

FUTURE FICTION

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SIX ASTOUNDING NOVELETS

- LIQUID HELL**.....*Neil R. Jones* 8
 Nez Hulan finds himself battling amidst the bloodiest mob of space-pirates in the solar system! Himself an outlaw, he struggles for supremacy on a tiny asteroid, where he is trapped to die a lingering death in a lake of acid!
- LAUGHTER OUT OF SPACE**.....*Dennis Clive* 24
 A world of laughing death, where a plague of madness promises the destruction of all Mankind!—such is the world that Conrad Smith fights to save! But the powerful evil out of space is not to be conquered—and we promise you a powerful, realistic climax that will leave you awestruck!
- PROPHECY OF DOOM**.....*Ross Rocklyne* 43
 Argus Nesban was the master of the Imperians—the handful of people that composed the last remnant of the human race—and he upheld the Rule that Knowledge should be shunned as an evil! The Rule demands that the Imperians ignore the prophecy of Zaga-meen—He-Who-Broke-The-Rule—a prophecy of certain Doom to Man's last stand!
- THE CITY UNDER THE SEA**.....*Duane W. Rimel* 55
 Two undersea explorers are thrust into a weird adventure amidst a kingdom beneath the waves! Huffman finds himself battling a strange science, to save the surface world from the traitorous plans of Belton, conspirer against his own people!
- THE MAGNIFICENT POSSESSION**.....*Isaac Asimov* 71
 After many patient years of painstaking experiment, Walter Sills makes the discovery that promises him great fame and a million dollars! But success is no bed of roses, as Sills finds out—trouble and terror threaten from every side!
- THE POISON REALM**.....*John Coleridge* 83
 Two helpless humans in a far world of another dimension, Lona and Terrance fight a torturing doom as the poisonous gases of a strange atmosphere threaten a painful death in that weird jungle of alien monsters!

AN AMAZING SHORT STORY

- GRAVITY OFF!**.....*Leslie F. Stone* 100
 Jerry Moore looked like anybody else—except that his face became very red when he stood upright—for "upright" to us was "upside-down" to him! Tired of walking on ceilings as a side-show freak, he considers just letting himself fall into the sky!

SPECIAL FEATURES

- FAN MAG DIGEST**..... 41
LETTERS FROM READERS..... 66
FANTASY TIMES.....*James V. Taurasi* 82

COVER BY SCOTT

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The POISON REALM

by JOHN COLERIDGE

Terrance and Lona were just ordinary reporters—but theirs is a strange fate! Thrown into a far-flung world of another dimension, they face death in an alien jungle inhabited by horrible monsters—and the poisonous gases of the weird atmosphere crawl into their tortured lungs!

“I WOULDN'T attempt to explain the nature of my experiments to anybody but a scientist—and a darned good one at that!”

Terrance Hale stood his ground desperately. “But just tell me one thing, Dr. Vance. What is that tower affair on the

roof for? Has it got anything to do with your theory of the Fifth Dimensional Continuum? What do you expect to do with it?”

The scientist put his stained hands together in a pious gesture, but his expression was sarcastic.

“From the mouth of babes,” he quoted



Some spawn of this hyper-alien environment!

"Young man," he continued, "when Einstein's Theory first came out, only twelve men in the world were able to understand it. There are only two people who understand my new theory. I'm one. I haven't found the other one yet. Now get out."

"But Dr. Vance—that tower!" pleaded Hale. He tried wheedling. "I've driven a hundred miles up here just to get some report for my sheet. You wouldn't want me to lose my job, would you?"

The elderly scientist glared. Then, in an earnest voice he said, "Let me give you a tip, son. Drive back that hundred miles and stay there. I'm going to try an experiment in an hour that may end—disasterously. If worst comes to worst, and you're in the vicinity, you won't have any job to go back to, to lose. Understand?"

"But tell me—"

Vance literally exploded. His white mane flew up as he jerked his head violently and threw up his arms. "Will you go!" he shrieked. "Or shall I have my assistant throw you out? Hans—Hans—"

The assistant, Hans, came running up from the other side of the laboratory. He was even smaller and scrawnier than the scientist.

Hale grinned at the thought of being "thrown out," but shrugged and left, realizing he had overstayed his welcome by far. The irascible scientist, at the eve of some dangerous experiment, was not a man to interview. Perhaps after the trial, he would feel like crowing about it, if it worked. Terrance Hale decided to stay around for that possibility. His boss had sent him up for Sunday supplement material and Hale would hardly dare go back without something.

