

FANTASTIC UNIVERSE

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the
nobles
are
coming

by . . . Gene Cross

Together they discussed the Nobles — the old prospector and the weary, frightened man. Then — utter terror struck!

I RESTED on reaching what seemed to be the top of the incline, and leaned back against the wall of the cave. For a moment the silence was unbroken. And then in the darkness there was a whisper of movement, an unseen stirring that was stilled by my involuntary, voiceless cry, "*What's there!*"

With only a blurred memory of having reached for it, I found my gun in my hand.

"Don't shoot!" said a burry voice. "Allow me to introduce myself: Mister J. J. Abrogado, A-b-r-o-g-a-d-o, Serbo-Croat prospector, at your service!"

I lowered the gun hesitantly, letting it waver in the general direction from which the voice came. It was a strange introduction, but the possessor of the voice must have been as frightened by my bursting suddenly into the cave as I had been on finding it already occupied.

"What are you doing here?" I asked.

"That's supposed to be my question," said Mister J. J. Abrogado. "Who are you? And

When science fiction clasps hands with the horror story, pure and unadulterated, it's well to make certain you're being guided toward the abyss by competent hands. Gene Cross has the rare gift of lighting up his somber, ghoul-haunted woodlands by flashes of chilling lightning. By suggesting more than he tells he evokes the absolute ultimate in shuddery terror without venturing for a single moment beyond the rust-red hills of Mars.

what was it that frightened you?"

"Sorry," I apologized. "My name's Ross. I'm an archeologist. I was on a trip alone in my ground car when it broke down. Being no mechanic, I couldn't fix it. I decided to walk back to Marsport. I walked all day and most of this night, when—Well, listen!"

I bent my head to one side. Through the earphones of my headwarmer I could hear from far away a vague presentiment of movement, a dim blur upon the horizon of sound.

"The nightrunners," said Abrogado in recognition. "I thought it might have been something else that frightened you." There was an unspoken question in his silence.

"What?" I asked, wondering.

The cave was like a bottle of blackness. I could see nothing of my companion, not even his head and shoulders which must have been thrust rather sharply forward.

"The Nobles," said the prospector. "I thought perhaps you had seen a Noble."

The presentiment of movement had become a distant murmur, and my hand against the cave wall could detect a soft, smooth trembling.

"No, I didn't see a Noble," I answered. "In fact, I've never seen a Noble."

"Nor I," said J. J. Abrogado.

There was silence again. It

lasted for long minutes. There was nothing in my universe but the solidity of cave wall and floor; and—in the background—the growing murmur of the night-runners.

"I've seen a man who saw a Noble, though," I said at last. "What was left of him they brought into the base hospital at Marsport on a rubber blanket, and placed in a tub. Nothing was missing, but he was peeled."

I might just as well have said 'shelled' or 'husked', as if something had tried to turn him inside out.

The murmur was now the sound of a rising tide.

The man I had seen in the tub had been one of the few "missing men" who had been found. The others had never been seen again. They had been archeologists, exploring isolated Martian ruins or prospectors, seeking precious metals . . .

As if aware of my thoughts, Abrogado said: "Most of the missing were prospectors. I'm a prospector."

Instantly I regretted having contributed anything about Nobles to the conversation. I remembered all the stories I had ever heard about Martian prospectors gone mad. And here was one seemingly obsessed with the fear of falling into the two-fingered hands of the strange creatures from outer space.

My eyes were as accustomed

now to the blackness as they would ever be, and still I could see virtually nothing of my companion—except for a slight lessening of the darkness mirrored in his eyes occasionally. But that lessening gave me two items of information: He was about my height and he was looking directly at me.

"The Nobles," said Abrogado in his toneless voice. "Man knows almost nothing of them, as they can stop their hearts at will, and so are never captured alive.

"We can only be sure that they are stately, regal creatures, fifteen feet high who walk always with grace and dignity. Proud, sensitive, steeped in tradition—that is the impression one gains of them. But it's hard to understand how such remote, godlike beings whose lives should be devoted to beauty remain continually preoccupied with death.

"But then, standards vary, and what Earthman can say what is truly beautiful, what is truly ugly? Perhaps the Nobles evoke strange and somber rhythms from human diaphragms, play great symphonies of attenuated delight upon the nerves of living creatures."

Whatever else Abrogado had to say was submerged in a great flood of sound. Outside, a hundred thousand ostrich-like creatures were racing madly through the night, their thick legs drumming against the desert sands. The cave was filled with the

echoing thunder of their passing.

If it hadn't been for them I would have flung myself out of the cave to avoid sharing for another moment the company of the mad prospector. But nothing could stand before the impact of that terrible explosive migration, which had mystified zoologists for so many years.

Actually, I was being needlessly alarmed. After all, I was armed. What did I have to fear from a moonstruck old man? Nevertheless, I had an uneasy picture of him standing near, waiting for the turmoil to subside, his face gaunt and shadowed by a heavy beard. For once I wished I had the Noble's ability to see in the dark.

Minutes passed while the drumming drained slowly away.

"I'm glad that's over," said Abrogado. "I have some questions to ask you. I have been isolated in the desert for many months. You are the first human I have seen for a long while."

"Go ahead," I said, absently.

I was wondering just how the missing prospectors had been trapped. I pictured Nobles crouching in a cave, waiting for one of the poor devils to enter. But that wasn't likely. Their bodies were formed of large cartilage-like sections which were too rigid to permit them to crouch or kneel. Physiologically, they had but two choices: to draw themselves up to their full height

of fifteen feet, or to lie flat upon the ground.

In reply to Abrogado's questions, I chatted lightly about the new shops and homes, and the population figures as shown in the latest census of Marsport.

Abrogado asked: "Have you seen the new interstellar ship?"

"*The Stellar Missile?*" I nodded; "Yes, I've seen it. They're still putting the finishing touches on it—painting, insulating, and so on."

The existence of the great ship, long under secret construction, had just been revealed to the populaces of the Inner Worlds. It was being constructed on Mars as it would be easier to lift from the red planet than from Earth. The nose of *The Stellar Missile* was pointed outward in the general, but specifically unknown, direction of the home planet of the Nobles.

"What star is it investigating first?" asked Abrogado.

"Oh, a very likely star," I said, "considering the evidence. Sirius."

"So it is Mira?" mused the other. "I know little of astronomy, but it doesn't seem a likely star to me."

I touched the open face of my watch, feeling the hands. I knew that in a few minutes it would be—not dawn, but daylight. Because of its light atmospheric envelope there is no true twilight, or dawn on Mars. The sun just

suddenly waxes into brightness in about the same length of time as it takes the glow in a television tube to wane into darkness. And so, in a few minutes, I would see my companion for the first time.

"I have an idea," I said, "as to how we can deal with the Nobles when we find them."

"Yes?" asked Abrogado.

"Mind if I sit down?" I asked. I loosened my harness, unbuckled my belt. "Have you heard of J-bombs?" I said, and dropped.

Before I struck the floor my gun-weighted hand had leapt out, and the silence was shredded by a staccato blast of sound. I jackknifed upwards, holding the trigger tight against the butt emptying destruction into the night with desperate haste.

My gun brought its stuttered sentence to a halt and, as if a period were being added by the pen of chance, there was the metallic punctuation of a heavy object dropping to the ground.

Then, miraculously, the interior of the cave brimmed with radiance, and objects stood out in stark relief. There was a glint of brightness on metal: A gun of strange design lay directly before me.

And above me the explosion-pocked body of a Noble hung suspended from the ceiling by suction-cupped feet. It dripped blue blood upon the rocky floor, its eyes vacantly staring.