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## *Full-Length Feature*

### **THE WANDERER'S NECKLACE.....H. Rider Haggard 12**

Strange relic of a forgotten time, it lay awaiting its foreordained day of destiny in a hidden Viking grave. For then a long dead hand would reach for it, and grasp again the love and glory of the centuries—and its final; Inescapable doom.

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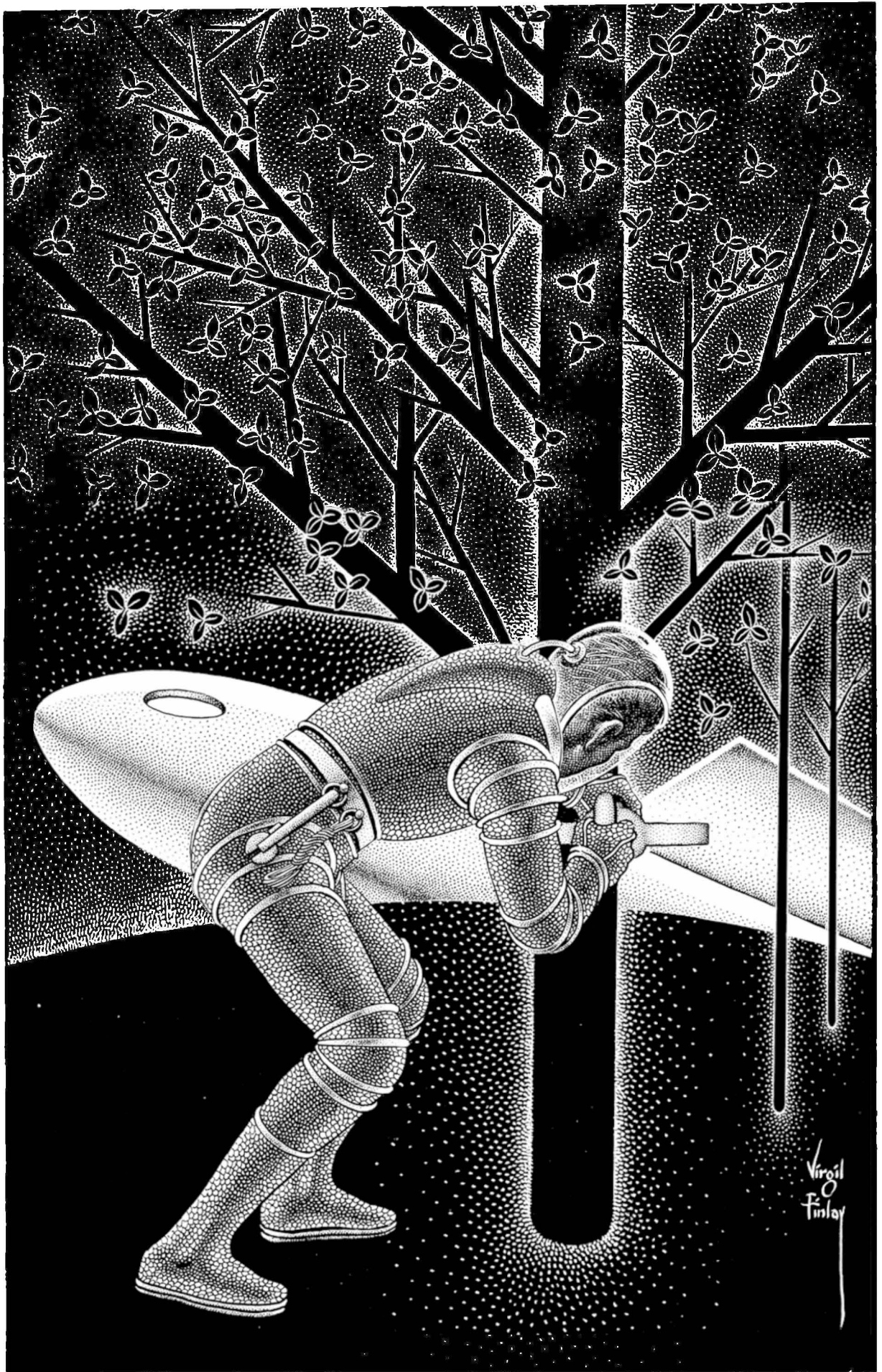
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# THE ESPADRILLES

By

Margaret  
St. Clair

I WAS carrying quite a lot of money. When the man in the espadrilles sat down beside me on the bar bench, I slid away from him. Except the rope-soled espadrilles on his feet, all he had on was a pair of dirty light blue pants. He was gaunt, hollow-eyed, and unshaven, with the exposed parts of his body burned almost black from the penetrating rays of space. Even in that part of Marsport only a very broadminded bar would have admitted him.