He drove his wheezy old car away and toiled it down the rutty road that led toward the county highway. Why had the scientist picked such a God-forsaken spot? He had had all his apparatus and supplies trucked up here at tremendous cost. It seemed like a crack-pot stunt.

But Dr. Vance was no crack-pot. He was the man of the hour in science, a trail-blazer into the unknown. A second—and perhaps superior—Einstein. Two years before, after announcing his amazing Fifth Dimensional Continuum Theory, he had moved his laboratory up here into practically deserted regions. But why? That was the question everyone asked, but no one had found the answer to. The scientist had become mighty close-mouthed about it. Was his brilliant genius about to scintillate with something still more astounding than his first theory?

Hale reflected that it might be so. When out of sight of the laboratory, behind a growth of stunted trees, he parked his car at the side of the road and got out. He lit a cigarette and sat on the running board in the morning sun. At least he would get a tan.

A FEW minutes later he jerked up his head and listened. Another car was coming up the road. It appeared around the bend, jouncing uncomfortably for its driver, and came to a stop near Hale. The young woman that stepped out was slim and graceful, her hair a golden blaze in the sunlight. Hale liked her instantly, in the quick way he had of forming his opinion of people. For one thing, she had blue eyes, and he had always had a weakness for blue eyes.

"Is this the right way to Dr. Simon Vance's place?" she asked, standing on the running board and looking around doubtfully.

"It is, Miss," nodded Hale. "Right around these trees. Do you have an appointment to see him?" He was already thinking of striking a bargain with her, if such was the case.

The girl shook her head. "No. I'm on the staff of Science Forum Magazine, sent up here to get some material from Dr. Vance for an article."

"Oh," said Hale. "Don't think you'll get it, sister," he added laconically.

The girl stared frigidly at him. "Why not? Who are you, anyway, and why do you say that?"

"Terrance Hale, m'am, of the Journal. Call me Terry." He then related his experiences in trying to interview the scientist.

The girl snapped her fingers when he was done. "I'll get an interview."

"Or your name isn't—?" prodded Hale, as the beginning of an acquaintance he had already made up his mind to promote.

She hesitated, looking him over. "None of your business," she said airily. "It might be Lona Darson," she added, climbing back into her car.

"Pleeztaamecha," said Hale. "But if you get anything out of him, you're a better man than I am."

"Not man—woman." The girl smiled. "Did you ever hear of feminine wiles, Mr. Terrance Hale?" She drove on.

"Lona Darson," Hale murmured to himself. "Lona Darson—dum-de-dum—fits in with a song—" For the next five minutes he hummed the song, till the roar of the returning car interrupted him. It zoomed up recklessly and stopped just beyond his car with squealing brakes.

The girl stepped out with an expression of annoyance, slamming the door. "Not a thing," she snapped. "He refused to talk and just hurried me out. All this long trip and waste of time for nothing! I could scratch his face!"

"I knew your — er — feminine wiles wouldn't work," commented Hale. "Not with him. Geniuses aren't human. He's at the verge of some almighty experiment, and won't talk till the strain of it is over. Why not join me in a wait and then we can both tackle him afterward?"

The girl's face suddenly changed. "Maybe we'd better go! Dr. Vance said it might be a dangerous experiment. He wouldn't say in what way, but he said the further away I went the better. Somehow"—her

face became a little frightened—"I know he meant every word!"

"Say, he really did scare you!" laughed Hale. "But he just wanted to make sure we'd stay away—"

"No, it *is* going to be a dangerous experiment!" breathed Lona Darson. "I—I just know!"

"Now what's that—feminine intuition?" Hale became serious. "Well, I'm going to stay and find out. It has something to do with his Fifth Dimension theory, and that's news, which is my business." He set his jaw firmly.

"I'm with you," said the girl, after a slight hesitation. "Where to?" she asked as Hale led the way between the trees over a matting of dead leaves and wild grasses.

"We'll get as close to the lab as possible, without being seen. Maybe we can find out what's going on."

THEY came to the edge of the tree patch and peered over a fringe of bushes. The old hunting lodge that was now a laboratory was no more than a hundred feet ahead, across the clearing. It looked like a miniature castle. But unlike a castle, it housed the most modern scientific apparatus available and one of the greatest minds the world had ever known. What mysterious research was being conducted in its enigmatic interior?

"See that tower?" pointed Hale. "I'm dead certain it's the king-pin of Dr. Vance's experiment."

Perhaps thirty feet high, a skeleton tower of steel reared over the flat roof. At its top was a small platform on which had been constructed something, protected from the elements by a large tarpaulin. A heavy rubber-coated cable hung down to the roof.

"Look!" whispered Lona.

