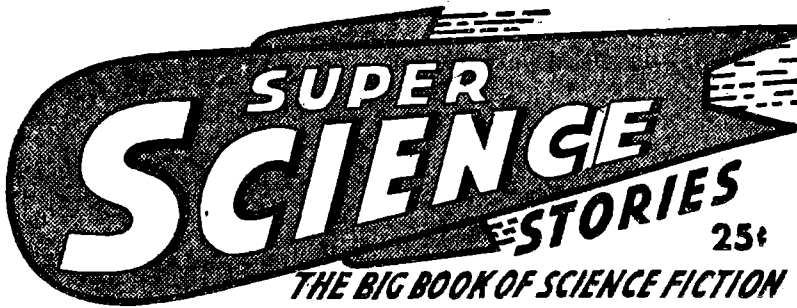


THE BEST IN SCIENCE FICTION



VOL. 5

JANUARY 1949

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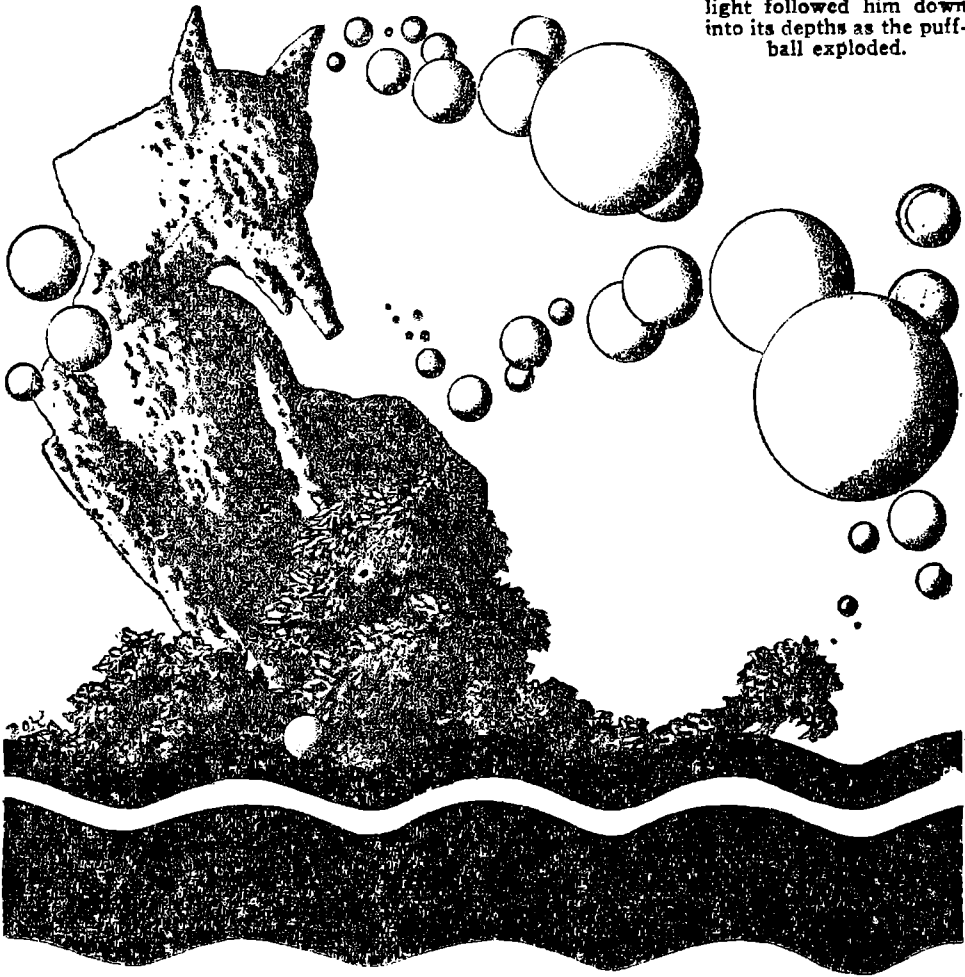
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He plunged into the Cauldron; and a flash of blue light followed him down into its depths as the puff-ball exploded.



