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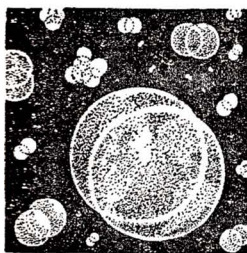
STARTLING STORIES

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September, 1948

A Complete Novel



What Mad Universe

By FREDRIC BROWN

When the first moon rocket fell back to earth with a flash, Keith Winton found himself catapulted into a world that couldn't be—a fabulous globe where men in jalopies were space masters! 11

A Hall of Fame Novelist

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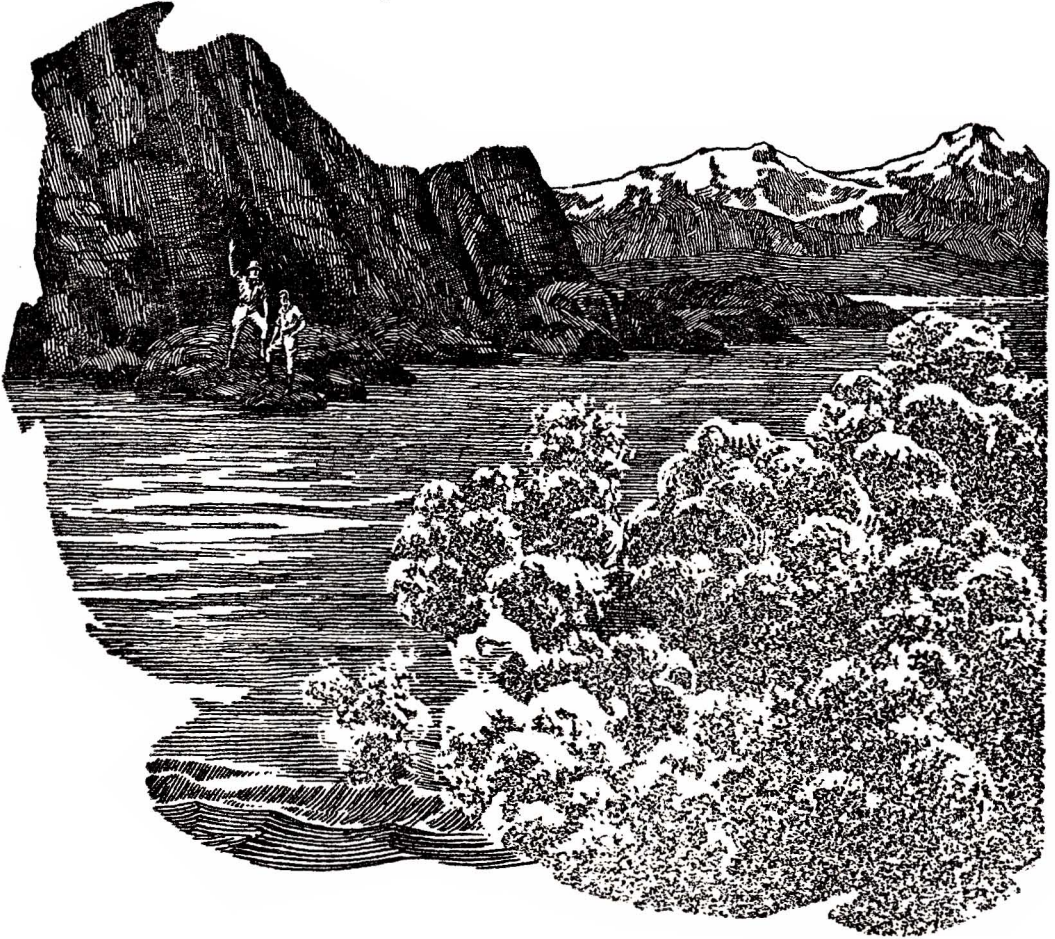
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Only a quartet of Earthmen stood between the Mercurian invaders and planetary conquest! A Hall of Fame novelet



TETRAHEDRA

CHAPTER I

Jungle Crack-up

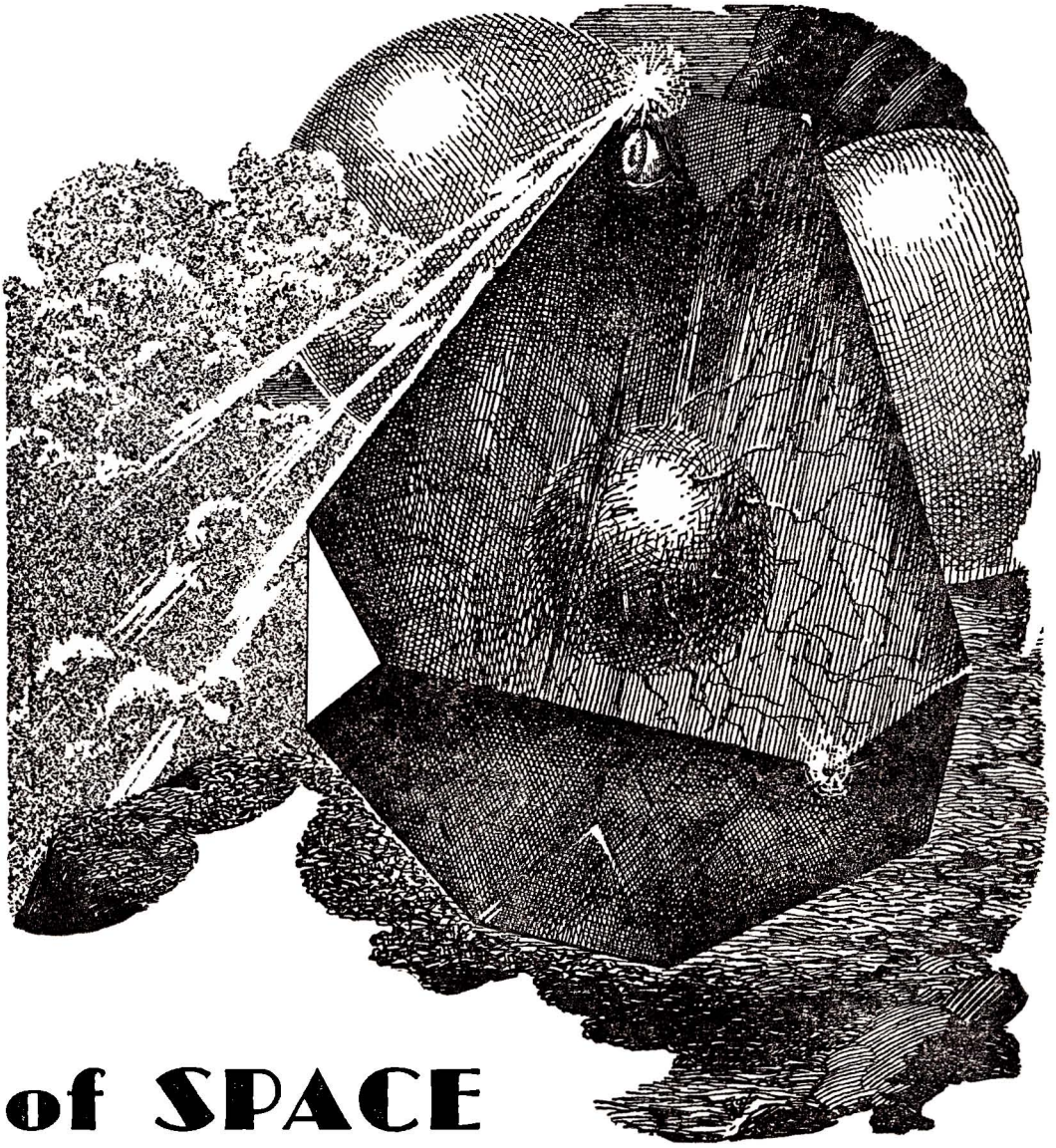
A MOON of mottled silver swam in the star-flecked sky, pouring its flood of pale light over the sea of blue-green vegetation that swelled up and up in a mighty, slow wave to break in the foaming crest of the Andes.