A trap door in the roof at the base of the tower had clattered open. The scientist's assistant, Hans, bobbed up out of it. Agile as a monkey, he clambered up the steel

ladder at the side of the tower and reached the platform. He pulled off the tarpaulin and set it to one side.

The affair revealed made no recognizable pattern to the two watchers—coils, tubes, gleaming mirrors and an intricate system of wiring that snaked about seemingly in haphazard fashion. It was no more informative than the inside of a ten-tube radio. Hans bent over it and his hands reached to various parts, apparently making adjustments.

"What do you know about the Fifth Dimensional Continuum theory?" Hale asked the girl abruptly.

Lona screwed up her face thoughtfully. "Only that it's a theory of co-existing worlds in a universe of five dimensions, whatever that means. Dr. Vance has taken de Sitter's world-lines and Einstein's space-time continuum and gone them one better by saying that the *fifth* dimension is a sort of *mental* plane. All objects must have length, breadth, thickness, time-value, *and* mental-value—that is, a sort of psychic-dimension, without which the object becomes non-existent. I've looked over some of the mathematics, as much as I could safely digest, and it really looks sound—don't you think?"

The reporter looked at the girl in surprise. "Yes—oh, yes," he agreed, wondering if that was a look of faint amusement in her eyes. He did not continue the subject. He had a hearty suspicion that she knew plenty about the theory and could go off the deep end and leave him stranded.

He glanced at his watch. "About a half hour to wait yet, before he starts anything. We can take it easy till then." He spied a patch of grass and stretched himself out on it lazily.

Lona stood hesitantly, glancing at the laboratory. "Aren't we rather close? Suppose there were an—an explosion? Skip it," she added hastily at his look of scorn. She sat down with her back against a tree. By mutual consent, their conversation turned to other things and both of them relaxed

from a feeling of tension over what might be going on at the laboratory.

Insects buzzed around them and birds twittered in the trees. A soft breeze kept the sun-heated air from becoming uncomfortable. It was pastoral and quiet, and Hale began to feel at peace with all the world. It was pleasant to just lie there and talk aimless things with a girl like Lona, and to watch the changing expressions in her blue eyes—

SUDDENLY this peaceful universe was shattered. Like a clap of thunder out of a clear sky, the bull-throated roar of a Diesel generator throbbed from the direction of the laboratory. Behind this sounded a shrill high whine from the top of the tower. The cryptic apparatus there suddenly burst out in a rainbow flood of radiance that bathed all the surrounding area in a ghastly phosphorescent glow, stronger than sunlight.

All this had happened in seconds. Hale had struggled on his elbow, paralyzed by the sudden pandemonium of light and sound. Lona had turned pale, in a frozen attitude of panic.

When Hale did try to get to his feet, he was thrown flat by a sudden pitching of the ground. Lona gave a sharp scream.

Then the universe seemed to go utterly to pieces. The ground dipped and swayed sickeningly. Trees danced at insane angles and the sun overhead darted in a crazy circle. It was as though earth had been uprooted from its orbit and flung pell-mell through space.

Hale's sensations were varied and all-frightening. First he had the feeling that he was hanging upside down, on a surface that was no longer the ground, and that he would fall—into the sky. Then he was being turned inside-out, like a glove. His final sensation was that he was traveling at blinding speed, far, far faster than light! And all the while something hammered his brain relentlessly, till it ached frightfully.

In a blurred, distorted vision of a whirling world falling apart, Hale dimly made out the body of Lona Darson, arms and legs twisted in impossible ways. He saw the agony on her face. Desperately he tried to crawl to her, to help and protect her in some way. His clawing fingers failed to move his body over the pulsating, careening ground. Panting, sweating, he cursed aloud. He could not hear his own voice in a hellish bedlam of cracklings and thunders as though the earth were splitting in two.

This holocaust went on for an eternity—or was it just seconds?

But suddenly it was all over. The ground became still and firm again. The noises vanished into an aching stillness. Hale looked around in bewilderment. All was normal again, as it had been before. The trees that had seemed to bend and break were upright. Nowhere was the ground disturbed. Nothing had changed. His own body, that he imagined might be little more than a dying pulp, was whole and sound and unscratched.

He had seen the world around him blasted and torn, and yet here it was—in one piece! Hale scratched his head. Had it been just a vivid nightmare?

Then, with a cry, he sprang to the side of Lona, seeing now that she was unconscious. He chafed her wrists. In a moment, her eyes opened. Bewilderment flooded them as she looked around incredulously. She sat up, looking at her arms as though wondering why they weren't broken in several places.

