideas about the Quitchies—it'll be best if you don't get him talking. He's naturally bound to resent you a bit, of course. Just follow your own ideas and report to me."

Blane nodded. It was plain enough that the superintendent was unfriendly to his purpose, if not to himself. He would, as Roarke suggested, keep his own counsel.

In the shaft house he donned the heavy metal armor without which it would have been suicide to go below. Mirzonite radiations were deadly, resulting first in superficial burns, eventually in a slow, inexorable disintegration of living tissue. Brief exposure was harmless, but cumulative in effect. Blane had heard of men trapped in pockets of high radiation intensity who had been forced to leave the mines forever because an hour's additional exposure would carry them beyond the danger point. But by wearing armor and avoiding rich pockets—in which the Roarke mine was woefully lacking from all reports—a man might put in a lifetime underground without ill effects.

Quitchies, being natives of this world so rich in radio-active minerals, and having a body chemistry radically different from that of Earth races, possessed an immunity to radiations which had been traced to a glandular substance or hormone secreted by their bodies. Attempts to inject this substance into the human system had failed, as it seemed to promptly lose its efficacy when so transferred. Quitchies were therefore permitted to work as loaders in the mines, the law of Toroga providing that they be paid in native foodstuffs. Because they were indifferent workers, many operators preferred to install automatic loading machinery, requiring only occasional attention on the part of armored operators.

**A**RMORED, but carrying his heavy helmet under one arm, Blane stepped aboard the shaft cage and was whisked downward at a rate that threatened to make his stomach misbehave. The six thousand foot drop was made in darkness relieved only by the feeble glow of the cage lamp. At the bottom Faulkner was waiting, completely armored. Blane put on his helmet.

Made of heavy gauge metal, this head-piece was equipped with mirrors which reflected light from outside around a number of baffle plates. These blocked radiation but left the helmet open to the air. The wearer could see clearly, although within a limited angle of vision, and could both breathe and speak naturally.

At a gesture from Faulkner, Blane followed him to a narrow-gauge rail car. An electric engine hauled them through a fourth of a mile of main tunnel, to a cross cut where half a dozen Quitchie's were at work loading the squat ore cars. Faulkner brought the engine to a stop.

"Rails aren't electrified beyond this," he said. "The loaders used to push the cars this far, then I made them up into a train and hauled them by engine to the shaft. But that's all over—there's no ore left back there. You can see for yourself what they're taking out here."

A glance told Blane that the superintendent was telling the truth when he said the mine was losing money. From the stuff being loaded Roarke would get far more rock than metal. It was scarcely worth putting through the reduction plant.

From his equipment Blane selected a lamp and the sub-electroscope, stowing the Geiger detector, drill and other articles in a small rocky niche, out of reach of the Quitchie's shovels. With a composite map he had drawn he set out for several likely locations farther along the main tunnel. Faulkner and the engine

had meanwhile disappeared with a string of loaded cars.

There was not sufficient ionization to discharge the subelectroscope completely anywhere along the tunnel. A man could work here even without armor. But he couldn't earn his keep mining mirzonite. There was none.

The lamp revealed quartz and the sharp, incredibly hard native silicate. Rails were rusty from disuse and the constant drip of water from the tunnel roof. The floor occasionally turned to soggy red clay underfoot.

An hour's tramp brought the end of the tunnel into sight but no promise of ore. Of course the 'scope test was not conclusive; a heavy facing of rock might absorb radiations from a mirzonite deposit behind, and only the Geiger detector would in that case reveal the few stray quanta of energy escaping, and then only if directly in their path. For a quick survey the 'scope was the better, but its results were entirely negative and Blane found himself inclined to agree with Faulkner so far as this part of the mine was concerned. Nevertheless he chipped off a few specimens for later study.

Returning to the spot where the Quitchie's had been loading, he found it deserted. His watch showed it to be past sunset—an hour when the natives invariably quit work to seek the questionable comfort of their tree huts. The electric engine was not in evidence; apparently Faulkner had quit the mine with the others.

Here the 'scope promptly indicated ionization, just about what was to be expected from the presence of low grade ore. Blane took a dozen careful readings, then walked back into the cut to the niche where he had left his equipment.

**A**N ASTONISHED, bitter oath escaped him. In the beam of his lamp lay the ruins of his Geiger detector. The

case was smashed beyond repair; glass fragments of tubes, batteries and wires protruded from it. He dropped to his knees, setting the 'scope down in order to have both hands free to salvage what they could.