The shadow of my plane raced far below, dipping into the troughs, breasting the summits of that vast, unbroken sea of emerald

stretching on and on beyond reach of vision. Night had caught me unawares, and it is no simple matter to lay down supplies in a little clearing, marked only by a flickering campfire, lost somewhere among the jungles of Brazil.

Or was it Brazil? Here three great states mingled in an upland of forest and mountain and grassy valley—Peru, Bolivia, Brazil.

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of SPACE

By P. SCHUYLER MILLER

Here ancient races had made their home, raised their massive temples in the little valleys, wrested a fortune from the mountains, given their lives to the jungles—a people more ancient by far than those others beyond the ranges whom the Incas conquered. Here none had come before to study, yet now, somewhere in the gloom beneath me, was a little oval valley hung mid-way

between crag and forest, and there would be the tents and fires of scientists, men of my own world.

But there came no glimmer of flame in the darkness, no flicker of white tents in the moonlight. Alone the outflung cross of the plane swam the unbroken sea of green, dark and boding against its wan beauty. It takes little error of judgment to miss a tiny clear-

ing in the dark. So, as the western ranges crept out of their alignment, I swooped and soared, and was roaring back, higher now, over the silent moon-lit forests.

I had seen one gap in the jungle—a harsh, black scar seared by some great fire from the bowels of the planet, ugly and grim in the soft beauty of the night. Again it slipped beneath, and as the shadow of the plane vanished against its blackness, it seemed to me that there came a scurry of furtive motion, an instant's flicker of shadow against its deeper gloom.

I half checked the course of the plane, to wheel and search it closer, then of a sudden the air about me blazed with a dull crimson fire that burned into my body with a numbing fury of unleashed energy, the drone of the engines gasped and died and we were spinning headlong toward the silver sea beneath!

As it had come, the tingling paralysis passed and I flattened out the dive of the crippled plane, cut the ignition and dived over the side. As in a dream I felt the jerk of the parachute, saw the deserted plane, like a huge, wounded bat of the jungles, swoop again in a long flat dive that broke and pancaked into the upper reaches of the forest.

Then the heavy pendulum of my body alone beat out the dull seconds as I swung and twisted beneath the silken hemisphere of the 'chute. And then the leafy boughs, no longer silver but like hungry, clutching talons of black horror, swept up and seized me.

THE rain-forest is like a mighty roof stretched over the valleys of tropical America. Interlacing branches blot out the sun from a world of damp and rotting dark, where great mottled serpents writhe among tangled branches and greater vines strangle the life out of giants of the forest in the endless battle for light.

And there are little, venomous things of the dark ways—savage two-inch ants with fire in their bite, tiny snakelets whose parti-colored beauty masks grim death—creatures of the upper reaches and of the glorious world above the tree-tops.

With the sunrise, a blaze of life and flaming color breaks over the roof of the jungle—flame of orchid and of macaw, and of the great, gaudy butterflies of this upper world. Beneath, there comes but a brightening of the green gloom to a wan half-light in which dim horrors seem to lurk and creep and

watch, and giant lianas twist and climb up and ever up to the living light.

The sun was an hour gone when I fell but it was not until its second coming when I managed to writhe and slip through the tangle as if I too were of the jungle, moving toward the spot where my memory placed that blasted clearing, and the light. And with the deepening of the gloom in the upper branches I came upon it, quite by accident, from above.

It was a little valley, perhaps a mile long and two thirds as wide, lying in an oval of glittering jet against the side of the mountains. Here the Andes were beginning their swift climb up from the jungles to the snows and beneath me fifty-foot cliffs of sheer black dropped to the valley floor.

I have spoken of it as blasted, seared into the living heart of the jungle. It was all of that, and more! There was a gentleness in its rocky slopes that spoke of centuries of hungry plant-life, prying and tearing at jagged ledges, crumbling giant boulders, dying and laying down a soft, rich blanket of humus over the harsh, under-rock, forming a little garden-spot of life and light in the dark heart of the forest.

Then came fire—an awful, scourging blast of fierce heat that even Man's Hell cannot equal! It blasted that little valley, seared its verdant beauty horribly, crumbling blossoms and long grasses into dead white ash, stripping the rich soil of past ages from its sleeping rocks, fusing those rocks into a harsh glittering slag. The sheer cliffs, once draped with a delicate tracery of flowered tendrils, had cloven away under the terrible heat, split off in huge slabs of the living rock that had toppled into the holocaust beneath and died with the valley.

The few thin shrubs that screened me at their summit showed blackened, blistered leaves and twigs, though here the heat had been least. As no other spot on Earth that little upland valley was terribly dead, *yet at its center something moved!*

Eagerly I peered through the gathering dusk. Full and golden, the moon was rising over the forest, throwing new shadows across the valley floor, brightening new corners, revealing new motion. It wakened a lustrous opalescence in the two great spheres that nestled like mighty twin pearls against the dark rock, to create beings of the rock and of the shadow, gliding wraithlike among the shattered boulders!

Painfully I crept through the dense growth of the brink, nearer to those great spheres and their dreadful cargo. Now I could see them clearly, rank on rank of them in orderly file, some hundred of them, strewn in great concentric rings about the softly glowing spheres—great, glittering tetrahedra—*tetrahedra of terror!*

They were tetrahedra, and they were alive. They stirred restlessly in their great circles, uneasy in the dim light. Here and there little groups formed, and sometimes they clicked together in still other monstrous geometric shapes, yet always they moved with an uncanny stillness, darting with utter sureness among the scattered rocks.

And now from the nearer of the twin spheres came another of their kind, yet twice their size, the pearly walls opening and closing as by thought-magic for his passing! He swept forward a little, into the full light of the moon, and the rings followed him, centered about him, until the spheres lay beyond the outermost and the giant tetrahedron faced alone the hosts of his lesser fellows!

Then came their speech—of all things the most mind-wracking! I felt it deep within my brain before I sensed it externally, a dull heavy rhythm of insistent throbbing, beating at my temples and throwing up a dull red haze before my staring eyes!

You have heard those deepest notes of a great organ, when the windows tremble, even the walls, the building itself, vibrate in resonance, beat and beat and beat to its rhythm until you feel it throbbing against your skull.

SUCH was the speech of the tetrahedra, only deeper still beneath the threshold of sound—so deep that each tiny nerve of the skin sensed its monotonous pressure and shouted it to a reeling brain—so deep that it seemed like a great surf of more-than-sound thundering dismally against desolate, rocky shores!

I think now that it was a sort of chant, the concerted cry of all the scores of tetrahedra, dinning savagely, angrily at their giant leader in a dismal plaint of discontent and unease! I think they were restless, aware of unfulfilled promises and purposes, anxious to make sure their mission or to be gone.

For soon I sensed a deeper, stronger voice beating against the din, drowning it out, thundering command and reproof, shouting down the mob until its lesser drumming sank to a mutter and ceased. But the voice of the



SOME stories are forgotten almost as soon as they are printed. Others stand the test of time.

Because "Tetrahedra of Space," by P. Schuyler Miller, has stood this test, it has been nominated for SCIENTIFICTION'S HALL

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giant tetrahedron rang on, inflected now as our own voices, rising and falling in angry speech and command, pouring out burning sarcasm, perhaps, cowing them with its greater insistence!