"W-what happened?" she gasped. "I thought I saw"—horror shone from her eyes—"the world collapsing. But now it's all—like before!"

"Not even a bump on us," nodded Hale. "It's the craziest experience I ever had. I could swear I saw you twisted in a way you couldn't be twisted unless you were a ragdoll or had rubber bones. Yet here you are—"

They stared at each other, completely baffled.

Lona's eyes suddenly narrowed. "Perhaps," she said slowly, "it was all in our minds—purely a *mental* experience. We just *thought* we saw all those terrible things happen."

"Dr. Vance's experiment must be the answer," returned Hale. "Come on, let's take a look at that tower—"

They felt peculiarly light as they rose to their feet and stepped to the edge of the bushes. They looked out and gasped.

The laboratory was not there!

IN ANOTHER DIMENSION!

IN ITS place, taking up about the same area, was simply a stretch of dark, purplish ground, overgrown with tall, lacey plants like ferns. All else was the same in the clearing—even the pump was there—but the building, its tower, all its contents, and its two occupants, were gone.

"For Pete's sake!" said Hale in a strangled voice. "For Pete's sake!"

Lona trembled against him like a frightened rabbit. "Gone!" she gasped, "as though something had wrenched his whole laboratory right off the earth!"

Hale closed his eyes and told himself not to be a damned fool and believe the laboratory wasn't there. Then he opened them hopefully.

"It *is* gone!" he said. "But where and how? You can't just take a big thing like that and whisk it away."

"Do you suppose," whispered Lona, "that Dr. Vance somehow transported himself to—the *Fifth Dimensional Continuum*?"

Hale started, for the thought had just then occurred to him. "If that's his way of proving there's a Fifth Dimension—by going off to it—he's welcome to it." He coughed a little and pulled the girl back suddenly. "Say, there's some kind of strong gas coming from there—maybe it's poison. We'd better leave."

Throats tickling, they retreated toward their cars. Lona sniffed at the gases and her face became puzzled. She stared around thoughtfully.

"Man, what a story this is going to be!" Hale was saying, "Scientist and laboratory vanish in thin air! This is better than I bargained for. Wait'll I get my hands on a typewriter—"

"**H**ANS! Hans, do you see it? — the world of the Fifth Dimensional Continuum around us!"

Dr. Simon Vance, in his laboratory, was more excited than his assistant had ever seen him. But the assistant was excited too. His eyes glued to a window, he was looking out at the other worldly terrain outside that had replaced the normal surroundings into which the building had originally been set.

"It's weird!" said the usually phlegmatic Hans, eyes popping.

He saw a smooth, level stretch of dark, purplish terrain, thickly grown with unnameable vegetation. It was like a jungle of the Carboniferous period — primeval, menacing, inimical.

And yet it was something utterly alien—something earth had never seen before, in all its millions of years of life and evolution. The fern-growths were not fern-growths. What seemed to be giant fungi were not fungi. They were spawned from seed and spore unknown to terrestrial conditions.

Hans shuddered, with a chill sense of the completely unearthlike.

The red haze was not just a dank spume from air overladen with gases, refracting the sunlight. It was a noisome chemical gas that earth's atmosphere had never known. It was a product of some incredible metabolism that the alien flora lived by. They exuded this poisonous gas instead of oxygen. The ground was not common dirt, or sand, or rock. It had the dull luster of wax, and glowed faintly with its own light,

especially where the shadows lay under thick branches.

It was almost unbelievable, impossible! It was a segment of the dark and terrible Unknown, hitherto beyond man's ken. It was something out of the limbo of the normal universe, more alien than the strangest planet of the remotest star could be! It was part of the vast Outworld—the universe of other dimensions.

Gasping, Hans turned away momentarily from the scene, almost on the verge of screeching to make the nightmarish spectacle go away. But the hooks of morbid fascination, stronger than fear, pulled his eyes back again.

Something was moving in that miasmatic jungle—some creature, some horrible spawn of this hyper-alien environment. The willowy bole of a tall fern bent aside as a bulky form slithered past. It was a beast of shocking proportions and protuberances that made no ordinary shape. It had claws and thick legs like a bear. It had the ponderous neck and mane of a lion. It had the jaws of a crocodile. It reared up like a Tyrannosaurus. It had the long, mean horns of a water buffalo. It had three great, gleaming eyes and snorted fiery breath from its flaring nostrils.

It had no earthly counterpart. It was a nameless monster, ferocious, stealthy, ravenous, cunning in its every movement.

Hans turned away, sick to the bottom of his being. Such things were not for earthly eyes to see and understand.

