

PLANET STORIES



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When they awoke the Chameleon men were there.

TEST FOR THE PEARL

By VASELEOS GARSON

Together, the Earthman and the Jovian outfought and outwitted the prison guards, the Venusian jungle-hell, the cunning Chameleon men. Together, they were invincible. But at the Test for the Pearl they divided . . .

FAR OFF IN THE STEAMING Venusian jungle, a band of the Chameleon men halted, lifting their mottled faces in the direction of the sound.

Closer in, a four-man jungle patrol of Earthmen broke as one man into a run along the trail, their swift-moving bodies swishing the clouds into ragged streamers.

At the edge of the viscous river circling the island an armed guard slipped on his infra-red glasses and began searching his area carefully, his special light traveling slowly along the river and its near and opposite banks.

On the island, only a few yards from the high, thick walls of the Interplanetary Prison, a patch of ground, approximately eight feet by five quivered once—and was still.

The deep-throated roar of the escape siren was thunderous. It carried for scores of miles through the steamy atmosphere of the planet, alerting both natives and Earthman patrols to a successful break from that most fabulous of prisons—The Hole.

Behind the oxygen mask he wore, lying under a foot of the thick spongy soil of the planet, Jarl Gare wiggled his itching body and chuckled.

He nudged Waltk, the huge Jovian who lay beside him. "Don't get restless, now," he mumbled through the mask. "We have hours to wait. And somebody might spot this patch of ground if you keep wriggling."

The Jovian grunted, wriggled again, and then was quiet.

"Men have escaped from The Hole before," Jarl Gare muttered, "but they were always caught before they got to the pearl beds. Waltk's body and my brain will get us through."

He envisioned one of the huge Venusian pearls—so rare and so precious on Earth that it could buy a man's freedom, even from a murder charge.

Jarl Gare fell asleep, dreaming of a bauble as big as his head.

HE was awakened by a nudge. "It is night," Waltk grunted. "I smell it."

Gare worked one hand up through the spongy earth, poked a hole in it and wiped the mud from his mask's eye-piece.

"Right," he muttered. "It's time to go." He worked his head out of the ground and looked about.

There could be infra-red spotlights covering the very ground under which they lay. But they would have to take the chance.

His body made a sucking sound as he drew himself from the self-dug grave. He reached back in and tapped Waltk. The big Jovian virtually erupted from the ground,

the weight nothing to his mighty thews. Carefully they replaced the spongy earth. Then, with Jarl Gare in the lead, the pair walked upright, but quietly, to the great power-charged fence.

It went up twenty feet and down the same distance underground—Jarl Gare had learned this depth from a prisoner who had tried to dig his way out but failed and nearly drowned as liquid seeped into the hole he was digging.

The big Jovian, his thick-thewed body glimmering with sweat in the ground light, bent to pick up Jarl Gare's slight naked body.

"Wait," Jarl Gare warned. "We must wait until one of the river beasts start plunging."

The Jovian grunted. He waited, flexing the great shoulder and back muscles. Then he said suddenly, "I smell guards."

Jarl Gare's thin face jerked up at the seven foot figure of his companion. "Where?" he asked tensely.

The Jovian with a quick movement shoved Jarl Gare to the ground, dropped flat swiftly himself and wriggled away through the short grass.

Jarl Gare waited quietly. The big Jovian whose eyes, trained on his homeworld of darkness, penetrated the steamy fog of Venus almost as well as an infra-red lamp, would take care of the guards his nostrils had scented.

That was the way Jarl Gare had planned it. Waltk's strength, nearly a dozen times greater than that of an Earthling, his hearing developed to a tremendous acuity by the environment of his homeworld, and his eyesight were the tools of Jarl's brain.

If Waltk had had Jarl's brain, he could have won a Venusian pearl, but, while Nature had given him a marvelous machine for survival, she had only given him just enough brain to keep it operating.

His work would be done when they reached the Venusian pearl beds. One glance at the bulky figure and the Venusians would know the weakness. But it did not matter if he lost. Jarl Gare would still win a pearl.

I have no weakness, Jarl grinned to himself, except pride and the Venusians seek out physical or mental weakness—not a character weakness. He remembered the oft-told tale of the Earthman whom the

Venusians had frightened to death, but that was because he showed that fear physically.