Like all good leaders, his followers were as children to him, and the hard, harsh beat of sound swept off into a soothing, cajoling murmur of whispering ripples, yet none the less dominant and definite in its message. And it sank to a far, hinting rumble and vanished.

For a long instant they lay quiet, like graven things of the stone itself, then through the circles, like a spreading wave, rose a thrill of slow motion, quickening, livening, until all were astir! The ranks parted, the giant tetrahedron swept swiftly over the valley floor to the two great spheres, his angular hordes flowing in swift, soft motion in his wake! Again, with that speed and silent mystery of thought, the spheres gaped open and the ranks of the tetrahedra were swallowed up within!

For a long moment I lay there under the bushes at the cliff's edge, staring out over the valley, stunned by the weird unreality of the thing I had seen. Then, out of the dark behind me, came a hand, gripping my shoulder in a vise of iron! Mad with sudden terror I twisted free, struck blindly at the thing that had seized me, a thing that spoke, its words a hoarse mutter that barely penetrated the gloom!

"For God's sake, man, be still! Do you want *them* to hear?"

It was a man—a human like myself. My

frozen tongue stammered reply.

"Who are you? What are those things out there? What Hell of Earth did they spring from?"

"None of Earth, you may rest sure!" came the grim answer. "But we will tell you all that later. We must get clear of this place! I am Marston of the Museum expedition—the biologist. I suppose you are the aviator—Valdez saw them burn you down last night. Follow me."

"Yes, I'm Hawkins. The plane is somewhere over there, if it didn't burn, with all your supplies in it. But tell me, first—those things, there—are they *alive*?"

"You've wondered that? I suppose anyone would. The Indians make them gods of a kind—realize they're beyond all experience and tradition. But I'm a biologist. I have had some experience in strange forms of life. They are as much alive as we—perhaps even more than we. But this is no place to moralize—come on!"

He vanished into the dark and I followed, plunging blindly after the sound of his crashing progress, away from the seared valley and the tetrahedra, to safety of a sort in the sombre depths of the rain-forest.

They crouched beside a tiny fire of bark and twigs—two gaunt skeletons hung and swathed with soiled rags, brooding over their pitiful little flame. With the crackle of our approach they sprang at bay—two hunted things of the jungle—then relaxed as we came into the firelight.

I will always remember them as I saw them then—Hornby, the Museum archaeologist, tall, grey-haired, his haggard face seamed with deep wrinkles of sleeplessness and fear and puzzled wonderment. Valdez, his colleague of the government that had sent me, short, dark, his Portuguese blood blended with that of the squat tribes of the interior. He seemed plumper than the others, and I felt that he could and would care for himself very well if need be.

NOW, too, I saw my guide for the first time as something more than a black hulk in blackness. Marston, the biologist, looked like an old-time blacksmith, a massive man of bone and muscle, with keen grey eyes under heavy brows and the beginnings of a mighty beard.

"We're all there are, Hawkins," he rumbled. "We've got to find that plane soon if it's still whole. Did you see flames, Valdez?"

"Flames, Senor Marston? No—I saw merely the falling of the plane, like a great wounded bird seeking the shelter of the jungles, and Senor—Hawkins, is it?—with his parachute. I am not certain that I can find it, now that a day and a night have passed, but I will try."

Then Hornby's voice—dry and withered as his shrunken body—weary as his tired old eyes. "You have seen the tetrahedra, Lieutenant Hawkins? You realize that they are living, intelligent beings? You can comprehend the menace of their presence here on our Earth?"

"Yes, Professor," I answered slowly, "I have seen them and heard them. They have a great leader, twice the size of any of them, and the rest seem to be dissatisfied with the way he is running things."

"You hear that, Marston?" cried the Professor, almost savagely. "You hear—they are impatient—they will act soon, as soon as they have fed again! We must do something, Marston—we must act now—!"

"Yes, I saw them too," said Marston slowly. "They're on the brink, all right. But I don't know what we can do—four men with three rifles and a couple of machetes against a hundred of them."

"Marston," I put in eagerly, "if it's guns you want, there are two machine-guns and plenty of ammunition in the plane—it was a government ship, fresh from the uprising in the North. If we can find that, there'll be guns as well as food."

"Valdez—you hear that? Can you help him search? You are the one who saw him fall and you have been out with the Indians more than once. How about it?"

"Very well, Senor Marston, I will do what I can. But do not hope for too much—remember, there has been a day and a night and I had only a glimpse. And the guns—what can they do against those devils from the spheres? We would do better to flee, and warn the world of what has come upon it!"

"I've heard that stuff preached before, Valdez. Stow it! If it comes to announcing them to the world those things will do it for themselves faster than we could! You'll hunt with Hawkins in the morning!"

Professor Hornby had said little. Now, at Marston's words, he roused again.

"Marston," his voice came petulantly, "have you seen the Indians in the forest as I have? Have you seen them, felt them staring

at your back, fingering their little darts in the dark? Marston, they take those tetrahedra for gods—things to worship and propitiate with sacrifice! The forest is full of them—I feel it—I can tell! Marston, *what are they doing?*”

CHAPTER II

The Coming of the Tetrahedra

MARSTON'S bluff rumble drowned out that final wail. "Sure, Prof, they're here, all right—all about us, out there in the jungle with the beasts. But they're harmless—just inquisitive, that's all. It's the things yonder that draw them. It's a legend come true, for them. They're not apt to hurt us for a while yet but it won't hurt to slip closer to the valley, where we can watch the things."

Then Valdez slipped in his acid wedge of dissent, smoothly and blandly as ever.

"You remember, of course, Senor Marston, that these poor Indios retain the superstitions of their ancient masters, and that in time of peril it was the way of the Old People to make blood sacrifice to their gods. Old customs linger long among savages, Senor!"

"We're staying and we're fighting, just as soon as you and Hawkins locate those guns, which is tomorrow. Your memory will improve with a little sleep, I think. And, Prof—I reckon Hawkins here would like to hear about those things yonder. Tell him what there is to tell."

And so, huddled there by the tiny, flickering fire, I listened as the thin, dry voice of the old Professor marched through the awful story of the coming of the tetrahedra.

They had come to the little valley in the hills, three white men and a half-dozen Indian guides from the more civilized tribes to the north. Here in its oval bowl they had made their camp among flowers and waving grasses, with the dark rampart of the jungle standing about them like the walls of a prison. And from those walls came the Indians of the forests—poor, savage creatures hag-ridden by superstition and ignorance, wracked by famine and disease.

They treasured weird legends and aborted ceremonies where understanding of other things had passed. But they bore memories

of things that even the savage mind can ponder, memories of magic and ritual and the adoration of fierce and powerful gods.

As the newer magic of this younger, paler race gripped their childish minds, they told of the things that their fathers before them had learned of grandfathers through the centuries, tales not only of custom and life in those long-gone days, but of cities swallowed up in the rain-forest, cities of massive stone and untarnishing metal—"the metal of the Sun," that sleeps in long, fat serpents in the white rock of the mountains.

Then, one day—and Professor Hornby's hoarse voice sank almost to a whisper as he told of it—there came the little group of savages who were to lead the way to the buried ruins of a great city, four little brown men with blow-guns and deadly darts, waiting patiently for the great White Ones to take up their magic and follow.

Hornby had stepped to the door of his tent to call their chieftain to conference and, as he went he gazed up at the towering Andes. There, drifting like wind-tossed bubbles just above the tree-tops, floated the spheres of the tetrahedra!

Gently they sank to rest at the other end of the little valley—lay there in the thick grass like the eggs of some huge moth out of fable. The Indians had fled in terror but, as Hardy and Marston raced down the slope toward the twin globes, they sensed that furtive eyes were peering from the undergrowth, half-fearful, half-wondering, waiting with timeless patience for new magic—new masters.