AS Terrance Hale and Lona Darson, hand in hand, moved through the trees toward their parked cars, the girl wrinkled her nose distastefully. Suddenly she paled and tugged forward.

"We'd better hurry," she exclaimed. "Bromine gas! I remember that odor too well from my course in chem, in college. And—and"—she took another suspicious sniff — "and cyanogen too! Good Lord, Terry—"

"Are they bad stuff?" he asked. fleetingly, he reflected it was nice to hear her call him Terry for the first time, as though they were old friends.

"Bad!" cried the girl. "Bromine is as bad as chlorine, which they used in the war. Cyanogen is the quickest-acting poison-gas known. They're both fatal in certain concentrations!"

At the word "fatal," Hale automatically broke into a run.

"I can't imagine where those gases came from," panted Lona. "The laboratory disappearing—two deadly gases in the air—it doesn't add up to anything reasonable, Terry!"

"We're not doing any adding right now," shot back Hale, grimly. "We're just hopping into our cars and—hello, what—"

They stopped dead, thunderstruck. They had come in view of their cars. Hale's machine was intact, but Lona's was only half there. The front half, pointing away from the laboratory-site, had vanished. It looked as though something had sheered through as cleanly as a razor cutting cheese.

And when they looked beyond, horror filled their eyes. It was not the scene that should be there. The trees and bushes were gone! In their place were towering fronds of strange vegetation such as they had seen back where the laboratory should have stood. The road they had driven up ended abruptly, cut off by the waxy-like terrain in which the bizarre vegetation took root.

"W-where's the rest of your car?" asked Hale rather dumbly. "For Pete's sake, what's happened? What is all this, anyway? Lona, have we gone bugs?"

They were almost convinced of it, staring at the nightmarish panorama before them.

"THE world of the Fifth Dimensional Continuum!" Dr. Vance murmured again. "This is the proof of my theory that universes exist side by side in a five-dimensional continuum—like the leaves of a book,

or like the peelings of an onion. We have bridged the fifth dimension, by means of our amplified telekinetic force, and reached a new cosmos!"

"It it a terrible one!" said Hans in a half-moan. "I don't like the looks of it at all, Dr. Vance. It's frightful and menacing!"

The scientist came down to earth. "Oh nuts, man!" he scoffed. "Don't be a timid mouse. There's nothing to worry about."

Hans sniffed suddenly, twisting his head. "Gas!" he cried. "We'll be poisoned!" He glared at the scientist accusingly. "Do you realize what you've done? We're marooned here, trapped! We'll be poisoned, or attacked by those awful beasts out there . . ."

He glanced around wildly, as though seeking some way of escape.

Dr. Vance sniffed at the contaminated air and then strode toward a supply closet, with an almost casual expression. He pulled out two gas-helmets and handed one to his assistant.

"Had you forgotten I was prepared, Hans?" he said easily. "As for those beasts . . . just watch what will happen to them."

THE front half of the car was nonexistent. The split bole of a huge tree without bark rested against the sheered portion. It looked like the cross-section of two different worlds shoved together. All along the line, grassy ground joined abruptly to purplish, waxy matter.

Terrance Hale and Lona Darson felt a crawling uneasiness, as they stood there, staring.

Suddenly the girl gave out a hysterical screech. "There's something terribly . . . *wrong!*" she cried. "Look at the sun, Terry. Why is it so big and blue? What does it all mean?"

Hale glanced up at the sun through his fingers and eyelashes. It was certainly a queer-looking sun, twice as large as it should be, at least, and vividly blue in color. The radiance it shed was of a ghastly

tone, bathing their surroundings in abnormal shades that made blues and greens stand out much more sharply than reds and yellows.

Hale suddenly realized the temperature was higher too, and that he had been uncomfortable in the past few minutes since the laboratory had vanished. He swore then, softly and steadily, to give his reeling mind a chance to rationalize. Suddenly he dashed away and climbed the nearest tree back of them. From its top he looked in all directions.

When he came down and faced Lona his eyes were bleak. "This crazy forest completely surrounds us!" he announced "We're in a ring of it about three hundred yards wide!"

He looked carefully at the girl, wondering how she would take it. Her face looked shocked. Trickleing sweat had furrowed through powder and rouge. She looked half wilted.

Sensing his reaction, the eternal feminine came to the fore and Lona took a compact out of her purse. She gave a little shriek as she saw her face in the mirror. Then with busy fingers, she repaired the damage. A few moments later, she snapped her compact shut. Her manner had changed from near-hysteria to firm courage.

"What magic was that?" asked Hal admiringly. "I thought for a moment you were going to be a weak-sister on me."

