



NEXT MONTH

The Planet of Youth

by STANTON A. COBLENTZ

is a distinctly original story written in the realistic, satirical, and vivid style of that popular author. With the remembrance of the "Florida Boom" of 1925-26 fresh in our minds, we know how the human race swallows so easily the bait of perpetual health and great riches, thrown out by unscrupulous men. Suppose that a planet were discovered that yielded both of those sought-for things? What would happen on our poor little earth? The answer is given here with a surprising ending that will leave you breathless.

Chicago, 2042 A. D.

by PAUL BOLTON

is this new author's answer to the challenge of the gangster. The author is a newspaper man and has been close to the rise of racketeering and what it signifies. What will happen if the racketeer remains unchallenged and digs his fingers deeper and deeper into our lives? If racketeering continues to grow and prosper WHAT WILL HAPPEN ONE HUNDRED YEARS HENCE? "Chicago, 2042 A.D." is the answer.

Outcasts of Mars

by ARTHUR G. STANGLAND

carries on this versatile author's exciting stories of the far reaches of the solar system. Suppose a race of people were disinherited from their world and forced to seek refuge on another world? And suppose on that other world they were treated as outcasts and denied even a bare living? What would they do? Would they calmly accept it, or would an explosion occur that would reach across space to other worlds? Mr. Stangland's story gives one unusual possibility.

The Death of Iron

by S. S. HELD

grows in power as we see the ravages of *siderosis* sweep across France. We have just begun to perceive what would occur to civilization should our metals fail us. Now M. Held with vivid strokes draws his pictures more and more and more finely. We see how the disease of metals effects all parts of the population, and the new civil wars that will arise for control of the decaying civilization. The story rises and rises in power as this installment sweeps along.

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ON THE COVER THIS MONTH

we see another of Paul's scientific mysteries for our readers to puzzle out. Full directions for this contest, repeating that of the July issue, are found on Page 319. Again we offer a mental exercise and a test of imagination and scientific ingenuity to our readers with cash prizes as the reward.

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(Illustration by Paul)

The pale beams struck the bound men full in the face. Where heads had been were cinders. Toppling bodies were caught and hurled into the vine-net.

RED FLAME OF VENUS

By P. SCHUYLER MILLER

• The tales that Bill Bradley can and will tell on the slightest provocation may seem preposterous to one who is used to the trodden ways of the System. But when there were no trodden ways and Bill Bradley was a rookie in the newly-formed Space Patrol—well, things were different then.

We, who are used to the little eccentricities of the Venusians, so greatly modified by their contact with us during the past half century, can scarcely imagine them and their planet as they were in those early days. Only at rare intervals do we get an inkling of what the first space-rovers had to deal with—such as is given by Bill Bradley's tale of the "Flame Orchid."

It seems that he was on some sort of special duty at the time. He never knew exactly what he was supposed to be doing. You see, the Patrol had a rather keen-minded Commandant who was in the habit of picking young, intelligent men out of the rank and file of the Service, planting them in some out of the way spot where things seemed to be not exactly as they should be and where there were no grounds for official action and letting their intuition and initiative do the rest. Many a wild goose had been tamed and spitted by this process, and Bill's case is no exception, though his results are a bit unusual.

At the moment, he was hanging around the imperial palace in Laxa. Perhaps it will be well to say a few words about the place, so as to make Bill's subsequent adventures a little more lucid.

Laxa is perched on the edge of the great sub-sea peninsula of the Western Continent of Venus. An enormous area of land, bounded on all sides by sheer basalt cliffs, dropping two thousand feet to a bottomless sea, was set aside by the first emperors of the united planet as a floral preserve. As I have said, most of it is below sea level, and consequently swampy. The edges, though, and the tongue of rising land nearest Laxa, are more or less open forest, interspersed with grassy meadows and a few conical peaks. In six centuries of study, Venusian scientists have barely touched its possibilities. Sheer paradise and fetid, reeking hell lie together in the royal gardens of Laxa.

There is a reason why this last stronghold of nature on Venus has been practically untouched, save at the more accessible parts of its border. It is the same reason that has practically barred aircraft from the Venusian skies, and that had precluded the possibility of space travel until the time our first expedition landed in these same forbidding gardens. No Venusian subject may stand higher

• The fans of A. Merritt, who repeatedly call for more of his stories, will glory in this colorful and exciting tale of Mr. Miller. We are plunged into an intrigue of a new world, into a mystery of mysteries in which strange, almost unbelievable events occur.

To solve the mystery one must be cool-minded, cold-blooded, free from superstition of fear. And who but an Earth-man, possessing Earth science, and fearlessness could plunge into the swamps of Venusian superstition to unravel a great plot?

It will be dangerous work, as Mr. Miller himself explains, for people of one planet to "mix in another planet's pies." But if, as Mr. Miller, believes, the planets will eventually be tied together, and be affected by similar causes, then such interplanetary intrigues as this may actually take place.

than his emperor. And thereby hangs a matter of some importance to our tale. But it will be best to start at the beginning.

Bill's "vacation" had been given the background of Laxa's royal palace where the emperor and his family were holding court. Something—and he could not even hope to name it—was wrong in that palace. He was doing his level best to sense it and hunt it out and then, of course, events would shape themselves. Bill Bradley usually lived from day to day.

He was camped in the roomy hollow of a huge *billao* tree just beyond the back doors of the palace, well within the triple walls. If his experience and technique meant anything, he would soon be camping inside the palace itself. But he had not counted on circumstances.

Bill Bradley, young, handsome, utterly frank and incurably romantic, was waiting in the shrubbery beside a certain little door, when it swung softly open. Casting a quick glance about him, he slipped inside and glided up a narrow passage cut in the thickness of the massive outer wall. There was nothing mysterious about it, though, for it led openly and directly to a second, larger door which in turn let him into the royal kitchens.

There was more than food waiting for him. He had picked her up at one of the innumerable Venusian festivals, a really delectable bit of Venusian girlhood of the darker type. Bill preferred blondes as a rule, but her jet-black curls, her long lashes, her deep blue eyes and ruby lips had captivated him at once. And when he found

that in three days she would enter into service in the royal household—well, she was simply God-sent!

Food could wait. He seized her in an embrace that is approved by feminine connoisseurs on every planet of the System. He was very strong and very Earthmanish. He knew she liked it, and he didn't mind it himself, for she *was* darned nice. And could those royal cooks cook!

He had ample proof of their skill now. Snuggled in a corner of a divan in the apparently deserted servants' dining hall, the pair devoted themselves to a combination of royal love and royal menu. Some combination! Bill felt more contented than he had in years. Maybe some day, when he was retired on a pension, he'd come back here and—but pshaw, she'd have a raft of kids by then. He returned to matters at hand.

He waved an inquiring hand about him. "The rest—where?" he queried. He hadn't expected to be seen, but he had certainly not expected to be in a deserted suite.

She didn't seem to know and didn't care much. She pouted coyly up at him and snuggled closer, and he reacted in a way calculated to bring little wriggles and squeals of outraged delight.

He ventured a few remarks: "Pretty roomy place, this?" Decidedly. She was lost in it. "Lots of places no one ever goes?" Many. A man—a man could hide for days and weeks, undisturbed, if he knew his way about. "He'd need a pretty good guide, to show him the lay of the land." But certainly! "One who was in service here, for instance." Yes—coyly. He brought a forceful end to her giggles.

He changed his angle of attack. "Pretty cold nights, outside." Ah, indeed. Very. "He'd had a devil of a time the last few nights." Poor, poor man! He didn't react this time. He shuddered, let her hand fall. "He'd been feeling rotten—fever coming on, maybe." Oh! *Poor man!* He went right to the point. "He'd have to leave, right off, unless—" Unless? "Unless he could find real shelter somewhere."

She sat up very straight, her big blue eyes thoughtful, and digested that statement. She was no fool. He'd laid his cards out on the table, and her eyes were wide open. For all the roominess of the palace, it would be a pretty ticklish business. Suppose he was found here? Suppose Barto, the major-domo should find him! Suppose *Rillo* should find him! She went a bit pale. *Rillo* was rich, and *Rillo* was ardent, but this Earthman, this *Beel*—he was so *very* big and strong and warm! After all, *Rillo* had no call to be snooping around where he wasn't wanted. She cuddled up against Bill's broad chest, pulled his big ear down to her lips, and whispered her assent. His great, strong arms encircled her and she shuddered with delight. So big he was, and strong!

● He approved that shudder. The tensing shiver that came after it spelt trouble. He dropped her, sprang to his feet, and whirled to face the door. Tall, blonde, statuesque, the eldest daughter of the Venusian emperor was framed between its gilded posts, flanked by two giant guardsmen and backed by a horde of gabbling, scandalized servants. The lady of the house, come to inspect her kitchens. The maid on the policeman's lap. How many times has the situation seemed funny?

It was more than funny now. Bill swears it was sheer instinct. The blink of an eye and he was in love again.

Three long, quick strides and he had clasped her rigid form in his arms and was pressing a brutal, burning kiss on her parted lips. In a trice he had flung himself on the floor at her feet in deepest obeisance, just as the two inevitable fans of sizzling energy crossed where his brain had been. His fingers sought her white ankles. His lips were seeking out her tiny, pink-nailed toes. Bill Bradley has always spelled Tact with an emphatic capital T.

She drew her foot away, not too abruptly. She waved back the guards imperiously. She stood, very regal and very beautiful, in the doorway.