The three came to the spheres as they lay there in the lush grass—Hornby, Marston, Valdez—and in each heart must have been something of the wonder that I in my turn had felt. For the spheres were unbroken by any opening, were as twin orbs hewn from mother-of-pearl. Yet there came a force from them, a tingling of excess energy that thrilled in every nerve and set their minds on edge with unwonted keenness!

IT GREW in strength, slowly, and it was Marston who first sensed its lurking hostility, who turned his gaze from the enigmatic spheres to see the long grasses about their bases wither and shrivel to soft grey ash under the blasting radiation! It was he who cried the alarm, and in sudden panic they fled a little way up the valley, to stand like startled sheep, then flee anew as the

surge of energy poured forth in ever-quickening pulses from the opal spheres.

It swept all life before it into sudden, luxuriant growth that as suddenly dropped into blighted destruction! Beside their tents, nearly in the shadow of the brooding forest, they stood at last and watched the slow torrent sweep the life of their valley home into the sullen ash of death. And then its invisible van drifted up the slope to their feet, and again its subtle venom thrilled evilly in their veins, and they ran crazily, headlong, into the jungle!

But they could not long shun the brain-troubling enigma that had engulfed their little home. Marston, Hornby, Valdez—they struggled back and stared from the damp dark of the forest at the thing that was happening there in the sunlit oval on the mountainside.

Then it was that Marston broke the spell of fear that had been laid upon him—seized rifles, blankets, food from the deserted tents in the ebbing of the invisible waves, and fled again as the second billow of devastation poured from the silent spheres! Then, for a time, there came a lull—a peace almost of the days and hours when this little spot of light in the green dark was the home of happy, busy men—almost, yet not quite!

For there was a boding in it, an ominous sense of oppression, a tension of the very ether, a stress that spread to mind and brain and sucked hungrily at the dazed consciousness!

And they were not wrong, for of a sudden, with an awful violence that shook even the stolid Marston, the storm burst in its full fury.

In a great beating sea of horrid flame it lashed the oval valley, driving into the soil, into the very rock, waking them into an angry answer of leaping, burning crimson fires. The fires swept the thin black soil from the underlying rock and scored the naked face of the rock itself with an awful furnace of consuming fury.

And through the curtain where fire of heavens and fire of Earth met in that terrible holocaust, those three saw the curving flames of the twin spheres gape wide, saw huge angular shapes file from the darkness within—shapes never yet associated in the mind of Man with the meaning of life! They were of a purple that seemed to be of the essence of the things themselves, rather than a pigmentation of their surface; and near one

apex each had two green-yellow unstarling, unseeing eyes!

Within them one glimpsed a spherical body—purple too—from which ran hundreds of curious filaments to the smooth surfaces. Tetrahedra they were—living tetrahedra of chilling terror that feared neither flame nor lightning and spread destruction on every side!

"I cannot tell you of the feeling that came to me," the weary, dried-out voice of the Professor droned despairingly on. "Here was a power absolutely at odds to all the great, painfully evolved civilization of mankind, a power that could and would crush us as a fly if we came into conflict with the motives of the tetrahedral race! Here were beings endowed by nature with powers beyond our science—alien to our ideas of evolution, well-nigh to our imagination and reason."

His voice trailed off into silence as his deadened eyes saw once more the vision of that awful day. I thought he had done, but again his voice broke the quiet.

"Perhaps we can flee, even now—hide away in some corner where they can have no motive for searching. Perhaps, for a little, we can save our lives and yet—I wonder if it is not better to die foolishly, futilely, but to die with the knowledge that we have been closer than any man to the unfathomable, to the reality that underlies all life."

FROM the dark beyond the glowing embers came Marston's quiet rumble.

"We can't do less, Prof, and we won't. In the morning we must lay our plans. They are getting restless—they may strike any minute and we must be ready and waiting. We're going to die, I guess, but we'll die as men should!"

The events of the past few hours had crowded in upon me with such staggering force and complexity that I found my mind in a whirl. I could get no clear-cut impression—no broad meaning—only a blurred, fantastic cyclorama of unearthly event and taut emotion.

With the morning all this changed—changed swiftly and utterly as event after event rushed upon us, broke like a tidal wave upon our outraged consciousness, and vanished before the tumultuous onslaught of another, greater clash of mind and matter.

We were up with the dawn. I wanted to return to the valley to get my bearings but Valdez claimed it was uselessly dangerous,

that he could make better time from where we were. We struck into the tangle of dank underwood, Valdez leading, and within seconds of our leaving camp I was utterly lost. My companion seemed sure of his way, slipping through the maze of fine growth like a beast of the jungle.

For nearly an hour we plunged ahead, then of a sudden came a gap in the forest roof as the level of the ground fell in a narrow ravine, and I woke to angry realization of what was happening! The sun, on our right when we started, lay behind us! *We were traveling dead away from the valley, the camp and the plane!*

Angrily I sprang forward, seized Valdez by the shoulder! He spun like a striking snake, fury in his half-closed eyes, fury and crazed fear! In his hand was a gun!

"So—you have awakened at last, Senor Hawkins," he sneered. "You fool—did you for one moment think I would cast my lot with those idiots back there? You were not invited to our little party, but you came—and you will do as I say or wish you had! Am I clear?"

"You're too damn' clear!" I shouted. "So you're going to sneak off and leave your comrades to the tender mercies of those tetrahedra—you want to make sure of your precious hide! What do you think these savages will do to you when they catch you out here alone, running away from their new gods? You're a damned, yellow, mad dog!"

"You say unfortunate things, Senor Hawkins," he replied coldly, the ugly sneer still on his thin, red lips. "I think that I can dispense with your company. It might interest you to know that Valdez is the name of my father by adoption, Senor. My people are those whom you have so kindly classified as savages—my home is these very forests that you seem to find so unpleasant! And, Senor Hawkins, have I not said that I can always find your plane?"

"What do you mean by that?"

"I mean, Senor, that it has always been I who could find the plane, and I who *did* find it, not very many minutes after it crashed. You would be disappointed, Senor Hawkins, were you to see it now. The food, the guns and ammunition of which you boasted—they can never have existed save in a mind disordered by jungle fevers."

I stared up through the matted branches at the blandly shining sun. I raised both hands, fists clenched, as if to crash them

down upon that evilly smiling face! But the little snub-nosed gun that bored into my belly spoke eloquent warning and of a sudden came clear thought.

"So even in this you must lie, Valdez! It is bred in the blood, I think! I do not question that you stole the food and weapons that meant life to your comrades—it is much too characteristic an act to doubt—but, *Señor Valdez, no Indian would so steal another's food. Was it, perhaps, your mother who was white?*"

I saw murder staring at me and in the instant when he stood frozen with his hate I leaped—swung with all my weight on the great liana that was looped over the branch above me! Even as the gun spat flame, the tautening vine caught him full at the base of the skull and toppled him forward into the black mold of the forest floor, out, and out for good!

CHAPTER III

The Tetrahedra's Power

IT WAS his life or mine, but I had not contemplated killing him. The vine was heavy and swung loose on the limb, and it whipped taut with the force of a snapping hawser, catching him squarely at the base of his maddened brain!

I turned him over, and as I lifted him his head flopped forward like that of a rag dummy! With a shudder I dropped him after searching his body for weapons and food. In his breast pocket was a rough sketch-map, showing the valley, the camp, and a small cross where the plane had fallen.