THE BOUNDING CROWN

By James Blish

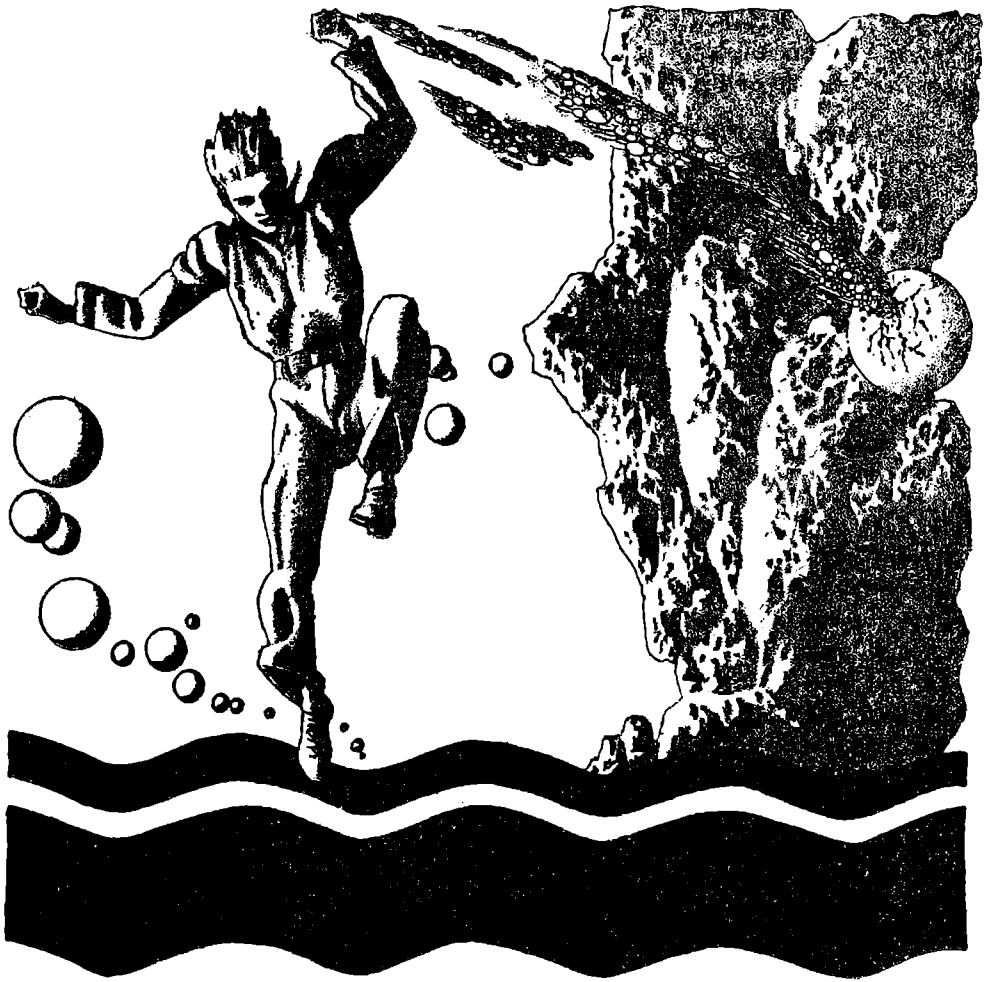
CHAPTER ONE

Renegade

FEW people are single-minded enough to walk down the central avenue of the Venerian pleasure-city of Etoin without gawping to right

and left at its system-famed beauties. It is probably the only beautiful city on Venus, at least to an Earthman's eyes, and although the beauty is mostly veneer, it is startling enough to demand the attention forcibly.

But Clyde Heywood was at the



One against a horde of fantasm come true, the outlander sought his last strange haven — Charybdis Cauldron, where no Earthling had ever survived.

moment a very single-minded man. After eleven years on the level expanse of baked mud which is the sunward side of the planet, he was able to stomp down the avenue without granting so much as a glance to the chromium-and-gilt magnificence about him.

His goal was the squat undecorated pile of the government building, and he was mentally engaged in preparing a tirade for the ears of the province administrators. There was a bedraggled card in his pocket, which had reached him a month late, by the ir-

regular mail service on sunward Venus, and it was the card which was to be the subject of his tirade. It read:

Etoin, March 6, 2002

To: Clyde Heywood—SV29-M

Our records show that the flyer registered under the above number and the name "Valkyr" has not been presented at the proper station for inspection in the time-period required. If you are unable for any reason to present this ship for inspection, kindly turn in your identification capsule and license at this office until such time as you are able to comply with the provisions of the Spaceways Act.

Every time Clyde thought of this card he got a little madder. He had never had any idea of flouting the Spaceways Act; he was not a dishonest man. Only, a poor man whose capital was tied up entirely in one ancient and battered hopper usually couldn't afford to have that hopper put under the keen eyes of the inspections men. They would indicate expensive repairs—all, it must be admitted, necessary for safety's sake—which must be made before the **Valkyr** could legally fly again, and Clyde couldn't make the money for those repairs without using the **Valkyr**.

The usual procedure in such cases was to have a quiet little talk with the governor in Etoin, who in return for a promised percentage of future earnings would see to it that the **Valkyr** wasn't called for inspection until its owner declared it ready to pass. Clyde had had an arrangement of that nature for a long time—so long that the exact procedure of ship inspection was a mystery to him. And the note had come at the worst possible time. The rockets of the **Valkyr** (in 2002 geotrons were still too expensive for miners) were in bad condition, and Clyde's pocketbook was in worse.

He paused for a moment outside the government building to look at the "Positions Available" board. Nothing. Nobody wanted a man with his training on Venus unless he had a ship; and he couldn't fly transport jobs with a "Rejected" sticker on the forward port. He strode on in and entered the AG shaft.

On the top floor he made for the door of the office whence the card had come, then changed his mind and burst into the governor's office instead. A young man looked up from the desk, and Clyde felt a sinking feeling. This wasn't fat old Manley; it was a new man.

"What's on your mind?" the official asked. On his sleeve he wore a novad with one chevron—the three concentric circles of Centrale, crossed by the bar representing the civil service. "You're a little unceremonious, I must say."

"Where's Manley?"

"In jail—he'll be there till about twenty forty-eight."

MANLEY in jail! Clyde was beginning to understand what had happened. The League of Nations on Earth had been replaced by Centrale just the year before—even on sunward Venus they had heard the reverberations of that plant-wide overthrow—and now a wave of honesty had struck the civil service. **Damn!**

"Brother, you're wearing a bounding crown," Clyde said. "First the League of Nations ousts local Venerian government and Arai disappears so that Manley can take over; then Centrale throws the League out and you replace Manley. I'm glad I'm not sitting in your chair."

"Centrale encourages local government," the official returned, "but I

don't think Arai is likely to come back and take my job. In the meantime, what can I do for you?" Mutely, Clyde shoved the card under his nose. "What's the matter? Can't you pass the inspection?" He looked curiously at the cockade of the now-extinct French Commune which was sewn on the pocket of Clyde's worn flying suit. "You're from Montbecque, I see. It's all right if you're late—the mails are irregular out there, I know."