"Come up," she commanded.

Bill came, joyfully, eagerly. Too eagerly, it seemed. Once was enough, for now.

"No!" she cried. "Go back! Guards!"

They leaped grinning to do her bidding. Bill struggled appropriately, but they were very large. He looked at her reproachfully and noted with satisfaction that she was weakening. But Bill has brains. He turned to the cowering maid.

"Farewell, my Zara!" he cried.

The princess stamped her foot in sudden anger.

"Guards!" she ordered. "To the dungeons with him!"

In one of the driest, roomiest cells that the imperial dungeons could offer—for it seems that even guardsmen have eyes and brains—Bill Bradley lay back on the polished stone ledge that served him for a bed and grinned happily and a bit dreamily at the moist ceiling.

Boy, what a woman! A blonde among blondes—only Venus could make 'em like that, and only a royal family could produce this one! Pale gold hair and lots of it—skin like a lily petal—lips like Martian rubies—eyes like the Mediterranean of Earth in June! And had he played his trumps where they belonged? There had been a year or two in space before he had joined the Service, and not a few weeks in various ports since. Bill Bradley had technique.

He repeated that fact to himself with growing satisfaction as, along toward evening of the next day, the same two guards came to get him. There seemed to be the ghost of a smile lurking behind their blank visages—a glimmer of understanding that he welcomed with inner glee. Nice work, Bill, old boy. And it wasn't all policy. Bill Bradley, as he admitted to himself, was in love again.

The symptoms were all there, as they had always been. His heart began accelerating, until as he stood alone before two crimson curtains it was leaping as if to tear itself out of his breast. His hands and brow were damp, and his knees a bit trembly. Buck fever, he told himself. He always had it.

He didn't notice that it was Zara who drew the curtains aside. He looked beyond, to the glorious creature who stood before the window, her back rigidly toward him. Beside her was a lean and rather pale Venusian youth, chewing his lip and trying to make small-talk with no notable success. Bill's head cleared and he snapped into mental alertness. Game was sighted—fever gone. The princess—Noreena, she was—heard the swish of the portieres. She turned to the uneasy youth at her side.

"Rillo dear," she murmured, "do see who that is."

Rillo? Ho! Bill's brain was still a couple of jumps ahead of the situation. He laid a hand on Zara's shoulder as the youth turned, brushing her black curls carelessly with his knuckles. Out of the corner of his eye he saw

that she was deathly pale. Rillo too. As for the princess, she was still disinterested.

Rillo came forward, his eyes blazing, his lips set. Bill gave Zara a friendly little pat on the shoulder and strode easily to meet him, hands in pocket. He forestalled the other's question.

"Your Highness desired my presence?" he asked coldly.

Rillo gasped. There was a scared stir from Zara's direction. And Noreena whirled like a flash, her eyes afire with sapphire wrath.

"Yes!" she snapped. "I was curious! I am amused by strange beasts from other planets!"

She came toward him, stood a few paces away staring insolently at him from under lowered lids. Rillo had drawn aside, behind him. Bill tottered a little on his feet, closed his eyes. His lips parted in the softest of whispers.

"God!" he breathed. "Beautiful!"

She heard. She was meant to. Her eyes came wide open.

"What was that?" she cried.

"Highness?" he stammered, as if wakened from a dream. "You ask me—?"

"What did you say?" she repeated.

"I, Princess? It was nothing. I—I was a little dizzy. I said nothing."

She knew better. "What?" she demanded.

He shifted uneasily on his feet. He half turned to look at Rillo and Zara. "I—I cannot say," he told her. "It was nothing. I was not thinking of what I said."

For a moment she stared at him, quizzically. He twisted guiltily under her gaze. Suddenly she turned to the others. "Tsol!" she hissed. "Go!"

Zara hesitated at the door and looked back. The faintest of smiles crept over Bill's features, and neither Rillo nor Noreena missed it. The Venusian wheeled and strode angrily out of the room, shoving Zara ahead of him. Bill heard some angrily whispered remark and her pleading whimper. Then he was alone with his princess. And there was anger in her eyes again.

"Well?" she snapped.

He stood as if petrified. A lump seemed to rise in his throat, a mist to cloud his vision. He swallowed. He blinked dazedly. His fists were white-knuckled. He half raised them, took a step toward her.

"Princess—" he muttered, choked, stopped.

"Well?" She was melting again.

"Princess! Noreena!" He stumbled forward and fell on his knees at her feet. He seized her cool hands in his, pressed them to his lips. Then, feverishly, frenziedly, he began to speak, his voice low and impassioned. The words flowed in lissome magic from his tongue—mad, hot words of adoration. He prayed to all the gods of space that she wasn't up on Earthly religions. He was reciting, "with dramatic inflection", the Songs of Solomon.

Bill had spent ten consecutive hours memorizing that particular bit of poetry, in preparation for his seige of Zara. But here, now—he really meant some of it, a lot of it. He could put real feeling in his declamation. And he did. And it went over big!

● We can afford to let a few days—weeks, even—slip by.

William Bradley, who, for reasons yet obscure, even to him, had attempted the conquest of the maid, had become the constant shadow of the mistress. And, being William Bradley, heart and head were displaying some marvelous team-work. Noreena never had a chance.

Perhaps, you may say, she was remarkably lacking in common sense. Today she would not have fallen for Bill's line, nor on Earth then. You may be right. The Venusians of that day were really very simple in some

respects, like the Earth-women of the early twentieth century. And yet—could the instincts that she shared with every thinking female creature in the Solar System have failed her here? I have a thought, at least, to offer. What if she did see through all Bill's romantic flummery to the clear, clever, practical brain behind the impulsive heart? What if she did realize that he was using her as a tool, a key to the palace? It was novel, it was nice, and she liked it. What more do you want?

At any rate, Bill found himself in a rather peculiar position. Seemingly half the servants knew his status—which was more than he did—and the other half didn't even know he existed. It was the same way with the guards, the nobles of the court—even with the royal family. He has never figured out

just what he was supposed to be. Presumably, from their extreme tact, the courtiers hoped for the worst.

On the other hand the pair of them were quite apt to go off into a spasm of passionate love-making just for the fun of leaving the circle of "chosen" confidants gaping bewilderedly at the romantic byplay. They would dash from the deepest of veiled metaphor to the baldest frankness, utterly without warning, that like as not would yank out an O. Henry ending like a jack-in-the-box, leaving the dazed courtiers laughing dutifully while Bill and his princess grinned understandingly at their puzzlement.

If I may inject an opinion, they were both bored stiff with the routine of their respective jobs, were attracted to each other both physically and mentally, and were playing a game of skill and daring with a verve and vigor that left the rather stodgy Venusian court miles behind. To be quite Earthly in idiom, they were having one hell of a good time, as only highly intelligent and perfectly congenial people can.

It had long ago been realized that Martians and Earthmen, having been born and bred millions of miles above the heads of the Venusian imperial family, could not by any rule of logic be brought under the imperial prohibition. They were by nature exempt. And when it became evident that Venusians were bound to take an active part in space life, a brilliant legal quirk of the emperor himself provided chameleon-like citizenship papers for space-minded Venusians, whereby they became citizens of Earth or Mars or some appropriate asteroid until they were safely back under the eye of their emperor.

But I am digressing again. Bill Bradley was Earth-born, and at times he made quite a point of defying the edict, towering over Noreena like a veritable giant by vir-



P. Schuyler Miller

tue of some trick of posture. She was really just about as tall as he. At any rate, he had moved from his hollow tree beside the kitchen door, and, for reasons of his own, had pitched camp on the outside of the palace, a hundred feet or so above Noreena's window, where nobody would think of looking for him. Venusian palaces are pretty ornate, and he had a recess the size of a small room, fully equipped with hammock and light-globes, hidden from the eyes of the world by a cunningly camouflaged canvas screen. The foremost artist of all Venus had executed that screen, at the command of the emperor, who never to his dying day knew what he wanted it for. As I have said, Noreena quite matched Bill in brilliance. They were a pair to be proud of!

On the day of which I write, along toward evening, Bill was sitting on the edge of his cot, thinking. Noreena's attitude had been puzzling of late. She was tantalizingly capricious and variable in temper. In one moment she would be the aloof, prudish Venusian princess of convention and he a worm under her heel, and then without the slightest warning she was back on the old, riotous standard, dueling with word and deed in a way that no ordinary Venusian could hope to comprehend. At times she would be glum and moody, deeply mysterious, and again she was light and frothy as a bit of thistle-down. He began to suspect that the situation was getting out of hand, and he didn't like it in the least.

He heard voices, laughter, below him, coming from the direction of one of Noreena's favorite tree-top bowers. Then something hit his canvas roof with a thud and slithered off into space. An instant, and a second something followed the first—a third—two together. He got up and raised a small flap in the canvas, his window to the outer world. Something bounded off the carved stone beside him and whizzed past just before his nose. He craned his neck a little to look down at the garden. He'd guessed it right. Noreena and her court were shooting bats.

The great brick-red fruit bats of Venus are ugly but harmless. Every nook and cranny of the upper palace was alive with them. Bill had driven hundreds of them out of his particular recess when he took possession. From the tree-tops, with the dying sun illuminating them fitfully, they made excellent targets for the long-range ray-rifles of the courtiers, who were mostly good shots. Noreena herself was one of the best in the entire System.