"You men swear when you get your mental breath knocked out. We women powder our noses. Mental uplift. Same difference." Lona was almost calm now.

But she had to fight to keep her voice from trembling as she said, "Terry, I don't think this is our world any more! This is the world of the Fifth Dimensional Continuum!"

"Yeah, I guess so," agreed Hale soberly "When Dr. Vance yanked himself into the F. D. somehow, some of the F. D. came here in exchange. But why it had to drap

itself around us like a coiled snake . . .”
He trailed off into muttered curses.

“No, Terry! It’s the other way around!”
said Lona bleakly. “Dr. Vance sent *us*
off into the Fifth Dimension! Remember
that queer experience we had of being
turned inside out and upside down and
rushing somewhere? That was our trip
into the Fifth Dimension . . . through a
sort of mental plane. But he didn’t know,
of course, that we were transported. He
simply sent a circle of land surrounding
his laboratory to the Fifth Dimension, and
we were on it, against his warnings.”

The girl spoke rapidly, as though putting
the final pieces of a jig-saw puzzle to-
gether. Hale stood open-mouthed.

“**H**IS laboratory still stands on earth,
where it has always been. Surround-
ing it is a circle of alien land exactly the
same shape and size . . . like a doughnut
. . . of this earth-piece we’re on. He found
the way to exchange them, through the
Fifth Dimensional psychic-plane. It prob-
ably involved no actual physical trans-
ference, but just a mental or probably
telekinetic process. And don’t you see,
Terry, *it’s his way of exploring the Fifth
Dimensional universe!*”

Hale nodded a little dazedly.

“I get it,” he said. “Clever guy. He
brings a sample of the alien world that he
wants to see right to his doorstep. He
makes the mountain come to him. Clever
guy!”

The line of his jaw tightened as he
looked around. “And here we are,” he
growled, “marooned in the Fifth Di-
mension! How . . . how far from earth do
you suppose we are?”

The girl sucked in her breath. Her eyes
grew misty as though she were thinking
of the biggest number there was.

“Terry, there’s no way of judging that
. . . not in terms we understand. It’s not
just miles, or light-years, or distance at

(Continued on page 92)

(Continued from page 91)

all. I know. I've looked at those equations. They use terms of dimension that would count our entire galaxy as an unmeasurable fraction of the smallest unit!"

Hale's eyes became a little hard. "You mean you really don't know just how far we are from . . . home? And there's no way of saying?" He snorted a bit sarcastically.

"Please don't ask me to explain, Terry," said Lona. "We're unthinkably far from earth, in another dimension—one humans don't ordinarily travel at all. No matter in which direction I pointed, I wouldn't be pointing toward earth, either. We're lost, Terry . . . horribly lost . . ."

Lona Darson was suddenly sobbing on his shoulder.

"There, there!" said Hale, automatically patting her head. "I was lost in the woods once and thought I'd never get out, but I did." There was a brittle cheerfulness in his tones.

He looked around with eyes red-rimmed from the touch of bromine. To himself he added, "But I never saw a woods like this before!"

"No, neither did I," thought Lona to herself. Then she choked on a sob.

They looked at each other startled. "Why, I heard what you said, though I didn't hear your voice!" gasped the girl.

"And I heard you . . . in my mind!" said Hale.

"Telepathy!" cried Lona. "But it's not so strange. This is the psychic dimension, the one in which thought radiates freely. I remember that from the equations."

"Well, so what?" growled Hale. "We're still stuck here."

The twining wisps and streamers of red fog of deadly poison from the alien jungle crept inward toward them, like a stealthy enemy. And in the depths of the alien jungle, savage beasts roamed, whose one blow would spell death to the two humans.

DR. VANCE and his assistant Hans looked like grotesque gnomes as they peered out through the goggles of their gas-masks at the unworldly scene about their laboratory.

There was a change going on out there. The reddish murk that overhung the ultra-jungle was thinning. Eddying currents arose that spiraled the red fog into the blue sky of earth, dispersing it in that vast vault. As the mists lightened, the alien vegetation became starkly revealed in the bright sunshine. It wasn't green vegetation. It was pulpy white, as revolting in texture as dead flesh.

Dr. Vance ripped off his mask finally.

"See, I told you, Hans!" he chortled. "The red mist had to diffuse into the air. That danger is past. We can even go out there now . . ."

"No . . . no!" interposed Hans, shaking his head violently. "Those beasts . . ."

Dr. Vance pointed. "There's one of the creatures. Watch him!"