Three years in The Hole and you either go raving mad or learn to mask every emotion.

Abruptly, Walth was back. "There were two," he said, "Two no more."

"Did they have fog-piercers?" Jarl Gare asked.

"Yes," Walth grunted. "I remembered what you said." He handed over a pair of glasses and the special light. "You would not need these. I see enough for both of us."

There was a muted splash from the river.

Walth's great hands seized Jarl Gare about the waist and lifted him. "Three splashes—then heave," Jarl Gare said.

The next splash was louder, the second louder and longer and, when the third crashed into the night, Jarl Gare was flung as if from a catapult over the fence.

As his naked body struck the river, his mind exulted. It was perfect timing, the splash of the river beast drowning out his own.

Jarl Gare trod water, waiting. The Jovian's hurtling figure was a dark blotch against the fog. Jarl swallowed a deep breath of air before the splash of water from the Jovian's body struck him.

THE TWO of them floated quietly, let the river water grow sluggish again. The splashing of the beasts grew nearer. Jarl Gare heard the big Jovian breathing hoarsely. He said reassuringly, "They are harmless, Walth. I've told you so a dozen times."

"I have never seen one of them," Walth said hoarsely. "I fear nothing I have seen. You have only told me of them."

Only a few feet away, one of the river beasts suddenly lunged out of the water. Walth squealed as the huge body loomed in the air over them, then landed between them, sending spray cascading over them.

Walth struck out at the beast and then began to chuckle. Jarl Gare heard the chuckle through the echoes of the splash.

The beast was gone. "Look," said Walth, holding up one hand. It held a blob of dripping flesh. "It is weak. I have seen it and I am unafraid."

For answer, Jarl Gare who had just donned the infra-red glasses, tapped Walth on the shoulder and plunged under the water. He had sighted the ray of an infra-red light on the river.

Jarl Gare swam under water, moving with the current. He felt the movement of the water behind him and knew Walth was following.

He angled for the far bank. On arrival he slid his head and eyes out carefully. The infra-red light was far up the river, following the jumping river beasts.

Without ripple or sound, Walth broke the surface of the river.

Their two naked bodies glistening with the water, Jarl Gare and Walth stepped out of the river and slid into the luxurious growth of the jungle.

One step in the climb to freedom and wealth had been accomplished! Jarl Gare chuckled, patting the mighty arms of his companion.

"Can you lead us in a straight line through the jungle if I give you a pointer?" Jarl Gare asked. He knew the answer—but he liked to preen his ego on the knowledge that his brain had evolved the plan. Walth grunted.

"Look back at the Hole," Jarl Gare said.

The Jovian turned, his eyes intent. "I see it," he said.

"The high radio tower?" The Jovian grunted. "The guard's barracks?" Again the Jovian grunted.

"Draw an imaginary line from the tower through the center of the barracks. Our path will extend along that line."

"Come," said Walth. He led Jarl Gare back up the river, watching the tower. He halted finally, facing across the river, and then made an abrupt about-face.

He closed his eyes and stood tense, unmoving as minutes dripped past.

"I have it," he said.

Brains, chuckled Jarl Gare to himself. Use every weapon, every tool. But it was easy. Walth was of a race which had developed for self-preservation the sense of taking a straight line between two points. In their vast world where landmarks were absent, it was a necessity.

Here on Venus that sense would lead Jarl Gare to freedom and wealth.

It was like a radio beam on the space lanes, but the Jovian needed no sending

station. He was the station itself, able to orient himself if he went off course.

They started out through the jungle—naked and unarmed—aiming straight for the Venusian pearl-beds which, by Jarl Gare's estimate, lay three hundred miles north of the Hole. Three hundred miles between hell and heaven.

WALTK was tireless, his great body immune to the ravages of the sharp-edged undergrowth and the strangling vines. He had no need of a path. He made his own, guided by that unfailing sense of direction.

Jarl Gare slid along in the Jovian's wake, his passage cleared by the strength of his companion.

Jarl used his infra-red lamp sparingly, for fear Earth patrols might be wearing the special glasses and discover the beam.

The patrols were tough and relentless. They shot first and then asked questions.

Jarl used the lamp to reassure himself, even though Walthk grunted when anything out of the ordinary appeared, describing it to his companion.