Her sharp eyes had spied the motion of his little flap. Perhaps she had been watching for it. Her white arm was raised in a mocking gesture of greeting and then in an instant she had outlined his body with a great arching U of ray-dots, needle-pricks of light where the sunset shone through. Noreena could shoot.

The sun was fast sinking and now the real sport began. The other had been but dalliance for the better shots of the court, a condescension to the poorer marksmen. Now, with the great red bats mere drifting shadows against the dark clouds, Noreena and her little group began to exhibit real skill.

CHAPTER II

The Coming of the Flower

● There were not many who stayed for this phase of the sport. Court etiquette permitted them to seek more

congenial surroundings, and most of them took advantage of it. To a poor marksman, utter skill is annoying. But Noreena and a handful of her court still stayed on, and the air was alive with their stabbing rays, glowing with fleeting blue fire along their ionized tracks. The huge trees in which they were concealed seemed to be hung with clustering fruit as here and there the blue globes that cling about a ray's electrode blossomed and faded. And Noreena did not forget her watcher behind the canvas. Skillfully she would send up a fanning burst of light that showed the little flap still open, and on its heels a sheet of blue fire would sing around Bill's ears. He only grinned. She knew her guns. He was perfectly safe.

That was where he made his mistake. Noreena was not the only pebble on the beach. Next to her a tall, gaunt Venusian of the dark race, sparsely bearded, had been lying on his little platform among the branches. He was an excellent shot too, and Bill tried in vain to place him. Try as he would he could form no association. The man was an utter stranger.

From where he lay behind the princess a queer beam of flickering red light went up for an instant, then faded slowly away. Bill wondered whether he had really seen it. He had. Beyond, at the very edge of the real jungle, a ball of greenish fire blossomed and he felt the electric tension of a ray singing past his ear. One, two, three in rapid-fire order the strange ray flowered. The first missed. The second drilled his arm. The third passed where his heart had been.

Swearing vividly under his breath, Bill lay on the floor of his hideout, clinging to his numbed arm. It was one of those infernal non-ionizing rays that left no track and both burned and jolted. There was dirty work in the offing.

The thing evidently was being run on some sort of three-contact hand generator, as a ray of that range would have to be. He lay quiet in the dark listening to the buzz of the energy-charges zipping through the tough canvas—three and three and three, drilling a breast-high line across the front of his hiding place. Where they hit the stone of the wall, it glowed momentarily, and he reasoned that this would show the hidden sniper when he passed beyond the concealed crevice. It did.

Three feet lower, the burst of energy returned, swinging just above his head. It vanished, then reappeared at the top, drilling a neat line of pin-pricks down the canvas front of the niche, directly above him. Frantically he rolled aside and wriggled down into a sort of tunnel behind one of the great stone statues that decorated the palace-front. They were out to get him!

Some twenty feet farther down he stretched out on a narrow shelf and watched the sniping with interest. Whoever had engineered it left nothing to chance. After the horizontal and vertical lacing was finished, they started on diagonals. They meant to get him and get him right! Well, let 'em try.

Noreena was still sending occasional darts of energy in the direction of his former shelter, though, now that the flap was down, she aimed only at places where he could not be. The others had no such consideration for his peace of mind. Coldly and methodically they went on with their dissection of that canvas surface. Then something happened that changed things considerably.

By sheer chance, Noreena's visible shaft crossed one of the non-ionizing beams, close to the face of the building. There was a crackle of electric fire, a blaze of white light, and Bill saw her electrode burst into flame, the metal burning like paper under the impact of the invisible energy. With a little cry she threw her gun from her, just as its bulb exploded with a glare of vivid violet light. In the faint glow from the city lights, he saw her standing erect on her platform, staring out over the trees at the place where the ray-projector was still flashing—three, and three, and three—hurling its deadly darts of energy at some unseen target. She whirled about, just as the beam overshot its mark, outlined three little green dots on the stone of the palace wall, and began its return trip.

She cried out in anger. Bill heard a man's voice answer, low and silken, from beside her. Again that flicker of red light went up from the tree-top. She saw it, asked some sharp question. There was a suave reply that seemed to satisfy her. Bill didn't like that man.

Her voice rose in a curt command. Lights blazed all over the garden. He saw men and women rising to their feet in the foliage and climbing down swaying ladders. Noreena was the last to go, in accordance with the imperial law. For a moment she stood there, waist-deep in the dark leaves, staring at the palace. She raised her arm, questioningly. From Bill's shoulder flashed a tiny dot of light, green, red, then green again. Again her arm came up, and then she went down into the tree. In a moment he saw her leading her little group across the lawns. A knot of the royal guards met her, saluted, then stalked off toward the jungle. The procession vanished under the bulge of the palace wall.

Noreena of Venus stood alone, brooding, beside the curtained windows of her audience chamber. At its far end little groups of courtiers were whispering excitedly among themselves. Suddenly they stilled, all agog as an officer of the Guards entered. She went to meet him, asked some question in a low tone. His head bent in silent negation. He had found nothing. Noreena waved him away, and turned back to her window.

A man was standing before the curtains. No one had seen him come, but most of them recognized him—the Earthman, Beel. Now there would be more of that bewildering, rather disturbing bickering between the two, crammed with allusions that passed completely over their heads. They stirred uneasily. They did not quite approve of it.

But tonight neither Bill nor Noreena was in the mood for quippery. Bill's right arm was stiff and sore, with a charred needle-thrust through bone and muscle, and Noreena's hands were blistered. Things that should not be, were.

● They stood there morosely, side by side, staring out into the dark toward the untrodden jungles whence that invisible shaft had stabbed. Bill broke the silence, jerking a thumb back over his shoulder toward an alcove where the lean, sleek stranger of the evening's entertainment was lounging on a cushioned couch.

"Who's that?" he asked. "I've never seen him around here before."

"No," she replied, "he has just come—from where I do not know. He is Atampa, a noble of one of our oldest families. He dabbles in science, and in religions."

"He was with you before, wasn't he?" Bill urged her.

"Yes, during the shooting. He is an excellent shot with the ray."

"Seemed like he had some kind of flare that he used a couple of times."

"Once only, that I saw. It is some ray of his own devising, undeveloped as yet. He turned it on those who attacked you and short-circuited their projector, so he said. My Guards found scorched leaves and some fused crystal."

"Um." Bill let it go at that. He was willing to wait a bit, and see how things panned out. He had been watching this Atampa out of the corner of his eye, wondering why he kept to himself the way he did. That alcove—wasn't there a door there somewhere, behind the draperies? He turned to Noreena to ask her, only to snap his gaze back to the lounging noble. There had been some sudden movement—a stir of the hangings—something that drew his eye. He stiffened. Atampa was fingering a huge crimson flower.

He turned to the princess. "He is a botanist, this Atampa?" he asked.

"A botanist? He has gardens, as we all have. He has some rare plants that most of us have not."

Bill hesitated. Better be careful. Then: "I think he has brought a rare blossom in your honor, Princess. It is one I have not seen in your gardens."

She looked up at him, puzzled, sensing something hidden in his words. She turned and looked where he was pointing. She stiffened. Bill sensed mystery.

"Come on," he said, "let's go over and look at it."

Together they moved across the room toward the unsuspecting noble. His back was to them, and he seemed very much engrossed in the great flower. Bill's heel scuffed on the floor, and Atampa sprang to his feet, his eyes sharp and wary, his face suddenly pale beneath his sparse beard. Seeing Noreena he bowed deeply and stepped aside to let her pass, directly into Bill's path. A little red glow of warning rose in the Earthman's eyes, burned for an instant, and flickered out.

"The Princess Noreena has come to see the flower you brought her," he said.

There was danger in Atampa's narrowed eyes, but when he turned to the princess it was veiled by his suave, oily smile. He bowed and held out the flower.

"Highness," he said, "only the winds know whence this blossom came, the winds and the sea. There is none like it known to science today, though it may be that the ancients knew it. I brought it with me tonight that your Highness might wear it, so."

He held it to her shoulder. Against the white skin it burned like a great, licking flame, deeply crimson, with a heart of angry scarlet and fretted filaments of gold and orange like little thrusting tongues of fire springing up about its throat. Its fore-thrusting lip was a vivid vermilion, dotted lightly with gold and fringed with the little flame-tongues. It was beautiful, yet in some way angry and sinister. A little chill wormed its way up Bill's spine.

Noreena was strangely rigid, staring with unseeing eyes at and through the great bloom. At Bill's voice she came to herself with a flush of embarrassment.

"Maybe there'll be mention of it in the records of some of the old families," he commented. "It happens like

that on Earth lots of times. Old legends and superstitions crop up that prove a thing has been known for centuries."

Their reaction to his words was curious. Noreena's face was drained of blood, leaving her like a marble mask, frozen with hidden dread. Atampa was trembling with rage, his face a thundercloud, his eyes blazing. Something funny here!

With an effort the Venusian regained his poise. He answered Bill, huskily, as if his voice were not quite under control.

"It may well be," he said. "Yet I know of no such legend, and my line is as old as her Highness's. You know of none, Princess?"

There was a definite menace in his voice, but she ignored it. Instead, she posed a question of her own, looking at neither of them as she spoke.

"What name would you give it?" she asked slowly.

Baffled rage seethed behind Atampa's eyes. His lips were thin and straight, pressed tightly together. He was like one whose cleverest move has been played by his opponent. Somehow, out of somewhere, a single word burned in Bill's brain, and three words of translation.

"*Taramantha*," he murmured. "The Flame Orchid."