The barman came and stood in front of him, glowering. The man fished in his pocket and pulled out a coin. "Zwiff," he said, holding up the coin so the barman could see it. Zwiff is that liquor which came in for so much attention last year because of its effect on the nerves.

The barman brought the drink, still glowering. The man in the espadrilles swallowed it as if he were trying to make it last. When the drink was gone he held up his hand and turned it over and over, looking at it. He looked at it as if he'd never seen a hand before.

I tried not to show I was watching him, but he noticed it. He turned toward me and said, "It's a soft, wet kind of life."

What do you say to a remark like that? I fixed my eyes on my drink and slid away from him again.

"Please don't move off," he said. He sounded so hurt that I felt ashamed. "I'm not going to make a touch."

It's always embarrassing to have your mind read. Partly because I was ashamed, and partly because I was curious. I said, "What do you mean? Of course it's soft and wet. There isn't any other kind of life."

"Oh, yes," he answered. He studied me with his punched-in eyes. "Out there, out on the edge of the galaxy— He gestured toward the rear wall of the saloon behind which, presumably, lay the edge of the galaxy—"Among the strange, boiling worlds, the suns millions

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of times hotter than our own sun, there might be another kind of life. A hard, metallic, coruscating life, a life pouring out from those vast furnaces like a flood of molten metal from a smeltery. Out there. . . ." He fell silent, studying me once more.

The barman was watching us doubtfully. The man in the espadrilles motioned to him and held up another coin. "Zwiff," he said.

When the drink came he sipped at it thoughtfully. He put down the empty glass and turned to me with an air of decision. "Look, I'll tell you about it," he said. He cleared his throat.

"It's all my fault. You can blame me as much as you want. Right from the start I disliked the looks of that planetoid. But I had to make repairs on the hull of my ship and I hate making repairs in space. You can't call that fear of falling pathological, since so many spacemen have it. The worst of it is that any way you fell would be up."

"The planetoid was a pimple of a thing, smaller than our moon, and yet it had nearly normal earth gee. What could it have been made of, to be so dense? It even had an atmosphere, though it wasn't breathable.

"I set my ship down on a hill. Remember that. I set it down on a hill. As far as I'd been able to see when I was circling the planetoid before landing, the hill was the highest

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me realize I had to get away  
from there. . . .**

point on it. The surface of the planetoid was remarkably level and flat."

The bartender came and stood in front of us. "What'll it be, gents?" he said menacingly.

"Two more of the same," I said. I paid for the drinks.

"The top of the planetoid—the soil, as it turned out," the man in the espadrilles continued, "glittered and sparkled and shone. I tested for radioactivity before getting out, but it wasn't that. But during the day, when the light of the double blue-white sun was on it, the soil shone so much I had to wear direct-solar type glasses to see anything. It was like trying to work in a drift of mica flakes.

"Well, I got on with the repairs. I was glad I'd landed, then, because the type of welding I had to do goes much better in an atmosphere. There were a lot of repairs, though, more than I'd anticipated, and I put in ten full hours without making much of a dent in them. I was getting tired and shaky. I decided to rest by going for a little walk.

"I'd been walking for about half a mile when I saw the trees. They looked just like the trees kids make with those glitter kits. They were low, with angled branches, and the branches and the trunks were the same diameter all the way up. There were neat little conical flanges where the trunks and branches joined. The trees and the soil were so much alike that for a moment I thought the trees were just complicated crystals or something like that. They didn't look like the things we're used to that are alive. And then at the ends of the branches I saw the hard bright green leaves.

"I took the geologist's hammer from my belt and tapped on them. They were hard, as hard as steel. And they made a noise like the ringing of little glass bells.

"Well, what should I have done? A tree's a tree, even when it's as hard as metal and glitters like aventurine. I turned around and went back to the ship. I didn't even try to break off a leaf. I just went back to the ship. And when I got there I found the ship was resting in a shallow, glittering depression about a third of a mile across.

"I should have got out right there. The ship would still fly, and I could have finished the repairs in space. And just to save myself trouble and unpleasantness . . . I told myself that I'd been mistaken, that I hadn't landed on a hill.

"That night a wind came up, and in the morning the ship was lightly covered with shining dust. I had to keep wiping it off as I worked. And still I didn't realize what was happening.

"I was almost done with the hull repairs when I found the main drive shaft was cracked.

I don't think the planetoid had anything to do with it—shaft metal does crystallize. But now I had the prospect of another week or so on the planetoid while I did metallurgy. I cursed my luck a good bit, but I set up the furnace and got ready to smelt. And then I found something that made me realize I *had* to get out."

"What was it?" I asked.

The man in the espadrilles looked at me owlishly. "Never you mind what it was," he said darkly. "I don't want you drawing away from me. I'll tell you later.

"I had to get out, as I was saying. I was afraid to stay on that shiny little planetoid a day longer. And yet it would take me at least a week to get the shaft repaired.

