

# WEIRD TALES



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Cover by  
Margaret Brundage

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"His body leaned into the wind, a spectral shadow doom-haunted."

# The Crystal Horde

By HARRY WALTON

*Jagged spears claiming their victims, the huge crystal globes rolled over a terrified world whose end seemed very near.*

"DANGEROUS!" muttered Peter Landers, laying the pinkish, sharp-spiked little sphere upon the work-bench to fuss with the galvanometer leads. "These things are deadly. *I know.*"

Tony Mills nodded, unwilling to contradict the older man in what had become a

fixed idea with him. Yet it was too absurd to credit, this conviction of Landers that the Martian crystals, first brought to earth by his own father twenty years ago, were a menace. The strange, unearthly beauty of them, the mystery and desolation of the red planet that somehow inhered in them—these Mills could grant; but that the crystals were other than what they seemed—exotic jewels of an alien world—he could not believe.

Yet this was what Landers was trying to prove to an incredulous world, this the purpose of his endless, futile experiments here in his private laboratory in the Berkshires. Daily for six months Mills had watched him, and the slow decadence of a brilliant mind. Belief had become obsession with the man. The scientific world that had once respected him now called him mad. But Tony Mills thought him merely ill.

"The clamps, Tony!" Landers snapped churlishly. "I want the clamps!"

Mills found them, refusing to flare up over the older man's petulance. He watched Landers fumble with the galvanometer connections in a manner characteristic of him now—of the aged, somehow senile Landers. Mills himself picked up the crystal, held the starry, pink-white cluster gingerly against the light.

The spiny form of this one was rare. Most of the crystals were smooth ovals or spheres. Expensive at first, when collectors had paid a fortune for the few brought back by the elder Landers on his epochal space-journey to Mars, their popularity had spread as they had become cheaper and more plentiful. Scarcely a family, rich or poor, but treasured one or more of them.

A name had been coined for them: "Marsistals." Crystals from Mars! What wonder they had captured the popular fancy? What wonder that you could almost sense a world of alien life within the clouded heart of them, or that Peter Landers should seize

upon them as the fertile field of his delusions?

Tony Mills laid the crystal down, wiped his hands unobtrusively as though to cleanse them of unseen contamination—and cursed himself for doing so.

Landers put the crystal into a tiny vise, adjusted contact cups to bear against the thing's spines, and tightened the vise with unnecessary care—unnecessary, because it was impossible to break a Marsistal by any means known to man. All efforts to crack, grind or polish them had been unsuccessful. Carborundum and diamond failed to scratch their impregnable surface. Their structure and substance remained a mystery, baffling analysis, resisting acid, X-rays, the electric furnace.

For twenty years the crystals had been studied, even tested, as Landers was testing this one, for Piezzo effects. There are crystals which, by some curious molecular friction within, generate a minute electrical current when subjected to pressure. Marsistals did not. But Landers tightened the vise, watched the galvanometer intently. The pointer, which would indicate the feeblest flow of current, remained motionless.

Tony Mills roused himself. There was little he could do for Landers, and that little he had done. His own work waited—the ultra-short-wave experiments which he was concluding, upon which depended his future—and Marcia's future with him. The thought of her was a heady wine, invigorating.

"I have to be going," he said. "Lots of work to finish."

"Fine, Tony. Fine," responded Landers absently, toying with the crystal. "Damn! These things are sharp."

MILLS grunted sympathy as the older man inspected his thumb. There was no blood, and after a moment Landers went to work again with trembling, inept fin-

gers. Mills stared broodingly at the instrument. A sharp exclamation from Landers startled him. Unbelievably he saw the galvanometer needle heel sharply over.

Simultaneously there was a sound, like the quick indrawing of breath a man takes in sudden agony. It took Mills perhaps a tenth of a second to tear his eyes away from the galvanometer, and by then a terrible silence had set in, upon which his own gasp of incredulous horror broke loudly.

Peter Landers was slumped over beside the work-bench with a spear of crystal through him. Even in death, what was left of his hand still grasped the thing, except that the thumb—the same he had pricked before and must have pierced upon one of those needle-sharp spines just before he cried out—was a bloody stump. The crystal itself, for that lightning-brief instant during which all photographed itself upon Mills' vision, was as before except for a single foot-long sliver that stabbed out from it and dribbled blood behind Landers' back.

But the thing must have started to grow immediately. Landers' body stirred, and a second crystal splinter spurted out below a shoulder-blade. More followed, with a constant crisp *tinkling* like the breaking of innumerable very thin glass rods, a musical shower of sound—brittle, delicate, terrible.

Mills leaped across the room, away from the spiked horror. It continued to grow, new spears thrusting out explosively to the accompaniment of that grisly chorus of sound. Then, suddenly, it stopped growing because it had assimilated Landers' body, bone, blood and gristle. It paused in its growth and there was silence.

It was still a spiked cluster, spherical, with a diameter now of about six feet. Upon its spears clung shreds of clothing, a metal buckle, pieces of a shoe. The crystal itself was spotless, unstained by the blood it had absorbed. Its color seemed deeper,

but that may have been due to its greater size.

Mills swore, a low stream of vituperation that seemed to suck the poison of fear from him as he spat it forth. Slowly he edged toward the door, lest a footstep reveal to the thing that life remained in this room of death.

That swift, surging growth must have left it unoriented for the moment, its faculties as yet unconditioned to its new size and environment, for Mills gained the door and was able to bolt it shut from the outside. From the woodshed he got hammer and nails and enough lumber to board up the laboratory windows. He locked the house and took the keys with him. His thoughts, as he returned to his own cabin, ran riot.