A stifled cry rose to Atampa's lips, and Noreena swayed in her seat. The great orchid dropped into her lap. Then, recovering instantly, she rose to her feet, making a gesture of dismissal.

"It is a name as beautiful as the blossom itself, Beel," she said. "I would give much to find the plant from which it fell, but that may not be. And now, I think, I will go. I am not well."

As she moved forward, the orchid, caught in the folds of her gown, freed itself and dropped to the floor. Instantly Bill pounced on it and knelt before her. Bending his head, he kissed the great flower's protruding lip, then raised it to her. A queer expression crept over his face. He ran his tongue lightly over his lips, then, as she took the blossom from him, he seized her hand and pressed it to them. Yet it was the orchid that he kissed, not her hand. And then she was gone.

Atampa bowed coldly. Bill rose slowly to his feet, a subdued light in his eyes.

"Some servant brought you the flower, Atampa?" he queried.

The Venusian glared his disgust. This groveling Earth-beast! Yet he answered civilly enough.

"I found it myself, Earthling," he said, "floating in the sea beneath the western cliffs. No menial has touched the blossom that I offer to my princess!"

"Sure," Bill agreed. "I get you. I just wondered. It's sure some fine flower, anyway, wherever it came from. Too bad someone can't find it for her Highness. Well, I guess maybe it's time I got going. See you again."

● Bill stood watching him, licking his lips thoughtfully.

His hand slipped down behind the hangings, found the latch of the hidden door. He drew back into a corner of the alcove and vanished under the heavy draperies. As he slipped along close to the wall of the narrow corridor he savored again the strange salt flavor that had been on the lip of the orchid. There were little black spots—some foreign matter—on it. They might have been

crusted salt from the sea, but they weren't. The orchid had never been in water. Those dark flecks were blood—the blood of an Earth-born man!

Shortly before dawn, the watcher in the tree-top saw a strangely shaped shadow fitting up the carven face of the palace, up and up toward the lowering clouds, higher than any building of Earth, higher than any man of Venus, up to the great fretted golden sphere that topped the imperial palace. Like a fly on that sheer wall, Bill Bradley crept upward through the dark, clinging to the deep-cut granite filigree, finding easy footholds in the maze of bold reliefs.

The watcher in the tree was a poor marksman. His rifle bore its globular fruit of flame and the invisible shaft of death darted forth to trace a little pattern of glowing dots about the moving shadow. Suddenly it dropped, ten feet or more, to hang limply over a jutting pinnacle of stone. The little green dots raced triumphantly down the face of the palace toward him, then suddenly a shaft of pale light split the air and in the tree-top a glowing globe of green light gyrated wildly and toppled into emptiness.

Seated cross-legged on the huge golden globe that topped the palace, Bill Bradley waited for the dawn, his back to the rising sun. There was a rift in the uneasy clouds above him, and he began to hope for even more than he had dared expect before. The sleeping world was growing wanly lighter, the peculiar pearly dawn of cloud-wrapped Venus stealing over the city of Laxa and the imperial gardens.

A shaft of silvery notes thrust down from the troubled, racing clouds, brightened swiftly into liquid gold. Its tip sped out over the rolling roof of the jungle, pointing out isolated forest giants, open, grassy parks, splotches of color that were luxurious blossoms, blunt cones that had been volcanic vents. Like a colossal spotlight it leaped across the forests, on and on, out over the great bowl of the rock-walled peninsula where no man had ever gone and lived to tell the tale.

The man on the palace-top followed its course with his glasses. It was narrowing, growing paler and dimmer as the cloud-gap closed. He let his gaze rove a little over the surrounding jungle, but for the most part he kept his eyes glued to that racing shaft of light. Out, out, until it seemed lost in the blue distance—out to the very edge of the hills beneath Laxa—out to the unseen rim of the hidden swampland—shifting, shrinking, fading it went. An instant—it sank into a dip in the forest roof, then rose, wavered, and vanished. And in that instant its dying light struck up a burst of angry crimson from the cool green of the sleeping jungle!

An hour longer Bill Bradley squatted there, peering at the spot on the horizon where the sun-shaft had disappeared. There, somewhere, at the edge of the great mi-asmic swampland, there had been an instant's flare of burning crimson, the crimson of living flame. But the cloud-gap had closed, and in the pale light of the waking day the distant jungles merged in a sea of hazy grey-green, where not even his powerful glasses could distinguish form or color. So, with the sun an hour high, he went as he had come, down the crannied face of the palace, to a balcony and a window.

Noreena of Venus stirred in her sleep. Her dreams were disturbed by unpleasant, disquieting visions—a sleek, bearded face, a bursting globe of white fire, a giant orchid tongued with living flame. Through the dream crept the

sense of some presence, some watching mind. She opened her eyes.

The thick hangings before her window had not yet been drawn, for it was early morning. Yet they were not as she remembered them, as they had been at night. There was a gap where pale light filtered through. Something moved in the shadows beside the bed. She sat up, reaching for the bell.

A form loomed against the gleam. A hand took hers, a finger was pressed against her lips. The man knelt.

"Hush," he whispered. "It's Bill, Noreena."

"Beel! What is it? Why are you here, now?" She drew away from him and raised herself against the pillows.

"Noreena," he said, "I'm going away for a little. I want to say goodbye."

"But Beel," she protested, "where are you going? Why do you go? Are you not happy here? Don't you like me any more?"

"You bet I do!" he grinned. "You just come here!" He demonstrated his affection. She required quite a bit of conversion. Her faith in Earthly fidelity had been shaken. But the sun was getting higher and the day lighter with every minute. He put her gently aside.

"Noreena, listen," he said. "I have to do this. It's what I'm here for—my duty to Earth and to you. There's something afoot that means danger and trouble for everybody, and I've got to run it down. If Atampa, or anybody, asks you where I am, you tell them I've gone to get you the Flame Orchid!"

He squeezed her hand and was gone. Alone, Noreena lay staring up at the shadowed ceiling. The Flame Orchid! What did he know, or guess? What would he do, and Atampa? She shuddered.

CHAPTER III

Into the Temple!

● Two days later found William Bradley, of New York and Laxa, deep in the untrodden jungles of the great western peninsula. At first the forest had been open, with huge, pillared trees like the columns of some great, green-roofed temple and little pools and grassy glades and slender brooks. Then, as the level of the land sank, the lower branches drooped lower still and the underbrush thickened and rose to meet them, while a tough lacing of vines and mosses wound over and around every trunk and twig. He had lost a good deal of time here—most of what he had gained in the open woodland—by casting from side to side of the broad tongue of land on which he found himself, hunting for the trail that he knew must be there.

He found it purely by accident. His water was running low, and to replenish it he sought out the growing stream that bounded the ridge on the north. During thousands of years it had cut down through stratum after stratum of rock, forming narrow terraces that broke the sheer drop of the cliff. On the highest of these he found the trail.

He had ripped through the underbrush down to the stream and was on his way back to the summit of the ridge when he slipped and scuffed aside a great leaf-disc of a sort that carpeted the upper ledges. Under it was soft, moist soil, and a human footprint.

He edged along the narrow terrace parallel to the stream. A path of least resistance had been cunningly disentangled, close to the outer edge where the vines were thickest. No trail was evident, but a trail there was, and he saw to the charges of his ray-guns and set out grimly to follow it to its end.

It came sooner than he had expected. Perhaps ten miles of Earth measure from the place where he had found it, the trail came out on the wall of a rocky gorge, with the stream, now a brawling rivulet, chattering along three hundred feet below him and the roof of the forest as far overhead. This in turn opened into a broad, U-shaped valley, another hundred feet lower down. Each arm joined the reedy edge-waters of the great central swamps, and directly opposite, forming the solid center of the U, rose a mountain of crimson flame!

It was a hill, really—a volcanic cone some thousand feet in height with its base set in the murky waters of the marsh and its summit overtopping the surrounding forest. And for all of half its height, from its midpoint to its peak, it was blanketed with the riotous blooms of the Flame Orchid! Thousands, millions of the great flowers cascaded down its steep slope in one mighty sheet of flaming crimson, dappled with waving streamers of golden orange like little spurts of flame licking up from a heap of embers. And from that great mountain of blooms came a faint, sickly sweet fragrance that he had not noticed in the single bloom, filling his lungs with a deadening drug, soothing him, lulling his senses, numbing his mind.

Numbed or not, Bill Bradley's brain was a match for most of the situations that he met or that met him. He had heard plenty about the perfumes of Venusian flowers, and he had come prepared. In a little filigree ball that hung from a fine, strong chain about his neck he placed a bulb of the powerful Martian garlic and bore down on the tiny screw that started the pungent juices flowing down his shirt-front. In a trice his head cleared and with smarting eyes he began his long climb down the face of the cliff.

His game arm was stiff and ached, and it had a nasty habit of going numb at unexpected moments. Probably the needle of energy had nicked some important nerve. Twice it failed and nearly threw him off balance, but both times he managed to recover his hold and rest until the spasm of paralysis had passed.

That descent took him half a day. The last two hundred feet were sheer drop with only a tough net of slender vines to hold his weight. Several times they tore away from the rock, and he saw that the face of the cliff had been smoothed and carved in low relief, by the ancients, perhaps. He could not quite make out the significance of the sculptured fragments that he saw, and he was in no mood for art-study. His goal, and his danger, was right next door.