"No, I'm not late. I just live off my ship, that's all, and I can't afford to make a hundred repairs, or pay storage either. What happens if I don't turn it in?"

"Nothing drastic. You're deprived of your license and capsule until you can put the hopper through. Then we turn the works back to you. We'll store it; any fuel that's in it will be replaced when you take it out again." He jabbed a finger at the V-ray on his desk and after a moment the little mirror glowed. "Joe? Send up a seventy-two hour authorization on SV29-M, will you? And look up the figures on past inspections."

While the governor waited for a reply, Clyde looked around the office. It was just as he had remembered it; the rows of filing cabinets, the circular V-Ray mirror reflecting the image of the interplanetary chronometer on Ceres, the list of "Positions Wanted" glowing on the far wall, the extra desk in the corner. A rangy, not to say mangy, Martian was looking at the list. Well, before long he'd be adding his own name to that roster of unemployed spacemen. He wondered if the contract on his future earnings was still in the file where Manley had stowed it. He found himself hoping the Centrale men had destroyed all

those contracts when they took over, but he recognized the hope as a Freudian wish.

"Yeah, Joe . . . Another percentage arrangement, eh? All right, tear it up and shoot me through that authorization . . . Right." The young man looked at Heywood. "We kept Manley's little graft records for checking. It's a wonder how hard-headed guys like you could ever expect to pay for inspection when your contracts were tied up like that."

"I had to do something," Clyde said sullenly. "Without the ship I can't pay for it, either."

"Well, this card coming up is a temporary license. It gives you seventy-two hours to get your ship over here—just show it to any cop who picks you up for flying without a capsule. Your ship'll be safe until you need it."

Clyde felt somewhat relieved. This setup really wasn't so bad. Only . . . there was still the problem of keeping the pot boiling without the Valkyr to bring in the wherewithal . . .

"You couldn't find me a job with the government, could you?" he asked.

The young man smiled. "I am a railing beside the torrent," he quoted. "Whoever will grasp me, may grasp me. Your crutch, however, I am not."

"Also sprach Zarathustra," Clyde said, grinning. "I see what you mean."

The official handed him the card as it emerged from the visiphone by his desk. "Here it is," he said. "Good luck."

Clyde thanked him, turned and walked out. Behind him, the tall Martian followed him swiftly and plucked at his sleeve. "You a spaceman, bud?"

"What if I am?"

"My name's Jolon. Outlander—in

the days when there was an Outlands on Mars. I need a good man to fly a job for me."

"Sorry," Clyde said briefly, recognizing the name as one on the IP's "Wanted" list and wanting no part of it, honest or dishonest. "I've no ship and no license."

The Martian grinned mirthlessly.

"You got an authorization and a ship you can fly for seventy-two hours. That's all I'll need. When you're done you can buy back your hopper, your license, and your capsule. You can rent a whole floor in the Dream Palace, and live there at top speed for a month, to boot."

Clyde raked him with suspicious eyes. He didn't like the sound or the source of the proposition, and he knew flying a commercial job on a ferry authorization was bad business—but he did need money. "Suppose you give me a definite figure," he said.

"Twenty nice round shiny new circles—five grand in the old coinage."

Right there Clyde lost most of his inhibitions, but the sum was so enormous that his instincts prompted him to abnormal caution. "What kind of a job is it?" he asked.

"From Etoin to the Dobrudjan Estevons—exact destination your employer's business until we're actually in flight."

Clyde marked the evasion of his actual question but it did not surprise him; he had the information he wanted. "You've got touching faith in my engines," he grunted. "Two thousand miles and back in seventy-two hours! Are you my employer?"

"No, just the agent for the transaction. That's not your concern, anyhow. Do you want the job or not?"

Clyde stood motionless for the time it took to budget twenty circles.

"I'll take it," he said.

CHAPTER TWO

Charybdis Cauldron

THE VALKYR lay in her temporary berth just outside the city, the eternal pearl-gray twilight running over her scarred sides in quivering lines, as she shuddered to the deep-throated hum of her engines. Impatiently Clyde looked at his watch. Four minutes more. Jolon had claimed that his job, whatever it was, would depend on split-second timing, and unless the ship arrived at 1 p.m. on the nose there would be no twenty circles for its owner.

Clyde spat experimentally at the tubes, which responded with a satisfactory hiss. Having enough fuel to spare to warm the tubes properly instead of blasting off cold and trusting to the spaceman's god that they continued to fire was a new experience; but Jolon had supplied the fuel, and Clyde in his turn had put the Valkyr in as good condition as he could without money.

He looked at his watch again, shrugged, and climbed into the ship. In the control cabin he increased the beat of the timer slightly, first retarding the defective number three tubes. All ready. Quickly he ran his instructions over in his head. Land near the point where the Tetuci River left Etoin, open the airlock, and wait for Jolon and his passenger. Okay. He opened the throttle on the underjets.

During the brief flight northwest across the city he tried to figure out just what it was that Jolon had planned. The spot he had indicated

for landing was an isolated one, well away from the general run of traffic, since the Tetuci was unnavigable throughout its length. The only buildings in the vicinity were a few factories, the government assay station for the north polar continent of Acor of which Etoin was the capitol, and the local prison farm. That didn't seem to offer much material for the imagination. Well, he'd know all about it anyhow, very shortly.