Landers had given ghastly proof of his madcap theory. How had he known? What had prompted the belief that became obsession, that ordered his life and resulted in his death? What had he known that science and reason had overlooked for twenty years? Had it been merely a "hunch," part of Peter Landers' tragic heritage from a family intimately associated with the crystals from the first?

Ralph Landers and his flight partner Comstock had been first to reach Mars, first to bring the glittering baubles to earth. And Ralph Landers had perished in his rickety, ill-built little ship during a second attempt to reach the red world. His wife had clung stubbornly to the belief that the crystals had brought about his death, although even now that seemed impossible. She had begged her son to avoid them as a curse. Queer and old-fashioned that had sounded to the Twenty-First Century, which had abolished curses and like superstitions from its complacent scheme of things. But even this modern age hadn't abolished mother love or that strange thing called intuition—the unreasoned wisdom of a mind sharpened by love and loss. And

Peter Landers had perished—by a Marsistal.

But what was done was done. Mills forced himself to deliberate upon the immediate problem. Landers would not be missed soon; he had tolerated so few visitors, had kept so constantly indoors, that even his immediate neighbors rarely saw him. Nor were these likely to approach the Landers place. Warren Pastor, ostensibly a writer but addicted to day-dreaming and sporadic playing of the violin, was far too immersed in himself to betray the faintest interest in any other living thing. And Burk Hall, who with his blind father lived on a stony, little farm nearby and raised prize-winning hogs, could ill afford time away from his work to inquire into his neighbors' affairs. No one else was near enough to count.

MILLS saw nothing to be gained by notifying the local constabulary. The village authorities were not of the caliber to deal with a problem such as this one. But who was? How was the swollen crystal to be disposed of? Acid, fire, lightning itself would have no effect upon it, if it retained, as he felt bitterly certain it did, the known properties of a Marsistal. If buried, would it not feed upon the very worms, and thrust itself again to the surface in convulsive growth? Was it perhaps best to immure it in Landers' laboratory, to seal it behind concrete walls?

Certainly he dared attempt nothing of himself. Once Landers was missed, suspicion would rest upon him, as the scientist's sole companion. For Mills' own sake there must be witnesses to the giant crystal's existence. Warning must be given, for the menace existed, potentially, everywhere.

It was a simple matter to put through a radiophone call to the nearest Federal Police post, not so simple to explain to a bored desk sergeant why he wanted a detail sent to a tiny hamlet in the Berkshires. Mills

had no intention of telling the story to an incredulous underling; to be dubbed a crank or a drunk would result in his call being ignored entirely. Besides that, the police wave-band was a public one, and casual listeners-in might spread the facts, create needless panic. He forced himself to be content with a promise that a police plane would arrive by morning, reflecting that the matter could well wait until then, that nothing could be done tonight.

Mechanically he turned to his own work on the ultra-short band. His receiver brought in immediately a piping, reedy whistle which he assumed to be a test call of some kind. But when, tired of waiting for the sender to identify himself, he tuned elsewhere in the band, it was to encounter the same signal all over the dial. In desperation he settled back, frowning over his thoughts, hearing again the brittle tinkle of the crystal's ghastly growth, seeing in memory that indelible mind-photo of Peter Landers with a spear of crystal dripping blood behind his back—only a little blood, because the thing absorbed it so quickly—absorbed it through an impregnable surface which no agency on earth could so much as scratch!

Monotonous, rhythmic rather than mechanical, resembling ancient voodoo drums and tom-toms rather than a test call, the mysterious signal continued. Upon impulse Mills swung a stratospheric direction finder upon it, plotted its readings, and felt a creeping chill gather along his spine as the result stared up at him from the chart.

The area intersected by the lines was perhaps half a square mile. On the map, it was that territory bounded by the nearby village of Spotswell, the cabin of Warren Pastor and his wife, and Mills' own place. In almost the exact center of that triangle stood the Landers laboratory, from which a giant Marsistal, swollen on human food, was sending forth the call of its kind—a

clarion call of growth, triumphant, hungry, strong.

## 2

MILLS slept badly and was starkly awake when the door-chime rang early the following morning. Upon the threshold stood Burk Hall, a strapping, red-headed young giant, his brow now wrinkled with unwonted thought.

"I reckoned I'd better wake you," he told Mills. "You'd know what to do. There's been an explosion up at Landers'."

"An explosion?" Mills felt his heart miss a beat. "When? What happened?"

"Don't rightly know when. I didn't hear nothin'. But I seen it when I started my chores. Whole side of the house is ripped out, like from inside. You could drive a cow through the hole, easy."

"Did you see—anything?"

"Just only what I told you. What'll we do now?"

"I'll advise the police," offered Mills. "You go back—no, run and tell Pastor and his wife to stay indoors—the fool hasn't a phone. Tell them not to budge from the house. Then get back to your place and stay there—inside. Don't ask questions now; I'll explain later."

Hall left, muttering. Mills dialed the police post on the radiophone, but received no reply. Angrily he switched on his speaker, prepared to rebuke some sleepy exchange operator. But no operator answered. Instead came a maddening "pee-whit, pee-whit, pee-whit"—monotonously regular, unvarying, and blanketing not the short-wave, but the radiophone band this time. With furious energy Mills checked his apparatus. His sender was undoubtedly functioning, but its output was scarcely equal to that of the interfering signal. Whether his call was being received or not, he could not tell. Any reply would be drowned out by that insanely repetitious

whistle. There was nothing to do but to wait for the detail plane promised him the night before.