With the cliff what it was, he was not particularly surprised to find a crumbling quay running along its base close to the water-level. None the less, he took three long, incredulous looks before the significance of it clicked into position in his brain. The U-shaped channel was a man-made moat. And the hill of the Flame Orchids was a vast temple!

He crouched against the wall, considering the possibilities of the situation. If it were not deserted—and the

hidden trail spoke against the idea—he would probably be dealing with priests and religious fanatics. The Service generally kept its fingers out of religious pies. One of the first laws of space is "ignore thy neighbor's creed." Missionaries are forbidden by interplanetary agreement. Then his arm went dead again, and he remembered that methodical, cold-blooded pumping of energy at him, three and three and three, across and back and up and down, cutting the air of his hideout to ribbons. His lips set grimly. He was on "vacation" and he'd play the game as he saw fit!

Presumably there was a signal system somewhere, and a boat of some kind. Bill had no truck with boats or signals. He went quietly and alone. He made sure that his pouches were water-tight and at the same time easy to get at. Then, choosing a spot where the tangled vegetation of the swamp-infested moat seemed thinnest, he slipped into the water and struck out for the other side.

Luck was with him. He had chosen the very place that had been cunningly cleared to offer a passage for the ferry. The tangled stalks of the water-weeds were cut and loosened, and where great, horny reeds grew a narrow lane had been cleared through their midst. Once his arm weakened, and he sensed the beginning of a cramp shooting down his side. Furiously he plowed into the thick water, forcing the numbing muscles to respond, driving them into action, and after a long moment of sheer torture he felt them waking, responding, doing his will again. Drenched with thin slime, gasping for breath, he dragged himself over the edge of the quay and huddled in an exhausted heap against the wall. He was on the island!

● Dully he stared up at the sheer walls above him. They were fretted with a delicate floral filigree, the great orchids, repeated over and over again, their fine filaments rising in a thousand little spires of flame from a nest of twining tendrils. And above them, lipping over the edge of the wall, cascading down from the summit of the great cone, was the mad profusion of the flame-flowers.

Even above the reek of the garlic and the swamp their cloying perfume dazed and sickened him—seemed to steal away the keenness of his mind and senses, to open the dream-gate of some weirdly beautiful Paradise where soft music played and there were women, tall and lithe and glorious, like—like Noreena.

Noreena! Her voice seemed to pierce the mists that enfolded him. Her face, grave and pleading as he had last seen it, swam before him. Her mind seemed to speak from behind those glorious eyes, to command him, to draw him back from his world of luring dreams. Drunkenly he fumbled in the bosom of his shirt and drew out a little metal box. Leaden fingers found the catch, opened it, drew out a tiny crystal bulb. He bent his head over it and with an effort burst it between finger and thumb. In an instant his brain had cleared as the powerful fumes of the ammonia surged through his head. He stared about him sheepishly, at the moat, at the walls with their crest of crimson froth, at the tiny gashes in his finger-tip. Gosh! It had been a pretty near thing! He'd have to be careful.

He rose to his feet and started off down the narrow ledge, toward the right—the north. There was no scaling that sheer wall above him. Somewhere there must be,

there would have to be, a door. And he was going to find it.

The fumes of the ammonia were beginning to dissipate and he mechanically reached for another capsule, wondering dully how long his supply would last. It wouldn't hurt to see how long he could buck that drugged fragrance, and conserve his ammonia. He shook his head violently to clear it and took a couple of deep breaths, then leaned against the wall to wait.

Five minutes passed, ten, and nothing happened. His mind was clear as a bell, cold and impersonal and utterly keen. His thinking-power was—well, he never *had* been so clear and clean of mind. It was wonderful!

It didn't take him very long to work out the truth of it. Like many drugs, this perfume was both a narcotic and a stimulant. First it befuddled the senses, and then, apparently, it cleared them. Or maybe it was the ammonia—the sudden waking from the drugged sleep, with both his waking faculties and the uncanny powers of the drug focused on his center of attention.

Those dreams—they had been unusually real and vivid. His subconscious mind had been working to capacity. And now that he had been snatched out of his trance, both conscious and subconscious intellects were concentrated on the same thing, giving an extremely keen, clear impression.

He tested his theory. He called up memory pictures—Zara, Noreena, the palace, Earth, New York. Wonderfully sharp and detailed they were, well-nigh perfect. He tried the other side—his conscious reasoning power, his awareness. That too was marvelously sharpened. There didn't seem to be a half-quantum of uncertainty in his whole mental makeup.

He turned his attention to the perfume of the orchids. Orchids didn't usually have perfume, he mused, not even here on Venus. Must be some reason for it. It didn't affect him as it had—didn't mean the same to him. It was just an odor, sweet, rather spicy, and just a little sickening, like ether. He didn't mind it though—in fact, he rather liked it. A hark-back to his dope dreams, he supposed. Well, he had no call to be dawdling away valuable time like this. He set out on his tour of the island.

He found the gate he had been looking for, around on the swamp side. From all appearances, the morass that choked the heart of the great peninsula had in ancient times been a huge lake or inland sea, and good-sized ships had come to the island temple. There was a ruined stone pier, and opposite it an alcove cut into the rock of the cone. Here the carving was truly riotous, and here traces of an ancient coloring still clung, protected from the storms, making the gloomy grotto live with the red-gold of smoldering flame-blooms, thrusting up in confusion from a maze of twining emerald. There were huge stone doors with shreds of gold leaf clinging to them, and high up in the gloom of the vault a little oval opening.

To be on the safe side, he tried the gates. No luck. They were barred on the inside. Bill grinned. Most temples, all over the system, were easier to get out of than into. He sensed something queer about the doors, and acting on impulse he reared up and gave them a terrific kick. It was with the greatest satisfaction that he heard

the boom of concealed steel armor-plate. This place wasn't half as old as it made out to be.

The doors were impregnable. So were the outer walls, as far as he was concerned. Here in the alcove though, the relief was deeper cut and little weathered, and fifty feet above his head was a hole in the bulwarks of this mysterious religion, plenty big enough to admit a man. He decided to be that man.

Compared to this, his one-armed scrambled down the cliff had been a picnic. Everything was beautifully smoothed and rounded, and nowhere was the carving more than three inches up. Luckily, his arm seemed to have recovered from its fits of numbness and he had two reliable hands with which to cling to the crumbling stone. Even two hands can be pitifully inadequate at times. Of one thing he was certain. Once up, there was no backing down, save by the uninviting process of diving. His bridges were spontaneously combustible.

Like some great drab bat, clawing and snatching and panting, he pulled himself up the sheer face of the niche and with a last spasmodic heave dragged his legs into the black, stinking hole that opened there in the shadow of the vault. It stank to high heaven, of damp and rot, and of the foul conglomeration of stenches that means dungeon on any planet. The thing was a ventilator shaft. Doubtless there were others, better hidden. He hoped that one of them might lead out, instead of in, by some less impassable route.

At least, it led in the right direction. On hands and knees, his body blocking out what little light filtered in from outside, Bill crept silently toward the heart of the temple. Yard after yard he edged his way into the stifling, reeking darkness, going warily, feeling his way gingerly along. And then, in the pitch blackness in front of him, there came a glimmer of light.

● Like some great, slinking rat he glided along the tunnel to where a narrow, barred slot opened in the floor. Lying at full length in the muck, he peered through. Only by a heroic effort did he keep from bursting into a strangled fit of coughing.

He was looking into a little high-walled cell, one of the temple dungeons—*oubliettes*, they used to call them on Earth. A cadaverous Venusian, holding some chemical torch over his head, was bending over the single narrow ledge of stone that served as a bed. There was a man lying there, gaunt and ragged. The stooping Venusian straightened up, and Bill bit his lip to check his cry of astonishment. The unconscious man was an Earthman—one of the Patrol!

Bill's eyes fairly bulged out as he stared into that little rock-hewn cell. The prisoner was stretched out on his stone shelf, dead to the world, and in a shallow niche just above his face was a golden chalice of the flame-flowers!

Strange contrast—that delicate vase with its vivid contents in this filthy hole in the rock! The great blooms, smaller only than the one Atampa had had, nodded eagerly above the drawn face of the sleeping man, their filaments swaying gently in some unfelt breeze, pouring their deadly fragrance over him. Bill smelled it, mingled with the foul fetor of the cell, stealing in perfumed waves through the heavy air.

The Venusian had been replacing them—the blooms of

other days lay rotting in the mire of the floor. With a last look and a leer of savage satisfaction, the jailer went out, leaving the cell in darkness. In a few seconds there came a second shaft of dim light, from a cell ten feet further along the corridor. After a moment's hesitation, Bill crept on toward it.

There were twenty of those narrow cells, and in fifteen of them men of the Patrol lay in drugged sleep under the avidly swaying flame-flowers. For they did sway—they moved of their own free will and volition, with a sort of hellish glee of their own. It was no breeze that stirred their nodding cups, but muscle-tissues. They were not tools, but allies.

Bill didn't find that very hard to comprehend. Orchids anywhere are a queer lot, many of them carnivorous. Here, it would seem, the presence of living food—the odor of it, probably—caused them to emit that intoxicating fragrance, and when the prey was of edible size, the orchids feasted.

What worried him was the fate of those fifteen captives. Why were they kept in a stupor? Why were the deadly blooms renewed so carefully? For what purpose were they being held here in this forgotten temple? Was it—for sacrifice? At least he could give them a fighting chance.