He circled once over the spot, as he'd been directed, and dropped into a flat landing. To the southeast, across the turbulent yellow river, the city gleamed with the silvery shimmer characteristic of Etoin. On the western side darkness usually prevailed, but this time Clyde could see lights in the prison compound. A searchlight beam was sweeping back and forth over the squat buildings. He wondered if there was trouble there. He could hear no siren, but the wind was blowing strongly in the wrong direction, as it always seemed to on this part of the planet.

His thoughts were interrupted by a clattering behind him, followed by the sound of the airlock slamming shut. "All right, Heywood," Jolon's voice snapped. "Take off, and be quick."

Obediently Clyde slapped on the underjets and the Valkyr careened into the air. Jolon's passenger was muttering in a peevish undertone; he probably wasn't used to the rough handling a small ship could give its occupants. The tone sounded vaguely familiar.

Clyde set his controls for the Dobrudjan end of the Estevon Mountains and turned around.

The passenger was ex-Governor Manley.

"So I'm a getaway man," he said harshly.

"You are just that," Jolon agreed, grinning cheerfully. "But it will be worth your while, if you keep your mouth shut."

"Yeah," said Clyde with a sarcastic snort. "If this slob is my employer, most of the dough I'll be getting is probably mine anyhow. So you made enough from suckers like me to be able to sling circles around in score lots, eh, Manley?"

"I don't think that's any concern of yours," the Venerian said, unruffled. "You got value received, didn't you? I don't remember ever having you called in unless you told me your ship was ready for it."

"No. You might also remember that I was never ready, either, since what I paid you made it impossible for me to make any repairs." He looked at Manley with disgust.

It is difficult to describe a Venerian to someone who has never seen one. They are very like Terrestrials externally, without any of the pronounced characteristics which make it easy to describe the inhabitants of other planets. The Martians are a canine race, the Ganymedians feline, the Callistans caprine, the Iapetians ophidian, but the Venerians are not distinguished in this way; although they are, indeed, very different physiologically from Earthmen, the difference is internal and is almost impossible to outline without using the technical classifications of the Cartwright Nomenclature.

For the purpose of this narrative, then, Venerians are a heavy-framed, pasty-white race stocky to the point of squatness, with features which look rather squeezed together from the top. In their own environment they are

by no means repulsive, and they are friendly and scientifically brilliant, especially in biological and psychological fields; but a Venerian in a Terrestrial environment, or one who has taken to Terrestrial ways of living, degenerates rapidly, the solid muscle of his body changing readily into fat, his face puffing, and his eyes assuming a fishlike dullness not normally characteristic of the race.

This was what had happened to Manley—even his name was not Venerian — and the half-chewed cigar which he customarily wore in his mouth completed the ensemble. Clyde was suddenly thankful that he had brought a gun. Manley, he knew, was not a pilot, but Jolon was an unknown quantity, and if the Martian could fly the ship there was no reason why they should not jump him and pitch him out as soon as they were over the ocean. He grinned inside himself at the thought. The Valkyr had a few peculiarities — anyone who tried to fly her without considerable experience would find himself in trouble.

THE radio squawked tentatively and broke into the IP call. "Flash your capsule, please," the impersonal voice of a vodor requested. Clyde had been waiting for this; it was automatic, tripped by the passage of the ship through the inductance field which surrounded the city. He cut in the speaker.

"I'm flying a ferry authorization," he said. "Recorded this morning."

"Number?" said the vodor with mechanical boredom.

"SV two-nine-M."

There was a brief pause and the rattling of papers. "All right, Heywood," a human voice came in. "You've got sixty-four hours left, so

you'd better not get too far away from the city."

"Right," said Clyde. "Thank you." There was a double sigh of relief from behind him as he cut off. "Nervous, boys? We're all right now, unless the sea patrol stops us." The chances of that were very remote, but Clyde knew that they would not now take the chance of getting rid of him. His voice was on record now, along with the number of the authorization, and every police vessel from here to Atian-Kar would be able to check it if they chose; it would not be healthy for anyone else to answer their call on the Valkyr's radio.

"Tell me this," he said. "Why is it that every time I hear about a particularly juicy piece of lawbreaking, there's a Martian Outlander connected with it?"

Jolon shrugged. "Simple. The Outlands have been broken up. You can't suddenly deluge a cooperative civilization with two million antisocial people and expect them to be assimilated without any trouble. Centrale should have thought of that. Things would have been a lot more comfortable for them if they'd left us alone where we were."

"You're a philosopher, too," Clyde commented dryly. "But all Martians are supposed to be, aren't they?"

"Yes," said Jolon, smiling. "Just as all Earthmen are supposed to be engineers. As a matter of fact what I said was a pretty fair condensation of the warning the Tetrarch of the Outlands gave Centrale during the Moon Trial. Manley, are you a biologist? All Venerians are biologists, so if you aren't you must be a Iapetian."

"Accounts for the snake blood in me, no doubt," Manley agreed trying to adjust his stomach in the confines of



Clyde's gun spat a thin, intense pencil of heat, but too late . . .

"Have you got an alibi fixed up for your time?"

"I recorded my name at an Etoin hotel for the night and rumped up the bed before I left. That should do the trick. Where exactly do you want me to go?"

Jolon frowned as if considering whether or not to answer. Finally he turned to Manley and said, "Acorn hop jelling, something anyhow most acorns downtown?"

Clyde did not understand Outlands code but apparently Manley did. "Caudal if must, pistachio acorns doubtless nadir anyhow turkey sandy hop," he replied, and his face was so solemn as he pushed this nonsense past his cigar that Clyde chuckled in spite of himself.

"All right," Jolon agreed. "Heywood, do you know where the Charybdis Cauldron is?"