Only one man in the neighborhood would have imagination enough to credit the fantastic truth—Warren Pastor. That Pastor wasn't a practical man did not matter at the moment. Mills felt a compelling urge to share the terrible facts with someone.

He left his house and struck out for the writer's cabin, keeping sharp watch as he hurried on. From the top of a rise he saw Landers' laboratory, with one wall broken out, the splintered beams showing. Impossible to doubt that the Marsistal, possessed of some strange locomotive power, had escaped.

The Pastor place was as slovenly as the man himself. A weed-strangled garden, a dingy hammock, a litter of boxes and camp stools everywhere—for Pastor wrote, dozed, or played the violin wherever the fancy struck him—these were expressive of the man, as was his refusal to install even an old-fashioned wire telephone or other more modern conveniences. Under a lean-to Nancy Pastor bent over a washtub, her bare arms beaded with suds.

"Is Warren inside?" he asked, and after her stolid nod added: "Please come with me, Mrs. Pastor. Right away."

Wordlessly she followed him, faced Mills and her husband as silently inside the cheerless living-room, her features a strange blend of patience and shrewishness, of nag and drudge. Pastor called her his Xantippe. God knew, thought Mills, the poor woman had better reason to bewail her lot than the notorious wife of Socrates.

Warren Pastor himself remained lying on a couch, his eyes half closed, a bottle of whisky on the table beside him.

"Has Burk Hall been here?" Mills asked angrily.

Pastor opened his eyes for a moment. "He was—with a stupid story about Lan-

ders' place exploding. That old fool will blast himself to hell one of these days. But that was no reason for Nancy to stay indoors. She had her work to do."

"Landers is dead," Mills announced bluntly, and told the story, omitting nothing. "The Marsistal is at large now. It can move, can hunt its food. Nobody is safe outdoors."

They waited for him to continue, offering no comment.

"But there may be greater danger than ours," Mills plunged on. "Those signals last night—they weren't mechanical, like this morning's. They had meaning. They were intended to be heard. What if there are—or will be—*others?*?"

Pastor sat up abruptly, his abundant hair wildly unkempt, his lean, bony face twitching. "Others, yes! Then—Judgment! Judgment of your kind and Landers' kind—of all the fools who worship what they call progress, who put a halter around their necks and call it science. Judgment, when those who reached the stars find it was only to bring their doom to earth!"

His eyes blazed fanatically as he poured himself a drink and gulped it. Mills watched with a sickening sense of futility. Nancy Pastor glanced from him to her husband, a dull urgency in her spiritless eyes.

"But we haven't seen it," she said at last. "It must be gone, or we would have seen it. And I can't stay indoors, with all my washing to finish."

Pitifully intent upon the work awaiting her, she shuffled out before Mills could stop her. Before the apathy of the wife, the fanaticism of the husband, he felt worse than helpless. In all likelihood no argument he could offer would have kept her. As for Pastor, it was in keeping with his fatalism to make no objection. Mills turned upon him angrily.

"You're going to ask me what's to be done," taunted Pastor before Mills could

speak. "And I'll tell you. Nothing! It's Judgment!"

"I was a fool to come here," said Mills. "It was only that I wanted somebody besides myself to know——"

FROM outside came a shrill drawn-out shriek. Mills hit the door solidly and was through before Pastor got to his feet. What he saw froze the blood in his veins. Nancy Pastor was running wildly toward the lake, and the Marsistal pursued her, rolling on those incredibly hard spikes with a curious, hesitant, space-consuming gallop. The thing was larger than it had been in the laboratory; perhaps it had fed since. And perversely Mills's mind took note, even as he dashed after the thing, that the crystal's rhythm of motion, a pause and a rush, a pause and a rush, was exactly that of the "pee-whit, pee-whit" of the radio-phonograph band.

He plunged madly after it, the ground slope toward the lake speeding him on, but quickening also the gait of the sphere. Pause and a rush . . . pause and a rush. . .

Nancy Pastor looked back once, terror in her haggard face. In blind panic she ran on, unseeing, straight toward a half-folded camp stool that lay where Pastor had flung it. Mills shouted warning at the top of his voice. She gave no heed. A moment later she sprawled headlong over the stool, rolling over once in a pitiful effort to gain her feet before the crystal reached her.

It hesitated for a barely perceptible instant, then went on as before—a rush and a pause, a rush and a pause—with Nancy Pastor spreadeagled upon its spikes and turning over and over with it as though lashed to a gigantic St. Catherine's wheel.

The Marsistal rolled on toward the lake, into the water with a splash, out from shore like some bizarre aquatic creature returning to its element, until the blue-green surface closed over it. Mills stared stupidly

at crimson flecks of blood spotting the grass. In the trail of the thing the greensward was indented with sharp prick marks.

He turned away, almost colliding with Pastor. For once the complacent shell of egotism surrounding the man was pierced. But he allowed Mills to take his arm, to lead him back to the Pastor cabin, walking as in a stupor, muttering over and over again a single word: "Judgment!"

Mills's own wirephone—an antiquated village affair—was ringing madly when he returned to his place. The postmaster, calling from the nearby hamlet, was almost incoherent with fright. Haltingly he gave Mills a message: that the Federal Police post found itself unable to spare the promised detail, in view of a nation-wide emergency that demanded every available man and made it impossible to respond to routine calls for the time being. What emergency? Hadn't he, the postmaster asked frantically, seen the day's tele-news sheets?