No casual accident, this. The dented metal was marked with sharp, bright scratches. A shovel could have made them—a shovel wielded by a Quitchy—or, the thought struck sharply, by Faulkner himself. It was hopeless to think of repairing the instrument. Blane gathered up the pieces, threw them into his equipment pouch, and reached for the 'scope.

In the circle of his lamp beam the needle of the instrument stood out as sharply as black against white. It lay over against the pin, and upon the ionization scale below figures appeared—incredible figures.

With trembling fingers he reset the 'scope. The needle dropped with amazing rapidity.

Then, moving it a foot to one side, he again charged its plates.

For five seconds the needle remained poised. Slowly then it dropped back to a reading no higher than he had obtained before. He moved the 'scope back to its original position. Again the needle dropped swiftly. The ore giving rise to ionization was evidently heavily overlaid with absorptive material, some small fault in which allowed a narrow, tell-tale "beam" of radiation to escape.

Hastily he removed his equipment to a place of safety, and set to work drilling charge holes in the rock face. Twice the bit of the battery-powered drill brought forth metallic shavings when he withdrew it. Into half a dozen holes he inserted mini-charges, then plugged in the firing cord and unwound twenty yards of it as he retreated to a place of safety. The explosion hurled billowing dust clouds as far as the main tunnel. Only with an effort did he restrain his impatience

sufficiently to allow the air to clear before venturing back.

The entire face had caved in. Mixed with the debris of exploded rock that he savagely cast aside with one of the shovels left by the workers were shards of metal, some large enough to betray their origin.

They were parts of anti-radiation suits. They had been hammered roughly flat and built into a shield, two or three plates deep, the whole skillfully faced with natural rock.

At last the opening was big enough to squeeze through in his armor. The torch revealed a short, cramped tunnel, which opened unexpectedly ten feet from the blasted wall into an irregular natural cavern or pocket of uncertain size. Upon the wrists of Blane's armor fluorescent bands glowed bright blue—warning that his suit would not protect him against the powerful radiation here present, and proof positive that the cavern was fabulously rich in mirzonite.

## CHAPTER THREE

### The Mother Lode

"THERE'S your ore," Blane told Roarke half an hour later, throwing two jagged lumps down so that they rang hollowly upon the metal tabletop. "Don't touch it without gloves. If you have a Geiger try it. But I can tell you that it'll assay over a hundred units per ton."

Roarke's tiny eyes fastened hungrily upon the rock, then darted to Blane. Abruptly the big man left the room. Blane could hear him throwing articles about in the adjoining storeroom. In a minute he returned, carrying an old and obsolete detector.

For all their grossness his fingers knew their work; the tubes glowed dully and when Blane put one of the specimens in

front of the target a blurred rattle of sound came forth.

Suddenly Roarke laughed, a full-deep-throated bellow of triumph. He went to the doorway and thrust his head out. The laughter ceased as suddenly as it had begun.

"Dave!" he roared. "Come look at this!"

He turned back to Blane, his lips still quirking with laughter, but in his eyes a malignant, unnatural triumph. There was no answer from outside. He stared hard at Blane, and lumbered from the room, shouting again for Faulkner. Blane stood where he was. A minute dragged by. He sat down to wait, then got up again. The Geiger rattled on. With a curse he reached out and shut it off.

Suddenly Roarke was back. Faulkner entered just behind him, paler than ever, and with both hands out of his pockets for once, their unpleasant blue half-moons plainly visible. Roarke switched on the detector. Its minute, significant roar filled the room. Faulkner's sunken eyes met Blane's, then went angrily back to Roarke.

"What about it?" he asked.

"It's your ore, Dave," sneered Roarke. "The ore you couldn't find—or couldn't you?"

"I suppose you know a piece like this means nothing," said Faulkner quietly. "I can find you some like this, but it isn't paying ore because there isn't enough of it."

Blane found his voice. "There's a lode down there four feet thick and it's all like this."

"A salting maybe," Faulkner said. "But not a lode—I've been fooled too often not to know."

"I'm not mistaken. There is a lode—I took time to make sure of that before I got out. We'll need double armor to make any real survey."

"You'll find no double armor here,"

sneered Faulkner. "And no need for it in a petered-out claim."

Roarke's fist smashed down on the table. "You're lying—one of you is lying. I want the truth, damn you!"