Their first sleep came when Jarl Gare judged they had come almost a third of the distance to the pearl beds. He suppressed the hunger pains in his belly by telling Walthk again the story of the Venusian pearls. They lay in a cradle of a great tree whose five great arms spread out from the trunk.

"I saw one once, Walthk," Jarl Gare said, and his voice was soft. "It was back on Earth, and it was the property of one of the richest men on Earth—Voltane, inventor of the force field that protects space cruisers from asteroids and space fragments. He gave half his wealth for it. And he was rated as worth four million credits."

"Two million credits for a jewel? He was a fool," Walthk said.

"Ah, but, Walthk, you should have seen it. He displayed it once a month in public. And the crowds that gathered . . . It was gray, but it pulsed and throbbed as it were alive."

Walthk said seriously, "I did not know the pearls were gray. I had heard they were pink or red or orange. I never heard of a gray one."

"Nor had I," Jarl Gare nodded. "But there it was. It wasn't the color that at-

tracted me, but the life force that seemed to throb within it.

"That day I decided I would have one—though I knew there were only four of them on Earth. But there was no way for me to get to Venus—"

"I know," said Walthk, "You have told me. You were Earthbound because you had been in Earth police custody too often. But you made a plan. Earthmen convicted of treason, murder and other high crimes were sent to The Hole. So you killed a man—"

"And was sent to the Hole. But for you, Walthk, my plan would have failed. I needed your strength—your instinct—your eyes. I promised you a pearl, too."

"You have already given it to me," Walthk said quietly. "Freedom from The Hole, if only for a while. Because you led me from the Hole, I will help you until your quest is ended. I swear it."

Jarl Gare chuckled to himself. *The simple-minded brute! He thinks he's free. For the moment, sure, but when he meets the Venusians he's done. Good riddance. A tool should be discarded if there's no more use for it.*

THE gentle touch of Walthk's big hand on his shoulder awakened him. "The Chameleon men," Walthk whispered.

Hastily, Jarl Gare slipped on the glasses and seized the light. "Where?" he asked.

"They are in a circle about the tree."

Jarl Gare swerved the light around the tree. A hundred yards away was the edge of the circle. The infra-red showed them—dark, hunched figures.

"They just seem to be waiting for something," Jarl Gare said.

"Us," Walthk said laconically.

Jarl Gare went through the card-catalog of his brain. The Chameleon men, the Venusian natives, evolved from reptiles who walked upright, were intelligent but could converse with men only through thought pictures. They were the guardians of the pearl-beds.

Their vision in their fog world was as good if not better than Walthk's. They needed no infra-red rays to penetrate the fog as the Earthmen did.

They had fought viciously against colonization by Earthmen. Despite punitive measures by Earth, they were not con-

quered and finally there had been an Earth-Venus treaty.

Earthmen were permitted access to the oil fields and were allowed to create The Hole. In token of the great pact, the Earth had given its largest, most perfect diamond to Venus. Venus, ruled by its hierarchy of the Guardian Priests, had given a pearl.

The pearl had touched off cupidity on Earth—and adventurers by the score had attempted to wrest others.

Earth at first had sought to halt the adventurers, but Venus had replied cryptically. "Let them come. If they can obtain a pearl, they have won it fairly."

Of the hundreds who had tried, only three had won through successfully. Only three had been strong enough to pass the test of weakness.

If an Earthman made it to the pearl-beds, he was given the test of weakness. If he passed it, he went free with a pearl of his choice. If he lost, he disappeared.

Only three . . . and Jarl Gare chuckled. Soon there would be four. Jarl Gare.

The Venusians were sluggish moving and web-footed, perfectly at home on their spongy earth. But in the trees?

Jarl Gare spoke quietly to Walth. "We can escape them by traveling through the trees."

"I could," said Walth, "but you would be too slow. They would capture you."

Jarl Gare looked at Walth appraisingly. "On your back, I would not slow you too much."

Walth grinned widely, his moon face wrinkling. He laughed throatily. "You would not slow me at all. I had not thought of that."

Jarl Gare's ray gun swept the circle again. "I wish I could see them," he said. "I'd like to know what they looked like if I met them face to face."

Walth's eyes turned to one of the waiting figures. "They are as tall as you. Their heads are conical, set on sloping shoulders without much neck. Their bodies are mottled green and red and brown. They carry two-pronged spears. Their feet are webbed."