The hulking shape of a nameless monster lumbered among the giant flora. He seemed to be running in a blind panic. His pace slowed as the red mist thinned steadily. Finally he stopped altogether and sank to his haunches. His lungs heaved in a labored way, like a fish out of water. He rolled over on his side, kicking feebly. He was obviously marked for death.

"You see, they can't live in oxygen, or in earth's atmosphere," resumed Dr. Vance. "Their metabolism requires bromine and cyanogen, which is their normal atmosphere. Oxygen kills them as surely as the other gases would kill us. In an hour or so no living thing in that area will exist. Of course, no living thing of earth could survive on that other world with its atmosphere hell-brew of lethal gases. If any birds or field-mice or insects were transported to the Fifth Dimensional Conti . . ."

(Continued on page 94)

(Continued from page 93)

A thought struck him. "Now I hope those two young fools that were here before didn't hang around!" he said worriedly. "No, no, of course not!" he added immediately. "They must have left. I put a good scare into both of them."

AT the same time, in that other world across the gulf of the fifth dimension, Terrance Hale was saying bitterly. "That's just the irony of our situation, that Dr. Vance doesn't know we're here, to rescue us. We might just as well be on Mars."

"Mars would probably be preferable," said Lona Darson resignedly. "We don't stand a chance here."

She had cried herself out and now faced the issue philosophically. They stood arm in arm near the spot where the laboratory had stood. It was about the center of the inimical ring of alien forest. Breathable air would remain here the longest.

But not for long. The taint of bromine was strong already. It stung their eyes and made their throats raw. The blue sun shone redly now through mists that were gathering thickly over them. Diffusion was steadily contaminating their pocket of earth-air that had come along with them. Deadly cyanogen was building up to fatal concentration.

Hale rebelled against the inevitable.

"Isn't there some way we could signal Dr. Vance?" he muttered.

"No," said Lona hopelessly. "Terry, we're unthinkably remote from our universe. That sun never was a star in earthly eyes, even with the biggest telescope. It's all so frightful . . ."

"How about this telepathy?" said Hale suddenly. "Maybe that's the one thing that can reach across this crazy dimension!"

"Terry, maybe you're right!" New hope flooded Lona's face. "It should be like a light signal across spatial dimensions. Let's try it! Suppose we concentrate on

gaining Dr. Vance's attention, by telepathy, and telling him we're here!"

With desperate enthusiasm they began sending a silent, mental call. "Dr. Vance! Dr. Vance! We are marooned in the earth-segment you sent into the Fifth Dimension. Terrance Hale and Lona Danson. Please rescue us! Dr. Vance! Dr. Vance . . ."

They kept it up till the terrific strain made their brains reel. But no slightest indication came back to them that the scientist, incredibly remote in a different universe, had heard. Their voiceless message seemed to beat futilely into the bottomless depths of sheer endlessness.

"No answer!" moaned Lona after a time. "We should get an answer if we established any sort of rapport at all." She glanced at her companion hopelessly.

They tried some more, but knew, by a strange subtle sense, that their message was not being intercepted.

"No use," groaned Hale finally. He looked at the girl with dark-circled eyes. "This is all my fault, of course. Like a fool, I stayed around, after Dr. Vance's warning. Worst of all, I . . ." He coughed as a reeking cloud of brominated vapor billowed around them. "I got you into this, Lona. That makes me the prize ass of all the known and unknown universes there are!"

The girl pressed his arm. "Don't say that, Terry. I'm as responsible as you are. After all, I could have left. It was my own curiosity that made me stay."

"Thanks," said Hale simply.

A moment later he went on more slowly, and in lower tones. "You know, you hit me like a gold brick when I first saw you, Lona. That was only an hour ago, wasn't it?"

His voice was husky now. He wanted to go on, but he couldn't. Instead, he laughed crazily.

"I was just thinking," he said, "of what

(Continued on page 96)

(Continued from page 95)

my landlady will say when I don't show up. I owed her three weeks' rent!"

Lona shuddered. "Terry, please . . ."

They both began coughing wretchedly as the bromine taint became stronger. A moment later they were writhing on the ground. Their senses reeled from the poisons that were accumulating within their bodies. Each searing gasp of their lungs drew in more and brought the end closer.

Around them, the alien environment was relentlessly closing in. The trees and grasses from earth were already withering at the breath of gases their evolution had not equipped them to handle. Birds and insects dropped out of the trees and bushes. Soon the bit of earth that had been transplanted across the abyss of the Fifth Dimension would no longer harbor its life. It would become a graveyard, later to be choked with utterly alien life-forms.

Instinctively, the two humans clutched one another in their arms. Hale ground his teeth in the effort to regain a moment of rationality before death.