Faulkner shrugged. "There's one way to find out, Jim. Go down and see for yourself."

The big man's truculence vanished. He looked from one to the other of them. A trickle of sweat broke out on one temple.

"You're not afraid, Jim?" asked Faulkner softly. "Not afraid—when there may be millions down there? Not that there are—"

"I don't believe you," gasped Roarke. "Blane, you're in charge. Put a gang of Quitchies on that vein or lode or whatever it is. I'll watch what you bring up—"

"The Quitchies won't work for Blane," interrupted Faulkner. "He doesn't talk their language. They'd work for you, Jim—if you went down with them."

"Dave, I order you to put them to work wherever Blane says. If there is a new vein—"

"I can't make them bring up what isn't there," snapped Faulkner, "no matter what Blane says. He's young and he's made a natural mistake, but the Roarke mine is worked out. You'll get nothing but what you've been getting."

Blane walked to the door. "I'm young, Mr. Faulkner, but I'm neither a fool nor a liar. My report stands. If you care to see for yourself I'm ready at any time to show you the lode."

"Blane—wait. Faulkner's right—we have no double armor here—never needed it."

"You do now," returned Blane curtly. "But an ordinary suit will do for a short inspection. I'll meet you at the shaft head, if you like, in thirty minutes."

Roarke nodded, a sickly white beneath the tan of his fleshy face. With unnecessary but satisfying violence Blane slammed the door behind him.



TOROGA'S moons were out, one a thick crescent, the other a broad orange disc, hurtling at such a speed across the heavens that Blane could follow their movement with unaided eyes. In two hours the farther one would set, only to rise again before morning and continue its fast flight around the planet. Double moonlight cast weird, staggered shadows of the machine house, the timbers of the cage shed, and a malformed native tree that grew inside the stockade.

"That you, Blane?"

It was Roarke, his huge body magnified by a trick of the moonlight. Sweat glistened on his bulging forehead, and on his face, curiously pallid in the ruddy light, was stamped something closely akin to terror. Blane answered, to his obvious relief.

"I'm late—couldn't find Dave anywhere. We'll go down alone," said Roarke nervously, fingering the blaster at his belt.

Blane helped him into a suit. The cage was up. They stepped on the car and were whisked down.

"Hello," said Blane, as they grounded. "I thought the rail engine was here. We'll have to walk."

Roarke made no answer. He had put on his helmet above ground, and Blane now donned his also. They set off down the tunnel, lamp beams glinting upon steel rails, boring shafts of brilliance into the darkness ahead. The ancient Geiger detector whipped against Roarke's armored legs as he walked. Blane did not offer to carry it.

"Much farther?" asked Roarke after they had walked some time. He was evidently trying to speak quietly, but the rock walls took his voice, shuttled it back and forth, magnified it.

"Almost there," Blane took the lead, quickened his step without looking back. A vague, formless fear urged him on. But the cut where the Quitchies had been

working was as he had left it. The opening he had blasted yawned just ahead. Behind him he heard Roarke's footsteps falter.

Blane entered the tunnel, emerged in the cavern. The beam of Roarke's lamp followed haltingly, then Roarke himself. He stood unmoving as Blane reached down and switched on the Geiger. A staccato blur of sound filled the cavern. Upon the arms of both men fluorescent warning stripes blazed with cold brilliance.

Blane stabbed out with the beam of his torch. "The lode is visible from this point and runs—"

A crash of footsteps whirled him around, and Roarke also. In the passageway loomed an armored figure. It entered the cavern, trailing a double-corded detonator wire, the two bared ends carefully separated and held aloft in one metal-gloved hand.

"You're late, Jim. But it's a triumph for sheer nerve that you came at all, isn't it? Or for greed, perhaps—" It was Faulkner's voice, but with a tone of mockery Blane had not heard before. "No, don't jump me! I might touch these together—"

THE other mailed hand came up, poised above the bare copper strands. From Roarke's helmet came a low whimper of sound.

"You can guess, eh, Jim? But I'd better tell Blane that I've got the tunnel charged. The explosion will jam it solidly. So don't move, either of you."

"What's this all about? What are you trying to do?" asked Blane.

"Awaken memories," replied Faulkner. "Strictly between Jim and me. It wouldn't have been necessary if you hadn't found the lode again. How you did it with only a 'scope I don't know—I smashed your Geiger, and I had the ore pretty well shielded. But you did and

now we have to have a reckoning, Jim and I."