He fumbled in his pocket and counted over the little ammonia capsules. There had been twenty. Two he had used and one was broken. Enough and two to spare, if things went well. The blonde Venusians would have to fare for themselves.

Beside fifteen slits in the stone he halted, thrust his arm as far as it would go into the room beneath, and hurled his little capsule at the sleeper's head. Let 'em chance glass-cuts! He had none to waste. With a grunt of satisfaction he heard the first man moan and stir, and after ages leap to his feet in horror and bewilderment. Into fifteen cells, to fifteen trapped men from his own planet, he whispered the same message:

"I'm Bradley, of the Patrol. I'm going to help you out of this if I possibly can. I'll be back after I get the lay of the land, and tell you how things look to me. Meanwhile you lay low and do a little tall thinking. We'll need it! Get me?"

And fifteen tense voices answered "Yes!"

Bill reconnoitered. The air-shaft that he was in, after it passed over the block of cells, went somewhere and he went along. Here and there it branched, but he stuck to the main shaft and crept slowly and carefully into the dark. And after about twenty minutes he saw a blue glow in the distance.

He went on his belly now, like a snake. He was a snake, ready to spit sure death at whoever had trapped those fifteen men.

The shaft broadened and opened into a sizeable niche high up in the wall of a great, echoing hall in the heart of the hill. Down over the face of the niche cascaded a veritable Niagara of the poisoned blossoms of the flame-flower, while from far below came a thunderous rumble and the murmur of voices. Rising cautiously to his feet, he peered through the net of tendrils.

Never in all his young life had he seen such a sight! The center of the island was one great cylindrical volcanic throat, carved by ancient men into the sanctuary of the giant orchids. It was open to the sullen sky, and

over its circular rim tumbled huge sheets and nets of the crimson orchids, hanging in long festoons and tassled draperies clear to the polished ebon floor. They were far larger than those of the cells, every bit of three feet across, with streamers of flame-hue nearly twice as long. The whole surface of the shaft seemed to be alive with leaping, swaying, thrusting tongues of gold and crimson flame.

From circular pits in the temple floor spouted fifteen thundering shafts of vivid sapphire fire, huge jets of natural gases, impregnated with some metallic salt. Between them lanes on crimson marble led from curtained portals to a huge bowl of beaten gold at the center of the temple, within the ring of flame. And in the giant cup lay a thing that brought the watcher's breath to his lips with a shuddering gasp!

It was an orchid—one of the flame-flowers. It was twenty sheer feet across its gold-flecked maw, and the twisting streamers of gold and orange and crimson that shot up from around its tattered edges rose every bit of fifty feet into the still air. Its great mottled lip was like an altar of crimson marble, dappled with golden fire. And in its heart of angry scarlet a maze of writhing yellow tendrils stirred lazily.

CHAPTER IV

The Sacrifice

● Slowly his mind took it all in. This giant blossom—it was the evil deity of this evil temple. From it ran thick green cables like giant tentacles, out between the pillars of fire to the walls of the sanctuary, where they split into thousands of tiny ropes, covering the stone with an emerald net from which sprang the lesser blooms and those that covered the outer slope with their flaming blanket.

All of them—all the millions of them that grew over all this mountain-temple—were part of the single monstrous plant whose body or brain or whatever it might be lay here in its golden cup, basking in the sapphire light of the fifteen shafts of roaring flame.

It drank in that light, rejoicing, reflecting only the red and yellow of its flame-hued body. But for the dim white light from the open roof, it would have been jet-black, for the shafts were utterly blue. And it had no perfume. None of the blossoms that hung here in the blue-lit pit of the sanctuary, drinking in the rich color of the fifteen flames, had the seductive fragrance of those on the outer wall—those that must subsist on the puny light of the cloud-hidden sun, and what food they might lure with their drugged perfume.

It had been one of these blooms of the inner chamber, flecked with human, Earthly blood, that Atampa had offered to Noreena. He recalled her words—"He dabbles in science and religion." Had he been right after all? Was it Atampa who was behind that attack at the palace, who had provided some unnamed fate for the fifteen human wretches in the cells? Who—what was he? Was he the priest of the Flame Orchid?

Something was plucking at his sleeve. He stared down—started back in horror. One of the great flowers had closed over his arm like a crimson leech, and from beneath it crept ten little tentacles, toothed wickedly at their

delicate tips, that were boring eagerly into the veins of his arm!

With a hoarse cry he tore loose. These too, for all their feeding flame, had the blood-lust in them. When had they fed last? *When would they feed again?* He must get back—warn the prisoned men—work out some plan of escape. He turned to scramble into the tunnel when from the sanctuary came the brazen muttering of an enormous gong.

He stopped short. Where was his duty—with the unsuspecting men, or here, watching, learning what it was that threatened? His choice was swift. They were of the Patrol—they could care for themselves. He turned to the screen of vines again.

He dared not risk attack. These things—somehow they had communicated, realized his presence. They were groping for him with their evil little yellow fingers, fanning the humid air with their eager flaming streamers. They knew he was here, and they were hungry. Well, he'd give them something to think of! He drew his knife and crept toward the front of the niche. He'd learned to use it in space, where a knife is as deadly as a ray. But never had he fought a duel so utterly weird as this.

The things were uncannily quick. He dared not sever the giant blossoms lest he be seen from below. In their avid tentacles lay their menace, and with his knife held ready he set out to sever those writhing clusters of slow death.

They had some sense of his nearness and were reaching for him, their very stems, long and slender like worms, bending and stretching in his direction. Like lightning he struck, twice, and two little clumps of yellow tendrils lay twisting at his feet—two great, mutilated blossoms, dripping thin red liquid, were whipped back out of reach. A sort of shudder ran over the whole net of vines, and the untouched blooms withdrew a little, then came groping blindly forward again. He stabbed—the flower whipped out of his way and a second fastened on his wrist with the speed of a striking snake. He slashed out at it, severing it from its naked green stem, and trampled on its evilly stirring form. Things went redly hazy around him. He struck out frenziedly, slashing at vines, flowers, anything in his mad rage. And suddenly he saw that the great orchid at the center of the temple was stirring too, uneasily, as if disturbed.

His whirling brain cleared. He saw the thing he had done. Blind mad, he had slashed and torn with unleashed fury at the hungry, groping flowers, the flowers that were the body, the outer husk of the giant plant whose vital center was in that monster bloom in the golden cup. *It* felt the agony of his knife, not they. *It* was fighting him, at first idly, as one might avoid a thorn or a gnat, then with growing, waking recognition of his menace. The thing *knew* that he was there, that he was hostile and dangerous, and it would fight in deadly earnest!

The temple was filled with a growing restlessness—the giant orchid heaving in its cup of gold, its lesser members waving their tentacles and fumbling eagerly in his direction. The priests saw it too, and as he crouched behind the tattered remnant of his screen Bill saw them rush out over the floor toward the master bloom, saw them crowd about it, puzzled, *questioning it!* And in an instant of horror he knew that in some awful way it would answer them!

Somewhere that great gong crashed again. The priests hesitated. Again came its brazen thunder, and from the depths of the temple-mountain came the sound of chanting. They scattered to their posts beside the curtained portals. As they stiffened in their places a strange procession entered through the great arch just beneath him and halted ceremoniously.

The orchids seemed oddly intent, rapt. They ignored him—forgot him in their eager anticipation. Cautiously he bent forward and peered down into the sanctuary. He was right! It was Atampa!

Like some huge moth he was, with his great flaring cape of scarlet silk, barred and lined with black. Scarlet and black were his other garments, and on his pale forehead smoldered a great ruby. A moth—Bill smiled grimly. More like Earth's Satan he was, with his pointed beard and evil, burning eyes!

Out into the middle of the temple strode Atampa, high priest of the Flame Flower. Behind him came others, half a hundred of them, spreading out in concentric rings beyond the circle of the flame shafts. Within that circle were only Atampa and six others—the highest in the service of the giant orchid. Like him, they were garbed in capes of red and black, like him they bore great rubies on their foreheads, but none could approach him in savage splendor.

From under his cloak Atampa drew a little disc of beaten silver, hung on a twisted thread of gold. He rapped it sharply, and every head snapped erect as the tinkling note sang through the great temple and ran laughing down the corridors. There was silence, broken only by the rasp and rustle of the avid blossoms—then there sounded an answering note, low and golden, and into the sanctuary strode a strange trio.

First, head in air, glided a woman. She was a flame of scarlet—scarlet of jewel-blood, scarlet of desert sunset, scarlet of sun-flame—and her face was hidden by a sweeping veil of gossamer black. Proud, graceful, beautiful beyond all doubt, here was a woman to make man gasp! There are many such on Venus.

● Behind her towered two naked giants—utterly hairless, utterly huge. Great muscles rippled under pendulous lobes of thick fat. Their vacant beady eyes were sunk under protruding ridges of bone. Their naked skulls were peaked. And their skin was scaly and deathly white. Imbeciles they were, cretins, lower than the lowest beast. And they bore scimitars of blued steel, and golden chains that ran to the woman's wrists.

Sardonically Atampa waited before the chalice of the great orchid. Utterly unafraid the woman strode down the crimson aisle between the glowering ranks of priests, between the sapphire shafts, into the holy circle. At the circle of the flames her warders halted. No common man might pass that gate of fire. Rudely she was jerked to a standstill, but no cry or gesture escaped her. And Atampa seemed to approve.