"Lona!" he gasped. "Just want to tell you . . . before we go . . . that I . . ." A harsh cough rattled in his throat.

"I know!" breathed Lona. Her lips were on his suddenly. For a brief moment, they forgot their pain and misery—and doom.

Then a choking current of gas swirled about their heads, tearing them apart like a jealous demon. They fell back, stricken and helpless.

Hale groaned mentally as he felt his mind reeling at the greater abyss of extinction. It was hell to die like this! — an ultrahell, when they were so young and had just found one another. They musn't die! It wasn't right. Wasn't there any way to signal the man who could rescue them? Telepathy! But they had tried and failed. His mind was slipping fast, if he couldn't remember . . .

"Half a car!" he yelled out, and then laughed madly. "Half a car! Half a car! Remember, Lona . . . just half a car!"

The girl, her mind just dropping into a vast black pool, was glad she would not hear any more in an instant, would not hear the man she loved rave insanelly . . .

DR. VANCE struggled out of his smock. "Come on, Hans!" he said eagerly. "We'll go out and wander through the alien environment we plucked out of the Fifth Dimensional Continuum. That will be a thrill never before experienced by man—and without the slightest bit of danger!"

Hans followed the scientist somewhat reluctantly. He was still trembling at the impact of the alien scene on his imaginative mind.

They stepped from the little fringe of normal ground to the soil of the other world. It was slippery and they had to move along carefully. It glowed oddly by its own phosphorescence wherever shade hid the sun.

"Radioactive stuff!" said Dr. Vance happily. "What luck! I'll have the radioactive element extracted and sell it. My funds have become pretty low with all the expense of this experiment. And incidentally, I'll also get the Nobel Prize for this!" He let out a boyish whoop. "Hurray for the Fifth Dimension!"

But Hans was not so enthusiastic. His face looked oddly reflective.

"Why have you got that sour look?" snapped Dr. Vance. "What's worrying you now? I never knew a man who could find more things to worry about . . ."

Hans spoke slowly. "I was just wondering. Suppose those two young people *did* get transported! Wouldn't it be horrible?"

"For heaven's sake," retorted the scientist. "Don't keep bringing that up. That's all you've been saying for the past half hour." He went on sarcastically. "Are

(Concluded on page 98)

(Continued from page 97)

you still getting that telepathic message? What does it say?"

"Yes, I'm still getting it. I believe it's they. But I can't make it out." Hans' face was serious and puzzled.

"Oh, forget it, Hans!" scoffed the scientist. "Of course they aren't there. Now don't mention that again."

But Hans continued to be reflective. He began to act dazed, and wandered around as though searching for something. He held up his head at times, listening.

He wandered rather far from the scientist. Suddenly something riveted his attention. He ran toward it. A moment later his wild shout startled Dr. Vance from his close examination of a queer, spiny plant. The scientist hurried to him.

"Look!" pointed Hans, at the edge of the alien jungle.

"Good Lord!" gasped Dr. Vance. "Then . . ."

He broke off and ran toward their laboratory faster than he had ever run since his youth. Hans was right behind him. Panting, the two men made frantic adjustments of their apparatus. Finally Dr. Vance threw the master switch and the odd mirrors at the top of their tower bathed the surrounding area in a spectrum glow. Telekinetic energy sprang into being, forming a pathway between two universes.

TERRANCE HALE opened his eyes, closed them, opened them again—and grinned. At a glance he had seen that he was on earth and that Lona Darson was

alive with him and smiling. They were lying on couches in Dr. Vance's living quarters, with the little scientist hovering over them nervously. He was waving ammoniated spirits under their noses alternately.

"Thank God you're alive!" said Dr. Vance hoarsely. "We got you back just in time. That must have been a horrible experience in that alien world . . ." He shuddered.

"I wouldn't have missed it for the world!" said Hale. "Lona and I . . . up there . . . well, anyway, this will mean a whale of a story . . . and a raise for me. By the way" . . . he turned his head to the girl . . ." does what I said in the Fifth Dimension go here on earth?"

Lona reached for his hand. "No, silly. You have to say it all over again!" She became serious. "But how were we saved? I don't understand. Did our telepathic message work through after all?"

"Not to me," said Dr. Vance.

Hans spoke eagerly. "A telepathic message came through to me. I couldn't understand it at first. I finally caught on. It said 'half a car!' Half a car!' When I saw the half a car at the edge of the jungle, I knew."

"Just as I figured," Hale murmured. "The first message was too complicated. I knew that if I could once get that simple thought of half a car across, and they investigated, they wouldn't be able to doubt what it meant."

He sighed contentedly. "As I was sayin, Lona—"