"The—the mother lode!" said Roarke. "You never mined it at all."

"I never touched it. You're rich, Jim—richer than we dreamt when we first saw this place. The lode runs twenty feet back. Millions, Jim—if you live to get them out."

Blane moved toward the speaker. Faulkner retreated a step, the bare strands of wire scarcely an inch from his glove.

"Don't touch me! You're not in this, Blane—I'll give you a chance. Get out quick!"

"We're all going out together," said Blane quietly.

"Get out," repeated Faulkner hoarsely. "For your life, get out—now!"

Blane did not move. "We're all getting out. No matter what there is between you and Roarke, you can't mean this, Faulkner—"

A thud from the passageway interrupted him—and another, and another, slow, deliberate, louder in their fateful significance than the racking crash of thunder—the unmistakable, sinister about-to-fire signal of a timed detonator. Nine warning thuds. Ten. Twelve—

The explosion buffeted them with gaseous fists, hammered at their ear drums with a thousand echoing thunders. Blane found himself sprawled on the floor, his lips salty with the taste of blood. He got his arms under him, lifted his armor-clad weight. Except for nosebleed due to concussion he seemed unharmed. Through swirling dust he could make out the motionless figure of Faulkner, spreadeagled against a wall by the blast. Roarke was also struggling to his feet.

The eyes of all three turned to the passageway. Rubble filled it solidly from floor to ceiling. Sand and rock spilled into the cavern, creepingly alive with the trickling of still more from above.

"You should have—hurried," whispered Faulkner. Deliberately he twisted together the bare wires he held, and threw them aside. "Bluff—the charge was set before I came. I only wanted to hold Jim here until it went off. Sorry, Blane."

He walked over to Roarke, who stood as though stunned. "Remember that other cave-in, Jim, that trapped us right here six years ago? Remember how we tried to clear the tunnel, with only one shovel between us, first I, then you?"

The other made no answer.

"You haven't forgotten, Jim?" The note of mockery was back in Faulkner's voice. "Hour after hour we worked like men damned, sick from ore burns and bad air, digging with bloody fingers at last. We both worked, until I dropped. You were stronger. You worked on alone. You finished what I had given my last ounce of strength to accomplish. And when the way was clear *you got out and left me, Jim!*"

"Because I was half crazy," muttered Roarke. "But you got out by yourself. The fresh air brought you to and you crawled out."

"But that was later, Jim. You don't know how much later, or how much longer than you I was exposed, do you. You'd taken the engine to the shaft, and I had to crawl all the way, weak as I was, with every inch of my skin raw with ore burn. I got to the surface three hours after you did—oh, I must have fainted on the way more than once. But you didn't come back down to see whether I was alive or dead. From that day to this you haven't been down, because you know what mirzonite does to a man. You knew the radiation had marked us for life, that absorption is cumulative, and that a certain amount of further exposure would give you radiation poisoning. You never would risk that—until now. Even now you don't know how much more exposure you can safely stand. Didn't

you wonder why I stayed on? I let you think the danger didn't bother me, but I didn't tell you *why* it didn't. Look!"

**F**AULKNER drew off his heavy gloves, took a small knife from his equipment pouch, and deliberately cut a small incision across the ball of his thumb. Blood seeped up, formed a rounded little drop.

"Turn off the lamps," said Faulkner, "and look, Jim. This is why I stayed on, why I wasn't afraid—"

In darkness relieved only by the glow of fluorescent sleeve stripes, the droplet of blood shone with a virescent light of its own, no longer scarlet, but a ghastly yellow-green. Against the blackness too Faulkner's hands were marked by the dull glow of those same half-moons Blane had noticed before; it came to him suddenly why they had seemed offensively familiar, and where he had seen their like before—upon the scabrous paws of the diseased Quitchy. Tulag.

"The sign of radiation poisoning, Jim," Faulkner said. "I'd caught it before I could crawl out—*because you left me there—*

"I knew there was no cure, but that it would take years to kill me. I swore that I would remain strong enough to work, and I never told you—I even went on wearing armor, although I would have been as well off without it. I wore armor because I didn't want you to guess, Jim. I wanted to stay with you, hoping that some day you would know how I felt—that you would some day see your blood glow green in the dark—"

"No!" whispered Roarke. "No, you wouldn't—"

Blane switched his lamp on. "That's enough, Faulkner. It won't help you if we all die. I'm going to find a way out."