"My God. You haven't got your hideout there?"

"You catch on quick. I take it you know the place."

an acceleration hammock. "Why didn't you hire a plane with seats?"

Clyde turned back to his control board, muttering. Far below he could see a vast dark expanse, flecked occasionally with streaks of white which came and vanished. They had already passed the mouth of the Tetuci and were over the ocean. The old ship was making good time. "We're out to sea," he reported, resting one hand pointedly near his heatgun holster. "Flying south-southeast at a pretty good clip. We should hit the Dobrudja before morning if nothing goes wrong. I take it you boys have a hideout fixed up in the Estevons somewhere?"

"Yes," said Jolon, glancing at Manley as if to caution him to silence.

"By hearsay, yes. I can find it, if that's what's worrying you."

"Find it, then."

"All right," Clyde returned, shrugging. "It's your party." As he reached for his charts, his dislike of the job increased to an active worry. There wasn't anything about it that didn't leave an old-sock taste in his mouth.

CHAPTER THREE

The Fox God Rises

THE five-thousand-mile chain of Venus' Estevon Range starts near the source of the Loiseaux River in the polar province of Dibovitzza, runs northward between Montecque and Barbados along the entire length of their borders, and ends at the ocean in a burst of incredible peaks in the westernmost tip of the Dobrudja. It is a volcanic and unpredictable range, impassable at most places, cutting off all communication between the central provinces except by plane, and the number of its mysteries is as great as its age.

Among these mysteries is the Charybdis Cauldron, which is located among the great escarpments of the northern end, those mighty ramparts which the savages call the Pillars of the Sky. It is part of a nameless lake some ten miles in length, which is blocked on three sides by sheer sandstone cliffs, the open side gradually giving way to a heaving ooze from which with savage suddenness the jungle of the Dobrudja springs — a jungle as wide as the province itself, and as deep. In its center rises the small peak which is the island of Scylla, on which, the legends say, the Fox-God holds his immemorial revelry

each "night" in the pale blue glow of the puffballs which float out over the uneasy waters from the borders of the jungle.

Charybdis Cauldron is a nearly circular, funnel-like extension of the lake proper. There are two ways of reaching it; one is by means of a crumbling sandstone ledge which reaches from top to bottom of the pit in one complete turn; the other is through a low natural arch through which the waters of the lake flow. Only desperate men have ever used the latter entrance, for it is not really an arch, but a hole in the wall; and its bottom edge is too near the surface to admit any boat, even of the shallowest draft. Swimming in those waters is seldom attempted for a multitude of very good reasons. . . .

This opening is one of a number which breach the sandstone walls, some of which reach back into unknown depths of the Estevons. Beneath them, at the bottom of the pit, the waters move in a slow circle, draining inexplicably from the bottom. Every so often—the period varies, and the laws of its variation have never been accurately worked out—there is a vast gulping sound, and the waters of the lake are abruptly roaring in over the lip of an empty funnel. Where they go is not known, but some scientists ascribe the fresh-water area of Atian-Kar's bay to them; something which is hard to determine because of the effect of the delta of the Loiseaux which emerges at the same point.

This, then, was the spot which Jolon and Manley had picked for a hideout, and it was a good one. It was of no interest to the main body of Venerians, the savages were frightened of it, and scientists had given it up be-

cause of the expense of getting to it. The three men stood on the edge, with the raw heights of the Estevons cutting off the view on all sides, and looked down at the yellow, sluggishly wheeling current of the Cauldron.

Clyde was none too pleased with the prospect. "I don't like the looks of that ledge," he said, frowning. "Venerian sandstone is insecure stuff."

"Well, I'll be damned if I'll swim through that hole," Manley said. "For one thing, I'd hate to have the Cauldron empty while I was making for the bank."

"You'd never get that tummy of yours through the hole anyhow," Clyde responded. He liked the idea less and less as he stood there. The terrible peaks frightened him vaguely; they frighten even the natives who have seen them all their lives, and to an Earthman whose Venerian experience had been confined entirely to the flat expanse of the sunward side, the relentless heights were overpowering.

"Well, skip the standing around," Jolon said impatiently. "Down the ledge with you, Heywood. See the big hole near the bottom of the incline — the one opposite the opening to the lake? That's it."

Clyde shrugged and started down around the inside of the Cauldron, picking his steps carefully. There was something very fishy about all this. There was no reason why Manley should hide out this far from civilization — unless, of course, there was more to the affair than just a mere jailbreak. Maybe they planned an anti-Centrale coup — if so, he would have to watch his chance to break clear; he wanted no part in setting the governor's crown to bounding again. He was glad once more for his foresight in bringing a gun.

Probably they would have dumped him off into the ocean before this if they had not been afraid of the gun and the sea patrol. But no, Jolon needed him to fly the ship—

Or did he?

He looked around quickly to see if they were following him, and he had just enough time to see that they were not when the sandstone shifted warningly under his feet. A cave-in! There was no time now even to think. He flung out his arms and leaped wildly for the opening Jolon had pointed out.

FOR an instant he seemed to hang perilously over the Cauldron; then his fingers were digging into the soft floor of the cave as he scrambled breathlessly to safety. He jumped to his feet and looked out at the damage. The entire half of the ledge from the bottom to the mid-point had caved and slumped into the Cauldron, which had swallowed the enormous mass of stone without a trace. Above, on the rim, the Martian stood silhouetted against the gray sky, Manley beside him, peering in nervously. The latter withdrew as soon as Clyde came into sight.