"I have seen pictures of them," Jarl Gare said. "But they weren't colored. I remember reading that they can change the colors of their skin to blend with surroundings."

"They blend well," Walth said. "It was difficult for me to see them at first after I had sensed them."

Walth slung Jarl Gare on his back. A tensing of his mighty thews and one leap took them to a tree thirty feet away. Then they were swinging swiftly through the upper reaches of the forest, propelled by the Jovian's strength, made even more powerful by the lesser gravitational pull of Venus.

A mile away Walth halted, while Jarl Gare swept the forest behind him with the infra-red ray. He laughed. "They're still sitting there, waiting for us."

"Good," said Walth. "It is easier to travel in the trees."

He resumed the role of carrier, and went plunging on.

THE HOURS of flight through the trees seemed hardly to touch the reserves of the Jovian's strength.

But suddenly, abruptly, he halted.

"We cannot go further through the trees," he said to a puzzled Jarl Gare.

"The end of the forest ahead?" Jarl Gare asked. "That means we're less than a hundred Earth miles from the beds."

"No," Walth said. "Not the end of the forest. There is something I don't understand. I feel a pressure ahead of us . . . as if some horrible fate awaits us."

Jarl Gare's first reaction was to brush away Walth's fears as if merely caused by not understanding what lay ahead. It was like Walth's fear of the water beasts. But then he remembered the intuitive sense the Jovians had.

"We'd better go down, then," Jarl Gare decided.

"No," said Walth. "It is the same there."

"Then we'll go around it. Come on."

An ironic smile blossomed on Walth's moon face.

"It is the same everywhere," he said. "To either side, above, below, ahead and behind us."

Jarl Gare, whose fierce desire for a Venusian pearl had lifted him above panic, felt only a twinge of exasperation.

"I feel nothing," he said, irritated. "Why can't we keep going?"

The Jovian shrugged. "I feel we can't."

"Hell," said Jarl Gare, "I'll go down and show you."

Jarl Gare's wiry, whip-scarred body slid down the limb on which they stood until it reached the crotch of the huge tree. He started down the trunk. Walth watched him quietly.

Jarl Gare stopped suddenly. Then, slowly, he inched his way back up the trunk to the limb where the Jovian stood.

"I see what you mean," he said. "This was something I hadn't figured on." He sat down on the limb, letting his legs dangle.

Whatever had them hemmed in wasn't intangible. It was real. His foot had touched it. It had felt cold and gave slightly. Jarl Gare brought the foot up and looked at the toes. They looked unharmed, but seemed numb.

He pinched them and felt no more sensation than if they had grown numb from loss of circulation. They were cold to his touch.

Was that force thin-skinned like a balloon or solid as a plasticine ball?

"Walth," he said, "Break me off a good-sized branch."

The Jovian slid farther out on the limb, snapped off a branch the thickness of his wrist and about three feet long and brought it to Jarl Gare.

"Watch it closely," he ordered Walth.

He dropped the heavy branch. It fell about twenty feet, and stopped abruptly. Then slowly, like a ruptured duralloy canoe, it started downward again, but gaining speed. It struck the ground, but neither Walth nor Jarl Gare could hear it strike.

Then the force wasn't solid.

He became aware that the foot which had touched the force was beginning to tingle. The power it released to numb was only temporary then.

Jarl Gare chuckled. Their bodies might be numbed for a while, but they would be free of the force.

Quickly, he slid down the branch again. At approximately the same spot where he'd stopped before, he halted again and reached out tentatively with his toes, touching the numbness.

He looked back at Walth. "Follow me," he ordered.

Then Jarl Gare jumped. It was like leaping into frigid water from a steaming shower bath. The shock wiped the con-

sciousness from Jarl Gare, but not before he felt his body falling freely. He didn't feel the lesser shock as his body struck the spongy sward of the jungle.

AWARENESS that his face hurt came to Jarl Gare first. It was a recurring pain. First it stung, then the pain retreated. Then it stung again . . .

He realized that someone was methodically slapping his face. He opened his eyes. Walth stopped slapping him.

The big Jovian was grinning. "It is all above us now," he said.