His lamp beam searched the far end of the cavern, the only part he had not yet explored. The wall here shelved away at

a height of five feet forming a ledge of uncertain depth. He thrust the beam of light far back, waking ancient shadows, striking reflected fires from quartz and crystal. An exclamation burst from him as he saw what appeared to be a small opening, scarcely two feet in diameter, in the farther wall.

"There's a hole here, blind or not I don't know. Have to climb up to find out—"

"I can save you that trouble," Faulkner put in. "It's an open passage leading to an unused cut one level above the main bore, from which it is easy to reach the shaft. But you wouldn't want to leave that way."

"Why not?" snarled Roarke, evidently emboldened by the discovery.

"Because the hole is too small. You couldn't get your shoulders into it—unless you take off your armor. But I wouldn't, if I were you. Even Blane, who hasn't been exposed much as yet, couldn't survive more than thirty seconds of this radiation without becoming—what I am. As for you—five seconds would be fatal. No, there's only one of us who can afford to escape that way. Mirzonite can't effect me any further, you know. But you missed the main thing. Blane. Look six feet to the right."

Blane shifted his beam as directed, to find what he had overlooked in the excitement of the first discovery—a square metal plate three feet across, apparently set into solid rock.

"Boost me up, Blane," ordered Roarke in something of his old voice. "I'll look it over."

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Escape—Without Armour!

**B**LANE stooped, allowing the other to step on his back and mount to the ledge. In utter silence Roarke ex-

amined the plate. Despite the concealing bulk of armor Blane could almost see his great shoulders sag.

"Quite solid, isn't it, Jim?" asked Faulkner. "Half inch stellite set into solid concrete sills. Behind it there's a tunnel—all my work, Jim, planned six years ago and built to allow you to escape when it pleased me. I didn't want you to die, but to live, knowing as I knew that the seed of death was sown in you—feeling the growth of it and your own helplessness. It wasn't a punishment of hours that I planned, Jim, but one of years.

"But when the work was done, the plans perfect, I found my hatred had burned itself out. In plotting your punishment I had glutted my desire for it. Strange, wasn't it? It might have saved you, Jim, if you hadn't given me new reason to hate you. The Quitchies—"

Roarke spoke in little more than a raw whisper. "I'll make it up. To you—to them. Get me out of here, Dave."

Faulkner turned to Blane. "I suppose every man wants to justify his acts. I want you to understand, Blane. The native you saw was suffering from an acute form of mirzonite poisoning. I've seen dozens of Quitchies stagger from this mine with their skin dropping off, their eyes bleeding. Jim killed three who wouldn't keep away after they caught the sickness, because it would have given his game away if a native welfare inspector had seen them. But while they look sound he's willing to let them kill themselves making him rich—"

"But it's a proven fact that the natives are immune to mirzonite," Blane interrupted. "Tests have proved it—"

"Normal Quitchies are," Faulkner put in, with acerbity. "There wouldn't be any Tulags if Jim used normal ones, and paid them out in food, and let them live out their miserable lives as God meant them to. But he found they wouldn't

work steadily for food, because they have the forests to feed on. He pays them in salt." Faulkner grinned bitterly.

"DID you ever see a Quitchy eat salt? They're stark crazy for it. They'll kill themselves with work to get it when nothing else will make them stir a finger. A Quitchy would sell his soul for salt—if he had one. There's no free salt on Toroga or in a Quitchy's body unless you put it there. And salt kills them—because it destroys the hormone that make them immune to mirzonite. That's why the stuff won't work in us, or in any metabolism that includes salt. And a salt-eating Quitchy absorbs radiation faster than a human—in six months they look like Tulag. In seven they're dead. But they don't know it's the salt that kills them—and it wouldn't matter if they did.

"Nor did I know at first. Then I noticed their finger nails and compared them with mine. I got myself a control—a Quitchy who worked with the others, but whom I paid off myself, in food instead of salt. He's still healthy. But every other native who was working here when he came is either dead or dying.

"I told you what I'd learned, Jim. You laughed, and told me to put armor on my damned pets if I cared that much. Armor! When a Quitchy goes crazy if you hang so much as a rag on him! But I tried it. They ripped the armor off and went back to work without it. I thought of reporting the thing, then realized it was my word against yours. I had no evidence. We use tons of salt in the reduction plant; what you gave the Quitchies would never be missed or traced. Nor would any ever be found on them—they eat it immediately. You would have found somebody else to run the mine, and the Quitchies would have died off quicker than ever. Because I was doing what little I could to spare them.