"Oh, you made it," Jolon called. "Well, it doesn't matter. This saves me the trouble of shooting you in the back."

Clyde's gun spat a thin, intense pencil of heat, but too late — the Martian had already disappeared. His voice came back, diminishing gradually into mountain silence, singing an ancient Terrestrial folk-tune:

"But alas, I was no swimmer,
so I lost my Clementine . . ."

And then there was nothing to be heard but the muted gurgling of Charybdis Cauldron.

Clyde did not waste time kicking himself for falling into such an obvious

trap. Instead he looked about him, sizing up his chances. They did not seem very promising. The angle of the opening was very precarious, growing more so the nearer it came to the open air. There might be a chance of digging handholds out of the rock, but the angle made climbing them once they were dug a virtual impossibility. Swimming was out, for the chance emptying of the Cauldron was but one of the dangers involved there. There were also the watersnakes of the Dobrudja, whose appetite for warm-blooded meat was insatiable; and a single scratch from the fins of any of the many species of fish which inhabit all Venerian waters was poisonous to Terrestrials.

That left only the cave itself. Of course, it had not been equipped as a hideout; it was as bare as the day it had been eaten out of the grainy rock. There was no back to it as far as Clyde could see, but that was not very far, for darkness had been gradually creeping over everything. That puzzled him, for having worked for eleven years in the eternal day on the other side of the planet, he knew that the sun never shone on this side; there was only the pale silvery light reflected from the bowl-like cloud-surface of the planet's atmosphere, which was of moderate intensity, diminishing as you moved farther way from the twilight zone. This section of the Estevons was on the far edge of the twilight zone, so there was some excuse for its having a fuller "daylight" than Etoin—but why should the light vary?

In a moment Clyde had the answer—libration. The slight wobbling of Venus upon her axis would cause the twilit area to shift a little back and forth over the planet's surface; and this place, being on the very edge of

that zone, would get the effect as a night-and-day cycle. That meant that for the next twelve hours at least he could expect no more light than Etoin got; plenty for all normal purposes, but no illumination Clyde would choose for exploring an unknown part of the Estevon range. He would wait for the next "day." It was probably safe enough, despite the nearness of the Dobrudjas, for dangerous land animals would find his cave as difficult to reach as it was for him to leave.

He settled himself as near the mouth of the cave as the slope would allow, grasped his pistol firmly, and began his vigil. After a while he fell into a troubled sleep.

He awoke at the climax of a peculiarly horrible dream, in which he was an insect drowning at the bottom of a drainpipe. He had never before heard the roaring, gulping, gurgling sound which had awakened him, but he recognized it immediately—the Cauldron was emptying its waters into whatever mysterious gulf was below it, and the lake was pouring in through the hole in the funnel wall. It lasted only a minute or so, and then died away in a confused murmur.

Then he became conscious of other sounds, and for a moment he could not believe his ears. Music! He speculated upon the sounds the wind might make in its passage through the mountains, but was forced to cast the theory aside—the tones were weird and wild, but there was a definite sequence of melody to them, and with them came a muffled pounding of drums.

It was as close to darkness as Venus ever sees, a steely twilight obscured by the mist from the waters. From the breach in the walls of the Cauldron another light played, weak, blue, coming from somewhere over the lake.

By lying down on his stomach Clyde could see its source. The little island-peak of Scylla was glowing softly.

The glows resolved themselves into a myriad of small blue globes, which were drifting gently about the island and over the water. These were the aerial puffballs for which the Dobrudja is famous — the fruiting bodies of strange fungi whose mycelia only a few Terrestrials had ever seen. The scene was frighteningly weird. In the uncertain light the rocky island had assumed a vaguely canine aspect, its topmost height crowned by a gigantic fox-like face which looked out blindly toward the shrouded depths of the jungle. Over the whole vista the music skirled, its piccolo-like tones repeating a single long melodic phrase over and over again; each phrase was tipped by a single shrill note, almost at the limit of audibility; and at each recurrence of this note one of the puffballs burst like a star shell, scattering a haze of spores. The tiny blue motes filed the air, and unseen drums boomed frenetically.

As he watched, he noted one of the blue globes which, a little apart from the others, seemed to be drifting his way. Almost immediately his fears were confirmed; the poisonous thing was gliding toward the opening of the cave with a motion almost purposeful, skimming low over the waters. All about it the waves of sound darted, and others of its ilk burst with increasing rapidity, but it reached the Cauldron unharmed. For a few seconds it bounced about against the edges of the rock, then dipped and floated in.

The eyes of the Fox-God were upon him.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Riddle of Charybdis

IN THE later, calmer years of his life, Clyde found it almost impossible to believe that his thoughts could have raced ahead coherently at the speed which they did while that puffball was blundering against the rim of the opening. There flashed into his mind a mental picture of a man he had once seen who had died of Dobrudjan fungus — a corpse-face, its mouth a clump of bluish threads, tendrils of blue crawling from his nostrils, his ears, even the tear-ducts of his eyes — and he knew, discounting superstition, that if the music should burst that ball at such close quarters and he should breathe the spores, the death he would undergo would be a thousand times worse than any the unknown Fox-God could mete out! Shooting the thing would be almost surely fatal, for it would be impossible to incinerate it all before it exploded.

Almost simultaneously quick calculations of the possible emptying period of the Cauldron flickered through his head. He never remembered what results he got from those calculations — indeed, he forgot at the time the poisonous inhabitants of the waters — but whatever the conclusion was in mathematics, its expression in action was definite and violent.

He plunged into the Cauldron; and a flash of blue light followed him down into its depths as the puffball exploded.