Jarl Gare stood up, and almost fell down again, staggering, feeling no sensation in his legs.

Walth supported him. "It will leave. My body is tingling only pleasantly now."

Sensations came back quickly. Even Jarl's eyes began to tingle in harmony with the thousand prickles that coursed over his body.

Finally he could limp along and as the power returned to his muscles he began to step out briskly.

"What was it?" Walth asked.

Jarl Gare shrugged. "I don't know for sure, but it must have been some sort of thin force field—able to resist concerted pressure, but not quick, sharp shocks like our leaping bodies."

The tangled jungle finally dwindled away and the pair were striding across fields rich with vegetation.

"It is beautiful," Walth declared. "Such bright colors shining like jewels through this fog."

Jarl Gare glanced at Walth sharply, and then at the gray vegetation. He grinned. "I wish I had your eyes, Walth, or been raised on Jupiter where I'd have to develop such keen perception."

Walth shrugged his big shoulders. "You Earthmen have good eyes, too, but you do not need them as much as we do."

"Are we still heading right?" Jarl Gare asked.

Walth nodded. They plodded on.

That night they supped on a queer animal that Walth had run down and throttled with his bare hands. It tasted like beefsteak. Walth ate prodigiously, but Jarl Gare, who wanted to be sharp and quick on the morrow, ate sparingly.

During the night, Jarl awakened several

times, his nerves on edge for the test he knew lay ahead, but Walthk slept heavily.

When they awakened the Chameleon men were there.

Walthk was on his feet instantly, his great hands reaching out. Jarl came to his feet more slowly, wondering that the Chameleon men had not slain them while they slept.

The skins of the Chameleon men were a mottled gray, colored to match the gray background in which they lived, he observed. There were a dozen of them ranged around the big Jovian and the slight Earthman. Their barbed two-pronged spears were held lightly in their webbed hands, and their lidless eyes stared blankly at the naked pair.

Jarl Gare waited quietly, one hand on the powerful biceps of his companion.

Finally, he became aware of a picture growing in his mind. Of a vine and tree-latticed river spouting out of a jungle into a deep pool. All around the edges of the pool were stacked great piles of huge oyster shells.

The surface of the pool broke regularly, conical heads popped out and the mottled bodies swam toward shore, depositing the huge shells where they were taken by other Chameleon men, expertly split open and examined.

One out of three yielded a pulsating pearl.

Then into Jarl Gare's mind came another picture. He and Walthk leaping through the trees, then jumping through the force field, finally coming to the fields, leaving the jungle behind. Then a picture of the pearl beds again. Now a picture of strange men—wrestling with the Chameleon men, throwing great weights, leaping, diving into the pool, racing against the Chameleon men in their own element.

A great sigh lifted Jarl Gare's breast.

"Walthk," he cried, "We have passed all but the final test. One more, and the pearls are ours."

The Chameleon men nodded and turned, to march ahead of them across the fields.

Jarl Gare was exulting. "I will win a pearl—a glorious gray pearl pulsing with life and beauty. I have no weakness, Walthk. My quest is almost over."

Walthk said quietly, "You have a weakness, Jarl. Perhaps I can help you."

Jarl Gare drew his slight body taut. "I

need no help now, Walthk. I used you when I needed you. I don't need you any longer. I will win out alone. With all your strength, you are weaker than I."

Walthk stared at him. "You do not like me? You have just used what I have to help yourself?"

"Yes, you big dumb ox," Jarl Gare gloated. "Your weakness is too obvious. You're strong, but the Venusians have tests for such strength, and even your mighty body will fail."

"And you have no weakness?" Walthk asked. "Suppose they give you the test of strength?"

"The Chameleon men don't do it that way. They read your mind, almost, and figure out a test that should not be impossible, if you are uniformly strong in body, mind and courage. The test is for all three, and you must have the brains to go with strength."

"I see," Walthk said, and when he looked at Jarl Gare, there was almost a sense of pity in the glance.

AT LAST they came to the pool. Out of the fog-shrouded lake came the Chameleon men, their bodies dripping, their webbed hands carrying the great shells.

The band of Chameleon men leading the Jovian and the Earthman halted. Two of them dived into the pool. After long minutes the pair reappeared, lugging between them a gigantic clam.