Across its penciled contours ran a fine dotted line, due north from the camp nearly to the place where the plane lay, then bearing off to the west, toward the mountains. Just beyond was a second little cross, to the south of the trail. I knew what it meant—the food and guns from the looted plane! Within five minutes I had uncovered Valdez' cache, under the cover of an out cropping ledge of quartz, and loaded one of the packs we had brought along.

How to return to camp with my news was another question entirely. I knew it was futile for me to try to follow the back trail.

There remained the valley—straight south along the ravine—and I felt certain that once there I could regain my lost sense of direction or wait until one of the others found me. The valley—and the tetrahedra! Driven by instinct or intuition, I shouldered one of the very light machine-guns and wrapped three belts of ammunition about my waist, under my shirt.

The going was easier along the rim of the little ravine than at its bottom, where extra moisture made the tangle thicker. The trail finally swung away from the stream-bed toward the east and suddenly emerged on a sort of peninsula jutting into the valley just above the point where the twin spheres lay. Here were gathered the forest Indians, clustered behind the thin screen of vegetation, gazing in dumb adoration at the things below. So rapt were they that my approach went unnoticed, and I was able to retreat and bear to the west, creeping up to the edge of the valley midway between clearing and ravine.

Now, in the full light of day, I could see that it was as Professor Hornby had said. The tetrahedra were formed from some hard, crystalline mineral, black almost to invisibility, with a faint wash of rich purple running through it. As they moved, the sun sent up glittering flashes of brilliance from their polished flanks. For the tetrahedra were restless, were weaving aimlessly in and out among the boulders in weird arabesques.

Apart from the rest, motionless in a sort of circular clearing among the rocks, squatted the giant leader of the tetrahedra. In him the deep violet of the crystal became a rich, plum-like hue, purple flushed with warm red, and the underlying black seemed less harsh.

And now the giant leader was dinning out his mighty call in long, slow billows of beating sound that seemed to thrust me back, press me into the dark of the forest, away from the alien monsters of the valley! In response came thirty of the lesser tetrahedra, chosen seemingly at random from the scattered ranks, to range themselves at equal intervals about their master, forming a single great circle a dozen yards in diameter.

A GAIN the throbbing call shattered against the cliffs about me, and now all the hordes of the tetrahedra broke into flowing motion, converging in a torrent of glittering purple crystal upon the natural amphitheater, clustering in threes at the spots that

their fellows had marked—all but ten, who glided into place before every third group, forming a giant toothed wheel with hub and rim and spokes of living, sentient crystal—*crystal with a purpose!*

I could see that the groups of three that formed the toothed rim of the giant crystal wheel were tipping inward, bringing their peaks together in a narrow focus, and more, that the ten that were the spokes, the binding members of the wheel, were of the same rich hue as their master.

As the sun soared higher, pouring its blazing rays straight down upon the sweltering world, I sensed the beginning of a vague roseate glow at the foci of the circling trios, a glow as of energy, light, focused by the tetrahedra themselves, yet not of themselves, but sucked from the flood of light that poured upon them from above.

The rose-glow deepened to angry vermilion, seemingly caged within the spheres defined by the tips of the tilted tetrahedra. Now the scarlet flame of the prisoned light was mounting swiftly in an awful pinnacle of outrageous color—pure fire torn from the warm rays of the sun—raw energy for the glutting of these tetrahedral demons of another world!

Slowly the great ring contracted, slowly the tetrahedra tipped toward their common center, bearing at their foci the globes of angry flame. Then they loosed the cradled energy of the spheres in one mighty blaze of blinding crimson that swept out in a single huge sheet of flame, blanketing all the giant wheel with its glory, then rushing into the blazing vortex of its center. Here, all the freed energy of the flame was flowing into the body of the mighty ruler of the tetrahedra.

And now, as in recoil, there spouted from his towering peak a fine, thin fountain of pale blue fire, soundless, like the blaze of man-made lightning between two mightily energized electrodes—the blue of electric fire—the seepage of the giant's feast! Like slaves snatching at the crumbs from their master's board, the ten lesser tetrahedra crowded close.

As their fierce hunger voiced itself in awful, yearning force, the fountain of blue flame split into ten thin tongues, barely visible against the black rock, that bent down into the pinnacles of the ten and poured through them into the crowding rim of the giant wheel.

As I watched, each tetrahedron began to swell, visibly, creeping in horrid slow growth to a magnitude very little less than that of their giant leader. And as they mounted in size, the torrent of blue fire paled and died, leaving them gluttoned and expectant of the final stage!

It came with startling suddenness! In an instant each of the hundred clustering monsters budded, burst, shattered into four of half its size that cleaved from each corner of the parent tetrahedron. Only the giant ruler lay unchanged beneath the downward slanting rays of the sun. The hundred had become four hundred! The tetrahedra had spawned!

Drinking in the light of the noonday sun, sucking up its energy to give them substance, these tetrahedral beings from an alien world held it in their power to smother out the slightest opposition by sheer force of ever-mounting numbers! Man was doomed!

On the jutting point to my left I sensed new activity. The Indians were chanting in weird low tones, to the rhythm of a deep-throated drum. It was some monotonous hymn or supplication to their ancient gods—gods now personified in the things below. Through the screen of shrubbery between us, I glimpsed their chieftain, taller by a head than the rest, his arms upraised, leading the exhortation. Their voices rose, broke in an angry clamor as a dozen of their kind burst from the forest dragging the bound form of a white man—of *Marston*!

Separated from them by a hundred feet of space and a double screen of matted vines, I dared not fire for fear of slaying friend with foe! Headlong I dived into the tangle, showing the machine-gun ahead of me! Had they not been utterly engrossed in their savage ritual, the Indians must surely have heard my blundering approach. By chance or fortune the tangle was less matted than elsewhere and I burst into the cleared space barely in the nick of time.

MARSTON'S huge, straining frame was bent back over a rounded slab of polished rock in the center of the clearing, the dwarfed forest-men fairly swarming over him to hold him in place! Arms raised in supplication, their chieftain stood over him, his features distorted by fear of his gods and frenzy of sacrifice! In his clenched fist he grasped a glittering knife of steel, a knife that half an hour ago I had seen buried in the

black soil of the forest floor—*Valdez' knife!*

With a cackle of savage laughter my gun woke the echoes, sweeping leaden death across the clearing, mowing its swath of lives in sacrifice more terrible than any savage mind could plan! I raked their bewildered ranks with the laughing death, then the belt of cartridges was gone and, as I fumbled for a second, the few cowering survivors fled screaming into the sheltering jungle!

Stumbling over the torn and bleeding windrows of slain humanity, I raced across the bloody clearing to where he lay. And, as I reached the rude altar, Marston heaved his blood-soaked frame free of the bodies that covered it, sat up and growled.

"Are you quite sure you've killed enough for the day? Or didn't you know it was loaded?"

"Marston, man!" I shouted frantically, "Are you all right? Did I hit you?"

"Oh, not at all. I'm quite all right. You're a rotten shot if I do say it—bring in a blasted flail and then you can't hit me! Though I'll not say you didn't try hard enough."

As a matter of fact I had nicked a chunk out of his arm—a nice, clean hit—and the blood on him was not all Indian. Still, his sarcastic joshing served its purpose and brought me out of my near-hysteria. Not until we were well clear of the shambles around the altar did he speak of Valdez.

"What happened?" he asked. "Did Valdez bolt?"

"He tried to," I replied glumly. "He had the stuff from the plane cached on the trail out, and—well, we had it out. I broke his neck—killed him."

"I'm not blaming you for it. I saw it coming, and I reckon it was you or he. But it's stirred up merry hell among the Indians. Did you know he was a breed? He claimed to be pure Indian, son of a jungle chieftain and a princess of some remnants of the Old People, but he was a breed and crossed the wrong way!