HARVEY BOK

This pocket, the mother lode, that I had first left untouched as part of my plan for your punishment, I later sealed up to save the Quitchiees from exposure to its radiations. Also I hoped to keep any new surveyor from locating it. The rest of the mine petered out. For a while that looked like the answer to things—but Blane found the lode."

The blurred roar of the Geiger filled the silence that followed Faulkner's words. Three expressionless masks of metal stared at one another, then as though by consent at the fiercely glowing sleeve stripes that shrieked mute warning.

"What do you want?" whispered Roarke hoarsely. "Name it quick. We've got to get out of here—" His breath came whistling through the helmet-plates.

"You're worried, Jim, aren't you?" retorted Faulkner calmly. "You know that every minute drags you closer to the deadline, when your blood will begin to re-radiate what it can no longer absorb. Then the sickness. I've had it six years, but I've had the sight of you as you are now, Jim, to help me stand the pain and the certainty of—death. You'll have only yourself to think of, and the memory of millions that will never do you any good—"

"Stop it!" snapped Blane. "If you have an offer to make, make it."

"Sorry, Blane. I keep forgetting you're in this now. But it's Jim who will have to pay my price. Life for the Quitchies, born and unborn, Jim—a guarantee on my own terms."

"What are they?"

Faulkner drew from his pouch a closely printed sheet of paper, and a second, typewritten one. "First, you'll sign a release of your concession here, Jim, turning it back to the government as the law provides you may. Second, you'll sign this confession stating that you have paid the natives in salt instead of legal foodstuffs. I'll hold it, as a guarantee that you won't contest the other. When the new operators see this lode they won't waste any time before putting in automatic loaders. No more Quitchies, Jim—"

"You're robbing me," whimpered Roarke. "But I'll sign—only get me out first."

"Sign now, Jim," said Faulkner coldly. "Or stay here—and rot."

**T**HE helmeted head of Roarke turned uncertainly from the Superintendent to Blane. Then, frantically, the big man ripped off one glove, seized the pen Faulkner held up, and hastily scrawled his signature upon both sheets. Quick as he was, the angry flush of an ore-burn crept over his unprotected hand before he could again don the glove.

"How do we know you'll get us out?" muttered Roarke, as Faulkner took the papers.

"You don't," returned the other. "But I will." Without further words he twisted his helmet free, then rapidly doffed the other parts of his armor, until he stood clothed only in shirt and jumper. No sign of ore-burn appeared upon his naked forearms, for, ironically enough, mirzonite poisoning rendered its victim immune to further radiation.

He scrambled up on the ledge, and a moment later vanished into the narrow mouth of the open tunnel. Roarke's breathing was a harsh, rasping sound. In Blane's ears the thudding of his own heart sounded like that of a trapped animal. His nerves were wire-taut.

Two minutes passed, and three. The sinister roar of the Geiger filled the stillness, until Roarke with a sobbed curse asked Blane to shut it off. He did so, then set himself to counting stones in one wall. But not that childish expedient nor an effort to blank his mind utterly could quell the chaos of his thoughts. What if Faulkner were mad enough to desert them?

"He's gone!" snarled Roarke suddenly. "Don't you see? With my release filed, he can claim this deposit himself. He never meant us to leave here alive—"

The thought had struck Blane also. He replied with an assurance more intuitive than reasonable. "I think he'll free us—if he can."

"What do you mean?"

"Faulkner's sick, sicker than he knows, maybe. Radiation sickness often attacks the heart. He may have collapsed—but it's a bit early to think of the worst yet, isn't it?"

"He lied, I tell you," snarled Roarke. "We'll rot here unless we blast our way out."

"With what?" asked Blane wearily. "We've no charges, no drill to set them with—and if we had, a blast might wreck the tunnel and leave us worse off than before."

"We've got this!" muttered Roarke, pulling the neutron blaster from the pocket of his suit. "I'm going to use it!"

Before Blane could stop him he leveled the weapon and fired, squarely at the metal barrier. A pencil-sized hole appeared as if by magic in one corner of the stellite plate. Roarke aimed again, but Blane, whose ears had caught an un-

mistakable metallic scraping, leaped up and struck the weapon aside even as its guard ring glowed with its discharge. Fragments of rock leaped and fell at the impact of its beam.