They set it down before Walthk. They stared at Walthk. Finally, Walthk grinned and nodded. With their metal spears, four of the Chameleon men pried open the bivalve, and held it open by standing on the shell edges.

Walthk flexed his great muscles and clamped a huge hand on each shell edge.

Jarl Gare's yellow eyes widened. Walthk's test was to hold open the clam, a prodigious feat. For how long? One of the Chameleon men glanced at Jarl Gare and he saw a picture of darkness descending on the pool. Why, that must be six hours.

The four Venusians stepped off the shell. The clam's writhing muscles and the great writhing muscles of the Jovian's back tensed together.

The Chameleon men stared blankly at the striving pair. Jarl Gare watched passively. If the dumb ox couldn't figure out

that all he had to do was to shove the clam open still further instead of bracing against closure, he would lose the test.

The moments dripped by, became minutes marked by the jumping back and shoulder muscles of the Jovian.

An hour passed sluggishly . . . Walth's usually white face became suffused with red. His chest was laboring.

At the end of two hours, Walth glanced appealingly over his shoulder at Jarl Gare. The Earthman laughed. With a convulsive effort, Walth pushed back the shells six inches either way.

If he had done that at first, he could have won, Jarl Gare thought, but not now. Walth's strength had been drained too greatly.

The great shells quivered, moving back. Walth strained, but the Jovian's great muscles could hold no longer. The Jovian's huge body quivered, the skin grew almost black with his great effort.

The clam had the leverage now. Its white muscles pulsed. The Jovian grunted with pain. There was a deep *thucking* sound. Walth whimpered.

Then the Jovian stood up. He stared at the blood pulsing from the stumps of his wrists. The clam had sheared off his hands.

"Sorry," Jarl Gare said. And laughed.

The Jovian's face convulsed with fury. Then he relaxed. His moon face was smiling as he looked at Jarl Gare.

"Your turn now," he said.

The Venusians gathered around Walth. One of them took a pouch from beneath his breech clout. His webbed fingers dug in and came out with a salve that he smeared on the spurting wrist stumps. The blood ceased spurting.

Then the Venusians turned to Jarl Gare.

They circled him, but broke the circle a little to let a wizened Venusian through. He was carrying a Venusian pearl. Jarl Gare gasped at the size of the pearl. He reached out for it, but the old wizened Venusian drew back and a picture grew in Gare's mind.

"You're going to hide it in an oyster shell, and throw that shell in with a pile of others?"

The conical wrinkled head bowed. The wizened oldster reached into a pouch inside his breech clout and pulled out a handful

of gray powder. The Venusians moved toward the pool, forcing Jarl Gare to move along with them.

At the pool's edge, the old Venusian dipped in a wrinkled hand and drew out a handful of water. He mixed the water with the powder until it became the consistency of paste. Jarl Gare watched as the old Venusian smeared the oyster shell one of the other Chameleon men handed him with the grayish paste.

Then Jarl Gare saw the great, gray pearl handed to the old man. He placed the pearl in the shell. Then the other Venusians turned Jarl Gare away from the oldster, one of them placing his cold webbed fingers across the Earthman's eyes.

Jarl Gare heard the rattle of the old shells, other rustling motions behind him as he waited. What test was this the Chameleon men were planning?

Finally, the hands dropped from his eyes. He turned around. The oldster was pointing at a huge pile of the oyster shells.

A PICTURE was in Jarl Gare's mind again. So they wanted him to find the shell? That was a fine test! All the shells were gray, and the pile to which the elder pointed was approximately twenty feet high. How could he find one gray shell among so many other gray ones?

He looked up and saw Walth grinning at him, the stumps of his arms folded.

"How can I find it?" he asked Walth. "One gray one among so many others?"

"Gray?" asked Walth. "It is not gray. It sticks out of that pile like a torch. The shell is smeared with red."

"Red?" asked Jarl Gare curiously. "Red? I see no red."

"That's right," Walth said, and there was laughter in his voice. "You're color blind, Earthman. I knew it when you first told me the vegetation was gray—that the pearls were gray. The Chameleon men knew it, too. You said they almost could read your mind."

Walth threw back his head and roared with laughter.

Jarl Gare spun his eyes to the Chameleon men who were watching. A picture grew in his mind. He had until sunset to find the shell—the *red* shell.

And he was color-blind . . .