"I told you I was suspicious of Valdez. I tried to follow you and they jumped me, south of here, near the ravine. It must have been shortly after they found Valdez, for they were all crazy mad. I think the Doc is safe, though. Do you realize that this spawning means that they're ready to go ahead and burn their way right through everything—make this whole planet a safer and better place for tetrahedra?"

"Doc has figured they're from Mercury—overcrowded, probably, by this wholesale system of reproduction in job-lots, and hunting for new stamping grounds. I don't know what our chances are of bucking them—about a quarter of what they were an hour ago—but they're mighty slim, armed as we are. You've got the other machine-gun?"

"It's at the cache, with most of the food, if the Indians didn't find it when they found Valdez. I have a map here that he was using."

"Good. Let's have it. You keep an eye on the Professor tomorrow, now that the Indians are out for blood and I'll get the stuff back to camp. Come on—let's hunt him up now, while they're still scared."

"Wait, Marston," I replied. "You get the stuff now. I have a hunch we'll need it, and that soon. I can find Professor Hornby well enough, and I don't think the Indians will want any more for some time to come."

"Right you are!" he exclaimed. "So long then."

CHAPTER IV

At Bay!

I HAD no trouble in finding the Professor. In truth, he found me. He was all but boiling over with excitement, for he had seen something we had not.

"Hawkins," he exclaimed, "did you see them spawn? It is remarkable—absolutely unequalled! I saw two that divided and re-divided into three-inch tetrahedra—over a thousand of them! Hawkins, they can overrun our little planet in a few days, once they start! We're done for!"

"I guess you're right, Professor," I replied. "But tell me—have you seen anything of the Indians?"

"The Indians? Yes—they seem to have lost their reverence for the tetrahedra. These tribes do not paint much but those I have seen were decorated for battle. They may resist now if the tetrahedra try to start something."

"Marston will be glad to hear that! Right now, I think we had better strike for the high ground across the ravine, where their flame is less likely to reach us. I'll leave you there and then look for Marston and the

guns. We're going to need them before long."

We found an ideal fortress, high on the west side of the ravine, where a little spur ran down from the highlands to the valley of the tetrahedra. Indeed, it had been used as a lookout by the ancient inhabitants of the region ages ago. Enough of the ancient walls remained to provide a decent bulwark against attack and I left Professor Hornby with the gun to hold the fort until I could find Marston.

I had little difficulty in locating him and between us we transferred the supplies from cache to lookout while the Professor kept a perfunctory guard over them. He was more interested in digging around in the ancient floor for potsherds and tools of the former inhabitants.

It was two days before the hostilities began. Meanwhile we had found the wreck of the plane, nearly intact but quite useless in this dense jungle. We drained the tanks of what gasoline they contained, storing in it great glazed jars of painted earthenware that Professor Hornby had found intact in a niche below our present floor-level. His idea was to fight fire with fire.

Marston and I cleared out the brush as best we could, and cut deep slots in the larger trees on the downhill side, piling the quickly drying underbrush at the far side of our little swath, saturating it with gasoline, then digging in to one of the Professor's excavations while the fireworks went off. We more or less leveled the thick forest for about two hundred feet on all sides before the fire petered out.

The next morning, there was renewed activity. The tetrahedra cleared out a sizable ring of forest before sun-set. The next noon they had another sunfeast and the blackened valley was fairly teeming with their angular forms, large and small.

In vast waves of horrid destruction, with rays of angry yellow flame darting from apexes, their flaming floods of energy swept over the jungle and not even its damp dark could resist. Mighty forest-giants toppled headlong, by the cleaving yellow flame, to melt into powdery ash before they touched the ground.

By evening, our spur of rock was a lone peninsula, an oasis in a desert of harsh black.

Aside from the vegetation which they were so methodically blasting, the Mercutian

tetrahedra—for such Professor Hornby swore they were and such we later found them to be—had not yet come into real contact with the life of our planet, much less its master, Man. Now all that was changed. It began with the Indians. It ended with us.

NOW that we were shut off from the jungle, we no longer sensed the unease and stealthy activity of the forest people. Their gods had betrayed them—their sacrifice had been interrupted and their chief men slaughtered unmercifully by the slayers of their half-white brother. Their whole life and legend had gone wrong. The tetrahedra were to blame and the tetrahedra must pay!

The invaders did not start their daily program of devastation until the sun was high. Of late, the people of the forest had become creatures of the night, and so it was that Marston roused us about midnight to watch the fun, as he put it.

The spheres were too small to hold all the tetrahedral hosts, now, and they lay crowded in great confocal ovals about them, sleeping, if such things can be said to sleep. The first indication of the attack was a tiny fire of leaves and twigs on the rocks above the ravine.

Then came a low, wailing chant, rising swiftly in vehemence and bitter hatred—a curse designed to blast the unearthly invaders where they lay. It suddenly broke in a shrill, senile yammer of sheer madness! The strain was more than some old priest could stand.

As in answer, other greater fires sprang up all along the walls of the valley, and by their light we could see the Indians closing in from the edge of the forest—thousands of them, drawn to worship over untold leagues of jungle paths, racing into battle with all the mad fanaticism of an outraged religion!

It was like a tidal wave of screeching humanity, pouring down over the black rock to break over the sleeping tetrahedra! Like a great city of black, tetrahedral tents the Mercutians lay, dim-lit by the falling moon.

It was I who first noticed the faint, rosy glow that hung over the silent ranks—a glow like that which had brought down my plane. I whispered to Marston, and he told me that it had not been there before—that the tetrahedra must be awake.

He was right. The red glow was spreading swiftly, out over the valley floor, and there must have been another, invisible emana-

tion that preceded it, for all round the valley, the first ranks of the savages were meeting this slowly advancing wall of unseen death—meeting it, and falling before it!

In long windrows they lay, body after body piling up before the momentum of the unleashed rush of the red-skinned hordes! Stones, arrows, spears flew through the thickening red mist to clatter harmlessly as it seemed, for only here and there among them showed a little spurt of pale blue flame as one of the smaller things was crushed by a hurtling stone! They were hard, but their skins of crystal were thin and *they were not invulnerable!*

The Indians sensed this, too, for they deserted spears and darts in favor of a hail of stones, large and small, that clattered among the tetrahedra in a veritable down-pour, dealing really telling destruction among those who had not attained a fair size.

The savages were yelling in triumph, now, thrilled with success and their blind onslaught was checked, but still the invisible barrier crept on, dealing death all along their evilly grimacing front, and still the rose-red haze followed after. The yelling circle was thinning fast, yet they had not realized the futility of their attack when suddenly the tetrahedra deserted quiet defense for active combat!

Five Indians on the upslope had shoved over the cliff a huge rounded boulder that bounded like a live thing among the rocks and crashed full into the side of a great eight-foot tetrahedron, splintering its flinty flank and freeing the pent-up energy in a blinding torrent of blue flame. The mad attack had become a thing of real menace to the tetrahedra, and they sprang into swift retribution. From their apexes flashed the flaming yellow streaks of destruction.

Now at last the Indians broke and fled before the advancing hordes, but flight came too late, for the tetrahedra were aroused and they gave no quarter! The doomed Indians seemed to float in a yellow sea and what the sea touched was gone in an instant! Before that awful barrage nothing living could stand!

Of a sudden the tragedy was borne forcibly to our own quarter, as a handful of Indians sought the refuge of our rocky spur! They were men like ourselves, men in awful danger of their lives, and Marston and Hornby sprang to the parapet, shouting at them in their native tongue.