Mills thanked the man. The Federal Police call had no doubt come through sometime when the Marsistal had been at rest, when the interference accompanying its movement was not abroad. His own radio-printed news sheet confirmed that guess; it was a mere smear in spots, but there was sufficient legible print to tell its hideous story a dozen times over, under as many date-lines.

Two hundred deaths of wearers of Marsistal jewelry were recorded, in Capetown, London, Tokyo, New York, and even in the new ultra-smart Antarctic resorts. Crystals ten feet in diameter were rolling down Unter den Linden in Berlin, down New York's Fifth Way, over San Francisco's ancient Golden Gate Bridge. Scores of persons were missing in cities, towns, and open countryside.

With the terror scarcely ten hours old, already a dozen theories existed to account for it. Comstock, one of the men first to

bring the crystals to earth, suggested that they might have been but one form of life upon ancient Mars, that in their blind lust for food they might have wiped out all other life without trace, until themselves starved into a state of suspended animation.

Mills found that easy to believe. For cons those horned spheres must have roamed a world their rapacious appetite had denuded of all other living things. Finding no more food, they must have settled in the dust of the red world at last, such life as dwelt in them, immortal as human life is measured, sustained by the slow consumption of their own bulks, drawing such infinitesimal energy as it required from the residue of their bodies, until these had shrunk to the tiny ovals, spheres and spiked clusters Comstock and Landers had found. Possibly the spiked crystals were those that had fed a little longer than the rest, and so were a little less removed from their original form.

The substance of the things? Perhaps an allotropic form of some familiar element, yet differing from that element as greatly as a diamond, that superlatively hard allotropic form of carbon, differs from ordinary carbon. Crystalline matter endowed with life! Invulnerable, fittest of all living things to survive—and to conquer!

Brought to earth and into daily contact with compounds new to their chemistry of life, they had by some evolutionary magic, over that period of twenty years, slowly altered their metabolism to assimilate the new life stuff present all around them—*carbon*. Until yesterday, shrunken, incapable of movement, they had been content with such quantities as they could absorb from the carbon dioxide of the air. How could their smooth, spineless bodies have availed themselves of the unfamiliar but abundant food supply at hand—flesh and blood?



IT WAS inevitable that a crystal which had retained its spines should first partake of that food, so prolific of swift growth. Through no effort of its own, but because of Landers' trembling, clumsy fingers, one of its needle-sharp points had pierced flesh, its altered metabolism had responded instantly to what it now sensed was food, and horror had followed.

Already the call that had gone forth from the thing in Landers' laboratory had borne grisly fruit. The last link in the crystals' life-chain had been forged when that signal had flashed around the world, macabre command to burst their crystal walls and feed. Overnight, with such energy as remained to them or they could gain from carbon dioxide, they had put forth tiny crystalline needles, thirsty for the flesh food all about—and woe to the wearer of the awakened Marsistal, or to the first to handle a hitherto harmless ornament!

What of Marcia? She had never worn Marsistals, Mills remembered with relief. In the neat, business-like observatory atop Mount Wilson, where she assisted her father, there were none of the accursed things. Nor was it likely that one could make its way up into the pylon-supported observatory. Marcia, he thought gratefully, was safe.

From the graveled road leading past the house came the pad of running feet. Mills went to the door and saw that it was Warren Pastor, hurrying past as though driven by some hypnotic urge, his eyes fixed, his tangled hair flying free. Mills sprang after him, shouting, until he saw Pastor turn toward the village. He would probably get drunk there and forget for a time, Mills decided. It would be as well to let him go.

Returning to the house, Mills succeeded in putting a call through to the Police post, and made a full report. He was assured that the matter would be "investigated in due course"—a promise in which he put little faith.

With the radio-news sheet under his arm, he walked through the little pear orchard beyond which lay the Hall farm. The stuttering song of Hall's tractor reached him before he topped the rise overlooking the field, half red and furrowed, half green. The machine was at the far end, Burk Hall a pigmy behind its steering-wheel and levers. Mills hallooed loudly. The tractor swung around.

Watching it against the sun, Mills caught the first glint of whirling crystal knives rising behind the ridge. Immediately the thing came fully into view, began rolling downhill with that curious, hesitant, yet speedy gait, splashing color from a thousand facets. The Landers crystal! It was larger than before; each revolution therefore carried it farther, and its speed was formidable. A man on foot would have had no chance of escape. Nor had its immersion in the lake harmed it. It must have consumed Nancy Pastor's body beneath the surface, and emerged—hungry.

Mills screamed warning, gesticulated madly, prayed that slow-moving, slow-thinking Burk Hall would understand before it was too late. Hall saw the crystal, and menace was too plain in those flashing daggers for even him to misunderstand. He jerked a lever, lifting the plowshare from the soil, and gunned the tractor's engine to full speed. The clumsy machine lumbered for the orchard, not swiftly, but still faster than a man could run—fast enough perhaps to elude the glittering horror behind.

A shambling figure came down from the porch of the Hall house and shuffled into the sunlight. Mills, too far away to act, sensed rather than heard the blind man's querulous voice raised in senseless questioning. With maddening deliberation he shuffled closer to flashing death. Burk Hall saw the old man's danger, swung the tractor in a tight arc, tempting the crystal to follow.

It was abreast of the pig-sty then, and whatever senses the thing had decided it in favor of the thousand-odd pounds of pork nearby. It swerved, crashed through steel stakes and wire fencing, mowing down the enclosure like so much stubble. The pigs squealed, a shrill trumpet of fear that was cut off in full voice. Their carcasses, swung aloft on that gigantic spiked wheel, were already half consumed.