Chuckling malignantly to himself he came forward, took one of the scimitars. With a single sweep he severed the two golden chains that bound her, dragging sharply at her wrists, searing the delicate skin. She made no sign, but stepped forward and stood beneath the great flower, a lithe flame every bit as avid as it. Sharply Atampa's hand came up, and the ritual of the Flame began.

From each corridor came a priest, wheeling an apparatus of prisms and lenses, with a great concave mirror of polished silver at the rear. They converged on the center of the temple, until each stood immediately before a sapphire pillar. Again the high priest's hand came up, and with a quick thrust they pushed each apparatus directly over the pit from which the flame-shaft sprung.

Out of those weird machines spread thin fans of pale blue fire, mingling above the paths to form a wall of flame with fifteen high-arched gates. Out of the inner face shot fifteen shafts of vivid sapphire luminescence, pure light, beating down upon the great orchid, bathing it in sheer glory, glutting it with energy. The flame-wall toppled slowly inward, forming a high-peaked dome above the golden chalice of the orchid-god, and as the pale light of the sky was blotted out the flaming orchid and the robes of its servants became coldly, evilly black.

Utterly strange that scene was to the man crouching behind his flower screen, high on the temple wall. The mosque of blue fire with its fifteen gates and its fifteen paths of crimson, dimming to glittering black—the half-seen shafts of light beating down on the basking flower-god and its golden altar—the silent black-clad shapes of evil within the holy of holies—to the followers of the dread deity the scene must have been alive with mystery and power! Bill saw only a brooding doom, creeping closer with every instant.

The silver disc chimed once. The priests leaped forward and as one man drew back their focusing machines. The fifteen sapphire pillars thundered upward as before. And in the center of the sanctuary the giant orchid was horribly alive and eager, its appetite aroused.

Again the silver chime. Fifteen haggard, blonde Venusians were brought in by their bestial warders. Filthy, emaciated, they stared boldly at the orchid and its priest, their lips curved by a cold, contemptuous smile. None seemed to see the woman beside the chalice, but her slim white hands, linked by a short golden chain, were tense and white-knuckled.

Smiling coldly, Atampa looked at the woman. He seemed to be waiting for a signal. None came. He turned with raised hand.

The strange machines plunged forward. An echoed click, and out of their rear faces darted pale white beams of fire, striking the bound men full in the face. Where heads had been were twisted cinders, and toppling bodies were caught by ready hands and hurled into the eager vine-net. A hundred little nests of tentacles seized upon them, bit into their veins, sucked hungrily at the rich red blood. Up along the face of the wall their limp corpses were borne, from group to group of the avid orchids, until, dry, lifeless husks, they were hurled to the ebon floor. There came the click of the machines, and they were drifting white ashes on the glowing stone.

Atampa stood with arms folded staring at the motionless woman. A statue she might have been, cut from enameled granite. No move, no sound betrayed the emotions that must torture her. With a snarl he tore the veil from her face. *Noreena!*

A cold smile curved her crimson lips, but her face was deathly white and her eyes blazed with the fury of the

sapphire shafts. Like marble she stood, staring at the little heaps of ash on the black floor.

Atampa's voice came purring out of the hush of the temple.

"Ashes, Noreena," he whispered, "white ashes. You sent them, Noreena—to die terribly before the altar of the Flame Flower, the flame-god, Taramantha. As its voice among men, I thank you, Noreena."

Her mouth was a fine red gash in her marble face. No misery burned in her eyes, but fury, cold and unrelenting. Atampa's voice raised in triumph.

"Look on the outlawed children of the Flame, Noreena! Look on its altar, and on *It*, if you dare, Noreena! Look—and remember!

"Remember the laws of the pale kings of Laxa: 'There shall be no worship of the Flame in the land of the kings of Laxa. Its temples shall be made ruin and its priests hunted with thlakas and slain to the last man. The Kings of Laxa are lords of the Universe!'

"Remember the old laws and the old tales, Noreena. Remember the curse of the dying servants of the Flame. 'O beardless Kings, await the Flower of the Flame!' Remember, Noreena! Taramantha is eager."

Goaded beyond endurance, Noreena spoke. Her voice was utterly cold, utterly contemptuous.

"Beast! Remember the old laws. Remember the thlakas of the Kings—their keen eyes, their savage beaks, their bloodied talons, wet with the vile blood of the black priests of the hell-bloom! There are yet thlakas, Atampa, and there will always be Kings in Laxa! Three planets will hunt you down if your filthy paws so much as touch me! Down—grovel before a Princess of Laxa!"

● Like a great, maddened cat Atampa sprang. He seized her by the shoulder and hurled her spinning against the chalice of the orchid, leaped after her and with his clenched fist beat her to the ground. Straddling her inert form he screamed his command.

"Bring them in! Show her the power of the planets!"

Bill's instinctive leap was checked. Into the temple, bound with heavy golden chains, stumbling in drugged stupor, came the captive Earthmen. He had not warned them. They were doomed!

Before each sapphire shaft a man crumpled to the floor. Atampa's fury knew no bounds.

"Fools," he screamed, "why are they still drugged? What were my orders?"

A priest of the outer circle came humbly forward to the circle of flame-shafts. "Lord," he said, "they were given the blossoms only as you decreed. Yet when we came for them they were thus. There was a strange odor, and the blossoms were limp—"

"No lies!" cried the maddened priest. "You have disobeyed the voice of the Flame! Get out! And remember as the Flame will remember!"

He wheeled and dragged Noreena to her feet. Her eyes were closed, her lips pale. With brutal slaps he beat her into consciousness, then dropped her in a huddled heap against the base of the great golden bowl. A demon of red fury he towered over her.

"Look up, Noreena!" he jeered. "Look up at the beasts of the swampland. Look up at the outlawed servants of the Flame. O Princess, look up!"

Trembling with rage, she staggered to her feet and

stood before him, clinging to the edge of the great chalice. Her eyes crept around the circle of inert forms, each beside its flame-shaft. Slowly she turned, her gaze following the circle. She stepped away from the bowl, her back to Atampa and the niche where Bill crouched. And then a miracle happened!

Against the far wall lay the great conclave mirror of one of the strange machines, of polished silver, very long of focus. Lit by the glare of the sapphire shafts, she tottered into line between it and the hidden niche, and in that instant it seized her image and hurled it, upside down, into the air, a bare ten feet before the startled man. With a leap he was at the screening vines, tearing them aside, and stood for a long moment staring into the eyes of the phantom before him. They widened. Her lips parted, then set. She saw him! He dropped back into the shelter of the niche as, drawing herself erect, she turned to Atampa.

"Who are these men?" she demanded.

"You should know, Noreena," sneered the priest. "For many weeks one of their kind has been your lover. By the old laws, of the Flame and of the Kings of Laxa, your life is forfeit. Bestiality brings death, Noreena, even to a Princess of the golden-haired Kings. And under the scourge of the Flame the space-beasts will be hunted down and slain to the last one, until no alien foot will dare touch the planet! Earth, Mars—by the Flame, they will fear the docile sheep of Venus before long! Every beast on the planet will die, and soon!"

"They were no beasts," she cried. "They are men—men of Earth. They are our cousins, our brothers. Three planets will blast you and your foul kind out of being if you dare touch them or me, Atampa. I swear it!"

"You think so, Princess?" he asked. "Look at those black rags, foul with filth. All is not dirt—that is the black of the Patrol, of the Service that cares nothing if its men are slain. They were sent here to die, Noreena, and if a fool had not drugged them you would watch them die. But you shall die first. You shall be judged! Are you ready, O Priests?"

Like the far mutter of thunder came the reply. "We are ready, Lord."

"Listen then, and judge according to the law of the Flame. She has hunted down the children of the Flame and put them to slow death. She has cast down its temples and destroyed its altars. She has cast it out into the swamps to rot unworshiped. She has blasphemed in its name before its altar. What says Taramantha?"

"It is death," came the dry whisper.

"Listen further, and judge by the laws of the Kings of Laxa, that no man may cry injustice. She has placed a beast above the high-born of the court. She has taken a beast for her lover. She has entered the temple of an outcast god and lain in worship before its altar. What say the Kings?"

"Death," souged the voices of the priests.

"Do you hear, Noreena?" jeered the high priest. "You are of the blood of the blonde Kings. What will you say? Have we judged aright, as the law proclaims?"

"You know the truth, Atampa! I have no lover, beast nor man, though you have sought to force yourself upon me. This place is no temple, this basin no altar, and your weed no god! You will die, Atampa, soon and not pleasantly."

A shocked murmur ran through the watching throng. Sacrilege! Blasphemy! Hell-fire burned in Atampa's eyes. A swift stride and he had thrust her back against the golden chalice of the Flame Flower. A word, and two priests seized her and pinned her there, helpless. From under his robe the high priest drew a little instrument of three strings and a tiny bow, and began to play.

Cold chills ran up the spine of the watching man. Like the thin, far screech of some harpey was that wailing tune, shrill and tremulous, mounting higher and higher in a thrilling lament of utter hunger. The orchids began to tremble, to stir uneasily on their slender stems. And in its chalice the great Flame Flower of the black priests was stirring too.

Its filament wavered and swayed like tongues of golden, red-flecked fire. Its hungry yellow tentacles crept out over its evil lip. It rose above the rim of the bowl, revealing the long, pendulous pouch that hung from its underside, nested in darkly colored serrated leaves. From where he crouched, Bill stared down into the monster's blotched and speckled throat, into that drooping sac. In it quivered a mass of pale grey jelly, seamed like some gigantic brain. He stared at it dumbly. It was covered with a net of fine white filaments, twining together into little cords of white tissue that vanished into the body of the giant flower. By God, it *was* a brain! Leaping to his feet with a scream of warning he emptied his ray-gun into the pulsing mass.