But the frightened savage knows no friend, and their reply was a volley of long arrows that toppled the Professor into my arms and sent Marston cursing for the guns! Lips set grimly, he sprayed the rocky slope with leaden death, mowing down the savages as I had done in the place of sacrifice!

Like locusts they came on from every side, eyes red with blood-lust, teeth bared in hate. It was the debris of our back-fire, piled in a matted belt around the spur, that saved us, for here the mad charge must halt and here our guns took their toll.

EVEN so, I think our defense must have failed but for the tetrahedra. They had not been slow to recognize the changed nature of the Indians' flight and they turned that realization to their own advantage, curving around the spur to cut off a second retreat, then laying down their fiery yellow barrage upon the rear of the clamoring savage host, licking them up as a bear licks ants.

For a moment matters were at a deadlock. We paused and took stock—three men with their guns against thousands of tetrahedra, armed with lightning. Hornby had slumped back against the low wall, his eyes closed, his spare frame racked with coughs that brought back blood to his twisted lips. An arrow had pierced his lungs. Marston dropped the machine-gun, now smoking-hot, and grabbed up a rifle. I followed suit. So for perhaps two minutes the rival forces held silent, waiting.

The Mercutians took the initiative. Their yellow tongues of flame crept slowly up the hillside, scouring it clean—up, up toward our little refuge on the peak. They began to glide forward, on every side, beginning the ascent. In answer our rifles rang out, and now there was no doubt as to their vulnerability, for wherever the steel-jacketed lead hit, the thin crystal splintered and the night was lit by the glare of freed energy.

By the dim light of the red mist I could see the giant leader of the Mercutians, standing at the summit of the cliff above the valley, commanding the attack. I raised my rifle, fired—not at the advancing front but farther back, into the body of the horde, slowly driving my fire back toward the giant commander, hemming him in with death, threatening—but not striking! I cannot tell why we did not destroy him, for Marston had followed suit. Somehow we felt that it was wiser to spare him and our intuition was

good. For a moment he hesitated, then thundered his drumming command and the ranks of the tetrahedra drew slowly back.

We remained virtual prisoners for eight days. On the third, Professor Hornby died—a blessing, for he suffered greatly. He was the only one who really understood the tetrahedra and we shall never know how he deduced that they were from Mercury, a fact which Marston later proved. The archaeological data collected by the expedition are lost too, since both he and Valdez are dead and we could bring out no specimens. The tetrahedra left us alone. Meanwhile they continued their barrage of the jungle.

Through the binoculars we watched them slowly advance and noted their surprise as they burned the covering jungle from the great ruined city which the expedition had sought. It was their first real experience with the works of Man, and it caused a great commotion among them.

Later in the same day they found the wreck of the plane, and this time consternation indeed reigned. Here was a machine of some sort, evidently the product of the civilization that they feared. Moreover, it was recent where the city was ancient.

The little valley was still the center of their activity, and every day we watched their spawning as the sun rode high. There was always a double ring of the tetrahedra about us now, and their crimson sea of energy beat high about our prison. The giant who led them came often to observe us, to sit and stare with invisible eyes at our fortress and ourselves. Their drumming speech had grown familiar, and I felt it would not be hard to understand, given the key.

Marston seemed fascinated with the things and their ways. There was a spring just above the limit of the red haze, where we got our water, and he would sit there by the hour, watching and listening.

Ever since Marston had first mentioned Professor Hornby's theory that the things were Mercutians, I had been trying to find some way of verifying it. Now that we were on semi-intimate terms with the tetrahedra, I wondered if I might not get them, somehow, to supply this evidence.

There was soft rock in the structure of the watch-tower and, as Valdez had rescued my tool kit from the plane, I had a hammer and chisel. With these, and a faulty memory, I set out to make a rough scale diagram of the inner planets, leaning a bit on the Profes-

sor's theory. I cut circular grooves for the orbits of the four minor planets—Mercury, Venus, Earth, Mars—and dug a central pit.

In this I set a large nugget of gold, found in the ruins of the fortress, for the Sun, and in the grooves a tiny black pebble for Mercury, a large white one for Venus, and a jade bead from the ruins for Earth. Earth had a very small white moon, in its own spiral orbit. Mars was a chunk of iron with two grains of sand for moons.

CHAPTER V

Face to Face

SO THINGS stood when the tropical storm broke over us. A cloud-burst, it would be called in the United States. The heavens opened in the night, and water fell in torrents, streaming from every angle of the rock, standing in pools wherever a hollow offered itself, drenching us and the world through and through. Day came, but there was no sun for the tetrahedra to feed on. Nor were they thinking of feeding, for very definite peril threatened them. *To the tetrahedra, water was death!*

Their fires had flaked huge slabs of rock from the walls of the ravine. And now that the mountain slopes, shorn of soil and vegetation, were pouring water into its bed, the stream found its course dammed—rose against it, poured over it, but not until the valley had become a lake, a lake where only the two pearly spheres floated against the rocky wall, the thousands of tetrahedra gone forever—*dissolved!*

Water was death to them—dissolution. Only in the shelter of the spheres was there safety and they were long since crowded. Hordes of the tetrahedral monsters perished miserably in the night. A hundred had come in the twin spheres. A hundred thousand had been born. A bare hundred remained. Our way of escape was clear!

Our "local shower" lasted for three days. Then came the sun, and the mountains began to drain. Only the new-born lake remained to remind us of the rains, a lake stained deep violet with the dissolving bodies of the crystal tetrahedra. Those in the two spheres waited for a day, then came forth to survey the ruins of their campaign—the giant

leader and a scant hundred subordinates.

The tetrahedra resumed their guard about the base of our crag, although the crimson barrage did not beat so high nor so vividly. Their master squatted outside the ring, brooding, watching us—perhaps pondering our connection with the tempest that had wrecked his hopes. And now Marston took under his arm the great Indian drum that I had brought away from the place of sacrifice and stalked down the slope to confront the tetrahedra.

I can see them yet, giant leaders of two utterly different races, born on two planets sixty millions of miles apart at their nearest, inherently opposite and inherently enemies, squatting there on the black rock, watching each other! A rumble of speech from the great leader and the rose-hue of the barrage deepened, climbed higher about the crag. Marston did not move.

Then he took up the great drum. He had cared for it as for a child during the long rain, sheltering it as best he could, testing its tautness. Now I learned the reason.

Slowly, softly, using the heel of his palm and his fingers in quick succession, he began to drum. Faster, ever faster the great drum of sacrifice boomed forth its message, until the beats melted into a low, continuous thunder of bottomless sound, mounting in volume to a steady, rolling roar, rising and swelling in delicate inflection. His wrist must have been wonderfully strong and flexible to so control the sound! *Marston was speaking to the tetrahedra with the voice of his drum!*

DURING those long, empty days on the crag-side he had been listening, learning, drilling into his scientist's brain the meaning of every voiced command that the great master of the Mercurian tetrahedra thundered to his crystal hosts, learning their inflections, storing them in his mind!

He had memorized a simple vocabulary—a host of nouns and verbs that even yet seem beyond the power of any man to glean from the muttering of an alien race, coupled with the actions that fitted the words. But Marston *had* learned, and with the sullen voice of the giant drum he was replying, in words that the tetrahedron understood!

For the crimson mist faded, vanished. The crystal ranks split, and through the lane between them glided the giant ruler, coming to where Marston sat with his drum. He stopped, spoke in words very like those that

Marston had used. "What—you?"

"We—tetrahedra—Earth." I translate rudely, as they spoke.

The giant was startled. How could we, misshapen, flabby monstrosities, be rulers of a planet, equal to themselves?

"You—tetrahedra?"

The drum muttered approval, as for a fulfilled command. The idea had been transferred but the purple giant did not seem to think much of it.