## CHAPTER FIVE

*"Seize Him—And Kill!"*

**L**ISTEN!" snapped Blane. "Faulkner's working back there—you might have killed him. You couldn't cut away the plate anyway, with the ten shots your batteries are good for."

Roarke snarled an inarticulate reply, but let the blaster fall to his side as the sounds increased in volume. Bolts thudded back. There was a grating of rusted metal, and slowly the plate swung inward, revealing Faulkner, breathless and trembling from his exertions.

At once Roarke leaped forward, hurling the smaller man aside in his mad dash for the tunnel. Blane, following, paused as he saw that Faulkner was near collapse.

"Here! We've got to get you to bed. Think you can make it to the cross cut?"

Faulkner smiled wearily. "Get out yourself, Blane. I guess—I can crawl that far. Been running—too much for me."

His lips twisted into a grimace of pain. Blane hesitated, saw that the cramped dimensions of the tunnel made it impossible for him to help Faulkner through it, and entered it himself. His lamp showed it to be fifteen feet long or more. He emerged into the abandoned cut Faulkner had described. There was no sign of Roarke.

It was a full minute before Faulkner painfully crawled out and rose shakily to his feet. Blane put an arm under his shoulders. With Faulkner clinging to him, he flashed the lamp about in search of the shaftway leading to the main tunnel. The

beam found it—and found also the armored figure of Roarke standing beside it, blaster leveled.

"Forgot I had this, didn't you, Dave?" snarled the big man. "Thought you could rob me without a fight? Stop where you are. Blane, search him. I want those papers back."

For all the fact that the robot-like face of his helmet concealed Roarke's expression, Blane felt the ruthless, decisive energy behind the big man's words. Roarke would fire as readily as not, if defied. Blane shrugged, went through Faulkner's pockets, tossing their contents at Roarke's feet—a few inches of firing cord, connection clips, a knife, the stub of a pencil.

"That's all. No papers on him."

"He's hidden them! Give them up, Dave, or you'll never get out of here alive."

Faulkner's pallor-ridden face lighted with a thin smile. "I was afraid you'd feel like that, Jim. That's why I had to keep you waiting in there—while I rode the engine to the shaft and sent those papers off to Administration City by Quitchy runner. He'll take them to a friend of mine, and if that friend doesn't hear from me within forty-eight hours, he will turn them over to the Administration. You're licked, Jim."

Roarke cursed him furiously, then, abruptly: "Maybe I'm not licked at that, Dave. Not yet—" Blane could imagine the cold smile on the big man's face as he went on, jerking the blaster up briefly. "This is my ace in the hole—this and the cat Blane drove over in. By driving like hell I can cut off your damned Quitchy, Dave—out in the sticks where a dead native won't mean a thing. Your friend will never see those papers—"

**F**AULKNER strained against Blane's arms, his deep-sunk eyes ablaze. "I've got a witness now, Jim. Blane heard you

admit everything. He won't perjure himself for your sake. Our story will convict you even without your confession."

"I know it," Roarke replied. "And I'm not taking any chances that way. Too bad, Blane—you could have gone far with me. I'll have to report you both killed by a premature blast. That won't surprise anybody, or raise awkward questions. These mines are dangerous if you're even a bit careless—and you *were* careless."

"That's murder, Roarke!" said Blane, fighting to keep his voice steady.

Roarke shrugged. "Between ourselves, so it is. But who'll guess it? Why should the owner of this bonanza kill his superintendent and geologist? No sense to that. No, it will be accidental death, and nobody more sorry than me."

There was a long moment of silence. The blaster steadied in Roarke's hand. His voice lashed out, whip-like. "Back into the tunnel, both of you. Back or I burn you down where you stand!"

Blane's whole body flamed with bitter resentment, with rebellion that death should come like this. Furiously he considered the chances of a sudden rush against Roarke's weapon. Then he felt Faulkner's slight body twist from his grip, heard Faulkner's thin voice whip out in unfamiliar accents—

*"Tulag! Eo-ghan tuhan. Tuhan!"\**

Faulkner was free, plunging toward Roarke. Behind the big man a blue shadow moved; a skinny, rope-like arm descended like a noose over his head, jerking him backward. The blaster's guard ring flared. Faulkner stumbled in his tracks, collapsed almost at Roarke's feet. In Blane's lamp beam the blue shadow resolved itself into the gaunt figure of the diseased Quitchy his single eye fixed upon the slumped body of Faulkner, his grip on Roarke relaxing as though the sight of his fallen master had drained all strength from those scabrous arms.