CHAPTER V

Parting of the Ways

● At his shout, Noreena tore free from the two priests that held her and dove under the curve of the chalice. Petrified, Atampa stared at his tortured god. Its brain was not as ours. vital to life, for its life was not as ours. It was a plant, living as plants do. Yet it felt the exquisite agony of death as Bill's ray seared the delicate nervous tissue of its unnatural brain. Writhing in pain and fury it raised itself like a striking snake on its stubby stem. Its heavy head and flaming jaws thrust out and down.

Its whipping tentacles closed on the throats of Atampa and his two priests and snatched them kicking into the air. Immediately the saw-edged tips dug into their veins, and their hot blood dappled the outthrust lip of the giant Flame Flower as it dragged them struggling into its cavernous maw! For a moment it swayed with the violence of their death-writhing, then there came a horrible bubbling scream and the huge petals closed slowly over them.

Beside the sapphire shafts fifteen men of Earth sprang to their feet and leaped into the inner circle of the sanctuary. Noreena was on her feet, and as the four remaining priests rushed at her she drew from the bosom of her dress a tiny silver whistle and blew three sharp blasts.

The temple woke to the echo of racing feet. From every corridor plunged a score of royal guardsmen, armed with swords and rays. Caught between death and superstition, the lesser priests milled frenziedly about, then broke for the altar of their god. But in every gate stood a man of the Patrol, brandishing a blue-steel scimitar that was like a disk of lashing flame before them, biting through flesh and bone in awful mimicry of the fifteen sapphire shafts of death that framed them.

The four priests within the circle of flame had stopped at Noreena's signal, undecided whether to fight or flee. They had no choice. But, dying, they would take with them the defiler of their god! Again they had counted without Bill.

He had come down the wall like a great, agile ape, ripping through the waves of angry orchids that burst over him. Streaming blood from a dozen deep gashes he dropped into the mêlée on the temple floor and drove through it toward the altar and Noreena. He reached the edge of the milling throng, beating his way with the butt of his ray gun, and with a warning shout leaped into the open inner space, under the guard of one of the fifteen warders. Noreena was down, stunned, the four standing over her with faces and arms raised in supplication to their dishonored god. At his shout they turned, and he was at them.

It was a good fight while it lasted. They were all big men, and knew a number of the finer points of in-fighting. Without help he would have been swamped, but help arrived in the shape of a blood-spattered blonde Venusian brandishing a two-handed sword. One man went down like a stone, his head bounding merrily off over the floor. The sword bit through the upflung arm of a second and turned, to sink into his shoulder and stick. And the third man stepped under its swing and before the Venusian officer could free it was at his throat.

It was a fine fight, nothing barred. Priests and poets make efficient fighters, with a maximum of damage for a minimum of effort. Bill Bradley found himself with his arms wrapped around a baby cyclone, and he didn't dare let go to get another hold. The advantage was all with the other fellow.

Out of the welter of claws and fists and teeth which he had managed to fend off with a hard dexterous skull, he emerged to consider the situation. Desperately he toppled backward. The fellow's head missed the base of the chalice by inches and rammed into the floor. No effect. Yanking his knees up under him, Bill let go and kicked out.

What might have been a success was a fizzle. The priest went right on over, landing on both feet where Bill's face should have been. It wasn't. They were both up, and then Bill's heel skidded in the red pool that had gushed from the severed head of the first priest and he went down with a thud that put him temporarily out of the picture. The priest drew back one foot for the conclusive gesture, whereupon the other was snatched from under him and he came down on his face, hard. Noreena had entered the lists.

Bill Bradley came out of a dream of flames and cretins to find a pale-faced Venusian officer tugging at him and shouting in his ear. Noreena? She was here a minute ago. He pulled himself upon his elbow and rolled over. In a welter of red, the gold of her hair caught his eye.

He dragged her out from under the man who had been trying to kill him the moment before, and began to mop at her face with the remains of someone's cloak. No wounds, thank God. She'd just fainted. Whereupon she shivered and drew closer to him. Grinning, he let her drop.

● So it happened that Noreena, Princess of Laxa, sat in judgment on the last of the black priests of Taramantha,

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Red Flame of Venus

(Concluded from Page 359)

the Flame Flower. Bill couldn't help admiring those priests. From every last stronghold on the planet they had rallied to fight in the royal courts for the lives of the survivors of the carnage in their holiest temple.

They hadn't a chance. Out of sheer sportsmanship, Noreena set aside the argument, fatal in itself, that they broke the ancient laws in existing as priests of an outlawed creed. Enheartened at this sign of weakness, they shifted from defense to attack and with utter insolence brought up Atampa's charges, daring her to disallow them. Then it was that a steely glint crept into her eyes.

Under their shameless assault she let her defense weaken, crumble away to nothing. Aghast, the court saw her convicted of bestiality, of murder, of sacrilege and blasphemy. They saw her conspiring against the emperor, her father, to give over the planet to a race of brute beasts. They saw her stealing the bread from Venusian mouths to cram it into the insatiable maw of Earth. They saw that death, and slow death, was the only possible sentence that she and Bill should draw. In horror, they saw that even where the defense was obvious she seemed dazed, blind to it. And strangely, neither she nor Bill, after the first few charges, seemed to be worried. Was this a suicide pact? Realizing that they could not mate, would they forfeit their lives and let these conspirators go free? Or were they bewitched—mad?

Nastily exultant, the spokesman of the priesthood of the Flame Flower closed his case. He glowered out over the pale faces of the courtiers, fingered his straggling beard, and shot his bolt.

"I demand," he shouted, "that the charges against my brotherhood be withdrawn, that this woman be placed on trial with her beast from Earth, on the counts which I have already proven. If there are no further charges, I demand dismissal and the immediate trial of this creature and her lover!"

Noreena's face was expressionless, but deep in her eyes something glittered, hard and cold and merciless. Enigmatically she stared down at him, then in a low, vibrant purr she spoke.

"You dare?" she whispered. Her slender fingers flexed like the claws of a giant cat. She moved to the edge of the dais. Her cold smile came again. "Tell me a little of the Flame," she said. "Is it a true brotherhood, as you have claimed? Are all equal before the god, or does one stand above the rest, greater than they? Tell me."

The priests stared at her bewildered. The faces of the courtiers were blank. Even Bill was puzzled, but in a moment he saw light, as the spokesman of the group gave his answer.

"We are brothers before the Flame and before men," he proclaimed haughtily. "We are one being, with heart and head and hands serving one body, and our soul is the Flame. We stand here in this place of justice as we have always stood, a single man, asking judgment. I am the tongue of the Flame, and I demand that we be judged as the law decrees!"

Noreena bowed stiffly. "So shall it be," she acknowledged. "As one man you have fought against me, and

come to be judged for your crime. What has been done is the deed of all. It is well." She stood a moment, silent, gazing into nothingness. The court sat petrified, horror-struck. Was this all? Would they go free? Was she mad?

Suddenly her eyes blazed. She towered above them, her lips curved by a cruel smile, a goddess of awful vengeance. Her voice was silken, yet her words cut like the edge of a keen blade.

"They have sworn to the truth!" she cried. "They have told of how I grovelled on my face before a forbidden god while they stood in horror and watched. They stood—stood mocking above me, a Princess of Laxa! Remember the law, brothers of the Flame! As one man, whether ye come from Laxa or from Narsook or from Keeth, ye will pay the penalty! Guards—seize them! They have stood as one man above a daughter of the emperor!"

* * * *

There were certain inevitable changes in the personnel of the palace staff. Not a few had been devotees of the Flame Flower. And Bill's vacation was over.

He stood with Noreena at the window where he had stood a scant fifteen days before, wondering about Atampa. And now—

"I hear you're getting married," he said.

She nodded. "Yes," she admitted. "It will be soon. It has been arranged for long, since I was a child."

"I know," he told her. "Rillo told me." He laughed, shortly. "Funny, isn't it, the way we've been," he said. "You better not let your husband get wind of it. He'll come raying for me!"

She smiled. "Yes, Beel," she agreed. "I fear he would not understand. We do not do these things in Venus, even in Laxa. The court has been horrified—frightened for me and for Venus. Even now, I think they do not believe—but what of that? For a little I have been free and young, like other women on other planets. Without you I could never have dared it. It was here, in my heart, but there was no man of all Venus to bring it to life."

She laughed, bitterly. "Think of me, Beel—like these women of the court, prim and dry and proper and always frightened. I would have been in your Hell, but there would have been no release. And now—now I can remember my Paradise. Now I am Noreena, not just a Princess of Laxa!"

Bill rose to his feet. "Right you are," he told her. "Pals is what they'd call us out there, on Earth and wherever Earth's men are, and not the usual kind, even there. If that husband of yours ever tries to sit on your safety valve, you just send me an S. O. S. and I'll hop right over and help you raise a few roofs for him. And it'll be fun!"

He squeezed her hand. Bending over, he nipped her ear gently. Then with a sweeping bow and the lift of a hand he was gone.

"So long, pal," he said. "Vacation's over. But—I'll be seein' you."

And the soft light of memory in Noreena's eyes told him she would be waiting.

THE END