"I thought awhile. Then I got out the power saw and went over to the trees. I measured them with the calipers until I found one whose trunk was exactly the right diameter. And then I cut a chunk out of it.

"I turned the trunk on the lathe when I got back to the ship, and it worked beautifully, just like super-beryllium steel. I didn't have any trouble with it at all. By noon I was feeding course data into the computators, and two hours later I was far enough away from that shiny little planetoid that I could go into space drive.

"I got back to Mars at last. Had nothing but hard luck, but you wouldn't be interested in that. And here I am."

He motioned to the barman. I ordered the drinks. "Is that all?" I said finally, when the glasses were empty. It didn't seem like much of a yarn.

He turned on me. "No, it's not all," he said. His sunken eyes were fierce. "How could it be?" He rubbed his lips. His fingers were trembling.

AFTER I got back to Mars," he said, "and before the licensing company repossessed the ship, I did a little prospecting. I was sick of space. I used to go into the desert on low drive and set the ship down in a promising location and work out from there. I never found much, but it was enough to keep me alive.

"I liked the desert. It was quiet and hopeless and dead, and as I said, I'd had a lot of hard luck. The desert fitted in with my mood.

"Finally I set up what was pretty near a permanent camp. I didn't have enough fuel to cruise around. I was there a week and a week and another week. And then one morning after breakfast when I was cleaning up and throwing my slops away, I saw something in the sand. . . ."

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"What?" I demanded. For some reason, my heart had begun to beat fast.

"A shiny patch, he answered, "a glittering sparkling shining patch. I got sick when I looked at it. And in the middle, something hard and bright was coming up. It was the top of a tree, one of those trees.

"I turned my hand blaster on it. I used up all the charges. When I got done the sparkle had gone out of the sand and I thought everything was dead. But I was back there a month ago. The patch was much, much bigger. And this time there were three trees."

"But how—you mean you brought the seeds of the trees back with you?"

"Not just of the trees," he corrected wearily. "The whole planetoid was alive. That's why it sank in around my ship. The trees were just a particular instance of it.

"As to how it was—it might have been from me, or the spores the wind blew on my ship, or even from the piece of tree trunk I used for the main drive shaft. Before I gave the ship back to the company I destroyed that piece of tree trunk in an atomic blast. Locking the stable door—I don't suppose it matters how that alien life got here anyway. It's here.

And now it's in the desert, growing away in that dead peaceful Martian desert. Pretty soon those quiet harmless sands will be crawling with the hard bright new life."

"But. The story was incredible. I boggled at it. "Didn't you try to tell anyone about it?" I couldn't keep my mistrust out of my voice.

"Of course I did.

"Well, then.

"They didn't believe me. Would you believe me? I look like a bum, I feel like a bum, I *am* a bum. I got thrown out of the office. Our only hope is that archacologists or somebody like that, somebody respectable, will see those patches out in the desert and report on them before it's too late. It may be too late now. We haven't anything capable of resisting that hard bright life."

He looked at me earnestly. "You don't see the danger? You really don't see the danger? It's a terrible one."

"If you had some proof. I murmured.

"Oh, proof. Yes, I've got that. What I was telling you about, what happened on the asteroid. I'll show you, if you won't be afraid of it. There's nothing to be afraid of, really. I'm sure you can only get it from the trees. Here." He bent over and tugged at his right foot. "I'm a little stiff in the joints. Look."

He tried to raise the foot to the level of his

## THE ESPADRILLES

left knee. The motion overbalanced him and he fell right on over the back of the bar bench and landed on the floor. He had had quite a lot of zwiff.

The bartender came out from behind the bar. "This is the last time, Jack," he said. He sounded very depressed. "I warned you before. Out you go." He grabbed my acquaintance by the belt and the seat of the pants and began to propel him toward the door.

There was a scuffle. In the course of it, one of my acquaintance's espadrilles, the right one came off. As he was half carried, half dragged to the bar entrance, I got a good look at the horny brown sole of his right foot. A green leaf was growing out of it.

It was a leaf of a peculiarly intense and bitter green, shot with greenish sparkles, and it looked as hard as an emerald. The sole of the foot was elevated around it slightly, as if from an upward thrust. It must have been a nuisance to the man in the espadrilles when he tried to walk.

The bartender and the man with the espadrille got to the door. They stood there a moment, swaying and struggling. Then the bartender heaved and my acquaintance flew out onto the sidewalk. He landed in a sitting position. The bartender picked up the espadrille and threw it after him.

Still sitting on the sidewalk, my acquaintance cupped his hands around his mouth and yelled at me. "Bigger!" he shouted. "I have to see it off twice a week!"

He yelled something more, but I couldn't make out what it was. Then he picked up the espadrille and went staggering down the street. By the time I had paid my bill and run out after him, he was gone. ■ ■ ■