Somehow he was not frightened. Fear is an expression of uncertainty, and Clyde knew what it was he had to do. The slow-moving currents drew him downward, and he swam with

powerful strokes with its movement, keeping his body against the lake side of the funnel. Gradually, as he had suspected, the wall changed from a sheer vertical position to a gradual outward slope; then he was swimming free in a universe of water with no wall anywhere near him. The waters were still.

His lungs were bursting, and little flashes of feverish red swept before his eyes in the darkness. He had deduced the existence of this underground reservoir, but if it should be entirely filled with water, with no air-space under its roof—

His head broke into cold air, but the grateful breath of it he gulped down scorched his throat. Treading water, he surveyed his discovery. He was in a vast underground cave, lit bluely from an invisible source. Its length he could not determine, but he guessed that it extended far out to the Dobrudja — an underground duplicate of the lake above. The waters here ended at a shoreline not far away, and suddenly remembering the poisonous and rapacious creatures swimming beneath and around him, he struck out rapidly for the beach.

He was not attacked. While he drew his exhausted body up onto the clayey sand, he wondered why he had not been set upon and torn to shreds long before this. The waters seemed empty of life.

Farther down the beach a single gigantic stalagmite reached from the floor of the cave to its roof, a gigantic pillar of stone which seemed capable of supporting the weight of a planet. It was pierced in three places with the mouths of smaller caves or tunnels, and from one of these openings a rope of woven vines suspended a frayed end to the sand. Clyde tried to

orient himself. According to his figuring he was about a quarter of the way out beneath the lake from Charybdis Cauldron; in that case, the great pillar must be directly under the island of Scylla.

This was an unpleasant conclusion, for it indicated that the mysterious musicians of the Fox God might have access to this cavern through the stalagmite's tunnels, the mouths of which he could see from where he lay. If any puffballs should come blundering down here he would be trapped irrevocably. He tore a strip of cloth from his shirt and bound it across his nose and mouth. It did not make a very efficient mask, but it would probably filter out most of the large spores. He would have to shift it every so often so that the moisture from his breath would not make the cloth a spore-catcher rather than a protection.

Thus inadequately armored against the unknown, he clambered to his feet, emptied the water out of his shoes, and walked cautiously toward the pillar. Perhaps one of those tunnels might lead him sideways along the roof of the cavern to an escape somewhere on the edge of the lake. The one with the rope certainly communicated only with Scylla, but since all the openings were above his head, he would have to try that one first and hope for a branch tunnel. Gingerly he tested the interlaced vines. They held. Shrugging his shoulders, he started up, his wet hands slipping on the slick surfaces.

As he got to the top he raised his head and looked into the surprised eyes of a native.

FOR an instant the two were motionless, looking with astonishment into each other's faces; then, before

Clyde could let go or slide back down the vine, the Venerian's huge hand shot out and grasped his wrist. Clyde was by no means a lightweight, but the native lifted him into the tunnel's narrow mouth like a baby.

"How did you get in here, out-worlder?" he demanded in a barbaric version of the South Continent dialect. His amazement at Clyde's presence in the cavern was obvious. Well, Clyde thought, they work the religious gag in all the stories—I'll take my chances with it.

"I am an emissary of the Fox God," he said, imitating as best he could the native's shuddersome verb-splattered use of the almost verbless Venerian tongue. "I was created by the music from the waters below, and invested with a message for Him Who Commands."

He was amazed at how well the age-old trick worked; the native released his wrist hastily and stared with confused fear at his masked face. Well, and why shouldn't it work? If you lived all your life in the visible presence of your God, you could be expected to have a fixation on the subject.

"You come masked, like those against whom the Fox God has warned

us," said the Venerian cautiously. "Is this a sign?"

"Do you question the forms which the God conjures up to serve him?" Clyde asked sternly. "I seem an out-worlder, yet you find me in the cavern which is sealed to all but the God's elect." He hoped fervently that this was the case; it certainly seemed logical enough. "The mask is indeed a sign and a symbol, representative of that which I must unveil to your leader alone."

"It is not similar to the mask-of-evil," the native agreed enigmatically. "Whom would you see — our chief, or him whom the Fox God sent to precede you?"

Clyde would much rather have spoken to the chief and steered clear of this local priest, but he knew that to insist upon such a course might arouse suspicion. "Take me to the god's emissary," he directed, and the native bowed his head respectfully and led the way back into the corridor.

Clyde's geological reasoning was fully vindicated as they climbed through the spirally winding tunnel. After ten minutes of a steady clawing from slope to slope, the native led the way out into the midst of a small forest, and the throbbing and keening of the music assailed his ears as if

from all around him. He was standing on a hillside on Scylla, and fires gleamed through the trees from just below. A puffball whirled slowly overhead and then floated away, and Clyde withheld a sigh of relief by main force.

The short trip to the house of the priest was an astonishing one. As they left the small patch of woods they came into a great clearing where ten fires, fed by briquettes of swamp-peat, burned in a circle; in the midst of this circle the musicians sat, swaying raptly with closed eyes as they blew through their reeds and flutes or thumped their many drums. They were all old, he noticed, and there was no sign of the dancers he had expected. He had never heard such complex rhythms; each drummer had his own pattern which he wove in among the others like a melody. It was pure rhythmic counterpoint, of a type not to be heard in the music of any other planet. Even the Iapetians, whose entire lives are bespelled by music, whose politics and business are controlled by it, had nothing to equal it.