"You—weak! (Easily vulnerable, like vegetation, was the sense of the term used.) We—tetrahedra—our planet—and Earth!"

Marston called to me. "Hawkins, bring down those stones you've been chipping and a flask of water. Wait—bring two flasks, and a gun."

So he had seen me at work and guessed my plan. Well, his own beat it hollow but if he had an idea, I wasn't going to hinder him. I lugged the slabs down and went back for the stoppered canteens of water and the gun. At his directions I set one flask against the rock of the hillside. He took the other.

"You work the slabs, Hawkins," he said, "while I talk. I'll translate, and you act accordingly." The drum spoke. "Sun—Sun—Sun." He pointed. "Your Sun—our Sun."

The tetrahedron approved. He came from our own Solar System.

Now he was pointing to my diagram, to the Sun, the Earth and its orbit. "Sun. Sun. Earth. Earth." I rolled the jade bead slowly along its groove, the white moon-pebble following in its spiral course. I rolled the other planets, showed him their colors and relative sizes. Marston was drumming again as I touched planet after planet, questioning. "Your planet—your planet? Your planet—what? This?"

The giant disapproved. It was not Mars.

"This?" It was anything but Venus! Venus must have been pretty wet for the completest comfort.

Eagerly, "This?" Assent! The Professor was right! They came from Mercury! So far, so good. Marston took my other plaque—the relief map of Earth.

"Earth—Earth."

Yes, the Mercutian recognized it. He had seen it thus from space.

With a crystal of quartz, Marston gouged our particular section of South America, pointed to the ground, to the lake, the forests.

"This—this," he said.

More approval. They knew where they were, all right. Now he reopened a closed subject. "You—tetrahedra—Mercury." They sure were!

"We—tetrahedra—Earth!" Not so good! He repeated: "You—Mercury. We—Earth. We—tetrahedra!" There were evident signs of dissent! Marston swelled the reassurance-tone, then added a sharp call to attention, raised his gun, fired twice, threw the weapon down, and redoubled his assurance of well-meaning and safety.

His aim had been good. The flask was pierced at top and bottom, and a thin stream of water was jetting forth, trickling over the glassy rock toward us. It made a little pool at his feet, lipped over, and the double rank of tetrahedra drew back to let it pass. It formed another little pool, close to the base of their giant leader. He wasn't taking bluffs! A flash of blinding energy and the pool was steam and the rock white-hot! Marston learned another word.

"Water—dead! We—tetrahedra—Mercury—and Earth!"

Not so good! Marston tried another.

"You—tetrahedra—Mercury. Water—tetrahedron—Earth!"

An alarming idea that! Water the lord of Earth!

"Water—no—dead!" Decided negation in the drum. He pointed. True enough, the steam was condensing and running down the smooth rock in little droplets. Water could not be killed! It always came back!

"We—tetrahedra—water!"

Phew! That *was* a statement! He proved it. He dabbled his fingers in the pool at his feet, took some up in his hand and slicked back his hair. I gave a thunderous grunt by way of attracting attention, uncapped the other canteen, and poured a long and very visible stream of water down my throat. Marston took the canteen and did the same, then sent me for more water, a pailful.

"Water—tetrahedron—Earth!" he reiterated. He illustrated his point, dipped water from the pail with much splashing and poured it over my relief of the Earth, filling the hollows of the seas. He had another hunch, rolled Venus around its orbit.

"Water—tetrahedron—Venus?" Oh, decidedly. The purple giant was sure of that. Marston tried Mercury.

"You—tetrahedra—Mercury. Water—no—tetrahedron—Mercury." A pause. Then slowly, "Water—tetrahedron—you!"

AND he was right. Water had them licked. I had a bright idea and Marston moved camp to the brink of the lake, striding like a conqueror between the double file of tetrahedra. Arrived beside the water, with the giant fairly close and the army in the background, I stripped and dove in—brought up a chunk of half-dissolved purple crystal! Marston rubbed it in gleefully.

"Water—tetrahedron—*you!*" They had to admit it. Now he tried to coin a word—pointed to the sky and shuffled syllables on the drum. "Up—up. Water—up." The giant caught on and supplied the correct term. Marston coined a real one—a genial, murmurous "Thank-you"—on his drum.

Marston drummed attention and reassurance and I started demonstrating my little Solar System again, while Marston announced again that Earth was largely water—no fit place for tetrahedra—water that could be killed, but that came down again in rain. He drilled in the idea of rain, until he was sure he made his point. The etymology of the word was clear to all concerned. They knew what rain was now.

I had poked a hole through the soft, thin rock of Mercury's orbit and put clay plugs in Earth's orbit at diametrically opposite points. Now Marston demonstrated. He poured water on Mercury. It vanished.

"Mercury—no—rain. No!" The entire host had crowded in and there was a general murmur of assent.

Venus, on the other hand, being a deep groove, held plenty of water. "Venus—rain. Water—tetrahedron—Venus."

They got that too.

He moved out one planet and I could feel a tensing. They knew what he was driving at! He was going to describe weather-conditions of Earth. Half Earth's orbit held water to the brim. The other half was rather damp. He slowly moved Earth around her circles, showing that six months were wet and six not so wet. He took to the drum for emphasis.

"Water—tetrahedron—Earth. *We—tetrahedron—water. Water—tetradron—*you.**" A delicate inference. Then slowly, emphatically, "Water—Venus. Water—Earth." And now his final card.

He set Mercury in its orbit, placed Venus almost opposite, paused. The giant assented. That was where the planets were at present. He skipped Earth and went to Mars, rolled it along its orbit, stopped it. Assent. All

true, so far. And now I saw his point for, when he dropped Earth in place, very nearly in line between Mars and Mercury, *it fell in the middle of the dry half of the orbit!*

A hundred tetrahedra slid back a yard or so in recoil. This rain which had drowned out practically all of their army was an example of our *dry* season! By inference, our real wet weather must have been sheer Mercutian hell to every tetrahedron of them!

But Marston was too good a diplomat to give them a hands off without suggesting an alternative. He slowly poured water on Mars. Mars apparently and actually had a hole in its bottom, for it drained bone dry. Mars, now, was very nice. But Earth was nasty and wet, as bad as Venus or worse. And it was inhabited by a race of super-intelligent fish, to judge from the impression he gave the tetrahedra. He picked up the drum for a last word.

"Earth—*rain.* Mars—*no—rain.* *We—Earth. You—no—Earth. You—Mars?*" He dwelt on the question, "Mars? Mars???" He rolled out an endless questionmark, then suddenly quit, took a long, flashing drink of water from the flask, and dove into the lake, clothes and all. I followed him, and together we splashed to the other shore, making our mastery of the water very evident. If things, worked out, all well and good. If they didn't well, we had the lake between us.

And it did work! For a moment they stood motionless, the mighty sixteen-foot tetrahedron of royal purple and his eight-foot purple retinue, silent, considering. Then came a sudden command, and the hundred flowed in orderly motion to the spheres, entered. Their mighty master was alone. For an instant he hesitated, then swept forward to the very edge of the lake. From this towering peak beat the white lightnings, lashing the purple waters into great billowing clouds of steam that threw up a dense wall of mist between us! Through the hiss of the steam came his thunderous voice, in last comment upon the invasion of his tetrahedral race! Marston translated, softly.

"Water—tetrahedron—Earth. *You—tetrahedron—water. We—kill—water! You—Earth. We—Mars. Mars!*"

Up from behind the wall of "killed" water rose two great, glorious pearls, marvelously opalescent in the rays of the setting sun—up and up, smaller and smaller, until they vanished into the deepening blue above the Andes. Ironically, it began to rain.