Nor was the thing sated. Horrified, Mills saw it curve toward the elder Hall, now standing in trembling indecision full in its path. The daggered juggernaut rolled down upon him, paused in its relentless gait for one brief instant. The old man did not cry out. Above the tractor's roar came the dry, penetrating tinkle of the crystal's growth.

Burk Hall swung the tractor about again and drove for the crystalline horror at full speed, throttle wide open, exhaust belching blackly, upon his face the passions of the damned.

Twenty feet from the crystal he flung himself clear. The tractor ran true, crashing solidly with a grinding of metal against the gleaming spines. Its front wheels reared, clawed upward as though to climb that formidable bulk. The machine, upended, at last fell on its side like an upset toy.

But it had stopped the crystal for an instant, long enough for Burk Hall to reach the tiny shack set well apart from the house, and to set Mills' heart pounding with hope. Hall did all the stump-work in the vicinity, blasting out unwanted tree roots, breaking rocks for removal. In the shack was enough detronite to blow Spotswell out of the country.

**H**ALL reappeared, a yellow-and-red bundle in his hand capped with the ominous purple of a detonator. A stumble, a touch, would explode that fistful of death. But he was sure-footed, deliberate. He

flung the explosive at a suicidal distance of fifty feet.

A tremendous blast swept Mills from his feet, left him gasping, stone-deaf. He felt blood on lips and neck where nose and ears bled from the concussion, simultaneously realizing that he was sprawled full length. Rolling over slowly, he sat up. Something plummeted out of the sky and struck deep, quivering, into the soft earth where he had been lying.

It was a sliver of crystal, perhaps three inches long, vibrating there with the force of its descent. Shuddering at his narrow escape, he still felt a thrill of triumph. The detronite must have broken that off. Had it shattered the monster sphere?

That hope was quickly blasted as he caught sight of the thing rolling lakeward. The explosion must have sheared a few thin spines from it, must have rocked it to the core to send it scurrying off so, but had done it no real harm.

Mills hoisted himself drunkenly to his feet and lurched toward Hall, who lay face down where the explosion had flung him—dead, probably, before he struck the ground; certainly dead now, for from his back jutted a slender knife of crystal that sparkled in the sun. Two, three steps more Mills took after the fact registered upon his dulled senses. Upon the fourth he froze motionless.

For Burk Hall stirred strangely. As a corpse moves that is shaken by an alien hand, he rose in ghastly resurrection—rose upon crystal shafts that burst tinkling from his chest, his throat, his thighs—that sang as they devoured him, and in their multitude grew round and spiny like a gigantic thistle, while the wind bore away their song of growth, crisp, musical, like the breaking of innumerable thin glass rods.

Mills ran then as though his feet had been suddenly uprooted. He was past his own house before he was sufficiently recovered from panic to slow to a walk, and

fought the horror seething in his brain while he continued on into the village. Reason told him that all he had seen was but an infinitesimal cross section of a tragic whole. Not one of these deaths so close to him differed essentially from similar tragedies in France or China or New Zealand. Not one but was a mere variation in the death-theme that underlay the saga of mankind. Horror multiplied was the fact, a thousand times more acute in the crowded cities than in this sparsely-settled region.

## 3

**I**N THE village store and post office, when he finally reached it, vociferous groups were discussing the news bulletins whose ghastly headlines frowned from the walls. An attempt to poison the crystals with beef blood, in which quantities of deadly chemicals had been mixed, had failed utterly. The spheres had absorbed all voraciously—and grown larger. Emergency regulations required that all Marsistals be turned over to police authorities. A shop prominent for marketing the dread jewels had been wrecked by a fear-crazed mob.

A state militia company had been wiped out in an attempt to destroy four Marsistals with liquid fire. Witnesses told how the spheres had plunged eagerly into the flames, hungry for the hydro-carbons present in the fuel and visibly expanding as they assimilated them. After attaining a diameter of fifteen feet, two Marsistals had exploded. The deadly shower of crystal splinters following had accounted for most of the casualties. More than a score of new spheres had sprung into being, grisly offspring of those destroyed by this bizarre mode of reproduction. The postmaster-storekeeper joined Mills before the bulletin board, volubly frightened. Two villagers had seen a monster crystal in the vicinity. A hysterical boy had brought a tale of see-

ing it devour a huge Guernsey bull. The man prattled on, Mills scarcely hearing, so immersed was he in his own thoughts.

"And now it's my crystals," groaned the postmaster. "The two we've had since our wedding. You remember we kept them here in the store, for show. When the bulletin ordered everybody to turn 'em in, I picked up a pliers to handle 'em with. And when I turn my back the things disappear. Gone, and the dust not settled yet where they'd been——"

"Wait!" snapped Mills. "Had Warren Pastor been here?"

"Sure," responded the postmaster. "But he didn't stay. Didn't even seem to want anything. Seemed kind of——"

Mills left him gaping. There was no time to explain—no time for anything but the greatest haste if another daggered horror were not to be born within the hour. What insane purpose could have moved Pastor he could not imagine.

**M**ILLS scarcely expected to find the man alive. But even before reaching the Pastor cabin he heard the thin, wailing notes of a violin rising upon melancholy minor scales, and these repeated with minute variation again and again. Nor was this the careless playing Pastor usually indulged in; it was deliberate, intent, purposeful. Mills stole up to a window and was able to look into the house—and promptly wondered whether Pastor had gone mad.