Then they were out of the clearing and walking through comparative darkness down the side of the hill. Below the shoreline the lake glimmered, and a horde of dark figures ran back and forth or launched small skin boats onto its surface. As his eyes became used to the renewed dimness, Clyde saw that they were casting nets; and his amazement was redoubled at the aspect of the waters themselves, which were broken by myriads of tiny black points. Water-reptiles, fascinated by the music! What a way of fishing! No wonder there had been none in the gulf below to attack him!

He wanted to get a closer look at this unique folk-custom, but apparently they were not bound for the beach.

About halfway down the native turned aside and led the way toward a single large hut, from the winds of which yellow light gleamed through sheets of translucent fish-bladder. Clyde felt the tightening of his muscles which always went over his body as he approached a possibly dangerous situation. No telling how impressionable his priest would be—he might see through the bluff at once. The tension was heightened as the two stopped before the door of the hut, for at that moment the music stopped too, and the night seemed to hold its breath while the native gave three slow knocks.

The door opened, and an upper-class Venerian in a tattered gray uniform stood silhouetted against the light. "Hello, a Terrestrial," he said in cultured tones. "Come in, by all means. You are dismissed, S'lguthyl."

CHAPTER FIVE

The Bounding Crown

"THIS beats me," Clyde remarked in disgusted, mask-muffled tones. The letdown had made him a little angry. He looked in amazement about the interior of the hut. It was furnished simply but very comfortably; there was a well-cured fur carpet and a large bookcase filled with the long flat volumes of Venus, and several shabby but clean chairs and a table. Only the parchment windows and the guttering stone lamp gave any hint of the primitive world outside.

"I managed to salvage quite a few of my personal possessions," the Venerian said. "Sit down, won't you? My name, by the way, is Arai."

Heywood gaped impolitely. "Not the pre-league governor of Acor!"

"The very same. You thought I was dead, I suppose."

"I didn't know — that is — everybody supposed so, after Manley took over the Province," Clyde said.

"Manley? Oh — he would take a Terrestrial name, I imagine," Arai nodded. "Well, you probably know now from personal experience what happened to me. The Cauldron has been a favorite dumping ground for political undesirables for generations, and 'Manley' couldn't be expected to show any originality. There are several others on the island."

"Any Earthmen?"

"There used to be one, but finding it impossible to live in a mask all the time, he died a little over a month. You probably will too," the Venerian said cheerfully.

"Pleasant prospect. Not if I can help it. I mean to vamoose very shortly, if I have to grow wings to do it. Didn't any of you ever try to get off this island?"

"No. Oh, we could, I suppose. The spores are quite harmless to us, and the islanders have boats. But it's a long and almost impossible trip over the mountains, and Atian-Kar is still three hundred miles away after you get over; and to reach Lusknii, although it looks easier on the map because of the river, means about four thousand miles of Dobrudjan jungle. It's easier to stay here and be high priest—the food is good and the life, on the whole, healthful and uncomplicated."

Clyde looked at him sharply. There was something in the Venerian's tone that was distinctly flat. Years of the System's most antisocial business had taught Clyde to estimate voice values very carefully.

"Somehow," he said, choosing his words carefully, "I don't think you actually enjoy it here. You were a pretty good governor according to report, and I've yet to see a Venerian who was robbed of anything who didn't resent the robbery very strongly."

Arai's small eyes glittered bleakly in his marble-white, wide face. "It is a matter which Earthmen are not usually prone to discuss," he returned, his voice bitter. "Yes, I'd go back if I had the chance, but it's useless to think about it. There would always be the League of Nations — I'd be spotted by your Terrestrial police, delivered to 'Manley,' and dumped off into the Cauldron again. I suppose under the Spaceways Act things are a little better now, but even so the League certainly won't look benignly upon my turning up and asking to have my province back."

Clyde permitted himself a smile before playing his trump. "Well, your friend Manley—"

An explosion from somewhere outside drowned the rest of his remark in an ocean of thunder.

"SO YOU see," Clyde explained to the Centrale governor, "it all depended, really, on the strip of cloth I tore from my shirt."

"No," the official admitted, "I don't see. All I can see is that you fell for a get-rich-quick scheme, broke the law, and came back with a dead Outlands criminal and a ghost governor under your arm."

Clyde grinned. "Arai didn't think much of Earthmen, and he thought it likely that Manley would send a party out after him to make sure he was

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THE BOUNDING CROWN

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permanently out of the way." He gestured toward the Venerian.

"I guarded against that by ordering my islanders to kill on sight any man wearing a gas-mask, since I knew that Manley's Earthmen would have to wear them against the spores," Arai supplemented. "The fact that Heywood showed up in a strip of cloth instead of a mask saved his life."

"But your ship?"

"Oh, that. You see the **Valkyr**, not having passed an inspection for thirteen years, has a few little tricks which I've learned to handle but Jolon couldn't. One of them is the number three tube, which has a defective feed line; if you operate all the bank on the ordinary timer system, three gets too much fuel and goes off like a cannon. Jolon didn't know that, and when the concussion knocked him out Manley lost his head and jumped into the lake.

"Old Arai's natives fished him swearing out of the muck near the shore; we dragged the **Valkyr** off the lake bottom, and here we are."

The Centrale man shook his head wonderingly. "Well, under the circumstances I suppose I'd better overlook the breach of law involved," he said, "since Arai will probably revoke any sentence I pass on you after he goes back into office. You were right; Heywood — this governorship is a bounding crown. Just remember, part of the reward money for Jolon goes toward ship repair. Do you think we ought to send a squad down after Manley?"

Arai grinned broadly. "I wouldn't. He's getting his punishment. I think he is by now the new high priest of the Fox-God."