\*Tulag! Seize him and kill. Kill!

Blane threw his lamp aside and flung himself upon Roarke, who drove one mailed fist into the Quitchy's face and turned to meet his new attacker. The native screamed, stumbled backward, leaving Blane alone at grips with the big man. The struggle centered around the blaster, and Blane knew beyond doubt that it was a struggle for life itself. With all the relentless strength of his bull-like body Roarke strove to bring the weapon's barrel against Blane.

Light from the discarded lamp threw their locked shadows upon rock walls. The second lamp, swinging from Roarke's waist, now and again limned in Blane's sight the grotesque helmet of his opponent, the thick, gloved fingers locked upon the blaster's trigger-switch. Relentlessly the weapon was being brought to bear upon him. A grunt of triumph burst from Roarke.

Downward inched the muzzle despite Blane's desperate resistance—and suddenly his fingers found the hollow back of the trigger casting. He thrust his thumb behind it, felt pressure against it as Roarke tried to fire the weapon. Pain flared mercilessly up Blane's wrist as metal tightened cruelly upon flesh and bone, but the flash and agony of the shot he feared did not come. Savagely Roarke twisted the weapon free. A cry of pain burst from Blane as his thumb was all but dislocated. Roarke stepped back, the weapon leveled.

A DARK body catapulted out of the shadows. Skinny arms locked again around Roarke's helmet. The big man squirmed, slipping the bayonet catch that held the headpiece on his shoulders. With a jerk the helmet tore loose, the rim of it striking Roarke's forehead with terrific force. Abruptly the man's body went limp, the blaster falling from his hand. Before Blane could make a move to interfere the Quitchy raised the heavy hel-



met high; there was a sickening crunch of bone as he bludgeoned it across Roarke's unprotected skull.

Silence then but for Blane's own heavy breathing, as down the curve of Roarke's temple flowed two crooked rivulets of blood, phosphorescent, alight with the cold fire of death—by mirzonite.

The Quitchy had faded back into the shadows. Dazed by the swift pace of tragedy, Blane knew beyond doubt that Roarke was dead. Nothing living could have survived that blow.

Through the confusion of his thoughts a voice called feebly. He knelt beside Faulkner. The man's coarse blue shirt was scarlet with blood in the lamp light—scarlet except where the shadows fell, glowing green-gold in the darkness.

"Jim?" asked Faulkner. "Is he—?"

"Dead," Blane answered. "But—he had the sickness also."

"Of course—we were both trapped—seven hours. I'd come around—enough to see him leave. Ten minutes later—by my watch—I crawled out. Ten minutes—made all the difference. I knew—he couldn't stand any more exposure. I cheated him—had to, for the Quitchies' sake—"

"That's over now. We have to get you out of here, to a doctor."

"No good. Thanks—I'd rather go this way—than wait for the other. Have to write—give me paper—"

Blane looked into the man's eyes, filmed now, their fires almost extinguished. Without a word he found the pencil he had flung away, opened one of his maps,

and lifted Faulkner so that he could write. Painfully the older man did so, visibly holding on to life by sheer strength of will. When finished he thrust the paper at Blane.

"Take it—to Reardon, lawyer—Administration City. He'll see you through—Jim's confession—back up your story of what happened. Reardon will file—Jim's release. As an employee you'll have—preferred claim—to file on these workings. You'll need money—put up a bond—buy machine loaders. Reardon will stake you—with my savings. Spare the Quitchies—"

He paused, exhausted by the effort of speech.

"I promise," Blane said quietly, "that there'll be no Quitchies working here. Is there nothing else I can do for you?"

The dying man's eyes flickered, briefly a gleam once more. "Tulag—he'll be waiting at the cage. I brought him down—afraid Jim might make trouble. Take Tulag up so he can—die in the sun. I've no kin—no friends but the Quitchies. See that they don't suffer—"

The gnarled hand that gripped Blane's tightened in a paroxysm of death, then relaxed forever. Gently Blane let the wasted body sink back.

*For this was Toroga, a crude new world, where life moved starkly amid death, and a single man with courage and strength of sacrifice might move mountains of greed and power.*

"The Quitchies shan't suffer," whispered Blane, "because you suffered for them—"

THE END