The man sat upon a stool, hunched forward, his face twisted out of all semblance to the cool cynic he had been—and fiddled to the crystals! The two Marsistals stolen from the village store lay upon the table before him, and to them Pastor addressed his playing, that weird, sobbing, infinitely varying sound pattern which seemed to seek a hidden, esoteric note—and found it suddenly!

From the instrument surged a shrill,

long-drawn tone, quavering eerily upon the stillness. One of the crystals vibrated briefly in resonance with it, dancing like a drop of water on a hot plate—and shivered into fragments!

The sight left Mills a-tremble. Exultant in this revelation, he forgot Pastor, forgot his own danger there on the hillside where Nancy Pastor had been killed, forgot death itself. The Marsistals could be destroyed! Sound could shatter them! Already he saw huge sound-projectors, mobile units which would disintegrate the spiked horrors, a world reclaimed from death.

Pastor rose and with the violin under one arm left the house. Mills intercepted him. In the other's dilated pupils, in the flaring nostrils, in the head thrown too far back, but most of all in the black and burning eyes, Mills read what Pastor meant to do. A blind longing for vengeance had in one brief hour replaced all the calm, futile cynicism of the man. For the first time he was afire with purpose—to destroy the great crystal sphere as he had destroyed the Marsistal on the table. He was an impractical dreamer even in that; for Mills knew that even if the resonance frequency of the monster crystals were not radically different from that of the small one, a far greater volume of sound must be directed against it to shatter that ton or more of living stone.

Cunningly, Pastor seemed to sense that Mills wished to stop him. He broke into a run, madness lending him wings; so that Mills, although younger and in better physical condition, was still thirty feet behind when Pastor dropped into the little motor-skiff Mills kept at the lake. A touch of a button, and its electric engine churned into life, swiftly propelling it from shore. Lacking so much as a rowboat in which to follow, Mills stood helpless at the landing. The lake was large, and great fringes of brush would make it impossible to follow the skiff by land.

Troubled, he returned to the Pastor cabin. Into a tin box he slipped the undamaged Marsistal. Then, yielding to an uneasy impulse, he scooped the fragments of the other into a carton. He chose the lake path home in the hope of seeing Pastor.

There was no sign of him, however, and Mills forgot him as, reaching his own laboratory, he was assailed by sudden doubt—by a suspicion that struck chillingly at the very root of his hope. Quickly he fashioned a long wire holder, inserted a large fragment of the shattered crystal, and held it cautiously—mindful of the fate of the militia company—in the flame of a bunsen burner. Nothing happened, except that after thirty seconds the supposed crystal fragment, red hot, formed a tiny globule and dripped from the wire.

Irony that only here, in the rustic back-country, could Pastor still have found an *imitation* Marsistal! Skilfully blown of ordinary glass, colored to defy detection, the imitations had been immensely popular years ago when the real crystals were worth a small fortune each. And such a thin glass shell Pastor had destroyed.

But was his inspiration entirely false? Was it not possible that sound waves, or else ultra-sonic vibrations beyond the range of audible sound, might penetrate the invulnerable shell of those engines of death? Must not every slender thread of hope be followed to its end, if the horror and heart-break of today were not to be multiplied until civilization crumbled?

Removing the shards of the genuine Marsistal from its tin container, Mills examined them carefully. A hundred times he had seen it, a flat, smooth rectangle of no striking beauty, in the village store. But now there grew from one oval fragment a dozen or more needle-sharp protuberances scarcely a tenth of an inch long, tiny crystal teeth athirst for blood.

Putting it in a safe place, he went to

work. Condensers, oscillators and modulating-coils for the generation of a wide range of frequencies were at hand, and loudspeakers to convert these currents into sound of tremendous volume. In his first experiment, with a shrill, keening whistle, he shattered a drinking-glass, but the Marsistal remained intact. Successive experiments, during which he was repeatedly deafened by the cataracts of sound unleashed, also left the crystal untouched. Outside, dusk deepened into night. He worked furiously on.

## 4

**T**OWARD midnight a sibilant whisper outdoors roused him from his labors. From the doorway he recognized the ghostly outline of a small mono-speedster against the sky. It settled softly, and something familiar about the little ship set his heart throbbing in his throat. He ran out, up the hillside, to meet the slim, knicker-clad figure alighting.

He clasped her roughly to him, in pain at sight of her in this valley of death. Her eyes, luminous in moonlight, were still unafraid.

"Marcia! You should never have come."

"You were here," she answered simply.

"You didn't answer my calls——"

Silently he berated himself for neglecting to glance at his radiophone recorder. Her presence unnerved him; he was afraid as he had not been even in Landers' laboratory—afraid for her.

"Come. Let's hurry inside."

He felt her tremble at the first whisper of sound, carried by some vagrant air current—a thin wail rising and falling in unearthly cadence. The thrill of her soft, clinging body was lost as the significance of that weird melody smote him. Warren Pastor, somewhere in the night, courted death in his search for vengeance.

Marcia stifled a cry as she saw it—the

stooped, bareheaded figure upon the ridge, silhouetted against a low bank of clouds, leprous-white in moonlight. The thin black line of his bow moved up and down in rhythm with his plodding step. His body leaned into the wind, a spectral shadow, doom-haunted.

Mills saw something else, even more terrifying in this silvery half-light than by day—whirling glitter of a thousand prisms, the rush of a huge, faceted globe hurtling through moonlit mist, the senseless plodding of Pastor—a shadow walking into the valley of shadows—the wail of a violin rising to a scream, half human.

The crystal globe paused for the merest fraction of a second.

Marcia screamed only once. Her hand was hot and dry in his as they fled down the hill, not daring to look back. But the crystal did not follow. Perhaps it had been too far away to sense their presence, for when Mills looked at the ridge the daggered horror was gone.

He prepared food for the two of them, and although neither was hungry, the commonplace ritual of eating calmed them, thrust back the memory of what had happened on the ridge into merciful semi-reality. But the latest radio-news sheets brought it back, starkly clear. Martial law had been declared in all large cities. Motor caravans and foot travelers fled in exodus from infested centers to regions whence the horror had preceded them.

Explosives had been found worse than useless, for flying shards of crystal expanded into new monsters whenever they struck a victim. Although a French artillery company had actually blown a Marsistal to bits with heavy shell-fire, against this solitary triumph stood the fact that there was not enough ammunition in existence to exterminate one half of that far-flung crystal horde, even had sufficient heavy cannon been available.

Tons of ordinary Marsistals had been

relinquished to the authorities and stored in bank vaults, concrete dugouts and the like. At one time it had been hoped that the crisis was past, that no new spheres would be reported.

Such hope was short-lived. Insatiable, the things fed so long as food was to be had, until they reached a diameter of about fifteen feet; then burst in a deadly explosion of crystal spears, any one of which, lodging in flesh, bristled into a new creature. Frequently the Marsistals burst on the very fringe of fleeing crowds. And for each thus self-destroyed by the necessity of their nature, ten or twenty new ones sprang up.

Mills put the tele-news sheets aside. Marcia's somber eyes questioned him. He told her all, from the death of Landers to his work—and failure—of the past hours.

"It was a wild, desperate hope," he confessed. "I thought Pastor might by chance be on the right track. But if detronite can't harm the things it isn't likely that sound or even ultra-sonic vibrations will. Maybe I'm looking for something that doesn't exist — maybe the Marsistals *can't* be destroyed."

"But you can't stop," she put in softly, "until you *know*. Oh Tony! There must be something, some overlooked facts."

"Facts?" he interrupted bitterly. "Twenty years haven't given us any real facts, except that they're alive, deadly—that they feed and move and interfere on our radiophone band——"

Arrested by a kindling spark of thought, he paused, then went on.

"It's when they move we get that interference, and to generate it there must be an electro-magnetic field, probably inside the crystals themselves. Maybe such a field works through their peculiar atomic structure to intensify the force of gravitation, as a burning-glass does sunlight, to make one side of them heavier than the other,

and so set them rolling. They certainly don't move mechanically, as we do."

He rose to pace the room restlessly. "Supposing we could generate that field within the crystals ourselves, by using a tight beam transmitter and getting a resonance effect. If the theory holds water, we should be able to produce terrific gravitational strains within them, perhaps enough to break down even their structure. It's worth trying."

"Then let's try, Tony—and quickly, because there is so little time."

THEY worked right through the night. Analyzers trained upon that telltale "pee-whit, pee-whit" yielded their data.

"But I don't think it's accurate," Mills confessed. "We're getting a lot of interference beats that throw us off. The frequency we want is somewhere in this range, but how narrow its band is I can't tell."

Nevertheless he assembled a beam transmitter according to the data given. Toward morning he forced Marcia to withdraw and rest, promising to call her if there were news.

The transmitter finished, he laid the Marsistal from Pastor's cottage in one pan of a laboratory balance, focussed the transmitter upon it, and snapped the switch. Invisible, silent radiation sprang forth. Slowly he tuned the circuit over its entire range of frequencies.

He might as well have lit a candle for all the effect it had. The balance never wavered. That sparkling bit of alien life pendent in it seemed to glow defiantly. He shut off the transmitter, and became aware of Marcia, watching from a doorway.

"Tony! I couldn't sleep. Look!"

He nodded dully at sight of the tele-news sheets in her hand, too weary and soul-sick to wish to read them. "You may as well know, Marcia. It's no use. Maybe our guess just wasn't good enough. Even if it was, I can't build a transmitter to work

on a narrower band, and that's what we would need——"

She stared at him, fear tightening her mouth.

"You're not giving up, Tony! You can't!"

"Nothing more I can do." He was groggy, drunk with fatigue, his voice acid with hopelessness. "We'd have to hit the critical frequency within one or two cycles—months of work maybe. No, we're through."

She shook her head as though to shut out a persistent evil vision. "All of a sudden I'm afraid, Tony—terribly afraid!" Through fatigue-drugged senses warning reached him that she was on the verge of hysteria, that his grim ultimatum had left her faith foundationless. But before he could stop her she had flung the papers at his feet and run out of the door. Out into gray dawnlight he stumbled after her.

He stopped there, let her get farther away. At the observatory she would be safer than anywhere else. He had no safety to offer her—nor anything else, now. Any other time Marcia would have stood by him. But this wasn't just any time; this was a special hell on earth and everything was crumbling into black horror—everything that was or might have been.

She had almost reached the speedster when she stopped, stood poised in a stiff, unnatural attitude. Mills' breath froze in his throat and his heart seemed to stop beating, for he knew already what she saw. He knew that a Marsistal would come rolling ponderously down upon her in a moment.

When it came he was amazed at the grim swiftness of it—a thing gigantic, larger than he had yet seen. The monospeedster was in its way, and the Marsistal rolled through and over it, crushing the frail craft to earth, and unhindered swept downhill. Before it Marcia fled with all the glorious vigor of her young body, silently,

saving her breath for flight. But the lead she had was fast dwindling.

Desperation sucked the strength from his limbs. Willing to give his life tenfold for hers, he knew this was no case for heroics, that rescue was humanly impossible, that even if he were to throw himself under the thing it would pause only an instant in its pursuit of her. One finish only to this race with death, unless——

He did not deceive himself. The chance was slender, but worth the playing. He shouted, made certain that Marcia was heading for the house—she didn't know, of course, that the sphere could roll walls down like so much *papier maché*. Then he sprang indoors and swung the beam transmitter around, facing the doorway.

MARCIA was two hundred feet from the porch when he grasped the small Marsistal gingerly by the edges, where it had grown no needles up to the time he had last examined it. That it might have grown new ones since was a chance he had to take, because this was no time for fussing delicately with tongs.

He jammed the thing into place before the little wire grid of the beam transmitter, where every iota of energy would have to pass through it. A wager for two lives, his slim supposition that the Marsistal's atomic structure might act as a natural screen or filter, that the transmitted energy would be so affected as to lie within that critical range of frequency peculiar to the crystals.

He flipped the switch just as Marcia reached the porch. The giant sphere was only fifty feet behind her then. What if the impressed field merely made it come on faster? What if it did nothing at all?

It did nothing at all, and Tony Mills, strangely cool and deliberate, began, turning the circuit from the very beginning of its range, uncertain whether he would ever finish that turn of the dials.

Suddenly the little Marsistal in the trans-

mission grid split with a sodden "thunk" and drifted down among the busbars as shimmering dust. Something happened to the monster sphere that same instant. It lurched, rocked backward, came to a grinding, quivering halt. It settled as though striving to force its bulk into the hard earth. Dirt shivered aside under its vibrating spears.

There was a sound, a sharp, tinkling death-rattle. Abruptly the crystal broke. The shards of it dropped to the accompaniment of that shrill, penetrating vibration. It disintegrated as though a charge of detronite had been exploded at its core, and every fragment crumbled still further as it fell.

Upon the ground, sparkling as with mica dust, lay a pulsing reddish-brown globe six inches in diameter, flattened by its own weight, flabby, repulsive. As though rehearsed, and without conscious thought, Mills knew what had to be done. From his laboratory he brought nitric acid. It hissed and bubbled as he poured it upon the globe. A stench arose. The throbbing ball dissolved into a puddle of steaming, frothy liquid. He emptied the bottle into it.

Then Marcia was in his arms, sobbing and unnerved now that all was past, and he shaking with fear of the fate that had passed her so closely by.

She pushed herself away from him at last, looked up at him with eyes in which pride and tears blended equally.

"We have to tell them now, Tony," she whispered. "There's a world waiting."

He turned to the radiophone and switched it on. No maddening "pee-whit, pee-whit" now. Silence but for a faint chatter of DX on some far-off channel—silence almost of death.

"It can't be too late!" he muttered. "Not now — when we can fight back! Not now——"

The selector bulb flashed into belated

response. Dialing Federal Police, he added the emergency signal. A tired desk sergeant grunted routine acknowledgment.

"I have completely destroyed a Marsistal sphere," said Mills slowly. "Give me your commanding officer."

The man gasped comically, but made the desired connection. Within a minute Mills was speaking to a national chief. Within three he was addressing not one man, but a world-wide conclave of emergency police heads, army officers, and technicians. To them he explained succinctly what he had done, and how by a simple determination of the exact frequency transmitted by the small crystals at the instant they broke down, special transmitters working on that predetermined frequency could be built, to be effective without further use of small Marsistals.

Before he was allowed to leave the phone, technicians were already at work; the first step in a world-wide offensive against the crystal horde had been taken. Mills himself was ordered to Washington. For the following hour he and Marcia packed and set the laboratory in order.

At the end of that time a police plane droned to a landing outside. Five minutes later they were winging toward Washington, a grinning young police lieutenant at the controls.

**T**HE plane's teletype rattled busily. From time to time the pilot passed back its curtly worded bulletins. The substance of them all was alike—news of humanity's drive against the dreaded spheres.

The first battery of transmitters, placed in action in Washington, had rid the capital of the spiked horrors. After a thirty-six hour reign of terror, the streets of that city were once more safe. London had won seven victories in isolated encounters with Marsistals, and was rushing construction of more transmitters. Panic was subsiding.

"I wouldn't be surprised, sir," said the



lieutenant gravely, "if there'll be quite a crowd at the landing-field. The people are wild with relief, and you can't blame them. You're the man of the hour, sir. Even before I left, there was plenty of excitement."

He passed back more bulletins. The Marsistals were being conquered. Where the transmitters went, victory followed. London and Berlin were wiping out the spheres as fast as they could be found. Metropolitan New York had been cleared of the menace. No further casualties were being reported.

"That makes it certain, sir," continued the pilot. "The crowd at the landing-field, I mean. They were planning a parade when I left, with a reception to follow. I thought you might like to know."

Mills groaned. His muscles ached with fatigue and his eyes almost refused to stay

open. The pilot's news made him wince in anticipation.

"Lieutenant!" said Marcia. "Do you know of a *long* way to Washington?"

The pilot considered gravely. "I've heard it's possible to go by way of Chicago, Miss. Of course I have my orders, but I was told to place myself at Colonel Mills' disposal. Your commission is waiting at Washington, sir. Any orders?"

"Yes!" retorted Mills, sinking deeper into the comfortable cabin chair and squeezing Marcia's hand. "Proceed to Washington—via Chicago. And don't hurry. You understand, Lieutenant?"

The pilot's head came around, but snapped instantly back to rigid attention ahead.

"Perfectly, sir. And—my congratulations!"